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TIME, SPACE, TECHNOLOGY AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

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Time and space offer intervals with which to define the place of human beings and societies in real history. Space intervals offer a measure of the difference between two points. Time intervals measure, likewise, the difference deriving from change. Space can be static; time is perpetual flux. Both influence human activity -political, social, economic and religious. In the wake of the rapid development of modern science and technology, holders of authority seem to be increasingly tempted by the appeal of totalitarianism in space-like techniques, believing in the possibility of finding or creating a central location from which global control can be extended over a given society, within a given space boundary. The speed and width of communication transfer makes this temptation great.

Recent European history has shown the elusiveness and the dangers of fascist and communist ambitions of this type. Democratic regimes, however, are not immune to totalitarian temptations even when their leaders are sincere believers in freedom, liberalism, humanism and the like. This seems inevitable when industrial systems of production transform into merchandise the very interpersonal relationships among individuals, not to mention the relationship between individuals and their environment.

Indeed, the transformation of an industrial, producing society into a society which increasingly owes its survival to its ability to consume the ever-growing amount of goods produced,⁽¹⁾ makes the consumption patterns spread out rapidly over space and time, thus making both space and time increasingly scarce and therefore increasingly expensive, because of the decreasing avail-

ability of raw materials and the pressing need to consume increasing quantities of goods. The paradox of the modern - individuals or societies - is that they become increasingly poor in leisure time, time which is indispensable for the creation and maintenance of civilised life. As the French say: "Le temps ne pardonne jamais à ce qui est fait sans lui." Hence the urge on all sides, democratic and antidemocratic, to act like planners of boy-scout outings: program, plan, organize, bureaucratize, accepting consciously or unconsciously the myth of progress, the despotism of determinism and the 'wisdom' of historicism.

How relevant are the activities of such systems to the problems of the post-industrial society in which we already live? How realistic is the belief of those contemporary scientist-philosophers that humans should be viewed as limited, since once conceived as limited systems they are replaceable by all sorts of cybernetic systems?⁽²⁾ Clearly, the centrality of man's position in the universe, already badly shaken by the Copernican revolution which moved earth from the center to a periphery of a periphery, and the relativity of Einstein which made mass equivalent to energy, is today confronted by two serious challenges: an ever-growing, increasingly complex science-based technology, which escapes from our control and turns against society (the bomb, pollution, population explosion, and the gap between rich and poor nations); the discovery of the extent to which the unconscious governs us, of the deep, animal roots of human behavior and the role of the unexpected and the unplanned discovery. All these facts underline the weakness of the claim that human beings are able to dominate themselves and their environment through thoughts, words and actions.

A new type of alienation, different from that of the slave, of the pro-

letarian and of the colonised, is thus sapping the solidity of traditional values and identities, calling at the same time for the formulation of new ones, apt to legitimize that authority which supports them and gives purpose to existence.

Individuals cannot live without identity, that is, without the feeling of belonging; nor can collectives exist without it. But there are deep differences and important implications between identities primarily bound in time and those primarily bound in space.

A typical, in fact extreme, example of individual and collective identity based on time is offered by Judaism, but other examples also exist: the Parsi, the Chinese diaspora, for example, not to mention the Gypsies.⁽³⁾

From the point of view of religion - which will not be discussed here - time has played a primordial role in shaping Judaism as a conception of specific and direct manifestation of the divine presence in human history. This conception has strongly influenced deterministic trends in other monotheistic religions - like Christianity and Islam - as well as 'secular' ideologies such as nationalism, marxism and fascism. But from the social and political points of view, Judaism has been influenced in a very particular way by the concept of time. Because of this, Judaism may serve as a useful reference point for a discussion on the impact of time and space on other forms of identity in modern society, especially when one asks, as I do here, in what way rapid modernization affects old and new individual and collective identities.

The Jews are not identical with the people of the Bible, though this is what one usually hears. If they are something specific, then it is better to call them the people of the Talmud. This enormous collection of debates has been, and remains, the primary source of the Jewish feeling of belonging or

of yearning to belong (even for the most ignorant and assimilated Jew, as long as his bond is not utterly forgotten in the mists of time), because it has developed a system of permanent intellectual discussion between scholars of all ages, using biblical sources, called pilpul, or casuistry, which strives to keep alive otherwise dead traditions. As a result, it deals with every possible subject, from medicine to magic, from money to marriage, from mathematics to poetry, from philology to astronomy.⁽⁴⁾ This living encyclopedia of discussions of and on sacred life starts with the apparently curious question: "From what time is the evening Shema prayer to be recited?" Time, not space, is the primary preoccupation of the traditional Jewish mind.

