

Kristóf Nyíri (ed.)  
A Sense of Place

The Global and the Local in Mobile Communication

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I am not a specialist in communication research, and even less in mobile phone research. In fact, I am not even a mobile phone user. This may have been of some interest to the participants of the Budapest conference, since as a member of a disappearing tribe I lent myself as an informant, witness, member of a control group or guinea pig for the conference discussions. In the final part of this paper I will try to give, briefly,<sup>1</sup> the reasons of my mobile-dodging and some sociological reflections, from an outsider's point of view, on mobile communication. In the first and second part I shall stick to my primary theme.

### Globalism and Globalization

#### *Old Stuff?*

I was invited to the Budapest conference because the organizer, Kristóf Nyíri, happened to read a paper on globalism and localism I published some time ago,<sup>2</sup> and to like it. My basic argument was and is quite simple, I think: 1) globalism and globalization are rather old stuff; 2) in the last few decades, technology has significantly accelerated and intensified old trends; 3) in a more globalized world, localism too shows new traits; 4) in particular, localities have become dialectically linked with globalities, giving rise to the new concept of glocality. Let me, in this first section, dwell a while on the first two points.

Globalism is the idea that men all over the earth live, or should live, in the same encompassing social (moral, religious, cultural, political, economic) system. Most ancient empires were driven by this simple idea. Of course there were also all sorts of less noble motivations for their efforts

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<sup>1</sup> The unabridged text is accessible at [http://www.fil.hu/mobil/2004/Strassoldo\\_webversion.pdf](http://www.fil.hu/mobil/2004/Strassoldo_webversion.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Raimondo Strassoldo, "Globalism and Localism: Theoretical Reflections and Some Evidence", in Zdravko Mlinar (ed.), *Globalization and Territorial Identities*, Aldershot: Avebury, 1992.

to expand territories and subdue peoples; but the idea of universal empire is basically a moral idea: there is only one right and good way of life – one way to be really human and civilized – and all peoples should be brought to benefit from it. So it is the imperial power's *duty* to rule the earth. The Romans harboured this principle, and Rudyard Kipling wrote at length, in prose and poetry, on the (English) white man's burden.

Catholicism is another literal synonym of globalism (greek *kathà-holikè* = concerning the whole world). Not all religions are expansive, universalistic and oecumenical (another synonym: *oekumene* is the entire inhabited world). Many of them are thought of as a privilege to be restricted to special groups. Christianity has early become catholic especially through the efforts of St. Paul, who overcame other apostles' reserves on the issue. He stressed that the Gospel of Christ was addressed to all human beings, and had to be spread all over the world. In the following centuries, the drive to convert the heathen often took harsh, and even cruel forms; but there is no doubt that it was meant to their benefit; at least, of their eternal souls.

In pre-modern times, it is almost impossible to keep religion apart from politics; thus, the doctrine of the global, universal empire was usually both an ideology and a theology. As there is only one true God in the heavens, so there should be only one supreme authority on the earth; the emperor is a god himself, or his representative. This is the idea that underlies most ancient empires, and ruled even in Europe in the late Middle Ages. Roman-Christian-German emperors, from Charlemagne on, were depicted holding in their hand the globe topped with the cross. This globalistic tradition of the Empire held on in neighbouring Austria well into the 18th century, but with increasing embarrassment. So it circulated in public mostly as a rather mysterious and ambiguous acronym: AIEOU = *Austriae Est Imperare Orbi Universo* = "it is the duty of Austria to rule over the whole world".

The idea of globalism remained quite distant from reality in all ancient empires. In fact, all of them remained regional, local powers. They had several techniques to reconcile the universalistic claims with the confined realities; one was to avoid interaction and mutual recognition between them (isolationism), the other was to define other people as utterly savage and even non-human, thus unworthy of any concern. Of course, the existence of some empires was in fact unknown to others, as in the case between the Old and the New worlds.

