

*Information and protocol* as new notion of meaning and the question of power.

### **The first sentence**

The first sentence of academic writings can be thought as somehow insincere, as something what comes into existence somehow devaluated. As a kind of *performative contradiction*. The first sentence sounds like a promise of knowledge and wisdom which is brought here to reveal the truth, when in fact, at least for some of us, it is just another small brick in their academic career rather than a blessing of Reason. This unpalatable insight can be understood as an unintended consequence of the reflection process or as an inevitable consequence of alienation. No matter how we conceive it, what is maybe even more important is that if the language is recognized as sold and devaluated, it seems that a narrative sentence is not the best notion of knowledge or wisdom anymore. Knowledge that works through such a language can be nothing more than just another ideology or deception. That nihilism, cynicism or scepticism towards contemporary knowledge could be understood here as unintended consequences of Enlightenment, its hidden blade or a mirror.

In *Dialectics of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno conduct their critique of Enlightenment through recognition of particular subject and object of knowledge and oppressive character of peculiar relationship between these two. It seems that mere use of language necessarily invokes and reifies system of domination founded on Enlightenment model of knowledge (Adorno, Horkheimer 2010). According to classical critical thinkers negation is no longer possible through such a language (Marcuse). Also poststructuralist thinkers recognize existence of peculiar relationship between knowledge, power and language perceived as a medium of knowledge. However post-structural thinkers such as Derrida (but also Foucault in particular period), assign much bigger importance to language than classical critical thinkers. For Derrida whole western metaphysics understood as a system of thought is constituted and reproduced on the basis of linguistic *sign* (Derrida 2000:241-248). Of course all of these kinds of concerns can be understood as a part of wider postmodern enterprise. Nevertheless what is important is the fact that as soon as 'hermeneutics of suspicious' had been aimed on itself dejection became most frequented result of theoretical practice and very often it was the language itself which turned out to be corrupted part of critical enterprise (Foucault, Deleuze, Baudrillard). One could claim that: "how to escape the corrupted medium of language if critique has to continue?",

respectively “were to find a transcendental realm from which the critique could be lead?” belong to still (never) answered questions of postmodern thought.

But it seems that language understood as a medium of knowledge not only loses its credibility. Armed with narrative sentences and closures of discourse one can refer to, judge and evaluate other narrative sentence, but do they really matter anymore? Does social life can still be understood as an outcome of agreement achieved through the process (less or more equal or rational) within which interests, values and meanings of particular groups and individuals are negotiated? Or eventually, if the form is not true and language still matters, then how does its meaning change when incorporated into so called information flows? These questions implies that narrative closures could lose not only credibility but their relevancy too. Scott Lash has already drawn on this phenomenon in his *Critique of Information* (2002). Lash recognized that introduction of communication technologies to our daily lives and their ubiquity have led to development of new forms of social reproduction as well as new technologies of power. In order to recognize and examine them one has to abandon realm of language and jump into *information flows*<sup>1</sup>. However for Lash *information* is not a kind of binary numeric code. Quite opposite, for him *information* is a notion of meaning. Meaning which he sharply distinguishes from meaning, which is created through language and discourse practices. According to author of *Critique of Information* it is *information* (understood as a notion of meaning), which seems to prevail now and that fact has a serious and complex impact not only on our lives but also on the realm of theory and critique.

Of course it is not only Scott Lash who tries to understand contemporary society in terms of profound cultural change rather than keep focus on quantitative indicators which refer to changes in employment or production patent. Even though similar ideas seem to be present in work of few others scholars, in this paper I would like to compare ideas of Scott Lash with these of Alexander Galloway. My reason to clash these two authors and their concepts is that also Galloway in his book *Protocol* actually introduces a concept, which can be understood a new notion of meaning - *protocol* (Galloway). Due to the particular common scope, which both writers share such a comparison seems to be very productive one – namely both writers claim that key to understand the essence of on-going social change is to be found in the realm of

meaning creation and transmission. According to Alexander Galloway in order to properly understand dynamics of contemporary society one must understand the way in which *protocol* rules flows of information. As such *protocol* is a diagram, which stands for contemporary society. Actually it would be much more handy for me to continue this introduction with a diagram too. Following nodes and surfaces would be present within that diagram:

*ontology, critical theory, power, theories of information society®, humanities, information, semantics, post-human condition, cultural theories, sociology, meaning, epistemology etc.*

Proposing any kind of linear connections or strict hierarchy between these notions would be an absurd, relic of language habits, nothing more than compulsions of knowing subject. And this paper is nothing more than a floating part of a wider project aimed to eliminate this amusing phantom – idea of knowing subject as developed within Enlightenment project or tradition of Western Metaphysics. In order to do so few operations are going to be done. Firstly I am going to briefly refer and compare two notions of meaning *protocol* and *information*. Then I will clash the concept of meaning, which they both presuppose with previously ruling notion of *sign*. Afterwards in order to complete the dialectic cycle I am going to draw possibilities of synthesis what actually leads me to more general question of dialectics. Unfortunately due to strict data storage restrictions in this paper I will touch only the surface rather than giving well-rounded explanations.

