The Social World after COVID-19
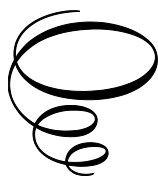
The Social World after COVID-19

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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

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This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

INTRODUCTION

The appearance, in December 2019, in the Chinese city of Wuhan, of a new virus would change social dynamics around the world. What was taken for granted was suddenly suspended and normality was reconfigured with new attitudes and behaviours. It is, now, important to rethink the lessons we can learn not only from what we have already lived, but, above all, from what we are still living. To think about this, we organize a congress that seeks to go further and think about what a post-pandemic situation can be, that is, to think, in a theoretical way, what can happen to our social world after the pandemic.

The congress was named *International Congress—The Social World after Covid-19* and it took place, online, on June 24 and 25, 2021, and it was a brilliant opportunity to share investigations and ongoing essays about social (but also artistic, philosophical, political, and economic, among others) dimensions implicated in the phenomenon of the pandemic.

This volume includes selected and adapted papers from the conference and I hope it can be used as a guide for further investigations.

Part One: From Philosophy to Sociology

The essays in this section are devoted to describing, in a philosophical or sociological way, the different meanings of daily life and social relationships with ourselves and others. In the first chapter, Paulo Alexandre e Castro writes about, what he calls, the brief illusion of behavioral and ethical metamorphosis—considering human nature and condition—that could have happened during pandemic.

In Chapter 2, Agostino Cera sketches, what he has named, a *pandemic society*, i.e., with emphasis on the link between *network*, *technology* and *pandemic*, as potential basic features of our society. Taking the approach of Heidegger and Manuel Castells, Agostino Cera will clarify in what sense the *network society* corresponds to a *technosociety* or *Gestell society*, rather than a mere *technological* society.

In Chapter 3, Ricardo Ferreira de Almeida, using the tools of sociological analysis, diagnoses the dystopian opacity of society and the abuse of capitalism forces in pandemic times.

In Chapter 4, the authors look, in detail, at the concept of social world and its difficulties. They also share the important question about the existence of social world during a pandemic: What does it mean to be living in a social world?

Part Two: Between Communication and Politics

This section of the volume looks at the different social perspectives including gaming, vulnerabilities (the particular case of Brazil) and justice procedures, access to communications instruments, and vaccination in the African continent.

In Chapter 5, Patricia Gouveia, Camila Pinto and Luciana Lima provide an overview identifying the immediate effects of COVID-19 for women employed in the Portuguese digital games industry. They stated that, throughout the history of human civilization, it has been shown that in each crisis men and women are affected differently, that the impacts of crises are never gender neutral, and, therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception to this.

In Chapter 6, Ana Branca de Carvalho discusses, what she calls, the new social world of communication, that is, how and what to think about new technology practices that will, now, form part of the new normal.

In Chapter 7, Thiago Allison de Jesus writes about the Brazilian society's experiences and the repercussions of the lack of politics to deal with the pandemic. He states that there is a notable ineffectiveness of fundamental social rights for all and of public policies that ensure citizenship in contemporary Brazil.

In Chapter 8, Gonçalo Mota drives the analysis through the consent for the intervention of the social worker in the protection of fundamental rights within the scope of social insertion income.

In Chapter 9, Levi Leonido and colleagues look, in detail, at the social responses (different and diverse), given the resources, means and policies in force, in each of three great continents and in the countries represented by Portugal, Brazil, Angola, Mozambique and Cabo Verde. They analyze several approaches and results in times that are/were also diverse, disparate and highly contrasting in terms of response and preparation for a post-COVID universe that wants to be socially and politically sustainable.

Part Three: Social Work(ers) in Analysis

In this section, the authors provide a glimpse into cutting-edge research into social work and social workers' challenges during and after the pandemic.

The section begins with Chapter 10, in which Vishanthie Sewpaul discusses the consequences of neoliberal capitalism, how planetary and social imbalances are exacerbating each other, the imaginings of a bolder, braver, and more equitable and sustainable world (it will depend, according to Vishanthie, on motivated human action and how to manage the infrapolitics of power), and the implications of these for social work.

In Chapter 11, Walter Lorenz states that, in face of the pandemic crisis, reactions have been extremely polarised. This means that the coronavirus pandemic is not simply a health crisis but a social crisis that poses a fundamental challenge to institutions responsible for maintaining the social fabric of societies. And so, Walter Lorenz highlights the contribution of social work to rebuild post-COVID societies.

In Chapter 12, Jacqueline Marques presents an examination of the image of social work in Portugal (an exploratory approach) in the press, during the pandemic phase (from March 2020 to March 2021).

The final chapter, Chapter 13, by Elisete Diogo, Isabel Muñoz, Tatiane Valduga and Joana Brinca, says that the COVID-19 pandemic has stimulated a social, economic, political, and cultural crisis on a national and global level, creating constraints in social protection, and contributing to poverty and social exclusion. From knowing this, they emphasize the role of social workers' practices: to deliver an inclusive education in the pandemic context.