Globalization, as a fact, started at a precise point in time, and in a particular place. It began in the middle of the 15th century in Portugal, when seafarers learned how to sail the oceans. Since then, European/Christian/



western/modern society has not ceased to spread over the whole world. It charted the globe on world atlases, caging it in an orderly grid of meridians and parallels. It christened its parts, stretching enormously the names given by the Greeks to the coasts facing their Aegean sea (Europe, Asia, Africa), while the Americas got their name from the Florentine gentleman Amerigo Vespucci (incidentally, the brother of the young lady Botticelli portrayed as Venus cruising the seas on a shell). Europe linked the continents in a world-wide web of sea routes and ports, along which ever-increasing flows of people, goods, ideas and information circulated. In time, she subdued most peoples of the earth, by the force of her inner drives, organizational skills and technological superiority. European sails and guns<sup>3</sup> allowed Atlantic-European powers to build colonial empires overseas, while Russia conquered most of Asia, down to the Pacific and beyond. Where the environment was suitable and the territory sparsely inhabited by locals, European immigrants built New Europes, as in the Americas, in Southern Africa, in Australia; filling them with animals, plants and bacteria brought from home.<sup>4</sup> Other countries and peoples underwent a process of Europeanization, with different degrees of success. European colonial powers transferred populations between continents; the case of Africans shipped to the Americas is only the most gigantic and infamous of many others. European languages – Spanish, Portuguese, English, French – became the official languages in large expanses of the planet, and so did the European religions. It may be recalled here that one of the original reasons of the Portuguese drive to circumnavigate Africa was to build alliances with the legendary “lost Christians” in Africa and Asia (particularly in Ethiopia and in the Indies), and so to attack Islam backwise. At any rate it is undeniable that since Columbus the mission to extend the Christian faith all over the world was one real motivation of colonialism, albeit of course not the only nor the main one. More recently, another European quasi-religious doctrine spread to important parts of the world (notably China), namely Marxism-Leninism.

Of course, it can be maintained that the most important motivation of imperialism was greed: the quest for valuable goods, starting with gold and silk and spices but soon encompassing the whole of economic valuables. The economy soon became global. Immanuel Wallerstein has written extensively on the rise of this world system since the 16th century, and

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<sup>3</sup> Carlo M. Cipolla, *Guns, Sails and Empires: Technological Innovation and the Early Phases of European Expansion, 1400–1700*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1965.

<sup>4</sup> See Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

on the differences between the capitalist “world economy” and the universal political empire model.<sup>5</sup>

In view of all this, by the 18th century it was generally believed that the European civilization was headed to become the only world civilization; that all peoples of the earth should be raised to her civilized standards. Some radical Jacobins (e.g. Anacharsis Clootz) thought that it was the mission of the French to free the whole of humanity from the chains of “tyranny and superstition”, as the phrase went; and that, in return, Paris was entitled to become the capital city of the whole mankind. Hegel spoke of *Weltgeist*, the World Spirit, and saw it riding on horseback, in Napoleon’s boots. Fifty years later, Marx and Engels wrote (in the 1848 *Manifesto*) that it was the historical mission of the European bourgeoisie to spread modern industrial capitalism to the whole world, in order to prepare the revolutionary onset of the World Proletariat and universal socialism.

But perhaps, more than of doctrines, globalization is the fruit of technology. After the days of sailing ships, a new spurt occurred around 1835, a date when the “mobiletic revolution” was born, according to some scholars.<sup>6</sup> In those years, the steam engine was routinely installed in boats (steamships), and on wheels (the train), and the telegraph was invented. In a matter of a few decades, most of the world was linked by a network of railroads and a web of wires and cables; often in parallel. Another quantum leap in globalization came around the year 1900, when the motor car, the radio, and the airplane were invented. A new series of webs – motorways, airlines, and electromagnetic communication – were added to earlier ones.<sup>7</sup>

All this was hailed as a boon to humanity – pure progress – but, as it soon turned out, it had its dark side. The world had become so small and interdependent, and the technologies so powerful, that local conflicts escalated to catastrophic global wars: the first time almost unwittingly, the second by conscious strategy. In the wake of it, it was deemed necessary to build world political organizations: the Society of Nations after the World War I, and the United Nations Organization after World War II. The eternal aspirations to a unitary World Government were revived.

### *Why Should We Be So Excited about Globalization?*

If we pay attention to fundamentals, then, globalization is rather old stuff.

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<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*, New York: Academic Press, 1974.

<sup>6</sup> See Bruce M. Russett, *International Regions and the International System*, Chicago: Rand McNally, 1967.

<sup>7</sup> See Amos Hawley, *Urban Society*, New York: Ronald, 1971.

