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THE EXISTENTIAL DEMOCRACY AND ITS PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL
The Surprising and Unsettling Challenges Arising from our Inter-connected Information
Society¹

Abstract

This paper is constructed as an elaborate answer to the question “what is and what should be a public intellectual today?” Using a range of critical theorists I argue that the function of a public intellectual is connected to specific conceptions of truth, and reveal the inherent difficulty of conceiving a straight-forward role of such a public intellectual within a relativist context. I then resolve the difficulty by elaborating an idea of an “existential democracy” revealed in and by the context of our inter-connected information society (cyberspace). What is a public intellectual today then? A public intellectual would have to be a genealogist, a critic of culture that would be capable of letting truth speak through writing, and, ultimately, a true practitioner and adherent of democracy understood existentially – meaning rather on an ontological level than political, or political only insofar as ontological. The paper also opens up a series of intriguing questions that are worth investigating in separate inquiries similar to the one I attempt here: what happens to the process of knowledge within the bounds of this existential democracy, what happens to our educational systems, and what happens with our already solidified academic understanding of humanistic research?

Keywords: existential democracy, process of knowledge, cultural genealogy, cyberspace, Wikipedia

What would be the role of an intellectual today? Especially a theorist. If on the heights of Modernity we can still picture theorists driving a culture and a society towards a “farscape” of progress, the historical lessons of the twentieth century would have to turn us at least a little bit skeptical. We all know the stories of the disastrous interpretations of Nietzsche or Marx – and that would be just to name the few more prominent ones. Perhaps

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the eighties (and early nineties) walking on poststructuralist trails would tell us that this would be exactly what intellectuals should do: guard us, the rest of the world, from such malign interpretations (by exposing their hypocrisies). But then (maybe thinking back to Plato's *Republic*) how would we answer to the question of who would guard the guardians? And after all, what sort of an image would we have in mind if we were to think of what an intellectual is? At this point I will have to call upon some Foucauldian thoughts on the matter, hoping that they will manage to take us on a good path towards shedding some light on this matter.

With Michel Foucault, a definition of a "public intellectual" might be always problematic. Of course, now that he is dead and he cannot speak back or make ironic remarks on our attempts to classify his ideas (as he, rather amused, commented on *Petite Larousse's* short description of his philosophy), we can try to boil down such an image of how a "public intellectual" should be and looks like. Using Foucault's own remarks in the interview with Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino, "Truth and Power," (Gordon 1980) we might draw the following picture of the late twentieth century intellectual scene: there are three strains of thought, two of them in effect and one of them projected into the future (or enacted by Foucault himself). The two strains in effect are Phenomenology and Marxism, with their respective intellectual figures of a phenomenological or Marxist descent. The third one is what Foucault calls (tracing Nietzschean steps) "genealogy." "Genealogists" then, would try to think outside of the established forms of subjectivity and representation, taking knowledge as formative discourse at the center of their discourse.

"And this is what I would call genealogy, that is, a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history." (Gordon 1980, 118)

Phenomenology, the thought thread that inherits the modern Western humanism, has become (especially in French academia) the established (institutionalized) form of philosophical (and I point here to the etymology of the term) discourse. Founded by the works of Husserl, who was trying to revive/recuperate the initial modern thought (Descartes' *cogito*) through the later Kantian critique, phenomenology takes an already constituted subject at the core of its endeavors, tracing the history of that subject through the various ages of the "human" thought. Marxism on the other hand, is the response to this institutionalized search for wisdom, its critical counterpart, trying to underline and unhide the "truth" behind the history of this subject: the fact that its constitution is essentially used in a complex of social relations centered around (economico-ideological) domination (and struggle). Public intellectuals in these two cases, would be the leading figures of the production of discourses, both Marxist and phenomenologic. Foucault though, wants to go one step further beyond this distinction, observing that the Marxist critique of the established ideological production in the end plays right into its game. Since Heidegger, the authors whose work will eventually amount to the post/late modern thought have tried to overcome metaphysics (phenomenology represents metaphysics in its later stage). Naturally, their works have turned towards Marxism, but the result could not have been other than a metaphysical critique of metaphysics, or, if you prefer, a metaphysical overcoming of metaphysics. And that is because Marx himself was still heavily tributary to the metaphysical thought (suffice to say that his materialistic dialectic was a spawn of Hegel's dialectic). Moreover, building a critique of ideology solely on economic relations of domination, believes Foucault, fails to call forth the intimate relation running both ways between discourse (knowledge) and the socio-economical landscape. Discourse may be a result of class struggles, but only as well as class struggles are a result of discourse. Genealogy then, would provide this necessary intellectual movement beyond metaphysics, or beyond totalizing systems of thought, by applying an interpretive *hybris* to various thought threads that appear to constitute us as individuals, and that appear to place us at various nodes in the social web. Genealogy would not be about discovering the truth

