

# Knowledge Society or Leisure Society?

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I am aware that this title is deliberately provoking in character. Even so, I believe that it expresses fairly accurately the situation of our advanced societies – the ones I am thinking of above all – where the amount of information available for use in producing goods and services is now so vast that we are obliged to turn to machines, artificial memories, etc. as possible ‘subjects’ in a position to contain and ‘dominate’ that information.

Modernity has also been the period when first the notion, then the cult of genius developed: first Leonardo’s ‘universal’ genius, then the artistic genius, for and by whom ‘nature is the rule of the arts’. The two images of genius, the mind capable of universal learning that was Aristotle’s dream in the *Metaphysics*, and the ‘innate’ talents of the great artist, seem remote from each other. Yet both reflect modern consciousness of a relentless extension which affects the possibilities of science as well as of art.

It is as if, during the step by step progression of modernity, the distance between the two conceptions of genius were dwindling: the genius of our time is one who is omniscient only in so far as another passes on the rules; it is no longer nature, but perhaps the computer, or even the network through which universal wisdom flows without being detected by anyone or any finite subject, no matter how gifted, simultaneously or in a coherent fashion.

In the modern transformation of the ‘subject’ of learning, there are characteristic moments such as the ever-recurring research on ‘the arts of memory’ (from Giordano Bruno to Pierre Ramus), romantic (and Marxian) nostalgia for a society in which individuals would no longer be bound by the social division of labour (fisherman in the morning and violinist in the evening . . .), the great Kantian project to carry learning back to the *a priori* conditions of reason, already imbued with a certain pessimism by the Husserl of the *Crisis of European Sciences*.

Today such theoretical projects, once more or less reserved for scholars, seem precisely like political projects. The European Union speaks explicitly of a ‘knowledge society’ as a beckoning horizon for its ongoing community policies of learning, and

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the popularization of science and education. The ultimate aim (understandably) is to overcome the challenges of the global market, which demands widespread abilities in order to implement the new means produced by the new technologies.

On the one hand one would have to organize a true and thorough 'recycling' of the great masses of industrial workers who must acquire new skills in order to avoid being excluded from the 'labour market' in midstream, as it were, or soon afterwards. On the other hand, national or supranational regions, in this case a united Europe, must become capable of producing autonomously the scientific and technological innovations which would enable them to keep abreast of worldwide economic competition.

Such aims are sacrosanct and concern us all as citizens. Achieving these aims will determine not only our material wealth, but also, for example, our fate as living organisms which need new remedies to fend off the less and less 'natural' threat of death. Philosophical consciousness (not all philosophies) in respect of the essentially 'technical' character of modern science could not find more explicit or more indubitable confirmation: when we speak of a knowledge society, what we really mean is a society of widespread technological learning, endowed accordingly with more 'productive' potential. If these observations are taken into account, some doubt emerges in respect of the meaning to be attributed to the term 'knowledge society'. The implicit laudatory sense, associated with positive values, suggested by the immediate expression, is quite drastically restricted. Knowledge (i.e. truth, the order of things, ultimately God as supreme 'object' of beatific contemplation) has always signified the worthiest and most gratifying activity of humankind.

Nevertheless, since Kant (and possibly before), philosophy has welcomed and explored the difference between knowing and thinking. That difference was taken up in the 20th century by philosophers such as Heidegger, making the astonishing assertion that 'science does not think', thereby attracting so much criticism, even from those who would not dream of doubting the word of Kant.

For Kant, the noumenon or that which is 'thought' is the being in itself of the world of which we can learn and know nothing because our knowledge, which supports learning, is limited to the phenomenon, what *appears*. The so-called higher activities of human reason are exercised beyond the world of the phenomenon. They begin with the practical use of reason, which is characterized by a power of initiative not determined in a causal fashion by a chain of phenomena to arrive at a form of aesthetic contemplation which remains silent on the state of things but finds its place in the field of the free play of the faculty of the subject, understood here, obviously, as something noumenal.

On the whole, the interpreters of Kant are agreed (I believe) in recognizing that the merit of his critique has definitely been to clarify the foundations of knowledge; but even more, and perhaps above all, to limit the terrain of scientific knowledge by excluding without condemning it to the arbitrary and the irrational the world of freedom, values and religious experience which, in multiple guises, might be only the 'world' or the non-world of the noumenon.

