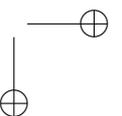
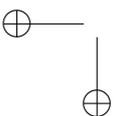


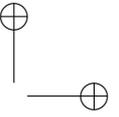
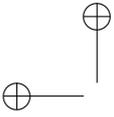
6. Mass and Multitudes: “Old” and “New” Ways of Being in Public

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Abstract: The “old” concept of masses (studied by Freud, Gasset, Adorno, Canetti, Elias, Blumer among others) seems to be vanished from the recent research in digital media, as if it was a primitive way of being in public. Not denying the social importance of well-structured publics with a clear agenda and rational goals, one tries to bring to light the relevance of the mass behavior and mass propaganda in digital media, frequently expressed in forms of digital sociability (flaming, digital hooliganism and bullying) that seems to be forgotten by some approaches. Simultaneously, one tries to identify emerging forms of sociability that act politically with internal discussion and critical intervention. Nowadays, one assists to the rebirth of political activism. After the cynicism of 80th and 90th (Sloterdijk, 1987), people seem to be awaking from political apathy, as the first years of the second decade seems to announce.

Keywords: Mass, Publics, Forms of Sociability, Political Activism, Digital Media.





Introduction and proposal

The "old" concept of masses (studied by Freud, Gasset, Adorno, Canetti, Elias, Blumer among others) seems to have disappeared from the recent research in digital media, as if it were a primitive way of being in public.

Notwithstanding the social importance of well-structured publics with a clear agenda and rational goals, one tries to bring to light the relevance of mass behaviour and mass propaganda in digital media, frequently expressed in forms of digital sociability (flaming, digital hooliganism and bullying) that seems to be forgotten by some approaches.

At the same time, one tries to identify emerging forms of sociability that act politically with internal discussion and critical intervention. Nowadays, the rebirth of political activism is evident. After the cynicism of the 1980s and 90s (Sloterdijk, 1987), people seem to be awakening from political apathy, as the first years of the second decade seem to announce.

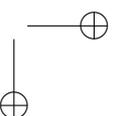
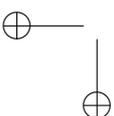
Suddenly, some phenomena occurred in Cairo, Madrid, and Lisbon, Greece. Activists began to occupy streets and squares, building their own agenda and causes in a process that seems highly flexible, autonomous and susceptible of being understood by the concept of multitudes. Simultaneously with mutations in activism, power suffers a structural change in its strategies and probably also in its very nature, being easier to gain or lose it. There is a strong acceleration of social dynamics (v. Naim, 2015; Hardt and Negri, 2000)

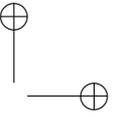
In this approach, our attention is focused on other particular social interactions generally referred to as multitudes that, by their features, seem to be productive to analyse when compared with masses.

Considering several ideal types of publicness, in the broad sense of acting in public, one finds it as a strong, complex and contradictory social variable pervasive in many different ways in the history of humankind and in the construction of political identities.

Mass critique and its critics

For a long period of time the social sciences have worked with ideal types of sociability to explain political and cultural dynamics. Among these, the public and the masses were the most frequently groups mentioned and studied by scholars.





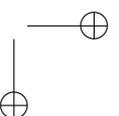
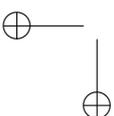
An ideal type approach from Wright Mills became famous
In a mass,

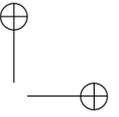
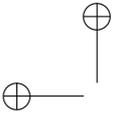
“(1) far fewer people express opinions than receive them; (2) for the community of publics becomes an abstract collection of individuals who receive impressions from the mass media. (3) The communications that prevail are so organised that it is difficult or impossible for the individual to answer back immediately or with any effect. (4) The realisation of opinion in action is controlled by authorities that organise and control the channels of such action. (5) The mass has no autonomy from institutions; on the contrary, agents of authorised institutions penetrate this mass, reducing any autonomy it may have in the formation of opinion by discussion”.
(Mills, 2000:34)

The concept of mass seems to be surrounded by suspicion: the concept would sometimes be considered elitist, others too literary or empirically unsustainable. Consequently, it would have disappeared due to the Internet, acclaimed as an ecosystem adapted to enlightened publics.

