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Abstract

Michel Freitag developed a ground-breaking sociological theory synthesizing the thought of sociology's founders into the form of a dialectical sociology that conceives of the symbolic as ontological to social reality. After outlining his conceptualization of the historical evolution of society through its 'modes of reproduction', we will see how his analysis of contemporary societal transformations rests on a critical theory of communication and technology that, while entering a dialogue with the works of the Frankfurt school, especially those of Habermas, seeks to overcome their inherent contradictions. According to Freitag, the development of capitalist globalization alters the very substance of society as it tends to morph itself into a self-regulating cybernetic system. His sociology allows us to apprehend phenomena tied to the development of contemporary digital technologies such as the drive towards a new form of algorithmic governmentality fueled by digital oligopolies that increasingly dominate globalized capitalism, the rise of fake news in the era of post-truth and the transformation of subjectivity. Finally, his critique enables potent reflection on the dialectical possibilities of overcoming the dynamics of contemporary alienation.

Keywords

sociology, critical theory, communications, globalization, dialectics

Introduction

The continuous segmentation of the social sciences into specific fields or studies has not been able to fill the growing void left by the waning of grand social theories. This phenomenon, combined with the related fact that critical reflection on the nature of contemporary societies is gradually dissolving into pragmatic interventionism and problem-solving, speaks to a deeper transformation

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within society itself, at the heart of which lies our conception and implementation of contemporary communications technologies.

This is the view of the francophone sociologist Michel Freitag. Relative unknown in the Anglo-Saxon world, we wish to benefit from the recent English translation of a few of his selected essays¹ (Freitag, 2022b) to showcase the contributions of his thought to critical theory in communications. Taking cues from both philosophy and critical sociology, Freitag developed his theoretical perspective by synthesizing the thought of sociology's founding figures into a dialectical approach that conceives of the symbolic as ontological to social reality. As we shall see, the various mediations that constitute the symbolic signal objective logics through which significant practice (re)produces meaning. Historically, aporia and contradictions within these logics lead to transformations that are formally and typologically grasped in what Freitag calls society's 'modes of reproduction'. In fact, the very category of 'society' belongs to modernity in so far as it conceives of its unity through the political burden of its self-constitution, realized transcendently in the ideal of the free individual. According to Freitag (2013), the historical rise of capitalism and instrumental rationality laid bare structural contradictions inherent to modern society that would dissolve (as opposed to resolve) and mutate through 20th-century communications and the increasingly unrestrained development of its technologies. On one hand, corporations gradually assumed control while institutions increasingly took on the functional form of the capitalist organization. On the other, post-war cybernetics harmonized with neoliberal epistemologies (Mirowski, 2002) in fomenting the fantasy and eventual quasi-realization of a society modelled on a self-regulating system. Together, these tendencies would combine to produce a world where the instrumentality of communications is projected as ontological.

We will argue that Freitag's dialectical sociology grants a unique critical perspective that unifies many of the disparate contemporary issues in communications studies, most notably the transformations tied to the development of communications technologies within processes of digitalization, financialization and globalization. Globalization will be understood as not simply the indefinite imperial expansion of capitalism, but the worldwide dissemination of a mode of reproduction that vitiates symbolic mediation through the efficient operationalization of both formal and technological decision-making systems. The financialization of everything, the collapse of normative regulation through an algorithmic governmentality, the flattening of the alterity of society and nature within the systemic uniformity of a world conceived as information flows and the dissolution of transcendental identity through the short-circuiting of representation will all be observed through this lens. Furthermore, we will argue on the basis of Freitag's perspective that many of the so-called 'critical' theories in communications of a postmodern flavour actually reflect within the categories of the system and develop into a pure description of the current state of affairs. We will finally conclude by briefly outlining what Freitag perceives as a possible avenue for escape through the political establishment of an inter-civilization dialogue, a process which he calls *mondialisation*.

An Ontology of Symbolic Mediation

In what is arguably the closest thing to a 'methods text' within his oeuvre, Michel Freitag proposes that the theoretical reconciliation of individual action on one hand and society as a whole on the other – colloquially known as the agency/structure dichotomy within sociology – rests on a dialectic recognizing the objectivity of social mediation; that between 'subjects' and 'objects', the mediations that we understand as 'social' are in a sense 'objective' (Freitag, 2022b). While Durkheim's imperative that we should consider social facts 'as if they were things' granted sociality an empirical character on the basis of verifiable constraints that evince representations and actions, Freitag

understands social mediations as manifest of a specific dimension of human reality, which he calls ‘symbolic’. The symbolic is just as ‘real’ as the empirical world, but of a different essence all the while emerging from it; it is a reality coming into itself from within the entire historical development of the necessary ontological distance created between subject and object in a dialectical process of co-constitution. On one hand, you have the objective determination of an empirical environment which ‘in its being-there, as being-before-the-subject, [. . .] appears to the subject as bearer or possessor of significations’ and through which, on the other hand, his or her relative autonomy is enacted within the indeterminacy of subjective orientation (Freitag, 2022b: 127). Thus, for Freitag, the symbolic speaks to the diverse mediations of human practice that constitute social reality in its historical becoming.

