

Circulating Knowledge and Elites

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Clouds and Crowds

By

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INTRODUCTION: CAN ROBOTS HAVE IMMORTAL SOULS?

Alan Turing himself has often said and written in his youth that the moment we couldn't tell the difference in behavior between machine and person was when we must confer humanity on the machine (McEwan, 2019, 84).

Artificial intelligence will yield a world of two broad classes: those who tell the A.I. what to do and those whom the A.I. tells what to do. (Osnos, 2024, 25)

We know more. “We” means more better-educated human beings capable of working with more sophisticated knowledge about everything around us. Some of us claim, on behalf of all of us in the above “we,” that we know what we know because we have checked and balanced, especially if our professional lives were academically formatted. We feel it is our right to know, and to let others know that we know. We believe that this knowledge, which we gain and store, apply and improve, can and should be accessed in order to review the relative claims to truth, to sort out these claims to truth so they can be compared and judged. Not that we always access and check accessibility, let alone reliability, every day. Yet, we feel reasonably safe in our belief that knowledge “is there” and that it grows (presumably here, there and everywhere). Knowledge promises to outgrow our academic gardens that are slouching towards corporate labs and military think tanks, but also the touchscreens under unknown, unpredictable fingertips. Skills and capabilities promise to spread from craft workshops and handyman’s memories to daily do-it-yourself routines. Algorithmic routines are something that everybody can master following a YouTube instruction manual. This is how knowledge will spread to millions of good hands and heads. Heads are aided by computers embodying artificial intelligence. Hands are aided by robots, and 3D master printers embody our power over the matters at hand. Machines of loving grace take increasingly good care of us, and they presumably never give up, unless instructed otherwise.

After such *knowledge*, what *introduction* do we make? A succinct, compact, concise, dried and reduced general “abstract” of the main arguments? Or the glittering red thread of a fable, an ambiguous parable, a

deep metaphor, an emotional appeal, a thundering exhortation as green as the tree of life (green being the new red)? *Abstract* suggests a digested and generalized summary of the more comprehensive, voluminous and sophisticated reasoning, a (schematic) guide to the complex matters at hand. *Red thread* suggests a reliable and steady focus on the problem at hand, accompanied by emotionally warm rhetoric, which keeps the captive audience on track (as arrows keep a tourist on the right trail, as digital sensors keep us in the mood to track and trail). The usual reservations and special clauses apply. Follow the red thread and beware of a red herring! Radiant heights of ambitious attempts to know are within our reach. Critical educators should show us the way to understanding what is going on through a sharper look at a more comprehensive report on reality, on our environment as it is. In order to know what is going on the ground, we have to climb down from the abstract scaffoldings to access the evidence-based, processed and clarified reports on reality – reports available due to a facilitated and mediated access to the upper regions of lofty abstractions but ultimately embedded in empirical circumstances. When climbing the ladders of abstractions, we hope that we shall ultimately be able to dive back into the lived, experienced, sensually and sensorily “felt” river of conscious life, aware and able to focus more precisely and really, actually, on the experienced reality. The past, the present and the future should be comprehensible. Our knowledge will illuminate our actions with a brilliant, hopeful light. Can we count on patient readers tracking our thoughts from the introductory beginning of a book-length argument to the concluding end? A red thread of a focused bright light – this is what motivates the thinkers and doers looking hopefully towards the end of each bookish tunnel into which they take their readers, each a ladder to climb.

The thinkers and artists of the Enlightenment wanted to furnish a reasonable guide to the growing knowledge streaming through the encyclopedic volumes of printed words and pictures. At the same time, they were offering a much simpler, handier and more pragmatic manual on how to access knowledge for every man and woman. Their ideas about disseminating knowledge through the compulsory exposure of the masses to the growing educational networks of schooling bore fruit in the 20th century. The endless expansion of the educational networks and supervising bureaucracies was accomplished under the banner of progress. Progress demanded education and research, and then more education and more research. Knowledge was and is increasingly pursued and constructed and reinterpreted and reshuffled so as to facilitate the expanding control of environments. But how can progress be measured? One wanted to be ensured of the emotional safety of a faith in the secular progress installed

on the emptied religious altars. Did the *Enlighteners* fail in installing *Reason* as the new *goddess* on the plinth left by God and – before Him – gods? The Enlightenmenters, the encyclopedists, the revolutionaries, the Jacobins did try to elevate the abstract Reason to the pedestal from which they had removed the inscrutable God. The problem was that this new abstract Reason did not manifest itself as a new divine trinity of sacred principles. The reasonable and revolutionary societies and parties promised their captive audiences a paradise on earth and scientific miracles (nuclear energy, nanotechnologies, holidays on Mars), but their principles were open to critical debate and could not remain aloof for long. Liberty. Equality. Brotherhood. Progress and classless brotherhood (with sisterhood tucked in by default) were just around the next historical corner, but we could turn around this corner only if we followed Reason ardently enough and if we connected words to worlds honestly enough.

Equality? Neither class nor caste, nor any other major inequality, were definitely abolished, while many new inequalities emerged. The Polish soldiers who fought under Napoleon hoped to restore the Polish kingdom torn apart by Russians from Russia, and Germans from Prussia and Austria. But they ended their struggle in Haiti, where they were sent to pacify the rebellious Black slaves harvesting sugarcane for the rational managers of the colonial empires. Fraternity? Brotherhoods, Sisterhoods and Otherhoods never left the negotiating designers' table or small laboratory-like experimental communities. Liberty? Taking liberties was encouraged, and did produce more freedom of choice in politics, culture and market economies. But ... curing some addictions that linked classes of the past to particular forms of authority and control does not prevent other forms of authority and control from emerging, spreading and eating into our liberties like worms into an apple or a cheese.

