PIERO DOMINICI

COMMUNICATION AND THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE
A ‘new contract’ for the ‘society of individuals’

Abstract
The current chaotic and disordered social systems are undergoing a (critical) phase of change marked by the advent of an interconnected economy, an economy which is calling to attention certain questions regarding the issue of citizenship. Under discussion are the new opportunities for emancipation offered by the widespread knowledge which is fuelling the networks of protection and social promotion. The links of interdependence and interconnection are intensifying, even if some observers continue to hypothesize the possible end of the social bond. The old industrial model consisting of consolidated orders, hierarchies, logics of control and closure to change seems on the point of being broken by the new knowledge ecosystem. On the other hand, we are living in an age increasingly marked by the fragmentation of the systems of belonging and belief – the real producers of individual and collective identity – and by the consequent affirmation of individual and utilitarian values. This is a sort of “tyranny of the individual” which presents itself as a real centrifugal force capable of corroding the ties within the social system and thus testing their resilience. This process of progressive weakening and fleeing away finds further confirmation in the widespread deficit of social and political participation, which is itself fuelled by a climate of general mistrust towards all the (formal and informal) institutions that used to be the sole agencies responsible for the transmission of value and knowledge guidance systems. The thesis that we shall therefore seek to discuss is the following: the individualism dominant in our social systems is the result – to some extent the inevitable result – of a process/project of emancipation that has been brought forward in the course of modernity. This process of emancipation, first of the masses, then of the Subject, has, on the one hand, increased the spheres of freedom and led to the recognition of certain fundamental rights (at least on a theoretical level); on the other hand, it has contributed to the weakening of the ties and bonds of belonging to a Community.

Keywords
Modernity; social bond; resilience; emancipation; individualism; communication, social production of knowledge.

In this complex modern age, social systems appear to be increasingly characterised by conflictual dynamics and a limited rationality which leave every dialectic open and unresolved. In such a context, communication – here taken to mean a social process of knowledge sharing – seems to have taken on a strategic central role in every area of the praxis. The hypertrophic growth of the bureaucracy, the progressive dissolution of public space and the evolution of democracies founded on transparency, access, the concept of popular sovereignty and, from a cultural point of view, economic individualism – at

* Dipartimento di Scienze politiche, Università degli Studi di Perugia – piero.dominici@unipg.it.
the expense of *democratic individualism*¹ – have caused a radical politicisation of the *public sphere*, whose operating space has been significantly reduced to the single issue of ‘representation’ and to *serve* the power system. This is the development process of newborn democratic systems, which are often culturally based on the concept of *popular sovereignty* – taken here to mean the *hegemony* or predominance of the *majority* – and on the lack of a definition of the relationship between the founding values of liberty and equality. The public sphere, which expresses itself through political institutions and new social issues seeking public recognition and translation into laws, has continued to formulate itself as an *autopoietic system*. Given that, and to echo Habermas², the level of *mediation* between the system and the life world has disappeared, a mediation based on a *communicative act* capable of critically addressing social issues and opinions produced in the *life world* and civil society, and thereby fully legitimising them and rendering them publically relevant. The current social systems, as chaotic and disordered as they are, are passing through a further (critical) phase of change, a change marked by the advent of the *interconnected economy*, which itself raises further questions about *citizenship*. The objects of discussion are now the new opportunities for emancipation created by the *widespread knowledge* which fuels the *networks of protection* and *social promotion*.

