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Paradise Regained? The Work of Mediation Technology in an Age of Open Communities

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This paper is about the propagation of an open global community in an age of technological mediation. Acts of mediation enable people to collectively create bonds and relations between themselves and others, whether this takes place through complex communication mechanisms such as the internet, or in direct acts of speech between individuals. The starting point of this essay is that communication technology may re-establish old forms of social bonds and cultural relations just as it may create new bonds and relations between individuals. Drawn from the work of Walter Benjamin and Pierre Clastres, it addresses issues in existing social bonds and cultural relations in the context of an emergent global communication network. Benjamin's critical analyses of violence and the work of art in the modern era is essential in understanding how technology shapes bonds and relations between individuals in society. Clastres's research into political relations in Indian societies suggests alternative political systems that govern relations between society and the State.

My purpose is to extend Benjamin's and Clastres's analyses of relations between people and society and the State to the work produced when communication technologies are conceptualised as performances of mediation in a globally communicative digital era. The argument this paper develops is that an open democratic global community has the right, and it very much enforces that right, to insist that the system of governance used in regulating global social relations is not based on the capacity of the State to forcibly ensure that individuals act in accordance with the State's decrees. While an open global communicative community recognises and acknowledges that violence remains an unavoidable feature of the way individuals may act in relation to others, and can only be adjudicated by divine law (in which retribution can only be exacted by God through acts of fate that befall individuals breaking God's law), an open global community refuses to allow the State to develop legal mechanisms or systems of governance that enable the rulers of society to use violence against the people in order to maintain or restore the governorship of society.

What is an Open Global Communicative Community?

If a globally mediated communication network is an open community, it must demonstrate how someone joining that network from anywhere may participate. It should be possible to imagine people all over the world joining this community, bringing with them cultures, histories, and linguistic capabilities uniquely variable and unpredictable. Such individuals will bring expectations, needs, and desires which that community must welcome and host. If, as it appears, the technology needed for such a network is available today, is it now a question of how individuals interact in turning this global network into a community? Describing a community globally indicates a preparedness to engage with and accept values, cultures, and languages of

others. Must we become new people, learn new languages, become infused with different sensibilities, as well as reduce, forget, or reforge our own cultural histories, in adapting to others who join this worldly crowd? This essay seeks responses to these questions that do not require individuals to become super-human techno-beings in order to participate in the new possibilities technology creates. Rather it tries to imagine social life in ways that strengthen and support the sense of individual humanity while incorporating and transcending the impact of technology so that it services rather than transforms biology.

The notion of individual humanity signifies a community of individual human beings acting with others with whom they identify, but with whom they may share no further levels of common acculturation. Differences may occur in language, history, cultural values, social mores, and even religious beliefs. The large collective of fans of the 1960s television series *Star Trek* who regularly gather together at large international conferences dedicated to the series could be regarded as a prototype of this community. In spite of wide international representation, such gatherings create a form of community even though there may be, at times, little more than a passion for *Star Trek* that binds these gatherings together. Yet, as a community, they relate to each other inclusively, allowing each to share in the public spaces that they, as a community, create and act within, according to the norms and conventions that the community sets to define itself. What distinguishes fandom communities from others is that they are bound only by the purpose of sharing and developing their passions and interests.

The community this paper imagines develops norms and conventions that relate to and are fashioned by the individuals making up the community, who each individually maintain their ability and freedom to act autonomously and independently without fear of retribution of whatever institutions of State this community establishes to govern and realise its aims and objectives. Each individual is, unconditionally, a part of the community. Individuals are, however, free to choose what and how they pursue their interests and desires as they choose, just as they are free to dissent from the community, and even go their separate ways as they choose. Clastres's study of South American Indians shows that the political arrangements needed to realise the sort of open society this paper imagines can, and indeed already have long existed in human history. As Clastres shows, a feature of the Indian societies he studies is that they allow individual members of the community the freedom to pursue their own ends. The freedom of these societies does not, however, give rulers the right to use violence or coercion in order to make others obey. Rather, the chiefs in such societies are expected to act as linguistic intermediaries, spokesmen, and articulators. Even in decisions about whether or not to go to war, individuals in the community exercise their right to differ from their chief as well as from their fellow Indians without fear or retribution from the Chief or others. This is how Clastres describes his first encounter with Indian politics:

For the first time, I was able to observe directly – for it was working transparently before my eyes – the political institution of the Indians. A chief for them is not a man who dominates the others, a man who gives orders and who is obeyed: no Indian would accept that, and most of the South American tribes have chosen death and annihilation rather than submit to the oppression of the white men. The Guayaki, who also believe in this “savage” political philosophy, make a clear distinction between power and violence: to prove that he was worthy of being called chief, Jyvukugi had to demonstrate that, unlike the Paraguayan [white man], he did not exercise his authority through coercion, but through what was most opposed to violence – the realm of discourse, the word. And when he made the rounds of the camp, he was not telling the Atchei anything that was new to them; he was reasserting his ability to exercise the function that had been entrusted to him. His discourse, then, had two meanings, since the apparent meaning was there only to dissimulate and at the same time reveal the true meaning of another word, another discourse, that was present in what he was saying. This was a weighted discourse that attempted to maintain a proper balance between the leader and the group, and it

really expressed the following: "I, Jyvukugi, am your Beerugi, your chief. I am happy to be your chief, for the Atchei need a guide, and I wish to be that guide. I have experienced the pleasure of leading you, and I would like to prolong this pleasure. I will continue to lead you as long as you recognize me as your chief. Am I going to impose this recognition by force, enter into conflict with you, confuse the law of my desire with the law of the group in order to make you do what I want? No, because this violence would not help me at all: you would refuse this subversion, and you would no longer see me as your Beerugi. You would choose another man, and my fall would be all the more painful because once you had rejected me I would be condemned to solitude. The recognition that I must continually seek from you cannot be gained through conflict but through peace, not through violence but through words. That is why I speak. I do what you want me to do, because the law of the group is one with my desire; you want to know who I am: I speak, I am listened to, I am the chief." . . . Jyvukugi defined himself not by doing, but by speaking, and it was this that determined his difference from the others and made him the chief. The obligation to use the instrument of non-coercion – language – every time it is necessary gives the group the permanent control over the chief because every word he speaks is an assurance that his power will not menace the society; on the other hand, his silences are disturbing. Of course, the Guayaki have not worked out a theory behind their concept of political power. They simply create and maintain a relationship that is built into the very structure of their society and found in all Indian tribes. The "power" incarnated by the chief is not authoritarian. This does not mean, however, that these primitive societies have great progress to make in order to create a true political institution (that is, something similar to what we are accustomed to in our own civilisation) but that these "savage" societies refuse, by a sociological act and therefore unconsciously, to let their power become coercive. The chiefs are prevented from using their position for personal ends: they must take care that their personal desires do not infringe on the interests of the community; they are in the service of the group, the leaders cannot transgress the norms on which the whole life of the society is based. Power corrupts, it has been said. This is a danger the Indians need not fear, not because of a rigorous personal ethics, but because of a sociological impossibility. Indian societies were not made for this, and that is why they have not been able to survive. (*Chronicle* 64-66)

Conspicuously, Clastres avoids using Western philosophical concepts such as humanist, liberal, or communitarian in describing the nature of Indian politics and community, probably because such terms do not approximate, even remotely, with the nature of the societies he investigates. Similarly, it is important to avoid conceiving the community this paper imagines in ways that limit, define, and render that community to existing norms within social theory. What this essay seeks is a political process that promotes communication that eradicates the use of violence by the State against the people. It does not argue that violence will therefore cease on an individual level however. This position – one that limits the use of violence by the State while accepting that individuals may continue to resort to violence on occasion which the State does not seek to regulate or adjudicate on – is in harmony with Clastres's and Benjamin's understanding of violence. Indeed Benjamin sanctions the use of certain acts which are sometimes regarded as violent, such as those surrounding revolutionary strikes. However, as Benjamin argues, such acts are only justified as long as they remain a means to liberate an individual or a collective from oppression and not as a way to alter the status quo or install another system of domination that privileges some individual's status over others ("Critique of Violence" 239-240).

If society can be defined in terms of structures of life, or, what Fredric Jameson, following Raymond Williams, refers to as "structures of feeling" (310-311), an open community does not produce the "structures of feeling" that a homogeneous society produces (such as conventions, laws, and norms) that bind individuals together. The community this paper imagines depends

only on one “structure of feeling,” the sense of importance, above all, of maintaining the freedom of individuals making up society to pursue their interests using whatever means that they can justify in conjunction with the limitation of the State’s capacity to use violence or coercion against them. This community may commence life as a network but it becomes a community when it develops a common sense of shared “feeling” which transpires into a value for the individual’s sense of freedom. This freedom allows members of society to pursue their interests using whatever means of expression, language, form of articulation, as well as technical means to do so as they desire. This means that there is, however, a sense of responsibility individuals feel towards others, that of ensuring that individual freedom is protected from erosion by the State. What characterises this responsibility can be thought of as an *attitude* towards freedom that all individuals making up this communicative society are committed to maintaining. Beyond this *attitude*, there is no prerequisite that participants share values, cultural background, or history with others in the community. This global community is therefore not bound by conventions such as common sensibilities, laws, or any particular values pertaining to life, except the *attitude* of being able to, and enabling others to, have the freedom to communicate and participate in society freely in pursuing one’s interests.

