

# The Eclipse of Reason - A Present Time Risk

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## Abstract

This paper contends that technical progress, from automation in industry to artificial intelligence, might involve the risk of a humanly impoverished society. Instrumental values could overcome final values and determine the end of meaning.

**Keywords:** progress; technology; reason; development; eclipse; intelligence

## Introduction

At the present time a great transition is taking place: from the rural world of the approximation to the cult of numerical precision. This transition has different names: virtual reality, augmented reality, automation, artificial intelligence. However, it overlooks the fact that technology, even in its most advanced stages, has definite limitations.

The machine works. It functions. Man thinks. The machine can be put on, put off, put on again. Man is either alive or dead. Internet is a marvellous machine. It can accomplish complicated operations in a few minutes. But it is a stupid machine, because it cannot doubt, reflect, take time.

Science cannot substitute conscience. Artificial Intelligence cannot take the place of human responsibility. In a world dominated by numerical precision and technical efficiency, there is the risk of a society technically advanced and humanly impoverished. The eclipse of reason, to use Max Horkheimer's phrase, becomes real.

## Time and the existential experience

Giambattista Vico, that most learned man and rigorous philologist, made a mistake in his birthdate in his *Autobiography*. Obviously, in his time the precise registration of births was not as important as it is to us today. And again, we do not know the dates of Rabelais's life. This ignorance is certainly not our responsibility alone; it does not merely call into question the gaps in our scholarship. «If today's scholars cannot establish Rabelais's birthdate, we may well ask ourselves if Rabelais himself knew what it was. This is one of the questions raised by Lucien Febvre in his *Le problème de l'incroyance au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle ou la religion de Rabelais*: "In Rabelais's time, did people know their own age, or not?" Febvre concludes that it cannot have been a common

thing at that time to know one's own age».<sup>1</sup> A person's age did not seem to depend on the exact, quantitative computation of his or her years. Perhaps it was rather a question of how the individual involved really felt, spiritually and physically.

Persons were the age they felt, not necessarily the age attributed to them by the mathematical sum of conventional measurement, linked to a general, and thus abstract, calendar; nor from the subjectively binding facts of a document linked to the extra subjective structure of social power, alien and distant by definition. So, not only was precision in the mathematical, quantitative sense of little importance, but the very idea that a living, present individual should have to prove with a supporting document his or her own identity must have seemed absurd to the ordinary way of thinking. In fact, when we think of it today, it *is* an absurdity. My great-grandfather, who died in our home in 1940, born in the Piedmontese countryside a century before, did not remember the year of his birth with exactitude. However, he had a very clear idea of the season of the year when he was born. In his long evening tales, at once slow and tortuous, suggesting the slow, chance meanderings of a river (the river of time?), my great-grandfather, then a centenarian, remembered being born at the beginning of the summer. It was starting to get hot, and the wheat was tall and yellow, interspersed in the field with the bright red of the poppies, and the festival of Corpus Domini was near. His time was the existential experience, not an abstract sum.

Perhaps, as some people maintain, this abstract sum allows the individual greater freedom, his or her own cautious snipping-out of remnants of a private time, to be savored and lived in a kind of clandestinity in relation to the global society, and the workaday life with its appointments, its phone calls, and deadlines. This seems to me highly dubious, but we do not lack people who are seriously and deeply committed to this position:

Today, when the development of the timetable in the West is increasingly based on a philosophy evidently economical as regards time, even our private life and the most minute phenomena of social life are influenced by that orientation. The art of "killing time," of using it in the most efficient and swiftest way, and the negative connotation given to any "gap" of waiting or interval, have emphasized the quantitative vision of time and introduced new practices based on the principle of simultaneous consumption. From the "working lunches" where one discusses business while eating, to the cocktail party, to the dinner party devoted to social contacts; from listening to music whilst driving, to TV at dinner and so on. However, the growing division of labor and consequent differentiation of the different phases of everyday life in modern society have also favored the separation of the public and the private spheres. In the past, private time was essentially defined as a residual category, no more than a leftover as regards time invested in work. Today, temporal rigidity in our professional commitments, *far from*

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<sup>1</sup> John U. Nef, *La naissance de la civilisation industrielle et le monde contemporain*, Paris, A. Colin, 1954, pp. 18-19; cf. too my *The Myth of Inevitable Progress*, New York, Greenwood Press, 1986, passim.