The ties of interdependence and interconnectivity are intensifying, even if some *observers* continue to hypothesize the possible *end of the social bond*. It’s worth highlighting here the interesting growth of social movements and pressure groups which no longer feel represented by the increasingly distant political sphere, and are therefore taking on the responsibility for making social issues generated *from below* visible to the *Sovereign*, and to public opinion. The old industrial model of consolidated structures, hierarchies, *control logics* and *closure to change* seems on the point of being broken up by a new *knowledge ecosystem*. *Knowledge is (finally) beginning to be (further) recognised as a common good* and a resource capable of (re-) establishing less asymmetrical social relationships. But, and it’s worth reiterating here, the new forms of the *social production of knowledge* will only become decisive if the actors in the public *arena* know *what to do* with the knowledge, the networks, the social media, and, more generally, the technology. And it’s for this reason that the need for a total reform of (*complex*) thought and knowledge becomes urgent. In any case, we are living in an epoch increasingly marked by the fragmentation of belief systems and systems of belonging – the real *producers* of individual and collective identities – and by the consequent affirmation of individual and utilitarian values. It’s no coincidence that there has been much debate on ‘the tyranny of the individual’, a full-blown centrifugal force capable of corroding the ties within the social systems and thus testing their *resilience*.

This process of progressive weakening and flaking away finds further confirmation in the widespread *deficit of social and political participation*, which is itself fuelled by a climate of general mistrust towards all the (formal and informal) institutions that used to be the sole agencies responsible for the transmission of value and knowledge guidance systems. This extremely complex and difficult-to-read scenario, coming in the wake


of politics’ loss of credibility and authority, leaves the field open to the possibility of a ‘post party’ democracy, given that the parties are no longer capable of maintaining the consensus and mediating between the new forms of conflict. Forming the background to this is a crisis of the very idea of the party\textsuperscript{4} which one can add to them much deeper crisis of \textit{representation}. The dominant individualism of our social systems is the result – to some degree the inevitable result – of the \textit{emancipation} process/project that has been brought forward throughout modernity. This process of emancipating first the masses, and then the Subject, has, on the one hand, brought about an increase in areas of freedom and a recognition of certain fundamental rights (at least in theory). On the other hand, it has contributed to the weakening of the ties and sense of belonging to the \textit{Community}. Paradoxically in an age apparently marked by greater opportunity for emancipation and extraordinary potential for communication – even if, in my opinion, \textit{communication} and \textit{connection} are often confused – the triumph of the Subject who is both ‘free of’ and ‘free from’ has determined an \textit{unravelling} of the social fabric, in that the fabric is made up of people increasingly left alone to face such complexities.

The contemporary age is one in which the social mechanisms of trust and cooperation – a supporting structure, along with economic and power relations – have also been sorely tested by the processes of precariousness which have rendered \textit{instability} an existential condition. In conclusion, the hypothesis of this paper is this: beyond the profound economic crisis (whose roots are far from being exclusively economic!), the phase we are living through is particularly dramatic. People clearly feel the risk of the \textit{‘end of the social bond’}, and this perception (both on an individual and collective scale) counts, along with a feeling of being alone in facing the insecurity and precariousness of life. I’d add here that one can also recognise this drama of solitude – which is also a void of sense, a difficulty in giving reality meaning – in the obsessive need to communicate and be ‘visible’ at all costs (old and new media), so as not to be forgotten (a question of identity and recognition). In this complex, uncertain and multifaceted scenario, communication, the means of communication (mass and new media), information systems, the Internet, and, in particular, Web 2.0, appear to have definitively \textit{occupied} – not to say dominated – the \textit{public space of debate} and the forming of \textit{public opinion}, as well as that decisive area of social prax is formerly controlled by the traditional agencies of socialisation. On this subject, it’s of fundamental importance to keep the two levels of discourse and analysis separated: on the one hand, technology and/or the means of communication; on the other hand, the communication itself, which is a social process characterised by the presence of ethical subjectivities and actors/individuals competing from more or less symmetrical positions of power.

