Digital Networks and Citizenship

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Paradoxical as it may appear, isn't it through the rights of man that transpires today—at a planetary level—the worst discriminations?

—Jean Baudrillard, *Les mots de passe*

Globalization versus Citizenship

CRITICAL DISCOURSE TODAY LOCATES AN ANTAGONISM BETWEEN GLOBALIZATION AND CITIZENSHIP. THE DEEPENING OF globalizing processes strips citizens of power, this position maintains. As economic processes become globalized, the nation-state loses its ability to protect its population. Citizens lose their ability to elect a leadership that effectively pursues their interests. When production facilities are dispersed beyond the nation, jobs are lost to foreigners, labor markets are affected by conditions in countries with diverse living standards, and capital flows, at the speed of light, to places of optimum returns. Consumption is also planetary in scope, bringing across borders alien cultural assumptions as embodied in commodities. The popular need no longer be the local. Although foreign goods are inflected with community values and easily adapted to local conditions, they remain indexes of otherness. What is more dramatic still than the changes in production and consumption, nation-states are losing their cultural coherence by dint of planetary communications systems. Much of contemporary music is global music or at least a fusion of diverse musical cultures. Satellite technology and the Internet bring all media across national boundaries as if those borders did not exist. Global processes run deep and wide, rendering problematic the figure of the citizen as a member of a national community.

In this conjuncture the figure of the citizen is placed in a defensive position. If freedom inheres only in the citizen, then we must admit that in all likelihood freedom is lost or soon to be lost. I urge us to consider, against the defensive posture, an offensive one. We need to reconfigure the political individual in relation to conditions of globalization, to discover amid the troubling inequalities of north and south and the unlim-

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ited appetite of corporate greed a means to define a new form of power and a new means of association, perhaps, as Jacques Derrida writes, "a new international," one that can open a new horizon of freedom in the space of the earth.

Beyond the Citizen

I want to suggest in this essay, in the spirit of my epigraph from Jean Baudrillard, that Western concepts and political principles such as the rights of man and the citizen, however progressive a role they played in history, may not provide an adequate basis of critique in our current, increasingly global condition. They may not provide, that is, a vehicle for thinking through and mobilizing a planetary democratic movement. This is so for three reasons. First, the simple fact that these principles derive from the West, which is responsible for an imperialist and capitalist form of globalization, detracts from their ability to catalyze truly global movements against domination; the origin of these principles makes one suspicious of them from the start. Second, the situation today calls for democratic principles that include difference with universality, that cover the peoples of the earth but acknowledge situational differences. Enlightenment principles are deficient here because they move to the universal too quickly, forgetting their conditions of possibility in an emergent bourgeoisie of the eighteenth century. In the rush to insist on democracy and humanity, in the intoxication with the idea of democracy, in the irrefutable radicality of such ideas in the context of the waning of the Old Regime in Europe, the principles of natural right required one to extract oneself from the social in order to proclaim the universal as natural. Third, today the natural no longer exists as an autonomous realm of self-determination. Today science and technology constitute a humanized nature and in so doing bring forth machines. The conditions of globalization are not only capitalism and imperialism; they include the linking of human and machine. New democratizing principles must take into account the cultural construction of the human-machine interface. In short, we may build new political structures outside the nation-state only in collaboration with machines. The new community will not be a replica of the agora, but it will be mediatized.

Interlude on Identity

One vision of a new citizenship joined with difference is offered by Steven Spielberg in his 1997 film *Amistad*. Let me explain what I mean by this surprising assertion and indicate why I think Spielberg's vision of new citizenship is not adequate.

Near the end of the film, John Quincy Adams (played by Anthony Hopkins) pleads before the Supreme Court of the United States for the lives of African mutineers by arguing, against John Calhoun, a southern advocate of slavery, that people are free by nature. Adams eloquently orates a liberal position, while pointing for emphasis to a copy of the Declaration of Independence that hangs in the chambers. Resistance to slavery, he says, such as what the accused did and what is inscribed in the document, is proof enough that people are free. Continuing his oration, Adams switches to another line of argument, one provided him by Cinque (played by Djimon Hounsou), a member of the accused group. Shortly before the trial, Adams and Cinque speak to each other (through an interpreter). Learning from Adams that their case will be difficult to win, Cinque announces that he will invoke the tradition of all his ancestors to give himself strength. The African, faced with an extreme danger, merges his identity with those of his forebears to achieve maximum solidity of self, or even a collective self.