So why all the excitement about this buzzword in more recent times? I venture to offer three "cultural" explanations, and a "structural" one.

First, I am tempted to impute it, at least in part, to sheer historical ignorance. The prevalent worldview passed down from national school systems to the half-educated masses is that humankind is neatly divided into national societies (the several, distinct "peoples"), as they are represented on political maps (the "planimetric fallacy", as Konau<sup>8</sup> put it). People may be appalled or surprised or elated to discover later, mostly from the media, that there is an enormous number of phenomena that are global in scope – circulation of resources, commerce, corporations, entertainment, epidemics, environmental hazards, terrorism. They would be inclined to think that all this is new; unaware that most of those phenomena have been around for centuries, while what is really new (relatively), and inadequate, is precisely the nation-state-centred view of the world.

Lack of historical perspective and awareness also characterizes, I am afraid, the discipline of sociology. The idea of society has generally been modelled after that of the nation-state, and most sociologists study aspects and problems of their own national societies; or at best, do comparative studies among national societies. The study of "international relations" has been mostly left to political scientists. A truly global perspective in sociology is rare; and the stimuli in this directions, contributed both by the founding fathers and by more contemporary masters of the discipline, have not found much resonance.<sup>9</sup> Who remembers nowadays the tracts on "global society" and "worldsociety" published several decades ago by Robert Angell,<sup>10</sup> Wilbert Moore,<sup>11</sup> John Burton<sup>12</sup> and a few others? I am particularly fond of Niklas Luhmann's flat statement, thirty years ago, that "there is today in the world only one society, and that is worldsociety".

Another explanatory factor may be the demise of the socialist systems and of Marxist-Leninist theory. Marxism, as mentioned before, had a strong "global" orientation (like most sociological grand theories of the 19th century), and the more recent discussions on globalization bear much resemblance to what was earlier discussed under the heading "imperialism". The social-political movements rallying under the "no global" slogan are the direct heirs of those who thirty years earlier would take to the streets

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<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Konau, *Raum und soziales Handeln*, Stuttgart: Enke, 1977.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Raimondo Strassoldo, *Temi di sociologia delle relazioni internazionali*, Gorizia: Isig, 1979.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Angell, "Sociology and the World Crisis", *American Sociological Review* 16 (1951).

<sup>11</sup> Wilbert Moore, "Global Society: The World as a Singular System", *American Journal of Sociology*, 71 (1966).

<sup>12</sup> John Burton, *World Society*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1972.

against “imperialism” and “dependence”. Why those names have fallen in such complete disregard, except in very small circles, I am not sure. It may be simply an example of the need of novelty also in the realm of the ideological lexicon, and hence a “political marketing” pitch; or the fact that that otherwise respectable term, imperialism, has been appropriated by world-terrorists.

### *Has Globalization Recently Made an Evolutionary Leap?*

The more structural explanation has to do with the quantitative growth of global phenomena. I assume that everyone agrees that the flow of people (for business, tourism, education, refuge, work etc.), goods (merchandises and services), “bads” (crime, pollution, pests, terrorism, etc.), and information across national borders have been increasing phenomenally in the last decades. Three questions now arise. The first is: Do the lines representing the growth of global flows (and the relative global stocks) show relevant course changes (accelerations, jumps and flexes, thresholds, etc.) in this period?

Alternatively, the second question is: Is the quantitative increase and intensification in globalization trends of such magnitude as to allow for the application of the old Engelsian “dialectical law”, according to which, under certain circumstances, quantitative changes result in qualitative ones? In other words, have globalizing forces proceeded far enough as to bring about fundamental changes in our society? Or yet in other words, has the centuries-old evolution of global society come to a revolutionary explosion, a quantum leap, a change of state? Are we living in a global or globalized society, radically different from the one of three decades or three centuries ago? I do not know. The problem here is two-fold. On the one hand, we should agree on which empirical data to select as indicators, and how to weigh and give meaning to them. On the other hand, we should decide *a priori* what behaviour of the data constitutes a qualitative change of state, a revolutionary change, a catastrophe in the literal, Thomaeian meaning of the world. And this, I am afraid, would entail endless discussions.

