Freedom of movement and the self-constitution of societies

Looking backward in history, one can ask to what extent the geophysical factors, the natural and the artificial borders of territorial units, separate identities of populations and Kulturkreise, as well as the distinction between 'inside' and 'outside' - all the traditional objects of the science of geography - were in their essence merely the conceptual derivatives, or the material sediments/artifices of 'speed limits' - or, more generally, of the time-and-cost constraints imposed on freedom of movement.

Paul Virilio suggested recently that, while Francis Fukuyama's declaration of the 'end of history' looks grossly premature, one can with growing confidence speak presently of the 'end of geography'. The distances do not matter any more, while the idea of a geophysical border is increasingly difficult to sustain in the 'real world'. It suddenly seems clear that the divisions of continents and of the globe as a whole were the function of distances made once impossibly real thanks to the primitiveness of transport and the hardships of travel.

Indeed, far from being an objective, impersonal, physical 'given', 'distance' is a social product; its length varies depending on the speed with which it may be overcome (and, in a monetary economy, on the cost involved in the attainment of that speed). All other socially produced factors of constitution, separation and the maintenance of collective identities - like state borders or cultural barriers - seem in retrospect merely secondary effects of that speed.

This seems to be the reason, let us note, why the 'reality of borders' was as a rule, most of the time, a class-stratified phenomenon: in the past, as they are today, the elites of the wealthy and the powerful were always more cosmopolitically inclined than the rest of the population of the lands they inhabited; at all times they tended to create a culture of their own which made little of the same borders that held fast for lesser folk; they had more in common with the elites across the borders than with the rest of the population inside them. This seems also to be the reason why Bill Clinton, the spokesman of the most powerful elite of the present-day world, could recently declare that for the first time there is no difference between domestic and foreign politics. Indeed, little in the elite's life experience now implies a difference between 'here' and 'there', 'inside' and 'outside', 'close by' and 'far away'. With time of communication imploding and shrinking to the no-size of the instant, space and spatial markers cease to matter; at least to those whose actions can move with the speed of the electronic message.

The 'inside' vs. 'outside', 'here' vs. 'out there', 'near' vs. 'far away' opposition recorded the degree of taming, domestication and familiarity of various fragments (human as much as inhuman) of the surrounding world.

Near, close to hand, is primarily what is usual, familiar and known to the point of obviousness; someone or something seen, met, dealt with, interacted with daily, intertwined with habitual routine and day-to-day activities. 'Near' is a space inside which one can feel chez soi, at home; a space in which one seldom, if at all, finds oneself at a loss, feels lost for words or uncertain how to act. 'Far away', on the other hand, is a space which one enters only occasionally or not at all, in which things happen which one cannot anticipate or comprehend, and would not know how to react to once they occurred: a space containing things one knows little about, from which one does not expect much and regarding which one does not feel obliged to care.

To find oneself in a 'far-away' space is an unnerving experience; venturing 'far away' means being beyond one's ken, out of place and out of one's element, inviting trouble and fearing harm.

Due to all such features, the 'near-far' opposition has one more, crucial dimension: that between certainty and uncertainty, self-assurance and hesitation. Being 'far away' means
being in trouble – and so it demands cleverness, cunning, slyness or courage, learning foreign rules one can do without elsewhere, and mastering them through risky trials and often costly errors. The idea of the 'near', on the other hand, stands for the unproblematic; painlessly acquired habits will do, and since they are habits they feel weightless and call for no effort, giving no occasion to anxiety-prone hesitation. Whatever has come to be known as the 'local community' is brought into being by this opposition between 'here' and 'out there', 'near' and 'far away'.

Modern history has been marked by the constant progress of the means of transportation. Transport and travel was the field of particularly radical and rapid change; progress here, as Schumpeter pointed out a long time ago, was not the result of multiplying the number of stage-coaches, but of the invention and mass production of totally new means of travel – trains, motorcars and airplanes. It was primarily the availability of means of fast travel that triggered the typically modern process of eroding and undermining all locally entrenched social and cultural 'totalities', the process first captured by Tönnies' famous formula of modernity as the passage from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft.