behind something (as Marxism claims to do) but about uncovering the ground beneath our feet. It is history done from today's perspective, starting from now and uncovering then. The ultimate danger for genealogy – for the genealogist as public intellectual for that matter – would be to fully become history, that is to say the danger would be to start (thinking that it is) speaking the truth and stop speaking to truth.

Because of this continuous *hybris*, or process of uncovering, genealogy can only be a public action. It is exactly the difference between Socrates and Plato. Socrates was an action-philosopher, he never wrote anything just because he was always speaking to the truth (that the people that he met thought they knew), and because his stage of action was always the agora – the public place *par excellence*. Plato was the erudite, encasing his and Socrates' discourse in the written word to be kept for posterity, or just for the dusty shelves of some secluded monastic library.

There is a problem though with this image of how a public intellectual should be, and this problem is shown (ironically) by a Marxist writing before Foucault: Gramsci. For Gramsci, to say that some people are intellectuals and some are not is absurd (Gottlieb, 1989). As we are all granted with intellect, we are all intellectuals. However, it is exactly the social class system (economically grounded) that makes us speak of intellectuals, and public intellectuals for that matter, when referring only to certain people. This means that the function of "public intellectual," which is to say the function of producing discourse is granted only to certain individuals. Certain educational practices and certain access restrictions would be enough to create this quite exclusivist category of workers in the fields of discourse. Foucault's genealogists would belong to this category, which raises the question: yes they might speak to truth, but who is there to hear them? Yes, genealogists would be a good image for our times, of how (necessarily public) intellectuals should look like. But even if they break apart ideologies with their applied *hybris*, can they be something else than just another worker in the field of discourse, producing formative discourse at their turn? In other words, can they break out of their place in which they were assigned by the very thing which they critique? The problem was known to Foucault as well, yet the solution remained a puzzling one. Should we go back to Enlightenment? But is not this the thing that we are critiquing in the first place? Can we ever escape the perils of erudition while, at the same time, avoid the dangers of unassuming philosophy?

We are not even half-way through our attempt to provide an answer to the question regarding a possible role of a (public) intellectual today and we already seem to be stuck. On the one hand we have the Foucauldian dreams of genealogists, applying *hybris* on discourse, perhaps philosophizing with a Nietzschean hammer, speaking not the truth but to truth; yet on the other hand, a Gramscian shadow still falls upon this thought as the speakers to truth appear to be as estranged (or alienated) from that truth as their counterparts, the speakers of truth. So perhaps at this point it would be a good idea to take a closer look at the way in which we got stuck.

This seemingly dead-end, or maybe deadlock, lies exactly in this oppositional binary relation. On the one we would have intellectuals and the truth of the world, and on the other hand we would have intellectuals and the rest of the world. We might go along with the reading and critique that Michel De Certeau (1988) applies to Foucault, as it is a critique that senses exactly this kind of differential tension.