The current \textit{secular} age of Modernity is characterised by a continuous redefining of the \textit{social imaginaries} and moral horizons by a kind of \textit{Great Disembedding}\textsuperscript{5}, which is \textit{calling into debate the very concept of identity}. It’s a phase of change that has seemingly set itself up as the age of the triumph of the \textit{plurality of linguistic games} – which develop around \textit{social action} – more than the age of the global and homogeneous (Lyotard vs. Habermas). Modern and contemporary thought, therefore, seem to arise precisely from the knowledge of this crisis, from the given fact that there is no longer any indisputable knowledge, nor predominant cultures, absolute values, or indisputable truths, only knowledge that is probabilistically and statistically reliable, relative values, and


complex explanations. In other words, one can see that knowledge is not only the result of a complex process of inter-subjective acquisition, but it’s also far from predictable. One doesn’t so much develop via logical deduction or the simple linear accumulation of information, rather through the use of (casual or systemic) trial and error capable of advancing thought and research. Fundamentally, we’re dealing with a crisis of western rationality and the forms of life it produces, a crisis that coincides with an autopoietic moment of self-production and self-transformation. The first consequence of the intrinsic dynamism that this crisis has caused has been a process of unequal development – globalisation – which manifested itself in new forms of interdependence on a global scale which reflexive knowledge is making (self-)evident. In our opinion, this globalisation has never shown itself to be a break (postmodernity) from the so-called first modernity. On the contrary, it has constantly contained all the contradictions typical of Modernity, extending them onto a global scale and radicalising their effects. The global knowledge economy continues to carry within itself two driving forces which were already present in Modernity, and which openly face each other dialectically – on the one hand, economic and technological interdependence (and inter-connection), and on the other, social, political and cultural fragmentation. Underlying these dynamics is the well-known awareness of the crisis of thought that’s no longer able to supply models of problems and acceptable solutions.

Communication has always been decisive to the development of social systems and the improvement of communication flows from the top to the bottom of human societies has always represented progress, or at the very least a moment of passage towards new forms of social relationships and new models of mediation between interests and conflicts. Typical examples of this include the birth of democratic systems, diplomacy in international relations, and bureaucracy in relations between the citizen and State. In the current climate of change – which, by the way, is characterised by a profound crisis that is (evidently) not solely economic in nature – communication and social knowledge could practically contribute to a process of rapprochement between the power system and civil society, defining a new symmetry in social relations and therefore provoking an inevitable reconfiguration and repositioning of the public sphere, a sphere I call the “weak link”. In practical terms, this would translate to a strengthening of (local and global) public opinion, which would become increasingly critical and informed and, for this reason, a more active participant in and recipient of the choices made by politics. This could be radical modernity’s added value after the great illusion of postmodernity. From this point of view, the interconnected economy offers the new knowledge ecosystem extraordinary opportunities to democratise knowledge and those cultural processes capable of permanently breaking up the old industrial model with its consolidated orders, hierarchies, control logics and closure to change. Thus, knowledge, an immaterial resource of strategic importance for the change currently in progress, is increasingly starting to be seen and perceived as a “common good” capable of restoring more balanced and symmetrical social and power relations. In this same line of discourse, it’s vitally important to avoid the historic error of measuring inequality solely in terms of economic indicators. Access to knowledge, information, and education; the possibility

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8 J. Rifkin, The Age of Access (2000), trad. it. L’era dell’accesso. La rivoluzione della new economy,
of having your identity and rights to citizenship recognised; equality of opportunity; the freedom to manifest your thoughts and to realise yourself; the development of an open society – these are all fundamental indicators as much as per capita income or GDP. Politics need to act in such a way that the social media and networks become technologies of cooperation not control, and to open up to the experimentation of new forms of democratic participation and to the power of the mobile many and smart mobs.