Coverage and Scope

Our first concern about this volume was about the relation between chapters. This book can be read straight through by those wanting a broad view of the theme, but we also wanted it to be of use to those seeking to know only about one specific topic in particular areas.

Taking this into account, all the chapters can be read as stand-alone pieces that can be read individually for a thorough treatment of a given perspective or topic. It should be noted that each chapter has a unique focus, emphasizing different aspects of common topics. Although the chapters were written (the majority of them) individually, the reader will notice a number of common themes appearing throughout the volume. That is why this book remains so coherent.

I have enjoyed putting this volume together and hope it will serve as an entry-point to the hugely important work being done about pandemic.

Paulo Alexandre e Castro

PART ONE:

FROM PHILOSOPHY TO SOCIOLOGY

CHAPTER 1

THE SHORT ILLUSION OF METAMORPHOSIS IN THE LOOKING GLASS

PAULO ALEXANDRE E CASTRO

Introduction

During the pandemic and the restrictions it placed, many television commentators around the world from different fields of study postulated the hypothesis that this global stop would allow greater awareness of man's place in the world.

During the first confinement, these statements followed and pointed to this transformation, towards a substantial metamorphosis in the way man would prioritize and reassess his ethical and moral values. This general change in behavior would mean, above all, a change in the way in which it would deal with the environment, with technology, and in human relations (which placed the status of the social world at the highest level of the concerns of the populations). This also meant, in sociological and (even in) phenomenological terms, the affirmation of human nature and the human condition embodied in the theoretical concepts of alterity and altruism (and there were numerous examples of altruism that seemed to confirm that hope). However, after the lifting of the first restrictions, a return to the same (and ultimately normal) attitudes was noticed.

Then, came the Delta and Omicron variant that confirmed the real indifference that some human beings feel for their neighbors. There was a paradigm shift: if, in the first major impact of the pandemic, it was a matter of understanding who needed urgent help, who should be helped, under what conditions, by whom, what criteria to obey, etc., with these variants, the criteria changed, so did the conditions of isolation and, with them, the social world that, until then, seemed solidary. It is about this brief illusion of behavioral and ethical metamorphosis that we will seek to draw a critical reflection and, at the same time, a philosophical approach to the human essence in the hypermodern times in which we live.

1. What Alice Could Have Seen

The social world, which is the shared world we live in, demands a serious reflection and time dedication, and, in times of pandemic, individuals feel the weight of chains that tie them to the harsh reality of human nature, now structured according to the dictatorship of modern times, according to the dictatorship of algorithms and screens. Lipovetski was right about it.

Narcissus no longer looks for his reflection in still waters; in fact, Narcissus has become a web designer, a digital creator without knowing it, and his image does not yet exist, it is in transmutation, it is in continuous re-creation, and all the images can be worked on in its digital composition. All images are now subtle ontological dots that connect to return an ideal image, we would say a subversion of the Platonic worlds, which can be retouched to exhaustion.

When the pandemic comes, it is still a spectral image, something distant, which is not yet in the realm of reality. Just like people, ordinary people living their own lives guided by spectral images returned by uncanny mirrors, which now take mainly digital forms, instrumented through fabulous apps, smartphones full of intelligence and fury, and whose content is as ghostly as a virus like that of social networks can be.

The pandemic, at the beginning was still a distant image, in a distant country, as if we were still living in a glass dome and could not travel around the world in twenty-four hours. And we live as if we were immortal, looking at ourselves in the mirror and seeing nothing but our navel, oblivious to the world where bacteria and viruses are born and developed. The way humanity behaves in society is governed by laws that subject him to fixed ideas or, should one say, to the main idea that rules life: the measure of happiness is made by the success achieved. The socioeconomic model imposed by neoliberalism is a false hedonistic model that alienates humanity from its essence, from its natural condition as social beings. This model can be seen in the small, animated films by Steve Cutts—*Happiness* and *Are you lost in the world like me?* Or, if one really wants to see the degree of alienation humanity is living in, the satire of the movie *Don't Look Up* (Adam McKay) can also serve that purpose. Ignorance glorifies and magnifies the model of socioeconomic exploitation that has marked the last few decades. It seems that not even the most precious lesson can wake us up from our materialistic and selfish behavior (Castro 2018; 2021).

Lewis Carroll (Charles Dodgson) wrote the story of *Alice through the Looking Glass*, and we usually forget the second part of the title, which is, *What Alice Found There*. People who read or see *Alice through the Looking Glass* don't seem to notice that Alice is not looking for her image in the

mirror, but she is looking through the looking glass, meaning, here, that she is looking for what is beyond the mirror, to what can be reality. Maybe, here, one can see the starting point; it could be the renewal of the deep experience of subjectivity, which is nothing less than the awareness and existential experience of being in time and being with others. What could be found was the roots of a new social world but looking is not always seeing.