Turning to the notion of openness, it should be said from the start that neither Clastres nor Benjamin refer to an “open” community in their work. Benjamin is referred to here because he focuses on critiquing the use of violence while Clastres indicates a political system in which the State is not allowed to use violence against the people in order to make society “work.” Openness refers to the extent that individuals in a society can participate without restriction even if they share only a basic common level of acculturation: an *attitude* to act and allow others to act in freedom and in a State that does not limit individual actions through the use of violence. Openness in this sense refers to a society that is open to the expression of difference by those who participate in it without prescription or proscription, inhibition or limitation. Openness also refers to the ability of individuals to express themselves freely in and through language, that is, to freely express themselves in languages and tongues that are not, or may not be, common to other members of that community. Nevertheless, such vast and uncodifiable expressions are commonly accepted, respected, and addressed equally. They enter into open discourses surrounding this global community, as valid communication, to which the community responds, even if in a range of other tongues. This multifarious fluidity of linguistic expression can be imagined in contexts such as when immigrants from different cultures gather and, speaking sometimes vastly different languages, somehow manage to communicate and commune together, in spite of a lack or even just a limited command of an international language such as English. In being able to and allowing others to express themselves in their own *native* tongue, this community comes close to realising through its performance the state of “pure language” Benjamin imagines in his “Translation” essay (*Illuminations* 70 -82). In an open communicative global community, any linguistic expression may need to be translated into the tongue of each receiver, consequently transforming and evolving their tongue ever further (Grech 185 – 186).

Finally, it is important to distinguish when technology services the emergence of such a community, and when technology acts to transform biology, that is, living creatures born, hatched or sprung in some form through naturally occurring biological process. Biological life refers to any form of life that is not, or has not come into existence as a result of being manufactured artificially through some form of technical production process – sometimes referred to as “a-life.” The etymological origins of the word artificial refers to anything that is made by humans, and shares common roots with words such as art, artifice, artificial, and even artifact. Biology is something that occurs naturally or through a natural process that may be said to have its origins in the act of creation which some associate with God. The distinction between technology that services biology and technology that transforms humanity to its technical ends is arrived at through Andrew Feenberg’s critique of communication technology. In *Alternative Modernity*, Feenberg shows how some technologies are designed to further the interests of producers of technology over and above the interests of users of technology. Feenberg argues for open systems

of technological design in which technology does not establish dependent relationships between user and producer, but rather enables users to wield technology to their own purposes and interests as they deem fit. One sees such relationships emerging in the evolutionary software designs produced by the Linux open source software community.

The paper is divided into three sections. Each addresses aspects and problems that a technologically mediated global network faces in becoming a community. It begins by recollecting how some so-called primitive societies deploy political power in order to enable individuals to freely pursue their interests. It then examines how modern States use power and politics to control individuals and the justifications used when individuals seek to realise their interests through violence. Section II considers the role of technology in facilitating interactive communication between individuals in establishing, perpetuating, and renewing social bonds and relations with others. The paper concludes by synthesising these ideas to rethink relations between State and individuals in an open globally mediated communicative society.

I

Foundations for a Mediated Community

Angelus Novus: Looking Backward to the Future

Perhaps we will feel better once the final frontier of this ultimate freedom has been broken. Perhaps we will sleep without waking a single time. . . . Some day, then, oil derricks around the chabunos, diamond mines in the hillsides, police on the paths, boutiques on the riverbank. . . . Harmony everywhere. (Pierre Clastres, "The Last Frontier." *Archaeology of Violence* 27)

Eurydice returns from beyond: a beyond in two senses . . . since primitive societies such as those of the Yanoama constitute the limit, the beyond of our own civilisation, and perhaps for this reason, the mirror of its own truth, and that, moreover, these very cultures are, from here on in, dead or dying. Thus, in two senses, Napagnouma [Daughter of Whites] is a ghost. (Pierre Clastres, "Primitive Ethnography (On Yanoama)." *Archaeology of Violence* 32 – 33)

The two quotes above come from a collection of essays in which Pierre Clastres reports on the indigenous societies of South America. The second quote is from an essay about a white woman, Elena Valero who, after returning to White society many years after she was abducted by Indians, recounted her life as an Indian. The first quote details Clastres's journey into the Venezuelan Amazon with fellow anthropologist Jacques Lizot. In both essays, Clastres identifies qualities that are foundational in an open community, global or local.

