THE NETWORK AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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The contemporary phase of modern society is often called the communication society or the era of communication technology, and computer networks are regarded as paradigmatic signs of the new culture. In this article, there are two main communication technology themes, one dealing with the debate on the contemporary cultural turn and the other concerning the implications of the disputed turn for some core concepts of communication research, especially the concepts of the public sphere, and connected to it, the civil society. The network, for its part, is both subject and object in the process of transformation.

The Network and Civil Society

The origin of the network, together with its structure and organisation, comprise a proper starting-point for the discussion at hand. The network embraces more than the well-known part of it, the Internet, and the Internet involves more than just a forum of university people and freaks. When I speak of the net I refer to a metanetwork of all networks, a matrix, and not to any single part of it. The phenomenon under consideration is hopelessly chaotic and messy, which actually forces one to apply fairly abstract or formal methods to make sense of it at all. The fact that the emerging networks are both more dispersed and more pervasive in their reach than ever before makes the attempt to analyse them all the more urgent.

The network is here approached with the assistance of Habermas's system model and, accordingly, divided into two parts: the system, comprising the economic world and the administration, and the lifeworld, comprising the privacy and the public sphere. In Habermas's conception the system and the lifeworld are not totally detached from each other but, rather, in many ways in-

terconnected and interacting through various channels. The division applied to the network is primarily analytic since in practice these spheres in part share the same infrastructure and are deeply intermingled. In this essay the concepts of system and lifeworld are not used, but the terms **digital highways** and **cyberspace**, respectively, are employed (Sassi 1995).

It seems clear that in cyberspace, in contrast with digital highways, innovation comes from the ground up. Internet, though it was born from a military monopoly, and because of certain external constraints which dictated its decentralised design, has developed into a chaotic, voluntarist, and unpredictably fertile world (Unsworth 1994). Internet is demonstrably useful for those kinds of communication purposes which rely heavily on verbal information, and particularly when the community of users has agreed on a set of consensual rules of behaviour.

The network as a whole has indisputable implications for civil society as well as for the public sphere, the latter being an elementary part of the former. The idea of civil society can in broad lines be equated to the principles of citizenship and democracy — they all belong to the same old tradition. Currently, the quest for civil society is gaining strength since the civil society appears to us as the only source of solidarity and sense of community available. However, just this longing for an experience of warmth and sympathy constitutes its main problem, both theoretically and in practice. Simultaneously with these difficulties in comprehending such a society, even the national one with its more familiar traits, we are now offered a global civil society by the network. The national civil societies for the first time in history, we are told, can now communicate with each other, and both the silent and the silenced will finally get their voice — all through the network. That is an attraction hard to ignore.

But who, actually, gave us the network and the global civil society along with it — have we behaved that neatly and nicely? I am looking for the answer through the emergence of the network, an event where necessities and coincidences intermingle and which has to be historically understood.

Main Trends of Modern Society

With the network the narrative of progress through communication has again been mobilised, and, in Druck's (1995) words, at the very moment that the collapse of the promise of urbanisation, industrialisation and modernisation is becoming impossible to disregard any longer. Therefore, before coming to the core items, the networked public sphere and the global civil society, I will briefly discuss some generally recognised trends and characteristics of modern society. This framework easily leads to the modern/postmodern discourse and to the dispute over the thesis of cultural turn. The dispute might become a little clearer, if not be resolved, by the examination of certain trends and processes of modernisation, namely **rationalisation, differentiation** and **commodification**.

Rationalisation denotes trends and processes of instrumentalisation, rational and technocratic thinking, instrumental rationality, efficiency, all intensified by industrialisation but already initiated centuries ago. There is no doubt about rationalisation still having enormous impact on various spheres of life and, presumably, being as impressive as ever. Its roots are deep in Judeo-Christian culture and history but the thrust towards rationalism and intensified efficiency has never been as clearly seen as in the current capitalist economy. The capitalist system of produc-

tion is inherently bound to enhance the volume of production in order to bring more surplus value wherein rationalisation has its importance.

What has the network actually to do with rationalisation? There is a non-casual connection, and in the first place, through the mediation of technology. A corporation can increase its profits remarkably if it is capable of obtaining more technological advantages than its competitors. Technological innovations are crucial in accumulating capital and for successful business. Just how are **information super-highways** justified in different nation-states? They are backed up with statements about "being able to meet international competition," of "taking a strategic market lead by means of new technology." As a system capitalism remains alive mainly through continuous technological changes. Social theorists have traditionally identified the consolidation of capitalism and the process of industrialisation as two developments central to the emergence of a modern economic order. A number, however, have refused to accord explanatory priority to either one. According to Murdock (1993) there are good reasons for prioritising capitalist dynamics in the analysis of modernity's political economy, particularly if the major concern is with the interplay between communication systems and other formations.

