Introduction

globalization as democratic utopia

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Introduction: Globalization as Democratic Utopia

The Globalization of Societies

Initially propelled by mercantilism and later by the industrial revolution, the processes of globalization have created empires and colonies, have brought millions to slavery, have destroyed indigenous people, and have denied basic living conditions to much of humankind. As late as the first half of the twentieth century, a substantial part of the periphery of the capitalist world was under colonial power and the majority of the global population lived in agrarian communities where there was only a vague resonance of the happenings in the rest of the world. At the time, in the cities, industrial workers fought for a place in their national political systems, the social space in which expectations were set and most information circulated. Until recently, awareness of global trends only existed for a small political, economic, and intellectual elite. It took five hundred years to reach the beginning of a new era: at the end of the twentieth century globalization began to permeate the consciousness of mankind worldwide.

An economic view of history confuses **globalization processes** with the contemporary phenomenon of the **globalization of societies**. Globalization processes, the transformation of productive structures, market integration, the internationalization of finance and, in particular, the technological revolution in communications, make up the substratum which allows for the globalization of social life. This, however, constitutes a new political and cultural reality in which the different social actors - individuals, groups, institutions and enterprises- base their actions on information, expectations and desires inspired by global references.

In a gradual process expectations and values are changing through social and ideological conflicts, which expand the perception of belonging to a common world. As a result, it is today possible for any individual on the planet, regardless of their place of birth or social position, to legitimately dream of access to better living conditions. Their point of reference is the information they receive from every corner of the world. Globalization of societies is, above all, a process that creates an increasingly unified global space for expectations of equality and the development of a worldwide public opinion.

The globalization of societies produces the vision of a global utopia of a more egalitarian and democratic world. It is based on the transformation of hearts and minds towards the recognition that all of humanity has the right to benefit from the same basic material and cultural goods that today reach only a small part of the global population. The hope for a

world of abundance where all people enjoy similar levels of development and decent living conditions is common to all major contemporary ideologies irrespective of their ability to reaching this promise.

The World Economic forum in Davos and the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre are two aspects of the same process. As media symbols they are presented as antagonistic, but in spite of their differences they are fundamentally linked and both are products of globalization. The former is sustained by the power and prestige of the market model and of the corporate sector capacity to renew the economy. At the same time, it is unable to give satisfactory solutions to social, cultural, political, and moral problems generated by those changes prompted by globalization that cannot be reduced to marginal concerns of market inefficiency. The latter has effectively promoted the values of solidarity and the public interest as central themes in an international agenda. However, even though it has abandoned the **anti**-globalization discourse and now seeks an **other**-globalization, it has so far shown little capacity to create effective proposals that integrate technological progress with a humanistic view of history.

It is important to confront simplifications that ignore common values that are shared by the greater part of humanity. In democratic societies, these values are expressed through the strong but conflicting interconnectedness between diverse social actors such as governments, private companies and non-governmental organizations.

During the last decades, social theories did unveil the mechanisms that reproduce inequality and domination but have overlooked the importance of explaining the other side of the coin: the processes that keep the fight for freedom, solidarity, and social justice alive as central values in contemporary societies. A comprehensive social theory requires an analysis of the complex interrelatedness of the two processes, those that favor inequality and domination and those that favor solidarity and freedom.

The topic of this book, the digital divide, refers to the unequal distribution of resources associated with information and communication technology between countries and within societies. We will explore how one factor, in this case information technology, can potentially support contradictory tendencies: towards greater freedom and social participation and to deeper social inequality and new forms of concentration of power.

To approach the challenge of analyzing the digital divide, we must avoid simple, easily formulated views with strong media appeal that overlook the richness, diversity, and complexity of social life. For some authors and international institutions, new technologies can allow less developed countries and poorer sectors of the population to substitute advanced technologies for investment in education and material resources. Others argue that new technologies will widen the gap between the rich and the poor both internationally and within societies. Both visions indicate partial tendencies. The social consequences of new technologies are neither linear nor predictable and they are capable of generating new forms of stratification and social fragmentation. While current data shows that new information technologies mainly reinforce social inequality, there are some indications that they could be

equally important in helping the least privileged sectors of the population. Both processes coexist and the final result will depend on the creative efforts of groups, companies, non-governmental organizations, and, most importantly, national governments. As the examples in this book will show, the impact of each technology depends on the way it is creatively appropriated by the different social groups and public institutions.