Among all the technical factors of mobility, a particularly great role was played by the transport of information – the kind of communication which does not involve movement of physical bodies or involves it only secondarily and marginally. Technical means were steadily and consistently developed which also allowed information to travel independently from its bodily carriers – and also from the objects of which the information informed; means which set the 'signifiers' free from the hold of the 'signifieds'. The separation of the movements of information from those of its carriers and its objects allowed in its turn the differentiation of their speed; the movements of information gathered speed on a pace much faster than the travel of bodies, or the change of the situations of which the information informed, was able to reach. In the end, the appearance of the computer-served World Wide Web put paid – as far as information is concerned – to the very notion of 'travel' (and of 'distance' to be travelled) and renders information, in theory as well as in practice, instantaneously available throughout the globe.

The overall results of the latest developments are enormous. Its impact on the interplay of social association/dissociation has been widely noted and described in great detail. Much as one notices the 'essence of hammer' only when the hammer has been broken, we now see more clearly than ever before the role played by time, space and the means of saddling them in the formation, stability/flexibility, and the demise of socio-cultural and political totalities. The so-called 'closely knit communities' of yore were, as we can now see, brought into being and kept alive by the gap between the nearly instantaneous communication made the small-scale community (the size of which was determined by the innate qualities of 'we-tware', and thus confined to the natural limits of human sight, hearing and memorizing capacity) and the enormity of time and expense needed to pass information between localities. On the other hand, the present-day fragility and short life-span of communities appears primarily to be the result of that gap shrinking or altogether disappearing: inner-community communication has no advantage over inter-communal exchange; if both are instantaneous.

Michael Benedikt thus summarizes our retrospective discovery and the new understanding of the intimate connection between the speed of travel and social cohesion:

The kind of unity made possible in small communities by the near-simultaneity and near-zero cost of natural voice communications, posters and leaflets, collapses at the larger scale. Social cohesion at any scale is a function of consensus, of shared knowledge, and without constant updating and interaction, such
cohesion depends critically on early and strict, education in — and memory of — culture. Social flexibility, conversely, depends on forgetting and cheap communication.8

Let us add that the ‘and’ in the last quoted sentence is superfluous; the facility to forget, and cheapness (as well as the high velocity) of communication, are but two aspects of the same condition and could hardly be thought of separately. Cheap communication means quick overflowing, shifting or elbowing away the information acquired as much as it means the speedy arrival of news. The capacities of ‘wetware’ remaining largely unchanged since at least palaeolithic times, cheap communication floods and smothers memory rather than feeding and stabilizing it. Arguably the most seminal of recent developments is the dwindling differences between the costs of transmitting information on a local and global scale (wherever you send your message through the Internet, you pay by the tariff of the ‘local call’), a circumstance as important culturally as it is economically; this, in turn, means that the information eventually arriving and clamouring for attention, for entry to, and however short-lived) staying in the memory, tends to be originated in the most diverse and mutually autonomous sites and thus likely to convey mutually incompatible or mutually cancelling messages — in sharp contradiction to the messages floating inside communities devoid of hardware and software and relying on ‘wetware’ only; that is, to the messages which tended to reiterate and reinforce each other and assist the process of (selective) memorizing.

As Timothy W. Luke puts it, ‘the spatiality of traditional societies is organized around the mostly unmediated capacities of ordinary human bodies’:

Traditional visions of action often resort to organic metaphors for their allusions: conflict was chain-to-chain. Combat was hand-to-hand. Justice was an eye-for-an-eye, a tooth-for-a-tooth.

Debate was heart-to-heart. Solidarity was shoulder-to-shoulder. Community was face-to-face. Friendship was arm-in-arm. And, change was step-by-step.

This situation had changed beyond recognition with the advance of means which allowed the stretching of conflicts, solidarities, combats, debates or the administration of justice well beyond the reach of the human eye and arm. Space had become ‘processed/centred/organized/normalized’, and above all emancipated from the natural constraint of the human body.

It was therefore the capacity of technics, the speed of its action and the cost of its use which from then on ‘organized space’. ‘The space projected by such technics is radically different: engineered, not God-given; artificial, not natural; mediated by hardware, not immediate to wetware; rationalized, not communalized; national, not local.’6

Engineered modern space was to be tough, solid, permanent and non-negotiable. Concrete and steel were to be its flesh, the web of railway tracks and highways its blood vessels. Writers of modern utopias did not distinguish between social and architectural order, social and territorial units and divisions; for them — as for their contemporaries in charge of social order — the key to an orderly society was to be found in the organization of space.