As far as space is concerned, Jews are in exile even in their own land - in exile since the destruction of the Temple. This situation has little effect on Jewish identity, individual or collective, because Jewish identity is determined by the calendar, not by territory or by birth (insofar as anyone can convert into Judaism). This, incidentally, is what made Copernicus so important: he reformed the calendar.

As I said, what gives the Jew the feeling of belonging is not the place in which he lives - and this includes the Holy Land in spite of the major role it plays in Jewish history - or identity with his history, but what he does and when he does it: the sabbath, the great pilgrimage festivals, the new moon and new year celebrations, the jubilees.

This significance of time was inherited by early Christianity and Islam, although for Jews and Moslems the idea of the separation of religion from other aspects of private and collective life is inconceivable: there is no way to "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's". The three monotheistic religions' common approach to time resides elsewhere. It is true

that time enters every way of life and every religion; moments of time are links in a person's identity - the rites de passage, so called: his birth, maturation, marriage, death, if not more. Yet these are inherently cyclic, and most religions are cyclic. Not so the three monotheistic ones. St. Augustine remarked of Christianity - and it also applies to Judaism and Islam - that monotheistic religions are, so to say, linear, since their divine purpose has broken the cyclic pattern of 'pagan' faith.

In any case, for the Jews, national identity, conditioned largely by time, has been the major reason for the survival of a weak, dispersed, often persecuted people, deprived of a central political and religious authority and barely having means of coordination and of information flow. The Romans - whose magnificent roads testify to this day to their space-like conceptions - understood this so well that after the conquest of Judea and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem they prescribed the death penalty for any attempt by the rabbinical authorities to fix the beginning of each month, the neomany, the act on which the observance of all other aspects of Jewish collective life depended. The prohibition continued to function as a means of crushing the Jewish national revolts during the 2nd and 3rd centuries.

For early Christians as well as for Moslems, time-conditioned identity (times for prayers, for festivals, for casuistry - Kalam) has survived (in spite of recurrent fights among states sharing the same faith) and has allowed, in different ways, the expansion of the Community of the Faithful, whether the spiritual Church or the Islamic equivalent, the Umma, over and above linguistic, racial and national barriers. Details differ in the three religions; historicity remains.

Yet for all three, one of the most important consequences of their meet-

ing with the Greek and Roman heritage was their confrontation with rationalism and territorialism. Furthermore, the a-historical lumping together of both Greek and Roman heritage made territorialism seem rational and temporality mythical, even though everyone knows how awful the myth of territoriality can be. In fact, although territory is not the only element constituting the national identity of modern states, it certainly stands at its very core, at least since the time of the French Revolution. Territory has proved to be more powerful than national identity, class identity, or even ideology. In our century, two world wars have dramatized this fact in Europe. Here and elsewhere (as today in the Middle East) it is clear that when territory comes into conflict with other components of collective identity, such as nationalism, socialism or religion, it wins. Furthermore, now that Europe has been forced to give up war (the old-fashioned Falkland operation notwithstanding) as a means of settling national conflicts, the idea of intimate connection between land and people, between the material connection with the land and the psychological connection with the group, is still exported overseas, creating new and in many cases insoluble problems within 'national' territories, artificially created by foreign colonial conquest and its aftermath. Thus, more and more states in the world are now caught up in the dilemma of tribalism, an imprecise and usually pejorative term to indicate the growing crisis of collective political identity in the countries of the so-called Third World. Should they cling to European-style territorial nationalism, or should they give up their 'prefabricated' centralized 'national' states?

I do not, of course, mean to say that national groups should relinquish territory. The Jewish case I mentioned before is interesting just because of its extreme,peculiar relationship with territory, despite its many allegiances

to time. The distinction anthropologists make between societies which follow matri- or patrilinearity (attributing special authority and roles to uncles and brothers) and societies which follow matri- or patrilocality (stressing the place into which the bride or groom moves when marrying) shows how the distinction between space and time exists even in the most primitive groups. To say, therefore, that territorialism is a particularly Western idea would be nonsense. What the West has dramatically developed in the last two and a half centuries is the centrality of the idea and the symbolism of the national territory, replacing the centrality and symbolism of previous elements of collective identity. Thus, not time but historicity, not land but motherland, competes with religion, family, clan, estate, social order, political parties, etc., for the right to define and legitimize the place of belonging, individual or collective.

