



# Knowledge society and the problem of a global public sphere

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## **KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY AND THE PROBLEM OF A “GLOBAL PUBLIC SPHERE**

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### ***Globale Gerechtigkeit. Global Justice***

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#### Introduction

The idea of a “public sphere” is straight out of the standard Euro-American political philosophy, of our common political thought, out of the political image of society we have in common. More precisely, the idea of a “public sphere” is the modern conception of society and within society of what constitute or should constitute the political. This concept is at the core of the liberal or “bourgeois” conception of the political order. The history of modern democracy is in fact the history of the various institutional arrangements designed to express in each nation the possibility or reality of a “public sphere”.

The presuppositions of this notion have not for the moment been the object of a thorough critical analysis, probably because we would enter an ambiguous and even dangerous zone: the risk to revive former criticism of democracy is real. However the idea of a “global public sphere” requires such an analysis. This notion is the present extension and projection of basic Euro-American assumptions and modern representations. It is the obvious by-product of the so called “globalization process” transforming our economies and building a worldwide commercial system based on similar economics behaviors and business practices as well as social and political standards.

In reality, the actual process taking place in the world today is far more complex than this idea as well as its usual criticisms. There is one obvious proof of this. As a by-product of

economic globalization, the formation of a “global public sphere” leads to a paradox. The anticipated and even intended effect of globalization is an advance of democracy in countries or nations where economic growth takes place. Advances in this direction have been real and positive in many countries. But an unintended effect can also be observed: the emergence of a “global public sphere” is conceived as a political counterweight to the formation of a “global economic sphere”. It is a form of resistance to it or even of emancipation from it. We have in the last few years seen the formation of a transnational public opinion, typically exemplified by the demonstrations in Seattle and Genoa.

This criticism of the economic process involves a potential advancement of democracy. But this advancement is not congruent with the political reforms induced by the economic globalization process.

Therefore a critical analysis of the idea of a “global public sphere” has become urgent. The reason is that this analysis participates in the very evolution of our societies and of their relations, of the reordering of the world since the end of the Cold War. The present conjuncture cannot be reduced to economical, industrial, technological, political and legal issues. Indeed the way this conjuncture is understood, conceptualized and theorized has a major impact on its evolutionary potentials. This is why the present situation is fundamentally philosophical, without being the property of institutionalized philosophers. It cannot be effectively thought within the available models.

The major feature of the present conjuncture is the following: in order to be successful and have an impact, this critical analysis needs to be achieved collectively according to shared standards. This is much more than a debate”: it is not a critical analysis which we send to each other but which we chose to share and therefore which we build in order to have it in common. Indeed the place where this work is developed is important. The question of a “global public sphere” cannot be separated from the question of the role of Universities in our societies.

The problem therefore is first to situate the present conjuncture and recognize the major lines of evolution of modern societies.

## **1. The double face of the globalization process**

Globalization is the principle of modern and contemporary political thought, international order and social organization. It is the core of the Enlightenment ideology. It does not ignore diversity. But multiplicity is controlled or managed by the distribution of identities and differences under a definition of sovereignty. Globalization is nothing new, but it has taken a new form in the last twenty years. It does not refer anymore to a moral norm or a political ground, but only to commercial rules and economic logic. But this new conception does not replace the former one. It only reinforces it. This contradiction explains what is happening today. On the surface, the unifying process is becoming more and more independent from the political level. Economic modernization is overcoming differences between political regimes and conflicts between States. Economic development is reputed the only way to solve all problems: it is a road leading in the end to democracy. This is why it is supposed to bring peace, or at least to “pacify”.

This conception of globalization does not hide obvious differences in performance and achievement. But it explains them by “culture”. At the age of globalization, “culture” is what constitutes and also distinguishes nations. Nations, regions, et, are supposed to be defined and understood by their “culture”. The reputed age of globalization is also the age of multiculturalism. Culture is reduced to the behaviors, values, attitudes and prejudices, which are resisting economic globalization. Then globalization transforms cultures into *national identities* and this process tends to destroy them. People who resist economic globalization in the name of their culture are at the end losing what they are fighting for. They just close themselves into the retrospective construction of an identity. Those who build their power on this collective illusion dominate them. Serbia is the most recent example. In this new era of nationalism, culture has taken the place of race.

The globalization principle has two faces:

- a. A transnational economic convergence and homogenization;
- b. A unifying principle of identity at the local level (the nation) called “culture”.