The third question is the one more closely related to the aims of the 2004 Budapest mobile communications conference. What is the contribution of the “new technologies” to the growth of globalization? Hard to say, also because we are in the middle, or only at the beginning, of a veritable explosion in this field. As Hegel put it, the owl of Minerva only takes flight at the end of the day, meaning that the powers of rational analysis can only be exerted when a phenomenon has run full course. But I am



afraid we'll have to wait a long time before the impact of the new technologies on society and culture result in some stable, recognizable patterns. Before that, we can only gather provisional data, draw scenarios and venture prophecies. My personal impression is that the fundamental impacts on society and culture have occurred with the spread of the land-line telephone (and telefax), broadcasting media (radio and television), and the PC. All newer developments – cable and satellite TV, internet, mobile telephony and all their mutually-reinforcing combinations – have phenomenally increased the speed, power, diversity and flexibility of the earlier technologies, but not altered the basic pattern. Perhaps more important is the fact that they have become accessible to the wide masses, thanks to the vertical fall of their costs.

This sceptical stance comes from my background as an urban sociologist, interested in the impact of communication technologies on settlement structure. It is clear to us that the shape of cities has been deeply affected – revolutionized – by the spread of mechanical transport, of telephone and of television (as well as by other, simpler technologies, like pipes, conduits, ducts). We do not see yet in urban patterns radical changes that can be attributed to the newer technologies. On the contrary, some forecasts of early prophets of the digital revolution – the disappearance of the big office buildings, and the spread of the electronic cottages<sup>13</sup> – have distinctly failed to materialize. After two or three decades from those forecasts, “telework” is still confined to a very small percentage of office workers, and virtual “tele-meetings” are still a minuscule part of business life. There is currently a great excitement, in some educational institutions, on the virtues of “e-learning” and the possible obsolescence of universities as brick-and-mortar structures, but I remain sceptical. As for the localization and organization of industrial productive units, the new technologies have only reinforced trends that were well underway with the older ones. So, it is basically a matter of “more of the same” than of revolutionary changes.

### *What Is Really New in Contemporary Globalism?*

I would like to close this part of the paper pointing out two real novelties in contemporary globalism. The first pertains to its *motives*; the second its *modes*.

Older globalism was fuelled, as we have seen, both by moral (religious) and material (political and economic) motives. It was pursued to spread

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<sup>13</sup> See Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock*, New York: Bantam Books, 1970.

religions, save souls, or bring people up to a civilized way of life; but also, perhaps more often in fact, to aggrandize and secure powers, seize resources, exploit people. In the last few decades, a quite new motivation has set in: to save the Earth from mankind's wrongdoings. The novelty in this view is that neither God nor man are placed at the centre of concerns, but Mother Nature. The "one world" attitude has been strongly reinforced by the awareness that the Earth is the only possible home of man, and that the life on the planet constitutes a seamless web, a unitary ecosystem, a single living meta-organism (the "Gaia Hypothesis"). As most environmental problems are rooted in the competition and conflicts among the nation-states (and especially among national economies), it seems imperative to strengthen the supra-national institutions. The "care and maintenance of Spaceship Earth" requires coordination at the global level. Environmentalism has become a remarkable force towards globalization.<sup>14</sup> (In fact, I was quite appalled, when I learned that the global environmental movement was gathering in Seattle under the "No Global" warcry. I couldn't believe they were so ignorant of history and unaware of their own nature. So I was happy to learn that, more recently, they have changed their sobriquet from "no global" to "new global", which is much more reasonable.)

The second novelty is that whereas former globalism assumed that the whole of mankind would be brought under one civilization, i.e. one set of core values and of common general rules, and under one paramount authority, the new globalism assumes that it is possible to reconcile unity and diversity; that some sort of political and moral unity of mankind can be achieved, while the differences in religions, customs, languages, ways of life and so on are respected. The balance between assimilation and identity, between integration and autonomy, between equality under the law and cultural differences, is a problem all empires and also some proselytizing religions, such as Christianity and Islam, had to face in the past. In our own days, it is politically correct to assume that we have to live in a multicultural world, where a plurality of civilizations co-exist without clashing; where European, Western values and mores cannot claim superiority on any other, and every civilization must tolerate, respect or even admire the others. This sounds all too good, but raises many problems. Personally I think that diversity and multi-culturality are certainly laudable when they pertain to relatively superficial matters, such as cuisine, music, dress, architectural styles, languages, artistic expressions, and so on. But regarding deeper, vital, more structural matters – the reproduc-

