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Global Survival

Towards a Communication of Hope?

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Abstract

Confronted with serious challenges to human survival, communication should be mobilized to rescue the planet's future. This requires the development of new forms of discursive power that shift from a culture of fear to a culture of hope. This can be achieved through global networks of those urban movements that increasingly move beyond their local political environments. The global city can emerge as a crucial site for the claim to human survival in dignity.

Keywords: global risks, global cities, culture of hope, urban movements, human survival, locality

Introduction

The argument that I want to discuss in this essay runs as follows. We live on an endangered planet and there are serious global risks to human survival. Throughout the history of human evolution communication has been an essential adaptive response to the challenge of human survival. Today we have to mobilize communication for the purpose of global survival. Although we may claim to be cosmopolitans and global citizens, we live our daily lives in local places -predominantly, in cities. Therefore, we need to design urban communication strategies for glocal networks that can inspire effective social change for global survival.

Global Risks

In 1992 sociologist Ulrich Beck wrote, 'we live on the volcano of civilization' (1992). In 1996 philosopher John Leslie even pointed to the real danger of the extinction of the human species (1996). According to social theoretician Giddens it is impossible to live on 'automatic pilot', since no single lifestyle can be adequately protected against the globalization of life-threatening risks (1991:126).

Our lives are threatened by warfare (nuclear, biological and chemical), terrorism, organized crime, ethnic and religious conflicts, changes in the environment (increasing ultraviolet radiation, rising temperatures, disappearance of rain forests, shortage of drinking water, desertification, depletion of fossil fuels, decreasing biodiversity), carcinogenic ingredients in food, restricted access to medication for hundreds of millions of people around the world, pollution by poisonous materials (acid rain, chemical products from

insecticides to deodorants), series of natural disasters (asteroids, comets, volcanoes, floods and tornadoes), and genetic experiments.

To all these risks we should add the dangers of the global applications of advanced convergence technologies (that combine nanotechnology, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, robotics, and information-communication technology) and their societal impacts, which are unpredictable.

The quality of human lives that are worth living is seriously at stake in the early 21st century.

Communication and Human Survival

Human communication is a process that enables us to cope with risks.

From Darwinian biology we can learn that species (and their behaviours) evolve over time through successful adaptation to their environment. The key to biological evolution is the finding of solutions to adaptive problems.

It seems sensible to argue that a similar process occurs in forms of non-biological evolution as cultural and psychological evolution.

Human communication is such a non-biological form of adaptation. In the basic Darwinian algorithm for successful adaptation, processes of selection are crucial factors. In the domain of human communication, keeping the best adaptive solutions means that communication forms that serve survival and reproduction best will be retained. Those forms of attention and memory that are designed to notice, store and retrieve information inputs and that are useful to solving adaptive problems will further evolve. Inadequate communicative solutions will disappear. This reasoning poses the crucial question of how adequate currently dominant forms of public communication are for our survival. These dominant forms are largely commercially oriented transmission belts for identical contents in identical formats. Within those market-oriented institutions a professional class emerged that has monopolized public communication.

Mobilizing Communication

The reflexive capacity of the human species renders it possible to think beyond mere survival of the species and to share the vision of human survival in dignity. In response to the barbaric acts perpetrated by the Nazis and their allies during World War II, the international community adopted a catalogue of basic values that put respect of "human dignity" centre stage. One way to concretise those values, expressed in of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948), is to define human dignity as the rejection of all forms of human humiliation.

Human humiliation include acts such as:

- The de-individualization of people. This means that people's personal identity is undermined, their sense of personal significance is taken away, they are reduced to numbers, cases, or files, and they are treated as group members and not as individuals.
- The discrimination of people by treating them according to judgements about superior versus inferior social positions. This means that the "inferior" people are excluded from the social privileges the "superior" people enjoy.

- The disempowerment of people by denying them "agency". This means that people are treated as if they lack the capacity of independent choice and action.
- The degrading of people by forcing them into dependent positions in which they efface their own dignity and exhibit servile behaviour. This means that people are scared in ways that make them lose control over their behaviour, and make them beg on their knees for approval, blessing or forgiveness.

Since the international human rights regime has established that "all people matter", no one should be excluded from the maxim to treat other human beings in non-humiliating ways.

