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Toward a Sociology of Public Intellectual Action: The Challenge of the Molecular Intellectuals

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Abstract - The present essay aims to give both a contribution to rethinking sociology of intellectuals and to the study of transition from the hierarchical order of modernity (idea of Society) to a social pattern based on persons and subjects. In particular, we will try to paint a sketch of the transformations of the intellectual function. Exerted by big bureaucratic machines, today the intellectual action partially detaches itself from the intellectual function carried out by big bureaucratic machines of the modern era. New typologies of intellectuals were born as well as a new, deeply ambivalent public space. The Internet and networked individualism are the main carriers of these transformations.

Keywords : *intellectuals, agency, networking society, molecularization.*

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I. Introduction

The term "intellectual" comes from late Latin *intellectualis,* adjective that, in philosophy, refers to what deals with the theoretical activity separated from the perceptible experience/world. So we can give the word intellectual two different meanings. The first meaning refers to: «the social stratum composed by all the people who perform an activity that can be classified as intellectual – implying a use of signs and symbols instead of a use of materials, together with a precise and effective mental effort – being the latter of technical, administrative, scientific, medical or artistic nature» (Gallino 2004:386). We can define this first group, to whom Antonio Gramsci (1996) refers with particularly deep thought, intellectual workers. They were one of the most important groups into middle classes during the Twentieth Century. Using a second meaning, the term intellectual does not imply a precise social group, but a specific public role: public intellectual or *engagé*[1]. Public intellectuals may or may not be part of intellectual workers. They, by making public actions, exploit their cultural reputation in order to influence public opinion and political élites about specific "events" (such as international crises, a social movement mobilization and so forth) or cultural issues. During the first modernity, public intellectuals thought themselves as well as a spiritual and cultural élite on the straight of a strong sense of ontological True and ideological seduction (Antonelli 2012; Aron 1957; Dahrendorf 2006). This *avantguarde* was part of the hierarchical order of modernity because of exerting a cultural power on non-intellectuals people – the majority of population was illiterate or non-educated people during the Nineteenth and until the mid-Twentieth Century in Europe. At the same time, a lot of critical and nationalist thinkers built a strong stigma on intellectual workers – whom were in relentless social rise as part of new meddle classes: they were judged a share of the commercialization of culture and mankind, cause either through Capitalism or world **bureaucratisation (Adorno, Horkheimer 1972; Burnham 1941)**. After Sixty's – the "Golden Age" of the public intellectuals – during post-industrial society rising, the consciousness of crisis struck themselves and they lose social, political and cultural influence.

Nonetheless, it has been finding since the end of Seventy's either analysis on the role of intellectuals inspired by a sense of "homesick" for the "Golden Age" or reproposing of the same old-fashioned model to explain political-cultural processes, both in Public speech and scientific literature: a couple of examples of the first kind, it is Italian book by Alberto Asor Rosa titled *The Great Silence. Interview on Intellectuals* (*Il grande silenzio. Intervista sugli intellettuali*, 2009) and the book by Frank Furedi *Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone?* (2004). An example of the second type is the recent Volume 25, Iusse 4 of the Review *Terrorism and Political Violence,* focuses on the relationship between terrorism and intellectual engagement.

Most of this analysis strongly undervalues contemporary transformation of public intellectual subjectivities due to new cultural and economic mode of production mainly based on networking way – also called *informationalism* (Castells 2003). The findings of that are, on one hand, the conclusive decline of avantguarde model – that survival just like a symbolic simulacrum (Baudrillard 1981) – and, in the other, the rise of a new one: *molecular intellectual*. It is based on the new public and political role of the latest version of

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[1] The above suggested differentiation partially follows the one gave by Mannheim in relation to the distinction between "mobile" elements (meaning not rooted in a specific cultural context) and "local" elements (on the contrary, expression of a well determined community) of a historically identified intellectual élites. *See* Mannheim, Shils 1980.

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intellectual workers: *knowledge workers* whom break previous split between public intellectuals and intellectual workers as well as political-cultural function and productive processes.

In the first and second paragraphs it is explained our theoretical and methodological approach: it is is based on a rethinking of post-marxist perspective through the contribution of the sociology of agency (Antonelli 2009; Giddens 1984, 1990; Ritzer 2003; Touraine 2007a). In followings they are analyzed the avantguarde model (industrial society), the factors of its crisis (transition to post-industrial society) and, finally, the model of molecular intellectuals (global networking society).