During the pandemic and the restrictions, many television commentators around the world postulated the hypothesis that this global stop would allow greater awareness of man's place in the world. In fact, during the first confinement, these statements followed and pointed to this transformation, towards a substantial metamorphosis in the way man would prioritize and reassess his ethical and moral values, how the construction of a new social world would be possible and desirable.

People around the world start to place, in their windows, drawings of rainbows with the message "everything will be fine." Media and social networks started to disseminate images that ranged from the return of wild animals to their natural habitats to images revealing the decrease in the level of pollution in the air and water, from showing examples of solidarity between neighbors in the same building or neighborhood, or artists performing small concerts on the porches or on social media. These first images seemed to shake human consciousness and its attitudes towards the world and others, and the message of a better world seemed to gain ground. It seemed, for a moment, that humanity was redeeming itself.

In fact, if this shake had an effect, that would mean an extraordinary change in human behavior, which would mean, above all, a change in the way in which it would deal with the environment, with technology and in human relations (which placed the status of the social world at the highest level of the concerns of the populations).

This meant, in sociological and phenomenological terms, the affirmation of human nature and the human condition embodied in the theoretical concepts of alterity and altruism (and as one saw, there were numerous examples of altruism that seemed to confirm such a hope). But no dream can last forever and, after the lifting of the first restrictions, a return to the same (and ultimately normal) attitudes was noticed. People start running to malls and large stores (registering queues of hundreds of meters in some cases that the media exposed with the same enthusiasm with which they spoke of a new humanity) to end up with a handful of nothing. People quickly forgot the help they received when they needed it most, and those who helped felt that everything was back to being the same. The brief illusion had vanished.

2. Viruses Can Do Metamorphosis (and Images)

The man who shut himself up at home and who seemed to be meditating on a possible metamorphosis did nothing more than the character of Jean-Philippe Toussaint in the novel *The Bathroom*, which accentuated his peculiar form of passivity, the immobility of creating/doing nothing.

How can a man dream of an ethical transformation if he was, more than ever, closed in on himself? How can man desire a metamorphosis if he is forced to live in digital shell, if he is forced to see what he is allowed to see? It is the power of the image that has replaced the power of words, as Susan Sontag reminds us, that creates new realities, because, as she says, the image "acquired a degree of immediacy and authority greater than any verbal reporting." (Sontag 2007, 31)

The individual is diluted in the very fragmentation of the images that come to him: everything takes place in the totality of representations, that is, from publicity to advertising, from business to leisure, from family life to politics (Castro 2021). The different media, in their different aptitudes, are not mere informative or communicative instruments, they are instruments to capture the subject's attention and, therefore, being instruments of generalized access with which he lives daily, because everything revolves around the fragmented visuality and is constituted by the technical images, as Vilém Flusser would call it, creates a framework of alienation that favors the secret policies that govern a predatory global economic market.

From the most intimate images of human life, whether images captured by surveillance cameras in a hypermarket or images captured in reality shows, in which everyone sees and is seen, to digital arts images, everything is subject to the scrutiny and validity of an Orwellian big brother. Even the images that translate the end of man's intimate nature, which were "sacred" until recently—with the revelation of Auschwitz being the first big blow—, such as the hanging of Saddam Hussein or the barbarity of the videos made by Daesh, reveal the passivity of an inoperative subject.

During the pandemic, in the abstract, nothing changed: the extreme passivity in which humanity found itself only reflected what was its normal state of acceptance of reality.

The ability to reproduce events in real time (mainly started with the Gulf War), the delirious daily reproduction of images of ethnic, religious, political conflicts, such as those in Cabo Delgado (Mozambique) or in Gaza, and the instrumentalization of analysis discourses, that is, interpretation devices, forge memories and establish paradigms of numbness. The times and spaces that allowed the formation of the (collective) imaginary were replaced in hypermodernity by the framing of imagery violence and the

accentuation of the level of insensitivity to which the contemporary individual is systematically subjected. That's why, at the beginning of the pandemic, everything seemed cloudy and distant, everything seemed a fictional setting like in a movie, like in Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion* or in José Saramago's novel *Blindness* (meaning *Essay on Blindness*).

According to Olivier Mongin, our relationship with images of violence has metamorphosed, that is, we have entered a "natural state" of acceptance of violence. (Mongin 1998) In other words, it is, at the same time, not only the violent images but also the violence of the images, in a disconcerting speed, as Henri-Pierre Jeudy tell us:

> It's not that nothing happened (the Berlin Wall did in fact fall, Tien Na Men's square was in fact the theater of a slaughter), but the event has an air of being so awaited, the devices for its interpretation are already so prepared. that everything digests itself with a bewildering rapidity, as if history continued on its own course, making fun of what happens. As the pace of events continues to accelerate, the devices for interpreting its history become rigid, comparable to models of petrified meaning. (Jeudy 1995, 70)