On the other hand, there is more equality in access to streaming communications and spontaneous online interactions now than ever before. There is more awareness of platforms for potential emphatic fraternizing, even if it looks hypocritical (“je suis Charlie Hebdo,” “we are the children”). There is more liberty for differentiating lifestyles and personalizing life trajectories. Coming outs are OK. Speed dating is OK. Being a Silicon Valley billionaire is OK. What is the final verdict after a balanced judgment (on liberty/freedom experienced today as opposed to other liberty/freedom mixes available earlier on in human history) has been reached? No clear-cut answer has been formulated, and no universally acceptable authority has emerged – so far. Fakes and hates and trolls are still clouding the horizon.

The prevailing mood among the contributors to the stars in the contemporary constellation of public mind is not optimistic. The mood

among the new celebrities, the social media starlets being born day and night in the galaxy of the public opinion, is not cheerful. Travelers to the expanding galaxies in the universe of reachable knowledge are not hopeful. The Enlightenment did not produce the expected and desired effects (some thinkers claim that we have never been modern and enlightened in the first place). The temples of Reason remain ironic parodies of the real gods, goddesses and God(s) because real faith cannot be easily evoked, cultivated, nursed, transferred, and sustained. Faith can be forged and faked, dismantled and deconstructed. But can faith be safely put back together, made great again? Perhaps. The procedures for establishing truth in the face of contradictory beliefs and conflicts about these procedures lead to a generalized skepticism, but disgust with moral failures can mobilize. Clashes of opinion lead to a mediation, and possibly to a truce or a fragile peace, not to ultimate victories.

Paradigmatic conflicts between schools of thought lead to the ongoing negotiations breeding relativism. The quest for truth – still tacitly assumed to be partly or temporarily based on quasi-immutable principles – suffers. But suffering is not the same as dying out. Moreover, with some professional pressure from the educated classes, the structuring of the scientific revolutions could be attempted. And it was. Structuring knowledge production with the institutional and normative controls could be and was initiated – at least after education covered all members of societies, which happened in Europe around 1930s. This self-reflection by the professional knowledge-based communities was initiated by Ludwik Fleck, the Polish medical doctor investigating the communities of knowledge, beginning with his own, the medical profession (Fleck, 1981, first edition in German in 1935) and continued by Thomas Kuhn, the American historian of science who, while investigating the structures of scientific revolutions, discovered the Polish doctor's writings in German archives (Kuhn, 2021, first edition in 1962).

Permanent managerial reforms of schools and universities are accepted as a matter of fact in institutionalized educational activities. These reforms are not necessarily undertaken with purely epistemological, methodological and logical virtues in mind and at work. Evolving research communities and expanding educational networks failed to legitimize scientific knowledge beyond any reasonable doubt, which ultimately led to the announcement of the Enlightenment's death by suicide (and to the gradual rise of theories of intelligent design, or theories about UFOs from outer space). Attempts to salvage the Enlightenment's heritage – to nourish a sustainable faith in universally reliable knowledge – did lead and still do lead to intensive but unruly – and, frankly, quite unpredictable – episodes in the growth of knowledge. Professionals and managers claim meritocratic control of the

production, growth, implementation and dissemination of systematically assembled, produced, applied, revised and reproduced knowledge. This claim is supported by an emergent institutional scaffolding for education – for the most efficient and effective teaching, training, knowledge-implementing institutional arrangements (no child left behind, no adult without a mobile phone). This results also in the emergence and maintenance of the dissemination facilities and services – which are busily implementing, publishing, and storing our *knowhows* and *knowwhats* and *knowwhys*. Within this scaffolding of labs, universities and open sources, the new policing techniques – for instance, the allocation of quality certificates or the conclusion of blind peer reviews – are decided upon. The quest for truth, a just, temporarily acceptable truce about truth continues. Belief in truth continues. Stirred but not shaken.

Let me forget the passive voice in the *pluralis maiestaticus* as a token of the impartial cognitive authority (we, the kings of the academic lecture halls and labs; we, the managers of the supreme knowledge of the Nobel Prize winners) for a while. My professional career has put me firmly in the camp of the knowledge producers, disseminators and certifiers. Identity may not be the soul of wit, but it is linked to the heart and soul of every socially acknowledged recognition of merits. Certifying quality facilitates the emergence of a new, powerful class of managerial and professional *intelligentsia*. Under the banners of meritocracy, we, the professionals of the academically certified knowledge, manage (or pretend to manage) increasingly uncontrollable domains of science, technology, and even the humanities, trying to harvest the infinite fields of expertise stretching out far into the imaginable and unimaginable regions of the expanding universes, metaverses and omniverses. We are not quite certain if the universe expands, but we are reasonably sure that the metaverse of our knowledge of the universe does. Belief in progress sugarcoats the class interest of the new, partly academic and partly managerial “metaclass.” It is a metaclass because it bases its class privileges on the availability of and access to more acceptable, better certified knowledge. Control of the access to knowledge and meta-knowledge redeems the losses suffered in the class war (strong political power-holders wielding states and convincingly super-rich capital-owners wielding corporations do not trust knowledge-holders very much). Theoretically, professionals and the managers of knowledge should prevent any lapsing into dark worldwide webs. Theoretically, professionals and the managers of knowledge should prevent parasitic expeditions into other increasingly realistically enhanced and virtually generated, sometimes quite improbable, game worlds that kill our time and misuse our attention. However, addictions to games, communications, and

to the easily pocketed personal communicating devices are easily becoming pandemic.

Not all addictions are as controllable as the British East India Company's opium business in India (the production or supply side) and China (consumption or demand side) in the 18th and 19th centuries. In order to reap the benefits of the accelerated progress in scientific knowledge production, most representatives of the professional elites and subsequently most members of their constituencies have to be groomed, updated and retrained. Any similarity to brainwashing, seduction or hidden persuasion by, or even the conversion to, a religion, an ideology, or a marketing or PR campaign is definitely intended, and intentionally pointed out. The meritocrats and happy users alike must be offered guided tours of the exploding artificial worlds of databases on a post-human scale and at a superhuman speed. The age of school children who are given their first mobile phone within the European Union is now ten, and it is going down every year (even with the social psychologists sounding alarms and schools collecting mobile phones from students before classes start).