The logic of the self-regulated free market has had an important impact but the social-cultural element continues to be of absolute strategic importance in the interpretation of economic phenomena and processes. In this sense, we can’t ignore the way that the global society has been fashioned by the values of individualism – an individualism that is sometimes exasperated even by postmodern rhetoric – and by the myth of productivity without workers. In our opinion, a mythology of the Individual has almost been created, an individual who’s autonomous and free of every tie, and who seemingly doesn’t have to respond to anything or anyone for his actions – a far cry from the reference to the well-known distinction between the ethics of intention and the ethics of responsibility. We have gone well beyond any juridical and/or cultural ties. What counts is money and consumption, and the only (micro-) power citizens have lies in their being consumers. Such factors, together with the void of meaning left by the crisis of ideologies, have caused various consequences, including a kind of general moral surrender which serves to fuel the society of irresponsibility, a society bereft of any ethic of sacrifice. The mythology of the sovereign individual, who has rights but no duties, has caused damage that it’s difficult to calculate/value in that it touches on respect of the Common good and the ‘res publica’, as well as the way norms, values, behavioural models, etc. are perceived and observed. This mythology, or put better, narrative, has produced, amongst other effects, a negative deregulation and de-responsibilisation of social actors at every level. The space that this weakening of ties has created has favoured the increasingly massive and decisive involvement of the media – specifically the Internet and social media – in the formation of individual and collective identity and in the recognition and practical definition of social issues to bring to the attention of the political sphere. This further proliferation of formation centres and, more generally, of arenas in which thought takes shape and the praxis is planned, is proceeding hand in hand with the communicative crisis that is affecting the institutions and the traditional actors in the formative process, actors who remain suspended between an excess of information and a fear of disconnection.

The hegemony of instrumental rationality and the (self-regulated) market economy has resulted in the triumph of a logic of dominion that extends to all walks of social life. This process has also weakened the ties that transform individual choices into collective projects and actions. In terms of social cohabitation, a strongly individualistic global society has been generated which loads much more responsibility onto the shoulders of each social actor. The exponential growth of the power of finance has had extremely negative consequences on the world economy, and, above all, on people’s lives. The formation process of a virtual space through which economic and information flows pass at very high speeds, has done nothing more than deprive politics and the power systems of


control over their own body, thus further distancing them from civil society and single social actors. And to believe that technology (in particular, the networks) can solve any problem, including the rapprochement of politics with the citizenry, could prove to be yet another fatal error. This is because the political and social praxis, even if it’s finding new virtual arenas for the construction and organisation of consensus and/or opinions, needs to undergo the crucial passage from theoretical elaboration to practical action which must affect the political decision-maker. And to do this requires informed, critically-aware flesh-and-blood social actors who are active and knowledge able recipients within their networks of social cooperation.

The society of individuals, freed from the ties of tradition and, in a certain sense, at the mercy of the increased potential of instrumental rationality, has to face the exponential growth of the productive forces that have made the modernisation process reflexive, that’s to say a subject and problem of itself. The advantage is undoubtedly linked to the fact that such risks can no longer be ignored – as in the past – by the public sphere and public opinion. And it’s in precisely this framework that we can place John Tomlinson’s analysis of globalisation, which should primarily be interpreted as a ‘cultural phenomenon’ made up of a network of experiences which has, by means of mechanisms of spatial-temporal disaggregation, profoundly changed the perception of the physical places where we come up against the Other, extending onto a global scale the effects of the local choices we make. Culture takes the form of a transnational resource. Globalisation constitutes the empirical condition of the modern world, a condition that’s associated with the concept of complex connectivity, meant here as a process of “constant intensification of the networks of interconnection and interdependence that characterise modern social life”11. It’s a process that can be interpreted as not only the triumph of western subjectivist and instrumental rationality but also as the triumph of an all-inclusive and all-encompassing ideology which envelopes, absorbs, and shapes all spheres of the praxis and real life. And criticism of globalisation12, a producer of a disruptive individualism13, is, in reality, a criticism of the global capitalist system14, which is guilty of breaking the old alliance between capitalism and democracy and concentrating solely on economic and technological development without considering the social implications and consequences for individuals. The world-economy is progressively weakening the mechanisms and devices typical of democratic governments causing profound repercussions on the structures and hierarchies of the global production system, as well as, and above all, on the general architecture of peoples’, more specifically, worker’s rights and tutelage. Thus we can see the passage from a work society to a risk society, with the definitive emergence of a political economy of insecurity15.

