

From “Organic” Intellectual to “Molecular” Intellectual in a Post-Society World

New Cultural Frontiers

Francesco Antonelli

University of “Roma Tre” - Italy

Email: fantonelli@uniroma3.it

Abstract

The present essay aims to give a contribution to the study of transition from the hierarchical order of modernity (idea of Society) to a social pattern based on persons and subjects. In particular, we will try to paint a sketch of the transformations of the intellectual function. Exerted by big bureaucratic machines, today the intellectual action partially detaches itself from the intellectual function carried out by big bureaucratic machines of the modern era. New typologies of intellectuals were born as well as a new, deeply ambivalent public space. The Internet and networked individualism are the main carriers of these transformations.

Key Words: *Intellectuals, Public Space, Networking Society, Ambivalence.*

1. Introduction

New information and communication technologies, especially linked to the arrival of the Internet, characterize our society. Among many changes brought by this cultural and technological long revolution, there are, in some thinkers' opinion, the emergence of a new mode of production – the informationalism, as called by Manuel Castells¹ - and, above all, the strengthening of a networked individualism opened to different evolutions. Networked individualism is a social *habitus* linked to tertiary social relationships. As a matter of fact: «after the transition from the predominance of primary relationships to secondary relationships [...] The new, dominant pattern seems to be built on what could be called tertiary relationships, or what Wellman calls “personalized communities”»² These communities are based on the supremacy of individuals. They are, first of all, rooted in the individualization of the relationship between capital and labor, between workers and the production process of a firm. The spread of networked individualism causes, among other things, the spread of

¹ By informationalism we mean that specific mode of production based on an extensive and intensive use, following networked ways, of the *Communication & Information Technology*. About these subjects See Castells, 2008; Fuchs, 2008; Dijk, 2006; Stehr, Meja, 2005; Rifkin, 2000, 1995; Böhme, Stehr, 1986.

² Castells 2003:128.

intellectual actions in the society; its partial detachment from the intellectual function performed by big bureaucratic machines. One of the main factors of the decline of the hierarchical order of modernity.

2. The intellectual in the hierarchical order of modernity

The term “intellectual” comes from late Latin *intellectualis*, adjective that, in philosophy, refers to what deals with the theoretical activity separated from the perceptible experience/world. So we can give the word intellectual two different meanings. The first meaning refers to: «the social stratum composed by all the people who perform an activity that can be classified as intellectual – implying a use of signs and symbols instead of a use of materials, together with a precise and effective mental effort – being the latter of technical, administrative, scientific, medical or artistic nature»³. We can define this first group, to whom Antonio Gramsci⁴ refers with a particularly deep thought, intellectual workers. Using a second meaning, the term intellectual doesn’t imply a precise social group, but a specific public role: public intellectual or *engagé*⁵. Public intellectuals are that part of intellectual workers who, by making public actions, exploit their cultural reputation in order to influence public opinion about specific “events”. Usually, public intellectuals come from the grassroots of national and international intellectual élites. Especially the intellectual workers take the opinions expressed by public intellectuals with a almost deferential respect and praise. The intellectual workers, and above all, those who are public intellectuals, are part of the hierarchical order of modernity because they exert a cultural power on non- intellectuals. From this point of view, in the modern era, intellectuals aspire to be:

- 1) interpreters of the true needs of masses (*action of social mediation*)
- 2) keepers of the knowledge about the development of history and nature (*cognitive action*);
- 3) supreme legislators of the way human beings should organize their actions, their society and their ways of life (*normative action*).

Each of these three actions has its roots in a universal concept of Truth which gives the intellectuals a moral superiority and a (presumed) superior mission: to lead and educate the masses. Between centuries XIX and XX the hierarchical order expanded: in order to lead and discipline wider and wider masses, bureaucratic machines were created in order to organize and exploit

³ Gallino 2004:386.

⁴ See Gramsci, 1996.