### **Setting of a paradigm shift**

My understanding of bodies of theories in which I am interested it is partly that of paradigm shift as introduced by Thomas Kuhn in 1962. I would argue that theories I am going to reflect on are part of wider paradigm shift in humanities. I think that only this particular awareness, kind of interpretative horizon, gives possibility to comprehensive understanding of theories under my interest. In the context of this paper Kuhn's insights are important as they inform us about historical and at the same time non-linear character of knowledge.

In Kuhn's key work *The Structures of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) “neutral” or random state of affairs in science is called a *normal science*:

*'Normal science' means research firmly based upon one or more past scientific achievements, achievements that some particular scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for its further practice. Today such achievements are recounted, though seldom in their original form, by science textbooks, elementary and advanced. These textbooks expound the body of accepted theory, illustrate many or all of its successful applications, and compare these applications with exemplary observations and experiments. (Kuhn 1970:10)*

In my field of study, which are sociology and media studies there do exist a huge body of 'normal science'. In more global terms with respect to 'revolutionary' theories which I am interested in one can include to such a 'normal science' all contemporary human sciences with their traditional division on particular disciplines, with their tradition based on Enlightenment idea of knowledge, with rational subject rooted in that particular idea of knowledge, which as mentioned earlier can be derived from tradition of *Logos*. It is indeed huge body of knowledge including whole spectrum of well developed methods and terminology. In more local terms, within field of media studies one can point to content analysis, discursive analysis, textual analysis, survey, observation and so on. All of these methods and approaches have been well developed and mastered to solve particular research problems within particular research field. It does not mean though that in my argument I want to overestimate language as the most important aspect of social life. Nor it does mean that it was the language, which in all cases has been the object of inquiry. I just claim that it is crucial to realize that knowledge about/referring to all the other aspects of social life to which the previous knowledge regime refers, has been grasped through language and language-derived tools of inquiry.

According to Kuhn serious dysfunction of 'normal science' has to occur to bring a paradigm shift. To stay on theoretical ground post-modernism could be regarded as expression of such a dysfunction. As such postmodernism is a critique of Enlightenment project and idea of knowledge, which it embodies. Indeed both Scott Lash and Alexander Galloway in many respects draw on postmodernist thinkers such as Michael Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida and others. Both apply post-modern insights in their theories.

As one of possible reasons of existing paradigm dysfunction Kuhn adduces a necessity to “assimilate new sort of phenomena” (Kuhn 1970:92). In order to identify possible reasons of previous paradigm dysfunction, namely the “new sort of phenomena” which has to be assimilated by contemporary knowledge, many post-modern thinkers, but especially post-critical thinkers, points to ubiquity of technology in contemporary everyday life.

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As Scott Lash notices nowadays one “*cannot achieve sociality in the absence of technological systems*” (Lash 2002:16). Yet it is important to understand that claim merely in qualitative terms as in Lash's terms ubiquity of technology is a cultural argument. What he means by that are the peculiar dialectic relations between technology and culture on the one hand, and technology and nature on the other. Namely what Lash means are ‘technological forms of life’. By that concept he means that the relation between technology and culture is not that of causality but rather of identity, respectively correspondence. Similar intuition can be found in a work of key postmodern thinkers. In his *Postscript on Control Societies* Gilles Deleuze states:

*“It is easy to set up a correspondence between any society and some kind of machine... The old sovereign societies worked with simple machines, levers, pulleys, clocks; but recent disciplinary societies were equipped with thermodynamic machines...; control societies function with a third generation of machines, with information technology and computers”.* (Deleuze )

Actually in this passage Deleuze seems to draw on Foucault work and his conception of shifting power regimes and their technologies (Foucault ). Nevertheless what is important here from the paradigm shift perspective is the assumption that changes within social reality will inevitably lead to emergence of new questions within field of knowledge in correspondence to new social phenomena. According to logic of paradigm shift as described by Thomas Kuhn in his *Logic of Scientific Revolutions* to answer these new questions one may require a whole new conceptual and methodological toolbox. One of the main claims which are present in theories under

my concern is thesis about insufficiency of 'normal science' to answer these questions (Lash 2002, Galloway 2004). This issue is closely related to another important notion which is present in work of Thomas Kuhn, namely that of *incommensurability* between particular paradigms, between 'normal' and 'revolutionary' science (Kuhn :148). Two paradigms cannot really refer to each other and this is one very important concern, which one has to accept if he wants to understand theories under my concern. In Kuhn's work incommensurability between “pre- and post-revolutionary scientific traditions” is derived from semantic assumption. According to commentary on Kuhn’s work given by Alexander Bird:

*“This is taxonomic incommensurability. A field of science is governed by a taxonomy, which divides its subject matter into kinds. Associated with a taxonomy is a lexical network—a network of related terms. A significant scientific change will bring with it an alteration in the lexical network which in turn will lead to a re-alignment of the taxonomy of the field. The terms of the new and old taxonomies will not be inter-translatable”* (Bird 2011)

That implies two important concerns for my analysis. Firstly one cannot judge, evaluate or interpret incoming theories with criteria or tools of inquiry derived from already existing theories, from *normal science*. To give some examples the accusation of technological determinism gives sense only within previously dominating paradigm. Only within sociology of modernity fields of social, cultural, technology and so on have been sharply distinguished so they could influence each other (ZDROJ). If there is no sharp division between culture and technology, one cannot distinguish between medium and content and so on. However in the light of theories under my consideration differentiation theory is no longer valid and such a kind of determinism basically cannot occur. But there is also a second transcendental condition to be fulfilled if technological determinism has to be possible. Such a type of determinism gives sense only if one assumes linear progress of time what allows him to think causal relationship between entities. But what if linear hierarchies or other divisions derived from Kantian categories are not valid anymore? Do these categories still give sense in the times of 'technological culture'? That is the reason why, if one wants to comprehend post-critical theories, he has to critically reflect on

‘epistemological rupture’<sup>2</sup>, which do exist between both paradigms.

Secondly Kuhn's notion of incommensurability can perfectly work as criterion to distinguish between 'normal' and 'revolutionary' science. For many scholars process of assimilation of new phenomena is just mere addition to existing state of knowledge and as such has not really serious impact on paradigm within which they conduct their work. In other words they encounter new phenomena with their old ready to hand toolbox. That seems to be the case of New Media Studies. Within that particular field of studies the new phenomena - ubiquity of highly developed technologies in our everyday life is understood basically as an introduction of the new medium. It means that a totally new phenomenon is being subsumed under already existing notion of ‘communication medium’. Thus what is 'similar' is being judged as more important feature than what 'differs'. What was incommensurable in the new phenomenon has been cut off or filtered out in order to conform status quo. However according to my understanding of post-critical theories, these theories are incommensurable with theories belonging to previous paradigm. Post-critical theories do not conform to status quo. They are still critical.

### **Information**

Scott Lash recent book, *Critique of Information* (2002), presents highly elaborated and complex argument in critical theory. According to Lash critical theory, as we know it from Frankfurt School and its followers<sup>3</sup>, is not longer possible. What makes it out of date is the social change that we witness as contemporary society transform into information order. In his argument Lash points out that tools for critical exploration of society, useful when applied to industrial society are not necessarily sufficient when one tries to comprehend an information order. Actually in the light of *Critique of Information* they could be even misleading as they can conceal phenomena which elude sensitivity of old toolkit. The reason is that nowadays we deal mainly with phenomena which are not discursive at all. At this point one can ask, what is so specific for ‘information order’ that makes it intangible for well-established methods and approaches? When Lash claims that information order is primarily made of *information*, he means nothing more than that. However he is one of the first thinkers who try to give some meaning to that frequently repeated sentence and

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consider its implications. To presents his idea what *information* really is Scott Lash confronts it with cultural, sociological and economical forms of previously dominating social order. In other words he considers *information* with reference to its antithesis, the notions of linguistic *sign* and notion of *discourse*. In this respect what is very unusual on Lash account on *information* is the fact that even though he derives many characteristics of `information` from its technological origin, he does not understand information in terms of binary code. For him *information* is foremost notion of meaning and it still belongs to the realm of thought, otherwise *critique of information* could not be possible. It seems that for Lash his notion of information is a kind of remedy for declining credibility and relevancy of previously dominating forms of culture, social order or strategies of capital accumulation. How does then the information, which constitutes forms of contemporary culture and social order, differ from these earlier forms? According to Lash main qualities of *information* are: flow, disembeddedness, spatial and temporal compression and real time relations (Lash 2002:2). Surely it does not sound new, neither meaningful, but what Scott Lash seems to do through his argument is trying to consider implications of that fact for epistemological concerns. To do so he draws on McLuhan dictum that *medium is a message* and that it is the medium itself what really makes sense. Thus with respect to profound changes in communication media, one should expect profound change in other realms of social life, especially these that deal with processes of meaning creation and transmission. As Lash notices in the information age this issue becomes almost an universal issue (Lash 2002:65-78).

For Lash mentioned changes in the realm of communication, epistemology and so on must have some consequences for the realm of power too.