Elsewhere in the essay from which the first quote comes, Clastres suggests that Indians maintain a high quality of life, even by Western standards. This includes the freedom to pursue – in a general and unhurried way – personal pleasure and fulfilment. This, suggests Clastres, is a society of plenty. The Yanoama quality of life can be measured by each individual's capacity to chat, joke, argue, sleep, and pursue other personal needs as they see fit. Clastres also describes the management of power, anger, aggression, and even the pursuit of war, by these communities.

The mood that emerges from this lively, sometimes humorous, account of tribal life is tainted, however, with a nostalgia for the values of that culture. Nostalgia only partly explains the sadness Clastres conveys, for he witnesses the disappearance of this "civilisation of leisure" (*Archaeology of Violence* 21). [1] In view of this ambivalence, the second quote headlining this section contains

an intriguing twist. As Clastres indicates, Elena Valero – “Daughter of Whites” (“Savage Ethnography” 31) – not only testifies to the existence of a disappearing culture, she also mirrors a truth in Western culture: the loss of freedom in White society. While Indians are condescendingly referred to by White South Americans as a warring lot – as Clastres states, “resistance is a sign of health” (“The Last Frontier” 19) – such perceptions highlight how the *Yanomami* pursue their daily needs and desires, even if they appear to Whites as “uniformly . . . lazy” (“The Last Frontier” 21). [2]

Clastres deepens his readers’ understanding of Indians’ freedom in a later essay (“Power in Primitive Societies,” *Archaeology* 87-92) when he describes power relations. Differences between Indian and White society become pronounced when Clastres considers political relations between people and their rulers. Although chieftainship is a powerful institution in Indian culture, one that delivers privilege and status to its bearer, a chief cannot coerce others to do his bidding. Even when crucial decisions such as whether or not to go to war are made, individuals remain free to choose what they do regardless of their chief’s – and the tribe’s – decision. This, above all, highlights the freedom individuals have to follow their interests without fear or recrimination. However, Clastres does not suggest that Indian governance is neo-liberal or minimalist, for Indians remained deeply committed to each other’s welfare and security.

The Indian’s freedom is where Clastres’s work intersects with this essay, and is brought into focus by Clastres’s simple and direct question of social scientists: “Why are primitive societies Stateless?” Clastres himself responds that “primitive societies . . . refuse the division of the social body into the dominating and the dominated” (*Archaeology* 91). Elsewhere, Clastres distinguishes Indian society by its refusal to allow chiefs to use coercion and power to force individuals to abide by their will. Instead of force, chiefs retain their authority through their ability to identify and articulate their tribe’s interests and guide it towards the future it wishes realised. A chief, in Indian society, has the status of speaking for and on behalf of the tribe, and the privilege of identifying responses it makes as he guides it through situations confronting it. The chief’s ability to represent the interests of the tribe is constantly tested as each new situation requires him to intervene and mediate it on behalf of his people. A chief who fails to adequately identify and articulate what issues confront the tribe, or who fails to provide proper guidance to them (in keeping with the tribe’s interests) is quickly abandoned. Not only is the chief unable to force others to follow his advice through force or coercion, but his performance as the tribe’s spokesman and guide is constantly scrutinised for veracity simply by the way he interprets and expresses the mood of the tribe in relation to its world. [3]

The use of power, coercion, and violence is of central concern in an open global community. Indian society offers alternate ways of thinking about governance and power relations in such a society. Clastres adds:

The politics of the Savages . . . constantly hinder the appearance of a separate organ of power, to prevent the fatal meeting between the institution of chieftainship and the exercise of power. . . . Chieftainship in primitive society is only the supposed, apparent place of power. Where is its real place? It is the social body itself that holds and exercises power as an undivided unity. This power, unseparated from society, is exercised in a single way; it encourages a single project: to maintain the being of society in non-division, to prevent inequality between men from instilling division in society. It follows that this power is exercised over anything capable of alienating society and introducing inequality: it is exercised, among other things, over the institution from which the insidiousness of power could arise, chieftainship. In the tribe the chief is under surveillance; society watches to make sure the taste for prestige does not become the desire for power. If the chief’s desire for power becomes too obvious, the procedure put into effect is simple: they abandon him, indeed, even kill him. Primitive society may be haunted by the spectre of division, but it possesses the means by which to exorcise it. (*Archaeology*. 91)

Rejecting the “Noble Savage” (*Archaeology* 34-36) theses of Hobbes and Rousseau, Clastres elsewhere calls on the work of anthropologist J. W. Lapierre to help him demonstrate that the nexus between violence, coercion, power, and politics is neither innate nor immutable in human social arrangements. Neither should social status, continues Clastres, be regarded as inextricably or universally linked to domination by the privileged. [4]

Freedom, Power, and the Modern State

Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” [5] analyses the use of coercive power in the modern State. In his “Critique,” Benjamin considers many forms of violence – from revolutionary violence in a general workers strike, to war, to violent acts of passion. Benjamin focuses on the *legal* use of violence, however, particularly when violence is regarded as a justifiable *means* of achieving just *ends*. Benjamin introduces the “natural” and “positive” schools of legal thought in establishing this discussion.

