

## **THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF COMMUNICATION WHEN THE WORLD BECOMES GLOBALIZED**

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### **Abstract**

This work is framed within the context of the researches and papers on the changes arising from the convergence of globalization and the ICTs that enable globalization. It resumes the theoretical approaches of Manuel Martín Serrano to study some of the transformations in the mediating function of the public communication linked to the technology advancements introduced in the Communication System. It tackles the technical developments that enable the access to more information – in many cases immediately, which does not necessarily imply that users have a better understanding of what is happening in the world. The current use of ICTs may lead to a reproduction of stereotypes within affinity groups – making each group more closed rather than opening them to different groups with whom they may discuss or share interpretations of the change in the environment.

### **Keywords**

Globalization; Knowledge; Representations; Humanization; Use of ICTs

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## **THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF COMMUNICATION WHEN THE WORLD BECOMES GLOBALIZED<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

In 1986, it was published *The Social Production of Communication*, in which Manuel Martín Serrano develops the Social Theory of Communication, the foundations of which are to remodel the communicative analysis from a socio-historic and macro-sociological approach. These analyses are based on the existing links between the historical changes of societies and the modalities of public communication that have appeared and disappeared, from assembly communication to communication through computer-communicative networks (Bernete, 2011).

The work abovementioned introduces the successive transformations of public communication in the field of technologies, the organizations in charge of providing communities with information, and its use in each community as a necessary component to analyse the historical changes in societies. The scenario in which the list of adjustments and imbalances between what happens to communities and the news about what has happened is opened with the first social organizations, in which the social production of communication is institutionalized when the agrarian and militaristic societies stabilize; and has remained open for four thousand years until our times. Now, it is necessary to understand the ongoing historical transformation related to the computer-communicative revolution, which will eventually reshape the different forms of social action at a global level, as well as the role of information and organizations (see Bernete, 2011).

In the third edition of *The Social Production of Communication*, published in 2004, the author incorporates the results of the successive researches specifically designed to verify the theory, following the dramatic changes in communication and information mentioned above. In the text, it is provided an interpretation of the leap from the audiovisual era to a computer-virtual era. The collective representations are related to the current ways to obtain, distribute and use the information; and both, with their order and disorder, find and confront groups and societies. This socio-historical mark – which distinguishes the author of *The Social Mediation* demonstrates once again its theoretical and clarifying power. Especially when it integrates the systematic study of the social and communicative changes in predicting alternative scenarios that may arise from the current computer-communicative abilities. Therefore, we deem it relevant to review some of the key ideas used to plan the analysis of the existing relations between the

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<sup>1</sup> The translation of the article is the responsibility of their authors.



production and the reproduction of public communication and the production and reproduction of social communication (see Bernete, 2011). We start this presentation by referring to the construction processes of the social representations required for the social reproduction.

As is known, social subjects create representations of the world on the basis of beliefs, principles and values. Such beliefs are not only valid for the groups to give meaning to their past and build a future, but also to understand their present. The collective imaginations embrace the continuous and endless change of the social, material or ideal environment to assume any novelty. In every society, incorporating in a cognitive manner what erupts in reality or understanding what disappears is an institutional task aimed at social control. The meaning of such intervention is contained in the following quote:

*"With the recourse to mediation, the community tries to achieve a certain degree of consensus in the representations of the world made by the different members of the group. Here is the reason why all societies need subjects (such as the shaman) or institutions (such as informative companies) specialized in the production and reproduction of collective representations – a certain event occurring and affecting all members of a group does not have one single representation, nor the consequent agreement to severally react to the event". (Martín Serrano, 2004: 142).*

The production and transmission of public information plays a mediating role when it establishes a link between the transformations of the world and the knowledge of the changes by the recipients of the information. This function involves the selection of reference objects<sup>2</sup> and the provision of a number of data and assessments about such objects; all this represents a representation of what is being communicated. By offering the community representations of what already exists and occurs, the public communication contributes – along with other mediating instances – to a proper adequacy between the changes of the environment, behaviour patterns supported by shared beliefs, and the institutions of the Social System. The public communication may offer this congruence by either suggesting the reprocessing of collective representations, or by providing an interpretation of the event to replenish the representations and legitimize the existing order. In any case, the adjustment is aimed at stopping the social action from exceeding the frameworks established.