The socio-symbolic subject’s relation to the world is always mediated by language since it is through language that objects gain signification as concepts, a significance which transcends their empirical manifestations. In other words, language mediates the relation to the world so that every relation is established through reflexive objectivization – it is ‘world-building’. As such, the structures and conditions under which the ‘references, expressions, and significant practices of particular social actors’ present themselves are in a sense objective, existing in the form of norms, common meanings and ways of being. Freitag (2022b) writes,

While I readily admit that ‘collective actors’ in the strict sense do not exist, I will nonetheless posit that [. . .] *objective mediations of their significant practices* do in fact exist in the forms of *norms*, and have a common objectivity for them, an objectivity that is nevertheless always more or less explicitly perceived, reflected on, represented and justified by them . . . (p. 67)

We can understand the objectivity of the symbolic by transmuting Max Weber’s notion of the ideal-type. Contrary to his nominalist understanding of the concept, where the structures, phenomena and collective entities described could ultimately only present themselves as ‘strategies’ or ‘tools’ for sociologists to approach significant human action, Freitag understands ideal-types in a realist sense – as signalling objective logics within symbolic nature that speak to its structures and mechanisms of signification. As such, if language is an objective mediation of the relation to the world, then ‘all social concepts, all significant terms of common language, and all classifications and categories, are already in themselves and for themselves “ideal-types”’ (Freitag, 2022b).

Far from being a mere reification of concepts, this move allows us to gain a foothold on the ways in which significant action transforms itself over time. For if the premise that action is meaningful beyond itself through the interpretation of what it reproduces and that the terms of this reproduction, while nonetheless real, can only be broken down formally given the symbolic character of human activity, it follows from this that the evolution of action over time and space, that is to say historical change, necessarily takes on a typological form; both ideal-typical in its general pretension of illustrating the essence of a mode of symbolic sociality, but real in its claim to access with regards to the essence and forms of this (re)production and of its transformation in the overcoming of its tensions and contradictions (Freitag, 2022b: 150). Emerging from Freitag’s symbolic ontology, the dialectical unfolding of these tensions and contradictions are captured typologically in what he calls society’s ‘modes of reproduction’, the forms of which must be contrasted if we are to grasp the depth of his critique of contemporary communications.

Society’s Modes of Reproduction – From Institutions to Organizations

It is no accident that Freitag’s concept of ‘modes of reproduction’ seems proximate to the terminology used by Marx and subsequently operationalized within an entire critical theoretical tradition.

At the heart of Marx's dialectical view of history lies a definition of the essence of human beings as the sum of the social relations which comprise society. Here, a 'mode of production' refers to the conditions of living subjects to their means of subsistence, conditions which are objectified in the material capacities through which human beings establish a metabolic relationship to nature (the means of production) and the socio-structural relationships under which these material capacities are defined (the relations of production). However, for Marx, the whole of society's means of expression and self-determination, including the conditions of language itself, are secondary to, or rather a surplus deriving from, this mode of production. In other words, the production of society is, in a sense, a by-product of people's productive activity. While Freitag shares with Marx this idea of a unity of society resting on the relations of social practice, he extends the productive scope of these relations to the entire sphere of sociality: On the basis of the realist conception of the symbolic and of its forms, the sociologist argues that the unity of society rests as much on the reflexive objectivization of culture and the practices of daily life as it does on the material conditions of its production. In this sense, it is the breadth of social practices that are here understood as activities of (re)production.

If for Marx the ideological, political and institutional mediations constituting the superstructure of capitalist society ensue from and maintain the categories of the commodity form, Freitag views the abstraction of social practices within modern political institutions as embodying the very manner in which modern society came to recognize itself in its conceptual unity. This structural nuance draws many parallels to Raymond Williams' critique of traditional Marxism, central to which is the view that cultural practices are fundamental to the way in which society produces itself. As such, communications are not simply instrumental to social production but rather ontologically constitute it. Conceived within the a priori mediation of the symbolic, the means of communication *are* the means of production² (Williams, 2005). For Freitag, 'society' as a concept signifies a socio-historic reality that is specific to the modern world and expresses a capacity for society to institutionally produce itself, which he refers to as the 'institutionalisation of the capacity for institutionalisation' (Freitag, 2013: 170). Institutions embodied in law, science and the arts represent abstractions of different social practices that from the point of view of everyday culture gain autonomy with regard to their specific ends, but that are nonetheless reconstituted at a higher level – in a transcendental manner – as specific conditions of possibility for liberty, progress and human emancipation. As such, symbolic sociality is the 'base' upon which, in modernity, a politico-institutional infrastructure takes the form of an ensemble of different mediations allowing various social bodies to reflexively grant themselves normative ends that were legitimated by law and ideally enacted through rational deliberation within a political public sphere (Habermas, 1989).

