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TECHNOCULTURES AND GLOCALISATION

EDITORIAL

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Abstract: The quick and massive developments of digital technologies and tools for communication and connectivity has brought about significant transformations both in the shape and dynamics of cultures. While modernization has generated genuine expressions of culture – some of them are modern or hypermodern while some others are so-called “traditional” or reinvented expressions. Among these new cultural forms, technoculture is maybe the most relevant yet also the most elusive concept: designed when the contemporary intermingles between cultures and technologies. The term is, however, all but a simple one, and this introduction is the occasion to recollect some of the key issues regarding the ambivalent and complex relationships between globalisation, technologies and culture(s) expressed through the term “technoculture”.

Keywords: culture, technoculture, cyberculture, glocalisation, globalisation.

INTRODUCTION: FROM CULTURE TO TECHNOCULTURE

Common wisdom states that globalization assumes different forms – the term can be labelled in its plural form (“globalizations”) even if this term is contested. The globalisation of new electronic connections (as described by Castells in the early 2000s), the acceleration and massification of cultural diffusions (Appadurai 1990), the widescale hybridization and creolization of cultures between them (Garcia-Canclini 1995), (and next to this process, with “technosciences”), the rediscovery of the importance of “culture” in the context of globalization (or why “culture matters” more than ever in a highly mediated world, according to Tomlinson 1999). These are a few examples amongst many, which remind us how the cultural dimension of globalization remains of primary importance, both on the



empirical and epistemological levels, whereas mainstream theories in Globalization Studies tend to focus on the more salient aspects of modern capitalism.

Nowadays, it is an acknowledged point of view that globalisation is a complex multifactorial process, and common wisdom reminds us that, beyond economics and politics, digital technologies have not only spread around the globe but have also taken part in the reshaping of social relationships, values, organisations and representations. Their quick and massive developments have significantly impacted cultures, for the “best” (as asserted by Mattelard, who belongs to the clan of those who deem globalisation as a chance for the rise of new forms of culture) or for the “worse” (this is the point professed by Warnier, for whom globalisation is a kind of “apocalypse” for traditional cultures). Actually, not all scholars in NITC (like Mattelard) share these optimistic views, and not all anthropologists (like Warnier) support these somewhat pessimist views. Whatever the ideological stance underlying the reflection, in the context of hypermodernity and globalisation, ancient forms of culture are reinvented, reshaped, redefined and embedded in these global flows and new conditions of the world that Arjun Appadurai (1998) calls “global scapes”.

While the very nature of globalisation’s processes is subject to critical investigations, and the fact that the historicity of many transformations assigned to globalisation have been debated, the putative and complex dynamics of inventions and reinventions of cultures has taken place under the pressure of global forces. Economic, political, ideological and technological forces are combined in the process of redesigning/restyling global or globalised cultures, alternatively considered as aligned on global standards (Friedmann 1994) or more freely hybridized (Garcia-Canclini 1995), yet, considered as outcomes of the impact of globalisation in “historical” or “traditional” cultures (Warnier 1999), as well as the fertile soils for local cultures (European, but not only) turning “global” (Jameson, Miyoshi 1998). Be they “globalisation-friendly” or “anti-global”, cultures of today’s societies can hardly escape from the dialectics of the global-local nexus, subject to global forces on the one side, but also capable of absorbing the shock of global forces



and being knowledgeable of tools for resistance – as many responses of “the local” entrenched in “the global” accountable for the diversity of genuine forms of cultures. Torn between globalisation (Friedman 1994; Appadurai 1998) and glocalisation (Roberston 1992; Roudometof 2016), cultures can hardly escape globalisation. On another hand, social forces and cultural movements coming from bottom-up dynamics rather than determined by top-down policies, norms and standards, draw an all the more complex picture of the everchanging landscape of cultural creativity, the backgrounds of tensions between groups and agents, political systems and actors, norms and agencies, globalization and localization processes. In a time of a high level of complexity, the dynamics of hypermodern connected societies and cultures call for subtle, flexible and comprehensive conceptual and methodological tools. “Technoculture” is one of these tools.