A crucial argument against humiliation springs from the cross-cultural desire to avoid harm. Throughout the world's religious and ethical systems we find a powerful motivation to limit human suffering. The motive to avoid avoidable harm to others and to diminish people's suffering is a key concern in Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Humiliation makes people undergo avoidable harm. Often people's physical pain is extended into psychical pain, for example when the pain of torture is reinforced by the pain of humiliation. Humiliation is the psychological dimension of human suffering. The pain caused by the humiliation can have consequences that reach far beyond the experience of the physical pain.The act of humiliation denies that its victims have value and significance. Humiliation goes beyond being treated in abusive ways: it implies experiencing that one is seen as having so little dignity that one can be treated by others in abusive ways.

The worldwide mobilization of people for the sake of non-humiliating forms of survival obviously requires a variety of strategies. If we want to employ communication as an instrument in this strategy, the notion of communication needs some qualification. Communication is often seen as inherently good, but it may be that modalities of communication may result in treating people in humiliating ways. Communication in interpersonal interaction and in public media (in news, entertainment and advertising) can be de-individualizing, discriminating, disempowering and degrading. Against these forms of communication the vizier Ptah Hotep already in the fifth Egyptian Dynasty (3580BC-3536BC) advised wise men to convey to their sons that they should communicate with respect. They should refrain from speaking evilly, not use vile words, be humble in speaking and listening, and not be angry when a debater does not agree with them. They should beware of making enmity by their words and perverting the truth. They should not engage in gossip or extravagant speech, realize that silence is more profitable than abundance of speech and they should speak as true friends. This ancient wisdom is pertinent to contemporary forms of journalism that under the influence of spindoctors and perception managers are often characterized by endless and empty babbling.

Therefore, the deployment of communication for human survival in dignity requires the engagement in a worldwide programme of learning the art of non-humiliating personal and social interaction.

As we embark upon this, we also have to realize that humiliating forms of communication are often inspired by the feelings of fear that people may experience in their encounters with others. Obviously, there can be solid grounds for fear, as we do live in a global "risk society". We now have worldwide a stock-pile of nuclear weapons that can blow up the planet several times over. But fear can be exaggerated and can be ma-

nipulated and exploited for political reasons (the terrorism fear that serves the erosion of basic civil rights and freedoms) or for commercial reasons (the virus-fear that helps to sell vaccines). Often, as the case of terrorism phobia demonstrates, the actual occurrence of terror acts and the probability of being a terrorism victim bears little relation to the alarm bells that governments and media ring. The present world is characterized by the spread of risks and fear. Worldwide we can observe a growing "culture of fear".

Fear is inherent to the human condition. Ontologically, humans live in the permanent tension between Being and Non-Being, between life and death, between love and abandonment, between success and failure. We are in a diffuse ("subjective") way aware of uncertainties, and of threats that are not necessarily connected with "objective" events. We are conscious of gaps between expectation and reality. This existential basic layer finds expression in emotions connected to concrete experiences like illness, unemployment, divorce or bankruptcy: in fear, anger, humiliation, shame, grief.

Although societies have probably always known times of fear, a general "state of fear" is arguably a prominent feature of modern societies. As opinion polls in EU countries (the Eurobarometer [2]) and in the USA show, there is in these countries a great deal of anxiety that things will soon get a lot worse. There is a shared economic fear focusing on inflation, unemployment and food prices. People are anxious about the threat of epidemic diseases, credit crises, food shortages, rising prices of oil, terrorism , the danger of Islam, bird flu, genetically modified food, and global warming. There is urban fear: its manifestations include locked cars, closed doors, gated communities, and ubiquitous surveillance. A feeling of fear means that the world is seen as a dangerous place. This perception has inspired the large-scale manufacturing of surveillance systems, the mushrooming of private security services, and the empty streets at night in many metropolitan centres. Many people are permanently anxious about their lives. About their health, their families, their relations, their money , their possessions, or their status in society.

Much of human fear is related to the perceived dangers of future conditions. Such perceptions are socially mediated. In social mediation processes, media (both entertainment and news media, and both conventional and new media) have become central institutions. They offer day after day a discourse of fear. (Grupp 2003).

Across the world, news media tend to bring primarily bad news: floods, earthquakes, wars, crimes or terrorist attacks. Many studies have been dedicated to this. In a study by Davis and McLeod (2003), 736 newspaper front page stories that appeared between 1700 and 2001 were analysed. The results demonstrate a uniformity of sensationalist topics that refer to fear, survival, and reproduction. Among the prominent ones are death, robbery, assault, injury and rape. Every single day the media warn us of some impending danger.