Social totality was to be a hierarchy of ever larger and more inclusive localities, with the supra-local authority of the state perched on the top and surveilling the whole, while itself protected from day-to-day invigilation.

Over that territorial/urbanistic/architectural, engineered space a third, cybernetic space of the human world has been imposed with the advent of the global web of information. Elements of this space, according to Paul Virilio, are ‘devoid of spatial dimensions, but inscribed in the singular temporality of an instantaneous diffusion. From here on, people can’t be separated by physical obstacles or by temporal distances. With the interfacing of computer terminals and video-
monitors, distinctions of here and there no longer mean anything."

Like most statements pronouncing on the 'human' condition as such - one and the same for all humans - this one is not exactly correct. The 'interfacing of computer terminals' has had a varied impact on the plight of different kinds of people. And some people - in fact, quite a lot of them - still can, as before, be 'separated by physical obstacles and temporal distances'; this separation being now more merciless, and having more profound psychological effects, than ever before.

**New speed, new polarization**

To put it in a nutshell: rather than homogenizing the human condition, the technological annulment of temporal/spatial distances tends to polarize it. It emancipates certain humans from territorial constraints and renders certain community-generating meanings extritorial - while denying the territory, to which other people go on being confined, of its meaning and its identity-endowing capacity. For some people it augurs an unprecedented freedom from physical obstacles and unheard-of ability to move and act from a distance. For others, it portends the impossibility of appropriating and domesticating the locality from which they have little chance of cutting themselves free in order to move elsewhere. With 'distances no longer meaning anything', localities, separated by distances, also lose their meanings. This, however, augurs freedom of meaning-creation for some, but portends ascription to meaninglessness for others. Some can now move out of the locality - any locality - at will. Others watch helplessly the sole locality they inhabit moving away from under their feet.

Information now floats independently from its carriers; shifting of bodies and rearrangement of bodies in physical space is less than ever necessary to reorder meanings and relationships.

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For some people - for the mobile elite, the elite of mobility - this means, literally, the 'depysicalization', the new weightlessness of power. Elites travel in space, and travel faster than ever before - but the spread and density of the power web they weave is not dependent on that travel. Thanks to new 'bodylessness' of power in its mainly financial form, the power-holders become truly extritorial even if, bodily, they happen to stay 'in place'. Their power is, fully and truly, not 'out of this world' - not of the physical world in which they build their heavily guarded homes and offices, themselves extritorial, free from intrusion of unwelcome neighbours, cut out from whatever may be called a local community, inaccessible to whoever is, unlike them, confined to it.

It is this new elite's experience of non-territoriality of power - of the eerie yet awesome combination of ethereality with omnipotence, non-physicality and reality-forming might - which is being recorded in the common eulogy of the 'new freedom' embodied in electronically sustained 'cyberspace'; most remarkably, in Margaret Wertheim's 'analogy between cyberspace and the Christian conception of heaven':

> Just as early Christians envisaged heaven as an idealized realm beyond the chaos and decay of the material world - a disintegration all too palpable as the empire crumbled around them - so too, in this time of social and environmental disintegration, today's protagonists of cyberspace prefer their domain as an ideal 'above' and 'beyond' the problems of the material world. While early Christians promulgated heaven as a realm in which the human soul would be freed from the frailties and failings of the flesh, so today's champions of cyberspace hail it as a place where the self will be freed from the limitations of physical embodiment."

In cyberspace, bodies do not matter - though cyberspace matters, and matters decisively and irrevocably, in the life of bodies. There is no appeal from the verdicts passed in the
cyberspatial heaven, and nothing that happens on earth may question their authority. With the power to pass verdicts securely vested in cyberspace, the bodies of the powerful need not be powerful bodies nor need they be armed with heavy material weapons; more than that, unlike Antheus, they need no link to their earthly environment to assert, ground or manifest their power. What they need is the isolation from locality, now stripped of social meaning which has been transplanted into cyberspace, and so reduced to a merely 'physical' terrain. What they also need is the security of that isolation — a 'non-neighbourhood' condition, immunity from local interference, a foolproof, invulnerable isolation, translated as the 'safety' of persons, of their homes and their playgrounds. Deterritorialization of power therefore goes hand in hand with the ever stricter structuration of the territory.

