

THE DISCONTINUITY OF CULTURAL PROCESS IN THE DIGITAL CIVILIZATION. MAIN DANGERS.

By Andrzej Kocikowski

Before I begin, I would like to express my gratitude to the organizers of this conference, especially Professors Rogerson and Szejko. Without their kind assistance, we couldn't meet today in cyberspace. Special thanks go to Mister Michal Ren, a student of informatics from Adam Mickiewicz University. He is the one who arranged it so that our servers can deliver the visual part of this conference all over the world. Be there tomorrow, when he will present his paper!

There are many more people, especially at my university, to whom I would like to give my thanks. I hope they will forgive me for not mentioning their names. I think of all, and have their faces in front of my eyes. Thank you very, very much!

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present a "black" scenario of development of the digital civilization. It foresees the **discontinuity of the cultural process** which leads to the creation of a **"supernomadic" society**. The main characteristics of this society are:

1. The inability to utilize the achievements of analog civilization.
2. The ability to use the *ex definitione* temporary achievements of digital civilization.

The text is divided into two parts. In the first I present chosen facts pertaining to contemporary social life and economic processes. This review encompasses many subjects, of which the most important are concerned with:

- (a) The process of the accumulation of the global value of capital, with special emphasis placed on the category of **profit**.

(b) The process of creation of knowledge (information) as a form of the aforementioned accumulation.

In the second part of the paper I have focused on expanding and justifying the following theses:

1. Discontinuation of mass production of electronic equipment used by the analog culture (including broadly defined information carriers) is the first sign of breaking cultural continuity and the first step towards “supernomadization”
2. Only those achievements of analog culture, which will be deemed profitable enough to be converted to a digital form will be available in mass-media. This is another factor which determines the break of continuity.
3. There takes place a phenomenon of cultural discontinuity in a qualitatively different dimension (educational process), which leads to “supernomadization” of the global community.
4. The North-American civilization gains an unfounded, highly disturbing advantage over the rest of the world.

2. Part I. In memory of:

Modern human society produces many goods – including intellectual ones -- in the form of **commodities**; the process of their production and sale is governed by rules of **market economy**. The main feature of such an economy is that every field of production of commodities (including the production of knowledge) is treated by the capital owners as a **source of potential profits**. Therefore, the condition of a particular branch of economy depends in general on the capital involved in its operation. National governments had, and for a time probably will have influence on the activities of knowledge-producing branches of economy. This influence, however, will decrease with the **increase of power** possessed by giant, multinational corporations.

Information technology is, like any other technology, a part of all that that is used by human beings for the production of goods which satisfy their needs. Hence, the information technology is an immanent part of the **forces of production** of modern society. I accept the view that the development of the **forces of production** is the main perpetrator of all social changes, no matter whether the changes affect a society, an economic community, a continent, or the entire world. After the development of the forces of production reached a certain “critical mass” (the sum of changes within a whole), it creates

qualitative changes. Sometimes, these changes are revolutionary. The transformation of human kind into a **global society** could be such a revolutionary change.

In my opinion, today's level of development of the **forces of production** was accomplished mainly through the application and development of information technology. The last thirty years were – I believe – the most important stage of this process. Therefore, it seems safe to assume that information technology is the **most important perpetrator** in the process of the creation of the global society (information society, information era society).

The next issue is the meaning of the **social division of labor** in the development of human kind. I support the view that the turning point in the history of *homo sapiens* was the division of labor into mental and physical. This division initiated the separation of human communities; with some members producing intellectual commodities, and other -- material commodities. The acceptance of this view has a variety of consequences, among others, regarding changes in so called **modes of production** and in the forming (and development) of modern capitalist society. I will omit the details here.

The **social division of labor** has recently entered a qualitatively new phase. Depending on the assumed criteria, the “recently” may mean the last seventy or fifty years of the Twentieth century (generally speaking). This phase is correlated with the information revolution of the last thirty years. Its consequence manifests itself as a disproportion (asymmetry) in the development of forces of production of the global society. Namely, the **North-American society** is exceptionally **advantaged** as far as saturation of all aspects of life where high-quality information technology is concerned. This state of affairs has its historical justification. It is interesting as an indirect indicator of another fact, namely, that the process of creation of information technology, hence also of knowledge (information), is actually controlled by capital under control of one civilization.

Let's repeat:

The information revolution transforms human kind into a **global society**. One of the features of the global society is that huge overnational corporations produce the overwhelming majority of goods. These corporations control *de facto* the most important part of the global capital, although *de iure* they do it still with the assistance of national governments. One needs to repeat here

again that the nature of the capitalist system of production excludes the investment of money in non-profitable enterprises.