15 U. Beck, Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem weg in eine andere Moderne (1986), trad. it. La società del
2. KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY AND THE COMMUNICATION ECOSYSTEM

The *knowledge society* has triggered a revolutionary change in all the socio-political dynamics and productive and cultural processes. And this change has made major features of intellectual capital and the *production and distribution of knowledge*. It’s yet another extraordinary *technological revolution* – whose origins, by the way, should be looked for in the last decades of the 19th century – generated by the rapid progress in *industrialisation* which had itself already caused a crisis of control. The means of *communication* have become the absolute protagonists of the processes of knowledge *production and diffusion* and have thus prepared fertile terrain for the building of a new *world-system interconnected in real time*. Beyond the much referred to marginality of politics, the liberalisation of the markets brings even more to light the absence of any really functioning and operative ‘global institutions’. The global economy is, therefore, undergoing a radical *restructuring* involving a *downsizing* of physical capital and the triumph of the offer of services over the sale of goods and exchange of property. Access has become the new *measure of social relations*. The age of globalised radical modernity, reflexive modernisation, and *total communication*, therefore presents itself as the *time of indeterminacy* and abandonment of hierarchy and order. It’s a present Era that’s forever *continuous*, almost *stretched*, and that’s asking new questions of the order of the day; political, social, and economic questions *which*, covering wider themes than those of previous epochs, are rendering urgent the need for a *re-positioning*, even a *reinvention* of politics. It’s a *sphere of discourse* that needs to reconquer its decisional spaces. It has been downsized too much, even humiliated in its role and functions, by the economic domain, the *technocracy*, Weber’s *mechanised petrification* and, on a more general level, by the progressive reclusion of life and social experiences in institutions and procedures. The *complexity* innate in globalisation obliges us to reformulate every category of political action, and to broaden our horizons of thought and action. We also need to elaborate a policy that doesn’t confine itself to observing the rules but rather tries to change them, given that most were defined in the context of a *strong nation-State*. This comprehensive re-thinking of *theory and praxis* takes places in the context of a *radical modernity* in which the aspect of “reflexiveness”

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with his typical behaviour, constitutes one of the icons of modernity. He has managed to utilise the whole of reality and, driven by his trust in the all-encompassing range of the means-ends category, has convinced himself that he can find a solution to any problem, uncritically identifying production/fabricatio n with action. The social actors in this eternal present have by now come to interpret all behaviour in terms of utility and are almost obsessed with the need to produce and, above all, consume material objects, often confusing ‘intelligence’ with ‘ingenuity’¹⁷. In this way, risk, taken also to mean deviation from the norm, has by now become an innate element of the modern nation-State and Political system, as well as of the social systems. Politics is increasingly being forced to take decisions (the central role of the public sphere) whose repercussions are not only local, in that “Risk communication has become reflexive and thus universal. Refusing to assume risks or demanding their rejection have become dangerous behaviour”¹⁹.

3. THE WEB’S DISTRIBUTED ARCHITECTURE AND THE NEW PUBLIC SPHERE

Further to their capacity to gradually destroy (dis-intermediate) all the mechanisms of political and/or social mediation, the network society and new communication technologies have the power, possibly limitless power, to extend man’s possibilities and communicative opportunities, thereby facilitating the production, elaboration and exchange of information and knowledge between individuals. On the other hand, and despite presenting itself as an extraordinary opportunity for economic, political and social evolution, the risk culture has led to a significant increase in the sense of insecurity and vulnerability within social systems, thus feeding a climate of fear (and/or social alarm) on both a local and global scale. And this climate is radically calling into question the very “precautionary principle”²⁰, which is ever more cut off from the social demand for protection. Within the community there’s no place for conditioning and everyone can (potentially) produce and exchange knowledge in the context of a system in which communication has become totally horizontal and is unhindered by any kind of filter. Out of a complex reality like today’s, which offers a choice between several ethical systems, a ‘new’ and more autonomous Subject emerges, a subject that is free of the ties imposed by the context and/or reference group.