II. Analyzing Intellectuals: Classical and Post-Classical Perspectives

Classically, roles, missions and subjectivities of the intellectuals were mainly studied through two different kind of perspectives: on one hand, intellectuals are seen as actors oriented by an universalistic pattern of True, as legacy the age of Enlightenment; thus, they would be dis-embedded both social stratification and class interests. In a deeply divided world, as modern society certainly is, this means intellectuals are the only ones would be able to rule *beyond* social struggles and *over* partisan points of view. In turn, this Platonic" perspective have had two different versions since the Nineteenth Century: the oldest one is based on mainstream identity of intellectual and the supremacy of humanistic knowledge. The most recent is the *technocratic* one, a point of view focuses on scientific background of "new intellectuals" – a theory has been developed since Saint-Simone and Comte age (Antonelli 2012). Finally, we could consider Karl Mannheim's sociology one of the most representative on the whole Platonic point of view so long as his work is a sort of synthesis of humanistic and technocratic theories, as Chiara Canta argues (2006).

In the other hand, we can find a *Marxism inspired perspective*: on the contrary of Platonic theory, according to neo-marxist, intellectuals always involved in economic structures and they are "agencies" of different social classes and different ideologies. Most of seminal authors in this point of view did not kwon Marx and Engels important book on intellectuals and ideology *The German Ideology* (1845): in fact, it was rediscovered and published only in 1932. Surprisingly, neo-marxism authors considered their theory about the world as the only scientific one as well as arguing by Karl Marx in his book: the others point of view would be either partisan – that is bourgeois – or outdated by History. Thus, intellectual world is divided between who works for proletariat and who for bourgeois. In neo-marxism, politics and culture are fundamental in order to make Revolution and building socialism: a "good" socialist and revolutionary politician must be an intellectual. In a way, a "good" philosopher, writer, artist or poet supports the proletariat by his cultural opera. Nevertheless, in this construction the supremacy is accorded to the political-intellectual pattern. So, beginning from a common perspective based on this specific avantguarde idea, they may be divided in two groups: the first one (Leninist) argues the most important mission of intellectuals is lead proletariat and building their political awareness through the Party. This point of view sounds more suitable in not-industrial society rather than in an industrial context. On the contrary, the second one (Gramsci and Italian School) seems longer valid for industrial societies. In fact, according to it the mission of the Party is involving both public intellectuals and intellectual workers - that is meddle classes - into Itself in order to develop a political and cultural hegemony. In particular, Antonio Gramsci argues modern intellectuals not as talkers, but as practically-minded directors and organizers (in our words as intellectual workers) who produced hegemony both by means of ideological apparatuses - such as education or media – and through performing their tasks in modern workplace – for example, bureaucracy. Furthermore, he distinguished between a "traditional" *intelligentsia* which sees itself (wrongly) as a class apart from society, and the thinking groups which every class produces from its own ranks "organically". Such "organic" intellectuals do not simply describe social life in accordance with scientific rules, but instead articulate, through the language of culture, the feelings and experiences which the masses could not express for themselves. Finally, relationship and membership to the Party are both fundamental to realize the transition from "unaffected" intellectuals to an "organic" one: specialized, technical or humanistic knowledge are not enough without a collective and political experience in the Party – that Gramsci called "Modern Prince", inspired by Niccolò Machiavelli thought (Gramsci 1992).

Despite to a shallow looking at them, Platonism and Neo-marxism theories seem deeply different, they share actually two common *general theoretic* assumptions:

1. *An image of the modern society based on a hierarchy idea*: both of them share the social (status) and instrumentally (function) distinction between intellectuals and non-intellectual people due to both different political-social functions performing and their linked ranking; at the same time, public intellectuals – that are intellectuals who perform political-culture tasks – have got the preeminence on the intellectual workers themselves.
2. *Every actors - included the intellectuals - are dominated by a general false consciousness*: on one hand non-intellectual people cannot act to achieve emancipation for themselves and society at whole without to be leading by intellectuals. At the same time, each social action of the intellectuals never work to own advantage or interest. They

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would (or *should*) always be driven by some superior Standard (such as Rationality for technocratic platonism), Value (such as the Universal True for humanistic Platonism) or Subject (the Political Party for neo-marxist, of course).