Sir Isaiah Berlin has noted that, curiously enough, nationalism was the only idea among the many 19th century 'utopias and prognoses' for which no thinker would predict an ever-dominant role in the future.⁽⁵⁾ In fact, most of the political philosophers of the 18th century, and more so of the last century, either ignored it or tended to believe that nationalism was a passing phenomenon to be superseded by more consistent ideologies, whether marxist or liberal. Natural as the need to belong was for the Europeans, as for every other human group in the world, the elevation of the concept of territorial unity and of self-determination of a nation to the status of supreme value, before which all other considerations must yield, did not - says Berlin - find prominent supporters among last century's major political thinkers. Now that this radical interpretation of territorial nationalism has met with political and military disaster in Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and their minor ideolog-

ical clients, and that territorial nationalism is clashing with such violence against other, non-Western forms of political identity in Asia and Africa, it seems legitimate to ask how the impact of modern science and technology will affect the consistency of old identities and promote the formation of new ones. (Incidentally, those who belittled nationalism as a passing phase failed to see that its territorialism is deeply rooted in European history, going back through Catholic Church history and Pax Romana).

Collective, and more specifically, national identities are in a sense very powerful sources of symbolic information. It seems therefore legitimate to ask what theories of information can teach a student of politics in the specific field of identity-building-or-destroying. I am not speaking here of the well-known use of theories of information in the field of propaganda and manipulation of amorphous masses: I am speaking along the lines of Norbert Wiener's ideas (and fears) of "human use of human beings", that is, the belief that modern life can be more, not less, than an outgrowth, thanks to the possibilities offered by modern technology.

Information must, in some way, be the measure of regularity of a pattern and particularly of the sort of patterns known as 'time series' which, to use Norbert Wiener's words, are patterns spread in time. It seems to me that information patterns are more congenial to societies accustomed to facing change and to meeting it with a collective consciousness conditioned by time (which is flexible) than they are to a collective consciousness conditioned by territory, which is more rigid. The Nazi concept of race, incidentally, which is so notoriously confused, becomes much clearer when seen as territorial: not blue-eyed Aryans, but blue-eyed Northerners - Aryans from India, the cradle of the Aryan race, were not considered Aryans by the Nazis.

Another important idea linked with time which Wiener stresses for the benefit of those who, like myself, are 'scientifically illiterate', is the inability to understand or even contemplate any but linear processes. Giving the example of the very different results which the impact of the same steel ball can produce on the same glass pane just by slightly increasing the speed of the steel ball, he recalls the major effects that small causes can produce in uncontrolled situations. "The long time results of two nearly identical causes", he says, "may diverge with time, until the final discrepancy has reached any degree whatever".⁽⁷⁾ Cultural systems like Judaism, continually involved in analysing the ultimate, abstract, logical possibility created by a practical situation sometimes many centuries old is - and indeed has been proved to be in the past and in recent times - more capable of facing crisis situations of unexpected magnitude, than cultural systems attached to more rigid, historicism-inspired political beliefs. Referring to Lawrence J. Henderson, who has popularised the knowledge that the environment in which life can exist at all is bounded by very narrow limits (and therefore that the survival of a race depends on a favorable balance between the variability and the adaptability of the race to different conditions and the variability of the environment in which it must exist), Norbert Wiener says: "It is one of the paradoxes of human race and possibly its last paradox, that the people that control the fortunes of our community should be at the same time widely radical in matters that concern our own change of our environment and rigidly conservative in the social matters that determine our adaptation to it."⁽⁸⁾

As we all know, modern technology means almost instant communication in ever-broadening channels of communication and means of transportation. One of the most startling consequences of this accelerated speed is the creation of

multiple geographies, that is, the radical transformation of the idea of space. For centuries and for all practical purposes (with the notable exception of seafaring) the space which Alexander the Great had to manage - politically and militarily - was almost the same in size as that of Napoleon. Moreover it was a space defined by the speed of human feet and horses' hooves, by the same obstacles - steep mountains and torrid rivers.