Freitag's ideal of an enlightened political modernity is closely related to the Frankfurt School's, in particular Jürgen Habermas, for whom the contemporary dissolution of the public sphere signals a kind of re-feudalization of society where the modern categories of property transition towards a specifically private property in the hands of large corporations. The German theorist believes that this essentially incarnates a structural contradiction arising in late modernity whereby modern Enlightenment ideals are giving way to instrumental rationality. The 'lifeworld', which encapsulates the entire range of values and identities constituting the symbolic and which corresponds to the concept of 'communication', is being colonized by the 'system' characterizing the self-referential regulatory processes and tendencies of the market economy. However, Freitag notes how this equation of symbolic reality with a pragmatic form of communication is precisely what signals the transition from modernity to postmodernity. In his view, every form of sociality contains its aporias and contradictions which instigate – through the dialectic of its historical and material conditions – transformations in the modalities of its reproduction and continuity. If the political modernity corresponding to the enlightenment ideal was forged in opposition to traditional forms of domination,

the aporias resulting from modernity's politico-institutional regulation would lead to what he called the *décisionnel-opérationnel* ('decisional' and 'operational') mode of reproduction where the concept of *society* gives way to that of a *system*.³

So, enlightenment modernity was already pregnant with contradictions, arising most notably from increasingly irreconcilable differences between its transcendental principles and the material conditions of their enactment. The most potent of these contradictions involved the status of labour within the industrial capitalist system, which essentially re-established and juridically sanctioned the traditional forms of patronal domination against which old bourgeois interests had progressively led to the institutionalization of modern political ideals. 'In actual fact, as well as in a principle of law' as Freitag puts it, 'industrial capitalism [. . .] therefore led, systematically, to the negation of the Enlightenment's entire progressive ideal for the majority of the population' (Freitag, 2002a: 7). This resulted in the increasing ideological dominance of instrumental and utilitarian rationality which eventually asserted itself politically through the social-democratic reformism of the welfare state and practically through the corporate and managerial revolution of the capitalist enterprise in America. Against the foregone abstract universalism of bourgeois liberal society arose a growing tendency towards a new form of social regulation based on direct intervention into action rather than acting on the norm regulating social practice, and through which 'communication' would become a dominant ideological signifier. Through this lens, we can see how Habermas' impetus to revive the public sphere through a renewed emphasis on Enlightenment Reason, by pragmatically grounding the lifeworld in what he called 'communicative action', essentially vitiates the political praxis specific to modernity and ignores the manner in which communication is part and parcel of the very system he scorns (Dean, 2002).

We need to look no further than Habermas' Frankfurt school colleagues to evidence the early 20th-century rise of mass communications as a means through which commodification and the categories of the value form extend into the cultural sphere. Adorno and Horkheimer in particular saw many parallels between the monopolization of symbolic communications through mass media and the Nazi propaganda machine. In Freitagian terms, the specificity of national socialism was the extremity with which it converted various ideologies⁴ into a direct form of action by mobilizing disparate themes, establishing between them a 'system of semantic' and 'radically pragmatic' equivalences which were converted into slogans and enacted towards the exercising of direct domination over subjects (Freitag, 2002a: 9). However, this process can just as well describe the manner in which mass media advertising short-circuits the essentially ideological legitimacy of political power in order to act directly on the (re)production of signification within the symbolic. This operationalization of communication as a form of manipulation is dissimulated in the indistinction between the legitimacy of *power* contained in its transcendent ideals and the operational exercise of *control* over the environment through direct regulatory mechanisms.

For Freitag, this distinction between power and control essentially follows the historical transition from modernity to postmodernity whereby the legitimacy of political institutions will wane against the efficiency of capitalist organizations whose operations necessitate control over both internal and external channels of communication. With regards to symbolic mediation, this shift signals the recognition of a tendency towards a new mode of reproduction, whereby sociality is less dependent on principled adherence to legitimate transcendent ends but on the direct intervention of different systems. Market logic is extended over the whole range of symbolic mediations that structure social reality in a way not unlike how Jean Baudrillard characterized 'symbolic exchange' against utilitarian capitalist thought. In this context, mass media becomes the vehicle through which cultural signification is degraded through the commodity form of the spectacle and the image (Baudrillard, 1976). As Guy Debord (1976) mentions, '[t]he spectacle is not a collection of images but a social relation among people mediated by images' (p. 3). If the advent of

late capitalism was therefore characterized by the importance of mass media in integrating the population to consumerist values, it would merely serve as an early example of the passage towards symbolic mediation *as* media, to culture *as* communications. As the foundation upon which this new world would extend its global hegemony, globalization's call sign would be found in what Freitag describes as the dissolution of the concept of society into that of a system.

Globalization as the Ground of Contemporary Communications

In Freitag's writings, contemporary globalization consists of the imperialist expansion of the new mode of reproduction – the regulation of society by means of rationalized roles, procedures and techniques conceived in a strictly operational capacity – on a world scale. Freitag (2022b) defines globalization as 'the historical process which tends to subject the totality of social (and also largely natural) spaces to certain formal and abstract logics that are those of the market economy, technological development, and the means of communication and information' (pp. 13–14; author's translation).