The surprising move in the film is that Adams reproduces Cinque's traditionalism in the court. As he speaks to the justices about the natural freedom of humanity, he walks around the room gesturing to busts of past presidents,

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including that of his father. He supplements rational arguments for freedom with the traditions of liberty in the still-young United States. He warns the justices that the identity of American citizens is at stake in the trial, that they must acquit the Africans to renew the nation in its commitment to freedom. What I find remarkable in this scene is its blending of liberal citizenship and traditional identity formation. In the magic of the movies, with its cutting and splicing, its making links that are difficult to experience outside the theater, Spielberg has his cake of natural-rights freedom and eats it too as particularist identity politics. We might say that today the figure of the citizen joins together the autonomous individuality of modernity with the postmodern traditionalism of identity politics. Is this most ungainly blend, we might ask, suitable to conditions of an emerging planetary politics of the twenty-first century? In particular, what is the fate of modern and postmodern political identity when communication takes place in the borderless world of the Internet?

Nation and Citizen

The citizen as an autonomous being was articulated as the nature of a person in the Enlightenment, achieving its best expression in Descartes. A being separate from the world of material objects, defined by rationality, outside any social integument—this Cartesian subject was the prerequisite of the citizen. The complexities, difficulties, and ironies of this historic change are captured well by Etienne Balibar in his term "citizen subject." For this subject was a transformation of the older subject of the monarchy, a relative and subordinated being, into an active, independent, and universal agent. The argument for such a radical redefinition of the term was accompanied, however, by the historical need to exclude women, children, slaves, and nonwhites. The citizen subject then was of necessity somewhat indeterminate, a category between the universal and the empirical, at once real and effective enough to promote the making of a revolution but also contingent and empty enough a sign to remain a possibility for realization in the future.[1] The citizen subject came into being not as an emanation of a Cartesian idea but in the dilatory, imperfect forge of massive political transformation.

The nation is now being superseded, challenged, and displaced by processes of globalization, as Saskia Sassen convincingly argues, both in its territoriality and in its sovereignty (81). Multinational and transnational corporations cause the nation-state to adjust to their profit-oriented imperatives. New global organizations like the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the World Intellectual Property Organization, however much they are influenced by the United States and other powerful nations, bypass to some degree national juridical institutions in the regulation of trade. Similarly international rights groups like Greenpeace, Médecins du Monde, and other nongovernmental organizations instantiate political relations outside national control. Could it be that in this process the citizen will be surpassed by the person and that earthlings will be recognized as a determinate human grouping more than as figures in science fiction? In this context, when claims for human rights are being at least somewhat successfully constructed as a global norm, we need to examine the role of the media in globalizing practices that construct new subjects. We need especially to examine those media that cross national boundaries to inquire if they form the basis for a new set of political relations.

In this endeavor, one must be careful to avoid the perspectives of existing political formations, such as the nation as well as political movements outside the nation that are opposed to it and bound to it at the same time. The new media, from these perspectives, merely reinforce or threaten territorial political relations. The important questions are rather these: Can the new media promote the construction of new political forms not tied to historical territorial powers?

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What are the characteristics of the new media that promote new political relations and new political subjects? How can these relations and subjects be furthered or enhanced by political action?

Netizen and Citizen

The name often given to the political subject constituted in cyberspace, in contrast to the citizen of the nation, is *netizen*. *Netizen* may only be a partial term because no one lives on the Net permanently, at least not yet (who knows what will emerge from the Human Genome Project and experiments with virtual life?). Yet the netizen might be the formative figure in a new kind of political relation, one that shares allegiance to the nation with allegiance to the Internet and to the planetary political spaces it inaugurates. Certain structural features of the Internet encourage, promote, or at least allow exchanges across national borders.

Like other media such as the telephone, radio, and television, the Internet deterritorializes exchanges, extracting them from bodily location. But it reterritorializes them in a distinctive manner. Radio and television are centralized at points of emission, which are located in national space and may be regulated and controlled by nation-states. The architecture of the Internet, by contrast, is that of a decentralized web. Any point may establish exchanges with any other point or points, a configuration difficult if not impossible for the nation-state to control. The telephone system, unlike broadcast media, is bidirectional, reterritorializing exchanges as point-to-point voices. The Internet differs from the telephone by including text (admittedly, fax does this too) as well as images, expanding the dimensions of the exchange. Also, the exchange is digital, affording considerable advantages over telephone conversation. On the Internet one may access not simply phone numbers but also vast stores of information, information that, in digital form, may be altered in its reception and retransmitted. Unlike the telephone, the Internet encourages a new cultural practice of resignification, something possible in the small agricultural communities of the past but then limited to the immediate members of the group. Folk music exemplified this form of cultural practice, which now may have become general. Further, the Internet makes it far easier to send messages to multiple recipients, like broadcast media, but also to afford multiple emitters, unlike broadcast media. In all these ways, the Internet contains the potential of new practices. The process of realizing these potentials is, it must be emphasized, a political one.