In a study with the rolling-it-all title 'Building Paranoia', Steven Flusty notes the breathtaking explosion of ingenuity and a most frenetic building boom in a field new to the metropolitan areas: that of the 'interdictory spaces' — 'designed to intercept and repel or filter would-be users'. Flusty deploys his unique knack for coining precisely targeted and poignantly suggestive terms to distinguish several varieties of such spaces which supplement each other and combine into a new urban equivalent of the moats and turrets that once guarded medieval castles. Among such varieties, there is 'slippery space' — 'space that cannot be reached, due to contorted, protracted, or missing paths of approach'; 'prickly space' — 'space that cannot be comfortably occupied, defended by such details as wall-mounted sprinkler heads activated to clear loiterers or ledges sloped to inhibit sitting'; or 'jittery space' — 'space that cannot be utilized unobserved due to active monitoring by roving patrols and/or remote technologies feeding to security stations'. These and other 'interdictory spaces' serve no other purpose than to re-forge the social exterritoriality of the new supra-local elite into the material, bodily isolation from locality. They also put a final touch on the disintegration of locally grounded forms of togetherness and shared, communal living. The exterritoriality of elites is assured in the most material fashion — their physical inaccessibility to anyone not issued with an entry permit.

In a complementary development, such urban spaces where the occupants of different residential areas could meet face-to-face, engage in casual encounters, accost and challenge one another, talk, quarrel, argue or agree, lifting their private problems to the level of public issues and making public issues into matters of private concern — those 'private/public' agoras of Cornelius Castoriadis's — are fast shrinking in size and number. The few that remain tend to be increasingly selective — adding strengths to, rather than repairing the damage done by the push of disintegrating forces. As Steven Flusty puts it,

traditional public spaces are increasingly supplanted by privately produced (though often publicly subsidized), privately owned and administered spaces for public aggregation, that is, spaces of consumption ... (A)ccess is predicated upon ability to pay ... Exclusivity rules here, ensuring the high levels of control necessary to prevent irregularity, unpredictability, and inefficiency from interfering with the orderly flow of commerce.

The elites have chosen isolation and pay for it lavishly and willingly. The rest of the population finds itself cut off and forced to pay the heavy cultural, psychological and political price of their new isolation. Those unable to make their separate living the matter of choice and to pay the costs of its security are on the receiving side of the contemporary equivalent of the early-modern enclosures; they are purely and simply 'fenced off' without having been asked their consent, barred access to yesterday's 'commons', arrested, turned back and facing a short sharp shock when blundering into the off-limits regions, failing
to note the 'private property' warning signs or to read the meaning of the non-verbalized, yet no less resolve for that reason, the 'no trespassing' hints and clues.

Urban territory becomes the battlefield of continuous space war, sometimes erupting into the public spectacle of inner-city riots, ritual skirmishes with the police, the occasional forays of soccer crowds, but waged daily just beneath the surface of the public (publicized), official version of the routine urban order. Disempowered and disregarded residents of the 'fenced-off', pressed-back and relentlessly encroached-upon areas, respond with aggressive action of their own; they try to install on the borders of their ghettoized home ground 'no trespassing' signs of their own making. Following the eternal custom of bylins they use for the purpose any material they can lay their hands on - 'rituals', dressing strangely, striking bizarre attitudes, breaking rules, breaking bottles, windows, heads, issuing rhetorically challenges to the law,10 effective or not, these attempts have the handicap of non-authorization and tend to be conversely classified, in the official records, as issues of law and order, rather than what they are in fact: attempts to make their territorial claims audible and legible and so merely to follow the new rules of the territoriality game everyone else is playing with gusto.