In line with this new mode of reproduction instigated by the aporias of later modernity and carried by the prerogatives of late capitalism, nation-states increasingly adopted strategic programmes that would secure their positions within the flow of global capital and within which their 'classical' role as regulators of the economy would be largely subsumed. As social mechanisms became increasingly preoccupied with the resolution of 'local problems, work conditions, salaries, ethnic relations, urban planning and development' from the point of view of a pragmatic and operational rationality, all the while managing the specific demands of an increasingly dominant professional class (Liu, 2021) who control the means of symbolic production (this is especially true of the more influential members of leading organizations), societies 'will let [themselves] go along with the economic, technological, technocratic, and cultural developments it itself engendered' but on which no judgement could be epitomizing nor any action could exert global reach (Freitag, 2002a: 18).

It is no accident that the latter formulation of globalization and the mode of social reproduction it disseminates evokes all the keywords of early cybernetics. Synthesized in the mind of Norbert Wiener (1948) as the 'scientific study of communication and control in the animal and the machine', cybernetics would essentially come to theoretically formalize the new social system where in all corners an expanded, self-referential and systemic form of rationality substitutes itself to the modern universalist symbolic reason. Here the concepts of communication and information are no longer generally conceived as designating symbolic exchange or the transmission of existential experience and signification but constitute modalities of regulation and control which subsume the totality of both individual and collective action (Freitag, 2002b). One can say that the cybernetic imaginary and the new technologies that came from it represent the respective theoretical formalization and practical intensification of the forms of communication typified in early 20th-century mass media and the convergence of all the various forms of information technologies that would arise from it. For Freitag, globalization is essentially the planet-wide dissemination of the system as the new operative mode of social reproduction. As such, his perspective should be seen as a deepening analysis of cultural imperialism that characterized earlier critical theories in communications (Schiller, 1969). However, where the latter saw the extension of capitalist domination to non-Western cultures, Freitag (2022a) sees America as the archetype of the new postmodern society and the new operational mode of reproduction as its fundamental export:

America has on the whole engendered and practiced a politics of exiting politics, an economics of exiting economics, a science of exiting science, an art of exiting art, an individualism of exiting individualism; in

a word, it has engendered a collective form of life that is an exit from modernity, and therefore a postmodernity. [...] and ultimately this society which exits modernity is a society which abdicates society, which becomes system, a society that abdicates its institutions, which become organisations, a society that abdicates culture, which become communications, a society that abdicates mediations, which become media. (p. 54; author's translation)

Sociologically, if modern society was based on the institutionalization of specific practices that were defined according to their own finalities and which were reconciled or reconstituted under the transcendental ideals of individual liberty and progress, then the interconnection and application of digital communications systems in all walks of life implies a societal 'flattening' or 'undifferentiation' of the fields of practice to which they are applied. In other words, 'the cultural, economic, political, and scientific spheres all become uniformly technological and process-oriented' and social institutions, as well as the ideals and forms of regulation specific to their respective domains, 'tend to dissolve under the indefinite proliferation of geometrically variable operational programs and strategic objectives' (Freitag, 2002b: 15). Alas, the generalized operationalization of communications and information through computation tends to substitute itself to the normative regulation which characterized prior forms of collective life.

However, the terms under which this new operational uniformity enacts itself are intrinsically tied to economic speculation deriving from the management of systemic effects (Freitag, 2002b). Historically, cybernetic theories of communication would have palpable effects on the reconfiguration of financial practices through neoliberal economic principles (Mirowski, 2002). The abandonment of the gold standard by the Nixon administration and the subsequent collapse of the Bretton Woods agreement can be seen as a founding moment since it replaced – in principle as well as in fact – the former institutional mediations which allowed states to politically regulate their currency with a logic underscoring the means to automate financial markets. The shift in the representation of value from gold to derivatives effectively signals the dematerialization of the prior measure of value to one that is essentially, and ontologically, informational (Freitag and Pineault, 1999).

Possessing no fundamental value in themselves, derivatives are essentially a means to render commensurable otherwise innumerable or incomparable entities; it is a mechanism through which the market can impart value universally. Its actions are not therefore based on reality, but on a virtual matrix of correlative values predicated on risk and aimed towards anticipating future events. In this light, what Freitag designates as the 'decisional-operational' mode of reproduction essentially illustrates the regulation and ad-based personalization of content on the largest online platforms such as Facebook or Google, where user profiles are derived from their correlation with the choices and behaviours of other users. The difference here being that the 'social graph' is not predicated on risk, but on the predictive accuracy of consumer habits correlated against the choices and behaviours of other users (Arvidsson, 2016). Such regulation is therefore not based on events that occur in reality, but on the correlative effects derived from the actor's choices, essentially echoing Freitag's (2002b) claim that the imposition of speculative economic logics and the ensuing uniformization of its operations across different social fields instigates the appearance of a new systemic space which – contrary to social and natural spaces – is 'indefinitely open to the production, reproduction, and circulation of artificiality as such' (p. 16). That the value of 'intangible assets' far outweighs the value of real-world productive output speaks to this. However, as Freitag (2002b) notes, 'action' here no longer invokes the categories of *praxis* and *practice*, but tends to give way in favour of *behaviours* conforming to the stimulus-response model of behavioural psychology⁵ (p. 13). What is most essential about what Freitag calls these 'various phenomena of "speculative virtualisation"' is precisely that they do not occur in some 'other world', but in the world of the economy and real life on which they exercise direct control. He continues:

We know how profoundly this mode of speculative regulation exerts its stranglehold not only on the economy in the traditional sense, but on culture, on research, on the very nature of living beings, on all the ‘natural resources’ – another economic euphemism – that are the condition of common existence not just for humanity but for the totality of living species within the biosphere (water, earth, and the atmosphere). Everybody knows this, and yet [...] the brunt of the politics actively involved in globalisation continue to follow a policy of unlimited extension of the grasp of this speculative logic on all dimensions of social and natural life. (Freitag, 2002b: 20; author’s translation)

In effect, risk-based pre-emptive regulation essentially outlines the basis of what can be qualified as governance by numbers (Supiot, 2017) or as algorithmic governmentality (Rouvroy and Berns, 2013). Heavily enabled by the varieties of machine learning and artificial intelligence undergirding the ICT (information and communication technology) infrastructure, algorithmic governmentality describes a new mode of governance in our contemporary cybernetic capitalism which consists in erecting various control and decision-making mechanisms based on the datafication of reality (*idem*). Essentially, what the accumulation of endless data allows is direct pre-emptive action based on observed effects that bypass the necessity to learn the causes of social problems and other phenomena, effectively rendering both theory (Anderson, 2008) and ideological politics unnecessary as the real speaks for itself.

Against the notion that technology is essentially a neutral force subject to the manner in which we use it, these examples evidence Freitag’s position that technics is inherently tied to the practices and mediations which give rise to its form; in a word, modern technics is the materialization of neoliberal economic ideology (Freitag, 2006). In the age of Big Data and social analytics, the capacity to quantify the unquantifiable to the end of transforming the whole of social life into information flows essentially dissimulates the technical means by which capital exerts its *nomos*. Thus, capital does not merely consist in the accumulation of material wealth but also, and especially, in the dispossession of the symbolic and in its reification through an automated force of calculation. Social forms which are not posited by capital must be appropriated under the terms of its own presuppositions (the self-referential ends of technics are also the ends of capital). Henceforth, the creation of new value involves the datafication of an increasing proportion of both physical and symbolic reality.

The impetus towards capturing the whole of reality as information is also a primary condition of the unravelling of public rhetoric and media discourse. Claims of ‘fake news’ are predicated on the delegitimation of the frame which constitutes a necessary boundary to all narratives; the only uncontestable account is one that emanates from what Marc Andrejevic (2020) calls “‘framelessness’”: the view from nowhere that corresponds to the attempt to monitor everything at the same time, all the time⁶ (p. 115). When the true context of information can only be established by a non-human viewer, the frame of narrative itself collapses; and because communications are predicated on information’s ontological neutrality and independence of form from content operating in parallel to alterity – the relation to objectivity as ‘world’ within symbolic mediations of language and social practice – rather than emerging from it (Samson, 2018), factuality itself become subject to market forces (the information with the most value gets repeated the most often).

The collapse of alterity through information systems also speaks to a general alienation with regards to material reality as embodied in nature, henceforth understood as ‘environment’. It also carries definite consequences with regard to the structure of identity within the symbolic. With Freitag, identity is never simply individual identity but always refers to a collective representation synthesized within the individual in a transcendental manner (Freitag, 2022b). In brief, the unity of the subject is always maintained in relation to the whole and in alterity with that which is beyond it. So as the world becomes increasingly reduced to information flows and our interactions become

ubiquitously mediated by information and communication systems in some form or another, reality loses its exteriority with regard to artifice. The reduction of the symbolic in communications implies the subsequent exclusion of all symbiotic non-communication-based systems harmonizing with it, and ultimately the concurrent tendency to collapse any alterity with nature whatsoever as the latter is integrated into the system itself, only to be maintained in the imaginary through its fetishized objectification as a site of both ‘reconnection’ and ‘unplugging’ (Freitag, 2022b). As such, the ‘entire objective horizon of experience’ tends to turn into a virtual ‘world’ as ‘it falls into the grips of systemic regulation or integrates itself to it’ (Freitag, 2003: 367; author’s translation). A similar thing can be said of self-identity, where a hyper-rationalized re-appropriation of the symbolic economy of the subject manifests through the increasing management of individuals ‘kept together’ through the perennial interventions of experts, signalling a breakdown in what Slavoj Žižek (2008) refers to as ‘symbolic efficiency’.⁷

Together, the dissolution of the frame of narrative, of alterity with nature and of transcendental identity speaks to a general collapse in representation (Bougnoux, 2019; Stiegler, 2013). As we shall see, subjectivity is therefore not so much fragmented across a plane of disparate ‘worlds’ – as growing currents in contemporary thought would argue – as much as made adaptive in line with systemic operability. It is the existential pole of a process whereby (re)productive processes within symbolic mediation are increasingly expropriated and operationalized within the system of communications.