The Net as a Tool

To the argument for the netizen, it might be objected that the Internet promotes, even enhances, existing political formations. Zapatistas and neo-Nazis alike further their political ambitions by means of home pages, electronic discussion lists, e-mail, chat rooms, and so forth. In heavily mediatized societies political candidates of all stripes deploy the Internet to their advantage. Reform movements in China and eastern Europe depended on it as well as on other media, such as fax and television, to spread their word and foster political change. In countless experiments, such as the City of Santa Monica's Public Electronic Network (Rheingold 268ff.), the Internet has been used to extend democratic processes. The demonstrations in Seattle late in 1999 against the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and globalization in general benefited by the ability of the Internet to aid the organizing of political protest. These examples all bespeak the ways in which the Internet can function in existing political structures.

There are new types of political movements unique to the Internet. Laura Gurak shows how the protests against Lotus Marketplace and the Clipper Chip introduced new forms of political action that relied on features particular to cyberspace. In these cases opposition to corporate actions and state policies was organized primarily

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online. A simple e-mail message to friends by someone who drew attention to privacy questions related to a database of consumers in production at Lotus Corporation grew into a heavy flurry of e-mail protests, eventually, after the president of the company figured out how to access his e-mail, leading him to drop the project. The case of the Clipper Chip was somewhat different. Here several organizations concerned with the Internet, such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation, organized an e-mail protest against the Clinton administration's effort to grab control of communications on the Internet by deploying a special computer chip that would allow the government alone to decode all messages. This protest was somewhat successful.

These two cases illustrate the way the speed, the rhetorical traits, and the connectivity of the Internet can be used to organize social movements. Gurak suggests that the Internet makes possible new forms of political mobilization. In both instances she studies, however, what is at issue is protest against modern institutions, the corporation and the state, not the development of new political bonds inscribed in the new human-machine interface.

The Materiality of Media

Another objection to my argument for the netizen might be that media merely mediate. One might point to the long history of sanguine expectations surrounding the introduction of new media, expectations that only ended in disappointment. At least since the telegraph, observers have argued for utopian consequences—global peace, the harmony of humankind, the elimination of inequality—from the invention and spread of media of communication. Many conclude that media are simply tools, neutral devices that change nothing of the structures of domination prevailing before them. This position overlooks the deep cultural and social changes ensuing from the media, even if these changes are regrettable. Who can doubt the role of print and television in the formation of modern society, each through myriad practices of appropriation profoundly altering the way people think, fantasize, and behave?

The brunt of the argument against the importance of the media does not concern their effects. These are beyond doubt. Rather it has to do with the ontology of symbolization in general. If the motor of cultural existence is consciousness, then media are merely facilitators, playing little role in the form of exchange. If language is the basis of culture, then there are two possible positions: either language mediates symbol formation in a material process of alteration or the specific wrapping of language affects the structuring of cultural subjects. I follow Marshall McLuhan's line of thought in arguing for the latter position. I cannot here fully develop this assertion, but to an audience of literary critics I maintain that a novel does not constitute subjects in the same manner as a digitized narrative inscribed in the Internet. If you harbor any doubts about this, I ask that you think about copyright law and its current dissolution in cyberspace. Or inquire of executives in the music industry about the difference between their commodities (LPs, tapes, CDs) and MP3 files. Or ask people in the film industry, which is zealously digitizing its products and disseminating them as DVDs, if they think the Internet elicits any anxiety about the difference of the media.

Humanists too often diminish the cultural significance of technical innovations. I cannot say if this habit derives from the culture of the book.

Conclusion

I am not suggesting that the political space that is opening or may be opened on the Internet is a utopian realm of equality and freedom. Far from it. Each area of the Internet, from e-mail to chat rooms to MOOs to Web pages to electronic discussion lists to databases, contains its own forms of hierarchy and control, manipulations and risks. In chat rooms, as Katherine Hayles re-

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minds me,[2] many political forms characteristic of the nation-state are reproduced. In electronic messages, one must sustain one's identity, even if it is invented for that encounter. In the same vein, chat rooms entail a means for the assignment of responsibility. These echoes of the world of territorial politics are nonetheless mediated by networked information machines and do not reproduce exactly the politics of earlier epochs.

But there is one political novelty specific to the Internet that I highlight. The Internet may introduce postnational political forms because of its internal architecture; its new register of time and space; its new relation of human being to machine, of body to mind; its new imaginary; and its new articulation between culture and reality. Despite what may appear in newsprint and television as a celebration of the Internet's harmony with the nation-state and the globalizing economy, new media offer possibilities for the construction of planetary political subjects, netizens who will be multiple, dispersed, and virtual, nodes of a network of collective intelligence (Lévy). They may resemble neither the autonomous agent of citizenship, beholden to print, nor the identity of postmodernity, beholden to broadcast media. The political formation of the netizen is already well under way, bringing forth, as Heidegger might say, a humanity adhering not to nature but to machines, not to geographically local identity but to the digitized packets of its own electronic communications.

Notes

[1] See Balibar's magnificent essay "Citizen Subject." Also of great interest is his "Subjection and Subjectivation."

[2] Hayles commented at the panel at which I presented this paper during the 2000 MLA convention, in Washington.

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