

TOPICS ON TECHNOLOGICAL AND COMMERCIAL DEHUMANIZATION

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ABSTRACT

The spectacularization of power and the state using the media machine helps hide the technological and commercial dehumanization fed by the economic and financial system during capitalism's current stage of development. These phenomena mark society as a whole and education and culture in particular, which are losing humanistic references to become instruments for reproducing the status quo. Even new information and communication technologies, which were initially defined as aiming to contribute to individuals' fulfilment, become instruments of alienation and submission by building a meta-reality. It is important to reject the overdetermination of politics, culture, education, information and communication by the economy and finance by encouraging a new critical awareness.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Capitalism; culture; education; commercialization; power; media

RESUMO

A espectacularização do poder e do Estado por via dos aparelhos mediáticos, contribui para ocultar a desumanização tecnológico mercantil alimentada pelo sistema económico-financeiro, na actual fase de desenvolvimento do capitalismo. Estes fenómenos marcam a sociedade na sua globalidade e, nomeadamente, o ensino e a cultura que perdem as referências humanísticas para se tornarem instrumentos de reprodução do *statu-quo*. Mesmo as novas tecnologias da informação e da comunicação que inicialmente se definiam como visando contribuir para a realização dos indivíduos se tornam instrumentos de alienação e de submissão construindo uma meta-realidade. Importa recusar a sobredeterminação da política, da cultura, da educação, da informação e da comunicação pela economia e pela finança fomentando uma nova consciência crítica.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Capitalismo; cultura; educação; mercantilização; poder; média

We are threatened by a new twilight of rationality. The spectacularization of power and politics, as already happened in the different totalitarianisms, is fed by a manipulation of emotions and instincts in detriment to citizenship. Powers become invisible, they are taken away from the centre and dispersed among the new lords of finance, the economy and the media that dominate at global level, shaping mentalities and influencing behaviours, especially consumer behaviour. The state is increasingly reduced to media

staging and self-reproduction by bureaucratic political staff that, in contrast to what happened at other stages of representative democracy, mostly do not act in accordance with ideological projects and future strategies. It is limited to bringing the interests of the dominant oligarchies, managed by the technostructure in day-to-day life, into the system. These interests determine hierarchies, cultural references, values, rules and *habitus*. Globalization is the peak of this state of things, penetrating every nook and cranny of society and influencing life in even the remotest corners of the world.

The lights of luxury shops feed the fetishization of brands in big cities but are unable to hide the attack on human dignity embodied in the contrast between the objects they illuminate and the misery of those who seek the warmth that those lights emit to spend another night outdoors. These are not only the vagabonds of yore, but they are university students ground down by the irrationalities of education and unaccountability of the state, workers or even management staff who the brutality of reengineering or globalized displacement expels from companies, sometimes at an age when it is difficult to start a new life. It is a whole range of individual and family dramas that the rhetoric of guilty consciences wishing to provide assistance lumps into the term “homeless”. In fact, as we can see in Portugal and many other countries hit by “austerity” economic policies while markets and stock exchanges “revive” and dividends in banking and large companies increase, we are returning to charity dispensed by religious institutions and sensitive souls, to food distribution and food banks and other ways of trying to overcome the most scandalous consequences of dismantling protection instruments and the irrationality of capitalism’s current stage of development.

Those truly responsible for out-of-control debts and deficits, for the recession, for unemployment and for all the other phenomena characteristic of the current situation aim to, through their political agents, reinstate organization models for the economy, society and state that allow them to compete with the wild capitalism of emerging countries or even adopt, with adaptations, forms of exploitation from those countries and other regions in the world. These mean a step back, in many ways, to the 19th century or the first half of the 20th century, as demonstrated by the reduction seen in recent decades of the portion of national income attributed to work¹. This step backwards is justified by pseudo-benign arguments related to development or budgets in contexts where it becomes necessary to use formally democratic instruments of legitimation of power through media manipulation of votes and public opinion.

