

Layers, Flows, and Switches: Individuals in Next Society

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One of the founding scenes in the invention of the modern individual is Michel de Montaigne's essay *An Apology of Raymond Sebond* where he describes himself reading great texts of ancient authors. Great texts are great in that they reach their reader in both brilliance of rhetoric and validity of argument. There is thus every chance, as Montaigne realized, that the reader will nod to himself while reading one text and do so again when reading another, only later to notice that the second text contradicts the first in matters of fact. Montaigne made his discovery when for once he tried to settle the argument not by finding out which author was right but by asking himself who he was if he could nod at one text and at the other even though their arguments were in contradiction. He was someone, he discovered, whose opinions could change without himself changing. He was someone who was ignorant of many things while nevertheless knowing that he was ignorant; which means there was at least something he knows. He knows himself, he knows about the nullity and volatility of his opinions, he knows about his ignorance. In this, very individually, he shares the fate of many individuals, that of being an individual.

Montaigne discovered the modern individual. Together with Pascal in his *Pensées*, Descartes in his *Meditations*, and others he discovered if not invented those strange shifters who began to call themselves 'I' at the very moment of recognizing that they did not know what exactly they were referring to. While facts, memories, and expectations change, fade away, or are blurred by others, it is they who are referring, this alone is certain. With a geometry of affect for calculating what any individual is about to do, and why, Spinoza in his *Ethics* tried to determine what others leave open. But this only demonstrated the impossibility of the endeavor.

The individual became the singularity *per se* of a modern age that was forced to invent a structure and a culture able to deal with the restless communication unleashed by the movable letters of the printing press. Books and papers, files and bills, credits and certificates, flyers and manuals obliged society to abandon the traditional attempt of ancient and feudal society to capture communication by distinguishing strata and to order rejection and acceptance by a teleological universe that gave ontological meaning to any thing, event, or person seeking it. This was difficult enough given that writing invented by empires emerging

from tribal society had already forced society to extend its time horizons well into a past and a future that were now remembered and envisioned by means of the written word, and thus had to be handled by political constitutions, economic planning, religious time management, and artistic imagery. Modern society, born of the printing press, is only the third in the series of media epochs in human society. The first is tribal society, characterized by oral communication interfering with bodily behavior and the direct perception typical of pre-human societies, where society was forced to develop a structure and culture able to deal with the overflow of reference to absent things induced by language. The second is ancient society, brought into being by alphabetical writing, with symbols constituting a memory of its own that again produced an overflow of meaning nobody was prepared for. The third is modern society, which emerged in response to the advent of the printing press. And the fourth to date is ‘next society’ developing in reaction to the invention of the computer.

Modern society, the age that invented the modern individual, had no choice but to go beyond the cosmological ordering, framed by chaos and monsters, which had been invented by ancient society. The mechanical restlessness of the printing press could no longer be contained by the teleological and ontological idea that by nature any thing had its place (*telos*) in this cosmos and by fate was designed either to reach perfection or, failing in the endeavor, to fall into decay and corruption. Instead, society needed a structure that ensured the deployment of all the comparison and criticism unleashed by printing, and a culture that could reduce the overflow of meaning ensuing from the printing press to core ideas that retained their validity under whatever circumstances.

The structure came with the development of so-called functional subsystems that figure prominently in the sociological theory of Max Weber, Talcott Parsons, Niklas Luhmann, and others. Politics and the economy, law and religion, arts and sciences, each with their own media of communication, such as power and money, justice and belief, beauty and truth, were emancipated from traditional ties to the one world created by God to be reinvented as free floating structures anchored not in substances of any kind, let alone ideas of perfection, but in second-order observations. Politicians watch their rivals, and entrepreneurs, workers, and consumers compete with their peers. Priests preach against the sins of other churches, artists seek to do what other artists have never done, and scientists make discoveries nobody else has made. It is all a matter of observers observing what other observers are up to. In hindsight it is amazing how the restlessness produced by this structure of functional systems developing their own code could be considered not only to converge in progress but also literally to implement rationality and reason. Of course, this amazement should be countered by pointing out that the philosophy of reason and rationality did not pin down action and communication

to any substance or essence predetermined by providence; it was concerned with means and ends, causes and purposes that at any moment could be both legitimated and changed in terms of each other. Reason is another word for fluidity of argument, not for teleological or ontological order.

