Dialectics of Identity in a Techno-Society

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Abstract

In our age of globalization, the onslaught of technology, particularly in the last two decades, has had some adverse impact on humanity. Identity crisis, manifested in the form of de-centering of self, emotional detachment from society, growing numbness to reason …. is causing grave risk to society. There is possibility of presence of hidden logic of domination behind enlightenment rationality forcing our world into 'uncontrolled bureaucratic domination and domination of machine-technology'. The substitution of rational personality by 'individual-self' of information society that considers shared life experience, tradition, values and institutions unimportant will cause the society to become a place of chronic indeterminacy and perpetual ambivalence. This presentation is an attempt by the author at answering two questions that hover around the issue of identity-technology relation in contemporary society: first, what characterizes the relation between the arrival of new technologies and people's patterns of identification; and second, what is its socio-cultural and geo-cultural impact?

Keywords: Globalisation, Technology, Identity, Transformation, Automation.

A British woman became so obsessed with an online game that she let her three children live in squalor and even left her two dogs to starve to death…the 33-year old widow played the game almost non-stop on the internet for months while her children were reduced to eating cold baked beans straight from tin with their fingers…her home became filthy, with rubbish strewn over the floor and the bodies of her two dogs left for two months in the dining room…the horror came to light when a neighbor peered through the letter box and alerted the authorities.[1]

The above incident forces us to arrive at the following disturbing conclusions regarding the transmutation of the identity of the lady caused by her obsessive, compulsive internet fixation: Firstly, it indicates cessation of her biological identity as a woman and her near complete metamorphosis in to a bio-mechanical hybrid. Secondly, death of her motherly instincts indicates, acquiring of a sense of apathy of criminal dimension towards her domesticity which includes her children and pet dogs. Thirdly, it ensures collapsing of her social identity for her self-imposed confinement in to cyber-reality. Her (in)actions unsettles us and makes her a soft target of our mutual hatred for scripting a family tragedy of such magnitude. However, I reserve a marginal sympathy for her because she appears to me a woman possessed by the spectra of net-culture which destabilized her reason-system, mutilating her consciousness. Before being the initiator of a family tragedy, she became the tragic victim of onslaught of technology.

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1 *The Times of India*, 14 September, 2010, Kolkata.

Here is an instance of identity-transformation and its consequences from an ontological subject position to the realm of cyber-void. This is indicative of a shift of the contemporary world for humanistic paradigm to techno-paradigm at the cost of abolishment of space-time-identity continuum to a space of instantaneity and simultaneity.

Although the origin of the term 'identity' has a well defined historical location, but it is not until twentieth century that the concept is anatomized for exploring its polyphonic significance. Paradigmatic shifts in the world history in the form of Industrial Revolution, World Wars, holocaust, Globalization and Technology-revolution led to reversal of essentialist notion of identity for its critical appropriation as 'construct'. The rapid *technologization* of society in the last two decades and the related barrage of rhetorical interludes offering explanations to the techno-phenomena vis-à-vis shifting subject positions, instead of offering a grand narrative, ending up creating an eerie image of role of technology in society and its relation with mutation of self. Thus, if to Virilio technology is 'pure speed', to Deleuze and Guitteri it is 'desiring machine', whereas for Lyotard it is 'a new aesthetic'. In this process every something of each theoretician ended up into grand 'nothing'.

The issue becomes doubly complicated in developing countries like India where society with its cleavage between rich and poor, a replica of Benjamin Disraeli's (1846) 'two nations' and the overflowing offshoots of its irreconcilable polarities like - class and cast, private and public, agrarian and urban, subaltern and suburban-in the context of which the issue of construction of identity gains a psycho-dynamic proportion and appears as a process "located both in the core of the individual as well as in the core of his/her communal culture."[2]

The history of western thought since Renaissance via Enlightenment has always attempted to nurture the issue of identity relating it to the faculty of reason. German Philosopher Immanuel Kant argues that

> Enlightenment is man's emergence from his imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. *Sapere Aude* [dare to know] 'have courage to use your understanding!', this is the motto of enlightenment.[3]

By 'immaturity' Kant here indicates a state of mind that makes us accept others' authority to lead us in areas where reason is called for. Thus the courage to use reasoning faculty, to subvert the domination of unjust authoritarian forces, is the crux

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2 B. Disraeli, *Sybil or the Two Nations*, London, Oxford University Press, 1846. See also Erikson, 1968..

3 Immanuel Kant, *What is Enlightenment*, 1784, p.3. cfr. URL:http://www.etext.org/text/Kant%20Immanuel%20%20%20What%20Is%20Enlightenment.pdf (accessed on 28/Jan/2013).

of the true emancipation of self. As opposed to medieval notion of faith, 'reason' is celebrated as a fundamental cognitive capacity.

