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The Meaning of Biopolitics in the Age of Numerical Revolution: What Has Remained of Foucault's and McLuhan's Legacy? The Contours of a New Expository Society

Abstract

Marshall McLuhan, in the 1960s, coined the well-known phrase "the world is a global village" at a time when the Internet did not exist, and new communication and media technologies were about to transform the world into a planetary village via interconnection. However, McLuhan may not have anticipated that accelerated technological advances would be made possible by communication without a "physical mediator-factor" and that the utilitarian and instrumental dimension of communication would give way to cultural and social domination and manipulation. In the numerical age, Foucault's notion of "bio-politics" as a system of complete control and regulation of the body and life by means of science and technology is, at first glance, an outdated term, belonging to the past of modern, biopolitical and repressive societies. The numerical control is today based on a deep urge for individual and narcissistic exhibitionism in the new expository society.

Key words: *biopolitics, power, numerical age, exposure, media.*

Digital ontophany

The contemporary communication is dematerialised and virtual, while the internet enables everyone to access and store data from anywhere in the world. Distance and time are no longer obstacles. Nowadays the communication happens in real time on social networks, enabling a new form of existence: digital "ontophany"[130]. The etimology of the term invokes a dimension of existence and appearance (phainô): refers to the way in which individuals and objects present themselves to us through digital devices or through the effects of their omnipresence and consists of the following characteristics: noumenality, ideality, interactivity, virtuality, versatility, reticularity, instant reproducibility, reversibility, destructibility, fluidity and ludogeneity. **We do not know yet if digital ontophany will lead to regression, cognitive atrophy (digital dementia) or to a new ontogenesis,** "the improvement of the human condition", i.e., transhumanism. The innovation of the digital technical system enables, on the phenomenological level, the emergence of a new ontophanic matrix, which is to be interpreted, as any technical revolution, as an ontophanic revolution, that is, a turning point in the perception of reality and the world.

Is biopolitics outdated?

The term biopolitics was coined in 1974 by Michel Foucault, who attributed it to his mentor, Georges Canguilhem. The term refers to the intersection between politics and human life, denoting organised institutional dominance over life in general, established by the scientific and technological regulation of knowledge as a new form of state control, that is, by repression over the lives of citizens. Therefore, what we have here is a combination of biology and politics. In his work *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben appropriates the term biopolitics from Foucault, connecting it with Hannah Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism. Agamben's study[131] shows that the whole history of the Western political world is characterised by a connection between sovereign power over the life and death of citizens-subjects and biopolitical control over citizens' lives – the connection epitomised by Nazi concentration camps, which has to date been reflected in democratic societies through efforts to set up a normative framework for bare life and subject it to the processes of political integration and exclusion. Biopolitics refers to the relationship between power and social governance, while also constituting a political strategy, an instrument of scientific power and an institutional practice. Its all-encompassing area of operation/governance tackles the processes of medicalisation of the population and public health: natality, mortality, hygiene, food, sexuality, behaviour. Is the term biopolitics still current now, in the time of digital media, giant database algorithms and partly also of artificial intelligence? Some philosophers,

130 In his book *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade describes religious experience in the traditional sense as hierophany, which is the manifestation of the sacred in the profane world.

131 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: Suverena moć i goli život* (*Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*) Multimedijalni institut, December 2016.

including Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval[132], believe that biopolitics has made an epistemiological step forward: control over the body exercised by means of individualised surveillance nowadays implies a new method of work and governance. In other words, governance no longer relies on norms and control, as it did in classic biopolitics, but on the idea of freedom of subjects managed by almost invisible and painless incentives. Corporeality, as meant by Focault, gradually disappears as an external and autonomous subject, being immersed and integrated in virtual reality. The term "virtual reality" is not unambiguous. In *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*[133], Michael R. Heim identifies seven different concepts of virtual reality: simulation, interaction, artificiality, immersion, telepresence, full-body immersion, and network communication. The term "medium" in the sense of intermediary also becomes disputable in the context of new technological advances in nanotechnology and robotics or artificial intelligence, while technological innovations combining robotics, i.e., artificial intelligence, with the human body herald a new generation of posthuman organisms, such as the cybernetic, posthuman body.

Other analysts suggest that the ability of Facebook, Google, and other top Internet players to collect huge volumes of data provides for a new art of governance in the areas where control has been substituted by profiling. Antoinette Rouvroy[134] notes that the regulatory regime is being replaced by the neutralisation regime, whereas in the opinion of Mondher Kilani[135] biopolitics now has "multiple power to control and shape individuals and consciences". While classic biopolitics aimed to objectivise individuals, the same strategy is now implemented by applying and manipulating the hypersubjectivisation of society. One illustrative example is that of Big Brother from Orwell's 1984, a totalitarian dystopia in which wishes, sexuality, altruistic feelings and freedoms were neutralised. In the digital age individuals become self-confident media subjects that have to be urged to constantly desire and consume digital technologies. In line with this, new digital consumer strategies are based on generating the largest possible personal exposure and transparency of consumers, who show and share their personal preferences (e.g., Facebook likes, comments and photos posted on the network). Desires and passions are not suppressed any more, but freely released and demonstrated with an approval of consumers-subjects. This is what Foucault calls "*conduite*" or the conduct of conduct (*conduite de la conduite*). Dardot and Laval[136] use the metaphor of the highway code, which allows for freely "choosing" the route and destination, but under the rules of the highway (speed, driver's licence, etc.). The reference implies a new form of the market, and of power, in which companies such as Google, Microsoft, Facebook and Amazon cooperate with intelligence agencies, law enforcement agencies (including the police), the military (and the military industry), marketing companies, insurance companies and Sillicon Valley startups. Therefore, we are no longer dealing