Second feature of modernisation, **differentiation**, has particularly to do with specialisation, expertise and fragmentation which all prevail in the current situation as well. Science, art and morals are branched off in modern world, and being divergent they have few points of contact with each other. They all produce their own codes and languages which have barely any interaction. More precisely differentiation has to do with elaboration and sophistication of the division of labour and the emergence of expert systems. There are strong trends towards specialisation in narrowly defined, though often deep, areas both in science and in work life. The logic of specialisation leads, for instance, to mathematical abstractions which render visible only matters that are calculable, measurable and simulable. This also explains the social and human indifference and backwardness of economics that, on the other hand, is the most mathematically advanced of all of the social sciences. The evolution of expert systems and, as a result, falling of issues formerly deliberated on and resolved by means of common sense and experience into the hands of specialists, is also a brand of specialisation.

How is the network related to differentiation? The network obviously produces and deepens cultural divergence and fragmentation, the emergence of subcultures and segmented audiences. Network may well, on certain level, produce dissolution of homogenised cultures and societies characterised by consensus, where they still exist — Finland might well pass for a paradigmatic example of this sort of homogeneity. The network may assist in reaching a certain maximum of individualisation, a genuinely modern phenomenon and a kind of differentiation.

Third feature, **commodification**, is also strongly effective in present-day society. Commodification lies at the heart of modernity's political economy. It deals with turning of matters and relations into commodities and objects of market exchange, with reification of all human value into market value. Extension of commodification into areas previously free from market forms is also easily perceivable. The process, however, is not without nuances: in cultural production, for instance, a twofold development has occurred. First of all, culture has clearly become commodified, become part of the market form, but in addition the market has itself become cultural; that is, cul-

tural meanings and distinctions are found in its functioning. In the network, the extension of commodification into the field of information is occurring, but also an intermingling of market form and public good which can be noticed in software production, for example. Distinctions between pure commercial action and genuine public good become difficult to make, which renders analysis and classification at least more troublesome, if not impossible.

"New" Features Elicited by Technology

Some new phenomena have sprung up attached to the network which, again, make the spectator thoroughly consider the proposition of cultural change. The most prevalent of these are, on the one hand, the expanding process of digitalisation of the most diversified matters and subjects and, on the other hand, the hugely increased volume of interaction and detached intercourse. Digitalisation means presenting a steadily growing body of processes and actions in the form of digits, that is, turning the basic knowledge of various fields into sequences of zeros and ones, enabling their quick delivery to, and retrieval in distant places all over the world. As a consequence, the models of physics and mathematics especially gain significance in evaluating the circulation and transformation of digitalised flows of values. This, for its part, contributes to detachment and disengagement of the flow economy from social and ethical valorisation. Although digitalisation as such will not provoke high feelings, it nevertheless has remarkable implications for our social and economic life. What is more, it clearly represents a true intensification of rationalisation and efficiency.

The second new feature, and from our point of view more interesting, is the extensive growth or acceleration of mediated interaction. In van Dijk's (1993) words, the last three decades have witnessed an acceleration in the use, demand for, and need for telecommunications, data communication, and mass communication transmitted by and increasingly integrated into networks. The miniaturisation of computer technology and the digitalisation of analogous communication facilities have led to a virtual explosion in the entry, processing, and transmission of information. Through telecommunications tens of millions of people are connected to a metanetwork and could, in principle, interact with each other. Although this interaction more often than not is indirect and impersonal there are however reasons for seeing the re-emergence of a premodern or traditional mode of communication even if in completely transformed form. In this context, the concepts of communication society or communication technology society are frequently heard.

Still, even if we agree to speak of explosions of information and interaction, were they really born by accident? Actually, the growth of information and communication has been characteristic of modernisation throughout its evolution and can be explained by modernisation theories. According to van Dijk, the attempts to explain the rising human need for communication facilities usually proceed with concepts of classical sociologists like Durkheim, Tönnies, and Weber and end with contemporary sociologists, especially Giddens and the theme of time-space distantiation in modern society. General modernisation theories explain the need for information and communication through key factors like extension of scale, growing complexity and division of labour, economic and cultural rationalisation, and social or cultural individualisation.

Finally, it is easy to see some connections between the sources of dynamism in modernity and the capacities of mediated communication and information networks.

The industrial system is increasingly dependent on communications networks for the effective control and co-ordination of production, distribution and consumption. The modernisation of Western societies also entails a fundamental shift in their social infrastructure. Traditional closed communities are lost and replaced by the much more selective communities of diffuse social networks which van Dijk sees as a necessary extension of the growing privatisation of a dense individual or small-family life. The communication networks have the capacity to pass the barriers of space and time across the globe and to assist in programming and organisation of extremely complex modern societies.

The Concept of Cultural Turn Once Again

The expansion of communication infrastructures and services can be seen as the result of a crisis of control in the economy and in society in general, van Dijk states. There are numerous signs that such a crisis has reoccurred in the last three decades. For van Dijk, growth in communication infrastructure looks like a revolution instead of a new, albeit accelerating phase of technological innovation. From this perspective, the thesis of postmodern turn can be interpreted as something more crucial than just cultural change. The technical potential included seems convincing enough since the new communication networks are integrating sound, speech, text, data, and images into a hybrid form and, in this way, producing a metamachine; in some respects an autonomous and creative phenomenon.