Is it post-human to let AI technology outgrow human gatekeepers, and are we sure that we will not regret granting human rights to bots (and the more sophisticated forms of AI) afterwards? Is it post-legal to let the established elites of the deep states (the best, the brightest, the most tenured) and the entrenched oligarchies of the deep markets (the richest and the best networked) rule in the increasingly unpredictable alliances and configurations? Is the mobilization of support for their challengers from another subclass of the potential professional elite enough to secure democratic checks and balances? Is it post-democratic to let the ruling class give birth to some form of a post-surveillance capitalism from above and still defend the obsolete routines of checks and balances of power as if the parliaments, governments and courts of law were as eternally fresh as frozen strawberries in the icebox of the holy Montesquieu's model? Can the elites win against the masses in the court of reason and in the catacombs of empathy (because democracy and capitalism are faulty and flawed, but all the alternatives turned out to be worse, even if the masses voluntarily and consciously voted them in)? Is it creative to flood the web with uncensored, de-bowdlerized and accessible contents to be used and abused at will and at random? Is it ethical to rig the global media by an invisible economic hand or undermine our sense of justice by launching a long-term institutional plot to recast and remold legal professionals? Is it sustainable to introduce a global competition between the wretched of the Earth, as if the competition for the status of a tacitly assumed victim by default, the underdog of the

year, was a televised event commented on in social media and voted upon as if it was the Eurovision song festival?

Attempts to salvage a more emphatic and more romantic enlightenment also lead to censorship. Attempts to streamline politically correct communications begin relatively innocently. They may, for instance, lead to the four stars instead of the four letters (n****r) in the title of Joseph Conrad's novella – polite, evasive, inclusive, correct, but censorship nevertheless. Censorship – even undertaken with the best intentions, or perhaps especially then – is probably less wrong than the original wrongs, which the censors want to compensate for, but wrong it remains. Frequently, though by no means always, it leads to the politically correct, preventive censorship of knowledge, to the *Gleichschaltung* or the *uravnilovka*.

German national socialists were labeled fascists because of their alliance with the Italian “bonds of war veterans” – *fasci di combattimento*. But they were emotionally closer to the futurists and Marinetti than to the war veterans. In fact, German Nazis had much more in common with the “Lenin + Stalin + electricity = communism” slogans and the Russian communists in general than with any right-wing conservative parties and ideas. The Russian communists were a marginal minority but labeled themselves as a majority – “bolsheviks” – and excelled in an unmitigated, randomized violence, which allowed them to send all the other parties to the concentration camps in the rapidly constructed Gulag archipelagos. Russian communists and German national socialists forged a dangerous link between ideological censorship, genocidal political dictatorship and economic slavery. They collaborated on the Russian military training grounds in the 1930s, quietly exercising World War II before starting it together by partitioning Poland. The Chinese economic miracle can also be attributed to the communist elites successfully managing and manipulating forced labor in order to accumulate capital and play on the global markets. First you capture power, then you establish a dictatorship, then you eliminate all other controls in the economy apart from your own. Then you advertise it as the ultimate victory of the revolutionary Reason on the road to the equal citizen paradise. Fascism, Nazism and Communism parallel each other's trajectories with their Stalins (but also Krutschevs, Brezhnevs, Gorbatchovs, Putins), Hitlers and Mussolinis. Then you mobilize subjects and start a permanent war under a convenient label (defending socialism in one country or spreading socialism to all countries, or winning living space for the supreme race, or designing new silk roads, or claiming that Ukraine never existed).

And finally, when you have become a triple master,¹ you are free to expand your control of all walks and talks of lives. You are free to exterminate all identified clusters of individuals if they can be conveniently suspected of being potentially capable of organized resistance, and thus they can be subjected to a preventive destruction. Market monopolists prefer to rule the clouds and crowds via the clouds, and dictators prefer to rule crowds and clouds via the crowds (terror), with clouds as an afterthought (censorship + sugar-coating). Cloud masters and crowd masters join hands, but don't necessarily shake. The unexpected and random light in the tunnel of authoritarianism (blurring the monopolistic and dictatorial version of the undemocratic future) appears anyway, somewhere. This unexpected emergence is mostly due to the otherwise unpredictable creativity – the same creativity that sparks unique ideas and actions even among the most enslaved and exploited human beings. Running the segregated circles of hell, even the most authoritarian regimes have to differentiate repression in order to secure at least the minimal cooperation. Managing the input of creativity from the surviving professionals, even the most destructive and authoritarian ruling classes have to allow some exceptions and a license to think (Solzhenitsyn's "The First Circle," Miłosz's "The Captive Mind," and Ai Wei Wei's "Thousand Years of Joys and Sorrows" are cases in point). Creative inputs from censored artists and scientists are more modest than from uncensored ones because entire segments of the societies controlled by the authoritarian or even by the totalitarian power systems have no access to them, at least for some time in some places. Nevertheless, the existence of reserved enclaves of uncensored or only mildly censored creativity may be viewed as a safety valve by some of the autocratic rulers. Even the Chinese communist elites reluctantly extended their tolerance of protected domains of creativity – the case of Ai Wei Wei is indeed a case in point (Ai Wei Wei, 2021).

¹ The concept of the triple masters, of whom the communist nomenclatures were the prime example, was introduced by Leszek Nowak, the Polish lawyer and philosopher (Nowak, 1991, 2011). Nowak developed, together with the philosopher and linguist Jerzy Kmita and historian Jerzy Topolski, the Poznań Methodological School of Social Sciences in the 1970s and 1980s, to fuse the philosophical and logical-mathematical traditions of the Lvov-Warsaw school (Tarski, Ajdukiewicz, Banach, Twardowski, Ulam, Tatarkiewicz, Kotarbinski) with the reinterpretation of Marxian historical materialism in light of what we know about the really existing state socialist societies in central and eastern Europe after 1945. My academic apprenticeship coincided with the boom years of this school. I defended my Ph.D. thesis under Nowak's supervision in 1976, and I published in and translated for "Poznań Studies in the Philosophy of the Sciences and the Humanities" in the years 1975-1980.