Structuralism, Post-structuralism and, afterwards, Post-modernism movements have *partially* destroyed the first assumption since Seventy's, *mainly* on theoretical side. They showed supremacy of the (public)-intellectuals is only a historical and social construction, rather than a "natural doom", orienting toward power relationships: the idea of "prophet" intellectual was rejected. At the same time, Pierre Bourdieu pointed out judgments of taste and cultural behaviors are themselves acts of social positioning, included intellectual actions: according to Bourdieu, intellectuals are "dominated share of ruling class" and preserve their social privileges across generation (Bourdieu 1979; 1990; 1992). On the other hand, Zygmunt Bauman's analysis, in particular through his famous book *Legislators and Interpreters* (1987) underlines the "death of strong ontological True" in order to explain and change human History, in contemporary societies: today, the intellectuals survival just as "cultural hubs" and "intermediaries" among different social worlds. Nevertheless, in my opinion all these analysis are strongly disappointing for a couple of reasons: at first, about practice iusses. In fact, while post-structuralist authors - such as Foucault or Bourdieu himself – were struggling against classical intellectual idea, they were as very important public-intellectuals as the other ones – for example Jean-Paul Sartre. The old idea refused on theoretical side were reproduced throughout everyday political life. The outcomes are been the powerlessness, the homesick and losing their legitimacy.

III. Rethinking the Point of View: The Sociology of Intellectual Action

A very serious theoretical reason is on the basis of that: a determinism view about social world linked by the false consciousness assumption. According to them social actions are conditioned by impersonal forces and this situation is reproduced in space and time during the centuries: superficially everything changes and than nothing happens. Human consciousness is always imprisoned. So, all these authors do not keep in touch with a social, political and economic world more and more complex - like our time is. They do not catch the linked between systemic transformation and human agency, each other influences. In particular, the role of the subject, its irreducibility freedom to the structure – the first reason to social changes - is too in the shade.

Differently, we embrace Giddens' position: social structures are both constituted by human agency, and yet at the same time are the very medium of this constitution (Giddens 1984). Thus, as Alain Touraine argues: «sociology was the study of social systems; it must now be defined in different terms as the study of the struggles of social actors who are fighting for their freedom and their rights insofar as they are subjects» (Touraine 2009b: 214). Translated to our discussion, it means we have to begin again from a fundamental question: *who is a public intellectual?* Sociologically, we can define an intellectual as a social actor, making public actions, exploit its cultural or artistic or scientific reputation in order to influence public opinion and political élites about specific "events" (such as an international crises, a social movement mobilization and so forth) or political issues. Intellectual is *embedded in* and *mobilized* specific social and power relationships: *it need to move from a sociology on intellectuals to a sociology on intellectual action*. Cultural and knowledge field, its history, networks and institutions are the source of intellectuals themselves; nevertheless, a scientist, a writer or a researcher become a public intellectual when he\she just approaches his\her knowledge to a public issue and he\she introduces himself\herself into public sphere – such as Burawoy explains about specific and, at the same time, general case of the public sociology (Burawoy 2005). In add, *it must be oriented by a situated engagement for human emancipation*. That action becomes an intellectual one and its structuration concerns three worlds: economy, communication and politics. About the first, modern society has always been charactering for a very important process: capitalism has tried to embed knowledge, science and culture in Itself for ages. Intellectual workers partially are a finding of that trend. Thus, the first kind of relationships mobilizing are those between public intellectuals missions and intellectual workers, and, in add, between public intellectuals, economic actors and social classes. About the second (communication), it is important to remember the impact of the means of cultural and opinion production on public intellectual identities: for example, "Gutembergian" means, such as journals or books, are linked with a particular idea of Public sphere – analyzing by Habermas (1989), among others (Cubitt 2005). Changing of these produces fundamental transformations both in possibility of intellectual actions and in audience. So, another remarkable kinds of relationships and actors are between public intellectuals, their audience and cultural gatekeepers.

Finally, politics forms are very important too because, on one hand, politics is the last goal of public intellectual activity and, on other side, it is the general environment of that. Thus, last but not least, we have to consider the relationships between public intellectuals and political actors – such as parties, political élite and so forth.

On the straight of this theoretical frame - that entails to accept the challenge of a new intellectual presence in a global world - we can make three hypothesis about contemporary public intellectual social action:

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- The decline both avantguarde model and intellectual hierarchy order based on bureaucratic mass organizations. We call this process *disintermediation*.
- Transformations into knowledge and culture field have produced the centrality of *knowledge worker* for almost ten fifty years. Thus intellectual worker is substituted for knowledge worker as the findings of the contemporary relationship between knowledge, new technologies (web 2.0) and capitalism. Most of public intellectual actions are going to arise from knowledge worker.
- By action of: a) higher education level among population than in the past b) rising web 2.0, number of persons whom are involving in public intellectual actions are going to increase. Nevertheless, status of these subjects is not equal: there are actors more influential than others. At the same time, the difference between intellectuals and non-intellectuals people is more and more undefined. We call the whole described process *molecularization*.

