The Media Society

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Abstract: *There are several approaches to diagnosing contemporary society, but many authors define it as a media society. The main characteristic of this type of society is, paraphrasing Descartes, I am mediated, therefore I am, I am not mediated, therefore I am not. This article refers to the famous work by Horkheimer and Adorno, representatives of the Frankfurt School, Dialekthik der Aufklaerung, a work where cultural industries are first defined as industries of producing truth. In the media society, interrogations become contextual, contemporary culture restricts values and has a paradoxical result globally. Gianni Vattimo discusses in his papers the unexpected effect of the media society; the contemporary human being stops understanding the world as a whole, a fact the Italian philosopher considers positive as a unitary picture of the world is characteristic to totalitarian systems.*

The modern society has formed its own public space as an area where people can debate issues of public interest. The parliament was devised as the fundamental structure of this area and the means of public communication were intended to serve it. The people's autonomy, the open debate, the prevalence of arguments, the triumph of reason were taken for granted. In the third decade of the past century the European culture was still dominated by this encouraging picture.

The shock was brought over by Carl Schmitt, who in his paper *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus* (Dunker & Humboldt,

Berlin, 1923), signaled the fact that the institutional system which has the parliament as an expression of its values and public communication as its medium is more famous due to its way of conceiving the exercise of power rather than due to its reality. This reality is very far away from the distributed conception. Providing an unsurpassed sagacity, Schmitt has argued that the public sphere is colonized by private interests (the parties take over the control of the parliament, the public debate is manipulated etc.). As a result, the liberalism is separated from the democracy.

Nobody could ever contradict Carl Schmitt's remarks. The left (see Horkheimer and Adorno) and the right (see „the direction towards a perfect state") have drawn different political consequences, these remarks being assumed. In time, it was only Habermas' paper *The structural change of the public sphere* (1962) which provided a vast research of the whole issue as far as the theme of returning to democracy is concerned.

I am not going to describe the complex debate over the issue of the parliament in detail, even if public communication is closely linked to this. I would rather have as a starting point the remark that together with „ the parliamentary crisis" the meaning and the functioning of the means of communication are taken under discussion.

After the second world war the means of communication – the radio, the television, the written press – expanded a lot, becoming trans-national and even global (the BBC inaugurated the trans-national radio, CNN the global television). On the other hand, mass-media is becoming autonomous, in such a way that it is no longer a means but a self undertaking enterprise, with its own goals. The trusts are gradually replacing the previous employees of the public communication institutions. Horkheimer and Adorno in their famous *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Amsterdam, 1946), have reached the following conclusion: we are entering the era of the „cultural industry" which totally changes previous public communication and leaves behind serious questions: is there any possibility that alongside the mass-media we cannot speak of serving the democracy any longer, but of using it for particular goals? Is there any possibility that the aspiration of rendering the reality has been replaced by the fight of creating the reality?

These questions are still alive today. However, the fact that we have entered a "media society" means at least three things: the self-governing of mass-media up to the point of becoming a contestant on the large markets of the globalisation era; the transformation of the media networks into power centres together with the economic, the political, the military and ecclesiastic centres; the dependance of reality upon mass-media. We can therefore ask ourselves if the "media society" is engulfing the late modernity or is only an expression of this. I personally agree with the second interpretation. Nevertheless, what we have to do now is to dissipate the misunderstandings that surround the "media society" by identifying it with "the society of communication means" or with the "transparency society" or with "the communication society".

"The society of communication means" (or its derivation "the society of information") is a result of the cybernetics' application and has organised itself around the theme of the rapid and honest transmission of information (it was Norbert Wiener who named it in his *The Cybernetics*, in 1966). In such a society the accent falls on the circulation of information and not on the mutual understanding of its participants to communicate over the subject in discussion (this aspect is treated in detail in *Rationality, Communication, Argumentation*, Dacia, Cluj, 1991).

"The communication society" has as a subject of discussion this very character of mutual understanding with its four aspects: the intelligibility of the messages, the speaker's veracity, the truth of the assertions, and the righteousness of the interaction of the participants to communication. Nevertheless, it is clear that the "communication society" is still an ideal; the present communication is far from real communication.

In the end, what hinders the "media society" to become a "society of transparency"? The main arguments have been expressed in the specialty literature from Horkheimer and Adorno to Vattimo: a) by its way of acting, the broadcasting spreads the „common denominator" of the facts and it cultivates the „levelling" of values; b) we cultivate the system's "functionality" rather than the changing initiatives; c) we cultivate the intuitive, the fragmentary rather than the understanding of the subtle but tenacious world correlations; we spread the "consuming" rather the durable values; d) the distinctions of classical culture between the necessary and the accidental, the essential and the casual, the truth and the rumour, the value and the improvisation are diminished. It is Vattimo who has formulated the conclusion: nowadays people are not at all more clarified over the situations than their predecessors, on the contrary.

These arguments are certainly conceptual; however, they allow us to look deeper into the varied situations of the "media society". These arguments don't replace the effective factual analyses and the distinct evaluation of the different situations. On the other hand, these arguments must be weighed carefully. An exclusively critical overview of "the media society" has brought over overwhelming cultural performances: people are incomparably more informed; the horizons have opened continually and people are determined to cultivate "the veracity" – the personal capacity of being honest, loyal to truth, competent.

Together with "the veracity" we must also immediately bring into discussion at least two issues. The first one is the forming of the actors of the "media society" (The Harvard University, which has a good perspective on the present society, has just launched „the movement toward general formation" for universities), the second one is the forming of genre capacities. The journalists reproach the detachment from the facts to those that deal with scientific knowledge, while the latter criticise the former that they don't have the adequate concepts to deal with the facts. We can believe that they are both right but with other meaning that the believed one. It is not the researchers' duty to write feature reports or feuilletons or to gather opinions together

as it is not the journalists' job to formulate concepts. Nevertheless, it can be a real success for both the categories to have the capacity to move forward from collages to feature report and from here to the feuilleton based on knowledge, then to the notional essay and finally, to conceiving the situation. This is in fact the main "challenge" that the "media society" brings about contributing to the mature professional development that we need today to fructify its advantages.

References

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