Chapter I
Electronic Constitution: A Braudelian Perspective

Francesco Amoretti
University of Salerno, Italy

ABSTRACT

In “The Electronic Constitution: A Braudelian Perspective”, Francesco Amoretti devises a model for analysing the time and space structures of digital networks based on the Braudelian triad of times: structure, conjuncture and event. By a short description of this tri-partition, he proposes a historical method to frame the products of innovation processes such as the Internet, in their wider socio-economic context. He thus argues that the world wide Web (WWW) with its enormous quantity of easy-access and easy-made information, is just the evenementielle of a historical process that could represent a new conjuncture, with its own dynamics and phases, based on the structure of the capitalist world system. The theory underpinning this work/study is that Internet, as opposed to being a revolutionary technology that will subvert the current organization of social and economic production, is a technological tool giving institutions and organizations the means to re-organize their assets and processes so as to start a new conjuncture of capitalistic structures. Most of the authors and scholars debating the transformational power of the Internet, have to date, focused their attention on the WWW as the locus of a democratising and participative movement that puts technology at the service of the citizens/civil society. With this chapter Amoretti sheds light on the nature of continuity characterizing the Internet as regards traditional categories of political economy such as hierarchy and institutional enforcement.
INTRODUCTION

Reputable scholars believe we are looking at experiences that have never existed before. And at the origin of this new world is the cyberspace evolution. Above all in its initial phase—the 80s and the early 90s—the idea that cyberspace was infinite, borderless—and timeless—was common and shared by diverse cultural and institutional bodies, not only by the prophets of the Information Revolution. Extraordinary power was attributed to this “borderless and timeless world” it could blank out history and set it in motion again based on radically new foundations (Mosco, 2004).

Others believe we are looking at transformations—cultural, social, and political—that do not subvert the present. Indeed, technological innovations not only re-propose conflicts and existing gaps, they also highlight the most worrying and threatening features. Revolution or Counter-revolution? When searching for “theoretical” literature on information technology one is apt to find empirically-disconnected speculation infused with utopian optimism or distonian cynicism (Garson, 2003). The interpretations of cyberspace continue to fluctuate between these two extremes. Neither account is adequate. If the extensive mapping by Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin in Mapping Cyberspace (2001a) and Atlas of Cyberspace (2001b) has demonstrated that a “borderless” and “timeless” world does not exist, and that cyberspace is characterized by specific coordinates of time and space; however it is hard to deny that nothing much has changed or is about to change: in politics as in economics and in the social practices of production, dissemination and consumption of knowledge and information. In other words: the Internet is neither a Revolution nor a Counter-revolution. To understand this model of historical analysis is needed, a model that captures and explains the different and at times (apparently) contradictory features of technological innovations.

It was exactly fifty years ago that in the Number 4 issue of the “Annales”, the French historian Fernand Braudel published his essay destined to become a classic: Histoire et science sociales. La longue durée. Why should that event be relevant half a century later in an article on cyberspace? The reference to Braudel is expoliatory, it clarifies that thanks to the Braudelian concept of time—or better—of past times, it is possible to overcome both alternatives. In terms of cultural representations, politico-institutional changes and social practices, technological innovations follow so to speak rhythms that are temporally different, marking the life of a unique historical system, in terms of unit of analysis: the capitalist system—and the inter-state system that enabled its working and reproduction—in its dynamics of expansion. Such processes often re-propose from a new perspective, more so than people are prepared to admit, the tensions that have accompanied the history of such a system. Awareness makes for understanding, or rather, the actual terms of the issue instead of being blinded by the ideology of “newness”, that if not historically contextualized, is a vague category. Therefore we shall be able to recognize new inventions—if and when they appear—only if we know how at the same time, to re-conduct them and to recompose them within the framework of the dynamic growth of this historical system. More precisely, Braudel’s tripartition of historical time—structure, conjuncture, and event—is a useful interpretative tool—and an ordinate principle—for the analysis of phenomena and processes (or at least some of the most significant) that characterize cyberspace. A useful example for clarifying this concept is the fact that to date, it is well-known that most of the authors and scholars debating the transformative power of the Internet have focused their attention on the WWW—with its vast quantity of accessible and easy-to-produce information—as the locus of a democratizing and participative movement that brings technology to the service of civil society. It is hard to deny the worldwide innovating lever.
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