On the other hand the concept of “public” appeared as exempt of all kind of suspicions which were very similar to those that are applied to the more optimistic versions of the Enlightenment. “Public” would mean normative and devoid of political effectiveness.

Generally, in literature “mass” is characterized by anonymity, uniformity and conformity, described as potentially fanatical and framed by the lowest common denominator. It gives expression to the unconscious motives, reinforced by the cumulative character and circular and reciprocal stimulation/excitation. It can assume several types: casual (have momentary existence, loosely organized); conventional (the behaviour is expressed in a pre-established and regulated manner, having limited duration); a mob (characterized by the obsessive presence of a target or objective driven to the action, which in general is destructive and aggressive); panic mass (the reciprocal stimulation within the group intensifies the panic, increasing the irrational character of the action, facing the escape of a common danger); expressive, when the excitement is discharged without pre-established rules by simple physical movement that aims to loosen the tension, and not a particular goal or proposal.





Mass critique became suspicious of being conceptually impressionist because of its somewhat apocalyptic tune, nourished by artistic approach. The capitalist urbanization, social *locus* of the appearance of modern masses is a strong sociological background represented in all its aspects in music, literature, and cinema. With regards to mass behaviour, one may well think of the London street mobs of Dickens, of the mass surveillance present in Kafka and Orwell (Literature) or of the de-humanization previewed by Chaplin (Modern Times, 1936), Jacques Tati (Playtime, 1967), King Vidor (The Crowd, 1928) and Kazan (A Face in the crowd, 1956).

Masses are indeed well documented in literature, the philosophy of movies and human sciences. Canetti, one of the winners of the Nobel Prize of Literature wrote one of the 21st century major essays on “mass”.

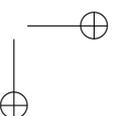
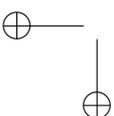
It’s really worth reading some quotations, where the accuracy of the scientist is enhanced by the expertise of the literary observer:

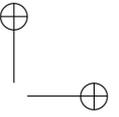
“Within the crowd there is equality. This is absolute and indisputable and never questioned by the crowd itself. It is of fundamental importance one might even defining a crowd as a state of absolute equality.

A head is a head, an arm is an arm, and differences between individual heads and arms are irrelevant. It is for the sake of this equality that people become a crowd and they tend to overlook anything which might detract from it.” (Canetti, 1978, 29)

Regarding the reciprocal excitement of dance:

“In the rhythmic crowd, on the other hand (for example the crowd of the dance), density and equality coincide from the beginning. Everything here depends on movement. All the physical stimuli involved function in a predetermined manner and are passed on from one dancer to another. Density is embodied in the formal recurrence of retreat and approach; equality is manifest in the movements themselves. And thus, by the skilful enactment of density and equality, a crowd feeling is engendered. These rhythmic formations spring up very quickly and it is only physical exhaustion, which bring them to an end.” (Canetti, 1978, 30)





When writing about mass leadership, Canetti uses a strong metaphor:

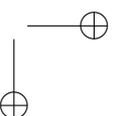
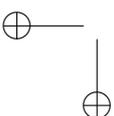
“Mass crystals are the small, rigid groups of men, strictly delimited and of great constancy, which serve to precipitate crowds. Their structure is such that they can be comprehended and taken in at a glance. Their unity is more important than their size. Their role must be familiar; people must know what they are there for. Doubt about their function would render them meaningless. They should preferably always appear the same and it should be impossible to confound one with another; a uniform or a sphere of operations serves to promote them.” (Canetti, 1978, 73)

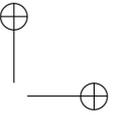
By its beauty and assertiveness, the book brings some of the qualities of a major essay. Nonetheless, it also brings with it all the imagined dangers that the more descriptive and quantitative thought might fear: Canetti analyses rivers, rain, sea, and forests as metaphors of mass symbols. For instance, the German army is described as a forest in movement (Canetti, 1978: 75).

Mass critics were often accused of Leftism. They would aim to be enlightened avant-garde representatives despising ordinary people. This kind of critique will be applied to different dimensions of mass society research: mass consumption (early Baudrillard, 1981; 1991), mass media (Adorno, s/d; 1995) and loss of autonomy and individuality (David Riesman, 1969). The paradigm would be the Frankfurt School with some peculiar contributions coming from Walter Benjamin, particularly sensitive to the innovation brought to media changes.