The public communication influences the social action inasmuch as it allows members to share a vision of what occurs; or, if preferred, as it exercises control over the social representations shared by a collective. If it provides an acceptable interpretation for the group, it favours a certain vision of reality and of what is more convenient to do in the face of a created new situation. That is to say, it proposes a certain social action and gives sense for the members of the collective.

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<sup>2</sup> The term *reference objects* refers to what two or more living beings communicate about – a provision, a need, a hazard or a sports event may be considered reference objects if communicators exchange data about them.



As is well known, the communicative mediations carried out in this historical moment differ from the ones used just some decades ago. The following paragraphs set forth some of the transformations occurring in public communication (its production, distribution, reception and use) and the way such transformations affect the cognitive representations of citizens in an era of transition between institutional communication systems; nowadays, together with the "Mass Communication System" operate other systems of information exchange through techno-computer networks.

This article deals with the ways to provide indications on what occurs – and its impact in our perception of reality – which are characteristics of the current networks of exchange of information. We will do so by recalling that some of the features of their ways to produce and distribute information have not emerged with the new ICTs – they have accelerated certain lines of the "communicative progress" that were born long before the advent of the internet.

The goal of this analysis is to prove that some of the technological developments of modernity – which may confer advantages to recipients (for instance, more information about more things, higher reliability or more possibilities to react in less time), started to give rise to contradictions with certain mediating functions, such as providing interpretations of the events narrated. And such contradictions have grown more acute over the last decades.

We refer below to what Professor Martín Serrano (2004) described as "great conquests by the Capitalist Social Structure in the development of referential communication" (synchrony, iconicity, extension of the referential universe) and the way in which their development hinders the function to offer representations of the event that are compatible with the principles and values shared.

### **1. The function to provide interpretation of the event when it is synchronically transmitted**

The time between the communicative product is produced and its reception by part of the recipients was being reduced until the synchronic dissemination of the information was achieved.

*"The conquest of communicative synchrony has made it possible that more people are potentially concerned by public events in a useful period of time" (Martín Serrano, 2004: 112).*

In fact, it represents a benefit for recipients since knowing beforehand about the event may imply advance in their decision about the facts. If they receive the information at the time the narrated facts are occurring, their reaction capacity would be as immediate as the eyewitnesses' of the event.

However, this technological development may hamper the mediating function of providing an interpretation of the event, since the mediator, in this circumstance, essentially works to give an immediate account of what is observed in the place and present moment. (Many times, it is not about what is observed, but about the expressions



of other mediators). Other tasks, such as selecting pertinent data, check them, or finding different points of view for the building of a narration that makes it possible to relate the facts if this present with previous ones, are subordinated to the goal of providing information as soon as possible. Usually the narrator accompanies the listener or the viewer in their access to the events, when they may be seen.

The story is believed to have a culturizing character, since it contributes to "introducing new generations in the cultural patters of society and prepare them for their recreation" (Echevarría, 2003), but the fact of transmitting the information of the event in real time makes this function extremely difficult.

## **2. The function to provide interpretations of the event when pictures of the reference objects are shown**

Technical developments resulted in a constant increase in the number of images, in the genesis of which participates the same object of the communication. From the recipient's point of view, knowing that the image directly comes from the object confers a degree of reliability, regardless of the sender's reliability. When means of iconic or synchronic information are used, the possibilities to avoid mediators are greater for the benefit of the autonomous interpretation of users. Recipients may configure a representation of the event transmitted by themselves if they have the cognitive capacity to process the iconic narration. However,

*"the ability to express in images everything that has a shape confronts the need that every interpretation must respond to a particular rule or code, only shared by the members of a same group"* (Martín Serrano, 2004: 128).

The contradiction pointed out in the quote leads to the following thought – either verbal indications are introduced (necessarily in a particular code) to channel the wide repertoire of individual interpretations towards the interpretative framework of the mediator, or they relinquish to the control over the interpretation of what was shown and it is allowed that the meaning given to the information depends on the perceptive and cognitive capacities of recipients.