*being an alienating phenomenon or regimentation*, provides the individual with greater protection for his private time, and thus acts as a liberating element.<sup>2</sup>

### Reason as an artifice and victim of the operational transformation

The argument is not new, but its groundedness is nonetheless uncertain. It follows the outline of the famous analysis by Georg Simmel of the mental and socio-psychological conditions of life in the metropolis and the blasé nature of the human type prevalent there. The division of labor and specialization of functions allow the individual personality in the metropolitan environment to offer only one aspect of itself in interpersonal relations, and thus avoid being swept away and, as it were, worn out by the excessive number of contacts. The specialization of professional contacts in this case is supposed to act not as a factor of mass alienation, but as a precious protective barrier for the person. As always, Simmel's argument is brilliant but not wholly convincing. In reality, extra subjective determination of space-time channels weighs on metropolitan man even beyond what Willy Helpbach suspected.<sup>3</sup> I had discussed his observation already in the immediate postwar period when the subject of human relations in industry was in fashion, and the polemics on «free time» were raging.<sup>4</sup> Human beings are delicate, *unitary mechanisms* (if I may use the expression) formed and dominated by a tendentious unitary logic which clearly contradicts the mass of juxtaposed, chance, heterogeneous or incongruous elements. For this basic reason, human beings cannot indifferently or even with concern pass from socially determined, and to various degrees coercive, «working time» to one which is supposedly «free», as though it were a matter of changing one's tie or one's shirt. Recently, this problematic tangle was again decisively attacked.

Technological innovations [...] [affect] labor [...] on a scale quite without precedent in world history. This does not imply that work in capitalist industry is devoid of "meaning" for workers, a matter that in any case varies widely within the high diversification of the division of labor in capitalist production. But there are no longer any guaranteed normative connections between the distinct time-encapsulated sphere of work and the remainder of social life, which itself becomes substantially disembedded from traditionally established practices. The converse of the «public time» introduced by the rule of the clock is the «private time» that is freely disposable by the individual but remains objectified time in the sense that it has been severed from an intimate involvement with the situated practices of social life.<sup>5</sup>

What seems obvious, but should be emphasized even more strongly, is that there is no painless possibility of «free time» in a society where social time and working

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<sup>2</sup> V. Castronovo, «Il signor spaccaminuti» *La Repubblica*, 29 August 1985 (my emphasis).

<sup>3</sup> W. Helpbach, *L'uomo della metropoli*, Milan, Comunità, 1960.

<sup>4</sup> See the exemplary book by Gianni Toti, *Il tempo libero*, Rome, Ed. Riuniti, 1956.

<sup>5</sup> A. Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1981, p. 153.

time are strictly objectified and measured according to the needs of production and consumption of commodities for the sake of maximizing profits. In other words, the free time of the individual as private being is not in reality free, but necessarily determined, like working time of which it is just the other, symmetrical aspect. In industrialized societies, the weight of the pendulum, in Marx's famous statement (in the *Poverty of Philosophy*, answering Proudhon's *Philosophy of Poverty*) «becomes the precise measure of the relative activity of two workers, as it is of the speed of two engines, so that one can no longer say that an hour from one man is the same as an hour of another, but rather that one man hour is worth another man hour. Time is everything, man is no longer anything: it is all *making time count*: there is no longer a problem of quality, quantity determines everything, hour by hour, day by day».