Mass critics were also accused of Conservatism, supporting elites against mass democracy and populism. German thought and particularly the influence of some readings on Freud, Nietzsche and Heidegger would be responsible for this charge.

Mass critics would follow an apocalyptic tune making predictions on cultural chaos, exhibiting melancholic grief for humanist culture. The problem can and must be equated bearing in mind its connections with the *volkisch* spirit, as a driven force for mass movements built around collective identities. For instance, for Franz Strich “Romanticism is the expression of the deepest tendencies of the German soul” (cit. in Löwy and Sayre, 1997, 24). However, those connections are ambiguous. It goes together with nationalism (Wagner, for instance) and it can appear in mass movements. Yet, it also appears





in a strange and subtle melancholy for the lost community (see, for instance, Benjamin, 1987-a), to support a Marxist critique of mass society.

Sloterdijk contributed with an interesting diagnosis of some historical moments particularly concerned with Critical Theory:

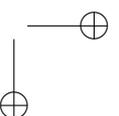
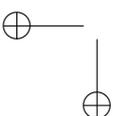
“Critical Theory was based on the presupposition that we know this world a priori, through *Weltschmerz* (world-pain). What we perceive of the world can be ordered in psychosomatic coordinates of pain and pleasure. Critique is possible inasmuch as pain tells us what is "true" and what is "false." In holding this view, Critical Theory makes the usual "elitist" assumption of an intact sensibility. This characterizes its strength and its weakness; it establishes its truth and restricts the scope of its validity” (Sloterdijk, 2000: 11).

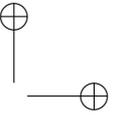
The return of the oppressed: critique comes back

Careful observations must be considered as far as these critiques are related. Warily, the narratives of humankind can and should be studied as testimonies from a particular culture, historical moment or sociological context.

This does not imply any kind of suggestion to leave science. One is not accepting some postmodern critic (Fayarebend, for instance) that almost claims we forget the division between science, literature and even common sense. Using James's concepts, we have multiple provinces of knowledge – a pragmatist concept also present in the phenomenological school. Each one of these different provinces of meaning has different attitudes and goals. Trust, in the domain of faith; doubt and accuracy in science; imagination and creativity in arts.

Each one of those schools of thought and each one those authors is sufficiently complex to be studied simply as a kind of apocalyptic material interesting to some subjects on the history of ideas. In spite of his Marxist ideas, Benjamin understood that the changes on reception brought about by the cinema and the radio and the changes opened (many years before the Internet) to surpass the wall between audiences and producers. Adorno and Horkheimer (1995), and Benjamin (1987-a; 1987-b; 1987-c; 1987-d) made some impressive foresights on populism, propaganda, aestheticization of politics and the



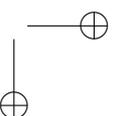
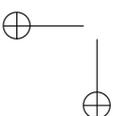


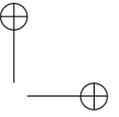
return of some ritual dimensions of institutional politics. As scientists, one must read them with cautious distance, and particularly, without prejudice and with a strong awareness of the historical contexts. Time does not affect the accuracy of the classics. Marshall McLuhan (1974) would remember the ritualization of society. Riesman (1969) theorized the other-directed theoretical type. Just some four years ago, Sherrill Turkle (2011) used it again in *Alone Together* applying it to mobile devices. Finally, all these authors have sharp intuitions concerned with the future of politics in what is related with media (the importance of secrecy and the principle of publicity).

The most definitive works of critical theory belong to a well-defined tradition in social theory. This tradition is concerned with evaluating the impact that different types of sociability have on the character of their members, and the moral alternatives that citizens may follow with regard to / their society. The distinction between other-directed and autonomous personalities, to take only one example, crucial in Riesman's work, which is embedded in similar distinctions made by Durkheim between organic society and anomie, by Tönnies between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, by Cooley between primary and secondary groups, and so on. One must stress the productive continuity that their work partakes. One of their primary achievements has been a mapping out of the conflicting orientations of men who exist amidst drastic social and cultural changes, and to express it with contributions from psychology and psychoanalysis.