One of the features of a global society, not clearly visible, and not discussed at all, is that we witness the **last** stage of the great, **fundamental** division of labor. One part of the global society, the United States of North America, takes over systematically the most important part of **global intellectual production**. This concerns especially the most sophisticated form of the intellectual production, namely **information technologies and information**. A mere hundred years ago, the United States was just one out of many societies within a great group of nations.

It is, of course, difficult to project in detail the long term effects of the last great division of labor. Of those significant for the main thesis of this paper one could mention all that result from the fusion of capital, power and the production of knowledge (information). They were all known for a long time, although on a different scale. The common denominator for the majority of them is **totalitarianism** in various forms. This does not mean necessarily a state of affairs that is generally disadvantageous for people. However, it demands, and will demand a **re-evaluation of a great many values**.

3. Part II: A warning:

Before discussing the main problem, I will present some thoughts from the paper of Łukasz Knasiecki. Knasiecki was the proponent of the issue that became the title topic of my presentation, namely, the problem of cultural discontinuity in the digital civilization. Both texts – Knasiecki’s and mine – complement each other, and it would be better for both of them to be presented at the same time. So, please come on Wednesday to hear his paper.

Knasiecki analyzes many specific cases which, if interpreted as a whole, show – in general – the process of destruction of a certain area of culture – the destruction caused by this culture’s own development. I shall take the liberty of focusing your attention on some of them: “Borland Delphi 5.0 can’t read some of the files created by version 3.0 of this product. Three years have passed! Corel Draw 9.0 doesn’t read version 1.0 files. Not even ten years!” [Knasiecki]. He also writes: “A compiled program will certainly work in the system it was created for. Sometimes, a previous version of the system will accept it, often several next ones. The life of such product is short, and it is inevitably sentenced to destruction. A new version of a program is created: faster, more complex, with more features, and which works in several versions of the system. The old program is useless, and can not be run. It is erased (destroyed)”.

Knasiecki's concern is the presentation of chosen "lifecycles" of digital products. The examples presented above show clearly that such a cycle is sometimes frighteningly short, and – what is the most important – does not allow for reproduction. Commodities are created which exist as something useful a few years – in extreme cases a few months, and pass irrecoverably away.

Knasiecki's analysis leads to sad conclusions. He writes about some of them; others, I presume, he will reveal at the next opportune time. In my opinion one of the conclusions contained *implicite* in his paper should be presented now, because it is related to the main thesis of my paper. I am referring to the idea which I called for the purpose of this paper the "supernomadization" of society. Simplifying it a lot, we can say the following: I always carry my culture (my heritage), that is – DATA in my PC (or a Mac – that is not important). My culture (my heritage) – DATA – is always HERE, NOW (for three months, half a year). TOMORROW there will be completely different DATA, and the HERE, NOW always passes into oblivion. I live without a past or, at least, I don't have a past like the people of the analog civilization could have. I am fifteen years old, and I don't have access to DATA that are two years old. I am five, and I may not have access to the DATA of yesteryear. I live with what I have NOW in my PC – I am a "supernomad".

I shall now discuss systematically some issues in detail.

3. 1. Devices (including electronic ones) and the information carriers of the analog culture versus the issue of discontinuity of the cultural process.

An unplanned result of the information revolution is the disposal of many devices and data carriers serving the analog culture. The first example could be the amateur film camera (with the 8mm reel), the record player and the analog record, and the reel video recorder. Next in line are the photo camera (with the 6 cm film), and reel-to-reel tape recorder with its reels. I suspect that in the next few years in the same line we will also find video recorders with their VHS tapes. That leaves the question of what to do with all those products of culture which were created thanks to the aforementioned devices and were stored on their respective data carriers?

One of the answers to this question could be: as long as we are "on the bridge" between the analog and digital civilizations, the analog records should be translated to digital form and the problem will disappear.

Indeed, at first glance this can appear to be an effective solution to the problem of transition. However, after closer examination only more questions appear, for which it is hard to find sensible answers.

The first of those questions concerns finding the people or institutions who or which would fund the “transition”. In case of private archives it seems obvious that the interested parties should bear the cost. But, if they are able to fund this task, they will become owners of the next share of trouble – those described by Knasiecki, and which appear to be an innate part of the digital civilization: they will reach “supernomadic” status; if they are unable to fund the transition, they will become people without past.

3. 2. Mass-media of the digital civilization and the problem of cultural continuity.