It should be noted that the very experience of violence has metamorphosed (it is part of our daily routines): we witness violence whenever we wish without raping ourselves (physically or psychologically), which relieves us a lot, given the widespread acceptance of aggression. It seems that we need violence (a cathartic device?!), or, as George Steiner satirically mentioned,

> open and democratic societies are therapeutic. They endeavour to alleviate pain and lessen hatred. For the latter in particular they seek to provide relatively innocuous channels and surrogates. Licensed aggression in the free market and in sports are a paramount example. Fictive violence is richly available. From early childhood onward, those addicted to television, notably in North America and western Europe, will have witnessed thousands of hours of homicide, assault, rape, humiliation.
>
> The spiral of graphic brutality in the media, on the Internet, may now be spinning out of control. In the United States, women's wrestling is a rapidly growing spectator sport. The sources of this voracity for violence, for the mimed infliction of pain in even the most democratic, materially privileged social systems remain unclear. (Steiner 1999, 134-135)

Perhaps, because of all this, the image of a pandemic does not scare us in the first place. It does not because, in the first place, it was not an image at all; it was just the news of a possible pandemic that started in the city of Wuhan, in China. Even when the virus starts to spread around the world, there were no images. And, in fact, the image of the new coronavirus (most

of them were digital images, simulations) does not scare us,[1] it is not a violent image, just as the images of people suffering in an intensive care unit or buried by the hundreds don't produce any reaction). If we can't see that, we wouldn't be able to see that a virus can undergo transmutations either, and that makes all the difference: the difference to taking care of others (especially the less fortunate, the exploited from developing countries or those subject to dictatorial/totalitarian regimes) is taking care of us.

Images of metamorphosis during the pandemic crisis are everywhere: on the faces of frontline professionals, from healthcare professionals to professionals in the security forces, from supermarket workers to delivery people, and, yet, it was not realized that another metamorphosis was needed: that of values, that of mentalities. It seems that the "risk society," advocated by Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, was another ignored lesson, book-ornaments that only serve to fill in the color of libraries.

3. What Has Changed or What Is Still the Same?

During the pandemic, the different media continued their work, which oscillated between presenting the news of the pandemic and the regular programming before it. It was curious to see how news about the pandemic almost always translated into numbers of contagions—especially in the approaches of some countries, like Brazil, the United States of America and England, and the almost absence of news about the African continent (even less before the existence of a South African variant). From the social media perspective, the world is his playground and, therefore, it cannot stop any of their activities. The repetition of news about the pandemic, instead of creating greater ethical awareness of the problem, ended up creating an even greater distance, almost as if we were watching a horror movie that we could leave at any moment. But not only could we not go out symbolically but also physically, and this was, for a moment, a brief illusion. The illusion that we could be different with one another; that we can act differently, that it was possible to live in a different world, where altruism would establish a return to that primordial essence of social being.

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[1] The new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) is the seventh known to infect humans and cause respiratory illness. Of these, four are responsible for affecting the upper respiratory tract and causing mild symptoms (HCoV-229E, HCoV-OC43, HCoV-NL63 and HKU1). The other three (SARS-CoV-1, MERS-CoV and the current coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2) affect the lower respiratory tract and cause Severe Respiratory Syndrome. The new coronavirus is a beta-coronavirus distinct from SARS-CoV-1 and MERS-CoV.

The good illusion of a new world—a brave but short dream. We have not seen, as we do not see the fragile relationships in which we live, we have not seen, as we do not see the liquidity of gestures and words in our social world (Bauman 2000), we have not seen and we do not see that the pandemic was/is the ultimate opportunity for a metamorphosis in behavior, in social and economic paradigms.

Politics and economics manage to mask reality even in times of pandemic (perhaps that is why the entertainment and leisure industry and the main media are in the hands of large global economic groups). That is why we have not even seen the Western world's unfair treatment (its policies for the acquisition of vaccines were scandalous) towards some parts of Asia, the Middle East and Africa (especially in countries where, in recent world history, ethnic and military conflicts have worsened).

4. In Conclusion

To conclude, one must ask: how to feel alterity (Latin, *alteritas*), the ability to put myself in the other's shoes, if, during the pandemic, everything seemed to be under the same strange conditions? Altruism has existed, in different ways, from isolated cases to professionals on the front line. But, in fact, what has changed? Phenomenologys of altruism and communication seem to be just academic textbooks with no repercussions in everyday life, as most of literature produced in universities.

In fact, maybe all this doesn't go like Lewis Carroll's tales of an extreme dream/nightmare that haunted us and in which we allow ourselves to be deluded into a metamorphosis that doesn't happen. Recent history—with regard to reports of previous epidemics—reveals the following: everything looks different for a moment so that everything remains the same.

The lack of generosity, of altruism, is already a mark of the hypermodernism we are experiencing. The neoliberal model is a cancer that is bombing people around the globe with the same efficacy as that of the virus. It creates realities, delivers false hedonistic images to capitalize profit. More than a pandemic crisis, we are dealing with a social(-economic) crisis. Unfortunately, there is no vaccination for that, for our blindness. It's a shame that we cannot see beyond the looking glass and we continue to prefer the manufactured, repeated, exhausted image that social networks have helped to spread. We continue to look into Alice's looking glass and see nothing but the immediate reflection of what we believe we are.