Around the world one finds in many radio and TV newscasts and newspapers' lead articles strong references to "crisis" (food crisis, oil crisis, climate crisis, population crisis; terrorism crisis), fear, and risk. Much of this language has little to do with actual world incidents. Although over a long time span (1986-2007) there has been a decline of terrorist incidents, governments and their complicit media keep up a credible global threat.

There is a growing cottage industry of "anxiety marketers" offering their services to deal with concerns that middle-class people might not even have realised they harboured. These concerns are about health, lifestyles, after-life styles (funeral fashion), appearance, aging, financial status, home-security, trouble kids, marital stress, sexual performance,

size and look of their private parts, culinary expertise, vinological knowledge, the psychopathology of their pets, or garden architecture (even if they have no garden).

In this industry, the news and entertainment media are both key vehicles for anxiety promotion and contributors to a fearful perspective on the world. Most of the popular perceptions on the dangers of crime and terrorism are mediated to people by news reports and entertainment programmes.

People are made anxious by telling them there is something wrong with them. (like in advertising or in medical TV programmes), by suggesting uncertain and probably very troubled futures (in daily newscasts about issues like the credit crisis), or by making them fearful (by discourses on terror, evil, and war).

Media render anxiety a shared perspective on life. Through satellite TV and the Internet for the first time in history, millions of people across the globe can watch simultaneously stories of fear and crisis. For these global audiences the media construct a world that is filled with warnings that the world is a dangerous place and that things may get worse.

Following Furedi's observation (1997), the media amplify people's sense of risk and danger but do not cause it. The media amplify people's disposition to expect that things will work out the wrong way by constantly warning for one or another danger. As Altheide observes "Fear has become a staple of popular culture, ranging from fun to dread. Americans trade of fear. News agencies report it, produce entertainment messages (other than news) about it, and promote it, police and other agencies of social control market it. And audiences watch it, read it, and, according to numerous mass entertainment spokespersons, demand it" (Altheide 2002: 64).

Altheide's research leads him to conclude that "Fear is more prevalent in news today than it was several years ago, and it appears in more sections of the newspaper. This is particularly true of headlines" (Ibidem: 99).

As Stefanie Grupp argues on the basis of much empirical material, there has been a general shift from a fearsome life towards life with fearsome media (Grupp 2003). Certainly after the 9/11 events "fear" has become a particularly dominant feature of media discourse. Many media have generously and uncritically adopted the threat rhetoric by using words like war, or rogue states, or axis of evil, or describing enemies with animal metaphors.

Dominique Moïse has proposed a division in the world between cultures of fear, hope and humiliation. He concludes his study on the geopolitics of emotion by stating "To respond to the challenges we face, the world needs hope" (Moïse, 2009: 159). It could therefore be suggested that an adequate 21st century adaptation to modern realities is a "communication of hope".

The notion of communication of hope is not meant as a reference to facile and trivial dissemination of naive euphoric messages or utopian dreams, but as the sharing of action alternatives that concretely demonstrate how people are capable of deeds of solidarity, compassion, acceptance of differences and mutual respect.

Local Embeddedness

Global mobilization for human survival through non-humiliating and hopeful modalities of communication requires the embeddedness in a locality.

This form of communication can only emerge from the location where people lead most of their daily lives: the global city.

This follows from Saskia Sassen's argument that the resources that are needed for global operations are deeply embedded in such places as global cities (Sassen 2009). Global cities are the world's centres of finance, fashion, the arts, and the media of communication. Cities are the key hubs in global economic activity and key actors in current processes of globalisation. The January 28, 2008 issue of "Time" magazine had a cover story about how three connected cities (New York, London and Hong Kong, aptly titled Nylonkong) drive the global economy. Their shared economic energy creates a powerful network that both illustrates and explains globalisation. They are not only centres of money and high-finance, they are also centres of culture. Cultural production and consumption has become an important element of the economy of the world's big cities and this has introduced new ways to use urban space for public cultural performances where a variety of cultural roles merge, such as those of spectatorship, tourism, performance, and sales. The big cities have also become key places for all kinds of services, such as legal assistance, marketing, advertising and architecture (Sassen 2001).