While electronic networks certainly open up possibilities for the decentralised circulation of information, it does not follow that cyberspace and the digital highway are going to ensure universal access, peace, democracy, equality or any other component of Enlightenment humanist ideology (Druck 1995). Despite all the promises and possibilities being articulated onto this new communications infrastructure, all the indicators of the actual implementation of this electronic infrastructure actually point away from the universality, equality and democracy promised by governments and academics alike. For example, only 13 per cent of American households are currently equipped with a personal computer and a modem; a small proportion of the first world, not to mention the so-called developing world. In current social scientific discussions it is also suggested that we, instead of living in a society based on discipline, now are situated in an environment characterised to a growing extend by control. In this emerging society traditional coercive institutions are losing their significance and extremely quick and elusive processes of control are evolving in their place. The network is a very efficient servant for accomplishing these controlling efforts.

Lash and Urry (1994, 3) argue that in the sense of increased profusion and speed of circulation of cultural artefacts, postmodernism is not so much a critique or radical refusal of modernism, but its radical exaggeration. It is more modern than modernism. The abstraction, meaninglessness, challenges to tradition and history issued by modernism have been driven to the extreme in postmodernism. On one hand they admit that a pessimist attitude is appropriate, on the other hand they argue that there is a way out. Against increasing homogenisation, anomie and the destruction of the subject there is another set of radically divergent processes simultaneously taking place. For Lash and Urry these processes appear to open up possibilities for the recasting of meaning in work and leisure, for the reconstitution of community and the particular, for the reconstruction of subjectivity, and for heterogenisation and complexity of space

and of everyday life.

The networks offer opportunities to form new communication communities in the social space between public and private. It is characteristic of the culture produced in this new infrastructure that it is generalised and pluralised at the same time. This situation can be interpreted as a postmodern turn, for we are witnessing important cultural changes. However, these shifts are more complex in nature, with deep roots in the contradictions of modernity. After all, to understand the changes we need to see them as a further extension of the process of modernisation rather than as something totally new, while having reached a new qualitative level. From this perspective the network world would be more productively viewed simultaneously as a modern and a postmodern phenomenon, a standpoint which has implications for the functions expected of the networked public sphere and the civil society.

Digital highways, the system part of the network in Habermas's sense, is the context for cyberspace, that is, the environment where networked civil society has to operate and to which it is in many ways tied. Cyberspace is confronted with tensions caused by networked economies and finance markets, and controlled and surveyed by the state's security services and the administration. The network definitely is not a neutral, virgin space for citizen's activities but instead it is loaded with economy's aspirations for extra growth and surplus gains as well as with increasing tendencies to law and order. To summarise it roughly, the hierarchic, authoritarian, linear modern ethos lives well in digital highways whereas chaotic, pluralistic cultural trends can obtain a foothold in cyberspace. All in all, the network is essential for civil society and citizenship realisation since, as Lash (1994, 121) says, life chances in reflexive modernity are a question of access not to productive capital or production structures but instead of access to and a place in the new information and communication structures. The position in information flow predicts who will be marginalised and deprived of citizenship because, in Lash's view, civil society and the public sphere are growingly existing precisely in this infrastructure.

The Reconceptualisation of the Public Sphere

Every time the media landscape changes — as with the rise of the "information highway" today — we confront the real but, in Rosen's (1994) view, unrealised possibility of a communicating public. One basic concept of communication research is the concept of the public sphere, the current renaissance of which is mainly due to Habermas. In very recent times it has come on to the scene both with new technology and the more comprehensive discussion on the future of democratic rule and the viability of civil society. Feminist scholars have paid critical attention to the concept of the public sphere and elaborated it in a radical way (see, e.g., McLaughlin 1993). Even this critical feminist formulation now seems somewhat challenged by the new communication environment.

The public sphere appears simultaneously to become thinner and more resilient. The private and the public are getting increasingly intermingled, and on the surface it looks as though hierarchies, institutions, and civil society could all be vanishing away. They still exist, however, and because of their more hidden form the essence of power is liable to become more obscure. On the other hand, fascinating new perspectives, especially from the feminist and women's point of view, are unfolding in the network. Features typically affixed to postmodern culture and liminality (Turner 1974) are those

that could equally well be coded as culturally feminine; for example non-linearity, de-centeredness, fragmentariness, anarchy; relations characterised as undifferentiated, eqalitarian, direct, nonrational, existential. If experiences of liminality are being actualised and certain postmodern qualities are gaining a stronger foothold in the network, shouldn't we be pleased? How are these two representations of the networked public sphere, the potential fading away of the public sphere and the experiences of empowerment and new horizons, to be adjusted to one another?

For a number of feminist scholars the general idea of the public sphere is indispensable to critical theory, but they argue for its reformulation. Fraser (1992, 110) sees the public sphere in modern societies as a theatre in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, and hence an institutionalised arena of discursive interaction. However, the original bourgeois public sphere, according to her, rested on, and was importantly constituted by, a number of significant exclusions, especially on the exclusion of women, the proletariat and popular culture.