⁵ The above suggested differentiation partially follows the one gave by Mannheim in relation to the distinction between “mobile” elements (meaning not rooted in a specific cultural context) and “local” elements (on the contrary, expression of a well determined community) of a historically identified intellectual élites. See Mannheim, Shils, 1980.

cultural power; they used intellectual workers as the main labor force: the intellectual actions became complex social functions. Particularly, as functions, all the intellectual actions put into action in the society are performed by bureaucracies of knowledge (mass schooling that educates new generations), by the information system and by the cultural industry (mass media that inform and influence the audience), by politics (mass parties that politically educate and lead their members), by the administration (a factory administration that scientifically organizes the workers; public administration that regulates the life of citizens/users).

The intellectual workers grew in number, their work started being hierarchically organized, their skills put at service for a general purpose. In the first half of century XX, the organic intellectual analyzed by Antonio Gramsci is a bureaucratized intellectual. He organizes the masses and the social work. He himself is organized and so socially detached: there are "executive/leader" intellectuals and "directed" intellectuals in such a hierarchy.

3. A clash between intellectuals? Rethinking the new social movements of the 70's

During the 60's and the 70's the shift from industrial to post-industrial mode of production led to the establishment of a programmed society. In Alain Touraine's seminal analysis – Post-industrial society in 1970- that society links the effort for an indefinite material growth to forms of total dominion (of the single persons and the society). Knowledge – meant as capacity of generating new creativity – is the *trait d'union* between these two elements. Bureaucratic machines are its main social structure. The dominant social class in programmed societies is defined on a knowledge basis; meaning specific knowledge which can be managerial, administrative or technical. The working class, that is subjected to the action performed by machineries in different ways, is composed either by those who claim a rise in their own consumption or by those whose private life resists to the changes; so: «the principal opposition between these two great classes or groups of classes [...] Comes about because the dominant classes disposes of knowledge and control of information»⁶. Considering the first two levels of power in a programmed society:

1. political-strategic level: at this level the ruling class is composed by technocrats, who believe in the submission of politics to the imperative of defense, of science, or economic concentration. Among the various subdued social groups there are "professionals" meaning members of "professions", two of which have a particular importance in our society: education and public health. Professors, researchers and physicians, who are not wage earner directors, nor, in the great

⁶ Touraine 1970:61.

majority of cases, members of professions. On one hand, their activity requires rationalized organizations; on the other hand, it aims to maintain and empower the capacity of productions of people and students;

2. administrative level: at this level the ruling class is represented by high level bureaucrats.

Among the member of the working class there are employees and technicians who work in bureaucratic machines; experts engineers, accountants, jurists, psychologists.

Alienation and submission cases to which the different subdued categories are subjected don't lead to class movements and struggles automatically: they simply lay the basis for them. Re-interpreting *The Post-Industrial Society* by Touraine today shows, therefore, a core aspect: conflicts in a programmed society, seen at their beginning by the French sociologist, were struggles between different groups of intellectual workers: on one side professionals, experts and students and the other side technocrats and high level bureaucrats (the ruling class).

New social movements in the 70's (ecologism, localism and so forth) were put into action by the first group against the second one. A struggle that arose from the heart of intellectual bureaucracies, between "executive/leader" intellectuals and "directed" intellectuals, in a growing number.⁷ The hierarchical order of modernity was so questioned by those who most had contributed to its development. In a society dominated by the service industry, the directed intellectual workers, besides being producers, they also are a significant portion of consumers and citizens; they refused to be directed and represented in a authoritative fashion by the top sectors of bureaucratic machines: so the social mediation function and the normative function started experiencing a crisis. A crisis that is based on the decline of the authority⁸ and on strong Idea of Truth⁹. The intellectual subject - in first place in his role of public citizen, user and customer - demands autonomy, in order to use and spread knowledge and information in a more democratic fashion. The intellectual action, that starts spreading in the society through the expansion of intellectual workers, begins its riot against the intellectual function, which is institutionalized and bureaucratic.

4. Networked societies and the new molecular intellectuals

During the 70's and 80's of century XX, therefore, the boost to the expansion of the intellectual actions and its separation from the function, was shown by the new social movements and by the loss of credibility and influence exerted by "organized intellectuals". During the 90's, this process reached its acme through the new ITC (Blogs, Social Networks, Web 2.0 and so forth). This process is currently redefining in a completely new fashion the public space as part of the definitive

⁷ For an in-depth analysis about these aspects see Antonelli, 2009.