Taking Foucault, the one from *Discipline and Punish* (1979) alongside with Pierre Bourdieu, the one from *Outline for a Theory of Practice* (2013), as such genealogist intellectuals De Certeau observes that both of them, although thinking and aiming their endeavors towards practices (and especially those excluded from discourse), have managed in the end to miss their object completely. In fact, judging by their end results, we might say that Foucault ended up in being interested in what the practices produce, while Bourdieu ended up in being interested in what produces them. And in both cases, argues De Certeau, they needed "other regions," a different space from which to extract what their culture has excluded from discourse: Foucault found that space in history – the *Ancien Regime* or the nineteenth century – while Bourdieu had to look for it in Algeria among the Kabylia people. They both needed an "other" of discourse as the only way to have that discourse revealed.

The problem then, seems to linger in this circling around difference, signified by the intellectuals' ivory towers and their constitutive departure from their object. Modernity with its subject-object formative difference seems to be stronger than we might have thought, as we see it infiltrating in every nook and cranny of our thinking. We are talking after all about theory and practice. We are talking about erecting systems of meaning, about constructing Babel towers to see the earth from heavens. We are talking about the way of thinking that isolates the subject just in order to let it gather around a whole, just in order to let it have a firm grasp on the web that it wraps around the object. Was it ever different? Can it ever be different? Modernity itself would not let us think of another way. But as I mentioned (as a metaphor) the tower of Babel I recall a particular version of this myth (as myths telling the story of people failing to erect a building and have their tongues "mixed" as a result can be encountered all over the world, from central America to Mesopotamia), to be found at one African civilization, telling how the failure to build the respective stairway to heaven happened because the builders, being out of just one more necessary step, took out the base step in order to complete the stair (Kernbach, 1983). Modernity may not let us think of another way, but maybe it does not even need to.

The help here may come from Jacques Derrida (1978), and his reading of the Saussurian conception of sign. The towers of Babel, the systems of meaning that I was mentioning earlier are all structures of signification, and their bricks and steps are the signs. Following Saussure's model we would have to look at the sign alongside a differential relation between a signifier and a signified. And this difference, says Saussure, is arbitrary. In fact, to clarify, instead of a difference we should speak of a bond, since the sign does not exist outside this dyadic system. But just this arbitrariness would not provide for the constitution of a language yet. Language is a code, that is to say a structure, gathering signs in a system by the virtue of the difference that brings them together as distinctive signs. If we take one sign out of a language, out of such a system, that sign would lose its meaning, and, therefore, its character of sign itself. The internal difference of a sign can only make sense within a differential system of language, since language is a self-contained system. However, even if all seems good for now, we need to pay attention to all the consequences of such a view, as Derrida warns us. The trick is that, given this system, the only legitimate conclusion would be that the thought of a transcendental signified has no place here. There is only a conceptual signified, not a signified object as such. Therefore our first drive might be to consider this system on two possible dimensions, one horizontal – the signs in their difference from other signs, forming the language – and one vertical – the signs in their internal difference between a signifier and a signified. The resulting image then, or better said, the resulting representation, of how we speak about the world would lead us into thinking of language as a web to be thrown into the world of objects. However, the vertical dimension presents us with a certain complication: the internal (and arbitrary) difference of a sign is not a difference between two discrete elements, as the elements become such only within that difference. The vertical "dimension" can only be then an illusory one – as there would be no "vertical" to talk about in the first place. Thus the image of "the web" thrown on the "world of objects" simply implodes and we can say, along with Derrida, that to think the Saussurian model to its ultimate consequences is to accept that there is no such a thing as a transcendental signified. In the case of the structures of meaning (or thinking) this very same principle would render for us the idea that there is no center generating (or maybe bringing together) structures, but structures providing the illusion of a center, insistently pointing to something that is not exactly there.