To understand the digital divide it is necessary to place it within the broader dynamic of each society and the international system, as an element in the set of goods and services that determine social inequality. Many argue that the digital divide is a secondary problem, that new technologies are luxuries in a consumer society, and that inequality should be fought through the classic channels of food, housing, health, and job creation programs. This book parts with this view, which represents, as we will see in the next chapters, a narrow and elitist perspective of the consumer world. Though we agree that new technologies are not a panacea for the problems of inequality, their universalization is today among the fundamental conditions of participation and productive integration in society.

Overview

In chapter one, we will use the example of the creative forms of appropriation of cellular telephones among low income Brazilians to analyze the limitations of social science when challenged to explain the role of consumption in contemporary societies. We argue that although some consumer objects have strong symbolic dimension related to social status, and although product choice can be influenced by advertising and personal decisions, the majority consumer products are prerequisites of access to a better quality of life, to jobs, and to active participation in society. A large part of the literature on consumer societies is focused on a relatively small number of products and says little about the majority of consumer products offered by contemporary society. This includes most products that are not oriented toward a specific social class and that are not consumed because of the influence of advertising or individual preference. Most of consumer goods are **artifacts embedded with technology** that have profoundly transformed society and access to them is a prerequisite for full participation in modern social life.

In the second chapter we will show that social inequalities are multiple and interlinked. They should be analyzed with consideration both to inequalities in personal income and to access to the goods that are directly or indirectly the responsibility of the state. The various kinds of social inequality are not independent; they are interrelated and reinforce one another. Public policy and civil society initiatives should confront the diverse forms of social inequality as an interdependent set of phenomenon and address them with simultaneous and coordinated actions. The digital divide has added another dimension to the diversity of existing inequalities in society: that of unequal access to the set of new goods and services associated with new information and communication technology.

Beginning with a summary description of the principal dimensions of the information society, chapter three will argue that an emphasis on new processes and changes related to the impact of informatics and telecommunications does not allow us to overlook the continuities in social organization. We will show that, in spite of the expansion of networks, societies continue to be pyramid shaped structures based on the control of material resources. The challenge for the contemporary world is to create a virtuous integration between networks and pyramids, between states and non-governmental organizations, and between national and international institutions.

In the fourth chapter we introduce the elements that constitute the digital divide. The digital divide is played out on many levels, in each case with specific impacts on social inequality. We will show that the digital divide involves different questions related to the social impact of new technologies that should be articulated in terms of their consequences over social inequality, economic development, and the fight against poverty. The existence of physical infrastructure, access to individual connections, digital literacy, education, and contents developed specifically to reach the needs of the poorest sectors of the population, all have an impact on inequality. At the end of the chapter we analyze the principal problems that must be addressed by public policy in order to fight the digital divide in developing countries and to establish efficient uses of resources.

In the fifth chapter we analyze the expansion of telecommunications in Brazil, in particular the expansions of telephone and Internet systems, within the context of the transformations brought about by privatization and the creation of a regulatory agency. We will show the successes and limitations of the transformations of the last decade, the inequality in access to new information systems, and its impact on society and governments.

The largest concentration of the poorest sectors of the Brazilian urban population is in the *favelas* (shantytowns) of Brazil's major cities. In the sixth chapter we provide a panoramic view of the *favelas* focusing on the themes of public services, violence and consumption. We will discuss the idea of *favela* residents as **excluded** sectors of the population. Despite a certain metaphoric value, in practice this notion promotes a false view of life among the urban poor, who are seen as people who are yet to be included in the culture, values, and expectations of the rest of Brazilian society. In fact, the residents of Brazil's *favelas* share expectations of access to the same goods that the middle-class already enjoy and constantly engage in efforts -sometimes successfully, as we will show- to obtain individual consumer goods. Though low income is a central factor, the principal problems in the *favelas* are directly related to the limited access to public services. In particular, the neglect of public institutions charged with ensuring security has allowed the *favelas* to be transformed into territories that are colonized by drug lords who generally control their areas in some form of collusion with the police. This has brought violence and death among *favela* youth to epidemic proportions.