The title of this article, then, could have been phrased differently: knowledge society or thinking society? But if we then go on to wonder, a little more specifically, what in the Kantian distinction might characterize thought in relation to knowledge,

even if it is not literally discernible in the texts, we shall end by finding what I intended to indicate by the word leisure.

Or perhaps even 'play', which once again recalls the Kant of the aesthetics and even more the hermeneutics of Hans Georg Gadamer. In that sense play allows us to accept at least two important characteristics of thought as non-reducible to knowledge: freedom and emotional involvement.

So it is a matter of two elements that could be correctly attached to leisure. Observing that such a way of characterizing thought reduces it to the frivolity of ludic behaviour, losing the serious element, signifies that humankind remains fettered by the idea that their highest activity is knowledge; but knowledge could be the highest activity only if it is the contemplation of divine order, where to see how things are authentically also signifies eternal beatitude. Spinoza thought so: *amor dei intellectualis*. But do we?

The struggle which modern thought has waged against metaphysics since Kant and even more radically in connection with Heidegger finds its own purpose in the refusal to imagine the meaning of existence as the reflection of a truth given once and for all and to accept that it should merely be recorded and respected, from technical procedures to moral choices. Thought as play and leisure is certainly not detached from the activity of knowledge; it is linked with it in the way first Kant, then Heidegger taught; it is the duality already-always given with our historical existence of a horizon where the experience of phenomena and scientific knowledge come within reach.

Since this is not preliminary knowledge in Kant and less still in Heidegger, but rather a historical 'disposition' of our reason, that duality bears the marks of experience which, undetermined by phenomenological data, still springs from essential spontaneity. That is why play and the expression of freedom, therefore a form of enjoyment, are described in the most incisive manner by Kant in the *Critique of Judgement* where the aesthetic pleasure we derive from the contemplation of a work of art is the pleasure of feeling able to share our experience with others, a kind of community spirit (for Kant: pure communicability, beyond all specific content).

The contemplation of God in Christian theology and mysticism never really had the 'cognitive' meaning of Spinoza's geometricism. Beatitude itself has often been described as a banquet, where people are seated together, conversing; the Christian tradition has called this *agapê*, and it differs so little from love in all its implications.

Naturally, I shall not dwell upon the mystical side of my article. Turning to Kant himself was mainly to legitimize the 'outrageous' element in my thesis. But how can one avoid taking some liberties when passing from (innocent?) philosophical considerations on thought and knowledge to a tentative proposal to draw consequences of a practical, social and political nature?

What should be taught at school? Play instead of the hard discipline of acquiring knowledge ever more indispensable to our individual and associative life? Knowledge, and its dissemination, pose much the same problem as the concept of 'development': with that, nowadays, we increasingly link the word 'sustainable'. This brings to mind Nietzsche's expression 'everything depends on how much truth one can bear' (or something like that). Of course he was referring to a different matter, but his argument fits in fairly well with our debate.

In the same way as for development, the social problem of knowledge is more and more that of its 'natural' limits. We only have to think of the quantity of information churned out daily by the newspapers and the media. Those who like to keep 'in touch' (for example, essayists, politicians, social commentators) must now resort more often than not to collaborators or 'search engines' who supply a pre-selection of the material ultimately to be appreciated by oneself.

Fortunately (or not!) the average member of the public neither reads nor listens to everything, or rather does not bother to obtain a full version of his or her information, because he or she has better things to do. This becomes a problem even in the workings of democracy and is plain to be seen. Where democracy is concerned, the other pertinent aspect of knowledge is that reflected in frequent public decisions taken on the advice of specialists: if it is a matter of a referendum on nuclear power stations, for example, would those consulted understand enough about physics to answer in full possession of the facts? To know what is at stake, all voters would have to turn into miniature Leonardo da Vincis, which is clearly beyond their powers. Can one imagine a knowledge society where, as in the case of 'development', one would gradually arrive at a wholesale 'Leonardization'? And if that is impossible, what else can we do?