It is odd that an English sociologist not unacquainted with Marxism should entertain doubts, when unleashing a critique *en bloc* against historical materialism, on the basis of three reasons, surprising for their ingenuousness as well as their intrinsic weakness. Giddens criticizes historical materialism (which is certainly open to criticism, but with more compelling arguments): first, because the modes of production of material life in tribal or precapitalist societies are not the principal motor of social change, just as the class struggle is not either; second, because historical materialism rests on an ambiguous mixture of evolutionary and ethnocentric ideas as well as on an obsolete philosophical conception of science; third, because Marx erred «to regard human beings as above all tool-making and -using animals, and to treat this as the single most important criterion distinguishing the “species being” of humanity from that of the animals. Human social life neither begins nor ends in production».<sup>6</sup>

To the first reason, one might adduce the whole of the literature on the «Asiatic Mode of Production», Marx's own reflections on the consequences alleged to have followed - as the start of rationalization - the building of the railway in India, and the «catalog» of the types of relations between «oppressors» and «oppressed» with which the *Communist Manifesto* opens. One might respond to the second reason that the Spencerian and Darwinian ideas, which historically have infiltrated historical materialism, are also its most complete distortion, in that they «biologize» a process which is and is intended to be wholly historical.<sup>7</sup> To reply to the third reason, Marx always consistently supported the idea - the ideal - of omnilateral or multidimensional man, beyond and against the one-dimensionality of the *homo faber* to which Giddens wants to reduce him, clearly ignorant of the characteristic Marxist dialectical tension whereby every concept is also at the same time a concept-limit (*Grenz-Begriff*). All

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<sup>6</sup> A. Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique*, pp. 155-56.

<sup>7</sup> The theoretically definitive criticism of such misunderstandings is to be found in the work of Antonio Labriola, the only «professor» the autodidact Croce recognized and respected as such. He was perhaps the only Italian Marxist to have enjoyed an international reputation and influence, as we see in Trotsky's *Autobiography*.

in all, Giddens's vision is simplistic and misleading, the product of wide but perhaps hasty reading, and in some cases superficial.

The problem of time remains, that once it is objectified in the name of productive goals thought to be socially desirable, it lends itself to rational calculation and precise counting - in days, hours, minutes - and falls under the sway of a quantitative control with no way out. This betrays and translates its intrinsic value into an ever-faster sequential process, while it presents itself to the individual as an ever-scarcer resource. The devaluation of the everyday is the clumsy justification of this situation that in reality contains the profound reasons for the crisis and its related loss of meaning, which have been spreading since the coming of the «industrial revolution». The etymological meaning of the «everyday» is invoked to emphasize its meaning of «repetitiveness» in the common sense, that is, what happens every day, with no aura or originality: the eternal return of the identical, the «every day» of existence. Its basic principle - on principle or by simple unawareness - is forgotten or underplayed, that of the reflexive and self-reflexive moment: the absorbed probing beneath the external noises and the internal racket of aimless haste - the stasis which makes ecstasy possible, meditation beyond the deadline, no mechanistic and no utilitarian thinking.

The idea of Josef Pieper, that leisure is the basis of culture, is situated, and takes on meaning fully, in this context.<sup>8</sup> Decades before, Nietzsche wrote that anyone who does not have at least two hours a day at his complete disposal is a slave. Time lacking is always mortgaged time, time removed from quiet contemplation and tranquil reflection, relaxing over one's own affairs. Paradoxically, one could say that *missing time is time which denies time*. In a Bergsonian key, it has been remarked that

Time as experience is creativity, and creativity has always been the cancelling of the perception of time. Creative tension cancels the sense of time, whereas acquiescence and indifference multiply it. This is true as much for the individual as at the collective level. In fact, rich cultures suffer time as a limit, as a bond and as a control. It is not by chance that the problem of time and above all of the differentiation of its meanings has been accentuated after the crisis of the '70s. Lived time, creative time in experience, allowed the unification of biological, psychological, and social time. The impoverishment of experience, on the other hand, has made the break between individual and social time increasingly perceptible, as well as demonstrating the inability of natural time to contain the expansion and contradictions of social time.<sup>9</sup>

Bergson had already postulated a qualitative time outside the normal, quantitatively measurable, temporal co-ordinates in the framework of general «creative evolution».

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. J. Pieper, *Leisure, The Basis of Culture*, London, Faber and Faber, 1953. On the same wavelength and basically in the same world of thought, though of a different sociocultural stamp, cf. T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1949.