HYPHENATED CULTURES

New forms of cultures born in global conditions, and especially those that have arisen out of the context of heavy digitization, require a circumscription of the empirical and conceptual perimeter of the hyphenated cultures of globalisation. The lexical and semantic range is large but not infinite and the cartography of the key concepts in use outlines the theoretical poles and descriptive tools. “Cyberculture” ranges among the most widespread and least defined – as equivalent of “digital culture”, “Internet culture” or even “e-culture” (in France the works of Pierre Lévy 1997) cultural habits or practices as they emerge or change in the context of media technologies – the term assumes two distinct definitions: the infusion of modern communication technologies (for a weak definition of the term) in modern cultures, or cultural forms shaped by the uses of internet and connected technologies. If Cybercultures are “modern” (or hypermodern) by definition, they are also “global”, considering the extension of the technologies on a world-wide scale. Yet, the definition of the global is far from being restricted to a geographic extension of a cultural form, an

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economic model or an industrial form but applies to connected, deterritorialised and networked forms of social and cultural dynamics. If there is one distinctive feature of “cybercultures”, it is that they are hybrid by-products of communication technologies, internet and cultural norms, mainly (if not exclusively) through media technologies, that can be categorised in other terms as “e-cultures” or “online cultures”.

Technoculture is a word widely used but rarely defined, in the galaxy of other terms – characterised by the coalescence between technology and culture. As such, the term has been popularized in 1991 by Penley and Ross for whom technoculture was a combination between politics, technology and culture. It is, however, hard to trace back to the genesis of its first definition. An occurrence of the term has been identified in 1961, far before the emergence and development of countercultural hypes and styles inspirational for technoculture. Cyberpunk is maybe the first cultural movement mixing science and science-fiction in the 1980s. Notwithstanding its loose definition, technoculture stimulated the establishment of curricula and the foundation of a journal (“Technoculture”). The concept did not receive any clear consensual definition, and yet, the idea of technology infusing culture and reciprocally, culture shaping technology predates the term. Considering that technological developments impact every compartment of human societies, a global digitisation permeating ordinary, private and domestic lives following the parallel progresses of technologies, technoculture is a mix between new global cultures and the knowledge field of technoscience, instilled by the narratives and aesthetics of alternative trends in music, fashion, entertainment, literature and cinema and so forth. With regards to the variety of uses, technoculture transpires alternatively in a substantive or adjectival form in textual, hypertextual and hyper-oral (audio-visual) discourses and narratives. The lexicon of technoculture is vast and the definitions are as fluid as the empirical occurrences they refer to: from cultural ideas and practices when they are inspired by technologies (the “full” sense of technoculture) to the imagination of technologies. The plasticity of semantics offers many possibilities; not limited to marginal and minority countercultural movements like the above-mentioned



cyberpunk, it can also extend to mainstream culture, and ends up exemplifying the features of mainstream cultural conditions.

In France, S. Octobre supports the idea of a global “Technocultural regime”, that is, a new ecology of culture in a digital environment, and technological skills becoming cultural resources (Octobre 2019). Not only is the whole population of modern-global societies already socialized in using these technologies, but each generation has developed new skills and has more creative energy than previous ones in terms of technological virtuosity, while also being inventive in unexpected uses in addition to those required for the use of these technologies. Therefore, technology fosters cultural creativity and reciprocity. Technoculture, in this sense, could have become the key word for a master narrative for global times, yet it did not succeed in becoming such a core concept.

In consequence, the field of the definition of technoculture still remains limited to a somewhat vague or, quite the reverse, too precise “link between technologies and culture” be it narrative, aesthetic or praxeological. And similarly, the scope of cultures impacted by technological developments or emerging thanks to them remains quite large and fuzzy, from the “classical” anthropological culture (as representations, ideas and beliefs embedded in the practices and institutions of a social group) to the more socially diffuse, unequally shared, yet widespread, ideas and values circulating in social and digital networks (less substantialised and territorialised). But do we need a clear definition of “culture” to define “technoculture”?

A first attempt at definition can lead us to consider technoculture as a phenomenon inscribed in globalisation and subjected to globalisation processes, and technocultures as collective byproducts and vectors of this globalisation. At the same time, the singular forms of technocultures are born from the fermentation of technological progresses and ideological systems, in particular cultural melting pots and social milieus, and are thus developed in certain geographies: the West coast of the United States, which is for many the starting point of the worldwide extension of technoculture and its “cyber” variants (see Reinghold 1993). But is there even a real epistemological need to define technoculture? In the social sciences and humanities,



as it is the case in other academic fields, defining concepts is and used to be a kind of prerequisite for any kind of scholarly reflexion or inquiry. Yet, the plasticity of the empirical occurrences ranging under of the category of “technoculture” is considerable and obviously in line with the complexity, ambivalence and uncertainty of the “fluid” modernity (Bauman 2000) of global times.

