The Internet and the Reenchantment of the World

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Let me start by giving some context. As well known the idea that the world has been disenchanted was was first articulated by Max Weber in two famous conferences of 1919 about the scientist and the politician. In the final paper of the first conference – "Wissenschaft als beruf" he writes: "The fate of our epoch characterized by the rationalization, by the intellectualisation and above all by the disenchatment of the world, led the humans to banish the most sublime of the highest values from the public life. Those values took refuge either in the transcendent kingdom of the mystique life or in the fraternity of direct and reciprocal relationships between isolated individuals".

Max Weber talks about his own times and what he regrets as being lost, as the sequence of the text clarifies, is "the prophetic pneuma that once blazed the large communities sticking them together".

The diagnostic suggested by Weber became since then a recurrent leitmotiv for the social and political scientists. The current interpretation links the disenchatment of the world to the racionalist trend of modernism- the belief on science and technology, and the consequent witheraway of the transcendent values. Acceptance of the diagnosis also leads to the challenge of how to reenchant the world or, at least, how to overcome the constraints and illusions of the Enlightment. In other words, to once again evoke a Weberian metaphor, how to break the "iron cage" of our bureaucratic societies. French post-modernism has certainly a word to say about that and I will come to them. But let me first refer to Serge Moscovici who recently also addressed the topic of reenchanting the world which, according to him, implies first of all, the reenchantment of the Nature. To be more precise the texts now published include recent interviews alongside with former interventions, now entirely revised, that go back to the 1970s.

The intellectual contribution of Serge Moscovici to the History and Philosophy of Science, to which those reflections about the Nature, Culture and Society are closely associated, would deserve more attention from all of us, interested in the development of the Social Representations Theory. In his monumental "Histoire Humaine de la Nature", Moscovici proposes a distinction between three types of Nature: the organic,

the mechanic and the cybernetic, each one of them related to different stages of Science and Society.

Such a distinction is important on several grounds. First of all in rejecting the representation of Nature as an external environment against which the human species adapts and evolves. Of course there is a natural history of the Earth or even of the Universe that goes back far beyond the two million years of the Homo Sapiens. But once born the new species, his history can not be separated from the history of the Nature in which he is embedded. In epistemological terms this also corresponds to the rejection of distinguishing the object from the subject, a central tenet in the Theory of Social Representations.

The distinction between different and successive types of Nature is also important in proposing an alternative narrative to the History of Science, centered on the practices of the humans in developing and reinforcing their strategies of common survival. The organic nature is thus described as corresponding to the fabrication of tools prolonging the body skills, an ability that can also be observed in many other infra-human species. The next step, this one exclusively human, is linked to the mobilization of natural forces, such as gravity. Now the pervasive metaphor is the mechanical watch, that comes to our days. The last step dubbed by Moscovici, as cybernetic, has its remote origin in the work of chemists, or even the alchemists, who aimed at producing not only machines, but also new elements, though the work of synthesis. Ignored if not devalued by their contemporaries like Newton, they come later to the forefront, assuming nowadays a predominant role reinforced by its association with the biological sciences.

I am not pretending to summarize an argument scholarly developed along more than 500 pages, but only to highlight what appeared to me as its central core. On the same vein I would like to suggest that these different scientific approaches of Nature could be considered as paradigms in the Kuhnian sense or, maybe better, as "Themata" as initially proposed by Holton and more recently also espoused by Moscovici. We are not far from the Theory of Social Representations. Although mostly conceived for describing how common sense thinks, social representations, at least at this higher and abstract level of "visions of the world and life" – Weltanshauung, cannot be evaded by the work of science, if not in the logic rationality of the so-called Scientific Method, at least in defining the boundaries of their curiosity.

But let me return to the theme of the reenchantment that, for Moscovici, starts with the reenchantment of Nature. Once again the argument is lengthy and complex, discouraging any attempt to summarize. Referring to the refurbished text of *Le réenchantment du monde* (1976/2002), the Weberian concept of desenchantment is therein interpreted by Moscovici as "the process of its demagification (démagification), aiming at liberating the nature of the animism that populates the universe with angelic and devilish souls, as well as of the anthropomorphism that conceives everything upon the image of the man, in order to dispel its fairy or grotesque halo, exposing it to the full daylight, impersonal and indifferent to men" (p.87).

I am not sure that this exactly corresponds to the Weberian dignosis as formerly quoted. Moscovici considerably enlarges the scope of the disenchantment process in knitting together Science and Society or, more precisely, in denouncing the underlying nihilistic rationality that shrinked the reality to the machine and the market. In his own words we are faced "in depth: with a society without qualities and in shallow a man without qualities" (p.92).

But Moscovici also differs in not adhering to the apocalyptic vision of the world that seems to be shared by Weber and other greater thinkers such as Marx, Simmel and Durkheim. In contrast with the apology of the prodigious advances in science and technology, and the belief on the perfectibility of the human species, they were quite aware of the other side of the coin, the one that increasingly impoverishes our lives.