However, ours is a world dominated by spectra of globalization, cultural offshoots of neo-colonialism and to borrow Marx's phrase - 'the fetishism of commodities'. Surely the Kantian notion of rationality, the self activation of which in an individual mobilizes the process of enlightenment guaranteeing order - falls short of reaching its desired goal. An atomized self now needs to negotiate with an altered version of reasoning which refers to a host of highly differentiated and conflicting paradigm of rationality. 'Self' which was at the center of Renaissance and Enlightenment philosophy, is in this age of technology, now decentered.

The process of decentring of the rational individual is a complex one and follows a steady path of perpendicular fall in relation to the transmutation of a society from its materialistic character of the early industrial era to the world of postmodern technology. The worst form of authoritarianism and brutality that the highly urbanized society of the west observed, led to the expression of despair by intelligentsia. Max Weber's anguish over the disenchantment of the world, articulation of elements of 'discontentment' in civilization,[4] argument for presence of hidden logic of domination behind enlightenment rationality forces a world of 'uncontrolled bureaucratic domination and domination of machine-technology'.[5]

The process of individuation and the creation of a rational scientific man, the hall mark of the early modernity had an abortive end when there had been a radical intensification of some of the tendencies of modernity. This is a highly techno-centered new world which leads to the formation of a 'risk society',[6] where growth of knowledge created 'manufactured uncertainty'[7] which comes from human being's involvement in trying to alter the course of Nature as opposed to 'external risk' which comes from external nature. The element of risk in such a society is multiple - not only physical risk deriving out of application of technological process but the risky organizational framework and social-familial relations.

Instead of aligning and expressing with the structures of modernity like - shared life experience, tradition, values, institutions - individual-self of information society declares them unimportant for self expression. The legitimacy of twentieth century structures are questioned and class biography of humanity is replaced by reflexive biography. Here is the emergence of a violent exteriorization of the self. The reflexivity of such a liberated self is synonymous with a liquefied existence. This produces an existential insecurity which contributes to the formation of, as Zygmunt Bauman,

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4 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (Standard editions XXI), London, Penguin Freud Library, 1930.

5 Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, London, Allan Lane, 1942, 1973(reprint).

6 Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, 1946, trans.1992.

7 *Ibid.*

would call, 'habitat', which is - "a space of chaos and chronic indeterminacy, a territory subjected to rival and contradictory meaning-bestowing claims and hence perpetual ambivalence[8] where the individual belongs. But, the external modality of the agents is therefore one of insufficient determination, inconclusiveness, motility and rootlessness. The identity of the agent is neither given nor authoritatively confirmed. It has to be construed, yet no design for the construction can be taken as prescribed all full-proof.[9]

This liquidation of a personality in a techno-dominated world raises questions about the nature and function of technology itself. How technologies come to be coded in certain ways? Is it the machine which is configured by men or the user is configured by machine to be subservient to its rule. This 'irremediable ambiguity about the function of technology-its 'double life'[10] like status,-the specific purpose- intended use of machine and its possibility of functioning 'beyond' the programmed purpose,-complicates its relationship with the subject.

The assumed effect of a new technology may at times create a vision of the apocalypse when viewed from a subjective panoptical position. This happens when the issue of identity construction is discussed not in isolation but incorporating it with larger issues of class position, gender and community maneuvering, because of introduction of a new technology. This demands not merely a superficial observation of type, look and function of an art-fact but how it is reproduced, represented and consumed. Analyzing the cultural lag formed in the process of introduction of a technology and its full socio-cultural impact,-helps one to determine the nature of technology of a society in relation to the life of the subject, the human agent who is in the receiving end of *technologization.*

Although technocracy romanticizes an idea of equality and commonality of a knowledge-generation in the age of 'informationalism'- the term the urban sociologist uses for post-industrialism which shows a paradigmatic shift from socio-political economic structure to informational economic model,-- but in reality it camouflages a stronger power structure operating in society.[11] It is a new type of cultural system "that restructures the entire social world as an object of control".[12] Financial globalization coupled with and expressed through technological superstructure of information society produces nightmare of technology. This idea of nightmare, formed in the process of shift from industrial to informational mode of development, is exemplifies, idea of Automaton:

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8 Ian Varcoe, 'Zygmunt Bauman', in A. Elliott and L. Ray (eds), *Key Contemporary Social heorists*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2003.

9 *Ibid.*

10 M. Bakardjieva, *Internet Society: The Internet in Everyday Life, London*, Sage, 1946.

11 M. Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996.

12 A. Pacey, *The Culture of Technology,* Cambridge, MIT Press, 2001.

We have created an Automaton, at the core of our economics, decisively conditioning our lives. Human kind's nightmare of seeing our machines taking control of our world seems on the edge of becoming reality - not in the form of robots that eliminate jobs or government computers that police our lives, but as an electronically based system of financial transaction.[13]

Such a culture renders the role of intra-personal and inter-personal value systems unnecessary, thus relegating the cognitive consistency of a personality in to a nullity. Instead, one encounters a space of spacelessness, not a reality but the illusion of reality.