There exist other archives besides the private archives of people who should worry about the effectiveness of the – in end result ineffective -- operation of “transitions.” These are the common (communal) archives, where cultural heritage of the highest rank is stored. In this case, there also appears the question of who should provide the conversion of analog carriers to digital ones?

It seems to me, that various government institutions, especially public media (including mass-media) are responsible for the realization of the task discussed here. One can not, however, omit the following question: will all the parts of analog heritage, or only some of them be carried over? If all, then what budget will be able to withstand such a project? If only some, then who and according to what criteria will decide which part of the analog heritage will be carried over to the digital civilization?

If we assume that economical reasons will be the deciding factor (could it be otherwise?), who today is able to predict what will pay off to a few magnates with dominion over the global information process?

3. 3. New dimension of discontinuity: education to supernomadization.

In addition, the aforementioned circumstances beg the question of issues of cultural continuity in the aspect of raising new generations. For a time, the life of our species had a certain order, and a part of it was (is) the **process of education taking over ten years**. The cultural heritage played, and plays an important role in it. A question appears – what to do with all this if there wouldn't be a possibility of referencing relatively permanent achievements of analog civilization (the main part of the cultural heritage of humanity today), and if the only possibility will be using the heritage of the digital civilization

– by definition, as Knasiecki says, perishable and (in my terminology) “supernomadogenic”?

How can one sensibly plan the educational process of at least one generation, if twice a year the operating systems change, and every three years – the information carriers and data formats change?

I think many more similar questions could be asked. Initial conclusions that come to mind could take the following form: for technical and economic reasons, the digital civilization must do away with the system of education used by the analog civilization. So what could the new system of education be like?

It is impossible to meaningfully answer this last question today, but I can honestly say that the model of educational “supernomad” seems inevitable to me.

3. 4. Information in the world of digital civilization.

At this moment, nine companies completely control the distribution of information in the World (Time Warner, Disney, Sony, General Electric, AT&T, The News Corporation, Seagram, Viacom, Bertelsmann) – [“A survey of online finance”, The Economist, May 2000. See: Gogołek, 2000].

This fact alone allows to state that the global village society is already divided right from the start, that it is in the first phase of moving towards a digital civilization. To avoid understatement, it should be mentioned that the North-American civilization has gained an unfounded advantage in this divided system. More questions appear, as well as more – sometimes ominous – conclusions.

We have all known for a long time that total control over distribution of information in the World allows (potentially, of course) to **manipulate** the stream of information at the points where it is created, and where it is delivered. Actually, we can't be sure if this is not happening already, at the brink of the digital civilization. Can we exclude the possibility that, after some time passes, when the digital civilization strengthens, the Great Informers from the country of the most advanced information technology would usurp the right to be Apostles of the New, and Only Truth? Won't the *ex definitione* discontinuous cultural process gain additional, absurd qualities?

4. Conclusion

The information revolution which is happening before our very eyes and with our participation, has its dark side. The digital civilization cannot

permanently take over and absorb all of the heritage of the analog civilization. In addition, taking over any fragment of the aforementioned heritage is plagued with a curse, so to speak, of permanent perishability and inevitable passing into oblivion.

The outlined state of matters leads, of course, to discontinuity of a broadly defined, cultural process of many centuries, which has to lead to many unwanted consequences. I count the possibility of “supernomadization” of the society among the most severe of them. This “supernomadization” means that I (the individual) carry my cultural heritage (DATA) with me, on my PC, and that DATA is always HERE and NOW (because that is how the current operating system is NOW, because that is how the file format is TODAY). I don’t have and can’t have the past like people of the analog civilization had.

The cultural heritage of a “supernomad” has one more quality that bears mentioning. It is a selected creation of that part of the global society, which has achieved a practical monopoly for production of information technology and distribution of information in the World, at the brink of the digital civilization; that is, of course, the North-American society.

The information revolution, and so also its consequences, are the result of processes which had begun long before ENIAC was built. It is hard to believe it today, but the laws of capitalist production and market were formulated about two hundred years ago. I have reviewed some of them and their interpretations, not without reason, in the first part of the paper. It follows from those laws, that the information revolution is only a stage in the development of a capitalist society, so that it, and all its consequences – **destruction of the heritage of the analog culture** – are immutable laws of development of a capitalist society. Before we accuse Afghan fundamentalists of barbarism, let’s think about the consequences of our own barbarism, described – at least in part – above.

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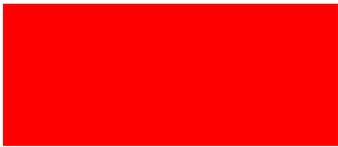
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