Additionally, one must bear in mind the general goals of those works: they were not – most of them – just empirical research on media and propaganda, nor did they intend to be. In the seminal works of Riesman (*Lonely Crowd*, 1969), Canetti (*Masses / Crowds and Power*, 1979), and Adorno (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1995), the masses are more than a product of contextual conjuncture and context. “Crowd” is present in history along with humankind since the first pack of primates. The “foundations” of culture are permanently confronted with ancestral forces that present themselves in specific historical moments. The hateful and beautiful fires from Riefenstahl movies leave us something that we try to forget but it is present inside us: humankind is highly capable of mass cruelty.

Mass media and TV critics are just a part of ancient history. The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is not just a critique of capitalism, and fascism. It is a Freudian and Nietzschean critique of a particular stage of reason. In some





moments of their work, an encounter occurs between media studies and social theory, including anthropology. They must not be confronted with small narratives on sociology of reception, but with narratives on reception that have a strong theoretical assumption in the domain of culture and politics (for instance, Raymond Williams).

From the end of ideology and the emergence of Cynicism to the rebirth of Activism

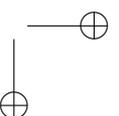
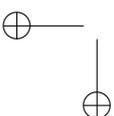
During the first years of the most recent stage of financial globalization, a blanket of apathy, cynicism and technological euphoria fell upon politics. In the late nineties, the most influential discourse was the techno-libertarian ideology wherein converged elements of the underground culture and neoliberal discourse. This culminated in a political project of economic and societal regulation (known as new economy) deeply focused on strengthening the market regulatory imperatives. A mix of social cybernetics, digital Darwinism, neoliberal economic theory and cultural libertarianism compounded this political and economic project. Those elements were added to the praise of individual freedom, entrepreneurship and creative innovation (Lovink, 2009: 11).

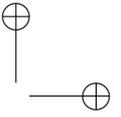
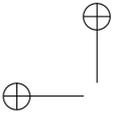
During those controversial times, cyber libertarians increasingly called for imaginative potentialities introduced by computer mediated communication. The concept of identity was often connected with notions such as fluidity, flexibility and non-linearity.

The dominant perception of politics, particularly among youngsters, seemed to be identified with the world of technocracy, efficiency or realpolitik but also of corruption and abuse of power. Another way would be a spontaneous form of humorous cynicism as a critical strategy of political distance. Such points of view with their strong disbelief in politics may well remind us of, with due reservations, the latent distrust on words and values taken for granted, the degradation of 'words with authority', words related with modern values ('democracy', 'reason') that have become dramatically devoid of meaning (Safatle 2009: 1, Sloterdijk, 2000).

Sloterdijk (2000: 4) claims: "Today the cynic appears as a mass figure: an average social character in the upper echelons of the elevated superstructure."

In 2001, during the World Social Forum of Porto Alegre there was an explosion caused by the demonstrations against globalization and capitalism.





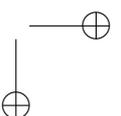
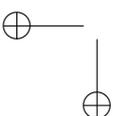
The rebirth of activism would once again become more evident in the demonstrations of ‘*Indignados*’, the name given in Spain and Portugal to young protesters against austerity, youth unemployment and labour precariousness. Since 2008, Europe has been undergoing through an unprecedented change with very different dimensions marked by widespread insecurity that undermines the trust and interdependence where civil societies lay their foundation (Judt, 2010: 22). In this scenario of uncertainty, hundreds of thousands of young people in Portugal, Spain, Greece and United Kingdom have joined together in groups against youth unemployment, huge cuts in social welfare and austerity measures taken to allegedly fight against public debt and increasing deficits. Those movements that are just now crossing Europe and influencing elections and governments are often identified with the new social movements, from which are certainly inheritors but with particular features due to new particular contexts:

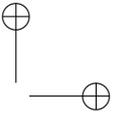
- a) decreasing social mobility, reaching a generation of middle-class youth distinguished by the use of cultural and technological skills;
- b) Proletarianization of qualified persons endowed with cultural capital and creativity;
- c) Circulation of media platforms, adaptable to more flexible forms of public intervention;
- d) Proliferation of new discourses sensitive to various forms of collaborative expression in digital media.

A new time was arriving after the defeat of fights, after the “triumph of the weak thought” (Negri e Zolo, s/d: 1). New kinds of movements are arriving, their future being, in Negri’s thought, the construction of a web of movements. The multitude would become global: “a multiplicity of singularities already mixed, capable of immaterial and intellectual labour, with an enormous power [potenza] of freedom”. (Negri ad Zolo, s/d: 8)

Simultaneously, this happens in a world where the nature and functions of power are changing, according to a common diagnosis of Marxists philosopher and former chairs of the World Bank, as the following quotations seem to confirm.

