Lecture- 13

I.THE INTERNET'S THIRD PHASE: NOVEL IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRACY.

There is little doubt that the Internet is an enormously important tool and space for democratic participation at all levels, the strengthening of civil society, and the formation of a whole new world of transnational political and civic projects.

But it has also become clear over the last few years that the Internet is no longer what it was in the 1970s or 1980s; it has become a contested space with considerable possibilities for segmentation and privatisation. We cannot take its democratic potential as a given simply because of its interconnectivity. We cannot take its "seamlessness" as a given simply because of its technical properties. And we cannot take its bandwidth availability as a given simply because of the putative exponential growth in network capacity with each added network. techical developments over the last two years raised the carrying capacity of fiber optic cable from 20 gigabits per second in 1996 to 400 in 1998.

This is a particular moment in the history of digital networks, one when powerful corporate actors and high performance networks are strenghtening the role of private digital space and altering the structure of public digital space, that is, the Internet. Digital space has emerged not simply as a means for communicating, but as a major new theater for capital accumulation and the operations of global capital. Yet much of the writing about electronic space and network power has been shaped by the properties of the Internet, more precisely what one can think of as its first two phases.

To recap a familiar story, the first phase of the Internet was confined largely to a community of insiders–scientists and select government agencies. That community invented communication standards and communication protocols that ensured access for all the members of that

community. The second phase of the Internet, centered in the decade of the 1980s, strengthened the democratic and open character of the Net and made it a space of distributed power that limits the possibilities of authoritarian and monopoly control. It is by now well known that the particular features of the Internet are in part a function of the early computer hacker culture which designed software that strengthened the original design of the Net – openness and decentralization– and which sought to make the software universally available for free.

But with the establishment of the World Wide Web in 1993, and its large scale discovery by business by 1995, we can say that the Net has entered a third phase, one characterized by broad-based attempts to commercialize it. emergence of firms that sell access services to speed up access. This is not an essential service to gain access, but it is a convenience, and an option for those with the income to pay for it. Another is the possibility of adding value (including commercial value) to Net features through the incorporation of voice and image, which consume enormous bandwidth and hence will eventually probably be more easily subjected to premium pricing mechanisms than is e-mail for instance. When we consider the enormous amount of software design effort that is right now going into producing programs that can ensure safe credit card processing and other types of electronic payment, then we can see that commercialization is likely to increase even though today it is minor. This could stimulate the creation of Web sites that incorporate the latest developments of voice and image and could charge for access. I think of the growing use of voice and image for non-essential uses as a de-greening of the net. E-mail is a system of astounding efficiency and "ecological soundness." Voice and image with their enormous consumption of bandwidth are much less so. Commercialization is often regarded as an extension of the positive aspects of the Net. But if carried too far it may in fact have negative consequences for the civic and political potential of the Internet, and in that regard, negative impacts on Liberal state agendas. This commercialization is pursued through the development of software that can simultaneously capitalize on the Net's features and implement billing/payment systems, and it is pursued

through the extension of copyrights–in other words, the opposite of the early hacker culture. There is insufficient recognition of the tension between some of the features of the Internet which promote openness and interconnectivity, on the one hand, and, on the other, the rapid growth since 1995 of software that seeks to facilitate and expand private appropriation and use of the Net and that would allow for the implementation of copyrighting on a scale we have never seen before.

Yet much of the thinking about digital space and about questions of power and democracy, has been shaped by the properties of the Internet's first two phases. What stands out especially in the second phase is the condition of the Internet as a space of distributed power that limits the possibilities of authoritarian and monopoly control. While this remains a feature of the Internet, too many other dynamics have also been set in motion for us to just stay with this rather utopian view. In this regard, it seems to me that we need to re-theorize digital space and uncouple it analytically from an exclusive focus on the properties of the Net which have so sharply shaped our understanding.

The polarization between Internet romancers, on the one hand, and the logic of business and markets, on the other, is contributing to a parallel polarization in the discourse about digital space, quite independently from the Realist vs. Liberal view when it comes to the state. There is a utopian approach that emphasizes the decentralization and electronic democracy of the Net, and a dystopian approach that emphasizes the global power of the large corporations.

Neither account is adequate today. While corporate forces have immense power in the shaping of digital networks, it is also a moment when we are seeing the emergence of a fairly broad-based civil society–though as yet a minor share of world population– in electronic space, particularly in the Net, which signals the potential for further developing democratic features of the Net. Further, each of these accounts rests on assumptions that limit the possibility of critical appraisals and future potentialities.

The assumptions that run through much of the discourse of the Internet romancers veil the existence of new forms of concentrated power that may undermine the better features of the Internet; nor do these assumptions help us understand the limits of such new forms of concentrated power, an important political issue. One assumption is that it will always be the open, decentralized space it was designed to be; this makes it ahistorical. John Perry Barlow's 1996 "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" probably epitomizes this view. Besides this political utopian vision there now is also an economic utopian view, especially strong in the U.S., which sees the Net as offering the possibility of a whole new type of market economy, one truly open and democratic. The California based Wired magazine is a key axis for this line of thought. The second assumption, tightly interlinked with the first, is that digital space is a purely technological event, and in that sense an autonomous space to be read in technical terms. One implication of such a technological reading is the notion that it can escape existing structures of power and inequality in the wider society.

The dystopian view of the Internet has its own limiting assumptions: Big capital will take over and the new high-income transnational class will also become a virtual class, with its spatial mobility further enhanced by digital mobility. Most people will be left out and at best reduced to passive consumers of Internet commerce. on questions of subjectivity: the transformation in the conditions through which our subjectivity is formed due to the overwhelming presence of technology intermediated sociability. This is a cultural pessimism derived from a notion that the new digital technologies will replace all other technologies through which people connect: the telephone replaced by e-mail, work in office buildings by tele-work from home, social visits by on-line chat clubs, business travel replaced by video conferencing, actual experiences by virtual reality games.

Both the utopian and the dystopian view of the Internet rest on assumptions that limit our understanding of current conditions and developments. The utopian view excludes the fact that electronic space is embedded in actual societal structures and is internally segmented, both conditions with enormous implications for current and future developments as well as for the theorization of networked space and power. The dystopian view excludes the limitations and complementary dependencies of the new digital technologies –no technology is an absolute: it cannot replace all other technologies aimed at similar functions, in this case communication and interactivity. And it excludes the fact of growing contestation between powerful economic actors and civil society in public electronic space, a fact which in itself may lead to new forms of political engagement and in that sense be a force for strengthening political activity.

The Internet, then, has not only undergone significant transformations, but also is caught up in polarizing representations about its key features.