Leila Green (2002), however, holds a critical position against the weak definition of technoculture and considers that the liability of the concept is detrimental to the heuristic power of the term. She suggests relocating it into the frame of media and cultural studies. In spite of a definition confined to a single framework, the concept is still assigned a strong relevance, and Simon Copper favours a critical approach to technoculture borrowing from the grand philosophical theories of techniques (from Heidegger to Foucault), underlining the ambivalence of the modes of engagement with the world (technologies as sources of transformation of modes of social integration and ontological categories of existence) that the technology moulds and reframes in the context of modernity. In this sense, technoculture takes part in a kind of fusion between the cultural and technological in culture – not of a particular culture, but culture at large (Cooper 2002).

According to Penley and Ross, technoculture has become a relevant concept since technology has penetrated cultural ideas and values to the point of become “natural” or “normal” (Penley, Ross 1991: 4). Technoculture is a hyphenation of two terms, but “culture” seems to prevail upon “technology” in this regard, and the concept is blatantly a cultural perspective on technology, shedding light on the user’s experience (Mccarthy, Wright 2004) rather than on the “usability” of technologies (which is a techno-centred perspective). Common wisdom leads us to recall that William Gibson’s *Necromancer* (published in 1984) paved the way for the fusion between humans and technology, and simulating the collective imagination of cyborgs, thereafter was substantially promoted by literature and movies. Still, it is not free from political and economic issues, shaping the global background. Technoculture epitomizes, on the one hand, the colonisation of cultural and social

environments by material and technological devices, and the resulting transformations of work, human relationships, love or playing (Malinowska 2009). On another hand, as pointed out by Sadie Plant (1997), technoculture can also be a tool of empowerment for specific social categories, especially those under oppression, providing resources for new aptitudes converted into competences and enabling mobility in social positions. Globalization is the theatre where the dynamics of “the universalization of the particular and the particularization of the universal” materialise (Robertson 1992), i.e. the diffusion of technoculture in different cultural contexts. As underscored by Penley and Ross:

Just as important, but less apparent, is the complex process by which Western technoculture, even the most propagandistic and militaristic, is always being reread and reinterpreted in ways that make sense of local cultures and that intersect with local politics, with all sorts of results that go against the grain and the intentions of the Western producers and sponsors (Penley, Ross 1991: 3).

Nevertheless, the concept of “technoculture” seems to be more relevant to artistic, media and cyberculture than anthropological cultures, since it applies more to the diffusion or expressions of culture in social networks, blogs and forums, online games, or videos. Moreover, technocultures can also be assimilated by consumer cultures when technology is “slavishly” or strategically serving the aims and objectives of mass production and consumption (Kozinets 2019) and therefore is related to the “I-zation” of society described by Adam Possamai as an alliance between capitalism and technologies (Possamai 2018). Since then, the concept has become conceptually thicker when it comes to the characterisation of larger domains where technology is nowadays intermixing – society, culture, power, economy, the body, aesthetics, beliefs – it is penetrating, irrigating, colonizing and transforming, but in return with which it hybridises (Shaw 2008).

This foundational ambivalence, and we can even say the fundamentally *janus* faces of technoculture, symbolises the two opposite aspects of an oxymoronic fusion of sociotechnical

representation and practices, actors and networks, embodying marginal and countercultures on the one side, mainstream and hegemonic forms of culture. Further, this ambivalence is characterised by a double dimension that is only separated by one letter “d”: “ludism”, the fact of playing with technologies, realities and cultural resources, and making technoculture a positive horizon for humanity, resolutely located on the side of *technophilia*, and “luddism”, i.e. taking a defiant stance towards technologies, and the active destruction of material and cultural forms of the “alienating” technoculture, this time noticeably expressing *technophobia* – both sides of the same coin of technoscapes or global technologies (Robins, Webster 1999).

THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

The aim of this special issue was to shed light on a complex, fluid, and almost unseizable phenomenon ranged under the category of “technoculture” and the dynamics they are subject to. Rather than supporting an authoritarian scientific point of view, this special issue is opposed to an exclusive definition, making a significant shift from exclusive to elusive, yes, but not giving up the possibility of empirically circumscribed forms, expressions or signs of technocultures in the context of globalisation. Faithful to the idea that technoculture is a flexible, fluctuating, versatile concept and that its volume of contributions is not confined to a narrow definition nor empirical aspects of technological impacts on culture(s) or cultural dimensions of technologies, all contributions embrace a wide scope of phenomenon and all of them directly or discreetly yet unmistakably questioning one or more aspects of technoculture.