The reception and recognition of images (fixed and in motion) require different information processing habits from the ones required to process oral expressions, aligned in a space or time sequence and more monosemic than images. If our culturization is based on particular codes (languages learnt), the narrated descriptions and assessments of the event in those same expressive models will be better understood than those narrated with iconic codes. Working with these codes would mean a new way of learning for a vast part of the population.

Only when recipients may unequivocally identify the object and the context in which the images are taken, the iconic narration can be sufficient to recognize the status or the activity of a reference object (for instance, a sports competition with which recipients are familiar), with no written or oral presence of a mediator.



Additionally, even when it is recognized what the images show, showing does not mean explaining the sense of what happens; many times it just means a way of constructing a show with that event. The mere vision of things may produce a feeling of knowledge, but the iconicity that supposedly makes facts transparent, usually produces the effect of making them more opaque<sup>3</sup>.

### **3. The function of providing interpretations of the event when the information is overabundant**

One of the conquests inherited from current technological systems is that the information about the events concerning to a specific community are made permanently available to all member of such community. The features of ICTs have accelerated the dynamics to expand the universe of reference objects – any emerging object may become a public event and any assessment may be part of a point of view about what is occurring, the manifestation of which is deemed legitimate (Martín Serrano, 2004: 127).

Theoretically, this expansion of what is referentially controlled may help to learn more data about more objects, more different perspectives, expressed with more freedom. If the increase of the information available was in accordance with what is more convenient for users to know, they would be able to improve their understanding of the changes occurring in their environment, and to know with stronger foundations what is possible and impossible to do to adapt to changes, to push to make what they consider desirable thrive, and to avoid what they consider undesirable.

As is known, the information overload of our times is incomparably greater than the one announced by Alvin Toffler in his book *Future shock* (1970)<sup>4</sup>, but the effect is not necessarily having more true information that could allow us to assess the facts and participate in the public sphere with a great deal of information. The increase of communicative interactions does not change one bit its character of “process that may be used to tell the truth or to lie, to construct or destroy, to unite or separate, to educate or diseducate” (Díaz Bordenave, 2012).

The amount of information accessible to user citizens to ICTs is not offered to meet their needs for knowledge and is not the result of a so-called equality of opportunities to publish on the internet their personal narrations and participate in the public sphere. Indeed, the technical features make it possible that every user of networks may offer reference data and assessments about any matter of interest. But not all users have the same economic and technical capacities. Therefore, they do not have the same possibilities to appear in networks or to influence in the social representations of the collective with their personal view of things. Social, economic, political, etc. inequalities are also taken into consideration in the order of the communicative production.

The applications allowing current ICTs have accelerated the elimination of two dividing lines: a) the one distinguishing between agents and communicants, and b) the one distinguishing between senders and recipients within the Communication System.

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<sup>3</sup> Please refer to *La sociedad de la transparencia* [The Society of Transparency] (Han, 2013) to find out more on the sense of “more exposure” in contemporary societies.

<sup>4</sup> Toffler perceived “too many changes in a too short period of time”.





- a) Among the actors of the Social System, the functional separation between *social agents* (those who produce, sell or buy things) and *communicants* (those that exchange information about things) still exists, although the information and the knowledge (resources for social reproduction) have become resources of the productive system and have strengthened ties between production and communication. Public and private interactions are organized from the information and the knowledge.

One of the consequences that all agents (political, economic, etc.) are communicants is reflected in the informative overflow of the internet. Large corporations have the ability to plan it in a way that the information provided in the technological networks (all of them equally legitimate) hampers the access to knowledge.

This new form of opacity has been observed as "information intoxication", which hides truth under the excess of narrations. This is another way to censor – instead of (in addition to) silencing or prohibiting, words, images, sounds and number are provided. This is how the so-called "knowledge-based society" also becomes the "uncertainty-based society", since –paradoxically– it hinders knowledge by providing a flood of information.

- b) The separation between *senders* and *recipients* in mass communication was functional; on the one hand, the subjects authorized to perform the role of informant –to produce and distribute the communicative products to the mass – and, on the other hand, the potential recipients of such products (for instance, according to their age, working spaces or times and leisure). This distinction has been blurred. Although the institutional communication has not been diminished, many other informative exchanges are produced alongside – comments about news or opinion columns, or sometimes just isolated words, photographs, emoticons or directions that refer to another informative space. The subjects that publicly interpret the event have multiplied and, consequently, the views of the world.