The reenchantment of the world for Moscovici is not only desirable and urgent, but also possible. At a certain extent it is already under way, not a "pie in the sky". It requires profound changes in the relationships within and between science and society, already discernible although in *statu nascendi*.

Such a reenchantment, if I correctly understand the thinking of Moscovici is taking place by a bottom-up social mobilisation approach – the ecological movements, in parallel with new emergent forms of governance, as well as by a top-down approach through the epistemological strategies dictated by the emergence of the cybernetic nature, as described in the "Histoire Humaine de la Nature".

In terms of social movements it is worth to remind that Moscovici was actually an intervening protagonist that contributed to launch the ecological movement in France, in the early 1970s. Such a movement acquired momentum and nowadays represents a significant voice all over the world. We could also invoke here the role of active

minorities in iniciating socio-psychological changes, another idea developed by the very same Serge Moscovici. Ecologists were and remain important in voicing and denouncing the side effects of the techno-science *hubris*. We live now in a "risky society", as theorized by Beck and many others. The men are proud in having won the battle against Nature but now they have to face the hazards that they themselves provoked by their uncontrolled initiatives.

Reflexivity, another feature according to Giddens, of late modernity, reinforces the tendency for becoming alert and also for raising doubts about the capacity of the scientists to close the Pandora's box that they started to open. Nature comes again to the forefront and common sense reactivates arcane representations such as nature capricious, benign, perverse or ephemeral, as typified in the Mary Douglas cultural theory.

But social movements do not limit their action to express concerns.They also have greatly contributed to introduce new ways in policy making and societal governance, as well as in qualifying the role of scientific experts.

In his text Moscovici also underlines the role that Non Governmental Agencies (NGO's) are increasingly performing, thus contributing to new arrangements in power distribution between the State and the Civil Society. Instead of the hierarchy we might be evolving to heterarchic formats which, according to Moscovici, could be another way for escaping from the "iron cage".

But all of this bottom-up approach is complemented from the top-down side with the emergence of the cybernetic nature and its corresponding epistemology. Cybernetic nature, writes Moscovici, is the new age of the world. How is it characterized? In a nutshell, he explains "the contract between the mechanical nature and the cybernetic nature has as fundamental reason the contrast between the automatism and the communication". The cybernetic nature, he adds, has as a major theme the communication that statistically transforms part of the energy into information and the information first into language and then into thinking" (p.133-134).

This would be the new "paradigm", the new "themata", aiming at unifying Nature and Society, natural sciences and social sciences, but also science, or more exactly, sciences, in the plural, and common sense. It is also under this new paradigm, as claimed by Moscovici, that what he calls the "performative rationality" linking thought to action, comes to replace the instrumental rationality. In his words such a change of rationality "expresses the transition from a traditional world at the third

person toward a world formed at the first or at the second person… instead of attempting to know the thing that indifferently floats in the time-space, we aim at something distinct and even unique, whose knowledge passes through others" (p.138). All this excursus paved the way for the second part of the title of my presentation focused, as you may recall in the Internet. The question is at what extent this new media could be considered as a possible contribution to the re-enchantment of the world.

At first sight the answer, if we accept the new paradigm of communication, seems to be positive. The Internet is a very specific technology of information exchange, but it is also a metaphor, or more precisely, a metonymy of this our "brave new world", not only because "the many goodly creatures are there here", as wonders Miranda, but because they are potentially able to communicate one another, within infinite network patterns.

Moscovici does not directly address this point in the text I have been commenting. Anyway he recalls the law according to which the more we communicate with distant interlocutors, the less we communicate with proximal ones. The risk, he adds, is becoming encapsulated within oneself. Instead Moscovici recommends that the time came where we should attempt once again "the experience of small communities at the aims length, thus putting an end to the zapping of our individual bodies and minds" (p.161).

Advancing judgments about the role of the Internet in re-enchanting the world is surely a risky task. Annamaria de Rosa has recently presented a paper where she examines the related issue of the extant at which Internet does enhance interpersonal connections or instead leads to a greater social isolation. What Annamaria found, after a comprehensive review of the literature is, in her words, a confusing diversity of positive, negative as well as integrative views. I would like to insert here her extensive analysis that I fully endorse but, of course, it is better to go directly to the source, which I strongly recommend.

Among the integrative views Annamaria de Rosa gives a particular attention to Manuel Castells, certainly one of the most lucid observers of the Network Society in which the world is entering. In his most recent work – The Internet Galaxy (2001) -, Castells examines the role that Internet has been playing in fostering social movements such as the ecologism.