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CHAPTER 2

THE PANDEMIC SOCIETY,
OR THE DIFFERENCE, AS TABOO

AGOSTINO CERA

Introduction

The following pages aim to sketch the idea of a *pandemic society*, that is, to emphasize the link between *network*, *technology* and *pandemic* seen as potential basic features of our society. In particular, I will try to clarify in what sense the *network society* (according to Manuel Castells' definition) equates to a *technosociety* or *Gestell society*, rather than a mere technological society. By *Gestell* society—according to Heidegger's definition of technology as *Gestell*/enframing—I mean a social and epochal framework within which technology emerges as the "subject of history" (Günther Anders).

Given these assumptions, I will show how its technological imprimatur could transform our *globalized network society* into a pandemic society: an ideal incubator of pandemic phenomena. Expressed in a formula, it sounds as follows: the network society proves to be a *potential* pandemic society precisely insofar as it is *de facto* a *Gestell* society.

If contamination emerges as an inevitable consequence of networking, then to avoid zoonosis within a network society—to preserve the perfect flow between the nodes of the network—it is necessary for all its nodes to be as similar as possible. The precondition for a safe interconnection is, thus, *homologation/ homogenization*. To avoid pandemic outcomes, our global and interconnected society must *immunize* itself against difference.

If the homologation/homogenization represents the necessary premise of a safe globalized interconnection, then in the shell of the network society could hide the seed of an *anesthetized/sterilized society*. In particular, axiologically anesthetized, that is, a social context entirely inspired to the performance principle and the logic of efficiency. As a result, the real face of the pandemic society proves to be that of a *unary world* (a definition

inspired by Roland Barthes' ontology of the Photograph), the social and epochal framework where "all becomes one." Such a framework aims to immunize itself against the difference, because difference/otherness arises as the real virus from which a pandemic society must necessarily defend itself. Within the network society, difference becomes a taboo.

This unary world looks a lot like Byung-Chul Han's *transparency society*: an "inferno of the same," where the *other* turns into an *alien* and finally into an *enemy*. From an anthropological perspective, the pandemic society can be described as the framework within which the human type "Bartleby" —someone who can affirm, "I would prefer not to" —becomes an unworkable option, something literally impossible.[1]

1. Network Society as *Gestell* Society

Around the beginning of the new millennium, the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells established a hermeneutical hypothesis about our age, according to which we are living in a *network society*.[2] By this definition, he tried to scientifically translate a matter of fact that each of us experience daily and directly, namely we are moving within an increasingly homogeneous, interconnected and interdependent framework. We are inhabiting a globalized world.

The network society is

> the social structure that results from the interaction between social organization, social change, and a *technological paradigm* constituted around digital information and communication technologies. We start from a rejection of technological determinism, as technology cannot be considered independently of its social context. (Castells 2004, xvii).

Networks constitute "the new social morphology of our societies […] the new information technology paradigm provides the material basis for its pervasive expansion throughout the entire social structure." (Castells 2010a, 500).

And, by "Social Structure," the organizational arrangements of humans in relations of production, consumption, reproduction, experience, and power

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[1] After having written these pages, I continued to develop my "dialogue" with the pandemic as an epochal symptom, i.e., a sign of the current *Zeitgeist*. In Cera (2021a), I dealt with some of its economic, political and ethical issues, the sum of which I have called "pandemic capital." More recently, as a natural outcome of such a path, I have tried to put the pieces of this mosaic together within a volume entitled *Nella Società Pandemica* (see Cera 2022).

[2] See Castells (2010a), Castells (2010b), Castells (2010c) and Castells (2004).

expressed in meaningful communication coded by culture. (Castells 2004, 3).

In general terms, a network is

> a set of interconnected *nodes.* A node is the point where the curve intersects itself. A network has no center, just nodes […] Nodes only exist and function as components of networks. The network is the unit, not the node." The functioning of the whole structure depends on the *flow* among nodes and networks. "Flows are streams of information between nodes circulating through the channels of connection between nodes. (Castells 2004, 3).

On a historical level, the network society can be seen as the epochal framework within which the human being has become the demiurge of itself, a being capable of making what it wants of itself. It is the context where the Promethean dream—that of a human being freed from the protection of the gods, finally the maker of its own destiny—comes true. Obviously, the Promethean dream can only be achieved thanks to the Promethean gift *par excellence*: *techne*, technology. Castells' words, cited above, confirm this: *the network society is a technological society*. More specifically, this is a society grown in the image and likeness of "an entirely new technological paradigm," that is, "informationalism" (Castells 2004, 7). Translated in even more updated terms, Castells refers to that evolution of technology on which Luciano Floridi's well-known work focused, summarized in the concepts of "infosphere" and "fourth revolution" (Floridi 2014).