#### **4. The function to provide interpretations of the event with fragmented narrations**

The increase of information abovementioned is linked to certain innovations in the format and in the use of communicative practices. In the past decades, there have been changes in the way we see (for instance, zapping or narrative grammar that mix genders), the way we write (for instance, hypertexts) or the way we read (for instance, instant messaging or microblogging short stories).

In the new narrative formats communication modalities proliferate (or simply, connection modalities). They tend to reduce narration as much as possible. There are more exchanges of images and short-length texts. After micro-stories and blogs, "social networks" emerged, where anything is said or shown with no connection to other things. Later, microblogging services, such as Twitter, through which users exchange texts that are obligatorily short, frequently used to announce the existence of more informative load in other internet space.

Although there are still large narrations, (for instance, some very successful TV series), micro-stories have multiplied, with almost no narrative structure at all (except from advertisements). Given their nature, they are not ordered narrations that offer a certain



representation of a reference object, but pieces of narratives, flows of images, sounds and words that leave the mental construction of references to each user.

Inasmuch as current ICTs are applied to the educational system, especially in online courses, it is evidenced a break in the sequentiality that has characterised the structure and the use of textbooks. Instead, fragments from different texts are introduced with links to others. This composition seems to avoid a closing of the narration. Regarding their use, the discontinuity of reading, exercises, etc. is facilitated in different times and places. As we say, the effect is to leave knowledge structuring in the hands of students – by using their many and portable technical devices they must decide where and when to do each thing.

### **5. The absence of collective representation provided by mediators and the difficulty to build up consensus on the basis of shared knowledge**

Between producing and disseminating narrations, and doing so with fragments, headings, tweets or simple emoticons, there is something else than a difference of length – the first ones are elaborated by knowledge mediators (for instance, writers, teachers or journalists) that choose the references, data and the order to build a product for their community. The second ones are usually disseminated with no order, so the members of the receiving community must assess their informative value and create some representation. It seems clear that in this way the existence of shared representations is difficult.

Here is the following paradox – on the one hand, globalization is supposed to lie on the use of shared information and knowledge at a global level; on the other hand, there are more and more ICT applications aimed at offering informative fragments instead of providing structured representations that contribute to diminish the level of lack of knowledge of what happens in the world.

Uncertainty grows while the information dumped in the net by the marked increase of communicative mediations that, instead of improving our knowledge of the world, our own and others' life, feeds prejudices and misunderstanding, they create confusion and promote endless conflicts.

Nevertheless, it may not be inferred from the points above that the social reproduction is at risk due to a decline of consensus. In fact, consensus is promoted, but not from all citizens and, surely, not at a global scale. "Theoretically, globalization and the ICTs that make it possible provide a possibility to know more about the culture of other countries and regions of the world; which theoretically may also extend the possibilities to reach better understanding between people from different parts of the planet" (Bernete, 2010).

The consensus based on the control of networks may reach unprecedented levels. Because the consensus based on obedience to the own group is being promoted, strengthening some identities before others, the consensus of the local or nationalist glorification; the consensus based on the reproduction of stereotypes of any nature that networks quickly and easily amplify – national and local stereotypes, gender or sexual orientation, Jews, Muslims or Christians, just like hundreds of years ago.

The same technologies that allow the dismantling of knowledge, also allow a use aimed at prioritizing certain stereotyped representations of reality and their reproduction with





redundant "information". The dominant views of the world in quantitative terms eventually become dominant in qualitative terms. Just like in previous times, but now with more reasons – a minority of subjects are able to distinguish true information from false.

Distinguishing true information from false information has had the greatest importance in the prevention and solution of social conflicts. In the same way that confusing what is false with what is true may lead and exacerbate confrontation.

In social communication truth has been used to deactivate conflicts, while lies have created and intensified them. And this is how it happens nowadays. For instance, lies legitimate aggressions to other countries, when mass media exacerbate warmongering or when a military invasion is planned.