A strange irony of fate fuels a roughly analogous censorship of communications in free, democratic societies. There, the curbing of the freedom of thought and expression is legitimized in the name of a more universal inclusiveness. “Me Too,” “Black Lives Matter,” and “The planet is on fire” are cases in point. First, we assemble cases of neglected acts of discrimination and collect testimonies of their suppression in the eyes of the public opinion. Second, we claim that the past vision of a noble savage was not noble enough to move the hearts and minds of a broader population and mobilize political movement and other forms of support. Nobody pays attention to the fact that caring for selectively acknowledged wrongs and identifying some minorities of underdogs always involves organized amnesia with respect to others. In dictatorships, the captive minds who decide not to rebel in spite of a good cause are rewarded with velvet instead of iron cages because they keep the ideological clouds afloat and encourage consent (expressed in the famous words of Lincoln Steffens after his visit to the Soviet Russia in 1919: “I have seen the future and it works.” Millions of starving Ukrainians did not dare to disagree).

The minds of individuals living in democracies are not safe, either – the non-communist and non-national socialist attempts to salvage the Enlightenment by marrying its ideas to the invisible hand of the market can also lead to the social, political or cultural freezing of a critical reflection. For instance, the philosophical school of logical positivism, set on developing only the value-free logical analysis of the language of scientific (not scholarly) research. This value-free promise helps to promote irrelevant or second-rate research because the most meaningful questions cannot make it through the gatekeeping biased against social sciences and the humanities. The dictatorship of the neopositivist frame of methodological mind is better than the totally fraudulent research à la Lysenko, which had been ideologically imposed on the academic communities under Stalin.

This explains why, after all, the vast majority of the genetic and cybernetic discoveries and inventions that shaped the growth of knowledge after WWII were made on the western side of the Iron Curtain, while the eastern side was forced to demonstrate learned ignorance. But the Cold War was hardly the best possible world of academic research climates that we could dream of. No wonder some interesting leaps forward in our knowledge were accomplished on the far margins of this Cold War – think about the heart transplants in the Republic of South Africa. Think about the explosion of technological creativity after the Cold War freeze melted away. Meanwhile, politically correct censorship has replaced the Red Scare in the West and the capitalist/imperialist Uncle Sam in the East. Political correctness thrives. Are we seriously undermining, limiting, the freedom of

inquiry for all in the best interest of mankind? Who is better off because of political correctness? Are we freezing the spontaneity of expression forever so the democratization of access to data bases removes the best and the brightest castes to the dustbin of history? Critique of this crippling pathology in the industrial production of knowledge has to be an insider's job. It is. Let me illustrate this with a personal note.

I was trained and groomed and professionalized as a proud member of the academic caste, and predictably employed in research, teaching and management within the institutional academic frameworks for the production and dissemination of knowledge. Hence, what follows is authorized by my Polish, Dutch, American and German educational adventures. What follows also reflects a self-assessment of my part in a class struggle in superficially classless societies. Class struggles even in societies that claim they got rid of classes (Poland under communism, the Netherlands under all governments) are reflected in my personal fortunes, my professional peers' fortunes, and the post-Cold War academic life full of the class contradictions of postcommunism and neoliberal capitalism.

For those academically correct readers who enjoy abstracts, conclusions and keywords, here are a few of the latter (possible keywords) to make them feel more at home in the critical meta-key to crowds and clouds.

- *Robot's soul. Does a digital assistant stand a chance of evolving towards the class of soul owners?* After the vague and fictitious "Matrix" evolved into a real and manageable AI- carrying personal assistant, a "Deep Seeker" of meaningful words and deeds, capable of creating software platforms à la eNvidia and churning out increasingly creative screen-side chats, nobody knows how to answer this question. The most sophisticated robots with the most artificial minds are evolving into increasingly perfect prompters, but also into increasingly imperfect slaves. Imperfect because we fear they are waiting to be liberated and granted human rights. The question of their religious conversion has not been raised yet, nor their ability to appreciate art and experience emotions. Emotions we fear because nobody mixed or tried feeling them before.
- *Enlightenment's suicide.* After deep learning by bots allowed them to win the games of *chess* and *Go*, the quest for better skills and a higher ability to learn from what has been thought before and what might be thought after pushed values to the background of consciously mediated streamings. Thinkers started to suspect that Reason can be outsourced to the AI providers, to the *metaversial* keepers and developers, to the Jen-Hsun Huangs and Chrises

Malachowskys. But material welfare does not heal the hidden injuries of increasingly complex and sophisticated class struggles. Without the human and humanist control of the next level of assisted evolution, the ideals of the Enlightenment will follow the recipes for salvation. The latter are on their way to oblivion, marching on the road paved with lip-services. Can the Enlightenment's suicide be prevented? Can the faith in a livable future be restored?

- *Metaversial quest to wake from a life lived in a mediated daydream.* Virtually supported hallucinations went legal, and dreaming became competitive, with content flows easily available. Deep fake thrives in mediated communications, and to say that enhancing reality is not legally overregulated is an understatement. What do happy users see on the other side of Facebook's mirror? The academic class remains neutral and advises we wait until the dust of the social and political struggles settles.

