Instability, hypercommunication, poverty, fear: life cycle, claim, indemnity and protest

No cause is left but the most ancient of all, the one, in fact, that from the beginning of our history has determined the very existence of politics, the cause of freedom versus tyranny.

Hannah Arendt

In the introduction of the report *Un Monde* de Ressources Rares – A World of Rare Resources, made by the Cercle des Economistes in France and published in 2007, Eric Orsenna said: «The world today is made of potential disequilibria,

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unsupportable tensions for too globalized markets, unique polarization of wealthy, disturbances in the way of life, of production and of consumption that uniformly break weak and strong».

The instability and volatility of the new society is clearly revealed by the production and consumption of new products. Each year, according to 2006 data, annually appeared around sixteen thousand new products in the American supermarkets, and the tax of failure was of about 90%. In Europe, each year, more than twenty thousand new products were put in supermarkets, with a tax of failure of 95%!

It is estimated that, in the beginning of the 21st century, around 70% of the products sold in large-surfaces did not remain in the market more than two or three years.

That logic transformation is based on the change of scale, through human hyper connectivity.

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Still in the 1960s it was estimated that each person in the United States was submitted to a bombardment of about one thousand and five hundred advertisements every day! Investments in advertisement, not only in the United States, were multiplied many times in the second half of the 20th century and it is estimated that such number of the 1960s *bombardment* per person would be augmented to more than two thousand and five hundred advertisements of products and services everyday!

In the 1950s, in the United States, Milton Berle's celebrated television programs, every Thursday evening, reached 80% of the audience share. There were commercials in the program's intervals and the authorities noted that water pressure in the supply system in diverse cities was remarkably reduced in those moments — people took advantage of breaks to go to the bathroom as to avoid publicity.

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Then, commercial messages were direct, well-defined and departmentalized – the opposite of what happened fifty years later, when the advertising universe would become ephemeral, volatile, low-accuracy, large spectrum and essentially subliminal.

A person who is bombarded by about two thousand and five hundred advertisements of products and services every day, as it started happening in most major cities from the beginning of the twenty first century, doesn't see an ad but constitutes an imaginary of information clouds.

Soon the pop-ups and a huge invasion of spam appeared. According to *Nielsen's TV Ratings*, pop-ups grew, only the first to second quarter of 2002 from 3.9 billion to 5 billion inserts.

In 2003, several polls showed that more than 40% of emails were spam.

In 2004, around 75% of the population in the United States was connected to Internet,

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using the network for about three hours per day, in average. Since then, that number did not stopped to increase. Many of those people were relatively poor – even if a comparison with heavy poverty plots spread out on the world would not be possible.

In the 1980s, every year, around sixty thousand new books were published in the United States. That number jumped to more than one hundred and sixty thousand books in 2003. But, levels of functional illiteracy were alarming.

It is estimated that around 25% of the world population in the beginning of the third millennium was *totally* illiterate, not only in *functional* terms.

The American Management Association, in a survey dated of 2001, indicated that around 64% of the immigrants who arrived in the United States had few or no reading capacity. The National Adult Literacy Survey indicated, then, that about 60% to 75% of the American people were functional

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illiterate.

In 2007, according to *Unesco*, there still were around one billion totally illiterate people, representing 26% of the world population.

Since Mesopotamia, more than eight thousand years ago, education methods have been coined by the principle of concentration. However, in the last years of the 20th century, several countries started adopting educational strategies turned to dispersion. Those strategies determined, for example, that students should no longer be subject to tests with the objective to authorize the passage to another school period. The proof of capacity passed to be automatic without need of any test.

In 2007, parents of thousands students in Brazil protested, by the most varied ways and in the most diverse places, because their children, already teenagers, were no able to read, to write or even to solve the simplest arithmetical

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operations.

John Stuart Mill reminded that «the value of a State is the value of its individuals».

In a world in fast mutation, new educational systems are not immediately discovered.

In the first years of the 21st century all people between sixteen and nineteen years old in Norway had and regularly used cellular phones, sending an average of nine text messages everyday.

Between 1981 and 1985, all over the world, about six million computers were sold. Between 2001 and 2006 that number jumped to almost one billion unities!

In 1997, only in the United States, about three hundred and fifty thousand DVD players were sold, and around five hundred thousand players were exported. Five years later, more than seventeen million DVD players were sold only

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inside the American market.

In 1997 there were about nine hundred DVD titles in the United States. In 2003 there were more than twenty-seven thousand DVD titles in that market

In such scenario of hyper communication, in the United States, Europe, Canada, Japan and Australia among other countries, more people died of too much food than of hungry in the beginning of the 21st century. On the other hand, in that same epoch, around half of the planetary population, more than three billion people, still lived in the most absolute misery, with the equivalent of only two dollars per day.

According to the 1999 Human Development Report by the United Nations Development Program, the relation between poor and rich people in the planet in the year of 1820 was of 3 to 1. In 1913 that number passed to 11 to 1; in 1950, 35 to 1; in 1973, 44 to 1; and in 1992, 72 to 1.