Fraser (1992, 115) proceeds to present some elements of a new, postbourgeois concept of the public sphere. Two of them are of special importance here. First, she poses an argument in favour of **a multiplicity of publics** in stratified societies instead of a single public sphere. The problem of Habermas's notion is not only that it idealises the liberal public sphere but also that Habermas fails to examine other, nonliberal, nonbourgeois, competing public spheres. Revisionist historiography demonstrates that the bourgeois public was never the public (italics in original). A host of counterpublics which contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public arose simultaneously, elaborating alternative styles of political behaviour and alternative norms of public speech. Fraser sees that counterpublics can partially offset, although not wholly eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies. What then needs further examination is the interpublic discursive interaction that is of primary value.

Second, she poses an argument for **the inclusion of private interests and issues** instead of a universal common concern defined in advance of the discourse. Only participants themselves can decide what is and what is not of common concern to them. Fraser's point is that there are no naturally given, a priori boundaries between the public and the private. Democratic publicity requires positive guarantees of opportunities for minorities to convince others that what was not public in the past should now be so. Habermas's stress on a common good transcending the mere sum of individual preferences can work against the principal aim of deliberation; namely, to help participants clarify their interests. In particular, the less powerful may not find ways to discover that the prevailing sense of "we" does not adequately include them. In general, Fraser invites a more critical look at the terms "private" and "public" since they are cultural classifications and rhetorical labels deployed to disenfranchise some interests, views, and topics and to valorise others. **Instead of a coherent, homogeneous public, feminist scholars propose a public sphere, or multiple public spheres, where differences are recognised and appreciated.**

However, according to Baynes (1994) Habermas's project of communicative ethics or, more specifically, the conception of the public sphere that it is intended to strengthen does not anticipate the idea of a homogeneous public which excludes difference or diversity. Neither does it rely on a model of face-to-face interaction that has become

increasingly irrelevant for modern forms of social integration. Rather, the public sphere must be broadly conceived as a vast array of institutions in which a wide variety of practical discourses overlap. It ranges from the more or less informal movements and associations in civil society where solidarities are formed, through the various institutions of the public mass media, to the more formal institutions of parliamentary debate and legal argumentation.

There is a common understanding among the critical scholars that a post-bourgeois or post-liberal concept of the public sphere should be read as plural and decentered, constituted by conflict, and combining the notions of interest and identity. There is a further aspect of publicity, stressed by Fraser (1992), that has to do with the meaning of discursive interaction for members of a public. However limited a public may be, its members tend to understand themselves as a part of a potentially wider public. To interact discursively as a member of public is to aspire to disseminate one's discourse to ever-widening audiences. However, from the perspective of everyday life these considerations may appear distant and even uninteresting. For a citizen bound by quotidian constraints and routines it is sometimes cumbersome to grasp the concept of public sphere in all its abstraction and sophistication. What, actually, does the concept tell people who theoretically are embraced by the public sphere? If they happened to get acquainted with the concept, would these elaborations make sense to them?

The Politics of Representation

Not only do some basic assumptions that underlie the model of public sphere appear dubious, but the whole idea of comprehensive, open, and critical-rational political discourse seems highly utopian in the conditions of mass democracy and mass communication. For an average member of a public it inevitably brings up the question of representation: who is justified to speak for whom and by whose mandate?

Clarifying the contours of modernity's distinctive political formations led Murdock (1993) to the question of how representation is organised in modern societies. The issue brings together questions of social delegation, of who is licensed to speak on whose behalf, and questions about the organisation of discourse and visual representation, of what can be said and shown, to whom, where and in what forms. Murdock sees the problem of representation as an intensification of contradictions that have been unfolding since the early years of the century, when the state, the party system, the mass consumer system and the modern popular media, began to coalesce into something like their present forms. Thus, the present crisis of representation is a crisis in the relationship between the discourses of major parties and the institutions of public communications available. These discourses are losing their purchase on public attention and support and are subject to challenge from counter-discourses rooted in racism, nationalism, fundamentalism and the new social movements.

A critique of representation is also inherent in Arendt's (1958) conception of governance. In her view, representative democracy has led to the emergence of an oligarchic class and the privileged governing of the majority by the few. Representative democracy is in crisis because it does not allow systematic and active participation of citizens and seeks to render them meaningless to the system except on voting-day. Here we are dealing with the role of the citizen as a political actor and especially with the relationship between the state and the citizen. Part of a citizen's experience in

contemporary society is his/her relationship to the state presented as a direct union between these two (Vähämäki 1994). The model belongs to neoconservative political thought and seems to be prevalent both in theory and practice. The notion anticipates a citizen who is detached from intermediary social groups and communities, of traditions, special interests, class attachments and prejudices. Consequently, the prevailing conditions resemble a complete break between politics and the people. Politics has fallen into the hands of experts, the politicians. Since politics is the privilege of the politicians every articulation of citizen opinion is an interference, an inconvenience.

As an opposite view we could have Arendt's (1958) conceptions of power and the political world. For her power is essentially communicative by nature, evolves both as action and as discourse, and is inseparable from politics. It refers to power for something or the potential for power and in this sense is not repressive but a necessary quality especially for those without a share of entitlements and wishing to pursue change. Characteristic of Arendt's political world is its irreversibly open and processual nature: it is always a sphere of differences and ambiguity, and unavoidable conflicts and disputes are exactly the forces which create progress. Habermas (1992, 451), for his part, depicts politics as the interplay between a constitutionally instituted formation of political will and the spontaneous flow of communication unsubverted by power.