⁸ About the decline of the authority in contemporary societies, see Inglehart, 1998.

⁹ About the decline of the strong Idea of Truth see Vattimo, Rovatti, 1985.

overcoming of the (hierarchical) concept of society. The exclusive and centralized use of the intellectual actions (organizational function) is being undermined (but it won't disappear); groups of intellectuals produce and broadcast knowledge and information autonomously. As a matter of fact, as demonstrated by Manuel Castells, the convergence (highly unlikely) between the end of the fordist system, the innovations brought by the new social movements, mass schooling, the expansion of communication and the more and more growing role of creativity and of the innovation in the economic field, will lead not only to an exponential quantitative growth of intellectual workers, but also to their social and cultural and economic change¹⁰: born *molecular intellectuals*¹¹. There is a wide number of workers and consumers who can handle knowledge, culture and technology; they won't merge into social classes but will be spread in the social stratification and in relations of production: a part of them will become a part of the social élites, others will merge in a new middle class, others will, at the bottom of the social pyramid, form a new and precarious intellectual proletariat.¹² The high education rate, the use of cultural, symbolic and cognitive instruments while working, the search for cultural goods of consumption, individualism, are the common sides of this magmatic subjectivity. Today the intellectual worker does not merely reproduce knowledge and information, in the new networked economy he is urged, above all, to produce and innovate knowledge (*creative class*¹³). Each subject part of this new and complex group of intellectuals:

1) has (or thinks he has) cultural and cognitive means to self- representation, to produce values and projects and put them into use in the society¹⁴.

2) Through technology he has the actual chance to put into practice his will.

In other words, not only produces he immaterial goods linked to the production, he directly produces, through blogs, social networks, web tv's, opinions and knowledge as a citizen and consumer.¹⁵ Therefore, each of these new intellectuals feels and can represent himself as a public intellectual: public intellectuals who operate in great mediatic and institutional circuits keep being

¹⁰ See Castells, 2003.

¹¹ This concept is been formulated and statement by Francesco Antonelli and Robert Castrucci during the Italian Congress of Political Sociology (2009). See Antonelli, Castrucci, 2009.

¹² About the role of knowledge based work and about the production of immaterial goods see Castrucci, 2006. About the changes produced by new economy in the field of consumption and production see De Biase, 2007. About the category of *cognitariat* or cognitive proletariat see Berardi, 2004.

¹³ See Florida, 2002.

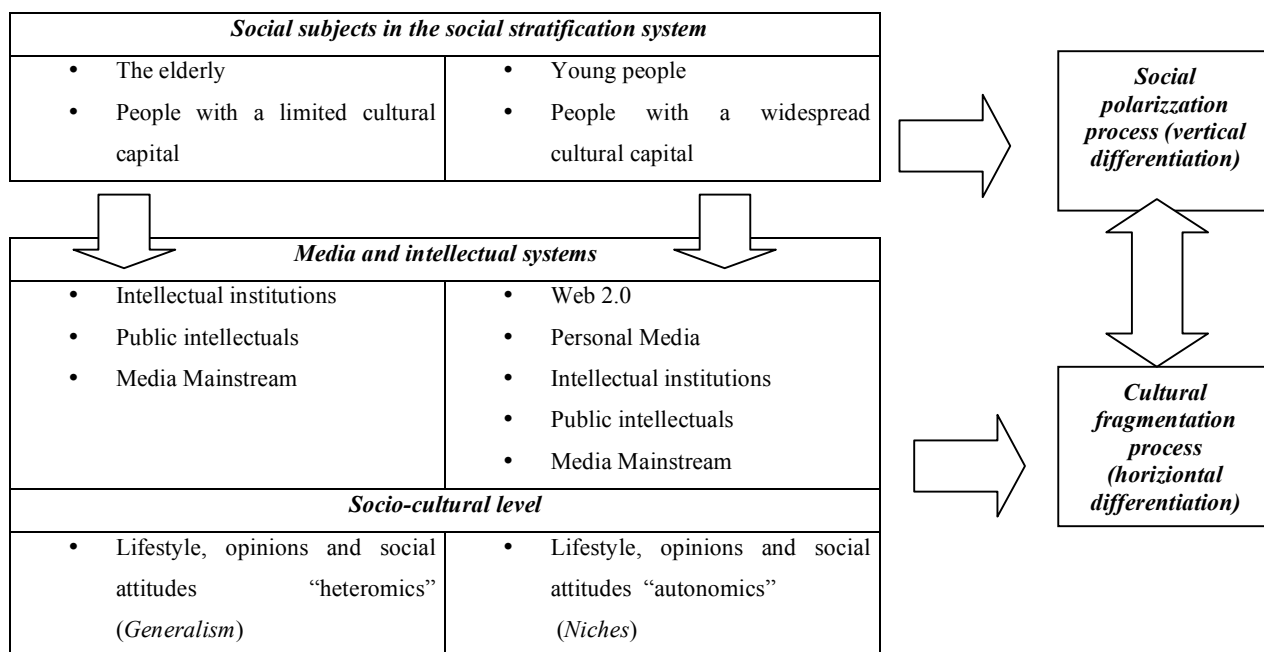
¹⁴ For a summary of the different analysis carried out about the redefinition of the concept of intellectuality as a productive force and of the intellectual as a knowledge worker in contemporary societies, in relation to the process of democratization see in particular Formenti, 2008; Castrucci, 2009.