From the start Benjamin rejects “natural law’s” justification of violence as a *natural means* to achieving an *end*. Violence, Benjamin argues, cannot be justified as logically “natural” in the same way as walking from one place to another. Benjamin does concede some ground to “positive law” (237-238) however, and agrees that violence may be justified if independently evaluated.

Benjamin examines this in consideration of two forms of strike: (i) a revolutionary strike that seeks to generally overthrow an existing social order, and (ii) a limited or “extortionate” strike that seeks only limited gain for workers directly implicated in and by the strike. Benjamin, citing Sorel, argues that the “general strike clearly announces its indifference toward material gain through conquest by declaring its intention to abolish the state” (245-247). In contrast to “positive law,” Benjamin then concludes that violence associated with a revolutionary strike is justified because it expresses a general will to alter relations in society for everyone in equal benefit. It does not, as a limited “extortionate” strike does, privilege a select number of workers over others. So Benjamin builds a case for justifiable violence when used as a direct *means* to revolutionise social relations rather than to privilege an individual or sector of society.

Parallels emerge between Benjamin’s position and the South American Indian’s insistence on removing rulers who seek to coerce others to do their bidding. Benjamin arrives at his position by developing a “philosophico-historical” critique of violence. In doing so, he distinguishes what he calls “mythic violence” from “divine violence” (248) which, Benjamin suggests, is exacted when God punishes an individual directly through *fate*. [6] Unlike *fate*, “mythic violence” is entirely the product of human invention and is a legislative codification of human perceptions of God’s law. Linking State power and legal violence with social status and the perpetuation of myth, Benjamin, citing Sorel, suggests that “the state was really . . . the basis of the existence of the ruling group, who in all their enterprises benefit from the burdens borne by the public” (245 – 247) before adding that

the function of violence in lawmaking is twofold, in the sense that lawmaking pursues as its end, with violence as the means, *what* is to be established as law, but at the very moment of instatement does not dismiss violence; rather, at this very moment of lawmaking, it specifically established as law not an end unalloyed by violence but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power. Lawmaking is powermaking, assumption of power, and to that extent an immediate manifestation of violence. Justice is the principle of all divine endmaking, power the principle of all mythic lawmaking. (“Critique of Violence” 248.)

For Benjamin, violence is justified when it is used directly to eradicate an injustice within a system of governance that is instigated to exercise power over individuals and enforce general obedience for the benefit the society’s rulers (251-252). Violence remains justifiable only as long as it then establishes a norm which permanently eradicates injustice by removing power from the

privileged who seek to force others to abide by their interests. Indeed, Benjamin even questions the “sanctity of life” itself when life is embedded in or perpetuates unjust existence. A *just* society is one in which coercion and violence are uncoupled from the State’s legal and governmental apparatus. Revolutionary violence is justifiable because it rids individuals of violations of their right to act in accordance with their interests. Violence cannot be justified, however, to establish or re-install a group’s or class’s or individual’s dominance over others.

Benjamin’s probing critique of *just* society would benefit from the empirical evidence provided by Clastres’s “Looking Backward” [7] at South American Indian power relations. Both Clastres’s anthropology of political power and Benjamin’s cultural critique of State violence come to rest on individuals’ ability to challenge and overrule their rulers. This paper contends that new media communication technology can provide a *means* of enabling a global community to rid itself of the link between privilege and power by dislocating governance from coercion and by separating power and violence from the organs of State. State power – in an open globally mediated communicative community – is not connected with, dominated by, or implicated in either past or existing social bonds and cultural relations. Failure to neutralise and abolish the nexus between State power, violence, status, and privilege perverts and corrupts the formation of a new society, in spite of the potential openness it may present. In the next section, I examine how new media provides a basis for enabling this new community.

II

The Work of Art in an Era of a Technical Community

So far I have argued that a globally mediated open community must eradicate the use of violence and power as a basis or foundation of social relations. Yet at a time when an open communicative community appears realisable, laws are daily being enacted to ensure State security, and the safety of the existing global order continues. In practical terms, this legislation further erodes the individual’s ability to use appropriate *means* to pursue their *justifiable ends* – from the simple fact of telling lies [8] to radical re-constructions of social relations between individuals through to revolutionary moves to re-configure the ruling global order. Not surprisingly, notions of safety and security are also being used to control and limit the global communication network [9], highlighting the potential and perceived danger new media technologies have to radically reform global society.