This is a world which doesn't wait for human intervention for its growth-it is always already produced. As Morley and Robinson puts it:

What is being created is a new electronic cultural space, a "placelessness" of geography of image and simulation… a world in which space and time horizons have been collapsed… a world of instantaneous and depthless communication… that is profoundly transforming our apprehension of the world: it is provoking a new senses of placed and placeless identity and a challenge of elaborating a new self-interpretation.[14]

The unabated onslaught of technological 'development' in techno-economic society of globalization produces serial moments of faking, by which I mean, confusing and coercing a subject to believe a simulated techno-order as against a rational world-order as truth. On the otherhand, in the mundane level it gives birth to 'techno-apartheid', as Mattelart, calls it. Economically rich countries here enjoys maximum advantage of new technologies where as poor countries are placed at their receiving end.[15] The marked of such developing and developed countries are experimenting as well as dumping ground of this neo-capitalism.For example, Broadband penetration is a good indicator of the broad outlines of created rift between developed, developing and underdeveloped countries. An International Telecommunication Report gives the broad outlines:

Today, however broadband penetration is dominated by the wealthy countries. Some 70% …of broadband subscribers worldwide in 2006 were located in high income countries which accounted for just 16% of world population. Furthermore, two economies-India and Vietnam - accounted for more than 95% of all broadband subscribers in the lower-middle income group.[16]

However, even with nations considered to be global high-tech archipelago people with less education have lower access to connectivity. People living in rural areas,

13 M. Castells, 'Information technology and global capitalism', in W. Hutton and A. Giddens (eds), *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism,* London, Jonathan, 2000, pp.52-74.

14 K Robins and D. Morley, *Spaces of Identity: Global media, electronic landscapes and cultural boundaries*, London, Routledge, 1995.

15 Joseph Straubhaar, 'Global,hybrid of multiple? Cultural Identities in the Age of Satellite T.V. and the Internet' in Ulla Carlsson (ed) *Nordicom Review Special Issue*, Nordicom, University of Gothenberg, 2007.

16 Ian Buchanan, *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010.

who do not possess cultural capital or group habitus, in the terms framed by Pierre Bourdieu, do not necessarily have the interest or ability to be the part of internet users group.[17] Further, there is another model of stratification and exploitation. Many of the larger developing countries like Brazil or India are heavily pursued by many of ICT equipment and content marketers because they have large number of Internet and Satellite T.V user. But they are internally stratified. In places like India and many Asian and African countries only a sizable quantity of globalized elite get access to new technologies excluding majority of population. The moot question here is not *when* and *how* the whole population is to be given access to latest technologies, but when existence is at stake for BPL people should we not try to use the benevolent potential of technology for public good rather than encouraging and valorizing a minority section of elites' championing of the cause of unplanned techno-'revolution'?

Consequences of such techno-stratification appear to be dangerous for an ordinary third world subject who is a symbol of choice-less fatality of globalization. Non selective, homogenized application and implementation of techno-projects increases social tension in societies like India where uneven socio-economic progress and the foray of decadent cultural practice give birth to a reverse-syndrome of identity construction. It is a sort of 'detraditionalization' which doesn't indicate the end of tradition but tradition actively defended at the cost of liberalism-giving birth of fundamentalism of various kinds.[18] The fear of cultural invasion in a place where no cultural revolution took place can result into alarming consequences: regards it as tension between the Net (Global Cultural Flow) and the Self (Local Communal Culture).[19]

'The effects of technology', opines media theorist Harbert McLuhan, 'do not occur at the levels of opinions or concepts', rather they alter patterns of perceptions. Technology has the power to mould what we see and how we see it. And if we use it enough, 'it changes who we are as individual and as society'.[20] New technology revises and destabilizes ones identity beyond recognition. In this regard Nicolas Carr argues that web-culture is depriving our mental faculties of the regular workout they need. That Google is damaging the brain of its user by providing instant information, leading to loss of people's intellectual capacity to store information.[21] While this will be simplistic to call it a final consequence of technology's domination over human mind, it nevertheless, points out to the difficulty involved for a person in safeguarding his/her rational self. In a bid to negotiate with a techno culture, we may end up being enslaved by it.

In attempting to outline the patterns of identification in a techno-society, we need to deconstruct the power-geometry of economic, cultural and technological globalization.

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17 *Ibid.*

18 Anthony Giddens, *Affluence, Poverty and the Idea of a Post-Scarcity Society*, NewYork, UNRISD, 1995.

19 *Ibid.*

20 Nicolas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is doing to our Brains*, London, W.W. Norton, 2010.

21 *Ibid.*

This in turn may open up conceptual pathways for a clear and fuller understanding of the intricate relation between man and machine, and its psycho-social pitfalls. This is urgent not only for its temporal relevance but also for ensuring a secured world for posterity.