Clinging on the other of discourse, insisting on the elements of difference and not on the difference itself, can only replicate *ad infinitum* the same Western ontological duality: the theory and the practice, the active and the passive, the subject and the object (and, ultimately, us and them). Thinking of the twentieth century Western intellectual endeavors I cannot but remark this strange framework implied by their titles: "Discipline and Punish" (Foucault), "Difference and Repetition" (Deleuze), "Being and Time" (Heidegger), "Being and Nothingness" (Sartre), "Totality and Infinite" (Levinas) "Writing and Difference" (Derrida himself). Perhaps this does not mean anything, being just a matter of Western intellectual

fancy, or perhaps this is one loose point from which a deconstruction could start its subversive work. Regardless of this, we are back at the question of genealogy (but hopefully armed with some new tools): how can one speak *to* truth without othering that truth? How can one not other the truth without speaking *the* truth?

One answer to this would be to let that truth speak through writing, instead of having the writing speak the (or to) truth. Derrida's deconstruction was moving into this direction, with its enhanced attention looking for that detail able to unfold what writing was constructing, looking for that first and last step that would cancel the distance between the place of contemplation and the contemplated space. Michel De Certeau, aware of the problems inherent to a Foucauldian enterprise, was trying to accomplish that as well. Looking for a way to write about practice without giving into the temptation that (according to his critique) determined authors like Foucault or Bourdieu to miss their intended object, he applied to Diderot's encyclopedic definition of the difference between arts and sciences (if the object is executed we are dealing with art, if the object is contemplated we are dealing with science). Considering that then, what would be necessary for the possibility of a theory of practice would be an art of theory, a movement that would set up, through an art of narration, a space in which practices would appear both in a verbal and a nonlinguistic field.

Such a requirement sounds puzzling, yet if we are to take a better look at De Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life* (1988) we might be able to see exactly this art of theory in practice. The issue at stake again, is the constitutive difference that seemed to have bothered us here all the time. De Certeau traces that difference across a wide range of practices to be told but he never names it as such. He does not offer a definition that would match this difference, thus managing to not focus his attention on the elements composing the difference but on the difference itself. It would seem that given such a requirement one would have to elaborate a theory of difference (see Deleuze), but De Certeau finds another way out. Instead, he builds theories around this difference already at work in his work and in the objects of his (theoretical) narrations. It is a difference between strategies and tactics, between places and spaces, between maps and tours, between acts of going and walks. The closest thing to an act of defining this difference is performed by De Certeau while elaborating on the difference between strategies and tactics. It is a difference in military terms because it is a difference pointing to the way in which power works, while at the same time (just because we are talking, after all, about this strange unnamed difference) telling us something about the way in which (to follow De Certeau's language) the users operate within the modern framework. The speaking of truth, or the discourse about the (truth of the) world – always a scriptural act, sets up an order, a place to be inhabited, a map to be used, a strategy to be followed. The use in itself though, the operations operated in the already given field, are something of a different order: they are (improper) spaces created inside (proper) places, a touring around, or a tactic unfolding within the given strategic field. A strategy is the postulation of power just because, by definition, it has the power to set up, while a tactic is determined by the absence of power, just because it appears in that space towards which power is oriented. Around this gap (and, to follow De Certeau's critique of Foucault and Bourdieu, not because of a gap – be that between the here and now and the ancient past, or the here and now and a remote other) any story telling about what people do would have to be told.

There is one more interesting thing about this De Certeauian unnamed difference, and it becomes immediately apparent if we were to apply a reading in the spirit of Derrida's Saussurian thoughts (I would also have to say here that, given the absence of Derrida from De Certeau's dialogues, it would be really interesting to read a study done at a confluence of their thoughts). What De Certeau actually does there is to leave that illusion of verticality, present as a temptation within the construction of the sign as difference. De Certeau's discourse, or rather we should say narration, is anything but a scriptural play. In resisting the urge to name the difference, and thus reifying its elements, he opens up a space for that difference to work its work – or become manifest. His writing moves on the horizontality of difference, light(en)ing up the formation of discourse as web. He is not inferring things about the world, but instead he lets this world mirror itself in its own shards. Perhaps this is the same

deconstructive drive as Derrida's, although applied to a different spectrum, a drive that moves on the borders of discourse, between language and silence, between theory and practice.