Countering this, it is sometimes assumed that artifacts circulating freely through global communication networks automatically facilitate the flow of information equally amongst participants in that network. Such assumptions cannot be taken for granted, however, for too many questions can be asked about who is speaking through the artifact as much as the message it is transmitting. Ignoring the context of production and exhibition is only part of the problem however for even astute media practitioners sometimes overlook the role technology itself plays in determining the work the artifact and communication process produces.

In *Alternative Modernity*, Andrew Feenberg examines how technological design promotes the interests of manufacturers over those of the community that technology is said to serve. Citing Habermas’s “colonisation thesis,” Feenberg declares that users of media must not only wrestle with the “*intrinsically instrumental bias* of media” but adds that “the *implementation bias* . . . results in the selection of one among a multiplicity of technically underdetermined designs in accordance with social norms or interests” (85 – 87). While agreeing with Habermas “that considerations of efficiency increasingly replace communicative interaction” Feenberg argues that “technical design is not neutral but is normatively biased through delegations that favour the hegemonic interests” (87). Feenberg finally concludes that the implementation of “multicultural” design principals

allows audiences to

imaginatively play with alternative worlds and ways of being. A multicultural politics of technology is possible; it would pursue elegant designs that reconcile several worlds in each device and system. To the extent that this strategy is successful, it prepares a very different future from the one projected by social theory up till now. In that future, technology is not a particular value one must choose for or against, but a challenge to evolve and multiply worlds without end. (232)

As critical and insightful as Habermas's and Feenberg's work might be, however, the focus on the production of technology overlooks an important element. To Feenberg's optimistic projection, one should add that the "multicultural" openness of communication begins taking shape not only through the means of transmission, or the creation of artifacts (for artifacts are themselves technologies), but crucially also in the interpretative work of the artifacts' recipient(s). We should never underestimate creative ingenuity of audiences, who remain constantly capable of subverting whatever designs an artifact's producers devise. Benjamin again provides a useful framework in understanding what happens when an artifact and an audience interact.

The Work of Audiences

"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" [10] critiques not just the role of art in modern society but, more importantly, the work of audiences. Here Benjamin deals with a major transformation of the function of art in modern society, one that has transformed the nature of the artifact itself. The magnitude of this transformation can be gauged by artifacts such as film in which the reproducibility and (global) broadcast potential of the object becomes a factor of production. Benjamin contrasts this with the uniqueness of traditional art objects whose significance depends crucially on the authenticity of the object, the acculturation of the audience, and the rituals surrounding its display. The reproducibility of radio, television, and cinema artifacts – media objects that attach little or no importance to the physical properties (patina) of the artifact, the rituals of display, the nature of the audience, or the context of reception – only partially hints at the totality of this transformation. With the subsequent digitisation of artifacts, even the information borne by the artifact can be readily adapted and seamlessly re-organised.

The work of new media is no longer tied to the physical stability of the object, nor to the rituals surrounding display and reception, and neither is it tied to particular audiences. There thus needs to be a shift in understanding the work that the object does, one that looks not at the object in itself as a fixed and closed text, but rather in the way the object *performs* in the specificity of each performance with a particular audience. Benjamin begins developing this approach by considering the "modes of participation," "modes of perception," and "modes of existence" (216, 222-224, 226-229, 231-234) engendered in specific audience encounters with specific artifacts. He shows how technical reproduction of artifacts broadcast simultaneously to a number of locations and audiences dissolves the unity and stability of meaning artifacts traditionally produced. Benjamin thus decides to look not at the meaning of an artifact in determining the work of the object, but at the conditions produced in the audience's reception. Benjamin now suggests that reproduced artifacts require audiences to perform an "habituated" (215, 218-219, 233-234) response in receiving the object that facilitates each individual's "absent minded" participation in renewing the social bonds and cultural relations embedded within, by, and surrounding the production of the object. In short, Benjamin is hinting at the fact that one has to pay to be amused, which in effect means paying to have one's idle time taken away. In this payment, one perpetuates not only the production of the commodity, but simultaneously reproduce the values of capitalist society. What is more, the artifact now insists that every individual forgets or ignores that their participation in this performance coincides with the subordination of the workers at the same time as promoting the interests of the rulers of industrial society. This takes place when the audience supports the reification of the actor-worker's actual *being* as the actor's body becomes

alienated from the actor in producing the commodity (216, 224-228, 232-235).

Yet Benjamin recognises a revolutionary potential in technically produced art which he locates in movements and artists such as Dada (230 -232), Soviet artists (225-226), and Picasso (227-228). Juxtaposing these to the work of Charlie Chaplin, Benjamin argues that revolutionary art countermands the inherent logic to dissect and partition life as an element of industrial production and instead recognises that the suffering worker being made a fool of on the screen actually represents the audience's own reality. So Benjamin argues that revolutionary art enables audiences to create a sense of solidarity with others sharing a similar fate – renewing social bonds and relations with the repressed at the same time as putting them in touch with their real interests – through their interactions with the artifact. This engagement is tied to the individual's ability to recognise that their interests and *ends* are not met simply in consuming mediated objects, for such consumption only succumbs them to the interests of those profiting from the *means* of production.