¹⁵ About the above mentioned aspects see Levy, 1994; Tapscott, Williams, 2008.

there but they are more and more participating in a great rumor and, therefore, less and less capable to influence the audience and the cultural classes.

In a very similar way, the monopoly – and therefore their credibility – of organized intellectuals (mass media, school, administrations) is going down, in favor of more complex paths. Therefore we can see the silhouette of a new public space. The public space, as shown by Richard Sennett, is the location (social and symbolic) where a series of social actors share a language, a way of expression and matters on which they share opinions¹⁶. According to the American thinker, the fall of public man, visible already at the beginning of century XIX, lies in the progressive disappearance of shared public behaviors in favor of the private dimension. Actually, it has been just a decade since the analysis of Sennett became visible in reality, following a redefinition of the public space which links polarization (meaning a vertical differentiation process on a structural basis) and fragmentation (meaning a horizontal process of differentiation on a cultural basis). Simplifying analytically, on one hand, as a matter of fact, a layer of population, mainly old and/or with a limited cultural capital, lives (almost) exclusively inside the public space created by mass media, by other collective intellectuals and by the most important public intellectuals. On the other hand, following the prompt coming from new intellectuals that operate through the Net, there is a multiplication of niches of consumption, of ways of living, of political opinions (fig. 1).

Fig. 1 – Public and social space in a networked society



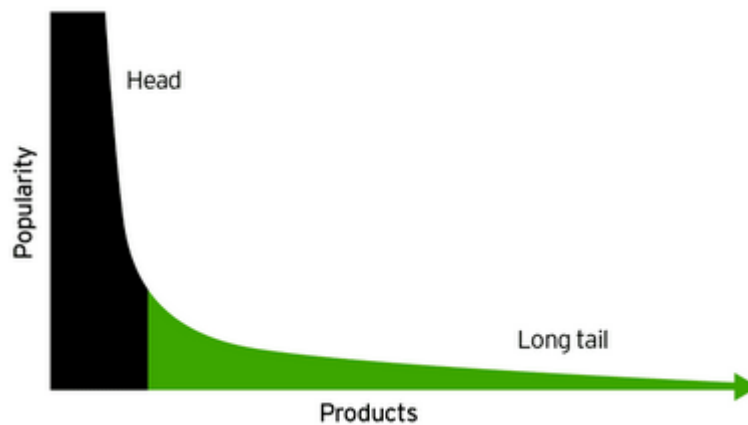
5. The long tailless of cultural markets: some empirical suggestions

¹⁶ See Sennett, 1977.

The emergence of networking societies lead to the molecularization both intellectuals (salaried producers of cultural and symbolic goods) and audiences (consumers of cultural and symbolic goods); at the same time, these social figures tend to merge with one another.