However, the "simple" fact of the network society as a technological society can assume very different meanings dependent on the interpretation of technology. Despite being well-informed and up-to-date, Castells' interpretation of technology from a strictly philosophical perspective seems to reaffirm the *topos*, according to which it is "a contrivance" or "an instrumentum*,*" namely "a means to an end," "a human activity." It is that "instrumental and anthropological definition (*Bestimmung*) of technology" (Heidegger 1977, 5), already investigated and criticized by Heidegger. The limit of this definition is that it is "merely correct," for "the merely correct is not yet true" (Heidigger 1977, 6). More clearly, in Castells' approach, the term "technology" merely corresponds to a collective noun, a label to apply to a series of procedures and protocols (the technologies); while its meaning as such—i.e., as a historical-epochal phenomenon representing the *redde rationem* of all modernity, the final stage of "the disenchantment of the world" —is almost completely ignored.

This kind of interpretation fits perfectly into the so-called *empirical turn*: the hermeneutic approach that has monopolized the philosophy of

technology in recent decades.[3] More precisely, here, we are faced with what Philip Brey calls the "society-oriented" empirical turn, its light version in comparison to the hard version he calls "engineering-oriented."[4]

In my view, after almost forty years from its establishment, the empirical turn has proven to be an *ontophobic turn*: a philosophically weak interpretation of technology, based on the rejection of its Heideggerian—and continental, more generally—background, considered as essentialist, aprioristic, deterministic (one-dimensional) and dystopic (Achterhuis 2001, 3).[5] On the contrary, in such a background, I see not only a precious legacy, but also the epistemic *imprimatur* for the philosophy of technology itself, the basic prerequisite for an authentically philosophical investigation of technology.

As is well-known, moving from the assumption that "the essence of technology is by no means anything technological" (Heidegger 1977, 4), Heidegger established a *Gestell* (enframing) *paradigm*: a configuration of reality according to which

1) the being of beings is understood as *Bestand* (standing reserve) or raw material;

2) the human being itself becomes *Bestand* (i.e., what Günther Anders called *homo materia* and Hannah Arendt called *animal laborans*);

3) while the relation between human being and world is characterized as *Herausforderung* (challenging),[6] that is, nature is conceived and made use of as a warehouse of resources that has to "supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such." (Heidegger 1977, 14).

As a rejection of the *Gestell* paradigm, the empirical turn/ontophobic turn gives birth to an *epistemic metamorphosis* of the philosophy of

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[3] On the empirical turn see Achterhuis (2001) and Franssen *et al.* (2016).

[4] The society-oriented version of the empirical turn aims "to understand and evaluate the implications of modern technology for society and the human condition," while its engineering-oriented version primarily aims "to understand and evaluate the practices and products of engineering, rather than anything that happens beyond in society." (Brey 2010, 41).

[5] I fully developed the idea of an "ontophobic turn," namely a critical historicization of the most recent philosophy of technology, in Cera (2021) and, above all, in Cera (2020a).

[6] "Enframing (*Gestell*) means the gathering together of that setting-upon which sets upon man, i.e., challenges him forth, to reveal the real, in the mode of ordering, as standing-reserve (*bestand*). Enframing means that way of revealing which holds sway in the essence of modern technology and which is itself nothing technological." (Heidegger 1977, 21).

technology, namely its conversion into a "positive science"[7] in the form of a problem-solving activity: a way of knowledge that makes any question a problem, that is, a promise of solution. More clearly, what I call an ontophobic turn equates to the finding that the philosophy of technology is living an *epistemic crisis*, which, incidentally, mirrors a crisis involving the philosophy itself as a form of knowledge. To avoid being dystopian or apocalyptic (as the classical philosophy of technology partly was), the current mainstream in the philosophy of technology has become apologetic. That is to say, no longer able to be critical. It is flattened on the status quo, incapable to distance itself from the reality. In front of the real (of what it is), such a philosophy of technology seems capable to say only "yes and Amen" (Nietzsche 2006, 131). Listening to some scholars referable to this approach,[8] one can have the impression that we are living—or we are going to live—in "the best of all possible worlds." This epistemic crisis culminates, therefore, into an *apologetic outcome*, that is a *critical obstruction*.[9] By the way, the latter proves that this crisis produces ethical and political consequences as well, because an apologetic/acritical philosophy represents the ideal (i.e., docile, compliant) interlocutor for political and economic institutions. Someone who tells them exactly what they want to hear.

Franco Volpi gives us a perfect explanation of this ontophobic turn/epistemic metamorphosis, by speaking of "philosophy in the genitive case." According to Volpi, here and now,

> there is a risk: that yet another philosophy in the genitive case will be produced. I mean, a reflection whose only function is ancillary and subordinate [...] the risk of numerous philosophies in the genitive case is to reduce philosophical thought to a noble *anabasis*, namely to a strategic withdrawn from the great questions to take refuge in problems of detail [...] So, one asks oneself: is *philosophy of technology in the nominative case* possible? (Volpi 2004, 146–47).