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<sup>14</sup> See Strassoldo, *Temi di sociologia...*, and "Globalism and Localism".

tion of life, the relationships between gender and age groups, the upbringing of children, the freedom of thought and expression, the procedures of collective decisions, the basic principles of political organization, the respect for life and individual dignity, the integrity of the body, and so on – it is not easy to accept a diversity of principles. Western civilization has tried to spread its own core values to the rest of the world, under the form of “universal human rights” proclaimed by the United Nations; but the extent to which it has succeeded is debatable. Non-western civilizations show some resistance, and even growing testiness. Some of the major tensions and conflicts of the present world revolve around such issues. What the final outcome will be is uncertain; but I tend to believe that progress toward global society is only acceptable to the extent that fundamental human rights – the core values of the Western tradition – are globally accepted.<sup>15</sup>

### A Few Remarks on Localism

On localism I shall be short because I feel that on this issue there is now a wide theoretical agreement among social scientists. It is clear that the relationship of man and society with space – the social organization of space, or the spatial organization of society – are fundamentally affected by communication (transport and information) technologies. Since the “mobiletic” and the “communicational” revolutions, territorial constraints have been overcome, space-time has shrunk by orders of magnitude, and the ties of man to space and place have become much more arbitrary and negotiable than before. A paradigm is by now well established, according to which the phenomena that can be classified under the concept of “localism” have generally been affected in many ways by the intensification of globalizing trends. Localism and globalism are dialectically linked. The theory of “glocalism” is now the standard in the field.

As a former social ecologist I have myself worked extensively on these issues. In 1980 I had almost readied a typescript of about 500 pages on the very ambitious subject of “space and society”. Then the PC was named “person of the year” by *Time* magazine, and everybody got excited about the social effects of the digital revolution, the spread of satellite and optical-fiber networks, internet and so on. So I decided to delay the publication in order to assess the impact of all this on the spatial organization of society,

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<sup>15</sup> See Raimondo Strassoldo, “Prospettive di fine millennio”, in Giorgio De Finis and Riccardo Scartezzini (eds.), *Universalità e differenza: Cosmopolitismo e relativismo nelle relazioni tra identità sociali e culture*, Milano: Angeli, 1996.

on spatial behaviour, spatial awareness, and so on. Of course the job quickly proved to be unmanageable, because of the extremely dynamic nature of the phenomena. While waiting for the impossible – the stabilization of the ICT revolution – the typescript obsolesced beyond salvation. In the meantime many other urban-sociologists-turned-ICT-sociologists, such as Manuel Castells, published their important books on the subject. So I limited myself to publishing some short excerpts and summaries,<sup>16</sup> and left the tome in the drawer. Then I found that many other prominent scholars were working in this field, and excellent books were appearing. Some of their authors, such as Joshua Meyrowitz and Mark Poster, were present at the 2004 Budapest conference, and have delivered masterly papers. I agree wholeheartedly with what they have said, and have nothing to add or object, nor do I want to be repetitious. What I shall do is simply quote a passage from the paper of mine which I referred to in the opening remarks, in order to show how close to what has been said here (for instance by Meyrowitz on the similitude between new localism and romantic-love marriage) my own earlier thinking was:

Post-modernism is also marked by a revival of localism. Localism represents one of the possible ways out of the anomy, alienation and identity loss, typical of modernity. The new localism is the search of refuge from the unsettling confusion of the larger world. Modern man/woman has created a global system, which has many advantages and values but which is certainly too complex to survey and manage, even though only intellectually. Post-modern man/woman, just because he/she is so deeply embedded in global information flows, may feel the need to revive small enclaves of familiarity, intimacy, security, intelligibility, organic-sensuous interaction, in which to mirror him/herself, contrary to the process occurring in front of the subjectivity-effacing TV screen.

The possibility of being exposed, through modern communication technology, to the whole infinity of places, persons, things, ideas, makes it all the more necessary to have, as a compensation, a center in which to cultivate one's self. The easy access to the whole world, with just a little time and money, gives new meaning to the need of a subjective center – a home, a community, a locale – from which to move and to which to return and rest.

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<sup>16</sup> See e.g. Raimondo Strassoldo, *The Sociology of Space: A Typological Approach*, discussion paper, Syracuse, NY: Department of Geography, Syracuse University, 1987, as well as Raimondo Strassoldo, "The Social Construction and Sociological Analysis of Space", in B. Hamm and B. Jalowiecki (eds.), *The Social Nature of Space*, Warsaw: Polish Academy of Sciences, 1990.



