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EDITORIAL

THE NEW DIGITAL ERA¹

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Human evolution has constantly been achieved by incorporating into it the inventions of those techniques identified from time to time as survival factors in a hostile environment, or at least to be governed according to purposes dictated by the humans living there. The human is therefore technical, regardless of whether hybridization reaches an organic integration that internalizes the technique to the point of making it indistinguishable from the organicity of the human, or whether it places itself in its exteriority with respect to the human who conceives it, governs it, and uses it without being used by it and without being governed by it. This threshold of indiscernibility has become increasingly thinner as evolution has become increasingly technical, arriving at technological devices that exempt themselves from being prostheses of the human in order to hegemonize it to the point of making the human its prosthesis—a radical change of paradigm, of its direction in the human-technical relationship, a Gestell that changes the episteme and the human condition itself, from the atomic bomb to the smartphone.

Technophiles and technophobes are in the field to halve a reflection that is still in progress, which on the one hand knows how to escape the enchantment and re-enchantment of a technological device considered irreversible and therefore to be accepted unconditionally, but on the other knows how to elude the neo-Luddite trap that deprives us of the understanding not only of the internal technical dynamics that push societies

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towards a totally digital environment (to paraphrase Mauss), but also of the effects on social and political dynamics whose warning signs are undoubtedly disturbing and difficult to control with the usual instruments of legal and jurisdictional regulation, despite the good intentions at European level.

The hyper-accelerated processes of digitalization of advanced societies are sparking discussions and debates in the most disparate venues, from the social media that are its backbones and main effects to the more soberly traditional media, from scientific institutions to companies whose activities are at its foundation, not to mention the financial flood that from Big Tech to start-ups constitutes the necessary greasing of a techno-corporate mechanism representative of the new frontier of contemporary capitalism. All this on the threshold of an innovation that in the immediate future—or already in a still undersized present—can mark the centuries to come of humanity: the development of a generative artificial intelligence capable of not only going beyond the limits of the human but also passing us towards a post-humanism whose contours are yet to be divined.

If the digital structure of the planet is the horizon that opens up before us, assuming that it is not already in an advanced stage and has already permeated all the continents—but we doubt it, given the enormous pockets of digital divide and cultural, social and economic inequalities present on our planet—the two typical techno-phobic/philiac approaches must be displaced in favor of a critical bending that fully assumes the data of digital technology in order to focus attention on the conceptual strategies that animate the actors in play and that support companies to extend investments and research on the computational practices of human action, among which algorithmic profiling, the learning autonomy of technological devices, the processes of automated and embedded surveillance and control and so on are becoming increasingly important.

Moreover, such strategies are elaborated and redefined in real time, interacting with “archaic” times and methods to the point of hybridizing the post-human cyborg with effects that are still unforeseen and unprecedented in terms of social dynamics, political processes in the triple sense that can be seen in English by differentiating politics, policy, and polity. In this direction, a new governmentality is emerging (to use Foucault’s term) of which little can still be glimpsed in terms of configuration and stabilization, perhaps an increasingly automated society that pervades the sphere of politics to the point of prefiguring an automatic government of things and people—an Internet of Things and (Wo)Men....

Indeed, what “destinal” condemnation of human and techno-scientific progress does a totally digital environment entrust to us as a new horizon for carrying out actions and reasoning? Are we certain that Turing was right when he stated that mathematical

computation offers the ontological representation of the human mind? Or was Wittgenstein right when he replied that Turing machines are “humans who compute” (“Diese Maschinen sind ja die *Menschen*, welche kalkulieren”)? (Wittgenstein, 1988, § 1096; see also Wagner, 2005).

In other words, what is being investigated is the relationship between the digitalized subject that “governs” the political technologies activated by the machinic extension to everyday life, to the point of building an environment so homogeneous with the digitalization of the existing that it loses its own origin without realizing that its own digital identity is the suitable fruit of the abilities promoted by the environment to which it conforms and fully adheres. In practice, the algorithmic regime translates the artificiality of its procedure into truth of and for the digital subject.

This triggers truth effects on digitalized statements, while at the same time concealing the power effects that the digital machine activates to assert itself as truthful in its functioning and in the objectives it processes.

Human as symbol-manipulating-device holds very brave and some notably unsubstantiated assumptions. The first assumption is the reduction of human neural activity to a binary system of 1's and 0's, “True” or “False,” “On and Off” configurations. [...] The second assumption is the psychological and phenomenological reduction of human experience to data-processing where each subjective sense-impression is coordinated with bits of information, where the software program operates as a set of rules, commands or background beliefs that enable us to make judgments and form beliefs about the world. The third is the epistemological assumption concerning the possibility of rendering all biological life and natural processes completely and systematically formalizable, i.e., translatable into an artificial language. None of these assumptions have any real philosophical or empirical basis. (Vachnadze, 2024, p. 11)

These hypotheses are neither irrelevant nor easily refutable, since the aura of enchantment that surrounds the wonders of AI and, more generally, of the digital world displaces the plane of critical reflection on a level of almost mystical adhesion, in which, for example, a predictive or taxonomic efficacy of a given algorithmic operation automatically takes on the meaning—improper and abusive—of scientific explanation, as if the calculation of the algorithms gave meaning to the models represented starting from the statistical correlations fed by the immense quantity of data. Hence, the idea—premature and perhaps unrealizable in the short term—of an AI superpower.

Thus, a gap opens between the functioning of the calculating machine and the understanding not only of how the machine pursues its objectives, but also of the very content of the result achieved, in terms of epistemic soundness. This is what Floridi (2021) claims: *agere sine intelligere*. Nonetheless,

this divergence between calculation and understanding raises important questions about the application of deep learning in social domains. [...] Deep learning systems are at their most deterministic when they are applied to ascribe identity or other social characteristics from a set of inputs understood as signals. (Campolo & Crawford, 2020, p. 10)

Therefore, bias, hidden hierarchies, and discriminating differences are concealed behind operational effectiveness, escaping political visibility and accountability, a category that does not apply to the machine but, at most, to its designers. Although human nature and technology have always been an inseparable pair, the re-enchantment of artificial computation splits it as if the performance exceeded the human, even in the sense of an extra-human, post-human extension.

We are not being confronted with a sublime form of superhuman intelligence, but a form of complex statistical modeling and prediction that has extraordinarily detailed information about patterns of life but lacks the social and historical context that would inform such predictions responsibly—an irrational rationalization. (Campolo & Crawford, 2020, p. 13)

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