IV. The Intellectual in the Hierarchical Order of Modernity and its Clash

During XIX and XX Century, the intellectual workers, and above all, public intellectuals, were part of the hierarchical order of modernity because they exerted a cultural power on non- intellectuals. From this point of view, in the modern era, intellectuals aspire to be:

1. Interpreters of the true needs of masses (*action of social mediation).*
2. Keepers of the knowledge about the development of history and nature (*cognitive action*).
3. Supreme legislators of the way human beings should organize their actions, their society and their ways of life (*normative action*).

Each of these three actions has its roots in a universal concept of Truth which gives the intellectuals a moral superiority and a (presumed) superior mission: to lead and educate the masses. Between centuries XIX and XX the hierarchical order expanded: in order to lead and discipline wider and wider masses, bureaucratic machines were created in order to organize and exploit cultural power; they used intellectual workers as the main labor force: the intellectual actions became complex social functions. Particularly, as functions, all the intellectual actions put into action in the society are performed by bureaucracies of knowledge (mass schooling that educates new generations), by the information system and by the cultural industry (mass media that inform and influence the audience), by politics (mass parties that politically educate and lead their members), by the administration (a factory administration that scientifically organizes the workers; public administration that regulates the life of citizens/users).

The intellectual workers grew in number, their work started being hierarchically organized, their skills put at service for a general purpose. In the first half of century XX, the organic intellectual analyzed by Antonio Gramsci is a bureaucratized intellectual. He organizes the masses and the social work. He himself is organized and so socially detached: there are "executive/leader" intellectuals and "directed" intellectuals in such a hierarchy.

During the 60's and the 70's the shift from industrial to post-industrial mode of production led to the establishment of a programmed society. In Alain Touraine's seminal analysis – Post-industrial society in 1970- that society links the effort for an indefinite material growth to forms of total dominion (of the single persons and the society). Knowledge – meant as capacity of generating new creativity – is the *trait d'union* between these two elements. Bureaucratic machines are its main social structure. The dominant social class in programmed societies is defined on a knowledge basis; meaning specific knowledge which can be managerial, administrative or technical. The working class, that is subjected to the action performed by machineries in different ways, is composed either by those who claim a rise in their own consumption or by those whose private life resists to the changes; so: «the principal opposition between these two great classes or groups of classes […] Comes about because the dominant classes disposes of knowledge and control of information» (Touraine 1970: 61). Considering the first two levels of power in a programmed society:

1. Political-strategic level: at this level the rulling class is composed by technocrats, who believe in the submission of politics to the imperative of defence, of science, or economic concentration. Among the various subdued social groups there are "professionals" meaning members of "professions", two of which have a particular importance in our society: education and public health. Professors, researchers and physicians, who are not wage earner directors, nor, in the great majority of cases, members of professions. On one hand, their activity requires rationalized organizations; on the other hand , it aims to maintain and empower the capacity of productions of people and students;
2. Administrative level: at this level the rulling class is represented by high level bureaucrats.

Among the member of the working class there are employees and technicians who work in bureaucratic machines; experts engineers, accountants, jurists, psychologists.

Alienation and submission cases to which the different subdued categories are subjected don't lead to class movements and struggles automatically: they simply lay the basis for them. Re-interpreting *The Post-Industrial Society* by Touraine today shows, therefore, a core aspect: conflicts in a programmed society, seen at their beginning by the French sociologist, were struggles between different groups of intellectual workers: on one side professionals,

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experts and students and the other side technocrats and high level bureaucrats (the rulling class).

New social movements in the 70's (ecologism, localism and so forth) were put into action by the first group against the second one. A struggle that arose from the heart of intellectual bureaucracies, between "executive/leader" intellectuals and "directed" intellectuals, in a growing number (Antonelli 2012). The hierarchical order of modernity was so questioned by those who most had contributed to its development. In a society dominated by the service industry, the directed intellectual workers, besides being producers, they also are a significant portion of consumers and citizens; they refused to be directed and represented in a authoritative fashion by the top sectors of bureaucratic machines: so the social mediation function and the normative function started experiencing a crisis. A crisis that is based on the decline of the authority (Inglehart 1998) and on strong Idea of Truth (Vattimo, Rovatti 1985). The intellectual subject - in first place in his role of public citizen, user and costumer - demands autonomy, in order to use and spread knowledge and information in a more democratic fashion. The intellectual action, that starts spreading in the society through the expansion of intellectual workers, begins its riot against the intellectual function, which is institutionalized and bureaucratic.

