

*The Oligarchic Artifice* – Carlo Podda

Artificial intelligence is only the latest, even if probably the most important and pervasive tool used and in which the revolution that mankind is going through is substantiated, after those that have taken place in the past centuries, such as the one that took the name of the industrial revolution, with the advent of steam first and then of electricity. To try to understand what the complex of changes that artificial intelligence can induce in our lives and, specifically as regards our discussion today, in democracy; perhaps first of all we need to try to understand the changes that the processes at the basis of its substantiation and creation have

*already* induced: the whole of the phenomenon which we precisely call the "digital transition".

But before we even do that we should agree on "rules of engagement", so to speak. Trying to overcome that way of approaching the complex of these phenomena which, even if starting from totally opposite, I would say symmetrical, points of view, reach the same result. I am referring to the prevailing culture, to the way in which this has determined the ways in which change is observed, hypothesizing on the one hand the ineluctability of the change itself, as well as its disastrous results, but at the same time the impossibility of opposing it; and on the other a vision according to which the change would have produced up to now, and will produce in the future, only positive results. However, the outcome to which these opposing points of view arrive is the same, namely: total immobility, the abandonment of any attempt to determine the direction that digital change proposes, leaving these choices exclusively in the hands of the four or five most large corporations in the world. I personally remain convinced that there is much to be done for those who believe that artificial intelligence is still a tool, and that the judgment we must make of this tool depends exclusively on how it is used and what will be done.

Having made this premise on the method of approaching the topic, which I consider indispensable, we can resume the reasoning from before. What are the changes that the digital transition with respect to democracy has already produced so far? And what did we do, or rather, didn't we do so that the results were not the ones I will try to describe?

Since the beginning of the century we have been in the midst of a revolution which can in part be defined as cultural but which can equally be defined as industrial, because the use of *big data* has not only changed the structure of human and social relations, but also the work and its nature with it, the relationships in work are generated, the relationship with production and between the methods of production and the environment.

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According to some studies, within the next three years we will have doubled the amount of data we had produced so far in our history as inhabitants of the planet. This definitely made available, for a growing number of people, a quantity of information and news which apparently were supposed to help the growth of people's awareness and democratic participation. Putting aside for a moment the distorted use that has been made of these means, such as that to lead people to wrong conclusions through the notorious *fake news*, what catches the eye at a first observation is that this mass of information has generated a sort of "turbulence", so instead of producing greater awareness, disorientation has very often been produced, not to mention the use for persuasive purposes what of these tools has been made during these years. Suffice it to mention in this regard the so-called Arab Spring of 2010/2011 in which a massive campaign on *social media* in the countries involved by the CIA was evident, or the campaign for the presidential elections in the United States of Donald Trump in 2016.

The risk, in fact, of a distortion in the use of these tools or of their exploitation for the purposes of the few or "of the few" is inherent in the same data ownership, management and distribution structure; which, as we know, they are in the hands of a few very large private subjects who de facto hold the planetary monopoly. After all, even intuitively we realize that democracy has certainly not been implemented on a global level in recent years, indeed, to put it bluntly, there are not a few who observe that democracy as such is also in crisis in its homeland, namely Europe. In our continent, in addition to the worrying growth of autocratic regimes, it is evident to all a political turning point that aims to limit personal freedoms and actually increase the ability to control the behavior of each of us.

The question to be asked is whether the transition from the possession and management of data aimed at implementing control through the network that is no longer authoritative but this time persuasive, and therefore to a presence that all observers imagine of a pervasive nature of artificial intelligence; may accentuate this trend or limit it.

Just to say a triviality, this will depend on us and on how mankind will use this tool. The thing that from my point of view is already clear is that in order to guarantee a use that does not worsen the existing situation but rather implements possible corrections to current trends and behaviors, there is a need for a "return of protagonism", in this area, by politics and in any case by those who are called to represent the general interest. It is indeed evident that if the old paradigm money-commodity-money

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it can now be replaced by the new information-money information paradigm; the monopoly, or it would be better to say the oligopoly, in the use, in the possession of the data and in their use, determines their aim to the advantage only of a restricted oligarchy; which, hiding behind the presumed objectivity of the data corroborated by the support of the AI, it convinces the many, through a real "artifice", to do what they want and choose, leaving us however our inner belief that we are free. In short, the risk of what Byung Chul Han, a brilliant German philosopher of Korean origin, calls *the Infocracy*, seems to be expanding dramatically.

Of all these factors, artificial intelligence will act as a very powerful accelerator and catalyst, and it is perhaps time to start wondering about how to adjust the use of this tool. Beyond the moral-ethical debates on how it can impact on the very nature of man, it is a matter of seeing if we want to treasure the experience gained in recent years; and that is to take into account the substantial fragility of the relationship between technology and the law, and more generally of the "strange" rules that we have experienced on the web in recent years.

It is a question of demanding that politics understood as a "public decision-maker" intervene in this sense. It is necessary to urge the decision maker to start a new and more marked regulatory activity that safeguards democracy, the rule of law and human rights. Of all this, politics seems to be totally unaware, even if some are worth mentioning

interesting initiatives which, with the debate that has opened up in the United States, or in some parts of Europe, from Spain to Italy; urge the European Union to reflect on the opportunity to switch from an activity of the *Authorities* dedicated to regulating and guaranteeing *privacy*, to a new activity that is aimed at guaranteeing the ownership of data, starting with those of each of us.

Finally, I would like to conclude with a consideration on how, as far as I'm concerned, perhaps we should begin to reflect and ask ourselves through which new tools we can "go beyond" the very function of the authorities, or rather, how the functions of the Authorities *can* be accompanied, with regard to "participatory democracy", by forms of organized and widespread representation in the communities affected by the change. These new subjects of social representation should be entrusted with the *function of assessing the impact* on the community concerned and *monitoring progress in the use and methods* of AI; a bit like they tried to do in North America for the cycle of the environment, therefore for the disposal and recycling of waste, thus guaranteeing the right of access and control of the methods with which the companies in charge carried out their

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activity. The paradox of this situation, in fact, is that in an industry such as the data industry, which makes the transparency of people who have penetrated their private sphere every day into one of its "mantras", it envelops the place of processing and use of this data in total darkness: today it is the algorithm, tomorrow it will be AI

That's why in any case I believe that the time has come to sensitize people to worry about this issue, or if we want, to pay attention to it with awareness of the benefits and risks; and therefore initiatives such as those of this debate are welcome, from which I am sure important contributions and food for thought will come. Carlo Podda Head of the National Connect Slc CGIL Study Centre