This Subject is aware of the fragmentation of the social bond and of religious morality, as well as the dissolution of traditional ethical ties. And it couldn’t have been any other way, given that historic phases of social change have always been accompanied by great insecurity and a general sense of disorientation caused by the absence of a strong cultural model. The problem also involves trying to understand whether, in reality, the network society and interconnected economy, both of which appear to guarantee greater opportunities for equality in social actors’ initial conditions, are concealing a risk. The risk is that the social systems’ connective tissue will be further weakened, that individuals (people/social actors), convinced that the virtual is real, become passive, and that

issues are not translated into change and political decisions. But there’s also danger of a cultural uniformity, which would provide fertile terrain for a culture of total social control capable of reducing the citizen’s/consumer’s freedom. Hence, although the Network Society undoubtedly offers an extraordinary chance for the emancipation and liberation of the forces and energies of the social and global fabric, nation-states need to be careful that the Great Network not only increases communicative and cognitive possibilities but also contributes to the creation of a more culturally evolved and open humanity that’s able to contrast what some see as the end of society. Since the origins of pre-complex society, communication has, as is known, been the lifeblood of the social relations’ system, representing the connective tissue of the social systems. But this presupposition doesn’t stop us observing how the Internet and social media are bringing about an unprecedented leap in quality, specifically in relation to social action and the communicative praxis. In the same way, modifications to social mechanisms connected to trust and cooperation— which are themselves being boosted by the network of protection and social promotion, the concept of social capital— are following one another much quicker.

The links of interdependence and interconnection that innervate the world-system are intensifying, even if some scholars are talking of the end of the social bond, alerting us to the new forms of socialisation and a virtuality of reality and social life whose multiple implications are yet to be studied and evaluated. But the fundamental question lies in the fact that the knowledge society has all the features of a global risk society, a society that has extended the dynamics of conflict, and spread risks, (real and potential) emergencies, and systemic anomalies over every border or limit. This dimension crosses the equally crucial sphere of trust which continues to emerge as a fundamental social mechanism capable of reducing complexity and rendering the acceptance of risk sustainable. This trust—it’s worth reiterating— remains closely linked to the problem of learning and knowledge. Modern social systems, which are often orphans of a strong cultural model, are nowadays characterised by instability and a high degree of unpredictability of their actions and processes. And it’s this that renders the knowledge sharing option even more strategic, not to say urgent. In fact, the ‘virgin territory’ of the current communicative praxis is seemingly characterised, above all, by an extraordinary opportunity for the democratisation of knowledge and cultural processes, which could definitively break the old industrial model, as well as—and as we’ve said before—the consolidated structures, hierarchies, control logics and closure to change. Therefore, what’s in play here is the redefinition of the structure of social power relations and all the implications that that throws up. The complex architectures, which support the network society, undoubtedly confirm and further reinforce the character of ‘common good’ connected to the resource of knowledge. We should reiterate that knowledge is the only strategic resource derived from the processes of intersubjective acquisition that can nourish, even from below, the nerves and tissues that innervate the interconnected economy. Think about the idea, rather the ambitious project—which is no longer utopian—to develop an open source global network geared not only towards producing/
elaborating knowledge but also to controlling information. This *knowledge ecosystem*, structured in a reticular manner, is destined to significantly facilitate the processes of reducing complexity in a phase of the passage to hypermodernity, itself increasingly marked by an increase in indeterminacy and disorder within the systems. On the other hand, indeterminacy and disorder can trigger off a halt (or, on the contrary, a state of entropy) of all the organisational mechanisms and their relative sub-systems deputised to react/respond to the unforeseen.