Technological and commercial dehumanization also involves the destruction of the humanist dimension of culture and schooling. Culture crushed by the image, by the fleeting and by money is becoming widespread and, above all, it is turning into marketable,

¹ Thomas Piketty, in his fundamental work, writes: “at the beginning of the 1970s, the total amount of assets – deducting the debts – was between two and three-and-a-half years of national income in all rich countries and on all continents. Forty years later, at the beginning of the 2010s, private assets represented between four and seven years of national income in the countries studied. The overall evolution leaves no doubt: with bubbles or without them, there has actually been a great step back to private capital in rich countries since the 1970s, or, if we prefer, the emergence of a new asset-based capitalism.” In other words, there has been: “a movement of privatization and the gradual transfer of public wealth to private wealth since the 1970s-1980s” (Piketty, 2013, p. 273).

consumer objects. Democratizing cultural policies have structurally failed because, by subordinating education and teaching, they have not been able to overcome the great differences generated by the system, and have been limited to cosmetic operations regarding the inequalities of people's access to spiritual enrichment and the enjoyment of what is beautiful and unique. Several forms of creation placed on the same level by an "everything is culture" outlook have made simple entertainment, the spectacle, an adornment of power and illustrate the degradation of contemporary societies in this area. As in the past, fundamentally, only socially or educationally privileged minorities are able to have access to the knowledge that frees and to the deciphering of the created and enriched aesthetic languages that the state – in a broad sense – or the initiative of some creators and private institutions encourage so that a suitable sheen of civilization can be kept up (Pereira, 2016).

The powerful have the chance to show off their fabulous fortunes (with varying degrees of discretion) at auctions, buying consecrated pieces for their personal collections or dedicating them to other types of ostentation and displaying their status. The state, once the sheen of civilization has been safeguarded, has its budget conditioned by priorities belonging to the stage of ultraliberal financialization of the economy (in simple terms, this means that, for example, the sustainability of the banking sector takes prevalence over other functions and sectors). The state has begun managing historical and artistic assets according to market criteria of profitability: monuments are rented for entertainment, language is counted in terms of owing and having, and museums become shops and commercial attractions. There clearly is an economic dimension in cultural production and practices, but it should be enhanced by integrating those practices and production into the exercise of citizenship and the search for the individual's complete fulfilment.

Aesthetically basic or spectacle-based sub-products (talk shows, reality shows, festivals, etc.) are provided for young people – and others – so they can get drunk or indulge in group behaviour that exorcizes their anxieties and channels energies that could otherwise turn against the powers-that-be. In other words, entertainment is sold to the masses, to the multitude: stars paid their weight in gold, millionaire football players, myths built by marketing, noise, images. In a word: spectacle. This is a creation of a meta-reality that hides the world and life.

Education, from primary to higher, has similarly become organized according to a commercial rationale and the needs of the economic system. The aim is not for every citizen to contribute to the common good with his or her different skills and acquired knowledge, but for all citizens to become integrated into the operations of markets and the dynamics of capital movement at the service of those who *de facto* decide because they *de facto* have. The concept of profitability therefore extends to the very education process and, for that reason, with the introduction of certain reforms, such as the Bologna process in Portugal, the aim is for children and young people to stick to gaining skills applicable to reproducing capitalism just as it exists.

The humanities suddenly disappear or are reduced to a minor point on syllabuses at different levels of education. History, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, geographic,

social sciences in general are pushed aside or directed towards immediate application in the economic process. “Living” or “dead” languages disappear in favour of the language – English – which, as well as corresponding to the still leading power, best meets the needs of the different technical, technological, commercial discourses.

At universities, in a broad sense, teachers’ actions have become bureaucratically supervised based on the quantitative criteria of intellectual production. Confusing what is specific to research in the areas of the exact sciences and nature with the methods of social and human sciences, the number of papers presented at conferences and seminars takes priority. So, under pressure for funding needs and bureaucratic evaluations, papers stumble over one another, repeat each other, are produced artificially; in the same way that the number of articles published in “scientific” journals are counted administratively. As a result, and always as regards the social and human sciences where the incidences of such guidelines are perhaps clearest, the importance of in-depth work, whence essays and books emerge, is of secondary importance; the same can be said of the role (which should be central) of teaching actions, as the living and experienced relationship between teachers and students.