In the 21st century, the human species will for the first time in history become an "urban species". In 2009 half of the global population lived in urban areas and in the years to come this will be some 70%. "According to current projections, virtually the whole of the world's population growth over the next 30 years will be concentrated inurban areas" (UN Habitat, 2011: ix). The city will be the space in which people have to find ways to live together and to deal with all the conflicts that go with urban spaces.

Latin America is the most urbanized region in the developing world, with 77 per cent of its population – 433 million people – living in cities. The urbanization of Latin America has yet to reach its peak. By 2015, it is expected that 81 per cent of its population will reside in urban areas. Equally, Asia and Africa are regions with a very intense urbanization. Asia alone will account for more than half the world's urban population by 2030 and in the same year the African urban population will be larger than the total population of Europe.

The world has never before known so many cities and never such large cities as the massive conurbations of more than 20 million people that are now gaining ground in Asia, Latin America and Africa. Many of these cities have populations larger than entire countries. The population of Greater Mumbai (which will soon achieve megacity status), for instance, is already larger than the total population of Norway and Sweden combined.

The quality and sustainability of life in the world's cities will largely depend upon the ways in which the urbanites manage to co-exist with each other.

The way cities structure and manage their public space is obviously essential to any effort to enhance social interaction among urbanites. In addition to the management of the physical environment, there are also economic and socio-cultural elements that enhance or obstruct urban social interaction.

There is, however, more. If we had an optimal urban grid, would urban dwellers be able to engage in constructive conversation? Beyond the physical, socio-economic environment there has to be a psychological environment that overcomes essential obstacles to urban conversation. This environment would need to address adequately the issues of heterogeneity, speed, and mindlessness.

Heterogeneity

The city is a place of heterogeneity, a place of differences. Dealing with the permanent provocation (Foucault 2003) that heterogeneity poses is exceedingly difficult for many people.

Coping with heterogeneity in communication requires that people have to begin recognizing the polyphonic structures of their own minds. The dialogue between different people is only possible if the internal "self" extends into the external "others". This implies that we understand our inner self as a society (Minsky, 1985) that is populated by many different I- positions that have the capacity of conducting dialogues among themselves. Dialogical self theory (Hermans, Kempen and van Loon 1992) proposes that the self is extended to include both internal and external positions, both I positions and positions of others. The extended self breaks through the separation between self and society. Only when we learn to communicate with the plurality of our own identities, can we communicate with others. We need to first engage in the dialogue with ourselves, i.e. with all the different I-positions we live with, and then discover that others (my friend, my wife, my enemy) are part of these positions. Meaningful communication with others demands that the dialogical self is extended to these others. Only in this way can the Cartesian obstacle of the distinction between me and the other be resolved and can we communicate as members of the same universe.

Speed

The city is characterized by the tremendous speed of its movements and interactions. Disarming conversations demand time. For most city dwellers this means that they have to learn the art of slowing down.

One of the tools the city offers its citizens are pedestrian traffic lights. In many of the world's cities, one can observe how masses of people rapidly cross streets ignoring traffic lights unless there is a cop or the immediate danger of being run over. Waiting for the red traffic light is an important exercise in slowing down and creates even the opportunity to say something to another human being.

The essential problem with speed is that whereas our bodies may move with cyber-speed our minds are still in earlier ages. As Cosmides and Tooby have phrased this "Our modern skulls house a stone age mind" (Cosmides and Tooby 1997: 6). This raises the question as to whether our minds can catch up with our bodies? Can our minds cope with the problems of modern urban life?

Mindlessness

Much of urban interaction is mindless. People run without seeing faces, pass others as 'strangers in the night', without feelings of responsibility towards others. People speed along the urban routes in cocoons that broadcast the signal "I don't mind you, please don't mind me!" The mindlessness of modern urban life implies a mindless mode of speech that is more characteristic of urban than of village life. Modern cities need massive training programs in mindfulness.

The quality and sustainability of life in the city will largely depend upon the ways in which the urbanites manage to deal with heterogeneity, speed and mindlessness in

communicating with each other. The development of a "communicative city" is critical to the sustainability of life in the urban environment (Hamelink 2011: 83-91). By and large, worldwide city administration and urbanites alike have ignored the importance of local communication policies in response to global risks. Whenever communication is at all present in city politics the emphasis tends to be on access to public information, on interactions between administrators and citizens and on the freedom of expression in public space.