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[7] "There are two basic possibilities of science: sciences of beings, of whatever is, or ontic sciences, and *the* science of being, the ontological science, philosophy. Ontic sciences in each case thematize a given being that in a certain manner is always already disclosed prior to scientific disclosure. We call the sciences of beings as given—of a *positum*—positive sciences." (Heidegger 1998, 41).
[8] I am thinking, in particular, of the so-called postphenomenologists: the scholars inspired by Don Ihde's work. On the topic, see, at least, Ihde (1993) and Rosenberger and Verbeek (2015).
[9] Babette Babich is one of the few scholars—especially in the anglophone context—who denounced "professional philosophy's enduring resistance to a critical philosophy of technology and action." (Babich 2012–2013, 41).

In my view, Castell's network society adheres to this genitive interpretation of technology by way of its belief that the information age / informationalism equates to a brand-new technological paradigm. On the contrary, I think that information and communication technology—including infosphere and fourth revolution—still fall within the *Gestell* paradigm, that is they express the same approach to reality, the same ontological assumptions. As a consequence, insofar as the network society refers to an ontophobic (i.e., weak, genitive) interpretation of technology, it can only emerge as a *technological society*: a social framework marked by the increasing presence of technologies (i.e., gadgets, apps, devices…), but where technology as such (i.e., as epochal phenomenon) embodies an accident or a superficial peculiarity, at most. The recovery of a philosophically strong interpretation of technology—the establishment of a "philosophy of technology in the nominative case" —, instead, represents the benchmark for grasping the authentic link between the network society and technology. It allows us to bring out a social and historical framework within which technology embodies the "subject of history" (Anders 1992, 271–79).

My point is that, understood as it essentially is (an epochal phenomenon), technology stands out as the basic premise for a network society. Enframing embodies the *Ur*-network (the archetype) of all possible concrete networks; *Gestell* should be considered the transcendental (the condition of possibility) that makes such a society real. As a result, by means of this strong/nominative interpretation of technology, the network society emerges not only as a *technological society* (i.e., technology as an accident of social structure), but rather as a *technosociety*, or, better, a *Gestell* society (i.e., technology as the substance/subject of social structure).

The clarification of the real link between network society and technology allows an adequate philosophical investigation of the pandemic phenomenon, and that is why I chose to present this excursus about the philosophy of technology as an introduction to my argument. In other words, only insofar as the network society proves to be *de facto* a *Gestell* society (i.e., not a merely technological society), it can also prove to be a *potential* pandemic society.

2. *Gestell* ociety as Pandemic Society

> Another 'flow' has been added to the 'space of flows' […] the new flow is that of the novel coronavirus. (Olivier 2020).

According to this quotation from the South African philosopher Bert Olivier, *the network society is (also) a pandemic society.* This claim can be interpreted in two different ways. The first confirms a factual reality, one of

simple temporal coincidence, in that the COVID-19 affair took place in the context of what we call the network society. Alternatively, the second interpretation suggests an etiological/causal link between these two realities, meaning their co-presence does not represent a mere coincidence. This interpretation leads to a question: could the network society represent a particularly fitting environment—an ideal incubator—for pandemic phenomena? Could it even be intrinsically exposed to the risk of becoming a pandemic society?

That this connection is not coincidental—and that such questions are, thus, fully legitimate—is suggested, among other things, by two instances of popular culture in which several unintentional Cassandra dilemmas can be found, *ex post*, considering what would eventually occur. I'm referring to Steven Soderberg's blockbuster *Contagion* (2011) —written by Scott Z. Burns with the advice of the epidemiologist Walter Ian Lipkin—and David Quammen's bestseller *Spillover* (2012). The first opened our eyes (by giving us images), the second our ears (by giving us words) for deciphering what we have experienced.

Over a century ago, Nietzsche's *History of an Error*—the history of "how the 'true world' finally became a fable" —summarized the six-move checkmate that metaphysics inflicted upon itself by collapsing from within the bimillenary Platonic-Christian ontological dualism between "true world" and "illusory world" (Nietzsche 2005, 171). Today, we could talk about the checkmate that the network society—as *Gestell* society—inflicts upon itself, by converting—in a matter of months, what is more—the technological Eden into a globalized, in real time and with simultaneous broadcast, nightmare. I am thinking, in particular, of *Contagion*'s last scene, a remarkable synopsis of this five-move checkmate, or to stay more focused, of this meta-network made of five nodes: 1) First move/node. The bulldozer destroys the forest, forcing the bats from their natural habitat; 2) Second move/node. The evicted bat comes into contact with a pig in the context of intensive animal farming (first spill over); 3) Third move/node. A restaurateur purchases the infected pork; 4) Fourth move/node. A chef has a close encounter with the infected food (second spill over, that is zoonosis); 5) Fifth and final move/node. A handshake between west (the businesswoman played by Gwyneth Paltrow) and east (the chef), moreover within the framework of a perfect global location, a starred restaurant, establishes the metamorphosis of epidemic into pandemic. Checkmate, that is, "incipit tragoedia." (Nietzsche 2008, 195).