Thinking Within the System

If Freitag’s theories provide the ground for a radical critique of contemporary communications and its ideological and technical underpinnings, it also grants an important perspective on the current theoretical zeitgeist in communications scholarship and the social sciences more generally. In his view, the effective deconstruction of the symbolic dimension of reality is not just happening in practice, but also in theory:

From the crisis of the modern forms of representation (cognitive, figurative, normative, ideological and identitary), not to mention the crisis of the forms of existential representation, a significant current of contemporary philosophy has – while often citing Nietzsche – elaborated a problematic of ‘deconstruction’, of the death of the subject, of the end of grand theories, etc., that has managed to associate itself with other contemporary philosophical currents like analytical philosophy, philosophy of language, the problematics of textuality and intertextuality, reception theories, etc., in elaborating the same overall outlook implying and promoting (most notably in social science methodologies) the self-referentiality of the ‘production of signifiers’. Yet this self-referentiality becomes an effective capacity for self-production once it falls under the technologies being discussed here. (Freitag, 2002b: 13)

Freitag’s analysis outlines that what many contemporary theoretical currents are claiming in the realm of discourse parallels what is occurring in the order of practice and reality. The theories in which symbolic reality instituted beyond individuals is reduced to arbitrary discourses resulting from equally arbitrary relations of ‘power’, find their counterpart in the decomposition of reality through the immediate operability of discourse and communicational processes in and through the general ubiquity of information technologies. What gets deconstructed in theory is then reconstructed through technics as a new mechanism on which to operate and shape the real. With the spectre of discourse seized only through its systemic effects, reality presents itself in the form of ‘an immense process of continuous metaphorization of everything into everything, which directly operates on the “materiality of signs” [like] some interminable DNA chain wound on itself and

within which every gene metabolizes the raw material of its specific environment' (Freitag, 2002b: 13). For Freitag, the most accomplished theoretical description of this state of affairs is formulated in the system's theory of Niklas Luhmann. The tendency towards the dissolution of all 'integrated symbolic mediations' is formally accomplished in Luhmann's vision wherein everything falls under 'self-orienting and self-regulating (autopoietic) sub-systems in "environmental" interaction with each other' and is driven by the singular requirement that they remain operative between one another (Freitag, 2022b: 114). 'Luhmannian systems theory' he surmises, 'is perfectly coherent with contemporary reality in its repudiation of a quasi-organic unitary or "total" system' (p. 168).

But there are other contemporary theoretical currents that also fit this bill. Intrinsically tied to post-structuralism and deconstruction are new expanded notions of subjectivity under the large umbrella of post-humanism. Here, the expansion of sense perception and cognition into technical systems necessarily transgresses prior categories of meaning and signification, and necessitates a relational understanding of the subject which embraces a new ecology of being and technics which Katherine Hayles (2006) conceptualizes as the 'cognisphere'.⁸ Here, the 'social' itself is essentially nominal and arises merely as a by-product of relationality between various forms and degrees of cognition within what Hayles (2017) refers to as the 'cognitive non-conscious'. Post-humanism sees in the fragmentation of the liberal cartesian subject – through its increasing interconnectedness with a ubiquitous technological network – the possibility of moving past the aporias of modern thinking and living. However, Freitag sees in these perspectives the echo of what is essentially occurring in reality. If the progressive implementation of contemporary systemic regulation allowed for the technological resolution of the functional issues of capitalism, it never in fact overcame the structural contradictions that arose through the crisis of modern transcendental individualism and the abstract universalism which supported it. Modernity, says Freitag (2002b), 'rather lost or exhausted itself in a reality of substitution (a generalized *Ersatz*)' in which the political capacity to reflexively orient itself was 'short-circuited by the immediate efficiency of its purely technical regulatory mechanisms':

As such, the mutation of society into a technological system was not 'realized' by taking inspiration from theories arising from the crisis; rather these premonitory theories were joined by a reality whose mode of self-construction took this situation of crisis as its most obvious premise, and pragmatically made of it its own condition of possibility. (p. 19)

In other words, contemporary theories positing the dissolution of the synthetic categories of social practice as a means of *critically* overcoming systemic contradictions rather end up offering a *pure description* of the system itself. Deleuze himself arguably came to recognize this fact when, near the end of his life, he observed his own categories of thought take form in the new systems of control. 'What matters' he wrote, 'is that we are at the beginning of something [...] what we understand as the crisis of institutions, that is to say the progressive and dispersed installation of a new regime of domination' (Deleuze, 1990: 7; author's translation).