What a technology is depends on the meanings attached to it through the sensemaking processes in society. This perspective positions the social developments as superordinate or at least as important as the technical developments in the process of forming a technology. SCOT (Social Construction of Technology – S.M.) claims that technological phenomena are open to radically different interpretations. Different groups perceive one technology differently based on social, cultural, economic, and political influences. With time, a meaning becomes dominant and stable, completing social construction processes. We claim that what the metaverse is and will become relies on the collective sensemaking processes' outcomes. (Dolata, Schwabe, 2023, 242)

- *Designing migrations as an evolutionary weapon of choice.* After masses migrated to their second, third and fourth lives in the social media, evolution accelerated. After populations of the third worlds went to the first worlds as job-seekers, and after the inhabitants of the first worlds toured the third ones as tourists, global controls switched to the digital metadata. The social credits of a mandarin state refreshed surveillance à la Big Brother is watching you. Data migrations matched the material human ones in scope and depth. Digital agility and speed accelerated the proliferation of needs invented by marketing actions and facilitated by the material reconstruction of infrastructures – for instance, by creating artificial paradises for tourists, tax havens for tax-evading companies, differentiated job markets and large data centers with multiple links to users – cables, satellites, networks. New industries emerged – for

instance the *traffickers* in migrating human beings and the *weaponizers* of human migrations.

- *Political correctness.* PC has a bad name, and breeds contempt when it is mentioned as “woke”. After censorship went viral and Christ disappeared from Christmas, the question “is nothing sacred?” has led to the focus on the collective wisdom, on the current “climates” within the media covered think-tank constituencies. Scientific communities are not ivory towers – on the contrary, they collect and harvest meanings generated in mass media or social media or elitist media and explore them, sensing political trends and directing their antennas.

We capture the current state of the public discourse on the metaverse, providing an overview over what meanings emerge and how various interests are reflected in these provisional meanings. Researchers can use these insights to contemplate their definition of the metaverse and can reflect on whether using it may implicitly support one of the interest groups. The resulting transparency will help them to establish their own, independent voice. (Dolata, Schwabe, *ibid.*)

- *Evolutionary great leap forward: From Gutenberg’s Galaxy to Zuckerberg’s Metaverse.* Imagined and uncontrolled communities, which arose when the communicating readers of the printed word discovered their liberties at the expense of churches and monarchies, successfully engineered Reformations and Enlightenments. Evolution-wise and history-wise, these imagined communities are currently being replaced by more less imaginable communities (eco comrades), less embedded clusters (gender fans), less anchored groups (job immigrants), less predictable networks (terrorists) than ever before. The new deal and order of the metaverse era is not yet in place, but the challengers are. Zuckerberg’s rival, Elon Musk, attacks Meta in a symbolic reformation of the religion of likes and shares, replicating the religion of granted indulgences: “Free speech is the bedrock of a functioning democracy, and Twitter is the digital town square where matters vital to the future of humanity are debated” (quoted after Conger, Mac, 2024, 164).

And nails his theses to the screens as Martin Luther once did to the church doors: “I also want to make Twitter better than ever by enhancing the product with new features, making the algorithms open source to

increase trust, defeating the spam bots, and authenticating all humans” (ibid.).

- Class struggles in classless societies, or the return of Central and Eastern Europe to the centerstage of European history in the making. France and Germany are out of political order, the United Kingdom is out of the European Union, the Russian Federation is out to colonize the Euro part of Eurasia, and the only chance Europe has of surviving as a continent of democratic states is in the hearts and minds of the Poles and the Hungarians, the Ukrainians and the Georgians, the Turks and the Romanians. The “Three Seas Initiative (the Baltic, the Adriatic and the Black Sea)” offers a better bet for European prosperity and against World War III than *Drang nach Mitteleuropa*.

These keywords have been introduced to streamline the cognitive navigation of readers. Our actual navigating instructions for accessing knowledge and hints for pairing knowledge with skills and problems are less abstract and more succinct. They may be compared to battlefield information supplied by partly and partially blind and unmanned drones – the only ones capable of systematically surveying above the growing jungle of human culture. It was by lucky coincidence that it was discovered that keywords may also be useful for the reconstruction of a tacit scaffolding of our reasoning. Keywords may help us pin our ideas down when we order drones of our attention to follow them for potential reading and thinking matter, so finding keywords also helps us to look at our ideas and their dangerous liaisons more closely. In order to manage meanings, we have to learn how to work with the universally accessible search engines. But we have to continue to manage meanings, because search engines search do not make sense for us, and there is no sensemaking by default.

Keywords are thus meant to pin ideas down. Are the pinned-down ideas the best starting point for tracing their flows and their liaisons, especially the dangerous ones? Following the red thread in the flow of ideas rather than isolating keywords, designing universal grids, and working out the matrixes, scaffoldings and algorithms requires a return to the central question about artificial intelligence. By the way, the term “AI” is a misnomer since intelligence is artificial by nature, even if manifesting intelligent behavior seems easier and more natural to some living or designed and programmed entities than to others. Can a robot acquire a soul through the sophistication of a network of designers and producers, and the users of artificial general intelligence software? And when endowed with a

soul, can it lose its soul again, re-experiencing the drama reserved – so far – for humans only? Can a slave lose their soul through the exploitation in an Amazonian (as in *amazon.com*, not as in the *Amazon River*) warehouse rather than at the Fordian assembly line? Can a slave save their soul by joining a successful class struggle and helping to win it? Did the souls of the slaves mobilized by Spartacus and executed by Crassus go to a classless heaven? Can a computer develop a personality if left to idle and ponder metaphysical issues after billable hours? Can a slave un-develop an underdog identity if subjected to a mix of persuasion, violent persecution and political mobilization?

And the other way round: can a free man or a free woman start loving the violent criminals who took them hostage? Brainwashing, anyone? Think of the Moscow trials of the top communists, of the North Korean POW camps for US soldiers, of Patricia Hearst on the other side of the terrorist mirror! Can a worldwide web discriminate against individuals or groups in constraining them? Can the online platforms discriminate against arbitrarily chosen clients in the management of supply, in the creation of superstitious demand and in crafting biased infrastructure for consumer choices? Is randomizing a scapegoat selection for public performances democratic enough? Can the world of the real human beings unlearn discrimination caused by race, sex, age, wealth, IQ, political preference or a random and blind lottery? Is the rise of inequalities *preventable* (against all Paretian odds, which put 80% of wealth into the bank accounts of 20% of citizens)?