Traditionally, localism and rootedness have been considered backward, if not reactionary, attitudes, since history seemed to unfold towards cosmopolitanism, universalism, and mobility. Territorial *Gemeinschaft* seemed bound to be destroyed by functional *Gesellschaft*. This has happened to some extent, but the trend could not run full course. It has found inner limits in some basic human needs, and has generated dialectically its own limiting contradictions and countervailing forces.

Of course, as the qualifiers make clear, new localism is different from old localism. The essential differences are two. The first is that while old localism was primordial, unthinking, the new one is the outcome of free will, of conscious choice; the former is "necessary and natural", the second voluntary and intentional (rational).

The second difference is that the old localism tended to minimize contacts with the exterior, to maintain a strong closed boundary; while the new localism is quite aware of the rest of the world, and is quite open to interactions with it.<sup>17</sup>

## Some Thoughts on the Mobile Phone

### *A Claim of Sympathy*

As I informed you at the outset, I do not own a mobile phone. Why? First, this has nothing to do with the health hazard worries accompanying this new technology since its beginning,

Second, I have nothing against technological innovation. In fact, I am a great fan of technologies, and an enthusiastic visitor of science and technology museums. I get moved contemplating the tools, engines and apparatuses which were the result of so much human ingenuity, imagination and often sacrifice, and which, in turn, had such enormous effect on human life – generally, making it less miserable, brutish and short. In particular I am a great admirer of electronic and digital technologies for many reasons; one being that they not only use very little matter and energy, but in many ways can help in saving them in other sectors of the social metabolism, and thus are particularly environmentally-friendly.

Third, I am not against competitive capitalism and the market economy, and I must say I am very fascinated by its inexhaustible, fantastic capacity to create new products and the corresponding new needs. This has been going on since the beginning of mankind. To the question of "who needed the mobile, before 1990?" the answer of course is "who need-

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<sup>17</sup> Strassoldo, "Globalism and Localism", pp. 46 f.

ed to cook the meat, before the invention of fire?”. It is clear that the ability to talk to anyone the world over through a few grams of matter in anyone’s pocket is more than a great progress; it is something miraculous, previously imagined only in myths and fables.

Fourth, I am quite happy that everybody else has a mobile, so *I* can find *them* anytime anywhere.

### *Some Reasons for Not Owning, So Far, a Mobile*

So, why do I not own a mobile?

There was a period, in the first years of the mass adoption of mobiles, in which the experience of large numbers of individuals, each engaged in conversation with invisible partners – such as is usual in “non-places” like airports, train stations, central city intersections, and some meetings – would give me chills. The fact that each of them was elsewhere with his mind gave me a queer sensation of separation between body and soul; the impression that what I was seeing were not whole humans but mere walking bodies, zombies or robots. I have mostly overcome this uneasiness, and have adapted to the new world in which the space of places and face-to-face interaction has been superseded by the non-space of electromagnetic wave-flows.

In later years, however, a number of mild worries or reservations have dawned in my mind. They are based neither on systematic research nor on readings, but only on casual personal impressions. Thus, they do not feign any scientific status. I hope they will be, nevertheless, of some interest to the reader.

### *A Question of Good Manners*

A first observation concerns the changes in the rules of “sociability”, of good manners, that the mobile has brought about. It was formerly considered rude, for instance, to intrude into an ongoing conversation between two parties; whereas it now happens all the time that the person you are talking with stops and turns his back on you to start another conversation with an absent, invisible caller. People would invite you to the restaurant and then spend much of the time talking with some invisible partners; or may be invited to a friend’s home and spend much of the time talking with their faraway relatives. It should be recalled, however, that the breach is more than a century old, having started with the landline phone; the mobile has only made it general and ubiquitous.

One of the grounds of opposition, more than one century ago, to the

installation of telephones in private homes was that it was unthinkable to allow strangers to enter uninvited into the domestic private sphere. In many Western cultures the principles of privacy and reserve were very important, and it was considered uncouth to expose to the public one's private affairs; whether the blame fell on him who did not keep for himself his affairs, or on him who spied on them. This principle has completely collapsed: people publicly discuss with their invisible partners all sorts of private matters. Once upon a time, talking aloud and alone was seen as a manifestation of psychic derangement ("only mad people talk alone"); now it is accepted as normal.