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But this picture of crescent poverty brings countless contradictions. In Africa, the poorest continent in the world, a true *explosion* of consumption of cellular phones started in the first years of the 21st century. In 2007 a research showed that 97% of the population in Tanzania had access to mobile phones. In South Africa, half part of the users of cellular phones was located in the poorest layers of the population.

In 2008, in China – a country that only two decades before was classified as poor – there already were more than three hundred and fifty million cellular phones in continuous use.

As Gilles Lipovetsky showed in his already classic book *Le Bonheur Paradoxal*, of 2006, «before, popular and medium classes saw luxurious labels as inaccessible goods which, destined only to the social elite, were not part of their real world, not even in dreams. It happened a rupture in relation to such form of culture: the acceptance of social

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fate gave place to the *right* to the luxurious, to the superfluous, to the quality labels».

Around 1.1 billion people practically had no access to potable water; and almost half of the world population, around 2.6 billion people, had no access to basic sanitary treatment, according to the 2006 United Nations Human Development Report.

Then, almost one trillion dollars were annually spent in weapons all over the world – and only six billion were dedicated to basic education programs in the countries in development. This means to say that the expenses in weapons were almost two hundred times higher than those dedicated to education.

Disseminated power, in high distribution and low concentration, generates a subtle and generalized numbing.

Terror – in its most diverse manifestations

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– is equally disseminated in discontinuous spacetime logic. It is what happens in the unpredictable streets of the most violent cities of the world, or practically anywhere with terrorist groups.

Post urban violence has no alibis – it does not need motivators. It simply is there, in a context where identity is almost eliminated.

In the streets of the larger Brazilian cities, some years ago, it was inaugurated a new kind of crime – the assault generated by chance. The criminal does not know exactly what will happen or even who will be the victim, everything is surprise – eliminating, in this way, all vestiges and, thus, becoming practically immune to the process of police investigation.

So, threat becomes a continuous spectrum event. *Tyranny* penetrates the system as a whole, without person or personage, freely distributed. With the spectrum of continuous threat, there equally is a continuous numbing.

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Nobody has absolute power, but everyone has some power – and all become little *tyrants*.

You go to a shop, for example, and – with rare exceptions – if you do not behavior like the expected, the seller can aggressively correct you, what would be an unimaginable experience for a client in the first half of the 20th century.

Also consumption passes to reveal a continuous spectrum — everybody tending to consume permanently. In the same way, everything is quickly transformed into continuous entertainment.

There is no longer the critical division between producer and consumer. In the same way, artifacts of long permanence tend to disappear.

In digital systems, the existence of memory – as a kind of prosthesis for neural systems of long term memory – passes to be potentially infinite, or

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of very *short life*, simultaneously. A paradox that practically eliminates the old concept of *life cycle*. It is enough to experiment a computer failure to live this paradoxical phenomenon.

Fame became more and more generously distributed – and there are each time more famous people in the world, in the most diverse scales.

In the past, figures like Dante Allighieri, Luis de Camões or William Shakespeare were famous in small circles of connoisseurs, and when fame reached an enlarged scale it rarely surpassed the frontiers of their countries. Even Johann Sebastian Bach needed to be recalled by Brahms to become more popular and widely known.

In a society of entertainment where billions of people participate, thousands *Goethes*, *Schopenhauers* or *Leonardos* would need a process of intense concentration for a consequent expansion, or they would simply disappear in the whole.

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Going, in some way, in the sequence of Galbraith's brilliant and prophetic ideas, Massimo Gaggi and Edoardo Narduzzi launched in 2006 the book *La Fine del Ceto Medio, The End of Middle Class*, announcing the overpowering emergence of the low cost companies and the end of the called *medium class* in Italy.

«New rich appear everywhere flaunting their opulence, sudden impoverishment of workers and retired, gradual rarefaction of the medium stratum who lost incomes and security» – in this way Gaggi and Narduzzi started to describe the Italian society in the beginning of the third millennium. But, such description was equally valid to any other country in the world.

In fact, all over the planet, a strong decrease of the called *medium class* was a clear fact – not only in quantitative terms, but still a true degeneration of the traces that along around two centuries constituted that social stratum vulgarly

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known as bourgeoisie.

Three years later, Jean-Marc Vittori stated at his book *l'Effet Sablier*: «the middle class will disappear».

The ideals of that *medium class*, which founded the concepts of economic and social development in the 20th century, were established on the sense of a crescent expectation: everyone should fight to *win in life*. Then, elder's aspiration was to live under a true protection of the State.

The old *medium class* was quickly substituted by a *low power society*, where *low cost* companies and services revealed a new economic and social model.

If for the old *medium class* it existed the right to claim and to indemnity, such a right practically left to make any sense in a *low cost* reality.