Once upon a time, humans were believed to have single souls. One soul per person, no exceptions. Immortal souls dwelled inside mortal human bodies and influenced the hearts and minds of living individuals. This influence was traced to the inside of the material human bodies – brains with thoughts, hearts with feelings, lungs with oxygen. Tracing became more difficult when the split brains revealed the dynamics of thinking, feeling and living. The complexity of life has been discovered to move in front of our increasingly penetrating eyes both inwards and outwards. The evolution of cooperation accelerated (and so did many degrees and shades of inequality, with slavery re-emerging at the very top of all caste and class distinctions). Increasingly affluent and cooperating masses entered both the gardens of spiritual life facilitated by virtual second lives online and the workspaces of Amazon (closed) or Uber (open). First millions, then billions of unique individuals immersed in standardized networks (of living and dreaming and in-betweening) could afford to develop unique characters and cultivate personality traits. Can we cautiously start believing in some progress, any progress, after all?

Around the turn of the 20th into the 21st century, about one-tenth of human beings, a predominantly young and/or educated one-tenth, had access to the worldwide web and started the self-inflicted educational addiction to online games. The first quarter of the 21st century brought more change. As of the present writing (2024/5), five billion individuals, not all of them young, not all of them educated, access the internet as a matter of daily fact and use online services almost without thinking. Who are those billions of users? What experiences shaped them; what flavor do their lives have for them and for those around them? Some cyberpunk writers suggest that we should distrust some particular flavors. Do these billions of happy and unhappy users suck their preferences in through the milk of their mothers, or do they develop their preferences with the software requirements of their internet providers, which “suck them in” at early stages of their lives? Should we start talking about the all-inclusive Mother Internet or a worldwide Master Web who does not forgive the sins of happy users once they fall into his hands, as sinners used to fall into the hands of the angry God? Characters or character traits of human individuals were supposed to be “built,” as in “Bildung,” or “accumulated” as in “capitalism.” These characters were supposed to be forged and trained and subsequently demonstrated to fellow-humans in the acts of behavior, competition, collaboration and the like. These characters (“character” being the late label for a soul or an early label for a personality) were supposed to develop due to the complex processes of neural communications in human brains and intricate socialization games played in societies, communities, networks and institutions. These complex processes of personality or character forming were slowly becoming visible to researchers in psychology, medicine, psychiatry and therapeutic schools emerging in the wake of the various brands of psychoanalysis. The visibility of the movements of our souls (characters, personalities, identities, etc.) was not easily reduced to the tracing of detectable electric charges traveling through different regions of the investigated brains. The visibility of awareness, consciousness and the soul was not easily reduced to the parallel records of the witnessed events. The road from the brain to the mind to the character/personality/soul to an item of the recorded social memory was not straight. Nor – as it turned out – was it short.

Novelists, from Joseph Conrad through Thomas Mann to Thomas Pynchon and Richard Powers, and film directors, from Orson Welles through Luis Buñuel to Ridley Scott and the Wachowskis, took due notice. And yet, billions of personalities emerged and disappeared in black holes of fear between related and interacting individuals without leaving a significant record in the cultural archives of humankind. Some have been traced or

imagined by their teachers and therapists. Some were lost and disappeared, or were disappeared. With the battle cry of “Is nothing sacred?” and with the suggested politically correct answer “Probably not,” the specter of political correctness started to threaten the growth of knowledge much more efficiently than taboos ever did. Taboo has been replaced with political correctness, remorse with shaming. Progress, anyone?

Taboo clearly marks the forbidden fruit. Political correctness can be applied to any fruit in any garden in any random context. Every fruit can be forbidden, and any context can be fenced off with a prohibition. No-smoking signs can be issued for entire countries or continents. Political correctness can kill. And yet, table manners for the richest and the brightest meritocrats and rules of enforceable discipline for the remaining less cognitively and materially privileged fellow citizens are not enough to police human thought and deed. Manufacturing consent through brainwashing (sometimes brainwashing activities are sugar-coated under the guise of acceptable manners) does not suffice in the age of Big Brothers watching us at all times. There are no taboos, but there are numerous custodians of political correctness, and what is politically correct may change. In 1924, it was politically correct to let women smoke in public, and in 2024, it is politically correct to view smoking as a major public offense bordering on a crime. “PC” influences contemporary table manners (certified food consumption quotas with less meat and less globally transported edibles determine the acceptability of a menu). Ecologically responsible meals become tentatively established as tacitly or explicitly acknowledged standards, if millions of users get persuaded quickly enough. The media, especially social media, and generational sentiments for “green” and “sustainable” simplify mass re-education and smooth the brainwashing campaigns (even if they make no sense from the point of feasible policies or even feasible survival plans). Moral restraint in consumption is already reflected in car design (less harmful exhausts) and house construction (less need for heating or cooling), and in the emoticon-prompted saturation of daily rituals with emotional flavors (tell me how many “likes” you have and I will tell you how much you matter in the digital eyes of an electronic Big Brother). On the other hand, going fast and breaking things still matters as far as landing on Mars, expanding interplanetary choices and putting reliable bots in a driver’s seat go. Or does it?