<sup>9</sup> See C. Mongardini, «Il problema del tempo nella società contemporanea», paper prepared for the seminar on the problem of time, sponsored by the University of Krakow, 16-20 October 1986.

But creativity does not arise from nothing; it needs, in fact, time, to elaborate itself and mature, at the risk of yielding to the romantic myths of «strokes of genius» which are, moreover, never too far from strokes of disorder and madness.

Creativity needs, and grows in, no mortgaged time. Reference to the 1970s confirms this. At least part of the creativity of 1968 was spurious. It abolished time because it was unable to plan in time. It wanted «everything at once», because it lacked the intellectual clarity necessary to establish a hierarchical order, a list of priorities of the objectives it mystically wanted. It felt it was historically right, but it did not manage to understand fully the reasons for its own rightness. Unfortunately, it could not escape the depressing destiny of a great, missed opportunity.<sup>10</sup>

The mere mechanical, de-dialecticized counterposing of coercive social time and personal, private time, one's own and therefore authentic, indicated an insurmountable impasse and led reflection up a blind alley. No mortgaged time grows in the anxiety (consciously assumed and resolved by performing the task) of time wherein the subject discovers, «realizes» his or her limits, but also recovers his or her own genuine potential. This is not a certain result. It is the subject's chance, the gamble of his or her life. The context weighs heavily, but in the narrow margins left open one has the - never assured, always problematic and thus dramatic - possibility of reacting. The possibility of reaction stands in direct relation to the capacity for choice. In this sense, the weight of the context expressed in collective times and the «blind» deadlines of bureaucratic-institutional rhythms does not necessarily involve the process of desubjectivation. This process and its danger exist in mass society, dominated by the great formal structures where rationality has abandoned the individual to make itself the abstract characteristic of impersonal organizations, but they are neither fatal nor irreversible. It is an open question.

### **Personal vs Impersonal domination**

The rigid counterposing of social time, mortgaged by collective demands and thereby inauthentic, against time as not quantitatively calculated nor precisely measured, has led philosophical and sociological analysis to an impasse as desperate as it is meaningless. Here, there is no help from speculative, metahistorical and abstract oracles. They can only supply the consoling help of a kind of philosophical last rites. And yet even the more consistent Cassandras have quickly become aware that man as historical animal lives and realizes himself in time, is nothing outside time: «out of time» – a phrase without meaning – existence can have no sense. It can be neither experienced nor thought in a meaningful manner.<sup>11</sup> The reason comes quickly to mind. If the first expression of the meaningfulness of the experience of the living is to be

<sup>10</sup> See my «Nostalgia dell'autorità», in *In nome del padre*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1985.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, especially the whole second part concerning the ontology of the *Zeitlichkeit* of «temporality».

concerned with and about something, it is obvious that this «concern» must use time, cannot but realize and develop itself in time, within a «time horizon» – a phrase I prefer to translate into the analogous if not exactly equivalent «historical horizon». One then comprehends Heidegger's conclusion: «Temporality is the primordial meaning of the being of *Being [Dasein]*».<sup>12</sup>

In this perspective, the problems posed to humanity become insoluble, the liberty of the Enlightenment is transformed into its contrary, and the dream of an emancipated humanity gives way to a new barbarism. The very radical quality of denounced evil acquires the tone and dimension of a new metaphysics. Horkheimer discovered the definitive words to express this despairing impasse: «If one were to speak of a disease affecting reason, this disease should be understood not as having stricken reason at some historical moment but as being inseparable from the nature of reason in civilization as we have known it so far. The disease of reason is that reason was born from man's urge to dominate nature...»<sup>13</sup>. The philosophical confirmation of this cruel self-accusation that reason pronounces against itself is seen most clearly in Horkheimer's *The Eclipse of Reason*. Here three separate and previously antagonistic spheres are brought in contact: reason, the subject, and nature. The attempt to dominate nature, to understand its secret and «laws» in order to subjugate it, required the establishment of an impersonal bureaucratic, «scientific» organization which in the name of victory over nature ended in reducing the human subject to a mere instrument. In this situation, the concept of formalized reason and the subject-object dialectic are necessary and inevitable results.

