Capitalism, cyberspace and society: avoiding extremism*

Capitalismo, ciberespaço e sociedade: evitando o extremismo

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I definitely share Jaime Breilh's guidelines of thought, which are shown in his article. First, I also believe that social phenomena should be understood as part of a totality. In my work on the area of Science Studies, I try to incorporate in an articulate way the contributions of Philosophy, History, Sociology, and Economics of Science in a spirit very similar to that of Critical Epidemiology.

Second, I also see capitalism as the most powerful organizing principle of the society, almost in the whole world today, and the resulting society marked by numberless and essential dysfunctionalities.

With regard to this second guideline, I believe that we should resist the tendency to radicalize it, conceiving capitalism as a monolithic, all-powerful entity, a source only of bad things, responsible for everything that is wrong in society. An example – that is interesting in the present context, because it has to do with cyberspace – of an internal contradiction of capitalism, which shows its non-monolithic character, is the following. On the one hand, hardware and software manufacturers seek to make their products capable of performing an increasing number of functions efficiently, thus increasing its use value, and therefore the demand, and lastly, the profits. On the other hand, among the developed capabilities, there are those of access, copying, and diffusion of content, so it is very hard to enforce intellectual property rights; being thus harmful to another capitalist economy sector, that of the content producers.

The question I raise is whether the author does not advance a little too much into this radicalization, falling into some kind of extremism. I raise it mainly because, throughout the text, both capitalism and cyberspace are shown in a bad light. Capitalism is

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denounced as a power essentially destructive of nature, the sovereignty of peoples, solidary relationships, and that foments a frenetic consumerism, and many kinds of unhealthy life-styles. Cyberspace is condemned as an oppressive force, a "sphere of social disciplination and conduct robotization," which barges into our privacy, promotes the "unconscious pro-letarianization of Internet users," has harmful neurological and psychic impacts on young users, and so on.

The only passage in the text that escapes this view so full of negativity is when the author declares that "the reaction to cybernetic subordination is not disconnection, which would leave us without the advantages of cybernetic tools; an option that would be, if not impossi-ble, at least clearly disadvantageous." Now, if it is impossible to suppress cyberspace, it must be because its advantages come from its capacity of satisfying genuine needs of the peo-ple. However, such advantages are not mentioned or characterized in the text. Isn't it odd, for instance, given the political orientation of the article, that no mention was made to the role of social networks in the organization of manifestations and other political activities of progressive nature, such as the Arab Spring, the movement of the indignados in Spain, occupy in the US, and so on?

And why would it be important to give attention to the positive aspects of the system? As a reaction to the negative aspects, the author suggests a militant attitude of awareness and mobilization, which deserves to be supported. To my mind, however, in order to succeed, this movement should not lose sight of the positive aspects of the system, in order not to eliminate the advantages in an attempt to block the disadvantages. One should also not forget that the Internet itself is an important tool to resist forces that tend to pervert its democratic character.

These considerations do not deny the merits of the article, in favor of critical epide-miology, and of the promotion of debate about the impacts, which are with no doubt fundamental, of the revolution of information and communication technology on society.

To conclude, some questions concerning a more direct link between epidemiology and cyberspace are raised. The topic is that of computer viruses and viral contents in the Internet. On the one hand, it is evident that the term, in cyberspace, is imported from Biology — or, more properly, given the harmful character of computer viruses, from Medicine, which deals with pathogenic viruses. On the other hand, it is amazing the similarity that completely jus-tifies the choice of the word, between the diffusion processes of computer viruses and viral contents, and the spreading of pathogenic viruses in epidemics. The questions are: How far does this similarity go? In what sense could we say that antivirus software is a vaccine? Is it possible that epidemiologists could learn from creators of antivirus software or vice versa?