The obvious goal of this double standard is the control the side effects of the process.

To understand what is shaping the world today requires going deeper than the present opposition between culture and economy. Globalization operates a further dissociation between the economic and the political. States are all different according to their national ground, culture and history. But the economic logic is supposed to overcome these limitations in time and space.

It has become the new norm for all contexts, for all management methods, criteria and practices. To follow this economic norm is supposed to emancipate the economy from all cultural, historical and sociological constraints.

Numerous historical examples have clearly proven that in a society a change in the *autonomization* of the economy generates a strong dynamics. This is what has been happening on the world level since the 1980ies. But research in Human Sciences (for instance the works of Karl Polanyi and his school, of Louis Dumont in France and many others) has shown that this dissociation is based on strong historical and social conditions. It happens within an historical context, it is not free of any context. This dissociation then needs to be analyzed within the context in which it happens (Escobar 1996). It is itself a social and historical phenomenon and requires to be studied as such.

The problem is therefore more complex than the common idea of globalization. The apparent process is nothing new: the slow disconnection between the political and the economical is the reason of economic development in Western Europe since the late Middle Ages. It created the conditions of what is called Capitalism. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century on, it is the source of the “modernization process”. Modernization is a much wider and deeper process than Capitalism, than the separation between the economic system, the social order and the political regime. Anthropology, philosophy and history have repeatedly proven that the transformation of an economy cannot be separated from political and social change as well as from scientific and technological progress. On top of it, it is clear that economic development was achieved in countries like Japan and South Korea through strong internal relations between the State and the economy. This has led to remarkable economic results and also to social and political abuses. Still the fact that this alliance did not work elsewhere proves that it is not a proper understanding of this process (Rieu 2001).

Furthermore the disruptions introduced by industrial development in Europe and Japan have generated political movements opposed to their consequences for society. These movements were either an attempt by the ruling class to assure its control on the population, or they pretended to protect the “people”, its culture and identity against social changes induced by industrialization. Both cases were never fully separated. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Fascism and Communism were the two political, social and economical movements born to oppose Capitalism and its social impact. Fascism pretended to restore a former social order based on race, culture or tradition. Communism

tried to construct a new collective system in order to overcome the contradictions, conflicts and exploitations of modern societies. They both relied on a strong relation between the State and the Economy.

Because of its two faces, the globalization cannot be reduced to a separation between politics and the economy. Politics and the economy are not two independent levels or types of activities in a society. Nor are they becoming so. Three main types of relation between these two functions can be observed nowadays:

- a. Politics should not interfere with the Economy.
- b. Politics should organize Society according to an economic logic, in order to stimulate or sustain economic development or growth.
- c. Politics should define Society outside the economic world, for instance on a spiritual, ideological, religious or “cultural” ground.

There is apparently a fourth relation: the role of politics is to find equilibrium between economic development and social cohesion. But the goal of this equilibrium is to stimulate economic development. It is therefore a variation of the second type. The first two types are the liberal and neo-liberal ideologies. The fourth is mostly the socialist or social-democratic discourse. The third type is the source of contemporary fundamentalism and nationalism. It was historically the source of different sorts of fascism.

## **2. Globalization and the mutation of Knowledge**

Economic globalization is not the major issue of our societies. It is the problem we know best because it has dominated our societies since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Something else is happening in advanced Industrial Societies, which the notion of globalization partly represses and largely misunderstands. This concerns the mutation of the role and status of knowledge in the evolution of societies and of their relations. This process is not only technological and/or economical: it also concerns political and social theory, philosophy, Epistemology, science studies and Ethics. Indeed, all Human and Social Sciences and the reciprocal distinctions between these disciplines. Different names are given to this change: “Information Society” in the late 1960ies, “Intelligence” or “Knowledge Society” more recently, “High Tech” or “High Added Value Society” in the early

1980ies. This mutation is mostly visible in Japan and in some parts of the US, in Northern California in particular, in the Bay Area.

The rise of Economics as a specific field of study during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in nations as different as England and Japan, indicates a precise historical moment: the economic sphere is recognized as having its own logic of development, its own laws. It gains a relative autonomy towards other activities and social groups (Polanyi 1944, Dumond 1977, Najita 1987). In the same way, the debates of the last thirty years concerning Epistemology, Sciences Studies, theories of innovation, etc, indicate the moment when the sphere of knowledge is being recognized as having its own logic and developing its own constraints on the evolution of industrial societies. The recent formation of an Economics of Science is therefore a major feature of the present conjuncture. The problem is to see if it can be the key discipline of a Knowledge Society, the same way Economics have proven to be the core discipline of Industrial Societies.