Consider, by comparison, what now happens in technologically equipped societies. Even in industrialised societies like Italy and Israel it is easier to communicate with Tokyo or New York, at least at certain hours of the day, than it is to communicate from Rome to Milan or from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem. International telephone equipment, being more sophisticated than local equipment, offers smoother and quicker communication across oceans, through satellites, than across one's own country through old telephone lines. What is true for an industrialised country is true in a more striking manner for a developed one, where counterproductivity is more brutally in evidence, as the traffic jams in Mexico City or in Cairo vividly show. The environmental differences become much greater in the case of the Afro-Asian or Latin American businessman or politician, who can board a plane, work in an air-conditioned office and use a satellite link. His geography is totally different from that of a farmer who lives only a short distance away, not to speak of the standards of living of the two, which may be as different as those of a European in the Middle Ages and of his 20th century descendant.

These differences, however, seem to play a minor role in the political and social consideration of the leaders of most countries. They act, especially in military, bureaucratic, industrial and economic matters, as if science and technology were equally applicable all over the world, only

needing an adequate number of experts to work properly. Little attention is paid to the consequences of the fact that, to use Norbert Wiener's words, "knowledge is inextricably intertwined with communication, power with control, and the evaluation of human purposes with ethics and the whole normative side of religion." Norbert Wiener stresses this point in his famous God & Golem Inc. (9). He reminds us that the reprobation directed in former ages at the sin of sorcery is now directed at the speculations of modern science. Legitimate scientific curiosity becomes sinful when used by those types of engineer and organiser (I would add, the specialists in development) whom Wiener calls "gadget worshippers". Gadget worshippers have no sense of environment - space-like or time-like: these engineers themselves often act as gadgets in the hands of dictators who have no sense of time. The problem is complicated by the fact that both Western and Eastern political ideologies tend to justify the validity of concepts now long past - thus creating a growing dichotomy between rigid ideas and institutions which mold identities. This dichotomy is made worse by the efforts and the jealousy of many social and political scientists who wish to transfer to their fields methods of mathematical physics "without quite understanding the intellectual attitude" (as Wiener says) which has contributed to its success there. (10)

In our time, individual and collective identities are being submitted to a double process of enhancement and erosion. This makes them much less manageable than a century ago, especially for one whose chief tool is ideology. On the one hand, it is easy to see how collective identities become stronger because they are exposed through global communication to global influence, both positive and negative. I have in mind not only political phenomena like Israeli and Palestinian national identities which have been enhanced by the

interest aroused in the Middle East conflict thanks to modern communications: I am thinking of cases like that of a popular composer like Mikis Theodorakis whose music has become more representative of Greece than many other pieces of authentic Hellenic music, because of the time and the psychological relationship with the musical phenomenon of the Beatles. On a different plane, there is no particular reason why the kilt should become the major symbol of Scottish identity rather than whiskey or bagpipes, but it could hardly be otherwise since everybody drinks whiskey and the bagpipes have become a symbol of martial virtue even in Arab armies.

On the opposite side of the line there is erosion. As we all know, Marshall McLuhan puts the problem squarely in front of us when he claims that the media are the message. The essence of modern communications is in fact related less to the message they carry than to the fact that channels should be kept open at all times and in all directions. In that strange and provocative book of his, the Gutenberg galaxy (which was first published in Britain in 1962, when the counter-culture and the student revolution had hardly started), McLuhan suggested, on the one hand, that "schizophrenia may be a necessary consequence of literature" and that on the other hand, civilisation gives to the "barbarian or a tribal man an eye for an ear which is now at odds with the electronic world."⁽¹¹⁾ For him, a theory of cultural change is impossible without the knowledge of the "changing sense ratios effected by various externalizations of our senses".

In a way, de Tocqueville, in his Ancien Regime, had already touched on this problem when he accused the French of having transported into politics the habits of literature. The fact that so many books with abstract political ideas were written in literary spirit and style was, in his opinion, largely

responsible for the fact that the French Revolution became so attracted by general theories, by the search for symmetry and exactitude in legal matters and in the desire to live according to strict rules of logic.