According to Prof. Martín Serrano (2007: 252-262), a piece of information is truthful if the data provided about the reference object are

- *objective* (they correspond to the object's characteristics)
- *significant* (necessary to inform about this object from a specific point of view) and
- All data are *valid* or complete to provide users of the communication with a certain view of the object.

The overload of information citizens have nowadays forces them not only to have technical capacities to make the most of the IT applications, but also, and especially, cognitive capacities that they will hardly get by themselves. Please consider if each computer, Smartphone, internet, etc. user, just for the simple fact of having an access device and being connected can search, compare, assess, and relate information to produce his/her own knowledge. Or if he/she may distinguish objective and significant data from those that only seem so; or if they have criteria to assess the validity of the data offered in each case, analyse their structure and take into account other data or alternative structures. All in all, to distinguish between truth and a lie.

Learning to relate, assess, etc. to convert the information into knowledge depends on the fact the models, the organization and the resources of the educational system are oriented in such direction and that everybody have the chance to benefit from such learning.<sup>5</sup>

Until users do not acquire such capacities, it is possible that most of them will have to understand that they are "a mass living in their lack of knowledge, fascinated by technology and more and more alienated" (Brey, 2009: 38). If this is the scenario, probably individuals will not be the ones benefiting the most from ICTs, but large corporations able to correlate huge amounts of data, according to this author.

*"The centre of gravity of the commercialized knowledge-based society gradually moves from the individual to the collective structures (...). Increasingly, there is more knowledge in*

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<sup>5</sup> In the past decades, political and academic authorities promote with their guidelines that students have competences in the management of information and the acquisition of an applicable knowledge with a change value. This does not necessarily mean they are trained to manage assessment criteria on the veracity of the information.



*organizations, but less knowledge in individuals, more information in the silicon memories and less in human brains. Individuals progressively leave their central position, which becomes diluted, and from the periphery they are weaker and more expendable than ever". (Brey, 2009: 40-41).*

In general terms, the duality predicted by Castells (1995 b:11) seems to be consolidated unless technical innovations are used in a different way:

*"(information society) is the society of the technological and medical feats as well as the society of the marginalization of a large sector of the population, irrelevant for the new system".*

## **6. The social use of technical innovations defines the sense of mediations**

If the technical capacities of the informative instruments are known as well as the options of their potential uses, it is understood that, up until now, advanced capitalist societies have defended themselves from the undesired transforming effects of the technological innovations by restricting their social uses.

The Capitalist Social Formation has used Mass Media with the goal of providing information and training based on domain ethics. Technology has changed, but the management of current ICTs favours the same ethics and the domain has been strengthened, since the capitalist production method has not changed.

Manuel Martín Serrano describes the "communication production method" as *the way each Social Formation takes control over the public information*.

*"The information owned is different in each Social Formation, not only for its utility, but also for its ownership:*

- *The use of the information may refer to different use criteria. But the information required for the reproduction of the Social System will be owned when it contributes to the creation, or at least the recreation of the conditions (material, institutional, cultural) that are crucial for the functioning of the Social Formation.*
- *The ownership of the information may be assigned to specific users, namely institutions, groups or individuals; or remain seemingly inexistent. But the information useful for the maintenance of the social structure, or the information that may eventually be used to transform the organization (hierarchical, stratum, classes) will be owned by dominant groups. This ownership is not judicially recognized, and not even at a functional level in all cases. However, it is always identifiable at a structural level by defining who are the ones to decide what is*



*the value of use of the public information". (Martín Serrano, 2004: 101-102).*

The innovations in the infrastructures of the Communication System have been incorporated to keep a production and reproduction model, but not for other uses that render less benefits or that would weaken the political or economic domain.

The maintenance of the productive and reproductive models allow current ICTs to offer the possibility to participate in an endless number of recreational, educational, relational or political activities, among others. This does not mean that the political participation, education, social relations, services or benefits to citizens are promoted, since they are only allowed in the new techno-informative space. While certain activities are allowed in the so-called "cyberspace", there is more instability and insecurity in the material dimension of daily life – employment, income, housing, health, etc.