This reconstruction, which we had considered "Hollywood" and fanciful until just a couple of years ago, once again, confirms the epochal status of technology, in that, the technological point of view represents one of the

few—and, perhaps, the only—perspectives able to decipher the logic beneath what has happened. The way the virus emerged from our relentless "challenging" of natural environments (where we enter without asking permission, evicting the old inhabitants, viruses included), but also of anthropic ones (I mean the violent distortion of rural settlements, which from one day to another are transformed into "modern cities"). The way the virus spread around the world quickly and comfortably (in business class flights). And, above all else, what the post-pandemic period will entail. Each of these steps becomes comprehensible only when using technology as a hermeneutic lens, as each step speaks the language of an epoch in which technology has become the subject of history. From here, the following general observation can be drawn: the network society is a pandemic society precisely insofar as it is a technosociety, i.e., *Gestell* society.

The pandemic event produces an updated version of the famous parable on chaos theory. "The flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil sets off a tornado in Texas" (Lorenz 1972) now is "a Chinese villager (whose village had, in the blink of an eye, become a megalopolis) biting a bat wing can trigger a massacre of elderly people in northern Italian nursery homes." As a result, from this moment on, the Chinese farmer will no longer have the freedom, enjoyed for centuries by his ancestors, to eat bat wings (this consideration holds weight despite one's opinion of such a culinary custom), because the health of the entire world could depend on the persistence of that single custom (which is also a testament to cultural biodiversity). Now, no adequate objection can be made to an argument of such indisputable common sense, of such cogent (smothering) reasonability. There is no choice. There is only one right thing to do and it is given a fatal character by this indisputability. As Hans Jonas argued, here and now, "technology is destiny." (Jonas 2003, 193).

More and more, the rationalization takes the form of a universal discipline, the sole smallest common denominator possible within a network society. If *Herausforderung* (challenging) is the evil (the virus), then rationalization appears to be the only possible *pharmakon* (the vaccine). The natural *pendant* of "total mobilization" (according to Ernst Jünger) is total rationalization, i.e., "total administration" (according to Herbert Marcuse).[10] Technological solutions are the sole response to the problems caused by technology: against technology, more technology is needed.

The combination of technology and rationalization looks like a pre-established harmony. In this respect Jacques Ellul—one of those classical philosophers of technology against whom the empirical turn reacted—spoke of a "technical system," describing it as "the environment in which modern

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[10] See, respectively, Jünger (1998) and Marcuse (1986, 4).

man is required to live" (Ellul 1964, 21). This is an environment, or, better, a *neo-environment*,[11] that comes about through the insertion of "technological *ratio operandi* into every human context," that is through the quest for "the most efficient method in every field." (Ellul 1964, 21). The *technisches Zeitalter* (the age/epoch of technology) equates to the epochal framework within which *Rationalisierung* stops being an option to transform into an obligation. Where there is no longer alternative to the search for maximum efficiency, where the pursuit of the best optimization is the only possible choice, there, technology has already become the subject of history. There, a *Gestell* society has already been established.

Expressed with the lexicon and logic of the network society, this means that the more we are connected, the more we are interdependent, the more certain discrepancies/oddities will become intolerable and inadmissible. I don't believe it is too far-fetched to imagine—it is an exercise for Nostradamus' apprentice—that, in coming years, after the predictable suppression of wet markets (the real pandemic proto-clusters), the focus will shift towards all those particularly audacious (i.e., too exotic) gastronomic customs found in almost every culture. Gradually, these manifestations of otherness will be banned for being "too risky," namely they will be perceived as too different from a rationalized global standard.

In general, the network society's development seems to proceed towards the suppression of radical differences, towards a homogenization (i.e., homologation, standardization) in the name of parameters that are entirely neutral (objective) insofar as they are entirely rational (rationalized). To avoid pandemic outcomes, the global, interdependent, interconnected society must *immunize*[12] itself against difference. This principle currently applies to hygienic and alimentary norms, but immediately the question emerges: will this global regulation stop at (make do with) the prophylaxis of bodies? Will global hygiene and the resulting homogenization concern only that which we eat, or will the network society gradually reach the point of being unable to tolerate alternatives and differences in other fields as well? Cultural? Ideological? Ethical? Erotic?... *What is,* generally speaking, *the gradient of otherness/difference that a network society is capable of*

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[11] On the keyword "neoenvironmentality," that is, the interpretation of technology as our current (neo)environment, is based my proposal of a *Philosophy of Technology in the Nominative Case (TECNOM)*. On this topic, see Cera (2017) and Cera (2020b).

[12] Obviously, when dealing with the concept of "immunity" (*immunitas*), I refer to Roberto Esposito's work (2011). On this topic, also see Byung-Chul Han (2015a, 1– 6).