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Umberto Eco and the global village: decoding social media's tribal dynamics

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Abstract: This article begins with Umberto Eco's critique of social media, articulating his concern that these platforms amplify voices unnecessarily, giving public resonance to what was previously confined to informal conversations. The article utilizes Marshall McLuhan's "global village" metaphor to discuss how digital modernity may represent a return to tribal and undemocratic dynamics, despite the apparent openness and global connectivity. By examining the contrast between the village and the polis, the article highlights how the web can limit, rather than expand, true democratic dialogue and cultural maturation, often confusing the private with the public and the real with the virtual. The author calls for reflection on the need for a "global polis," a virtual society that fosters independence and individual maturation within a globally connected network.

Keywords: global village; polis; closed society

1. Introduction

Umberto Eco's marked criticism of social media has long been a staple of journalistic anecdotes, particularly his comments during a conference at the University of Turin in 2015[1].

At this event, Eco emphasized his significant concerns about the power of social media to grant visibility and a voice to individuals who previously restricted their opinions to informal contexts, such as "bar or pub conversations". According to Eco, these platforms facilitate a dangerous overflow of commonplace expressions that only succeed in giving public space to "legions of idiots," who would not have found resonance outside of their immediate circles or the local "sport's bar". Ultimately, Eco feared that this new media reality could amplify baseless discussions, contributing to the spread of ignorance and superficiality in public debate. Furthermore, the global village we inhabit reiterates itself, despite global interconnection, as a village—a small reality dominated by gossip and chatter.

The enduring and convincing expression that still describes today's network society was coined in the 1960s by Marshall McLuhan (1964) in *Understanding Media.*

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[1] Reported here, ex multis, the article in La Stampa: https://www.lastampa.it/cultura/2015/06/11/news/umberto-eco-con-i-social-parola-a-legioni-di-imbecilli-1.35250428/

The Canadian sociologist, with almost prophetic foresight, defined the nascent "electric society" as a "global village," an expression that was not difficult to adapt to the emerging web society of subsequent decades.

The scientific literature, particularly in the fields of philosophy, sociology, psychology, education, and communication theories, has long focused on the global village metaphor, analyzing its individual and collective forms (Nuzzaci et *al.,* 2013), its alienating forms that bring new isolation and loneliness (D. Kerchove & A. Jannucci, 1984), its communicative and educational dynamics (Gamaleri, 1976), and its social and political consequences, becoming particularly fascinated by the 'global' attribute, perceived as the unequivocal emergence of an inclusive society, sometimes engulfing, which, whether criticized or appreciated, has imposed itself as a fact.

However, while the adjective "global" has been a subject of study, the noun "village" has sometimes been overlooked.

2. The nostalgia of the tribe

McLuhan does not speak of a "global city" but of a "global village"; thus, it is necessary to ask what "village" means and what it has represented in the social, anthropological, and even urban evolution of humanity.

We might say, with reasonable accuracy, that the first stable form of human settlement, immediately following prehistoric nomadism, was the village (Gamble, 2007), to which the earliest forms of human communities, initially matriarchal and later patriarchal (Bachofen, 1988), can be traced, where modes of primitive social coexistence were experimented.

The fundamental characteristics of the village have been reconstructed by cultural and social anthropology (Lévi-Strauss, 1964), which proceeded both through the method of comparative analysis (Malinowski, 2013), finding parallels with surviving village forms in remote Australian or African realities, and through the analysis of artifacts related to these early forms of human settlement (Gordon Childe, 1952).

In any case, the multiple characteristic traits can be summarized in a fairly certain overall picture that tells us how the village was an ancestral social reality, closed, substantially authoritarian due to the presence of stereotyped figures of reference such as the shaman, populated by untouchable totems, founded on magical-ritual thinking, traversed by an oral and mythical culture, strongly conditioned by social consensus that constantly monitored the individual's life within the community, and especially characterized by forms of tribal coexistence (Lévi-Strauss, 1962).

The tribalism and primitivism of the village, based on a right of family that had not yet developed broader, more general, and abstract (in a sense, secular) forms of law, manifested itself in attitudes that can be traced back to some fundamental human archetypes, among all the presence of the scapegoat, which was none other than a member of the group deemed responsible for inexplicable calamities (such as an epidemic, an eclipse, a famine) and, transformed into a container of evils and primal fears, was ousted from the perimeter of coexistence and in the worst cases persecuted and killed (Girard, 1986).

The collective violence that poured and was channeled into the ritual sacrifice of the chosen victim represented, in the group dynamics of the village, a form of symbolic catharsis fundamental for the emotional and social stability of the village,

for the control and maintenance of roles, for a rudimentary, initial dichotomy and division between the sacred and the profane (Girard, 1972), which would then mature into a subsequent and increasingly complex elaboration of religious thought.