In fact, in the “contact hours”, as classes are called today, recommendations suggest reducing bibliography to the essential minimum, favouring instead the slicing of works through photocopies and the presentation of subjects (“content” is the preferred term) using powerpoint presentations. While the traditional, conservative university of the past cultivated, to a great extent, students’ passiveness towards *ex cathedra* teachers, today the same passiveness is encouraged through outlines projected on a screen and a purportedly didactic minimalism that subverts complexity.

The objective of educating children and young people so they can be fulfilled as people capable of self-determination and citizens useful to the humanization of the *polis* is replaced by their transformation into units designed to produce and consume in a society where competition, predatory selfishness and injustice are encouraged as if they were qualities.

The *homo* consumer of developed societies is kept in a virtual reality, which we call meta-reality, caused by the alienating and joint action of ideology and the market. Governments, by not wanting, not daring or not being able to go against the national and transnational interests that condition them, gain the legitimation they need in democracy and manage the status quo, hiding what is really at play, bypassing what really matters to citizens’ day-to-day lives and the functioning of the institutions. The ideological arrogance of triumphal capitalism is as unbearable as that of those who assigned to history a sense that, by crushing the individual, would lead to a perfect terminal society, since it reproduces that crushing in other forms of conformism, mystification and attacks on human dignity.

It is not by coincidence that digital technologies have Silicon Valley – located in the region of the San Francisco of the 1960s’ Flower Power – as their prime focal point of development and projection around the planet. These technologies, “artificial intelligence”, which originally emerged as a “counter-culture” or individual assertion and liberation, have inevitably been absorbed by the commercial rationale of the system and

have come to support the techno-liberal capitalist model already mentioned. This model expands with incredible effectiveness, influencing all of life in society, ways of producing, consuming, informing, communicating, socializing, living, participating and deciding (Sadin, 2016).

With a view to achieving profitability and productivity, work (and therefore workers) is subjected to algorithmic systems of impersonal control (i.e. there is no longer a direct point of contact with whom to establish a dialectic for argumentation and claims). On a pretext of comfort and well-being, personal autonomy is submitted to digital rationality conveyed by networks and systems. In the name of a mythical idea of modernity, creativity itself is increasingly conditioned by technology. Kant's *Sapere aude!* is delegated in a place that, as a product of human intelligence, takes on an intrinsic power that suits the new mechanisms for the submission of individuals.

How can we overcome this state of things? All social change is a consequence of direct or indirect dynamics caused by the action of actors and this action is the result of those actors gaining awareness in a specific context. So, as the behaviour of workers who tried to stop development of the mechanic's industry by destroying the machines was not a solution, it remains not only to refuse the overdetermination of politics, culture and education by the economy and finance, but also by technologies, since, as ever, individuals will always be responsible for their own destiny, by that which could be called history. When we talk about a triumphal capitalism, we mean that overdetermination being accepted as inevitable. While this remains the case, there can be no general or specific cultural and educational policies that do not feed the status quo.

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BIOGRAPHIC NOTE

Fernando Pereira Marques (Coruche, 1948) has a degree from the Paris Higher School of Social Sciences (EHESS) and a doctorat d'État in Sociology from the University of Amiens (France). He was an invited professor at the Lusófona University of Humanities and Technologies (retired), where he ran the second cycle course in Political Science, and a researcher at the New University of Lisbon's Contemporary History Institute. Among other roles, he has been a Member of Parliament and chaired the Parliamentary Subcommittee for Culture, as well as being a member of the Portuguese delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, where he was a member of the Culture and Education Committee, among others. He has written several research and essay works and is the Deputy Director of the journal *Finisterra* (Director Eduardo Lourenço).

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