To the extent that it has assumed epidemic proportions, urban violence cannot be viewed as a simple byproduct of urban poverty. Violence is associated with specific problems related to the illegal arms trade, at-risk youth without high school education or hope in the job market,

and ineffective and corrupt systems of police security. This book is inspired by the experiences of Viva Rio, a non-governmental organization located in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In Brazil several organizations have developed important programs in the fight against the digital divide. Viva Rio excels due to the variety of its activities, all of which converge on the theme of **human security**: the right to live without fear of violence or lack of basic needs. Viva Rio's activities are oriented toward reconstructing the social fabric to permit **new forms of communication** that promote greater equality through different practices and giving value to the self-image of the poor communities and their members.

The central characteristic of Viva Rio's activity is its multidimensional vision. The organization works on the social, economic, educational, cultural, ecological, legal, and police security aspects involved in improving the living conditions for *favela* populations. Viva Rio relies on its pragmatism and ability to mobilize public and private resources without committing itself to any political trend. Viva Rio's projects are oriented to create **replicable** models and its constant effort to integrate its activities with public policy effectively supports the process of democratizing public institutions. Viva Rio is specially conscious of the importance of communications mediums and acting through local networks. In the fight against the digital divide it excels in the production of digital contents oriented toward the needs of the urban poor.

The variety of themes that compose Viva Rio's approach shows the complexity of the struggle against the digital divide and indicates that it should not be considered in isolation from the various dimensions of inequality and poverty. The experiences we analyze will show that in some cases the Internet is not necessarily the most appropriate tool for addressing a problem. Sometimes "less advanced" technologies are more effective in the context of *favela* life, and in other cases the Internet can be helpful but plays only a secondary role.

The seventh through twelfth chapters describe Viva Rio's main areas of activity. Chapter eight describes the efforts to bring dignity to the self-image of *favela* residents through the creation of a web portal dedicated to *favela* life. The ninth chapter describes several different communication spaces created within the *favelas* by Viva Rio. Chapters ten through twelve describe Viva Rio's principal projects in the areas of education, job creation, violence reduction, and developing a culture of human rights. It is important to indicate that Viva Rio has the capability to keep track of the results of its activities in a systematic way. This is an important contribution given that information on activities for digital inclusion is replete with anecdotal examples describing pilot projects that generally lack quantitative data on their social impact.

In the final chapter we will analyze the lessons of the Viva Rio experience within a general discussion of the relation between the state, non-governmental organizations and enterprises, and the challenges posed by the digital divide to develop creative policies and uses for new communication technology in the fight against poverty and social inequality.

Box A - The` Long Journey Towards Social Globalization

The globalization of societies is a long-term process unfolded under the aegis of capitalism and liberal democracy. Its history is full of contradictions. The discourse of human rights, now a basic part of humanity's common language, cannot be disassociated from the economic, political and cultural processes of capitalist developments that make the universalization of human rights viable.

In the name of humanistic values, it is both necessary and possible to question and limit the most negative aspects of globalization today such as the excessive power of multinational companies and financial capital. But when this questioning is presented as an antagonistic conflict between human rights or cultural traditions and the political and economic forces that promote globalization, it leads to rhetorical discourses with practical impotence and, as in the case of religious fundamentalism, the danger of abandoning illuminist thought.

One of the challenges of the globalized world is to control the colonization of global public goods by private interests. The challenge to national governments – which continues to be the most important institution for organizing social cohesion and citizen rights – is to regulate the public interest and actively participate in the construction of a new international order.

As the examples in this book show, it is the capacity to advance the positive aspects of the principal forces of modern civilization that transforms globalization in a democratic utopia. The horizon of humanistic thought of the twenty-first century, filled with challenges, dangers, and hopes, needs to recognize the central role of technology and in many cases the positive aspects of mercantile relations in the shaping of modern civilization.