V. Networked Societies and The New Molecular Intellectuals

During the 70's and 80's of century XX, therefore, the boost to the expansion of the intellectual actions and its separation from the function, was shown by the new social movements and by the loss of credibility and influence exerted by "organized intellectuals". During the 90's, this process reached its acme through the new ITC (Blogs, Social Networks, Web 2.0 and so forth).This process is currently redefining in a completely new fashion the public space as part of the definitive overcoming of the (hierarchical) concept of society. The exclusive and centralized use of the intellectual actions (organizational function) is being undermined (but it won't disappear); groups of intellectuals produce and broadcast knowledge and information autonomously. As a matter of fact, as demonstrated by Manuel Castells, the convergence (highly unlikely) between the end of the fordist system, the innovations brought by the new social movements, mass schooling, the expansion of communication and the more and more growing role of creativity and of the innovation in the economic field, will lead not only to an exponential quantitative growth of intellectual workers, but also to their social and cultural and economic change (Castells 2003): born *molecular intellectuals*[2]. There is a wide number of workers and consumers who can handle knowledge, culture and technology; they won't merge into social classes but will be spread in the social stratification and in relations of production: a part of them will become a part of the social élites, others will merge in a new middle class, others will, at the bottom of the social pyramid, form a new and precarious intellectual proletariat (Berardi 2004; Castrucci 2006; De Biase 2007). The high education rate, the use of cultural, symbolic and cognitive instruments while working, the search for cultural goods of consumption, individualism, are the common sides of this magmatic subjectivity. Today the intellectual worker does not merely reproduce knowledge and information, in the new networked economy he is urged, above all, to produce and innovate knowledge (*creative class*) (Florida 2002). Each subject part of this new and complex group of intellectuals:has (or thinks he has) cultural and cognitive means to self- representation, to produce values and projects and put them into use in the society[3].

Through technology he has the actual chance to put into practice his will.

In other words, not only produces he immaterial goods linked to the production, he directly produces, through blogs, social networks, web tv's, opinions and knowledge as a citizen and consumer (Levy 1994; Tapscott, Williams 2008). Therefore, each of these new intellectuals feels and can represent himself as a public intellectual: public intellectuals who operate in great mediatic and institutional circuits keep being there but they are more and more participating in a great rumor and, therefore, less and less capable to influence the audience and the cultural classes.

In a very similar way, the monopoly – and therefore their credibility – of organized intellectuals (mass media, school, administrations) is going down, in favor of more complex paths. Therefore we can see the silhouette of a new public space. The public space, as shown by Richard Sennett, is the location (social and symbolic) where a series of social actors share a language, a way of expression and matters on which they share opinions (Sennett 1977). According to the American thinker, the fall of public man, visible already at the beginning of century XIX, lies in the progressive disappearance of shared public behaviors in favor of the private dimension. Actually, it has been just a decade since the analysis of Sennett became visible in reality, following a redefinition of the public space which links polarization (meaning a vertical differentiation process on a structural basis) and fragmentation (meaning a

[2] This concept is been formulated and statement by Francesco Antonelli and Robert Castrucci during the Italian Congress of Political Sociology (2009). *See* Antonelli, Castrucci, 2009.

[3] For a summary of the different analysis carried out about the redefinition of the concept of intellectuality as a productive force and of the intellectual as a knowledge worker in contemporary societies, in relation to the process of democratization *see* in particular Formenti 2008; Castrucci 2009.

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horizontal process of differentiation on a cultural basis). Simplifying analytically, on one hand, as a matter of fact, a layer of population, mainly old and/or with a limited cultural capital, lives (almost) exclusively inside the public space created by mass media, by other collective intellectuals and by the most important public intellectuals. On the other hand, following the prompt coming from new intellectuals that operate through the Net, there is a multiplication of niches of consumption, of ways of living, of political opinions (fig. 1):

The emergence of networking societies lead to the molecularization both intellectuals (salaried producers of cultural and symbolic goods) and audiences (consumers of cultural and symbolic goods); at the same time, these social figures tend to merge with one another.