Locality

We are all locals in a global environment. Locality is the geographical and psychological place that forms our daily habitat. At the same time though these local places are affected by global flows of goods, finances and stories. Daily life in localities is influenced by global perceptions. However, local communities can reach beyond their borders, network with other localities and thus develop global countervailing power to the forces that threaten the survival of the planet. These forces consist of those individuals and groups that actively pursue financial, banking, military and industrial interests that enlarge socio-economic divides, endanger peace and security, and disempower people. The power of these elite minorities is not merely physically coercive but is primarily discursive. Through persuasive forms of public communication they manage to make majorities believe that their world order will benefit all.

The key strategic question for the social movements of our age is "how to reach the global from the local through networking with other localities….How can social movements use communication resources to network globally for the mobilization of counter power?" (Castells 2009:52).

Of paramount importance in the mobilisation of countervailing discursive power are strategies for local urban media to network with other localities, to form alliances with similar urban movements and to lobby with local administrations to design and implement communication policies that contribute to publicly owned and managed urban communication systems.

Such global inter-city networks can begin to exchange stories of hope. In many cities there are examples of hopeful and promising initiatives (like in urban arts movements for human rights) that should be told in other cities.

These movements should realize that their media have to escape from the dominant corporate model. Survival communication is not about making money but about making urban life (and thus planetary life) worth living.

They will not go uncontested by those powers that profit from the very technologies and economies that threaten human survival. Against their power, the rise of the social media and their networks have provided a new chance to mobilize for resistance. There are presently many new vehicles to tell stories of hope. These can however not be used in blind naivety and the warnings of Evgeny Morozov (2011) about censorship, surveillance, manipulation and the stifling of dissent in the network society should be taken seriously. His analysis convincingly warns of the risk that the digitization of communication processes offers a plethora of repressive tools for those resisting social change.

And yet, there is also truth in Castell's proposal that the rise in self mass-communication creates new chances for social and political change (2009: 302).

Networked social movements can use these new chances for the building of countervailing power and the developing of alternative solutions. Crucial for this is the global effort to keep the Internet a free and open medium for social deliberation. It is evident that the new information and communication technologies offer unprecedented opportunities for the construction of global networks of local communities.

The world's cities are becoming globally interconnected systems. In many cities around the world, fascinating and promising experiments are conducted in the use of cyberspace technologies. From Kyoto to Honolulu and Amsterdam digital city governments are being experimented with. (Yasuoka 2010). However, there is little concrete policy planning by local governments for this innovation, and little reflection on how this can render cities nodes of global networks.

The inevitable question evidently is how realistic the prospect of glocal networks for global survival might be. Given the formidable power of the driving forces of the dominant global order and the effective propaganda for the supporting belief system, this prospect would seem rather dim. Yet, against the current "globalization-from-above", a "globalization-from-below" (Falk 1993: 39) is no longer a chimera.

Over the past decades local communities have demonstrated that global change is within their power. Today millions of people around the world are involved with forms of local community-based activities that focus on global problems. A new type of world politics is emerging through these initiatives. They represent a shift from conventional international relations mainly conducted by the national foreign affairs elites of statesmen, diplomats, and politicians towards a world political arena in which ordinary people in local communities involve themselves directly in the world's problems often bypassing their national officials. This happens in movements for civil rights of the homeless, for labour and minority rights. As these local communities begin to network and cooperate, a new formidable force in the shaping of world politics develops. Local communities no longer depend upon the national leadership to make the world a safer place to live. In this process, globalization of the local is countered by local communities going global (Hamel, 2000).

Local communities have begun to recognize responsibility for problems outside their boundaries and have put world problems on their policy agenda. Local initiatives provide people with the opportunity to address this responsibility and increase people's contribution to political life. People in local communities accept that the fundamental obligation to take the future in their own hands is inherent to the democratic ideal. As local communities around the world are presently engaged in such areas of activity as development, environment, and human rights, it could be argued that the achievement of a global production and distribution of stories of hope can be put on their agenda as a decisive contribution to human survival in the third millennium.

Saskia Sassen writes that the global city has emerged as a site for the formation of new claims (2009:92). Among those could be the claim to global survival in dignity. Urban space could become a frontier zone for a new type of "glocal" communicative engagement with human survival in dignity.

Notes

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2. The Eurobarometer began in 1973 as a research project of the European Commission. Through interviews, data are collected about attitudes of European citizens regarding the European Union and about general political and social attitudes of European citizens.

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