The dominant trend of contemporary society, however, is to downgrade citizens more or less to the role of spectators which for Rosen (1994) is a dismissal of democracy itself. What emerges as a result of these considerations is a picture of society where an empty space has arisen between the citizen and the state, and between the citizen and the class of professional politicians dependent on the state. When political affairs are submitted to the expert system of politicians governance begins to resemble mere administration and the citizen, gradually, an instrument of the system. As a consequence the public world will tend to dissipate in the absence of citizen deliberation, conversation and decision-making. In Rosen's view this condition should be corrected by reinstalling the public as both the object and the subject of democratic politics.

It is now suggested by some postmodern scholars (e.g., Vattimo 1991) that the cultural turn, assisted by new information and communication technology, will bring essential changes to this situation eliciting plurality and a vast array of heterogeneous audiences. Even though fragmenting and proliferating formations of discourse and contested cultural fields are characteristic of late modernity, plurality does not mean that all players on the field are equal in any case; some are more equal than others. In this essay the question can be formulated as follows: Does network strengthen the political model of representation and lobbyism rather than that of participatory democracy? Is the net, in the main, a way of defining an emergent elite, a technological class, a way of making distinctions between both the older elites and various popular and plebeian strata? The questions, Whose public sphere is the network? Who are the publics? can also be raised.

Though the network is not as elitist as is easily suggested, it nevertheless comprises just an insignificant minority of the global population. Network as a whole can contribute to legitimating an emergent form of class rule. Nevertheless, it is simultaneously an arena in which different social and cultural groups may constitute alternative publics. They may or may not be subordinated social groups — subaltern counterpublics in Fraser's (1992) terms — like women, workers, peoples of various

colours, and gays and lesbians. These publics are arenas where members of social groups invent and circulate discourses to formulate interpretations of their identities, interests and needs. They may be counter-discourses and oppositional interpretations in Fraser's sense but they may also be these in a weaker sense, that is, as discourses infrequently represented in official public spheres. In short, we can notice a slight turn from the politics of representation toward the politics of participation brought forth by the network but though it exists it is not without problems.

Fragmentation and Unity

As noted above, Fraser has constructed a reformulation of the concept of the public sphere emphasising four important elements, the first one pointing to the significance of the multiplicity of publics. Articulated slightly differently, we can under the same heading, of multiplicity, discuss the basis of civil society, and specifically the fragmenting and unifying forces beneath its construction. In general, to understand modernity is to understand the dialectical interplay between the disaggregating and the uniting forces of modernity. Seligman (1992, 120) notes that it was the autonomy of the individual citizen stressed throughout the nineteenth century that led to a decrease in solidarity between citizens, and gradually to the fragmentation and reformulation of social life. In highly complex societies there will necessarily be a plurality of competing interests that makes it doubtful whether a general interest of the kind to serve as a foundation of civil society can ever emerge. Thus, homogeneous background convictions cannot easily be assumed.

On the other hand, there is the globalising and assimilating quality of modernity that acts against fragmentation and subsequent social disintegration. However, these unifying forces do not bring about any strong affiliations and what we are left with is, as Tomlinson (1994) says, a kind of "weak sense" of global commonality. In his view, the simple perception of common risks might give some sense of global unity, but this is liable to be fragile and easily displaced from the foreground of consciousness. What is required in the current situation is a much stronger sense of commonality, a sense of a "positive global community." The question arises as to whether any experience of "community" can be retained in global modernity. There are tentative suggestions that the media may give us access to a sort of communal experience, though different from the experience of community linked to locality. For Tomlinson, the problem of the constitution of global "community" via a global media is that of the audience lacking a "past in common." What seems clear is that a sense of communal identity must depend on opportunity at some point to engage in a dialogue — to have a sense of others as dialogue partners. Because there is nothing like a global public sphere it is not surprising for Tomlinson that our sense of the global context remains largely that of a set of determining structures, not of a potential political and cultural community.

The technologically mediated or mass-mediated experiences of global community are by definition dispersed by nature. Although the experiences of network events in the main resemble the mass-mediated ones there are significant traits of and occasions for more interpersonal-like interaction. The mode of communication in the network can alternately be dialogical and hence the environment can actually produce conditions for an audience to be a community, though maybe not necessarily in a strong sense. But is not the notion of a global public or global public sphere an anomaly itself, precisely because it can never include the majority of population? That is also a

problem of representation, as Seligman notes (1992, 191). Given the interconnected nature of today's world economies, for civil society to attain the validity mandated by Habermasean communicative rationality, it would have to include all of humanity and not just the citizens of a given state. In his view, social movements and the institutional arena of their interaction would have to be of an international scope and not limited to the confines of a particular nation-state. This question could perhaps more productively be approached from the perspective of process and flow than from that of a structure. For a moment, something may evolve that could be called global in the sense of interaction reaching all over the globe, though to a restricted extent. Not underestimating the possibilities of the emergence of a global public, however, it seems more plausible that in the network various micro public spheres (see Keane 1994) applied to specific issues or spaces will flourish.