In November 2003 the IATA – International

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Air Transport Association established the Montreal Convention on the Unification of Certain Rules for International Carriage by Air, eliminating the old Warsaw Convention as well as all previous protocols and related treaties. The Montreal Convention practically eliminated all rights of the passengers related to the transportation of their luggage. That Convention determines for each pound of lost luggage a right for indemnity that is insufficient even to buy one shirt or a good sock! With it, the right of claim is practically annulled.

Before, the bureaucratic systems selected claims to be attended according to the level of urgency and need they presented — when the claim was long, personalized and hand written, its *degree of insistence* automatically leaded to a quick response. When the claim was short and non-personalized, it generally was left to oblivion. That was the general criterion used by claim departments in big companies.

But, with new electronic media, what is the

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E T Y menta sense of urgency and need? More than this, in a society leaded by the spirit of continuous *low cost* consumption, claim is no longer possible.

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In 2008, in New York, I called a car company to put me in the airport, as I always did along more than twenty years. It is a very common habit in the city. Twenty minutes delayed, a driver was at our door. I noticed how, along the years, the services of that company were deteriorated. In that afternoon a driver dressing big colorful pieces of fabric, with long beard, practically not speaking English, surprised me. He had left the car in another block. He took several minutes to appear again. When finally parked the car, he almost crashed with a policewoman who came in a small vehicle. Then, he started an incomprehensible discussion. The police gave up and disappeared. I should not be more delayed, if not I would lose the flight. When we went out, already about two blocks from my home, he informed me that his car had no fuel.

He started screaming at every corner, looking for someone who could tell him about the location of

a gas station in the neighborhood. It was extremely hot. Summer, I noticed that both the windows and the air conditioning did not work. Some minutes later the car simply stopped, at the other side of the city. It was broken. The driver turned to 0 ° me and said that I should go out. I would be left there, under the sun, with my luggage. I called the company and they sent another car - but I already had lost the flight. I asked the driver what ₾ _ he thought about his job. He dryly answered me ш saying that he was not caring about anything. I s ≥ tried to know, later, what would happen, if I would have right to indemnity. It was almost impossible to speak to anyone at that company. There was no right to indemnity - the only thing I could do was to enter with a legal action against the company, what made no sense, considering the value of the service and the high costs of lawyers, as well as in lost time, of legal procedures - which were extremely bureaucratic. I asked how they could hire someone like that driver. I knew that they had hundreds of drivers and that it was not possible for the company to know all them. Everything was

automatic. Anyone who attended to initial basic requirements could become, automatically, driver in that company. Quality control worked through claims, which no longer existed. I asked if they were not disturbed to lose a client. «Lose a client? It makes no difference. We have thousands of clients everyday» – was the answer.

The new reality substituted indemnity and technical assistance by silence or by pure and simple exchange of the product – because it is *low cost*.

One thing is to claim about a high price product with defect. Another one is to claim about a product with defect sold in millions of unities which price is almost zero. When that happens, in the majority of cases, even the right to claim left to exist

In the same way, the gigantic quantity of low cost products also turn impossible, because of its scale, the old concept of technical assistance.

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Because of this, the old idea of products that last practically an entire life simply ended. Nothing works rigorously well. Everything started working well in terms of large numbers, in statistical terms.

With a society of continuous consumers, any act of legitimate defense of individual rights passed to be considered a reactionary action contrary to the intensely massive low power universe. Thus, associated to the numbness generated by continuous consumption, public protests practically disappeared – they started to happen, in general, only when the appeal indicated a similar content, in some way, to that of the low cost culture. It was a phenomenon well manipulated by old pacifist and left oriented groups.

That is, large protests emerge when the mobilization passed to happen from cellular to cellular phone or from computer to computer, with a low defined, general and superficial appeal. There

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are a great number of definitions and approaches, even contradictory, for the phenomenon known as *globalization* — even so, great part of the few large protests occurred in the first years of the 21st century had the low defined concept of *globalization* as their flag par excellence.

When the subject of the protest is not something oriented to a low cost universe and to general participation — and when mobilization doesn't happen from person to person through a virtual network — it simply doesn't work. The appeal to an idea or stable set of ideas became non-sense to many people in a low power society.

Protests against meetings of the richest countries of the world, like what happened in Genoa with the *G8 Meeting* in 2001, or in international forums like that of Porto Alegre can happen. But, protests against the Iraq war were relatively few and isolated – a war that in few years killed more than one million people, whose original motivation was proved to be false and whose development,

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according to a countless number of articles in newspapers and magazines, beyond many books, was supported on economic interests of a small group of large corporations.

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The same is valid for protests against the clear degeneration of education, salaries, health care, justice, corruption of the governments and so on. When they happen, it is with relative small impact involving a small part of the citizens, even when the reasons for protest are overwhelming terrible

Taxes levels knew dramatic increase, politicians passed to be each time more frequently accused of fraud and illicit enrichment, educational standard was clearly degraded, justice became more bureaucratic, politic and slower, the States eliminated much of what was the individual right for privacy – but only rarely people vehemently protested against those events.

Sagely, John Stuart Mill said that «there is

not a natural relation between strong impulses and a weak consciousness. The natural relation is in the opposite sense».