The fortifications built by the elite and the self-defence-through-aggression practised by those left outside the walls have a mutually reinforcing effect clearly predicted by Gregory Bateson's theory of 'schismogenetic chains'. According to that theoretical model, schism is likely to emerge and deepen beyond repair when a position is set up in which

the behaviour X, Y, Z is the standard reply to X, Y, Z... If, for example, the patterns X, Y, Z incite boozing, we shall see that there is a likelihood, if boasting is the reply to boasting, that each group will drive the other into excessive emphasis of the pattern, a process which if not restrained can only lead to more and more extreme rivalry and ultimately to hostility and the breakdown of the whole system.

The above is the pattern of 'symmetrical differentiation'. What is its alternative? What happens if group B fails to respond to the X, Y, Z kind of challenge by group A with an X, Y, Z type of behaviour? The schismogenetic chain is not then cut - it only assumes the pattern of 'complementary', instead of symmetrical, differentiation. If, for instance, assertive behaviour is not responded to in the same currency, but meets with submissiveness, 'it is likely that this submissiveness will promote further assertiveness which in turn will promote further submissiveness'. The 'breakdown of the system' will follow all the same.11

The overall effect of the choice between the two patterns is minimal, but for the sides tied by the schismogenetic chain the difference between the patterns is one between dignity and humiliation, humanity and its loss. One can safely anticipate that the strategy of symmetrical differentiation would be always preferred to the complementary alternative. The latter is the strategy for the defeated or for those who accepted inevitability of defeat. Some things, though, are bound to emerge victorious, whatever strategy is chosen: the new fragmentation of the city space, the shrinkage and disappearance of public space, the falling apart of urban community, separation and segregation - and above all the exterriority of the new elite and the forced territory of the rest.

If the new exterriority of the elite feels like intoxicating freedom, the territory of the rest feels less like home ground, and ever more like prison - all the more humiliating for the obstructive sight of the others' freedom to move. It is not just that the condition of 'staying put', being unable to move at one's heart's desire and being barred access to greener pastures, exudes the acrid odour of defeat, signals incomplete humanity and implies being cheated in the division of splendid's life has to offer. Deprivation reaches deeper. The 'locality' in the new
world of high speed is not what the locality used to be at a time when information moved only together with the bodies of its carriers; neither the locality, nor the localized population has much in common with the 'local community'. Public spaces – agoras and forums in their various manifestations, places where agendas are set, private affairs are made public, opinions are formed, tested and confirmed, judgements are put together and verdicts are passed – such spaces followed the elite in cutting lose their local anchors; they are first to deterritorialize and move far beyond the reach of the merely 'we-ware' communicative capacity of any locality and its residents. Far from being bedroths of communities, local populations are more like loose bunches of untied ends.

Paul Lazarsfeld wrote of the 'local opinion leaders', who sift, evaluate and process for other locals the messages which arrive from the 'outside' through the media, but to do so, the local leaders must first have been heard by the locality – they needed an agora where the locals could come together to talk and listen. It was that local agora which allowed the voice of the local opinion leaders to compete with the voices from afar and gain conviction able to outweigh the much more resourceful authority, thinned as it was by its distance. I doubt whether Lazarsfeld would come to the same conclusion were he to repeat his study today, a mere half-century later.

Nils Christie has recently tried to encapsulate, in an allegory, the logic of the process and its consequences. Since the text is not yet easily available, I will quote the story at length:

Moses came down from the mountains. Under his arm he carried the rules, engraved in granite, dictated to him by one even further up than the mountains. Moses was only a messenger, the people – the populus – were the receivers. Much later, Jesus and Mohammed functioned according to the same principles. These are classical cases of 'pyramidal justice'. And then the other picture: females gathering at the water-

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useless may only descend from on high, from regions never to be penetrated by any but a most inquisitive eye; the verdicts are unquestionable since no questions may be meaningfully addressed to the judges and since the judges left no address – not even an e-mail address – and no one can be sure where they reside. No room is left for the 'local opinion leaders'; no room is left for the 'local opinion' as such.

The verdicts may be completely out of touch with the way life runs locally, but they are not meant to be tested in the experience of people on whose conduct they pronounce. Born out of a kind of experience known to the local receivers of the message through hearsay at best, they may rebound in more suffering even if they intend to bring joy. The extraterritorial origins enter locally-bound life only as caricatures; perhaps as mutants and monsters. On the way, they expropriate the ethical powers of the locals, depriving them of all means of limiting the damage.