

Narcissus and Narcosis: bureaucracy, *low cost and format*

*Every revolution evaporates and leaves behind only the
slime of a new bureaucracy.*

Franz Kafka

To start a small company, in great part of the countries, it represented to assume taxes and bureaucracy costs equivalent to more than 50% of the incomes. This level of taxes and bureaucratic costs imposed by the State practically made impossible the appearance of new companies with safe and long life.

detected that a company had fiscal benefits in a third country, started to determine compensatory taxes, as a way to punish the company because of the benefits.

Until the 1980s, countries with strong socialist orientation generally imposed to the companies the obligation to assume the State as majority partner, without any kind of counterpart. This was a fact considered scandalous by the called “free” countries. However, in the beginning of the 21st century, all countries did the same, in a disguised way, never declared. In practically all countries of the world the State became obligatory principal shareholder of the companies, through direct or indirect taxes.

The old socialist countries, behind the called *iron curtain*, argued that the State gigantism was a way to collect funds for social development; the countries in the 21st century argue that it is a way to collect funds for development.

between both.

The word *narcosis* derives from the Greek *narkê*, which indicated the idea of *lack of breath*, a light asphyxia like when we are in love. The Greek term *narkê* launches its origins on the Indo European particle **n* that was related to *water*. To ancient Indo European peoples the idea of *negation* was implicit in the experience inside the darkness of nocturnal waters: negation of the concrete world. Because of this, *Narcissus* sees his own image in the reflection on the dark waters of a lake, and becomes profoundly numbed, *narcotized* by it.

From that old Indo European root **n* other words appeared, like *anima* meaning *soul*, *nó-os* that means *mind* in Greek, *night* which is so important to understand the mystical world of Orpheus, *naked*, *Neptune*, the Latin *nebula* that means *fog*, the term *new* and curiously, even the word *name* among others. Expressions that keep in themselves old and mysterious relations.

Each one manifesting a certain aspect of negation: the soul negates the body; mind, the matter; night, the day; new, the past; and name detaches the person or the thing from a whole.

Even the words *no*, *negation* and *negotiation* – which is the negation of laziness, from the Latin *otium* – appear from that old Indo European particle.

«The Greek myth of *Narcissus* is directly concerned with a fact of human experience, as the word *Narcissus* indicates. It is from the Greek word *narcosis*, or numbness. The youth *Narcissus* mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image» – said McLuhan.

Narcissus negates the Other and *narcosis* negates reality. The negation of the Other and of

diverse sectors.

Everything becomes dilettantism.

In the accelerated world of each time lower salaries and self-explained products, the need of a specialized intermediary disappears. Anyone can sell a computer, a telephone or even a book – it is enough to smile and to know three or four basic rules, all rest will be managed by the digital system itself and by instructions inside the product.

So, a quick rotation of people changing job many times per year starts to design much of the labor force specially in services, turning each person, in general, into the most disqualified worker possible.

In Switzerland, shortly after the September 11 2001 attacks, the great composer and conductor Pierre Boulez, a world-famous personality, who directed the Philharmonic Orchestra of New York, founder and director of the celebrated *IRCAM* –

Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique / Musique de Paris, was detained for several hours on suspicion of being a terrorist! In May 1968, Pierre Boulez, a young composer, had proclaimed that opera houses should be burned. At the time, someone wrote a statement about it, indicating – in adjectives – that he was a “terrorist”. Swiss police simply did not know who he was and was unable to distinguish what would have been the outburst of a police officer less careful about thirty-five years before and the description of a real terrorist! Invited to a festival, he was recognized and released, with many apologies.

The story lived by the French composer reveals us various facets of the contemporary world – the superficiality of the data, the incompetence of the operators and the fragility of a extremely volatile surveillance system.

If it would be a different person and not the famous Pierre Boulez, surely he wouldn’t have the same luck and could be condemned to an even

cruel injustice.

And if it had happened in another country – because Switzerland was still considered one of the most rigorous and serious countries in the world – the disaster would surely be even more overwhelming.

In the United States, only in 2006, around sixty million people lost their jobs and another sixty million people started a new job, in a rhythm that would annually repeated – not being restricted to the American reality.

That turbulent fluctuation of the American society represented change and new job for around 40% of the economic active population every year!

Never before a so huge quantity of qualified labor force was at disposal of the production systems and never before the political discourse was so oriented to professional education. But,

mecenas or of the court. At the same time, athletes of football, basketball, box, auto racing pilots and tennis players among others – people that many times were not able even to correctly speak as to express a thought – became millionaires.

Low power society's essential aim is not qualification, but the highest disqualification possible.

With the intense rotation among jobs with different functions, the sense of identity is diminished and what was a great value to the old medium class is over: *loyalty*.