In a tribal and closed society such as the village, a social dynamic akin to any form of democratic or egalitarian coexistence could never have been established because the rivalries and authoritarian impulses of the tribe prevented even a primitive form of sharing among equals.

For these early, rudimentary patterns of coexistence detached from the tribalism of closed society to be established, it is necessary that, in the historical-geographical evolution of humanity, the narrow confines of the village be eliminated, venturing out of it, and different forms of economic relationships be established: trade and the emergence of the first forms of the market would lead men to undertake not a new form of physical nomadism (which remains an expression of the primitive) but an unprecedented form of conceptual nomadism.

The exchange, relationship, and economic comparison would lead to a fertile ethical, social, and cultural exchange that would result in the birth of broader forms of human stanzas. These, although fortified and circumscribed, would take on the face of a city or *polis*. The socio-cultural characteristic of the *polis* can be traced back to what Karl Popper calls "detribalization", i.e., the exit from tribal socio-cultural dynamics and the entry into open socio-cultural dynamics or at least available to openness and exchange (Popper, 1973).

In them, the first expression of democratic governance takes place and shape, which Pericles defined, among other things, as a reality of responsible and at times libertarian coexistence where everyone is free to live without constraints, without feeling oppressed (annoyed) by the group (Canfora, 2010).

Taking the Athenian polis from the 7th to the 5th century B.C. as a political paradigm, Popper observes how this process was slow and characterized by stages marked by crises and progressive developments.

The transition from social tribalization to detribalization appears, in fact, at certain historical moments, painful and dramatic, as an inevitable labor from which, however, the first form of civil, a-tribal, and democratic coexistence is born: this transition manifests itself with the need, on the part of the human community, to equip itself, as a first modern political tool, with laws that are not so much and not only certain and written but above all valid erga omnes and subtracted from religious power, i.e., state laws different from the laws of the law of the Gods or the family or the clan or the most overbearing or most numerous tribe. The Sophoclean tragedy *Antigone* describes how this handover from an infallible divine justice to a fallible, contingent earthly justice was not painless and how it was indeed saturated with dramatic contradictions: Antigone, entrenched behind the religious laws of tribal and family law, demands that her brother's body be given a dignified burial (as the laws of the Gods, which are above human laws, want) and places herself in an attitude of tragic confrontation with Creon, who, with a state edict, forbids the burial. The tragedy stages the uneven confrontation between two civilizations, the dying one of familial tribalism and the emerging one of legal secularism, which, although temporarily downgraded by blows of despotism (Creon was a tyrant), irreversibly inaugurates Greek and Western modernity (Zagrebelsky, 2006).

Antigone is condemned to death and buried alive: when the soothsayer Tiresias manages to obtain permission to free her, the girl will already be dead. In this tragic

outcome, we witness the symbolic transition from ancient tribalism to modern polis. The Greek public (of the motherland and the colonies) was faced with the dramatic consideration of the need and urgency to let the ancient laws die without leaving any room for the possibility of a suggestive resurrection by authorities (such as soothsayers and shamans) now anachronistic and petrified in that ancient magical and mythical cultural world. The emotional participation and empathy of the public and the reader towards Antigone, a tragic and indomitable heroine, is justified by the eternal nostalgia towards a bygone civilization, a nostalgia that for Popper animates much of the philosophical reflection from Heraclitus onwards (reflection that will always long for a suggestive rehabilitation of the ancient and primitive age always conceived as a paradisiacal 'golden age'), but this nostalgia, warns the epistemologist, must not deceive: it could never justify, in turn, a return to ancient tribalism. The price to be paid for the birth of modern and secular law turns out to be high but also necessary to prepare the ground for the impending Athenian democracy. The nostalgia for a perfect world inhabited by magical forces, benign and superior to human fallibility will remain as a backdrop for subsequent, sometimes admirable, political and ideological constructions of a utopian, closed, totalitarian society oriented towards the supreme good, of which Plato will become the first theoretical engineer (Popper, 1973).

3. The village is not the *polis*

In the polis, even the ritual practices of ancient tribalism such as the physical and violent killing of the scapegoat by the community will be relegated only to the tragic symbolism of Greek theater. The ancient nickname for Dionysus, the god of tragedy, was indeed "goat" (Vernant & Vidal Naquet, 1986), and thus it will be consumed only on the theatrical stage, exhausting in it all its cathartic charge, repeating itself always identical, as a ritual, in performances that in fact lasted for several days taking on the role of an important and decisive religious and secular (as well as political) adhesive. The chorus of Greek tragedies becomes a sort of first example of public opinion, like a mirror in which the audience is invited to identify themselves not only and not so much as spectators but (and this is where we can place the shift towards modernity) as judges called to take a stand, to choose, to deliberate on what is right, but only after having listened to everyone's reasons: the reasons of Creon and the reasons of Antigone, the reasons of Prometheus, the reasons of Oedipus, and even the reasons of Medea. In this new scenario, the roots of the first form of Athenian democratic government will sink, which will feed precisely on religious and political skepticism, that is, the ability to put everything into question, even the positions of the sovereigns: the pillar of the entire democratic dynamic will be the Socratic dialogue that will nourish and in turn feed this skepticism which, free from strict religious and authoritarian ties, will seek to dismantle in the 5th century B.C. the last, residual prejudices of the past. The quintessential Socratic question *ti esti* imposes a response from the interlocutor, slow, meditated, argued, in other terms not superficial nor anchored to the pre-established solutions of authority (not by chance the death sentence of Socrates will be motivated by the reckless, and corrosive, use he makes of the word as well as by his alleged intention to deny the omnipotence of the Gods).