Nowhere is this confusion of critique and pure description more obvious than in object-oriented ontologies like that of Bruno Latour's (2005) or in the various new materialisms that it directly influenced. Arising out of an acute exhaustion with the cultural turn in humanities, new materialism affirms an escape from what Karen Barad (2003) calls 'representationalist' epistemologies that reduce matter to a simple substrate of human discursive constructions, towards a non-anthropocentric view of reality as 'performative' materiality. Highly influenced by Deleuzian ontology, the world is conceived as an endless field of overlapping and interlinked assemblages established through temporary relations that evince what Jane Bennett (2005) describes as an 'emergent causality' which 'places the focus on the process itself as an actant, as itself in possession of degrees

of agential capacity' (p. 33). Where the linear causality of narrative imposes a teleology that can only seize reality anthropocentrically, emergent causality approaches the production of theory from the recognition that any synthetic comprehension of the world disregards its ebbs and flows often to the detriment of important causal 'actants' within the state of affairs (Leduc, 2023).

Marc Andrejevic (2020) remarks that 'emergent causality' is in total keeping with the current impetus towards 'total information capture' issued from information-based technocratic strategies justifying the zealous proliferation of data-capture technologies. With the direct interventions and operations of communications technologies progressively substituting themselves to the symbolic mediations of representation, the latter is not only reduced to systemic information-based processes of communication which, as Freitag (2002b) reminds us, 'virtually, completely detach themselves from all synthetic representations of the subject, the other, and the objective world', but enacts communications as the 'universal, or rather global, mode of production and control of reality' (pp. 9–10). In the same fashion as the cybernetic reduction of action, and even the whole of life itself, to the transmission of information between systems in various phases of homeostasis, the new materialist universalization of the subjective capacity for action into materiality as such confounds or equivocates the intentional action of beings with the effects of objects or natural forces on their environment.⁹ This conception of reality therefore doubles down on the systemic effect of reducing the social to discursive performances of domination; not only is the meaning and specificity of significant practices arbitrary, but subjectivity itself becomes a process like any other that can only react on the basis of an adaptation to materiality. Reflexively, and despite claims to the contrary (Coole and Frost, 2012), critique therefore no longer enacts the possibility of conceiving the conditions for a better world, but enables the strategic negotiating of one's own effectiveness within the ineffable tides of the dynamic system.

It seems therefore that the free and unattached creation of new perspectives and concepts that emphasize the 'immanent vitality of nature' ironically dismisses the specificities of both being and the world. On the contrary, the recognition of the symbolic specificity of being necessitates an equal admission to its ontological belonging to the world in its contingency. The subject in Freitag's dialectical conception is not closed in on itself, but rather unified; that is to say, it conceives of subject and object from within their co-constitution. If the world is apprehended subjectively from the attachment of life to the real – material, sensible and symbolic – conditions of possibility from which its forms, as well as its forms of action, emerge, subjectivity is enacted through these forms as the positive condition and affirmation of its freedom within the world. Significant practices are deployed within symbolic mediations that are already given, but the continuity of these mediations is contingent upon the reproduction of meaning within the practice as the condition for existence within a group or collective. As such, and as has already been stressed, language is not only a means towards communication but especially and essentially the objectivation of meaning both as communication and as its condition of possibility. Therefore, its conceptual reduction to an information carrier weaving the relation between individuals in contemporary thought merely reproduces in theory what is effectuating itself in reality through the new globalized order of communicational cyber-capitalism (Ouellet, 2016).

Conclusion: Overcoming Contemporary Alienation – A Civilizational Dialogue

In so far as it constitutes a 'unifying' process, systemic-technological-capitalist globalization in the manner described by Freitag (2008) is achieving this by dissolving the diverse societies and cultures that constitute its collective components 'in order to eventually leave only the "multitude" of individuals' subsisting' (p. 293). While it might sound facile, it is nonetheless true that

countering this crisis, where crisis is the new normal (Freitag, 2009), involves reflecting on and reconsidering the foundations of human life understood as ‘collective’ or ‘social’ life. Anthropologically, Freitag (2022b) suggests that individuals belong first and foremost to *civilizations*, which ‘constitute or deepest, richest, and most *common* “global” heritage’ (p. 213) against the concept of society which belongs to Western modernity and does not necessarily speak for humanity as a whole.¹⁰ Furthermore, it is at the level of civilizations that the threat of globalization can be seized and potentially countered:

There is no common future for humanity in disappearing behind a modernity which, with the self-referential globalisation of media, economic, and communications systems, has converted itself into ‘rampant modernisation’ without place or home, help or astrolabe. This form of globalisation which feeds an increasing feeling ‘powerlessness’ in individuals is also, by chance, an immense *provocation of civilisations* [. . .] We must therefore count on them rather than on the individual or societies reconstructed on the basis of individuals. (Freitag, 2022b; emphasis in original)

Contrary to our current obsession with innovation, a “thoughtful and critical anthropology of civilisations” would not necessarily and essentially present anything new, aside from the important fact that until now it has largely been observed and produced under the aegis of a single [civilization] and that it has therefore allowed no veritable confrontation with itself” (Freitag, 2022b: 214). As such, this confrontation can act as a reflexive catalyst for a more thoughtful world unity which Freitag (2008) calls *mondialisation*.¹¹ Just as modernity came to affirm itself on the principle of the transcendental individual and its freedom from bondage and traditional forms of domination more generally, so we must take upon ourselves the production of a new polity that grounds itself on intercivilization dialogue and communion¹² (Freitag, 2022b: 213).