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" Benjamin shows that relationships between media object, producer, context of production and exhibition, and recipient all play a crucial role in producing or reproducing bonds between those participating in the communication chain created by the artifact. These bonds form each individual's relation between self and other, self and world. Benjamin also shows that a globally circulating (new as well as old) media artifact can facilitate the creation of bonds and relations between non-identical human individuals based not on the interests of those controlling the *means* of production, but rather on the investments each individual makes in creating meaning out of the object. This suggests that individuals can actively participate in collectively creating the meaning of objects and the world that surrounds them as equals, irrespective of whatever imbalances exist in social and economic status between them.

III

Conclusion: The Work of Mediation in an Open Global Community

Mediation, that is to say, technologies of language and communication, and the speech acts that follow, are playing a crucial role in reproducing familiar symmetries of power in the world today, translating structures of belonging and exclusion, difference and identity, violence and coercion across the globe. Capitalism seems to have facilitated technologies that provide a backbone for a globally mediated communication network. What still needs to be shown is whether people can use such *means* to realise their interests, even if those run counter to the interests of those controlling technology. A mediated open global community will refuse having its expressions totalised so that a uniform governing culture encompassing universal values and absolute meaning can be assembled. Ironically, however, the gravest danger facing this community is embedded in the technology that realises it. By its very nature, new media makes it possible for centres of power and governance to be established, and for those centres to keep under surveillance communications that threaten the social order. Yet that same apparatus offers opportunities to scrutinise and keep under watchful eye those who would dictate terms to that community.

This paper has argued that while the technology needed to realise an open, globally communicative society exists, the socio-political culture needed to realise it is missing. A mediated open global community emphasises communication as well as freedom to make choices based on individuals' own discretionary interests, without fear of violence or recrimination or exclusion from on-going social processes. As long as social relations between individuals are underpinned by State power, as long as the State continues to intervene to assert the rights of privilege and status at the same time as limiting the *means* individuals have to alter those

relations, familiar structures of inclusion and exclusion, power, violence, and coercion will continue to constrain individuals and society. [11] What is needed is a radical rethink of relations between individuals in society and the State.

With the help of Clastres, we can say something about how State-society relations might be re-shaped. With the help of Benjamin, we can recognise when the State violates individual and collective rights and freedom. With the help of Benjamin and Clastres together, we can see how power can be separated from the status of society's rulers and facilitate the emergence of good leaders instead. Leadership stresses and re-enforces the creative powers of communication, of discourse over violence and coercion as a means of addressing and solving problems facing individuals and the community. What is more, leadership in this community remains flexible. A good leader, hence, is superbly adept at identifying and articulating the will of the community, conceptualising and expressing the potentials – dangers as well as opportunities – that confront it, and devising strategies to move it forward in meeting the challenges and goals it has without imposing or limiting the rights of individuals in that community to pursue their interests as only they can and see fit.

Re-thinking the role of leaders requires also to rethink the role of individuals in the community. The community this paper imagines is one in which individuals interact with others through *means* of mediation over vast distances, whether such distances are measured in spatial, temporal, cultural or linguistic terms. These individuals constitute a community by:

- (i) communing with others in and through differences
- (ii) remaining situated in and acting response-ably, that is, responding to subjective interests and needs using all faculties fully as cognitive (emotional, intellectual, sensual, spiritual, physical, biological) beings
- (iii) moving temporally and spatially through an ever changing set of cultural and linguistic coordinates, and
- (iv) maintaining the *attitude* that responds to and respects individual's rights and freedoms to make choices regarding their futures without exerting coercive force to make individuals conform to their or the community's norms or interests.

A community made up of such proactive participants is better described not so much as a leaderless or anarchic society but as a society with inherent flexibility and creativity that allows each of its members to assume leadership as and whenever they have a capacity and desire to do so.

This essay has examined how a technologically mediated global community may enable people to pursue just *ends*. However one need not look far to see how those same technological *means* can be used to forge a society bound in chains. Slavery in this coming technological age is of a sort that forcibly binds people and society to the interests of their rulers. On the other hand, the freedom of Clastres's Indians indicates how *people* can practically reconcile and pursue their individual *ends* within the scope of an open global communicative community. Primitive as those societies may appear, it is they who show how to "refuse, by a sociological act . . . to let their power become coercive" (*Chronicle*, 66). Further consideration of a technologically mediated community will focus on ensuring that technological *means* can never again be used to link power and status to coercion and violence. Nor can the propagation of a governable society be justification for the State's use of power. While a technologically mediated global community would never return us to the Indian States described in Clastres's books, a future open community will create conditions under which the sociology of those societies – that is, a community that never ceases to cultivate and guard its freedom whilst enabling people to respond collectively as well as individually to whatever threats and challenges may face them – is regained.