As a matter of fact, one of the most controversial and trouble some features of the Internet resides in supplying the technological support for networking individuals which does not necessarily contribute to a communitarian culture. One could say that the virtual communities are more virtual than communities. For Dominique Wolton, one of the most sceptical observer, with the Internet we have entered in what he calls the age of "interacting solitudes" (2000, p.106). The perversity becomes apparent with the perfect internaut unable to dialogue with its neighbour in a cybercafé. Another source of concern is the multiplication of identities, the dispersion of the self, and the consequences for the lack of accountability.

Still in accordance with Wolton, the Internet, strictly speaking is not a media, because a media is always linked to a community and also implies a complex system of relationships between the individual and the collective mediated by a specific (social) representation of the public, that gives meaning to the communication process. Two different if not opposite communicational logics are here competing one-another, being difficult to forecast at what extent this contributes to a positive complementarity or rather to enhancing the most negative facets of each one of them. A strong point to retain from the arguments developed by Wolton is that we must not reduce the problematic of communication which is fundamentally social and cultural to its technological supports. But what remains to be seen is whether the technological innovation introduced by the Internet does not parallel and even contribute to an homologous transformation at the social and cultural levels.

Other examples could be given like feminism, human rights, pacifism or religious movements. It is obvious that as a technological tool the Internet could be helpful, due to the flexibility that it offers in relating "many to many". The success of Seattle in 1999 is a major eloquent example. But the Internet, as argued by Castells, is important not only as an helpful instrument that we use because it is available, but because it is perfectly adapted to the main features of the social movements that have been raising in the Information Age. It could be said, in the post-modernistic style of blurring the boundaries between inside and outside, that between the social movements and the media they use, there is a reciprocal reinforcement. The Internet contributes to the expression of a "different voice" but in so doing it also acquires a new socio-political dimension. It is no more an innocent tool but a potential danger for the powers-that-be. A consequence as argued by David Lyon is that the Network Society could instead degenerate into a "Surveillance Society" in which the Internet rather than a "smooth

space" where we freely navigate, becomes a "striated space", a sort of hypperpanopticon, where all our exchanges are under strict monitoring and control.

To come back to the argument of Castells, we could explain the fit between the Internet and the strategy of contemporaneous social movements, in that… both are expressions of the same underlying network structure, which is, according to many observers, the fabric of our new brave new world. On that light, we can understand and accept that the action triggered by social movements must aim at values and beliefs in order to sensitize and eventually change the codes, that is, the social representations, to which we draw-on for making sense, of the issues at stake, be it the spoiling of our natural resources, the gender asymmetries, or the genetic reengineering.

I think that we are not far from the "performative rationality" suggested by Moscovici. Furthermore, the strategy of communicating through the Internet increases the chances of a global reach, which more and more seems to be a necessary condition for being listened. As remarked by Castells, the globalization of social movements is to be distinguished from the anti-globalization movement which, paradoxically, also has to mobilize at the global level.

The other side of the coin is however that the Internet is not only available to social movements and non-governmental organizations. It was primarily conceived for fostering the interests of a global economy, which is the main responsible for jeopardizing the natural resources. And for the time being it seems that such a degradation will continue, well and alive. As alerted by Edward Wilson on his last book – The Future of Life (2002), "for every person in the world to reach present U.S. levels of comsumption with existing technology would require four more planets". Such Cassandra voices are not listened, or may be worse, cannot be listened, because the system cannot be stoped but only obey to its dynamics as a destiny. The advent of the cybernetic nature has not put an end, so far, to the production of machines, and the communicational logic does not necessarily reduces the multiplication of material objects with the inherent increasing probability of collision. Suffices to look at the highway traffic, as an illustration.

Anyway the internal logic of the network society, as described for example in Empire, the seminal book written by Hardt and Negri, points to the very same diagnostic of a rhizomatic fabric – Delenze & Guatari again, with no center, no hierarchy, no

boundaries, no dialectics, randomly evolving according to the capitalistic spirit of unfettered accumulation and growth, to a moving target.

Maybe such a picture corresponds to evading the "iron cage" but I am not sure that such an escape necessarily leads to reenchant the world. Let me evoke here the final sentences of the Mille Plateaux:

"Et certes, les espaces lisses ne sont pas par eux-mêmes libératoires. Mais c'est en eux que la lutte change, se déplace, et que la vie reconstitue ses enjeux, affronte de nouveaux obstacles, invente de nouvelles allures, modifie les adversaires. Ne jamais croire qu'un espace lisse suffit à nous sauver" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980, p.625).

Coming to a close of my presentation I find myself in a doubl-bind, where all questions as well as the answers seem to lead to a blind-alley. Maybe the enchantment coincides with the History itself, maybe the enchantment cannot be dissociated of the mystery, risk or even fear, as any child could testify. A disenchanted world, rather than a succession of "winters of our discontent", would be the end of History, the final victory of a sort of gigantic world chessboard, where infinite games would still be possible but always in accordance with the same rules. Apparently the future is not yet closed and the island of Caliban is still full of noises, sounds and sweet airs.