In his book *The Crisis of Global Capitalism*, criticizing the planetary transformations in the end of the 20th century, George Soros said that «in a society in which the stable relations are dominant» people need to be honest as to reach success. «But, when there are full freedom (...) society becomes unstable».

In fact, it is not about to have more freedom, but yes about a crescent regulation that, paradoxically, is strongly unstable. Everything became regulated, but one never knows exactly what is what, because everything constantly changes.

After the 1980s, in practically all over the world, it was created the idea that a strong and irreversible wave of total *deregulation* appeared, liberating the commerce, and eliminating all kinds of controls and barriers.

In fact, the celebrated *Bretton Woods* agreement, signed in 1944 by the most industrialized countries, generated a heavy regulation of financial markets – following the ideas of John Maynard Keynes, for whom the State had the duty to intervene in the economy.

Later, the United States and England promoted a worldwide wave of price and commerce liberation in which Ronald Reagan and Margaret

Thatcher were true paladins in the 1980s. Thus, European countries eliminated frontiers, the *World Trade Organization* established new parameters of free commerce, television channels passed to be controlled by private entities, the same happened to energy and telecommunication companies, international agreements determined criteria for free transit of products and people, the control of prices was practically eliminated and so on.

In 1980, the average tariff for imports and exports was 26.1%. In 2002, it was only 10.4%.

What it is not said is that, simultaneously, a tentacular bureaucracy emerged, establishing all kinds of control and surveillance, a police universe made of general and *globalized* information. Such complex of bureaucratic surveillance established a new *regulatory* phenomenon replacing the previous one, and operating in a *nano* scale.

The emergence of this complex bureaucratic surveillance has one of its main landmarks in the

gradual computerization of state administrative systems after the 1970s, in global terms. The initial appeal was precisely to eliminate bureaucracy! Curiously, this was a global phenomenon.

The process of digitization and automation of bureaucratic procedures began, with the promise of reducing its impact on people's lives. But then, in addition to a tremendous increase of bureaucratic control through increasingly complex systems, the principles based on the *welfare* were dismantled with an overwhelming increase in individual risks.

What David Garland called, in 2001, the emergence of a «culture of control».

In the early 1990s, the central government of Canada operated more than two thousand and two hundred databases with about twenty files for every citizen!

As David Lyon has pointed out, «fewer and fewer transactions and interactions are based

on face-to-face relationships. (...) Human beings, embodied persons, are thus abstracted from place and are siphoned as data into flows, to be reconstituted as ‘data images’ in surveillance systems».

The tentacle bureaucratic universe, like the emergence of an Argo Panoptes, tends to eliminate the individual, like what happens in the acoustic universe, where only the collective is substantial – because the ear has no eyelids.

Thus, many critics have observed that such a universe of bureaucratic surveillance and control would make any change not only unnecessary but also seemingly impossible, perpetuating the existing policies and their actors.

In 1996, the American Senate approved the *American Telecom Reform Act* looking to control and limit the freedom of expression in all communication media. John Perry Barlow – who in 1990 co-founded the *EFF Electronic Frontier Foundation*, entity dedicated to the defense of

free speech and free thought – said: «the Telecom ‘Reform’ Act, passed in the Senate with only five dissenting votes, makes it unlawful, and punishable by two hundred and fifty thousand dollars fine to say ‘shit’ online. Or, for that matter, to say any other seven dirty words prohibited in broadcast media. Or to discuss abortion openly. Or to talk about any bodily function in any but the most clinical terms».

In fact, everything passed to be even more regulated and controlled, but no longer by a *single central of high power*.

To make everything worse, in September 2008, just after the beginning of the terrible wave of crash in the world finance system, the *New York Times* announced «Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley Shift Marks End of Era in Finance», revealing the companies as the two last independent investment banks on Wall Street, then subjected to strong regulation by the State!

Everything passed to be controlled by a complex web of interests, much heavier than the previous *paradigmatic* sets of interests.

Interestingly, reflecting a general expectation, the newspaper *Le Monde* of November 6, 2008, announced through the words of Hubert Védrine: «Everyone is in favor, nowadays, for the reintroduction of controls on the financial system. The States should strike while the iron is hot and not let the “deregulators” to hold».

If we take this question as a whole, in historical terms, we see that the world has moved, since the last decades of the twentieth century, in direction of increasing regulation, tending to put on a new form of authoritarianism – a kind of dictatorship of the system itself without the figure of a specific tyrant.

And one of the faces of such metamorphosis is directly related to the emergency of a low cost economic model.