The emergence of a knowledge ecosystem is always tied to the concrete possibility of accessing and spreading information/knowledge (primary needs). In the so-called *Knowledge Society*, the criteria of hierarchy in accessing information are tested every day, and culturally weakened by the new *spirit of the information age* and the multiple forms of mediated interaction that appear to have definitively cancelled the borders between the *public sphere* and private sphere. However, after a long siege the decisive assault on the ‘ivory tower’ of knowledge (power), used here in the traditional sense of the term, has arrived with Web 2.0 (and its successive versions). With its participatory architecture, this motor of collective intelligence, amplifier of social cooperation, and authentic global relational network, is capable of making users real ‘proactive subjects’. All the conditions exist for the definition of a platform suitable for a more participatory democracy, even if the affirmation of a non-commercial production of information and culture is destined to create situations of conflict, mainly with businesses structured according to the economic model of industrial information. The current (global) *knowledge ecosystem* is de-structuring the basis of the traditional industrial model which accompanied the evolution of the mass media system and, in some way, guaranteed its control by power groups and, more generally, the management class. In this way the media platform that gave form and meaning to the ‘old’ public sphere – which still exists, and is here taken to mean, as Habermas expressed it, that structure of intermediation between the political system on the one hand and the private spheres of the life world and specialist functional systems on the other – is failing.

The Internet’s new distributed architecture is preparing to substitute the centralised and hierarchical architecture of the past. For this reason the Great Networkconcretises the opportunity to organise and coordinate, even on a global scale, opinions and actions alternative to those ‘more visible’ which dominate the media arena. Above all, they are short-circuiting the old media system. Consequently, the networked public spheres also feature social actors who have no involvement with the market and can create a critical mass in regard to little-known social issues by exercising pressure on the power and Political system. The networks’ capitalist system therefore reveals itself to be a *knowledge-based economy* which is causing an irreversible transformation of knowledge into social knowledge capable of supplying know-how that is constantly re-usable and that overcomes the limits of exclusively owned knowledge, thus introducing numerous discontinuities and asymmetries into the new social complex. *Horizontal production* has become the absolute protagonist. However, one must always remember that this is just the infrastructure on which the flesh and blood(individual and collective) social actors can define, plan and carry out social change. The hope is that such change is based on collective knowledge and the passage from mass culture to participatory culture. Thus, it appears evident how communication and the social production of knowledge are sinking their roots into the Modernity project. It’s politics – and we reiterate this strongly – that needs to reformulate itself and redefine its priorities in the name of the *common good*. We need a new *humanism* – a necessary condition in truly democratic systems – based on widespread knowledge that’s accessible to everyone and capable of involv-
ing weak subjects and/or subjects that have been penalised by the mechanisms of the world-economy and growth without rules. In this sense, we should also note some positive signs of a reawakening of the global conscience in the face of the many problems of hypermodernity (identity, gender, precariousness and work, citizenship rights, human rights, the environment, etc.), signs which are further evidenced by the extremely interesting phenomenon of new (local and global) social movements for whom the Internet and the opportunity offered by Web 2.0 provide the ideal infrastructure and input for the coordinating and feeding of their projects. The world communication system, although presenting several aspects that are open to criticism and, in some cases, are disturbing, appears to offer an extraordinary opportunity for the development of (scientific and non) ‘world visions’ alternative to the dominant and/or externally-produced ones. The choice to work on strategies aimed at sharing knowledge could have an absolutely decisive role in the reduction of inequality (social asymmetries), the governance of social egoism and, consequently, in the productive mediation/re-composition of conflict. By now this seems to be a given fact. In this sense, communication and the social production of knowledge are increasingly destined to extend social actors’ options and their degree of freedom (on condition that they are increasingly informed and competent), guaranteeing them greater opportunities for emancipation than in the past. And this real emancipation, if achieved, will form the structure for a “new social contract”.