132 Pierre Dardot, Christian Laval, *La nouvelle raison du monde. Essai sur la société néolibérale*, La Découverte, coll. "La Découverte/Poche", 2010, p. 498, EAN: 9782707165022.

133 Michael R.Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (Oxford University Press, 1993)

134 http://www.ladeleuziana.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Rouvroy-Stiegler_eng.pdf

135 Kilani, Mondher (2018), *Du goût de l'autre. Fragments d'un discours cannibale*, Paris, Seuil.

136 Dardot, Laval, ibid, cit.

with the traditional panoptic control performed from one central point, but rather with an "open government", a myriad of private and public actors, often with overlapping and converging interests, which redefine the form of power circulating in the digital world. At his point one should recall the panopticon, a system of control designed by Jeremy Bentham, which was popularised by Foucault. The panopticon was modelled on the disciplinarian societies of the 18th and 19th centuries. In his book *Discipline and Punish*[137], Foucault describes it as an environment in which "an inmate should be consciously and permanently visible", which enables the "automatic functioning of power". This "visible and unverifiable" power can be used to describe the overall "relations of power in people's everyday lives".

In contrast with the panopticon and previous control systems, personal identities and profiles are at present revealed voluntarily and need not be integrated in a system of power to be controlled. The imperative of control has disappeared before the conscious and voluntary exposure of everyone and everything via digital systems. In the words of Bernard E. Harcourt[138], this new "form of the power of exposure" uses digital media to produce subjective micro-narratives, intimate and trivial stories (as opposed to inconsistent meta-narratives referred to by J-F. Lyotard), which take an active part in the shaping and recreating of various subjectivities. Within the new digital regime and distribution of power, individuals are no longer subject to physical dyscipline or moral restraint, but participate, voluntarily and enthusiastically, in this exhibicionist and voyeuristic society.

Role of the virtual counterpart

By encouraging the creation of similar profiles, "ideal correspondences" and "perfect matches " in the cyberspace and social networks, the digital environment has given rise to the virtual counterpart, the so-called "double", as discussed by the philosopher Clement Rousset[139] , a figure used as a virtual model profile to optimise the decision-making process and asessment of the means used and goals achieved in order for the individual to respond in accordance with newly introduced variables and "oscillations in behaviour". The theme and figure of the counterpart, found in the writings of Plato, Sophocles, Bergson, Calderon de la Barca and Lacan, demonstrates the paradoxical structure of the counterpart, which derives from an illusionary division of a unique event into two events. Such a split is made possible due to the ability of human beings to eliminate or supress reality when it becomes traumatic or unpleasant, which is frequently realised in virtual reality, an improved version of reality, often used to escape from everyday life.

137 Foucault, Michel, *Nadzor i kazna: rađanje zatvora*, Zagreb, Informator, Faculty of Political Sciences, 1994, Politička misao.

138 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319873665_Le_pouvoir_a_l'ere_digitale_la_societe_de_l'exposition_reflexion_autour_de_Exposed_de_Bernard_E_Harcourt

139 Clément Rosset, *Le Réel et son double*, 1976, Gallimard.

Due to its voluntary and high exposure, our subjectivity is observed, recorded, managed, cut and intersected by external factors, which makes subjects transparent and vulnerable. Such an exposure of subjectivity in virtual space goes through phases that are similar to phases shaping subjectivity in "total institutions", described by Erving Goffman[140], but voluntarily, painlessly and without any coercion: humiliation and reorganisation, reconstruction of an object; the adjustment of a subject (isolation, resistance, absolute inclusion, pretence) to the institutional environment and the formation of specific groups within an institution. The key role in this new subjective autodiscipline is played by "libidinous investments".