We find ourselves facing a technological revolution of enormous significance since it will probably result in irreversible changes for the human condition. And in the time in which a historical process of such a magnitude is started, there is a renewal of hope for humanity to have the control of their future using the technical inventions to improve the nature of people, their life conditions and the organization of societies. Therefore, the determination to put technical innovations at the service of humanizing objectives has been reborn and makes new sense with the existence of ICTs. These are the initiatives that try to use these technologies to gradually introduce methods of communication social production that are not conditioned by the logics of control and of the economic benefit (see Martín Serrano, 2014a).

Mediators are required to walk towards a more human future, based on precise information and shared knowledge. Instead of being driven by the principle of competitiveness among groups or States, mediators are supposed to be moved by solidarity and brotherhood in a single universal community. The ethnocentrism marking our relations has caused so many divisions – gender, generations, religions, nations, etc. – that this horizon is seen as utopian.

## **Conclusion**

The professionals of public communication are not the only interpreters of the event. They also interpret what there is and what happens to other socializing agents such as friends, relatives or teachers. These agents and the professional informants themselves are obliged to be familiar with the transformations in the communication methods.

The processes of social communication are transformed when the world globalizes. And it had to be this way, because the largest material interactivity (transport, commercial exchanges, etc.) is necessarily linked to greater information flows, favoured by current ICTs. A dimension of such transformations is related to the nature of the mediations that the communication introduces to orient social action. The communicative actions performed in this historical moment differ from the ones used just a couple of decades ago.



This work is focused on the communicative mediations, which aim to establish a link between what changes in the environment and the knowledge of the changes by the recipients of the information.

The previous paragraphs state that the function to provide the community with representation of what occurs in the environment is changing –in some cases, minimizing – because the technological developments, together with institutional communication, fosters the prosperity of other communication practices, where the narrative made with complete and ordered information (following whatever criteria) is not valid.

We also referred to the difficulties to provide recipients with an interpretation of the event when it is synchronically transmitted, when iconic codes prevail over oral, when the information is excessive, and when predominant formats are extremely reduced in extension and scarcely narrative (headlines, tweets, emoticons, etc.).

If public communication does not provide collective representations, the construction of consensus on the basis of shared knowledge is more difficult, as it entrusts the recipient community with the task to assess the information and make it fit in their view of the world. This does not put social cohesion at risk because there are other mediators, in addition to the ones that work in the communication system, and because consensus may lie on the basis of stereotyped representations that are easily disseminated and reproduced, and that feed the prejudices of each collective before the rest. Group cohesion is strengthened as well as consensus about its own culture within collectives, when, in theory, there are more chances to discuss and to know about who is different (given the technical resources and scale economy).

The result of this use of the information and the knowledge is and increase of ignorance about what exists and what does not exist, and an increase of uncertainty about what may occur and what can be done. Ignorance and confusion emerge when the wealth of information dumped in the public space is so great that it becomes a torrent from which we have to defend. In these circumstances, mediation is open to mystification and dehumanization, which in fact is exercised by institutions created to this end to control the representations shared about what occurs:

*"Experts in mystification disguise the geopolitical interests of dominant nations with noble principles. These manipulators are key pieces in the planning of design wars around the planet (...). During war actions, experts in dehumanization will turn barbarity of bombing into spectacles. They are professionals serving the current warlords that will schedule disinformation to ensure the suffering and outrages are not visible for media chroniclers or audiences (Martín Serrano, 2006).*

In this context, today more than ever, citizens need mediators to help them to interpret the facts:

*"In the emerging globalized world, professionals, teacher, and communication researchers, take increasing social responsibilities.*



*Few fields can prove certain – as much as communication does – that expert knowledge does not legitimate control and makes it more efficient, but to unveil it” (Martín Serrano, 2006).*

The representations that will bring the real globalization of humanity, with no reduction of their identities or cultures, will be the ones to link technology revolutions to the liberation of peoples, those protracting the progress in humanization. Views of the future that direct the applications of the new technologies to share their knowledge and information, to globalize the solidarity that humanizes. This was the use programme of the knowledge and information technologies designed by the enlightened.

They applied the sociologic perspective to find out if it would be possible to reach another time when history would have reached its zenith, removing power from the symbols and lowering the symbolic value of power. That time when there is a single human community, enriched by any possible diversity, with all its cohesion, because, finally, solidarity ties would have tied the whole species (see Martín Serrano, 2014b).

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