It is important to find out how easily and unnoticed discussion on the network and the civil society turns into the discussion on the public sphere, and actually with full justification because the network can be seen as nothing else than just a huge public sphere itself. However, this observation offers a more crucial insight into the current cultural transformation, that is, the extension of the public sphere at the expense of the civil society and its basic activities. If in recent history there were civil societies without any means of communication of their own, there now are networked public spheres without any significant social organisations and citizen activities or put another way there is a tiny civic body that has developed an enormous public head. The heterogeneous and fragmenting nature of these public spheres constitutes another problem of politics. McLaughlin (1993) notes how counter-public activities often appear to be operated on the assumption that they are inherently resistant, emancipatory and, preferably, altruistic political activities. This is so despite the presence of numerous counter-publics and movements characterised by conflicting interests, many with notions of liberation based on the repression of others. These publics may end up using methods of force and violence which actually belong to the prepolitical assets of governing whereas in democratic political practice it is assumed that decisions are reached by means of negotiations and persuasion. For this reason the organisation of interest groups on racial or ethnic-particular lines is seen by Seligman (1992, 167) as a breakdown of civil society and not as its realisation.

Aspects of the "Public–Private" Dichotomy

The second element mentioned by Fraser as part of the reformulated public sphere was the inclusion of private interests and issues instead of a universal common concern defined in advance. There are actually complex reconfigurations of the public and private domains which are themselves linked to the ways communications systems are organised. Communication technologies can be viewed as the site of continual struggles over interpretation and use intermingling with the disputes over the boundary between the public and private spheres (Murdock 1993). It is commonly accepted that the boundary separating public and private should be seen as continually contested, and that precisely these shifting interactions between them should be explored. Some commentators go as far as to state that the whole division is simplistic and unhelpful in relation to the new communications technologies.

Scholars also frequently use these terms in meanings widely departing from each other. The first aspect of the dichotomy examined here is the one set forth most deter-

minedly by feminist research and based on various **exclusions from the public sphere**. A set of objections against the model of the public sphere is projected onto the hierarchical ordering inherent to it which privileges reason over affection, the universal over the particular, and male over female. A consequence of this ordering is a model of the public sphere which is homogenising in its appeal to the common good or general interest, excludes difference — including gender difference — and relegates particularity to the realm of the private (Baynes 1994). The "original" creation of civil society through the social contract is a patriarchal construction and thus also a separation of sexes (Pateman 1988). Most scholars have, however, failed to appreciate the gendered subtext of the public sphere.

The core meaning of "privacy" and "privacy rights" for Benhabib (1992) is that of the intimate sphere. This is the domain of the household, of meeting the daily needs of life, of sexuality and reproduction, and of care for the young, the sick, and the elderly. Benhabib argues that contemporary moral and political theory continues to neglect these issues and ignores the transformation of the private sphere resulting from massive changes in women's and men's lives. For her the women's movement and feminist theorists have shown that traditional modes of drawing this distinction have been part of a discourse of domination that legitimises women's oppression and exploitation in the private realm. In a later work Habermas (1992, 458) points to the integration of the patriarchal family system with a system of private property as the fundamental grounding of the private sphere. In the light of various feminist critiques, he has conceded that his earlier formulation of the public/private distinction may have failed to note how this distinction was gender-specific. This critique has led Habermas to suggest that it may be more appropriate to speak of public spheres rather than simply the public sphere. His later formulation of the concept constitutes it in a more fragmented and unorganised form (Habermas 1992, 445).

For van Zoonen (1991) the bourgeois public sphere seems to presuppose a civic public consisting of impartial moral reasoners standing outside the situation discussed, adopting a detached attitude. This civic public is not misled by particular ends and interests, but guided by universal rationality. A necessary precondition for this is the exclusion, at least temporarily, of all non-rational aspects of existence such as affectivity, desire, feelings. As an alternative, van Zoonen proposes a contextualised evaluation of public life which would appreciate specific discourses rooted in e.g. the particular experiences of women and ethnic groups. The gendered subtext of the bourgeois public sphere leads her to suggest replacing its universalist morality with more particularist and contextual evaluations of public life, and recognising and appreciating differences instead. Nevertheless, says Baynes, the conception of public sphere is not inherently structured to exclude heterogeneity or particularity. Though it presupposes some distinction between the public and the private, it has a self-referential character that opens it up to possibilities of self-transformation. The boundaries between the public and the private are not fixed but rather refer reflexively to the presence of a public sphere in which the reasons or grounds for any particular division remain open to contest, criticism, and possible renegotiation. Similarly, the model of the public sphere does not rest on an a priori distinction between the universal and the particular.