Referring to this passage by de Tocqueville,⁽¹²⁾ McLuhan believes that the "mysterious logic mania" of the French is easily recognisable as "the visual component in isolation of other factors." Yet it was rigorous centralism which appeared to him to be the main feature of literacy and print. Nationalism depends on or derives from "the fixed point of view" that arrives with print, creating at one and the same time national uniformity together with individualism and opposition to it.⁽¹³⁾

We all recognise the growing impact of modern life on one's individual and collective identity. The feeling of belonging is hardly satisfied by the fleeting sense of community one develops in the 'global village'. However much a person can be influenced by the explosion of 'universal' musical tastes or fashions, share in the 'immediate communion' of millions of people who are fully aware of the fact that millions are watching an international football match, or a royal coronation, or dramatic events like the landing of the first man on the moon or Sadat's arrival in Israel, it is difficult to evaluate the stable cumulative effect of these and other electronic messages on people's behavior. True, De Gaulle could nip in the bud a military revolt in 1960 with the help of a masterly television appearance and an appeal to his countrymen; true, the Ayatolla Khomeini could unleash a revolution against a powerful autocratic ruler by a massive distribution of recordings of his speeches; but allegiances and instant identities can be destroyed as rapidly as they can be created, and bestsellers sold by the million are soon forgotten and leave room for newer bestsellers. Furthermore, traditional feelings of belonging can be

weakened from outside, in spite of the efforts of social, political and religious institutions to protect them, due to the direct penetration of electronic messages into the smallest social cell - the family. Christian, and much more so Moslem and Jewish types of fundamentalist reaction against modern communications derives not from any objection to science or technology but from what is considered the immoral use of them by unbelievers. This creates a growing dilemma for religious fundamentalists all over the world since it becomes increasingly impossible to dissociate the means from the message. Time, in territorial societies, thus assumes a role which is the very opposite of the coalescent role it has traditionally had in the three monotheistic religions. It destroys identities because it continually creates and destroys or changes the significance of symbols. Those who want to disengage themselves from its influence must remove themselves from the world, like the Amish in the USA, the Satmar and some similar Jewish Hassidic courts, the monks, the ashrams, and so on. Woody Allen's portrayals of the social and psychological ambiguity constantly underlying modern life caught between traditional values and prejudices and the attractions and frustrations of change (and dramatized in its Jewish version) owe much of their success to the transnational, transcultural symbolism he employs. The frustration which induced so many 'progressive Catholics' to join the first group of highly motivated members of the Red Brigades in Italy in the sixties was partially due to the crumbling of beliefs in both Marxism and Christianity. "Né Gesù né Marx" was the slogan, showing the utter confusion of symbolism into which some of the most politically and ideologically motivated people in Italy had fallen. In these circumstances, it seems to me that the question to be asked is no longer whether one identity is better than another, but whether one type of identity can be more tolerant

than another, since only tolerance can promote an integration which is not artificial.

Contrary to the humanistic belief of the Enlightenment movement which so drastically influenced the material and moral evolution of the Western world in the past two centuries, divine religions are less intolerant than secular religions. It is precisely because Clemenceau was a typical product of French Enlightenment that the only tolerance he could think of was that of the 'maisons de tolerance', the brothels. The reason lies not so much in the logic or values of the religions but in the advantage Russell attributed to both religions and wine: the older the better. For ideas and institutions, to grow old means to possess the ability of constantly taking something which appears to be dead and making it live, by accepting new wine into old bottles on occasion.

At the end of May 1985, when the greatest living French historian, Fernand Braudel, was at last, at the age of 80, admitted to the Academie Francaise, the fellow historian who received him in that most select and closed shop of French 'immortals' recalled one of Braudel's maxims: "L'histoire change parceque les questions qu'on lui pose, changent" (History changes because the questions which are put to it, change).

The question we should ask history in our time is - Who am I?

The Enlightenment answers: I am part of the human race which is rational - an answer which is true but insufficient because it does not give us identity. The romantic answers: I am part of my land; without my motherland I cannot realize myself. This is also true, but destructive, because history - and my own personal fate in it - is visualized as a permanent conflict of identities, each one believing itself to be better than the others and linked

forever to a piece of land. Are we entitled to hope that the answer of people in the year 2,000 could be: We are rational beings because we cannot accept arbitrary choices; not ashamed to be romantic, because our heritage is not arbitrary. We want to be historical beings linked to a territory and yet not helplessly dependent on it, because we are aware of our time dimension.

It is not an easy age. French sociologist Edgar Morin calls it "the global iron age (l'age de fer planetaire). The present crisis of globalism (planetarisation), he says, is the crisis of humanity which is still unable to behave as such. It is an age in which Homo Sapiens is also Homo Demens and violence is marked by madness.⁽¹⁴⁾ He may well be right. After all, ethnologists tell us that animals may be no less territorial than human beings. They tell us that animals can develop some tradition and even some rudiments of speech.

Still, only humans, conscious of being condemned to lose their identity, in time and space, through death, have been granted the ability to contribute in a significant way to creating the past of their own future generations.

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