It would seem that it remains to be seen if the sight of power in the unnamed difference was a scriptural move or not. After all, there might be a reason for which the first site to find the difference at work in De Certeau's narrations is the one framed by military metaphors. But is not this the sight displayed by the Saussurian model of sign if taken to its last consequences? A script is always about power, as it is about impositions. When the sign reveals itself on that "vertical" dimension to be nothing else than a preserved act of pointing that gives birth to the pointed as such, what we have is exactly the imposition bringing about the script. I say "bringing about" because just the act of pointing does not yet justify the use of thinking in terms of power. But the differential nature of the sign happens, as we have seen, on two possible imagined dimensions. In other words, a pointing does not make any sense unless it is a pointing *for* someone/something. The sign appears as (internal) difference but it is also caught in its differential relations that render it as a sign in a language. Therefore, because the pointed needs to make sense within the web of a language, we can in the end speak of scriptural plays and power.

Perhaps De Certeau's genealogies (not to mention Derrida's applied deconstructions) are yet too abstract (and therefore a bit too much tied up in a pure discursive world), perhaps they move too close to the formative difference in their insistence of unearthing the world upon which they glide. But they are not the only intellectuals (to go back at the question setting off this trail of thoughts) performing their writing in this way. An interesting, and more recent, example that comes to my mind now would be rooted in a field concerned with the same essential difficulty that determined De Certeau to embark on his chase for the unnamed difference: performance studies. If De Certeau was troubled by the ways in which discourse fails to account for practices (without programming them into a discourse of their own), the study of performance faces the same problem: how can one offer an account of a performance without destroying it? Moreover, how can one offer an account of something that exists only in a here and now, how can one talk about something that permanently moves into silence with each passing moment of its happening?

In her performance studies essay *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003), Diana Taylor stops for a moment to analyze a performance act staged by two artists: Coco Fusco and Guillermo-Gomez Pena. They called their performance "the Guatinaui World Tour" and presented themselves to various publics as "authentic" tribesmen that have been "just" "discovered" on an (fictitious) island off the coast of Mexico. They were caged and acted as museum exhibits even performing various tasks for money should the audience request them. Obviously that was supposedly a performance act uncovering the Western colonial discourse. By being a performance and not a theory text though, they were aiming to uncover that discourse in places where it usually stays covered, continuing its work as such: common sense perceptions/acts/situations. Diana Taylor tries then to mirror that performance in her text, letting the artists deconstructive work to manifest itself within the confines of a text, and in order to do that she performs her own (textual) deconstructive work on the idea of "discovery" arising in the space between two worlds in conflict (labeled "new" and "old" by the ones living in the "old" one). Diana Taylor's performance is set prior to her telling of the artists' performance, thus setting up a frame in which they would be able to perform inside her text as well. But, and here is the strangest thing, as they do perform within her text, their performance becomes Diana Taylor's performance and not Coco Fusco's and Guillermo-Gomez Pena's performance. In fact this comes out with no difficulties out of Diana Taylor's text, when it is revealed that the artists' expectations from their ideal public would be to have someone take them out of their self-imposed imprisonment. Just that the only ones that have actually tried to do that, were doing it in order to hurt them, and not to liberate them. Faced with the puzzled artists Diana Taylor explains, reveals, deconstructs, and continues their work, letting them speak in her text. She performs.

I go back at this point to the question asked a bit earlier, the question that was reformulating the problem exposed in the beginning of this writing: how can one speak to truth without othering that truth? How can one not other the truth without speaking the truth?

What appears now, after we armed ourselves with these new tools, would be that we need to carefully position our writing so as to let writing bring about that truth that we are trying to speak to.