Whatever form this dialogue takes, it seems clear that overcoming the levelling force of globalization will not only require the establishment of a proper political counter at the level of thought but an effective and radical rethinking of many institutions and practices ‘on the ground’. A primary one for Freitag is education (Freitag, 2022b) since not only do recent reforms in education throughout Western countries seem to systemically redirect in adaptation to the economy of new technologies, but it is also in research and higher education where much of these new technologies are developed, and that afterwards trickle down into all other ranks of education to inform future principles of orientation (Freitag, 2008; Ouellet and Martin, 2018; Williamson, 2017). Freitag clearly states that these thoughts are not solutions, but mere directions to follow on a path towards one.

One thing is certain, the impetus to pragmatically seize every aspect of the environment, to deconstruct our reality, to reassemble our world and the global deployment of information and communication technologies that increasingly serve as both means and end of this capacity, must at the very least be checked against a recognition or avowal of the symbolic, and therefore collective, nature of human existence and the world to which it belongs. If we follow Freitag’s thought on the contemporary issues facing humanity, the project of a critical sociology of communications remains inseparable from a general theory of society. In contrast to current trends in critical communications studies and its heavy reliance on economic reductionism, or cultural studies and its substantializing of discourse, Freitag’s relevance lies in the notion that all empirical acts of communication are mediated through the dialectics between totality and a means of communication that cannot be reduced to its instrumentality. A negative critique that aims to recognize communication beyond its technical reification, must also positively recognize its grounding in an ontology of symbolic frailty. It is precisely its frailty and its contingency that characterizes the value of the symbolic as the very essence of sociality, and which is slowly dissolving itself through the blind and thoughtless development of the new means of communication.

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Notes

1. Although the core of his theory can be found in the three volumes of *Dialectique et Société*, an English review of these works can be found in Côté and Dagenais (2002).
2. In this sense, Freitag's approach – which we can qualify as symbolic materialism – allows us to bridge the increasing gap that has developed between the political economic and cultural studies perspectives in communications studies. See Babe (2009).
3. The archetypal example of this can be found in the works of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann.
4. Ideology for Freitag (2011) ontologically designates the necessary symbolic projection of subjectivity onto the world of objects wherein reside the conditions of social reproduction (p. 398).
5. On this specific issue, see also Zuboff (2019) and Sunstein (2014).
6. 'All theorizing, categorizing, and abstract thought relies on a framework. For finite subjects, to dispense with a frame is to abdicate thought' (Andrejevic, 2019: 123).
7. '... the symbolic fiction which confers a performative status on one level of identity, determining which acts will display *symbolic efficiency*, is no longer fully operative' (Zizek, 2008: 399).
8. Hayles operationalizes this concept as an update of Donna Haraway's cyborg all the while maintaining the provocative and critical intent of the original: 'Although Haraway associated it with the "informatics of domination", the cyborg's shock value came mostly from the implication that the human body would be modified with cyber-mechanical devices. Although research on implants continues, contemporary formations are at once more subtle and more far-reaching than the figure of the cyborg allows' (Hayles, 2006: 160).
9. While Bennet claims that emergent causality can instigate an 'enchanted' conception of the world that recognizes its material vitality, this 'enchantment' naturalizes the conditions of production behind objects produced as commodities.
10. Freitag's approach echoes post-colonial theories in its defence of local cultures and the questioning of Western epistemology's domination on the rest of humanity. However, contrary to these approaches that essentially conceive of globalization through its discursive angle, Freitag's sociological realism recognizes an objective dimension to globalized domination; global politico-economic structures are what objectively constrain societies to indefinitely produce an abstract form of wealth – value – and are at the heart of the dissolution of any form of political autonomy within globalization.
11. French has two words for globalization: *globalization* and *mondialisation*. The way in which Freitag appropriates the latter can be roughly captured in the neologism 'worldization'. Where globalization refers to 'the result of a more abstract and formal process of generalization of a properly unidimensional social logic', *mondialisation* refers to a 'concrete, diversified, and synthetic "world" reality' (Freitag, 2008: 257).
12. Similar to Habermas, Freitag views the establishment of a public sphere as a means to normatively instil a dynamic that counters globalization. However, contrary to the German theorist, here this dynamic cannot unite individuals but already existing social groups.

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