Quite often in Economics, Sociology (but also other Human Sciences like History and Social Psychology) provides the knowledge of what surrounds Economics and which Economics cannot explain, what resists its theories or presuppositions, what shows its limits and explains its failure. The more Economics supposes a precise pattern of behavior to individuals or institutions, the more it depends on Sociology and History to explain what is outside these limits. In such cases, Sociology deals not with problems proper to the level of reality it delineates, but simply with this reality which resists Economics. So one can define Economics of science as a restructuring of Economics in order to absorb the results and problems of Sociology of knowledge. The goal of this is to better manage the production and distribution of knowledge in societies. Therefore the new Economics of science is not only an extension of economic Research; it is also an extended type of management of knowledge in our societies, of the relations between societies and knowledge production (Dasgupta and David 1994, 492). It is therefore a major element of the globalization process.

The best way to study this evolution is to analyze the evolution of Research policies and their institutional environment. R&D is becoming the main ground of collaboration, conflicts and evolution of advanced industrial societies. In this situation R&D encompasses the economy and not the other way around. Furthermore this mutation cannot be reduced to the rise and development of “new technologies” and their impacts. It involves the social system itself, its different components and their relations. This is the reason why this mutation has to be

understood not only from the point of view of technologies and their related institutions but also from the point of view of the social-economic system. There is a reason for it: the common representation tends to oppose two poles: the technologies on one side, the social-economic system on the other. Between the two is the black box which Sociology and Economics of science are trying to fill with many different theories. This representation has become inadequate and with it the black box itself. Indeed in the black box, “culture” and its disciplines are hiding our ignorance of the processes involved. Many case studies, for instance on Japan, have proven this point.

These various problems characterize the present *epistemic conjuncture* of advanced industrial societies. Two closely related problems need to be addressed: the present social representation of knowledge does not fully take into account this change which requires a different understanding of the production of knowledge and of its internal relations to society. We are in need of a different understanding of knowledge, of science and technology, of their relations, of their *embeddedness* in a given social system. This is why the idea of an “Information Society” is giving way to the idea of a *Knowledge Society* (Sakai 1991), the first one focuses too narrowly on Information Technologies, the second concerns the current structure of knowledge in societies and its institutions.

The main point is the following: the production and distribution of knowledge is becoming an autonomous sector, a full social function in which the relations and interactions of the various institutions and organizations dealing with knowledge are slowly reconstructed. This is the reason why Universities are playing a major and growing role. The emergence of such a social function deeply changes the Euro-American paradigm of knowledge. The distinctions at the core of this paradigm have become an obstacle to understand such a change. The consequences are many. The Japanese example raises new questions: what does the autonomy of such a sector mean? Is there any possibility of a self-governance of this sector? Is it to be desired? Would it improve the growth and distribution of knowledge? How could it be organized and connected to government, industry, civil society, etc? What are the benefits to be expected for society? We reach some major problems facing our societies and we find ourselves clearly outside the framework of any economic theory, Economics of Science, Philosophy or Sociology of Science.



The emergence of such a social function needs to be understood at two different yet connected levels: as a social process as well as the knowledge of this process in a society. Three related points may be underlined. First the framework in which Sociology and Economics of science have a role to play needs to be constructed in order to understand the full extent of the current mutation and their role in it. Secondly this function provides the framework to understand the relations between knowledge and society today, the intended or non-intended consequences of Research policies. It is also a perspective on these relations because the people involved in R&D activities do not always admit or recognize that they are part of the same process. R&D should therefore be called a *virtual function*. “Virtual” refers here to the idea of a “virtual class” (Barbrook and Cameron, 1995). which describes the social and political values, the economic interests of the different groups involved in new technologies. This virtual class is often criticized because its interests conflict with other groups, mostly blue and white collars, whose jobs, status and values are eroded in the present evolution of the industrial system. This virtual function reveals not only the present restructuring of Research and Education, Industry or Government but also the emergence of a different society.