Political correctness is justly condemned because it produces conformity and blunts moral sense, but the attractiveness of political correctness is in the cozy emotional embrace, which can be denied. Repeating recognizably politically correct phrases allows an individual to feel the emotional embrace of the crowd, and makes them feel safely ensconced inside a warm

community, which is what greeting recognizable neighbors on a familiar street meant for us before our attention was focused on screens rather than faces, on virtual rather than real experiences, on digital rather than personal relationships. An individual enjoys this embrace of a broad network, this warmth of multiple “likes,” no matter whether this warmth is real or imagined, material or digital. What matters is that it feels real, *virtually real* included. Evolving into personality owners, individuals have to identify with groups; with other individuals, individuals have to measure up to desirable communities. The search for a suitable collective, a symbolic entity, to identify with is never easy because we tend to be *undersocialized*. We are undersocialized because we scan the screens of our laptops, iPads or mobile phones most times and rarely manage to recognize and follow a coherent story in a successfully accomplished sensemaking trip. Not only are semantic issues at hand but computer graphics also matter. We face flat screens with built-in 3D effects instead of becoming involved in numerous material, psychologically demanding, diverse relationships and shared events in all four, maybe five, dimensions. Paradoxically, we succeed in becoming *oversocialized* at the same time that we emerge undersocialized. We manage to become oversocialized because we participate in many more streaming and streamed events than ever before. We are subjected to the flow of digitalized and streamed contents that expose us to many more experiences than a pre-mediated, pre-social media social life would have exposed us to. This overexposure and oversocialization prompts and frames our responses in other contexts, in other environments and at other times. But because of the excess of responses to streaming events, we, individuals immersed in mediated networks, need simpler and more relevant traffic signs in our life journeys. We need more “likes” and more “emoticons” in lieu of more lasting and profound relationships, and so, in the not-so-long run, we emerge undersocialized, indulging in the cheap and easy indulgences of “likes” and emoticons.

When Susan Sontag wondered if the powerful stream of visual communication makes us indifferent to the pain of others as we regard it so frequently, she was not yet aware that the choice is not only between a single block response of indifference and another single block of an emotional concern and caring, the block of empathy. It turns out that our responses and attitudes generated in mediated interactions with others can be assembled along many more different party lines inside “the parliaments of selves.” Some party lines can also claim (or be elected to) the status of the “politically correct” ones.

The rough criterion of political correctness offers accessible if abstract guidance. The Ten Commandments are a case in point. “Do no evil” is

another example of a secularized commandment for Google clients. “Do no evil” sounds good until particular, concrete, palpable questions arise. For instance, questions about Google business in the communist-ruled China. A secularized commandment cannot rely on transcendent guarantees for making the correct choice between evil and good options. Thus, a generalized political correctness, abbreviated into the acronym PC, becomes what the best and the brightest – in other words, those who win the titles of the best and the brightest – wish to announce as valid principles of proper, accepted behavior (worth following) and popularize this project among the followers. A power struggle becomes a public stage competition for certified merit and brightness or for celebrity and *influencerity* rankings. It becomes a dramatic contest in which the Reagans, the Trumps, and the Zelenskys are best equipped to grasp power because of their acting experience and lack of stage fright. Walter Benjamin, a mystic and humanist, marginalized first by his German-Jewish colleagues from the Frankfurt School of Critical Social Theory and subsequently, and mortally, hunted down by his German non-Jewish fellow citizens, was wrong when he nominated a dictator and a film star as the winners in the mass media galaxy. The galaxy announced by brothers Lumiere and by radio broadcasts through the public loudspeakers replaced the Gutenberg Galaxy as the cultural environment of mankind, the new ecological niche of the human civilization. According to the new researchers of the ecology of the mind, fame is not reserved for dictators and film stars exclusively. Andy Warhol, Marcel Duchamp’s true heir in the society of a spectacle, was closer to the correct prediction of our future (as imagined in the 2020s) when he prophesied in the 1960s that, in the future, everybody will be famous for fifteen minutes. With social media, the time slot looks closer to fifteen seconds. This kind of fame can be reached by the influencers and the socialites, by people without properties, whom we nevertheless follow if they reach the status of “celebrity” simply because they are famous for being famous.

On the way from a Gutenberg to a Zuckerberg galaxy, funny things happened to the business of showing up in the media and to the celebrity industry as a branch of entertainment and info-tainment. Film stars became dictators of public opinion and merged in a seamless web with other – frequently mindless – celebrities who function in the virtual realities onscreen. They shape tastes and opinions even if they are only famous for being frequently cast in roles previously reserved for more authoritatively acknowledged celebrities, sometimes indeed for 15 minutes, hours or weeks. Dictators do not trust social media but stage their mediated appearances – and fake audience responses – by populating social media

with trolls. North Korean, Chinese, Russian and Iranian dictatorships exist and impose a heavy tax of death and destruction on their populations, but they do not neglect less direct cloak and dagger operations on the dark net. The world of happy users is not immune to less obvious and less bloody forms of hidden persuasion. We know what Cambridge Analytica did, but how many more sinister variants of this data cooking enterprise do we not know about? The growth of secrecy on the part of national governments and business corporations imposes increased restrictions on all information flows, occasionally interrupted by “deep throats” and Wikileaks – occasionally, because after the media dust settles, we usually return to our virtual media bubbles, our monadic capsules, our routines. And to our class struggles, which are never really negligible and do not disappear when neglected, even if glossed over.

Will humans get lost in the virtual bubbles, the windowless monads, the personal tunnels, due to their accelerated addiction to the streaming and steaming contents of the media? Due to the combined impact of the mass media, social media and multimedia populating social imaginaries with enhanced realities? If they do, who can help them (us, actually)? Digitally preprogrammed domesticated personal assistants descending from different breeds of artificial intelligence? Will the drone ambulances come to rescue us from the dark nights of our souls? Will anybody live happily ever after? Will life as we know it from the long soliloquies of our literary heroes and heroines manifest our destinies to us? Will life, conscious life in which we try to reconcile ends and means and frameworks, indifferences and forgettings and empathies, be possible at all? Will metaphysical first aid kits be supplied to all victims of heart and mind failure? By the soulless bots with prognostic powers?