Robert Reich, former Secretary of State at Bill Clinton’s administration, explains how the containers were an important element in the transformation that would lead to the low cost universe. «The containers – boxes in steel with around six to twelve meters long, able to transport more than twenty-eight tons – already existed since the half of 1950s, but were not intensely used until the end of Vietnam’s war, in which the American army needed an enormous system of distribution to satisfy its insatiable objectives in the Southeast Asian forests. Traditional boxes for transportation were too small and unsafe. Thus, the navy created a port for containers in the Bay of Cam Ranh and the American ports were equipped to support merchant ships. One of the unpredictable consequences was the increase of Japanese exportations to the United States. To not go back to America with empty containers, the expeditors discovered that they could make money sending from Japan tons of watches, television sets and utensils... In 1967 there was no service of sea

transportation linking Japan to the United States. In the next year, there were seven companies. (...) In 2005, there were more than three thousand and five hundred merchant ships crossing the sea, with more than fifteen million containers aboard».

Such curious origin illustrates the process that designs the low cost reality, following a *distribution* logic against that of *concentration* which characterized the old medium class.

Thus, a world articulated by ideologies – strongly literary – forged on the principle of *paradigm*, is disintegrated in a complex of *syntagmatic* nature. It is no more about a concentration of ideas designing a coherent and stable political action, but about a *confusion* of actions that projects the most diverse political actors.

Thus, in journalistic communication, the old job of the reporter was radically changed. Centrals that sold, at low price, standard information

with guaranteed success together the audience, controlled great part of the news.

In this way, good part of the newspapers, television and radio channels passed to diffuse the same news, with minimum variations. It started to be almost no difference between this or that newspaper, this or that magazine – in journalistic terms – when a few years before that difference was fundamental. The *content* left to be important.

In January 2000, when *Time Warner* and *American On Line* merged, the general secretary of the *International Federation of Journalists*, Aidan Whilee, commented about the new reality: «We are now seeing the dominance of a handful of companies controlling information and how that information reaches people. Unless action is taken to ensure journalistic independence, we face a dangerous threat to media diversity... Otherwise we will have corporate gatekeepers to the flow of information, who will define content to suit their market strategies».

The old twenty-four hours news life cycle was substituted by a low information superficial continuum – identical image that characterized the low power society.

Publishers of newspapers, magazines or television passed to be a kind of market animators, operating an intense process of collage of information that is continuously received. The old control on what stories should or not be published practically left to make any sense.

While the old mass communication media – and specially television – were able to orient the attention of a great number of people to individual events, Internet made exactly the opposite.

In the change from a logic of *concentration* to another one, of *dispersion*, as it is typical in Internet, hundreds of channels of radio and cable television appeared, not to mention online newspapers and magazines, or even those newspapers freely

distributed in the corners of the cities, news and information in cellular phones – giving to those old media a logical design in certain sense similar to that of Internet: great quantity of information fully distributed and chaotically accessible.

In 2005, Joël de Rosnay and Carlo Revelli created the online newspaper *AgoraVox*, which is made on a collaborative basis and is totally free. Less than three years after its start, *AgoraVox* already had more than one and half million visitors per month.

In the core of such process, the phenomenon of *zapping* in television, with its strong non-linear nature, was generated by digital contamination – the transformation of an old communication media by the emergence of a hyper medium: personal computers in network, a medium for the transformation and use of all other media.

The hierarchical order that designed old journalistic communication determined the type,

audience avid for less expensive products in great diversity, generated another phenomenon – the quick and easy transference of costs inside departments of the companies, but in different countries.

The old fiscal system – and even the old techniques of accounting founded in the 19th century – stopped to work in this new universe, but continued to be used, even if inside an unstable low power society everything is more and more oriented to improvisation. This is, among others, one of the reasons of the big financial scandals that started happening in the passage of the third millennium – which, in a revealing way, practically did not count with any relevant manifestation of popular protest.

Inside a legal context in continuous metamorphosis, the world plunged inside a universe *without limits*.

Thus, it also became practically impossible

to regulate a credible tax system and the great conglomerates of companies became, in fact, exempt of taxes.

Rupert Murdoch’s News corporation, which controlled the American television network *Fox* among others, paid only 6% tax worldwide in 2003, and up to the end of 1998 it paid no net British corporation tax.

Such an exemption – which, however legal, was paradoxically contrary to the determinations by Law – generated a strong degeneration of the State’s credibility.

On the other hand, the levels of income taxes on individuals, small and medium companies, and taxes on consumption among others raised in dramatic way – in France, in the beginning of the 21st century, the level of direct income taxes on individuals reached the mark of 75%!

In Europe, in 2008, the daily cost of car rent

was, many times, lower than the taxes established in highways for travels with more than five hours.

The promiscuity with transnational corporations practically eliminated the old sovereignty of the States, transforming politicians – of any level, even when not exerting a public function, into true employees of large companies.