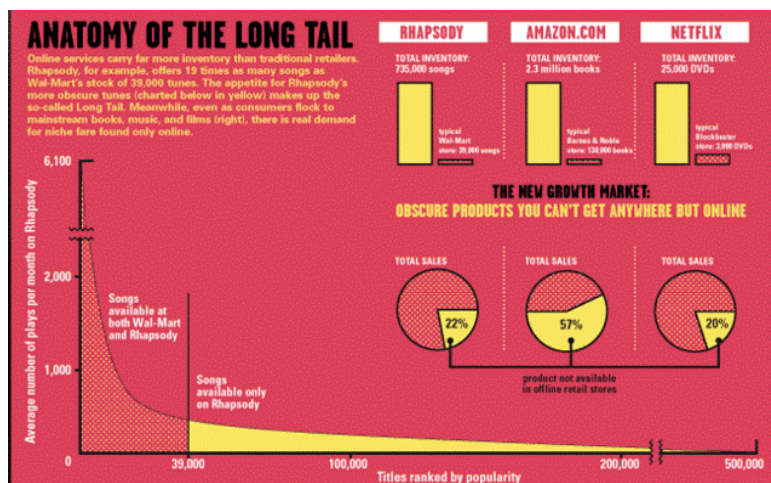
Another way to represent previous scheme is the *Long Tail Model* by Chris Anderson. In his book – *The Long Tail* (2006) – Chris Anderson explains how the paretian distribution known as the 80/20 rule looses much of it’s grip on media distribution¹⁷. Online business such as *Amazon.com* or *iTunes*, obtain more than half of their income from titles outside the 20% of the profitable selling books in a briks-and-mortar bookshop or cd’s in a cd-store¹⁸. So, in these markets there is a molecularization both cultural goods – with theirs *intellectuals-producers* (authors of books, journalists, scriptwriters and so forth) – and audiences; simultaneously, it is developed a dual processes based on the social polarization and fragmentation: in fact, the importance and the success of the cultural goods or intellectuals are different. In a Cartesian system the most important goods\intellectuals constitute the “Head” of the distribution; the sum of least important forming the “real” Long tail (fig. 2; fig. 3):

Fig. 2 – The model of Anderson’s Long Tail



¹⁷ See Anderson, 2005.

¹⁸ For an analysis of this process refer to *Amazon.com*, See Brynjolfsson, Hu, Smith, 2006.

Fig. 3 – A compared analysis about *Rhapsody*, *Amazon.com*, *Netflix* sales

Source: Brynjolfsson, Hu, Smith, 2006.

6. Final observations: the ambivalence of the new molecular intellectuals

Let us summarize the brief analysis carried out so far. Starting from the 60's and the 70's a first expansion of the intellectual class lead, at first, to the explosion of internal struggles in the institutions that exerted intellectual functions: on one hand the "executive/leader" intellectuals (technocrats, top bureaucrats), on the other the intellectual workers (students, professionals, experts); the prize was represented by the production and by the use of knowledge and information. Later on, starting from the 90's to today, a second expansion of the intellectual workers - more and more involved in creative tasks (creative class)- together with the spread of the Internet, lead to: 1) the spread of intellectual actions in the society; 2) the shaping of a wide decentralized area of intellectual production (in terms of critical knowledge and information); 3) the progressive separation between intellectual functions- exerted by the great bureaucratic machines we inherited from the early modern era- and intellectual actions; 4) the loss of credibility and influence of the great public intellectuals and of institutions which keep on performing intellectual functions.

The creation of a new public space was the outcome of this process, in which social polarization is linked to cultural fragmentation. About polarization: social strata that own a scarce cultural capital and belong to the oldest layers of age of the population, they keep being dependent on information and knowledge produced and spread by those institutions which exert intellectual functions and by public intellectuals. The social stratum with the widest cultural capital and the young ones (new intellectual classes) tend to self-produce and spread cultural objects autonomously. With regard to fragmentation: there is a multiplication of channels and cultural offers; the public space tends to look like an amount of cultural niches only partially independent.