The phenomenological description of the breaches of traditional etiquette rules brought about by the mobile could go on for a long while. Now, those rules are certainly culture-bound and relative, and they can change; it is possible that with time new sociability norms in this field will be generally accepted, or that new ways to reconcile the new technology with traditional norms will be found. In the meantime we are, I am afraid, in a period of anomy, which some may define as a period of bad manners.

### *The Eclipse of Thoughtful Silence*

But there are more serious worries. One concerns the prevalence of (external) communication over (internal) thinking, and the eclipse of that traditional virtue, silence. In all traditional cultures there are, I think, many adages in this vein; an Italian one says "words are silver, but silence is gold". Leonardo da Vinci said "keep silent, so that you shall be deemed the only sage". There were formerly severe rules imposing silence in many social circumstances, and especially in the presence of higher-status persons. There were also important institutions founded on silence, like the hermitage and some monastic orders, like the Cistercians. Silence is a golden rule also in many Oriental cultures. The idea was that silence with fellow-men favours communication with oneself and with God (*in interiore homine habitat Deus*, wrote St. Augustine: "in the interior of man God dwells"). The eclipse of silence thus also signals the eclipse of God (and perhaps of the traditional idea of man) in modern society.

In most social circumstances, the ability to communicate has today become the top virtue. This has to do, I believe, with the commercialization of society. Talkativeness (or eloquence) is the traditional character of vendors of all sorts (lawyers and politicians included, who have to sell their ideas). Nowadays, the great majority of people are employed in the service sector, and most services have to do with selling something. So there

are some very structural causes of the high value and wide diffusion communication has achieved in our society.

Now, speech and communication certainly are very good things. They respond to fundamental needs, both human-psychological and societal-structural. But every need and value must be balanced by the reciprocal (or opposing) one. Virtue stays in the middle. There is a time for speaking and communicating; but there should also be a time for thinking, for meditation, for contemplation, for concentration, for reflection, for introspection, for internal talk within oneself and, perhaps, with the inhabitants of the self. The worry is that the overemphasis on communication as the paramount human activity, and the ubiquitous availability of all sorts of ICTs, is going to reduce the time and the need for those other activities. Observing the behaviour of students and train passengers, it seems to me that the mobile is invading most of what was called "free" time. No time is left for just idle thinking and observation. In their free time, up until a couple of decades ago, people would just read something; in train or parks, they would try some conversation with strangers. In the last twenty years, they would put on their earphones and fill the void in their heads with music. In the last ten years, they just dial someone up and talk, or send SMS messages. They only seem to be able to exist as nodes and terminals of communication networks.

### *The Weakening of Self-Reliance*

A further worry concerns the destiny of such traditional virtues as self-reliance and ingenuity. Once upon a time, the main aim of education was to equip young people to confront the contingencies of life as free-standing, autonomous, self-directed individuals. Problems were meant to be met relying on inner resources of character, knowledge and skill. For many reasons, in late modern society the emphasis shifted to teamwork, coordination with others, ability to find and mobilize external resources, and, of course, communication. David Riesman denounced more than half a century ago the trend toward other-directedness. Earlier emphasis on inner resources and self-reliance prompted individual inventiveness, creativity, ingenuity, personal commitment. I am afraid that the universal availability of the mobile phone is encouraging an over-reliance on external help. Confronted with any difficulty, the automatic reflex is to dial someone up. This started already with the landline phone, of course. Secretaries spend a good deal of their time on the phone, asking their colleagues how do they do this and that, instead of trying to find out by themselves the right way to do it. But the trend is mightily reinforced by the efficiency and friend-



liness of the mobile. Of course, having a mobile gives a wonderful sense of security; and in many circumstances, it can be of vital importance, as, for instance, when one tries to find one's way in the metropolitan jungle, or when one gets lost while trekking in the wilderness or gets into trouble while climbing mountains. But the inclination is, unavoidably, to ask for help in all circumstances, however trivial.

Once upon a time the aim of education was to turn dependent infants into autonomous adults. Is the mobile reinforcing the trend – already fuelled by many other societal processes – to keep people in never-ending dependence, perpetual infancy, as Tocqueville feared 170 years ago?