John Perkins, who became famous in 2004 with his bombastic book *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*, described, in 2007, his meeting with an important Brazilian governmental authority: «He went on to explain that in Brazil and many other countries, the corporatocracy essentially controls all political parties. ‘Even radical communist candidates who appear to oppose the United States are compromised by Washington’».

In fact, in many countries, even tribunals and legislative power passed to be controlled by economic interests led by big corporations, which simply stopped to have a nationality, no

longer being American or European, and spread out through the planet transforming States into disguised extensions of their aims.

By that way, in a low cost universe, not only good part of people assumed intense superficiality, as everything of political nature became little credible.

As if we were dealing with a notable paradox, another curious phenomenon was associated to the disintegration of the political universe's credibility: bureaucracy.

Bureaucracy nothing more is than a tool of wealth distribution to non-qualified labor force.

In a society with more asymmetry and increasing wealth, bureaucracy seems to be a natural consequence.

One of the most used resources of the States to contain waves of economic recession

was the *subsidy*. Subsidies create something like a support for a continuous economic flux, relatively invulnerable to the dramatic market fluctuations.

The subsidy can only happen in a centralized society, like what happened in the literary culture. Only then it is possible to define specialized departments in precise temporal scale as to receive a money that apparently is “free”.

When social structure left to be visual and departmentalized, subsidies pass to be considered as iniquitous benefits that will provoke unbalances in the ensemble of the community – what is an illusion. So, a moral justification emerges – through the argumentation that the money of subsidies does not implicate work. But, that moral justification happens *a posteriori*, as *content* of the process.

Thanks to that, bureaucracy gradually substituted the resource to subsidies in low power societies. However, the cost of bureaucracy

is immensely higher than that of subsidies – bureaucracy implicates, beyond the salary of people, citizen’s time. Each excessive bureaucratic worker can represent the cost of many people, with a huge lost of time.

But, in low power society, unemployment passed to be one of the central governmental targets, in the most varied countries, pushing ahead bureaucracy.

With the obsessive aspiration to larger quantities of products more and more inexpensive, all kinds of automation passed to be intensified, associated to the increase of rotation of the labor force. This projected more and more less qualified people, and also implicated an increase in unemployment.

In a low power society the State passed to assume, directly or indirectly, the function of employer looking to absorb a great contingent of consumers without technical qualification –

because they will vote in the elections.

In the low cost society, with great mobility, volatility and turbulence, employment – not job – passed to be the individual and social aim par excellence.

What was sacred for the old medium class, the love for a *profession*, word which etymological root is linked to meaning of *to profess*, was practically eliminated. Competitions among students in schools and universities, not rarely, passed to aim to a lastly and safe employment in economical terms, which could bring social status – but not obligatorily representing a *profession*.

Curiously, even using the most advanced technology they condemned, the most terrible groups of terrorists in the passage of the millennium preached exactly the opposite of what happened with the new low cost society: no longer the aspiration to a lastly and profitable employment, but the dedication to a cause.

Many times, the establishment of a strategy of absorption of great number of people by the State happened – direct or indirectly – with the resource to the increase of bureaucracy. With it all kinds of *facilitators* appeared, at low cost, *distributed* everywhere. In general, they represented large quantities of small *taxes*, many times considered *invisible*, and lots of information to be filled.

Such vigorous wave of bureaucracy passed affect in strong terms small business and medium class families.

Even many structural funds of the *European Union* passed to be directed by low power society's principles. With the argument that they could avoid steals, the funds were given only after the projects concluded or significantly advanced, benefiting States and big corporations and making impossible the active participation of common people, families or small businesses.

And however many forms of that new bureaucracy were digital, eliminating in great part the need of human intermediary, its crescent complexity started to request a great contingent of new bureaucrats, which were, direct or indirectly, linked to the State.

In architecture, for example, until the middle of the 20th century, in many countries, the approval by authorities of a project was practically automatic. People knew themselves and competence was assured. Only fifty years later, not only the architects were unknown, because of their great quantity, as the bureaucratic complexity became so big that a new kind of architect emerged – the bureaucratic specialist on the approval process by city’s authorities.

The same happened to almost all liberal activities.

In Law, many times, minimum processual errors passed to be more dangerous for a

also became low cost with digital systems – as well as the emergence of a large contingent of low price products and services, with apparent good quality and huge quantity, everything articulated in a process of high dispersion, revealed a radical transformation of private life, changing not only the notions of Law, freedom, privacy and family but also the entire social behavior that assumed a great physical isolation but became profoundly gregarious in virtual terms, changing even the attitude face to death.

It is interesting to remind again what bureaucracy is: a tool for distribution of wealth among non-qualified labor force. When this concept is amplified to the world of ideas, everything is even more interesting.