Sometimes in the last century, after the Second World War and outside Saussurian terminology, Heidegger was asking a question concerning technology in order to find an answer concerning the world (1977), or, perhaps better said, in order to find something in the essence of the modern thought. The essence of technology, meaning the answer to the question concerning technology, appeared to be as something of a different nature (Heidegger's, strange even for the Germans, composite word *Ge-Stell*, framed in an acceptable English translation as "Enframing"), something pointing to a specific (that is modern) attitude towards being that, among other things, determines technology to be what it is and drives it on the heights of Modernity as what could be named "techno-science." Enframing, that is gathering beings together as a standing reserve, obscuring the event of being, and thus driving us into forgetting that being – which is the same thing as saying forgetting the constitutive difference (or ontological difference, if we are to follow philosophical jargons) between being (*Sein*) – always an event – and beings (*seiendes*). This is after all, the story of the modern progress, the story of (should I keep saying Western?) Modernity's advance into the field of knowable reality: the race for the infinite representation of the world. But we can also say, safely I would argue, that this is, after all, also the story of overlooking the full understanding of the differential nature of the sign. By forgetting that the pointed is brought forth in the act of pointing only, we leave enough space for the pointed to become the ground legitimating a reified web of (horizontal) differences, and thus burying the flow of power. However, Heidegger was asking this question concerning technology quite a while ago, in the previous century. I would say at this point that we would not be out of place to ask "what about now?"

The techno-science is still in its place alongside that which lies in its essence yet being of a different nature, meaning Enframing. But there is something else in place now, which was not at the time of Heidegger's meditations, something that appeared within the frameworks of this techno-science, and out of its inherent attitude towards being. We usually call this something "cyberspace," "web," "net," "internet."

As a communication medium, born out of a military technological project (thought to withstand and to keep providing a communication network even in the case of nuclear attack), the internet does not seem to pose too much of a difference from the techno-science inquired by Heidegger. However, as De Certeau reminds us, the users operate within given frameworks, yet we can always find an essential gap between their operations and the given framework – which was exactly the gap upon which he focused his attention. That is why we can talk today not only of an internet, but of a cyberspace as well. Back in the early nineties, the concept was borrowed from a genre of fiction called cyberpunk and slowly but steadily applied to this communication medium called internet. Cyberspace though would be a tricky word to define (especially when William Gibson's imaginings – the one that coined the term – do not really match the actual internet experience), yet perhaps the best way to do it would be to use an appeal to a paradox: cyberspace is a non-physical space. It does not have a palpable existence, and we would probably safely doubt its existence in what we would call "real world." Or, to use a Gibsonian terminology again, we could say that in the case of cyberspace there is no there there. But we still use the word, and by stretching this line of metaphors we can still talk of inhabitants of cyberspace. This paradoxical definition though may work, as it does in the end reveal something of the essential nature of this phenomenon: the fact that by not existing in the "real world" but still existing as such, the only space where it can be found would not be behind our computer screens, or somewhere in the "pipeline" networks providing signals to our computer screens, but it would be in that space between our minds, in that (horizontal) signifying surface. So how is then cyberspace more than just a communication medium? It is everything about its conveying nature, which has writing (though I should rather say fixed expression) as a conveying vehicle. Yes, it is all about communication in the case of cyberspace, but we seem to face a slightly different type: cyberspace appears as an open book that continuously (and this is another puzzling part)

writes itself (as the agents of writing, by their very functioning within this medium, are only functioning as parts in an invisible mechanism).

Taking the medium as a gimmick, or just a tool for e-mail, and thus refusing its projected nature of cyberspace, we would be tempted to doubt its radical difference. We would be able to doubt its impact on the rest of our everyday lives as well. But what if we would consider an extremely modern project developing in cyberspace right now as I write these words and as you read them? I am thinking, of course, about Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia (free both as in “free beer” and as in “free market,” to borrow a terminology often colported by the “copyright warriors”), a project similar in structure to, say, Diderot’s Encyclopedia, yet with an intended “democratic” twist on it. In principle anyone would be able to add their share of truth to the Great Library of truths displayed by this Free Encyclopedia. A database of all possible knowledge; what can be closer to the infinite representation of the world?