The culture form concomitant with this structure in modern society was ‘equilibrium’, posited first by philosophers describing the individual, and then by economists trying to protect the autonomy of the economy from moral, religious, and political intervention. ‘Equilibrium’ meant that disturbances were to be dealt with by robust systems that featured both negative and positive feedback. The ‘I’ of the individual is paradigmatic for this culture form and was translated into the ‘state’ by politics, ‘capital’ by economics, ‘formation’ by education, ‘conscience’ by religion, ‘method’ and ‘theory’ by the sciences, and ‘genius’ by the arts. No matter what was to be done in these respective fields of human endeavor, it was to be done by a peculiar combination of structural richness of possibilities and cultural redundancy of argument. As long as identities shaped as second-order identities can be maintained everything else can change. It is only the richness of these changing structures, whose interdependence heavily restricts what can change at once, that gives us the impression of a rather stable if not static world.

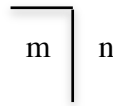
As we slowly begin to understand what modern society is about, it is being transformed apace into ‘next society’, to use Peter F. Drucker’s term to describe new structures and a new culture provoked by the advent of electricity and the computer. Once again the observation is that a new medium for the dissemination of communication, if this description captures what the computer is about, is not just about facilitating communication or cutting transaction costs to the satisfaction of society but primarily about the production of a new overflow of possible meaning for which no-one is really prepared. We watch organizations develop staggering ‘knowledge management systems’ just to prove the futility of the computer to anyone with eyes to see. We bother about our children becoming addicted to computer games. We try to invest students at school with a feeling of the dubiousness of all information found ‘in the Internet’. And we are startled to realize once again that most communication in society is about pornography, advertising, and scandal, giving us a clear notion of why we need an infrastructure for communication.

But the real challenge posed by the introduction of computers and their networks, or so it seems, is their slow but certain involvement with communication. Computers not only support or disseminate communication: they are beginning to induce communication through their own behavior. This effectively deals with modern society’s hubris that only human beings are able to participate in communication, to the exclusion, as it were, of spirits and

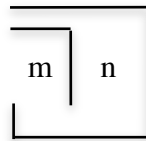
devils, animals and plants. Depending on which of the notions put forward by Michel Serres, Jürgen Habermas, or Niklas Luhmann we follow, computers can be seen as beginning to ‘parasitize’ communication, to ‘insinuate consensus’, or to make it even more ‘improbable’. Computers or artificial intelligences and the life nesting in them are attributed with utterance, information, and understanding and thus attract communication while being increasingly recruited by it. The concepts of artificial intelligence, artificial life, and robotics help to ensure that computers, too, develop the self-reference, intransparency, and complexity of which only human beings had hitherto seemed capable. Computers’ enormous memories, strong algorithms, and fast connectivity ensure that they fulfill the most pertinent criterion for participation in communication apart from error correction: the capacity to surprise and be surprised.

Next society is a society under pressure to find a structural and a cultural answer to the overflow of meaning that the introduction of computers, conceived of as complex units, has provoked not just into everyday communication but also into exacting, indeed professional kinds of communication. In markets, on the battlefield, in hospitals, in laboratories, in bureaucracies, and even in social networks, computers set out not only to provide support but also to make appropriate or less appropriate decisions. Once again, ‘structure’ means ensuring the differentiation, distribution, and dissemination of new kinds of communication, and ‘culture’ means providing communication with ideas of what makes sense and is of value. If Manuel Castells, Harrison C. White, Bruno Latour, and others are right, the structure of next society is a network structure, molding good old modernity’s fields of functional endeavor into new clusters and profiles of activities that defy rational ordering. Instead of the functional ordering of matter and cause so typical of modern reason, we are beginning to deal with a nervous ordering of flows and switches that gain their profile from an idiosyncratic exploitation of heterogeneity.

If ‘network’ is next society’s structure form, ‘system’ may turn out to be its culture form. Both are ‘forms’ in George Spencer-Brown’s *Laws of Form* sense. He defines a form as consisting in a distinction drawn by an observer (living, mental, social, or artificial beings) to create a space in which the two sides of the distinction, an indicated ‘inside’, *m*, and an unmarked ‘outside’, *n*, are to be distinguished by a ‘cross’, the mark of distinction:



only in order to 're-enter' this distinction into its own space:



To observe a form thus means to realize that the two sides of a distinction negate and imply each other. A network's form is thus the observation that all elements linked to each other connect only at the expense of further elements and further links becoming possible or at least gaining in potential. A system's form is the observation of operations of closure at the expense of attempts to re-include what has just been excluded.

It was Niklas Luhmann's assumption that systems, most of all functional subsystems of society, provide for the differentiation structure of modern society. It may, however, be worthwhile to note Harrison C. White's remark that the idea of systems may after all be just 'a rhetoric for culture' in this modern society (*Identity and Control*, p. 289). As the more recent career of systems theory since the 1940s has indeed been contemporary with the advent of the computer, we may assume that 'systems' do in fact define the culture of what in terms of structure ends up as 'network'. This means that systems define values that refer to events, which are linked to each other to produce programs able to search for further events. As Heinz von Foerster would have it, programs define the 'double closure' of systems, which on their first level just connect operations. If we assume that systems coincide with programs, we gain micro-diversity on the elemental or operational level and can look into how these values are produced and reproduced that invest this micro-diversity with programs.