Moises Naim states :

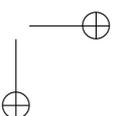
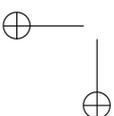


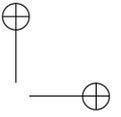


“We know that power is shifting from brawn to brains, from north to south and west to east, from old corporate behemoths to agile start-ups, from entrenched dictators to people in town squares and cyberspace. But to say that power is shifting from one continent or country to another, or that it is dispersing among many new players, is not enough. Power is undergoing a far more fundamental mutation that has not been sufficiently recognized and understood. Even as rival states, companies, political parties, social movements, and institutions or individual leaders fight for power as they have done throughout the ages, power itself—what they are fighting so desperately to get and keep—is slipping away. Power is decaying. To put it simply, power no longer buys as much as it did in the past. In the twenty-first century, power is easier to get, harder to use—and easier to lose. From boardrooms and combat zones to cyberspace, battles for power are as intense as ever, but they are yielding diminishing returns. Their fierceness masks the increasingly evanescent nature of power itself. Understanding how power is losing its value—and facing up to the hard challenges this poses—is the key to making sense of one of the most important trends reshaping the world in the twenty-first century.” (Naim, 2015: 14)

Michael Hardt and Negri do not claim the end of power, but they identify some common features:

The declining sovereignty of nation-states and their increasing inability to regulate economic and cultural exchanges is in fact one of the primary symptoms of the coming of Empire. The sovereignty of the nation-state was the cornerstone of the imperialisms that European powers constructed throughout the modern era. By “Empire”, however, we understand something altogether different from “imperialism.” The boundaries defined by the modern system of nation-states were fundamental to European colonialism and economic expansion: the territorial boundaries of the nation delimited the center of power from which rule was exerted over external foreign territories through a system of channels and barriers that alternately facilitated and obstructed the flows of





production and circulation. (...)The passage to Empire emerges from the twilight of modern sovereignty. In contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command. The distinct national colors of the imperialist map of the world have merged and blended in the imperial global rainbow. (Hard and Negri, 2000: xii-xiii)

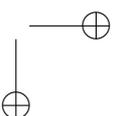
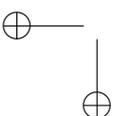
In spite of the fact that the ideological and philosophical roots of both statements are completely different and, in the end, opposite in their essence, both identify something similar expressed in the notions of “diversity” and “interdependence”. Traditional power is losing its strength.

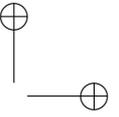
Masses and multitudes and digital communication

Many thinkers considered that digital devices, particularly those emerging with web 2.0 and social networks, were the protagonists of an ideal narrative of democratic participation. The concept of mass and mass media would become obsolete. Others believe that the Internet and social networks together with mobile devices exhibit many of the features of the traditional concept of masses.

The sceptical approach claims that one cannot neglect the social and political components of power over the media system, including the Internet. In fact, this perspective is accompanied by an idealized vision of the political and economic power structures that cross social networks. The societal, economic, and political constraints involved in the communicative process remain hidden, and therefore unacknowledged.

Secondly, the participation of audiences does not necessarily mean the increase of citizenship quality. A tendency toward conformity, visible in the fact that people prefer to form groups with whom they agree was found, generating polarizing effects that increased the possibilities for people to dismiss alternative points of view (Sunstein 2001: 49). More recently, social networks with





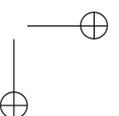
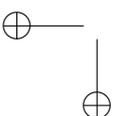
their causes and thematic groups can be held responsible for a fragmented environment with negative impacts on the rational and democratic dialogue (Fenton, 2009: 8-9).

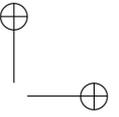
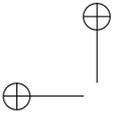
Research alerts us to domination processes in a / the virtual world. The introduction of social interaction technologies bear evidence to connections between the online and the off line world. Social Web initiated the possibility of merging various social interactive features of the Internet in one platform.