Sudipta Adhikary and Kaushik Banerjee address the issue of the impact of digitisation on economic practices, resources and work, and the acceleration of this process within the circumstances of the Covid-19 outbreak and lockdown. The changes in economic activities and labour have been fuelled by the quick but ongoing developments of digital apparatuses, that brought about changes in the rights and representations of work and workers. The two authors examine the role of unions

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in a context where digital innovation fosters distant and autonomous work but threatens sociability and collective action. This paper emphasises the “techno” side of technoculture, even if, in this context, education and training (in other terms, “culture”) also constitute an important facet of the progress of digitalisation in society and economy.

Arjun Appadurai proposes a genuine perspective on the social and economic consequences of the digital revolution, and the bodily appropriation of technologies by social actors. The conceptual nexus between phatic (communication) and haptic (touch) relocate at the forefront of the agenda of the study of technoculture the issue of touching and the recontextualisation of these skills based on body gestures as well as the impacts of technological developments at a wider social scale. It is also an occasion to deliver a balanced analysis bringing together anthropological approaches to bodily distance and social hierarchy (cast), and online communication. As an anthropologist, Appadurai is installing “culture” as main interpretative framework, and demonstrates how a focus on culture can help in understanding the organic embodiment as well as social domestication of technologies. A viewpoint and reflexion that stands at the opposite pole of technocentric outlooks on digital technologies.

The contribution of Erin Barbeau, Enka Blanchard, Levi Qışın, and Vinicius Santos Almeida is at the core of the theme of technoculture: it explores the complex, ambiguous power relationships, agency, technology, discrimination and culture (collective representations). Culture, in such context, offers resources for affirmative action and empowerment. The case of queers and transsexuals reflects upon the hybridisation of gender identities, networks and social mobilisation in every sector of globalised societies. The authors shed light on the geographic restructuring of social bonds and experiences in changing spatial dynamics, and on the grounds of technocultural aesthetics. The idealization of urbanity as sanctuary for queers and transgenders is counterbalanced by geographic shift towards rural spaces, echoing changes in the narratives and aesthetics of technoculture.

On the basis of an empirical investigation, Olivier Alexandre prolongs the reflection on technoculture with an investigation

into the “emic” (i.e. “indigenous”) conception of culture among producers of technologies (“techies”). Drawing upon a sociological perspective, the author examines the different meanings and uses of culture as in direct relationship with technology, considered in the West Coast as “second nature”. Here again, space is a key operational concept to understand the processes of integration in the Silicon Valley, where “techies” are instrumental in making culture both a source of legacy and a resource for social identification/integration.

Mauro Magatti tackles the issue of territory and the re-definition of spatial organisation after the Covid-19 outbreaks and under the regime of globalisation. If most of the reflections have been devoted to evaluate, after George Ritzer’s extreme position, deterritorialisation and re-territorialisation processes, observed in many contexts, Magatti calls attention to the evidence that “the local” also stands for a “place” (i.e. the spatial entity or node in a network). Rather than bringing into discussion geographic issues (scales and nature of the correspondence between places/territories and mobility), the author opens up another perspective, focusing on the dislocation and reconnection of social bonds, because of and thanks to new technologies, both weakened and reinforced by the extension of technology in work and professional activities. Magatti convincingly states that a “contribution territory” is a decisive way to recapture *mutatis mutandis* the essence of urban sociability, co-existence, co-participation and commitment to society. Of course, technology does play a role in infusing these new modes of (distant) territoriality while providing digital resources to reconnect people after having been one of the causes of the deterioration of social bonds and cultural frameworks – a *janus* and oblique impact of the technocultural regime.

In a more globalist and less technocultural perspective, Paul Agu Igwe and Mahfuzur Rahman tackle the issue of the paradoxes of economic competition between emerging markets in China, Brazil, and India. Not leaving aside the importance of technology in economic globalisation, the authors demonstrate that one of the paradoxes of economic liberalisation is to generate an “unbalance prosperity”.



And finally, in a short, yet stimulating essay, Christopher Thorpe discusses Vittorio Cotesta's *The Heavens and the Earth* and the images of the world in the *longue durée* to question Cotesta's stance concerning the relationships between "global" and "newness". The role of technology is a driving force for change (technologism) as myth or reality, and by extension, the continuity of history (by means of sources). This feedback loop to technology in history and civilisation appropriately concludes this collection of papers.

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