If 'system' in network society is a rhetoric for culture, we begin to understand that in fact programming in terms of identities and control becomes the main pursuit in this society. Empirically these programs take the shape of projects, posses, and controversies. Before concluding our text with our main question, namely what becomes of the modern individual in projects, posses, and controversies, we must outline what these things are.

A 'project', as Daniel Defoe already emphasized, is a way of sharing the risks of both ideas and their realization to enable possible profits to be maximized, profits mainly from the experience in the project, not exactly from the aim, which is always a part of it but seldom

attained. These profits are those of project maker, project commissioner, and project employees, all of whom learn about rhetoric, pragmatics, and new states of affairs. Projects thus allow for the combination and recombination of the most improbable material issues, political support, and financial resources. They are a continual probing of new worlds within old worlds, risk structures being the guideline for enforcing reflection on the decisions to be taken, the people to be involved, the moment to withdraw, and the lessons to be learned.

‘Posses’, introduced to the literature by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their book *Empire*, are not only the potential to which the Latin word *posse* refers, but also the gangs of four to seven people who team up to conquer some bigger structure like a market, a bureaucracy, a campaign, or a political situation by sudden intervention that defines new rules of the game. Posses include terrorist gangs, Hip Hop groups, and police task forces. They board a larger network by exerting a power to act that is available neither to a single person nor to groups of two to three nor to bigger groups of twenty and more. Four to seven is the smallest nucleation size available to human groups that obey the group size ratio which W.-X. Zhou, D. Sornette, R. A. Hill and R. I. M. Dunbar developed from Dunbar’s famous number 149 as the number of people humans are able to personally recognize. Posses of four to seven people are small enough to trust each other absolutely and big enough to engage in more demanding forms of labor division. Posses can develop unobtrusively, are always small enough to be severely underestimated, and may nevertheless command quite an amount of resources.

Add ‘controversies’ and you know what brings dynamics to network structures. Controversies, introduced to the literature by Bruno Latours in *Re-Assembling the Social*, are ways of making events, things, and people visible that would otherwise go unnoticed. Since networks are structures without boundaries, they rely on controversies to continually test who and what belongs to the network under what conditions and who and what may wish to be added. Controversies, like projects but with a negative twist, probe for what is possible, for who can muster what kind of power, what issues and what people may endure to either argue or be argued about and for how long. Without controversies nobody could trust his world because he would be unable to watch its always unclear boundaries.

Bringing projects, posses, and controversies together permits us to envision an individual that is no longer the restless individual of modern society, balancing means and ends by rationality and looking for cause and effect in engaging with reality. Instead, layers, flows, and switches become predominant. A ‘layer’ is one’s known place, taken in knowledge of the neighboring place to which one can switch and which one confounds neither with a position in a hierarchy nor with a decision on center and periphery. These older distinctions are

substituted by ecological distinctions that know about sudden reversals without losing a feeling for the neighborhood. ‘Flows’ mean that attempts to understand the world are abandoned for attempts to ‘surf’ it, or, to keep the wording technical, to control one’s own interaction with it. This control of interaction is a body-and-mind issue, a question of intuition, tact, and touch, which interestingly resists any attempt to cede either to cognition or to volition the leadership in finding the next idea or decision. Instead, the two intertwine, ensuring that the degree of freedom entertained by cognition when dreaming about possibilities is met by volition’s necessity to tie in with reality again in order to nevertheless realize this or that idea. And ‘switch’ is the key term, telling us that any one position or decision is just another moment for either continuing on the same path or changing to another. Next society, or so it seems, makes no allowance for any place with only one functional meaning to it. Any place is a gate to several possibilities for continuing or even to returning to start. It is a highly recursive complexity organized by switches, which cannot be otherwise in a society dominated by the advent of electricity.

An individual bound up with layers, flows, and switches for organizing and being organized by projects, poses, and controversies is not a mask like the ancient *persona* nor the self-assured modern self maintaining its equilibrium but a highly heterogeneous collection of experiences casted for diverse narratives depending on the particular case but always involving stories about people, places, and times. Self-tracking gains the upper hand over self-presentation, let alone self-being. Friends, followers, and visitors abound. We cannot and do not resist assuming both masks and selves, thus entertaining, say, Aristotelian and Cartesian feelings about what more or less social networks offer and demand of us, but we begin to acknowledge that masks and selves may in the end be ladders we have to climb in learning to identify layers and flows and to switch them as needed, and which may be discarded as we learn to listen to and tell the stories about how to cope with next society.

We thus abandon human hubris and learn to get along with computers and perhaps with other intelligent beings as well.

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