### *The Liquefaction of Decision Making*

Watching all the people engaged in apparently solitary conversation, in the streets, cars, public and private places, it is hard to believe that social life was even possible before the mobile phone. What is all this talking about? Certainly, part of it is just a new way to fill already existing pockets of empty time; a pastime, an idle play, replacing earlier modes, such as reading, watching, playing cards (or gameboys), or talking to stand-bys. Part of it fulfils a need which was not possible to satisfy before, such as nurturing important social relations also while moving. These could be defined as expressive uses of the mobile. There are also more instrumental uses, such as keeping track, also during transfers, of the state and position of significant others. But a fair amount of mobile talk (I do not have the data) simply is a new addition to the panoply of communications fed into decision making processes. What was previously done only with fixed ICTs now can be done also while the parties are on the move. Communication has conquered a new large province of time.

What are the effects of the mobile phone on decision making processes? One, I fear, is simply the cluttering of information flows, i.e. information inflation.

Secondly, it may be safely stated that the effects of ICTs and the mobile phone in particular to decision making processes are multifarious and probably contradictory. On the one hand, the new communications technologies contribute to the democratization of such processes, because more and more people have access to the requisite information, and may be involved in the process.

On the other hand, at the individual level, the availability of easy communication may make commitments less stringent. In the pre-telephone age, appointments and commitments had to be steadfast. Once you promised (in face-to-face communication or by letter) you would do something,

or be somewhere, at a certain time, you were bound to do it, because it would be often impossible to inform the other party of any arisen obstacles. If you did not do as agreed, you would lose face and be labelled as an unreliable person. In the mobile phone age, you can at any time contact your partner anywhere and inform him, with a clear conscience, of the impediments or of your changes of mind. You can keep open your options up to the last minute. You can keep your freedom, which is the opposite of commitment.

At the collective level, the widening of the subjects involved may render decision making processes more complex, fuzzy and slow; and dilute responsibility. The more people you consult on what decision you should make, the more you have to delay decision and share the merit or blame of the outcome with all participants in the process. Or, the initiator of a decision-making process must engage in long negotiations with many parties, in order to build consensus. Whether all this contributes to the clarity and efficiency of the political and the economic decision processes, I am not sure.

In cases when ideas, opinions, feelings, interests and positions involved are not very structured, the process may be even more fuzzy. One example is the endless mobile phone discussions among teenager groups (mostly concerning dating and mating activities, in the broadest sense). I believe that the case of the teenager group may be emblematic for the whole of post-modern society, which Zygmunt Bauman<sup>18</sup> has characterized as “liquid”, and Beat Wyss<sup>19</sup> has likened to the comfort, shapelessness and stretchability of a T-shirt.

### *Communication and Control*

Communication and control are two sides of the same coin, as Norbert Wiener made clear almost sixty years ago in the subtitle of his fundamental book on cybernetics. Every advance in ICT is an advance in the potential of control. Control is one of the many synonyms of power, and is also the reciprocal of dependence, which we have discussed above. Dependents are controlled by those they depend upon. But control also takes the benevolent form of assistance. All this applies to the phone, mobile or otherwise. Adults would force the mobile on their elderly parents living alone in order to be able to check, anytime and anywhere, their health or other needs.

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<sup>18</sup> Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Beat Wyss, *Die Welt als T-Shirt: Zur Ästhetik und Geschichte der Medien*, Köln: Du Mont, 1997.

Even more clearly, giving mobile phones as a gift to teenagers and even children is usually an attempt of the parents to control their whereabouts, and be able to assist them, in case of need. Firms usually equip their employees with mobiles both to let them work more efficiently and in order to be able to reach them all the time, and hence to control them. On the other side, the *refuseniks* often see the mobile phone as a leash, one more device to chain people to the System.

Then there are the worries about privacy and freedom. The suspicion that all technological communications may be controlled by some dark powers is as old as the telephone, and with good reasons. Many political regimes did put such technologies under their control; George Orwell based his 1984 novel on this idea; the Echelon scandal sent a wave of shuddering in many spines. That all telephone traffic is automatically recorded and stored, at least in some countries, seems clear. Personally, I haven't so far done anything I need to hide; but I assume that most people have some objections to a system where all their communicative activities are recorded and stored, somewhere, by someone.