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Endnotes

1. Elsewhere Clastres describes the disappearing life of the *Guayaki* Indians with similar empathy. See Chapter 2 “Two Peace Treaties” in Clastres, *Chronicle* 30-55.
2. The *Yanomami* are, of course, a different tribe from the tribe that Elena Valero lived with. Clastres’s work does not fail to distinguish differences between the different tribes, and indeed, is highly sensitive to them. Nevertheless, he does see certain patterns, particularly in relation to the organisation of power, the roles of the chiefs, and the freedom of individuals, that appear to span across tribal groupings. There are common traits exhibited by Australia’s indigenous population to the *Yanomami*, even though the Aboriginal people are comprised of many different nations.
3. Clastres develops his understanding of power relations between tribal chiefs and their fellow tribes members across a number of essays, including Chapter 2 (34-36) and Chapter 6 (87-92) in *Archaeology of Violence*, generally in *Society against the State*, and *Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians*, particularly 64-66.
4. J. W. Lapierre’s *Essai sur le fondement du pouvoir politique*, published in *Publication de la Faculté d’ Aix-en-Provence*, 1968, cited by Clastres, *Society against the State*, 8, 9.
5. Benjamin’s study owes it inspiration to George Sorel’s *Reflexions sur la violence [Reflections on Violence]* (5th ed, Paris, 1919).
6. *Fate* is a direct consequence of an individual’s compulsion to act in a particular way and is God’s punishment as the realisation (*end*) of that conviction. *Fate* can also take form as an inner conviction that dictates actions an individual attributes to divine or mysterious compulsion. Benjamin is understandably careful in developing his thought here for it is a difficult and subtle argument that he makes. He does this by recalling the “irreducible” first statement from God, who *commands* that “Thou shalt not kill.” Benjamin immediately adds that the first commandment “exists not as a criterion of judgement, but as a guideline for the actions of persons or communities who have to wrestle with it in solitude and, in *exceptional cases* [my emphasis], to take on themselves the responsibility of ignoring it” (“Critique of Violence” 250). Although the first commandment seeks to prevent the act of murder it is not a legal jurisdiction for the creation of the “fear of punishment that enforces obedience” (250).
7. Ironically, this is the title of the third chapter in Clastres’s first book in which Clastres accounts for his first encounter with the “savages” of South America – the *Guayaki* – whose traditional culture was coming to an end. In an important passage, Clastres describes the source of political power in the Indian’s world as intricately linked to language and the

right to speak. As Clastres puts it, “this ‘savage’ political philosophy, make[s] a clear distinction between power and violence: to prove that he was worthy of being called a chief, Jyvukugi had to demonstrate that, unlike the Paraguayan, he did not exercise his authority through coercion, but through what was most opposed to violence – the realm of discourse, the word” (*Chronicle* 64 – 65).

8. Benjamin would have appreciated Clastres’s account of how American Indians take pleasure in lying – “they avoid telling the truth on principle” writes Clastres (*Archaeology of Violence* 20). See also Benjamin “Critique of Violence” (244 – 245).
9. For an account of the implications of this initiative on global governance, see Raboy (225-232). On the other hand, the idea of a “right to communicate” also brings with it significant costs. For an outline of the practical limitations of achieving a global communications infrastructure, see Hamelink’s address titled “The Right to Communicate in Theory and Practice: A Test for the world Summit on the Information Society” delivered at the Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada, on November 17, 2003.
10. Although there are now several versions of this essay available in English, I have generally relied on Harry Zohn’s translation in *Illuminations* (211 – 244). However, Bullock and Jennings’s four volume set contains two versions of the essay, one representing an earlier draft of the work. See “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility (Second Version)” and “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility (Third Version)”.
11. Many of the antagonisms in globalisation can be traced in different forms, as Donaldo Macedo and Panayota Gounari suggest. “Hegemonic globalisation” is one example which depends on ancient bi-polar forms of cultural signification – particularly notions such as Christianity and Islam, “West” and “other” – which have again today become mutually exclusive but reflexive terms that simultaneously codify and define people into *natural* eternally fixed symmetries of human difference and conflict (see R. Dale and S. Robertson, “Interview with Bonaventura de Sousa Santos” qtd. in Borg and Mayo, *Learning and Social Difference*, 3)

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