Another way to represent previous scheme is the *Long Tail Model* by Chris Anderson. In his book – *The Long Tail* (2006) – Chris Anderson explains how the paretian distribution known as the 80/20 rule looses much of it's grip on media distribution (Anderson 2005). Online business such as *Amazon.com* or *iTunes*, obtain more than half of their income from titles outside the 20% of the profitable selling books in a briks-and-mortar bookshop or cd's in a cd-store (Brynjolfsson, Hu, Smith 2006). So, in these markets there is a molecularization both cultural goods – with theirs *intellectuals-producers* (authors of books, journalists, scriptwriters and so forth) – and audiences; simultaneously, it is developed a dual processes based on the social polarization and fragmentation: in fact, the importance and the success of the cultural goods or intellectuals are different. In a Cartesian system the most important goods\intellectuals constitute the "Head" of the distribution; the sum of least important forming the "real" long tail (fig. 2; 3):

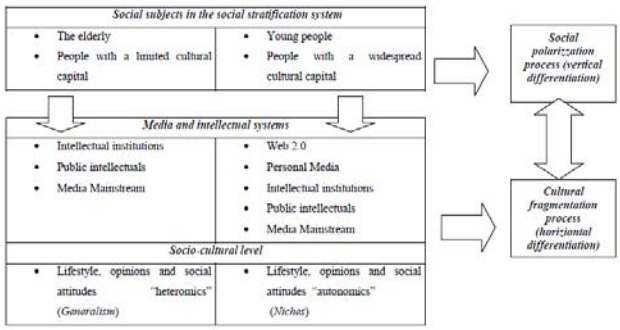

Fig. 1 : Public and Social Space is a Networked Society

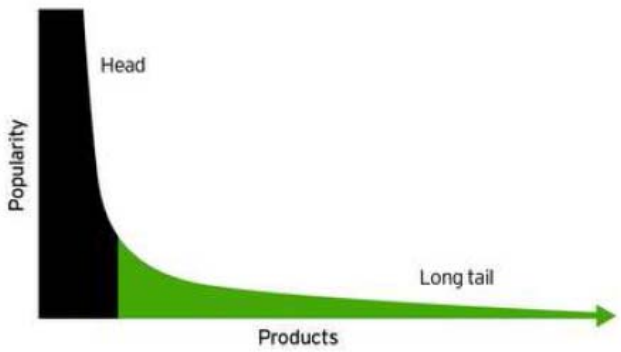

Fig. 2 : The model of Anderson's Long Tail

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VI. Conclusion

Let us summarize the brief analysis carried out so far. Starting from the 60's and the 70's a first expansion of the intellectual class lead, at first, to the explosion of internal struggles in the institutions that exerted intellectual functions: on one hand the "executive/leader" intellectuals (technocrats, top bureaucrats), on the other the intellectual workers (students, professionals, experts); the prize was represented by the production and by the use of knowledge and information. Later on, starting from the 90's to today, a second expansion of the intellectual workers - more and more involved in creative tasks (creative class) - together with the spread of the Internet, lead to: 1) the spread of intellectual actions in the society; 2) the shaping of a wide decentralized area of intellectual production (in terms of critical knowledge and information); 3) the progressive separation between intellectual functions- exerted by the great bureaucratic machines we inherited from the early modern era- and intellectual actions; 4) the loss of credibility and influence of the great public intellectuals and of institutions which keep on performing intellectual functions.

The creation of a new public space was the outcome of this process, in which social polarization is linked to cultural fragmentation. About polarization: social stratums that own a scarce cultural capital and belong to the oldest layers of age of the population, they keep being dependent on information and knowledge produced and spread by those institutions which exert intellectual functions and by public intellectuals. The social stratum with the widest cultural capital and the young ones (new intellectual classes) tend to self-produce and spread cultural objects autonomously. With regard to fragmentation: there is a multiplication of channels and cultural offers; the public space tends to look like an amount of cultural niches only partially independent.

This process is characterized by a strong ambivalence (Bauman 1991). On one hand, on the opportunities side:

1. There are new chances for people to be successful and establish themselves (Touraine 2007).
2. The civil society become stronger and able to exert a wider control on power.
3. Wider knowledge and information will be able to be spread: the cultural basis of global society will be increased, the risk of manipulation exerted by the power will be diminished.

On the other hand, the risks side

1. A growing lack of communication between social classes and groups in the society (a common ground of meanings and comparison will disappear).
2. It will become more and more difficult to tell apart reliable and non-reliable information and knowledge.
3. More and more frequently waves of populism will arise from the bottom layers of the society, they will undermine the authority of institutions, leading to a generalized lack of trust.

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