Another aspect of the dichotomy under consideration could be referred to as the potential **emptying of the public sphere caused by the extension of the private**. Habermas's analysis of the public sphere traces its reduction to an arena of private

interests, incapable of representing the whole. This development is characterised by the "collapse" of that publicness on which the idea of civil society stood. To show the difficulty to "return" to a civil society Seligman (1992, 132) also points to the way the relations between public and private spheres are currently conceived. The realm of shared public space, within which the citizen is constituted, has itself disappeared. What has taken its place is the individual existing in public only in most abstract and generalised form. Seligman proposes that in lieu of the public the private is projected into the public arena, is made public. The idea of civil society was seen to rest upon the synthesis of public and private, and it is precisely the breakdown of that synthesis that we are witnessing according to Seligman.

Scholars unanimously admit that there is need for a more nuanced analysis of the public/private distinction, although the way of defining these spheres may vary markedly. On the other hand, any theory of public, public sphere, and publicity presupposes a distinction between the public and the private since the public sphere rests on the distinction. Suggestions to include the formerly excluded publics into the public arena are, of course, justified as are the appeals to transform the boundaries between private and public issues. Finally, to make issues of common concern means making them increasingly accessible to discursive will formation; it means to democratise them (Benhabib 1992). From the perspective of political action and the conduct of everyday activities, a distinction between the public and private issues should remain, although between these oppositional terms a grey area of mixed qualities may arise.

Features prevalent in contemporary culture, in particular those of fragmentation and particularisaton, and the extension of the private over the public, certainly gain strength in the network. The exaggeration of these trends to the extreme would nevertheless be as disastrous or tragic as their radical reduction or reversion. Too strong a desire for unity can lead to repressing differences within groups, but correspondingly, too strong a desire for fragmentation can lead to indifference and passive appropriation of social inequalities, or, gradually, to the dispersion of the idea of the public. McLaughlin (1993) refers to the definition of a heterogeneous public as helpful in conceptually accommodating both the unity necessary for mobilisation and the differences and the specific experiences of individuals and groups. A balanced view is needed to weigh unity and fragmentation, private and public against each other, a view based on synthesis and natural harmony.

The Perspective of Civil Society Revisited

Besides the vague and dispersed foundation of its core institutions, modern civil society is facing another problem that may weaken its viability — namely, that of its ethical grounding. The current wish to return to civil society signals the need to reassert a social solidarity that would admit community as well as individuality, to include an element of shared solidarity in the notion of individual rights. The idea of civil society had already been an attempt during the Scottish Enlightenment to find a synthesis between a number of developing oppositions that were increasingly being felt in social life (Seligman 1992, 25). These oppositions, between the individual and the social, the private and the public, egoism and altruism, between a life governed by reason and one governed by the passions, have according to Seligman become constitutive of our existence in the modern world.

We identify the freeing of the individual from traditional, primordial and particu-

lar solidarities based on kinship and territorial identities with the forms of modern society. It is, as is well known, exactly the notion of the individual that is crucial for an understanding of modernity. The new civilisation of modernity based ideologically and politically on the assumption of equality and of the growing participation of citizens in the social and political life of society. However, previous as well as contemporary societies face the crucial problem of how to represent the ties and relations between morally autonomous individuals. In Seligman's (1992, 94) words, what emerges, is the classical problem of squaring the demands of the abstract rights of the individual with the desiderata of social entitlements and mutual welfare. The constitutive problem of ethically integrating individual and social life has been at the agenda of social and political debates for a century but has, for the most part, remained unsolved. Though we can celebrate differences as such, it is not the retreat into the group, into the particular, that opens up possibilities for empowerment (McLaughlin 1993). However difficult it may be, we should be committed at the same time both to the universalist and the particularist aspects or drives of social life since they both are necessary and, finally, only exist in union.

A further problem that has to be solved or dealt with is the conceptual confusion. The very basic concept of democratic vocabulary is civil society, but its history and all the ramifications have made it controversial or even unfruitful in contemporary discussions. For practical reasons we need a concept, a tool, to gather under the same heading all the efforts of care, co-ordination, compassion and political contestation. A pragmatic solution would be to apply the concept when needed and to pay no attention to its inherent ambiguities and anachronism. The other way would be to define it according to the present need and, again, to supplant its genealogy (Bourdieu on concepts, in Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). We are actually not left with any elegant solution if we want to deal with the old bunch of democratic- communitarian incentives. My choice is to keep the concept of civil society because of its reference to political action but to apply it as a faded horizon. As a structure the network seems to bring with it qualities of fragmentation and privatisation that are prone to weaken the organisation of citizen's activities but there may be evolving undercurrents of solidarity and care, of mutual understanding. To make these tendencies visible a cultural or microsociological approach with its near focused lenses is fruitful since it has the capacity of showing how social relations actually are constructed in the network. I decided to use the term "community" to refer to shared qualities and social ties although it carries with it the very similar problems and controversies as the concept of civil society.

The reading of the term in this context leads to a hermeneutic interpretation of it delineated for example by Lash (1994, 143-168). He provides us with two sets of notions worth presenting here, one dealing with the culturalisation of society and the other with the suggested basis of community formation. It is argued that only in very recent modernity has a cultural sphere fully differentiated off from social, political and economic life. Only now is there full value pluralism, only now the possibility of a genuine multiculturalism and a self-organising sub-politics (see Beck 1994) in which the stake is the cultural creation of reality. Not only have the former dominating social institutions — including economic firms themselves — become more cultural in character, but more strictly cultural institutions have become increasingly central to reflexive or late modernity.