One must face the fact that disclosure of personal information in social media and phenomena such as surveillance and data-veil lance are highly valuable to the economy and politics. The domestication of bodies and behaviors is statistically relevant for an economy increasingly dependent on immaterial concepts such as memory, culture and identity. Additionally, one must consider the critical importance of understanding what the autonomy of public discourse inside global platforms of social network strongly dependent on global major corporations like Facebook, You Tube, Twitter and many others objectively means.

Also, many scholars take into account the permanent and ubiquitous connection established among individuals making themselves more dependent on preconceptions that are dominant in the communities to which they belong. The adoption of this point of view includes the suspicion of a social regression induced by new media, due to the re-tribalization of the social world radicalized by the Internet. In spite of allowing access to a huge diversity of contents, research showed that users, wherever they are, often remain confined to their private worlds, connecting by e-mail, Skype and message service with their usual acquaintances. (Fidalgo, 2011).

Sheryl Turkle describes an experience with her daughter during a trip to Paris, when she decided to call by cell phone to one of her close friends to schedule a dinner. Walking through distant places, users carry with them their homes and their offices, talking to the same people on the same issues as if they had not left the neighborhood. Social media and mobile communication seem to induce the return of some characteristics of life style which seem more adjusted to pre-modern relationships. At least in some situations, this universal and ubiquitous presence of significant Others seems to be unsuitable with an idea of a cosmopolitan vibrant public sphere. On the contrary, it allows behaviors adjusted to the idea of multitude as conceived by Tarde (cf. Fidalgo, 2011, 69), very similar to the traditional concept of masses.





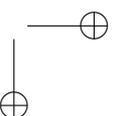
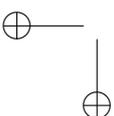
Despite those phenomena, urban *cosmopolis* are full of liquid multitudes ready to act. (Brazil riots, March eleven started quickly and with the click of a button the signal was often to come to the streets). Supporters of this point of view argue that web 2.0 and social media allow social movements to build support through their own websites, without constraints, empowering social movement groups to produce their own ideas, news, agendas, discursive practices, strategies, tactics, – indeed, their identity – and generating a phenomenon of cyberactivism. ‘ (Nah 2009:1296).

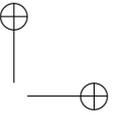
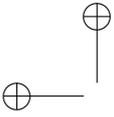
The new generation of Internet technologies has facilitated the involvement of citizens in the observation and interpretation of events. In this perspective, they may influence how the average public perceives social movements in a more supportive and positive way. Some media theorists talked about ‘technopolitics’, a term used by movements that fight the neoliberal hegemony by digital means. Some recover the old concept of tactical media, meaning the use of the cheap ‘do it yourself media’ or ‘self-media’ by groups and individuals who feel excluded from public dialogue and hegemonic culture.

“By the end of the nineties the post-modern ‘time without movements’ had come to pass. The organized discontent against neo-liberalism, global warming policies, labour exploitation and numerous other issues converged. Equipped with networks and arguments, backed up by decades of research, a hybrid movement – wrongly labelled by mainstream media as ‘anti-globalization’ – gained momentum’ (Lovink and Schneider, s/d).

Facing the question in this paper, some conclusions seem important, bearing in mind further work:

- a) Sociability forms, in their various expressions, either masses or multitudes, have different compositions where rationality and passions are more or less present in different levels;
- b) Those multiple expressions of different rationality are an anthropological constant feature of human sociability; they are not an abstract reality distant from concrete human life and it has many ways of being in history. The digital communication is no exception;

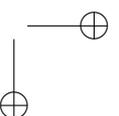
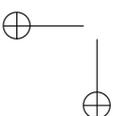


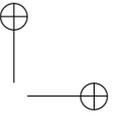


- c) This means an epistemic difficulty to the building of an ideal-type, without giving voices to the social actor;
- d) The definition of different kinds of sociability can't be found without the research on the social agents that think about themselves as public actors on a public stage. What does it mean to them to act in public within the digital world? Following Weber, Geertz or Taylor that problem is directly related with the core problem of subjective meaning of action, in this case of political action: difficult to evaluate without listening to the voices that collectively create and re-create the dynamic and never ending ties of political action.

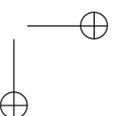
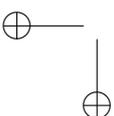
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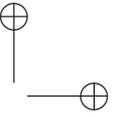
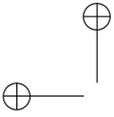
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