Perhaps an answer to the puzzles set forth here, or a possible course of (intellectual) action, would come from this direction. Although being writing (fixed expression) in essence, cyberspace seems to be a space of practice at the same time. It does not seem to present us with the same theoretical difficulties that a collection of books would do (the dangers of erudition). Also, because (at least in the case of Wikipedia) it moves in the direction of scriptural knowledge while at the same time undermining the usual power flow of the scriptural play, it seems to be helping us escape the perils of unassuming philosophy as well. I do claim then, that cyberspace can be a privileged place for unearthing what lies buried in our (physical) world. And Wikipedia’s project may constitute a good launching pad for that, appearing as a new Babel yet built on this puzzling ground, *seemingly* abstracted from the usual forces dominating the modern production of knowledge.

Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia that was launched in 2001 by an Internet entrepreneur, Jimmy Wales, and a philosopher, Larry Sanger. It is based on a type of software called “wiki” (Ward Cunningham developed it in 1994 and used the Hawaiian word for “quick” to name it) that allows its users to quickly create interlinked web pages directly via a web browser. When this type of software is coupled with the idea of an encyclopedia the result is an ever changing, never finished collection of articles detailing the general knowledge of our times. It is ever changing and never finished because a wiki-encyclopedia can be edited by anyone anytime, provided that they have an Internet connection.

While the constant updating of this general encyclopedic knowledge, its constant growth, seems to be in tune with modern thought – as a representation of our furious march forward to uncover all the secrets of this world – the wiki structure of this encyclopedia brings in a fundamental change in the essence of truth. Since anyone can edit the articles of this encyclopedia, these edits need to follow a consensus if they are to have any traces of (relative) permanence. Consensus rather than credentials is that which drives this project further. That is to say that truth, in the case of Wikipedia, takes shape as a democratic consensus that may or may not have anything to do with careful argumentation. It is a truth that compels not from within itself, but from its own consensual condition of possibility. Something becomes “true,” inscribed in this encyclopedia’s articles even if only for a fleeting moment, because of the agreement between its writers and readers. It is a node in a web, coagulated by a temporal contextuality.

Of course, this democratic intent and structure of Wikipedia brings in some puzzling questions. How can we trust the knowledge written there, when we have no more visible experts to guarantee for it? How can we trust that what is written there indeed follows a democratic process? But ultimately, the question is whether the democratic process is indeed in any way fit to the production of knowledge.

More than Wikipedia, we might say that these are puzzles set forth by the entirety of cyber practices gathered under the buzzword Web 2.0 (to which Wikipedia is an integral part). Insofar as its interactive “architecture” was already contained by the global network since its inception, “Web 2.0” remains only a rally call, or buzzword. Blogs, wikis, social networking applications, and their democratic ideals of communicability, information sharing, and user centered design (meaning what we now refer to as “Web 2.0”), were all contained as a

possibility by the Web, we did not need a reinvention of the Web to uncover them. The 2.0 does not refer to a restructuring of the Internet to make blogs and wikis possible, and not even to a redefinition. It refers to a focus, a shift of intention, a realization of a potential and, more than that, it refers to the acceptance of an emerging approach to the world, an ontological shift if you want. Of course, Web 2.0 is not a be-all end-all; however it does signify exactly that shift that Michael Heim was chasing through electric languages (1987). It is about the cultural and thought development that slowly amounted to our continuously writing the cyberspace.

Wikipedia's trust problems reveal a tension of thought present in the larger series of manifestations we call Web 2.0. Blogs (meaning "web logs") are a similar example. Web pages maintained by individuals and containing commentaries, opinions, or descriptions of events, blur the lines between established journalism and socializing. Moreover, the rising popularity of blog activities comes to subvert the very credibility of established media outlets. The question we face while engaging the "blogosphere" is "who should I listen to and why?" It is a question that slowly but surely directs itself from blogs to the established journalism medium. Another such example is the Amazon.com marketplace. An online shopping website that allows its shoppers to review its products, Amazon.com maintains all those reviews connected to their offer. While in the case of, say, shoes this might not present us with a host of abstract questions, everything changes in the case of books. As shoppers use the website to build a reputation from the ground up as "objective" reviewers, which book reviews should we eventually trust, the ones at the shopping site or the ones printed in academic journals? Perhaps both?