The second point concerns the possibility of cultural communities. For Lash, these communities, the cultural "we," are collectivities of shared background practices, shared meanings, shared routine activities involved in the achievement of meaning. Community is based on *Sitten*, which are customs and by definition not rules; it is based in habits, not on judgements, but "prejudgements." These preunderstandings and background assumptions are the domain of hermeneutics and the best mode of access to truth is in involved engagement, in having concern for things and people in a shared world. Lash refers to Bourdieu (1992) who speaks of reflexivity in terms of the systematic uncovering of the unthought categories which themselves are preconditions of our more self-conscious practices. These unthought categories or schemata are not inaccessible to the conscious mind as for example is the Freudian unconscious. Lash proceeds to ask where all this leaves the "self," pointing out that it is not at all satisfactory only to allude vaguely to a "dialectic" of self and community or to speak of a theory of community that "leaves space" for the self. What is needed is a notion of involvement in communal practices out of which the self grows. There are important sources of contemporary self, which are analytically separable as cognitive, aesthetic and hermeneutic-communitarian "moments," and which, according to him, exist in us in an often contradictory and irreconcilable way.

Because the text and the constellation of social interaction are readily available in the network it is an ideal environment to examine the mode of construction of social relations and the uncovering of the unthought categories. In bringing forth our shared experiences it is a "positive" project, yet at the same time it is a very hard project because the shared meanings are mostly hidden and live beneath the visible surface and there are not many other clues available except the discussions. Lash has his project, too, a "positive" task to be accomplished, namely to emphasise the hermeneutic or communitarian dimension because in the present age of cognitive-utilitarian and aesthetic-expressive individualism it is the one most in need of some sort of retrieval operation. I have nothing much to add to that except that how askew we may ever go with the conceptual elaboration and theoretical considerations — which many times appear as very remote and alienated — there definitely is an empirical need for a strengthened communitarian aspect in our lives and in our societies. And if we hesitate to concentrate on network research because of the minority and elite nature of the network let us try to keep in mind that the thrust towards its existence lies in economic forces which inevitably will also cause its extension.

A New Beginning of the Story

Confusing and ambiguous features of the network include the split between two worlds, the virtual and the real. Virilio, in an interview (Wilson 1994), states that there is no simulation but the coexistence of two separate worlds. One day the virtual world might win over the real world. These new technologies try to make virtual reality more powerful than actual reality, which is the true accident. The day when virtual reality becomes more powerful than reality will be the day of the big accident. Mankind has never experienced such an extraordinary accident. He further concedes: "I am a Christian, and even though I know we are talking about metaphysics and not about religion, I must say that cyberspace is acting like God and deals with the idea of God who is, sees and hears everything."

A principal code for contemporary political action is, nevertheless, clear: to be com-

mitted to equality, not to inequality, but equality understood as justice and reasonableness, not as sameness and annihilation of differences (Vähämäki 1994). The perspective on politics radically changes if differences between individuals are accepted as natural and individuals conceived on the basis of their differences more as imperfect than as perfect. If the plurality of ways of living is appreciated, we understand the need for co-operation and completion better. With respect to global and local risks we still have to try to apprehend the network from the perspective of civil society. The character of civil society's institutional core has been transformed and could now be better expressed as "relations of associations," which is a weaker formulation compared to the "associational life" that at one time constituted the social stratum of the bourgeois public sphere (Habermas 1992, 453). The relations of associations should finally produce political communication that readies citizens to engage in "responsible behaviour" through sufficiently convincing arguments.

However odd and archaic Habermas's expression sounds, the pursuit of reasonable and responsible behaviour is not totally out of question. In postmodern frontier conditions, and, more literally, as a neighbour of a collapsing superpower, I as a Finn would evidently benefit from something global and, at the same time, metaphysical emerging, of a new experience of the sacred. Somewhere in Siberia there is a city of 200,000 inhabitants called the town number 27. Underground, beneath the city's surface there is a comprehensive construction, a factory with its numerous floors and roasting facilities responsible for refining and management of nuclear waste. The plant should be closed but the earnest men working there know that it is impossible. Although the pipes and installations are getting old and dangerous, and the men tired and sick, the waste itself remains active for thousands of years. So the men stay underground and worship the sacred luminous matter till the end of their days, regardless of the insufficient and irregular salaries and inhuman conditions.

What has civil society to do with plutonium? Everything, since plutonium should not be let go, and somebody has to convince the men that the work they do is indispensable and irreplaceable. It surely is; they have to keep on servicing the radioactive substance at the risk of their health for the simple reason that if they don't the silent explosion will exceed all the effects of Chernobyl. Global civil society has to be aware of the town and its secret in order to put pressure upon governments and international bodies for assistance. The disintegrating Russian state alone will be incapable of preserving the secret in the box. Without global support, material and immaterial, the prisoners of the mountain may some day just walk away with no backward glance to the underground demon and to the generations to come.

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