Here, the distinction between thinking and knowing, between *scire* (to learn) and *frui* (to enjoy) appears in its brightest light. It will certainly not push us into hastily jettisoning the ideal of knowing and promoting science (which one might expect when philosophy stresses this theme); but it should lead us at least to an unavoidable redefinition of the social significance of knowledge. It is no accident that the society of the crisis of the ideal of a quantitative development of knowledge is also that of informatics. A book by H. Dreyfus, which came out opportunely a few years ago, was entitled *What Computers Can't Do*. It was an updated version of the famous dispute of the late 19th century between the natural sciences and the sciences of the mind (*Natur- and Geisteswissenschaften*). Of course there are things that computers cannot do; even so, we must pay greater attention to what they *can* do, and use them in the most efficient way. This amounts not to ignoring the irreducibly human character of the life of the intellect, but to recognizing and promoting positively the possibility of bringing certain activities which were previously a burden for truly human life down to a 'non-human' dimension.

In this respect, we could call upon a variety of studies on customs and habits as a means of freeing conscious activity from banal preoccupations. And again on positions like those of Schiller or German idealism beside Kantian moralism: morals are not threatened by the habit of doing good and civilization reaps the benefits. A knowledge society is a society where, just as good habits make us do good without thinking, knowledge is 'available' in networks, in artificial memories, and 'works' even if it is nowhere to be seen. Hegel himself would not really have believed it completely, although he spoke of an 'objective mind', that is to say an 'absolute' subject capable of possessing every type of knowledge, according to the classical conception of learning.

I must say that I am still not sure where the path I propose to take will lead. I know there are risks but I am convinced (I cannot say that I *know*, or I should be contradicting myself) that there is no alternative. To promote a knowledge society as a

world where tomorrow everyone should be capable of taking their own decisions on the most diverse problems of social life, which implies more and more the possession of specialized notions, seems to me to be an ideological mystification which serves only to highlight the inability to rethink the very concept of knowledge. Henceforth, in the matter of decisions which involve this type of knowledge, it is more and more likely that we will trust the experts we respect and on whom we can rely, for a series of reasons unrelated to any direct evaluation (of which we would be incapable) of their specific discipline.

The conceptual pairs brought into play here are developed from the differentiation between thinking and knowing, by going so far, for example, as to differentiate between technique and politics, economics and ethics, 'friendship' and 'truth' (contrary to the old adage 'Plato is my friend, truth even more'), so much so that it might be wondered whether we are not in a reverse situation. Might not the truth I recognize, that I can recognize in many 'specialized' fields, be that which comes to me from someone whom I *already* consider as a friend?

It is in referring to observations of this kind that it becomes less outrageous to speak of a leisure and play society as the only possible realization of the ideal of a knowledge society. Let us all remember the characteristics of the concept of play I mentioned before: the 'duality' and the spontaneity, and consequently an affective involvement. In concrete terms it means that our future harbours a learning that no-one will be able to possess personally. That is because in ever vaster sectors of individual and social life we must 'trust' someone else. Now this has even become a criterion of physical survival: if I wish to make a 'biological will' which will allow me to die in dignity, demanding that in certain cases my death should be accepted, or even speeded, I place my trust in whosoever will carry out my wishes. Even if I do not sign such a will, I am implicitly trusting not only nature, but doctors, the health service, and ultimately someone less reliable because more anonymous.

The most general and socially visible form of such trust is, in the end, political democracy. It is true that when I exercise my right as a voter I choose one of several political programmes set out explicitly. However, in doing so I do not go beyond a certain degree of knowledge. The political contract I sign with my parliamentary representatives rather resembles what happens with an insurance policy which includes clauses written in small print so that, more and more often, I need a *broker*, an expert who can advise me as to the policy most suited to my needs or even, henceforth, who will advise me as to the telephone company which is most advantageous.

Reason, watchful in the manner of the Enlightenment, would say that this is the way to forfeit freedom. However, it is a matter of taking seriously the transformations (produced moreover by science and technology) of the very concept of knowledge, truth and freedom.

Democracy and political freedom will never be achieved purely as widespread scientific competence but as the possibility each of us has of choosing the 'experts' most apt at guidance. The choice will be made according to a more complex affinity which it would not be exaggerating to call 'existential'.

Would recognizing all this mean giving in totally in the face of a democracy where rational argument would be replaced by charismatic 'leaders', constructed by the media and the strength of slogans? We are aware of the risk, but even in societies less

media-driven than ours the rational purity of political debate, if it took place, would be influenced by allegiances, friendships and 'trust'; even if ideology masked everything, as Marx knew only too well.

In democracy, we find that we are aware, not only negatively because we have become more sceptical with regard to a 'rational' choice of the true way, but also because we are called upon more and more 'objectively' to conceive and live our social existence as a token of friendship, sole guarantee possible of civilization itself.

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