The emergence of such a new autonomous sector, the unprecedented scale of investment, political involvement and collaborative work it induces, the activities it generates and their social consequences, show that this change opens to industrial societies a trajectory to develop which is different from the one they have followed till now. Their present goal has become the reconstruction of their competitive advantage as it is made clear by the work of Michael Porter (1994). If one considers the evolution of Euro-American and Japanese societies, Research and Education is conceived as the way for their future. It is therefore at this level that Politics needs to make sense today. This level is not for the moment fully recognized and conceptualized. This also means that a “Knowledge Society” cannot take shape without its proper form of democracy, capable of dealing with the problems raised by its development. This form of democracy cannot exist without of a proper understanding of this complex process. This involves a new *transdiscipline* to be built and recognized as the study of the production and distribution of knowledge in industrial societies. I propose to call it *Epistemics*.

A long-term perspective can explain how the social studies of science can be interpreted within a preexisting ideology. In the 1950ies, Epistemology had become a methodology,

internalized in science, a potential mean for its rationalization but in the end unable to make it more productive. The goal of an Economics of science was and still is to rationalize knowledge production and allocation. This is why it is important to decide if an Economics of science is a full knowledge of the role of science and technology in industrial societies. Against Epistemology, Sociology of science has been from the beginning a form of resistance to the power of science and technology. Its goal was to demystify science, its social representation and role. This is why Sociology of science has been controversial from the beginning. It has been criticized for being an ideology as much as a science.

When it tends to swallow Sociology as it does today, Economics of science provides the ground for the knowledge and the substitute for the ideology. Economics becomes an all powerful social technology extending its methods, its method of description and management to every sector of society, transforming societies themselves in a global industrial world which is supposed to become our sole and common destiny. When it extends to the description of every type of behavior, Economics become a *global* discipline: it tends to potentially explain *everything*, every aspect of Human personal and collective behavior. It runs then the risk of being vilified in the public opinion and proven wrong in the field where industrial societies are trying to design their future.

In order to avoid becoming an ideology, Economics has therefore to recognize its limits as well as the diversity of its methods in order to take its right place and play its role in the present epistemic conjuncture. Economics of science seems to be this sector of economic Research where these limits need to be constructed with great care. This clearly shows the limits of Economics when it pretends to provide a global intelligence of today society.

Therefore advanced industrial societies are going through a new and intense dissociation: the production and distribution of knowledge is becoming a function of its own, of the same importance than the political, social and economic functions which have characterized *modernized* societies. This means that these functions are interacting with each other in an unprecedented way. Therefore this means that the future of our societies has become unpredictable. We do not have a preset model of what a *Knowledge Society* is and will be.

This proves that a second level of complexity has been reached. Historically, democracy is the only mean societies have had to deal with a situation characterized by an increased level of

complexity. The idea of “public sphere” is a call for collective intelligence as well as for democracy. This idea was born within the dissociation of the political and the religious, the political and society. The public sphere is the very advent of society, the historical moment when individuals have a personal and collective life of their own, outside of any religious order and of political domination. It is this open space, which individuals have to conquer, which they have to define and organize within their own social context. To achieve this today, we need to produce a shared knowledge of the process we are involved in. It has become impossible to rely like in the past on universal norms and values. Our collective responsibility is to build a common conceptual framework. This new internal relation between Democracy and Knowledge is probably the main feature of the present conjuncture.

## Conclusion

The idea of a “global public sphere” is a problem emerging today when economic integration and interaction transform societies all over the world and reach both the life of each individual and also the condition of Mankind in its natural environment. But this notion is incomplete when it only focuses on the relations between societies and economies in the hope for a transnational definition of a political process. The citizens will always fail in such a context, the same way that ‘civil society’ born out of the scission between the religious and the political was never able to face the *autonomization* of the economical which was at the same time its major outcome.

We have entered a different historical moment based on the scope and role of knowledge in our evolution. Knowledge exists only if it is shared, distributed, if individuals are able to receive it, assimilate it and do something with it. This is the new social *condition of Knowledge*: when knowledge is not distributed, it does not grow. There is no innovation. Society does not change. New markets do not really form and develop. The distribution and production of knowledge have already become a major political issue but we do not have the proper concepts, theories and institutions to master and accomplish this mutation. This new dissociation and its impact on the former separations (between the religious and the political, the political and the social, the social and the economical) open indeed a new public sphere. It crosses and reshapes every groups and societies. It cannot be said “global” because it is always local. But what needs to

be built in common and shared is the knowledge we are able to draw from all these experiences. This knowledge is the potential source of a new definition of the political.

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