According to Horkheimer, the present crisis of reason «consists fundamentally in the fact that at a certain point thinking either became incapable of conceiving such objectivity at all or began to negate it as a delusion»<sup>14</sup>. The critical element sustaining the basic achievement of modern philosophy is the prolongation of a methodical skepticism that eats to the roots of the concept of truth and robs it of all meaning, transforming it into a merely subjective convention, formalized according to arbitrary limits: «The process was gradually extended to include the objective content of every rational concept. In the end, no particular reality can seem reasonable per se; all the basic concepts, emptied of their content, have come to be only formal shells. As reason is subjectivized, it also becomes formalized»<sup>15</sup>.

It is not a question of the relation between the natural and the social sciences, or of the cultural relation which was the crucial reference point of contemporary German thought, and which generated the famous *Methodenstreit* in which writers

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* For the concept of «historical horizon», see my *La storia e il quotidiano*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1986, pp. 124ff.

<sup>13</sup> M. Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, op. cit., p. 176.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*



such as Rickert, Windelband and Weber firmly opposed the possibility of a positivist analysis. Horkheimer's intention is different. «This book – he writes – takes a different approach. Its aim is to enquire into the concept of rationality that underlies our contemporary industrial culture, in order to discover whether this concept does not contain defects that vitiate it essentially»<sup>16</sup>. The essential defect of reason today in technically progressive industrial society must, according to Horkheimer, be regarded as an operational transformation in which reason is at once artifice and victim. This consists in substituting the means for the ends and winds up by instrumentalizing reason itself in the very name of reason, by reducing it to necessary, predictable and programmed thought – an integral part of the process of production. This shows that the Enlightenment has been turned into its direct opposite.

The Enlightenment's individual liberty enters into crisis when change from an elitist to a mass culture is occurring alongside the transition from liberal, competitive capitalism to a capitalism dominated by an ever-smaller number of large oligopolistic and monopolistic concentrations. Horkheimer approaches the problem both philosophically and socially:

Having given up autonomy, reason has become an instrument. In the formalistic aspect of subjective reason, stressed by positivism, its unrelatedness to objective content is emphasized; in its instrumental aspect, stressed by pragmatism, its surrender to heteronomous contents is emphasized. Reason has become completely harnessed to the social process. Its operational value, its role in the domination of men and nature, has been made the sole criterion<sup>17</sup>.

Domination is the truly universal and all-comprehensive category. But what kind of domination? It is no longer a personal domination – the lordly type of «employer». Nor is it a domination of the subjective ideas that have manipulated the world of objective relations toward their own ends and logic. It is rather an impersonal and anonymous domination, in pure flux, the consequence of decisions arising from the instinct of self-preservation but filtered through a rational calculation that undermines the self and negate existence as the instinctive, inventive reaction to objective conditions:

As the end result of the process, we have on the one hand the self, the abstract ego emptied of all substance except its attempt to transform everything in heaven and on earth into means for its preservation, and on the other hand an empty nature degraded to mere material, mere stuff to be dominated, without any purpose than that of this very domination<sup>18</sup>.

Thus, objective spirit – unprejudiced liberty of individual criticism that once was the basis of the justification and progressiveness of the Enlightenment – now has the same

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. V.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.



«obscurantist», regressive function of the objective reason of authoritarian religions and metaphysical philosophy. Horkheimer's criticism of individual subjective reason does not mean a return to dogmatic reason. On the contrary, it is a revolt against the desiccation of instincts – those essential impulses that have been so impoverished in the rational process. Without any concession to irrational tendencies, Horkheimer traces the trajectory which led from authoritarian and dogmatic religion to a complex of arbitrary, subjectivist constructions, incorporated into the massification of society and new forms of domination. Horkheimer failed to provide us with its phenomenology, but he did produce a marvelous account of the stages in the proletarianization of the mind in the modern world.

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