

Introduction: Indications of the Knowledge Society

Eduardo Portella

The idea of a knowledge society appears all at once as an interrogation, a provocation and a challenge.¹ Whether we receive it with mistrust or with curiosity, the 'knowledge-based society' is a fashionable conception. It is on the agenda if you like. Fashions and agendas are dated, fleeting occurrences. They are currents which never linger at any station, flowing along with the questions of the latest modernity. The postmodern society, which I insist on describing as a lower modernity, is inordinately fond of labels, to say nothing of its by-products: slogans, logos, packaging. An indolent disposition toward knowledge is no stranger to this.

More than ever, even more than during Francis Bacon's time, 'knowledge is power'. And to be legitimate, knowledge must be anchored in social life, take root in the life of the world, avoid solitary productions, and make interlocutors out of speakers. The 'knowledge society' is, of course, a programme dedicated to action: action involving education, the sciences, culture and communication at one and the same time.

It is impossible to think, or to be at liberty to interrogate today's simultaneous rather than successively evolving societies, without conversing with, confronting or perhaps even clashing with information and communication technologies. Can we really imagine that we live in a society that is founded, sustained and driven by knowledge? The answer would almost certainly be in the negative. The transition to such a society is fraught with hazards. The commerce of knowledge, the outpost of market economies, fails to make the needed qualitative leap. Instead, I would say we live in an information society that has reached new scales of exchange. Nothing more than that. Plenty of information; little learning.

Every intellectual effort, be it cybernetic or not, must be aimed at qualitative reconstruction, spiritual reinvigoration and ample intersubjectivity. No democratic and just knowledge society can be otherwise achieved in the face of the prevailing and often rising inequality.

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The gulf between knowledge and information reflects a worrying paucity of thought. And it underlines a hitherto insurmountable challenge. Social exclusion has been a familiar fixture for some time. And now, in the *non-locus* of cyberspace, the World Wide Web unravels a new plot, heedlessly bringing digital exclusion and other snares.

Inequality has become the blind spot of the social world and technological systems, a breeding ground for violence. One might hope that knowledge could be an antidote to violence. But for this it must be made accessible in the real and the virtual senses. If cultures are shut into hegemonies and unable to give form to openly democratic constructions, the pre-established design must be altered. Learning must be made compatible with emancipation. And this emancipating force must not be distorted into a second, unabridged and augmented edition of the enlightened despot. Be that as it may, one can hardly ignore the impact of these new technologies, of these now irreplaceable locomotives, upon society. As the pre-established scripts are altered, leading technologies must be diverted to increase the flow of learning, speeding up and democratizing access to knowledge.

In order to embark on an undertaking of such magnitude, we must guard against settling for a form of thinking that has become all but unanimous in this day and age. We must start by reformulating the interdisciplinary status of knowledge. The death of mono-disciplinary knowledge has gone unremarked. Yet, public and private research funding agencies operate upon this knowledge, unable to see that there is no one history, no one, unanimous culture, no unified society. It is impossible to imagine a unanimous way of thinking, learning, or knowing. The history that lives on has several facets. The history that is dying is unanimous or undisputed. The other one has scarcely begun.

Unanimity plunges all thinking into an absolute reductionism. Its fatal flaws can hardly be concealed: on the one hand, a proliferation of policies devoted exclusively to obtaining results, wholly dedicated to performance, but neglectful of values; on the other, the denial of intersubjectivity, for the benefit of a narrow, dubious and deceptive profitability. In both cases, what emerges is a modernity bereft of imagination – monofocal, unidirectional, globalizing . . . Performance is gradually reduced to a matter of simple accountancy, where the stock market indices play the leading roles. Intellectual desertification spreads and quality becomes a matter of last resort. The fear of enchantment gives way to just plain fear. The instrumental voracity and the phantom of bureaucracy stand in the way of challenging experiences, of the salutary turbulences, of the risks and the hopes that make up the life of the world.

In this low modernity, knowledge and know-how have signed a pact of co-operation. I doubt very much that any benefit has yet come out of that agreement. The performance imperative has once again silenced the sober catalogue of not-so-useless axiological references. With no further ado, the will to think has made itself scarce: one can easily foresee a dangerous return to positive or, more exactly, positivist knowledge. The opacity of know-how is but a form of jargon created for the delight of the experts of the day. Let us not be deluded: know-how has a tendency to be 'how' without 'knowing'. So much for the peculiar episodes of that species of naive competency that prattles, in a generally authoritarian manner, in the name of a sleepwalking efficiency.

Against a democratic background, the knowledge society advances as a fundamental human right. The link and the reciprocity are matters of course. Learning is a fundamental human right, as the law of humankind is legitimized in the ecology of social life. Knowledge and learning are kindled through society. In turn, the various forms of 'togetherness' found in society have learning as their compass. This brings us back to the turbulence zone.

The rights of the individual, inseparable from the rights of others – others as ideas, images, perceptions, languages, inclusion or exclusion – are put in doubt when societies are unable to ensure the right to learn. We might suppose that we are on the threshold of a new renaissance. This one will no longer be utopian, as the first one was. For if the sun then shone upon knowledge, now it is knowledge that must shed its clearest light upon the earth, society and interpersonal relations. Difficulties and questions prevail: is it still possible to think of the range of human rights within the confines of the nation state? What is it that holds sway today: the foundations of sovereignty or the sovereignty of the foundations? Questions of a civic nature continue to arise. But there can be no human rights in the singular. Society and learning know this.

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Notes

1. *Society, Knowledge and Know-How* was the theme suggested by Eduardo Portella, Coordinator of the transdisciplinary network 'Pathways into the Third Millennium', for an international symposium which was held under UNESCO auspices at the Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici in Naples (Italy) on 6 and 7 December 2001.

Issue 197 of *Diogenes* assembles some of the texts presented at this symposium. The texts of Homi K. Bhabha and Sergio Paulo Rouanet, however, were not prepared within this framework.

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