More than Web 2.0, these trust problems reveal a tension of thought present in the larger context of democracy. To restate, the overall question is indeed if a democratic process can be fit in any way to the production of knowledge. What kind of knowledge can we produce outside a traditional power flow? What kind of intellectuals would we listen, if we are not to listen to them from their ivory towers of power?

Yes, it is all about truth in the case of Wikipedia, it is about how truth comes to be, and how it comes to persist. The articles (of truth) on this Free Encyclopedia are ever changing, ever moving; they never stop, and refuse the permanence of print. Instead they work along traces. If one would try to approach Wikipedia, questioning its being, it would not be its particular truths the ones questioned, but that elusive truth itself that it is working with. If one would encase this encyclopedia in a series of tomes the encyclopedia itself would vanish back into the electromagnetic void from which it came. The attention does need to pay dues to the articles themselves, of course, but only insofar as it would be doubled by an attention focused on the cloud of intellectual dust surrounding them.

Cyberspace works with simulation as simulation. It works within the simulation – simulating itself first in order to let simulations follow their interplay. Moreover, simulating itself, being the non-physical (spectral if you like) space, it opens up the door for its simulations to simulate within what we call real. The truth of Wikipedia for instance, shows us the nature of the democratic truth itself: a simulation extracting its validity from persuasion and seduction. It is thus a hermeneutical truth, not a truth of "anything goes," but one limited by the language we speak and by our casting in that language. This might scare some people (the critics of Wikipedia's credibility for instance, or the critics of the journalistic qualities of the blogosphere), but only insofar as they still see themselves as seekers of truth in the sense of collectors of truths. The democratic truth has nothing to do with collection but with a sensing of a past in the way of perceiving that past and also in the way of giving it a sense. The persuasion lies in that sense, limiting it at the same time.

At the end of Modernity, we find democracy, in the sense of a democratic truth: hermeneutical by nature. Cyberspace questioned in its being, along hermeneutical lines, accounts for that truth. And as with anything democratic we need to maintain this questioning just in order to avoid our departure from democracy. The problem though, appears when we try to consider this being. If we separate it from its declension, if we succumb to the temptation of considering it in its "objectness," its very nature makes us turn our attention away from it. Cyberspace by itself, separated in its virtual distinctness, is nothing. Only as it comes to be in our making use of it, and mostly as it comes to be within this hermeneutical

approach to the world, cyberspace stands for a *koiné* of our times. That is why a discussion of cyberspace in terms of utopian fantasies, hateful cynicisms, or virtual realisms ultimately misses the point. That is why a discussion of cyberspace in terms of a closure of knowledge ultimately misses the point. If we ask whether cyberspace will bring us salvation or doom, the answer would be “neither,” and it would be so because there really is not a question on cyberspace there. As a *koiné* cyberspace cannot bring salvation or doom, insofar as a reflection of a cultural mode cannot be thought of in those terms.

What cyberspace may end up doing though – if we can really say that something in its manner can “do” anything by itself – is finally make us come to terms with our late modern condition. By consciously practicing it, meaning to engage with and in its being, by continuously paying attention to both its genealogy and structure, we may find it easier to leave behind our metaphysical temptations. Ultimately, we may find it easier to live in the ever shifting horizontality of the democratic dialogue, or, if I am to paraphrase Vattimo, live without neurosis in a world where absolutist values are dissolving.

Thus we journey on digital landscapes towards a feature of our times. It is a feature that shows us a democracy of an existential, rather than political sort. It is a feature that shows us dialogue and consensus as *modus vivendi* while warning us that, not even now, we might still not be prepared for it. The answer we sought has been with us all along: ever playful in its elusiveness, ever engaged in a game of hide and seek. Did we grasp it? No, but we have pointed at it. It is there, where there is no there, within the truth of an existential democracy.

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