Rather than being only technological innovations, numerical technologies are also without doubt a means of communication and socialisation, representing, as such, a social revolution, such as the one that originated from the mobile phone, which disrupted and changed the whole system of value as well as the way of communication and the perception of others and realty. In this virtual space, users live "per procurationem", "through and via others", with "friendship" being measured by the number of comments and likes. Intimate photographs accessible to all quasi friends are conducive to all sorts of virtual exhibitionism and encourage compulsive cyber-voyeurism. Facebook is a cyber-bulldozer of the omnipresent visual global culture that aims to dissolve all boundaries between the private and public lives and disrupt the capacity to differentiate between the intimate and the public spheres. Facebook makes intimacy disappear as the whole purpose of this virtual network drive is full disclosure, hyper-transparency with the manipulative strategy of virtual seduction. It should be said loud and clear that this social network is in fact an efficient instrument of repression, rather than emancipation, an instrument of control, a postmodern, virtual and global variant of Foucault's panopticon, which is no longer based on the control of the body, but on the shaping of the mind, both by passive consent through diffusing power (Chomsky) and by an illusion of active interactive consent. Most network users shamelessly expose themselves to others, while corporate human resource officers work in the background, collecting and storing marketable personal data. However, a hysterical passion towards narcisistic exhibitionism overrides objective facts and effects. Facebook has also become a perfect machine for control and general social infantilisation as well as a factor of bihevioristic advertising, establishing, as a social network, an experimental system for the control of social behaviour and private life. The numerical revolution that imposes total transparency is a symptomatic reflection of the contemporary society, which requires us to be hyper-transparent. A form of the terror of transparency. Everything has to be exposed and shown. What is more, moral judgement is imposed with regard to this social transparency: a non-transparent person is considered as suspicious and stigmatised. It can be expected that the people who favour a degree of secrecy will soon be persecuted.

140 Erving Goffman, Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates Paperback – October 18, 1961.

Such theses represent a form of web-neopuritanism that derives from communication protocols in which interactivity and communication are exclusively technological and virtual. The French writer George Bernanos has once said: "... the one who has not realised that the contemporary civilisation is only a conspiracy against internal life has not realised anything". Therefore, although one should not seek comfort in conspiray theories, it should be said that this social network is a good illustration of a society falling apart due to an excess of illusion, overexposure and panoptic rage. Social hyper-transparency becomes Baudrillard's "white obscenity", bestiality. The journalist Jean Lacouture speaks about a new form of repression that he terms the "ubiquitous eye", which is characterised by hyper-visuality and transparency that absorbs and distorts everything. Not everything has to be said or, more importantly, shown, an excess, hypertrophy of communication inevitably leads to overload and superfluousness. Habermas' "future of communication" could easily turn into a nightmare of simulation and total meaninglessness. Secrecy is necessary for a quality social coexistence, and secrets are made of "tiny nothingnesses", which need protection as, to quote Pierre Boutang in *The Onthology of the Secret*, "a secret is always a secret about someone else".[141]

New expository society

Along these lines, Bernard Harcourt points out that an "expository society" (société d'exposition) is a society that seduces its citizens into voluntary slavery." Our numerical counterpart is like a holohram of our 'self', composed of all traces we have left, which create a counterpart that is more reliable than an analogous 'self'. We reflect on and imagine what we are, our 'numerical self' is composed of everything we watch and read". The new logic of such expository society implies that we look for the closest numerical person to suggest to us and let us know what we want. This rationality is completely rooted in algorithms." What we have here is a radical change of the economy, with our most intimate personal data (profiles) representing what used to be goldmines and oil, because these data can be sold and linked, and they enable full knowledge of similar connected persons in groups. This represents a fusion of society, economy and politics. Large companies, such as Facebook, nowadays engage in politics by selecting content as well as in the repression of politicall correctness and censure, while some governments participate in trade by creating metadata bases. The numerical control is today based on a deep urge for individual and narcissistic exhibitionism, which is why the metaphors of Big Brother and panopticon are now outdated explicative models for the understanding of the contemporary expository society.

141 Jure Vujić, *Društvena klopka* (A Social Trap), *Globalni semafor*, February 2012, *Večernji list* https://blog.vecernji.hr/jure-vujic/drustvena-klopka-2413

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Značenje bio-politike u doba numeričke revolucije: što ostaje od Foucaultovog i McLuhanovog nasljeđa? Konture novog društva izloženosti

Sažetak

U doba kada internet još nije postojao, 60 - tih godina prošloga stoljeća, Marshall McLuhan iznosi poznatu sintagmu „svijet je globalno selo“, a nove su komunikacijske i medijske tehnologije trebale putem međuovisnosti transformirati svijet u međuplanetarno selo. Međutim, McLuhan možda nije niti slutio da će ubrzani tehnološki napredak omogućiti komunikaciju bez „fizičkog posrednika - čimbenika“, te da će utilitarna i instrumentalna dimenzija komunikacije prepustiti mjesto kulturno - društvenoj dominaciji i manipulaciji. U numeričko doba, i Foucaultov pojam „bio - politike“ kao sustava potpunog nadzora i reguliranja tijela i života pomoću znanosti, tehnologije, na prvi pogled glasi kao povijesno konzumirani pojam koji pripada prošlosti moderne, bio - političkim i represivnim društvima. Numerička kontrola danas se temelji na dubokom porivu individualnog i narcističkog egzibicionizma unutar novog društva izloženosti.

Ključne riječi: *biopolitika, moć, brojčana dob, izloženost, mediji.*