This process is characterized by a strong ambivalence¹⁹. On one hand, on the opportunities side:

¹⁹ About sociological ambivalence see Bauman, 1991.

- a) there are new chances for people to be successful and establish themselves²⁰;
- b) the civil society become stronger and able to exert a wider control on power;
- c) wider knowledge and information will be able to be spread: the cultural basis of global society will be increased, the risk of manipulation exerted by the power will be diminished.

On the other hand, the risks side:

- 1) a growing lack of communication between social classes and groups in the society (a common ground of meanings and comparison will disappear);
- 2) it will become more and more difficult to tell apart reliable and non-reliable information and knowledge;
- 3) more and more frequently waves of populism will arise from the bottom layers of the society, they will undermine the authority of institutions, leading to a generalized lack of trust.

²⁰ About the personal subject *see* Touraine, 2007.

References

- Anderson C. (2005), *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More*, Hyperion, New York.
- Antonelli F., Castrucci R. (2009), “La lunga coda della transizione italiana: pubblici molecolari e trasformazioni delle élites”, Paper presented at Italian Congress of Political Sociology, Roma.
- Antonelli F. (2009), *La modernità in transito. Movimenti sociali, élites e trasformazioni collettive nella sociologia di Alain Touraine*, Franco Angeli, Milano.
- Bauman Z. (1991), *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Berardi F. (2004), *Il sapiente, il mercante e il guerriero: dal rifiuto del lavoro all'emergere del cognitariato*, DeriveApprodi, Roma.
- Böhme G., Stehr N. (eds.) (1986), *The Knowledge Society*, Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht.
- Brynjolfsson E., Hu J.Y., Smith M.D. (2006), “From Niches to Riches: the Anatomy of the Long Tail”, *Sloan Management Review*, 47, 4.
- Castells M. (2003), *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Castells M. (2008), *The Rise of the Network Society*, Blackwell Publishing, London.
- Castrucci R. (2006), “Il lavoro immateriale e la produzione di merci”, *Innovazioni*, n. 7.
- Castrucci R. (2009), “Il paradosso della classe creativa”, in Medaglia R. (a cura di), *I confini della sfera pubblica. Orizzonti ed emergenze*, Liguori, Napoli.
- De Biase L. (2007), *Economia della felicità*, Feltrinelli, Milano.
- Dijk van J. (2006), *The Network Society: Social Aspects of New Media*, Sage Publications, London.
- Florida R. (2002), *The Rise of the Creative Class: and how it's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*, Basic Books, New York.
- Formenti C. (2008), *Cybersoviet. Utopie post-democratiche e nuovi media*, Raffaello Cortina, Torino.
- Fuchs C. (2008), *Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age*, Routledge, New York.
- Gramsci A. (1992), *Quaderni del carcere. Gli intellettuali e l'organizzazione della cultura*, Editori Riuniti, Roma [1930's original manuscripts].
- Inglehart R. (1998), *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Society*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Lévy P. (1994), *L'intelligence collective*, Éditions La Découverte, Paris.
- Mannheim K., Shils E. (1980), *Men and Society in an Age of Reconstruction: Studies in Modern Social Structure*, Routledge & K. Paul, London.
- Rifkin J. (2000), *The Age of Access: the New Culture of Hypercapitalism, where all of Life is a Paid-for Experience*, J.P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York.
- Rifkin J. (1995), *The End of Work: the Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York.
- Sennett R. (1977), *The Fall of Public Man*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Sther N., Meja V. (2005), *Society and Knowledge: Contemporary Perspectives in the Sociology of Knowledge and Science*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick.
- Tapscott D., Williams A. D. (2008), *Wikinomics. How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything*, Portfolio - Penguin USA.

26 From “Organic” Intellectual to “Molecular” Intellectual in a Post-Society World

Touraine A. (1970), *The Post-Industrial Society – Tomorrow’s Social History: Classes, Conflicts and Culture in the Programmed Society*, Random House, New York [1969].

Touraine A. (2007), *Penser autrement*, Fayard, Paris.

Vattimo G., Rovatti P.A. (1985), *Il pensiero debole*, Milano, Feltrinelli.