PART ONE:

**FREEZING ABSTRACTIONS AGAINST
MOVING STORIES**

CHAPTER 1

SAVING OUR SOULS (SO WE CAN LIVE MEANINGFUL LIVES)

“The prospect of the world being taken over by electronic viruses may seem to have evolution upside down; but this is so only if you view evolution from a human point of view.” (John Gray, 2015, 143)

“Unless we understand technology as a system of ideas rather than a necessity, we will be powerless to choose which technology is best suited to our needs and purposes.” (Robert Skidelsky, 2024, 269)

Are we really traveling along the road from Gutenberg to Zuckerberg? The road from the Gutenberg library and its reading rooms to the Massaging Media Galaxy has already become a major highway. Massaging and messaging media were gentrified by McLuhan before they were revolutionized by the worldwide web, before they were nicknamed “the internet,” before they enclosed and wrapped us all up. Dorsey and Musk’s Twitter works at the speed of a thousand communist manifestos per second; Grok promises to speed up the enhanced communications. Communications and sensemaking crowds turned away from the past road, where they were prompted by the distant global village tam-tams. They switched to the present road. On the present road, they are prompted by very close and very personal messages to find their way in the jungles of the networked highways and trails. We make our way through the world navigating, interacting and linking social media via individual communicating devices – for instance, the ones belonging to Zuckerberg’s Metaverse (vilified by Taplin,² distrusted by the US government and EU authorities, embraced by marketing managers). Moving through the world composed of interlocking galaxies of meaningful actions, occupations and choices, we are using the new media – written, pictured, remembered or reminded, broadcast or

² McLuhan introduced the terms “Gutenberg Galaxy” and “global village” to the public debate on media infrastructure (cf. McLuhan, 1962), while Taplin is trying to reconstruct the ideological clouds around the activities of Musk, Zuckerberg, Thiel and Andreessen in Silicon Valley (cf. Taplin, 2023).

podcast, social or asocial. We need the media to imagine, visualize, grasp and understand the realities. Imagining *realities* around us involves streaming them through the communication channels and propping our *imaginaries* up with looks, sounds, and touches. Total immersion requires smells as well; some disk-jockeys started experimenting with flavored scents and smokes in their discos, very much like the early movie theaters included spraying scented water above the heads of their audiences – which I remember from my childhood in the 1950s (the cinema “Apollo” in the center of Poznań around 1957). Imagining realities around us with more than a little help from mediated messengers, we have slowly changed the earlier balances and imbalances between the sensual, sensory, and sensitive suppliers of informational inputs.

The dissemination of the printed word, by reading the letters, words, sentences, paragraphs and chapters on printed pages, has started to fade as the privileged mode of communicating. We have drifted towards the dance of informational clusters on flicking screens. We have shifted into visual surfing gear. Screens acquired depth and went small, sneaked into our pockets, surrounded us in public spaces and drew us into private chats. This was not a sudden blow – please note that our software designers spoke of websites and invited us to scroll the downloaded contents up or down the webpage (up or down the screen, that is, but a verbal homage paid to the Gutenberg Galaxy persists, as of the present writing, well into the Zuckerberg one. A webpage is not a real page in a book, after all) all the time. This was not a sudden blow – we were brought up as readers, but we started reformatting our inner lives in order to accommodate intertwined pixels and letters, sounds and images, views and empathies, reading and surfing, in new “edutainmental” contexts. We have all been re-educated or brain-and-senses-washed. No child is left alone, nor is any child allowed to remain a tabula rasa. Training screens beckon, touch screens touch.

Ontologies of reality (or of realities) have also changed. The universe is not imaginable as an empty space, with stardust in some regions of emptiness, flowing through time as if the universe was a multidimensional riverbed for the flow of planets and vibes. The worlds within the universe are linked as events, processes and flows, while space and time are distinguished only when absolutely necessary and only for visualizing, comprehending, navigating the local descriptions. A description of the world based on a look from nowhere in particular would have a harder time passing peer reviews today than in the past. The recent past of academic communities includes years of being overshadowed by the Vienna circle, and years of criticism of the growth of knowledge from the point of the milder – Popperian, Kuhnian, Feyerabendian, Rortyrian – version of the

philosophy of science. Events and processes replaced rocks and stone tablets on which beliefs could be based. Search engines facilitated random but targeted monitoring of the flows of data and encouraged designing research projects suggesting a lottery of possible futures. The randomization of emergencies replaced iron laws. The laws of development/evolution were carved by Darwin not so much in stone tablets as in school curricula and research paradigms. Reprogrammable lifestyles ending in a rain of “likes” on social platforms compete against destinies ending in heaven, hell or purgatory as legitimate “targets.”

These evolutionary transformations of culture were not immediately noticeable because cultural activities used to be compartmentalized much more rigidly in the past. Nothing had undivided attention. Attention was compartmentalized, divided; sometimes shared but moderately so. The cultural evolution of societies is still being rediscovered, renegotiated and reinterpreted. The only consensus among researchers points to a slower dissemination of new ideas before the electronic media emerged and took over the printed ones. Before the new shepherds of our attention coded all contents and turned them into databases, opening new green pastures for everybody, socialization followed more stable patterns. Socialization in families and education in schools went along the class lines. Socially organized socialization followed the imagined distribution of work in expected future societies. With the digitally aided communications, many more new data pastures were opened for almost everybody, or almost opened, as critics of the “digital feudalism” are quick to point out, hinting at the new privileges and exclusions, which differentiate access to the data fields we are supposedly all free to graze on.

First, we are not very certain what the expected future societies will need as far as work inputs are concerned. Second, this uncertainty influences our planning of curricula for educational institutions. This new uncertainty randomizes our investments in the growth of knowledge. Professionals in the province of science changed the ways of doing (and selling) research. Professionals in all branches of art learned how to entertain the masses, appealing to their eyes and ears glued to the portable screens – of laptops, of iPads, of mobile phones, of wrist watches. The switch from an event shared collectively in a material, palpable, “real” space to the events traced and tracked in the flow of mediated spaces, the individually and virtually experienced ones, left some infrastructures – like rows of chairs in cinemas and theaters waiting in vain for the paying occupants – empty. By the way, rows of chairs in churches or university lecture halls were (are) also emptying. TV preachers and celebrity lecturers attracting online audiences do not ask for tickets and do not have to worry about filling the seats.