The democratic need can be defined as the need to give never hasty and never summary answers to problems and can be identified in the fertile humus of the

confrontation of different opinions which, just because they are such, always turn out to be debatable and fallible, arguable and transitory but always preferable to all forms of conceptual monopoly. In any case, on the theatrical stage, a healthy distinction between fiction and reality, between true and verisimilar, was realized, and where collective and social catharsis became harmless if not even salvific: if the village was thus a collective reality where spectators and actors mixed and merged, in an almost "liquid" mode, citing Bauman (2000), where the conditions for distinguishing between falsehood and lying, between stage and real life failed, if in the village everything became public and at the same time private and thus everything was obscene, in the manner the Greeks understood it (*o-schenos*, off the scene), the differences between village and polis were not only due to the presence of the theater but also to other foundational elements of modernity.

These elements are multiple.

In the first instance, the village did not possess an agora to be crossed far and wide to be able to sow seeds of healthy, critical, and non-directed thought, where one could remember the importance of guarding one's own daimon (i.e., one's own dialectical intimacy).

In the second instance, the village did not possess a court where the exercise of justice is carried out in the forms and manners of prudence (fronesis) and human rationality that defuses conflicts so that man does not become a wolf to another man: in the village, the court coincided only with the forms and manners of collective indignation which manifested itself as a Manzonian crowd we might say and which always revealed itself as headless and uselessly vengeful and which knew only stoning.

And finally, the village did not have an *oikos*, a private home of man, where inside remains hidden, guarded the sacred nuptial chamber, a place of an intimacy inaccessible to men and Gods. The sphere of human coexistence seems to have plummeted back into the tribal village despite, for example, all the literary tradition that has often taken an attitude, besides prophetic, also eminently educational when it described the limits, moral and ethical, of the forms and manners of a human coexistence that is culturally closed and needlessly redundant: in Roman times already Virgil draws in the *Aeneid* (Book IV, vv. 173-197) the disturbing portrait of "Fame" as a monster that never rests, equipped with wings and hundreds of eyes, which crosses places and swells and amplifies itself by abusing the gullibility of the people and humiliating the one who is the protagonist of its malicious tales, making the latter's name known to all.

4. Is the global village a tribal village?

If this is true, if it is true that the village has represented the physical, historical, and anthropological space of the primitive and tribal, and if it is true that the polis, with the repudiation of ancient forms of magical-ritual stereotypes, has represented the first container of rational, skeptical, modern, and democratic thought, are we then sure that the "global village" in which we are immersed does not mark a return to a new tribalism and a denial of the dynamics of civil and democratic coexistence?

Are we sure that the Web, or what we call the Web and that we relate only to forms of social and relational interaction, although allowing planetary connections, is an expression of an open society in the Popperian manner and not rather another

reproduction of a closed society that, although global and with worldwide borders, only poses as a village raised to the nth power?

A village with undoubtedly broader, boundless borders but irredeemably characterized by cultural claustrophobia where stereotypes, totems, and social cannibalism return, multiply, and bounce back.

Temporarily assuming this hypothesis as plausible, going beyond McLuhan's intentions and taking the noun village literally to emphasize the critical meaning of the anthropological, cultural, and social term, one might perhaps find an interpretation key for this new, unexpected re-proposal of tribalism and primitivism which is evidenced by the recourse, almost daily, to a glossary and terminology of ancient tribal origins such as, for example, "lynching" which, albeit media and computerized, recalls the experience of the ritual sacrifice of the scapegoat, around which forms of hysteria and blind collective violence manifest and are consumed, especially in those realities of the Net that due to a strange form of synecdoche we now, erroneously and lazily, consider the totality of the Net, namely social realities.

If the Web, in many of its ways of being and realizing social connections, has become the container of a disjointed language that resorts to new forms of emotive hieroglyphs typical of a pre-alphabetic civilization or resorts to what Calvino would have called an "antilanguage"; if it stimulates the return to an unelaborated thought, albeit empty and repetitive in its hurriedness, sometimes even imposing a brevity that, far from being an accurate and effective rhetorical and dialectical expedient, rather reveals itself as an escape from slow and critical argumentation (the opinions of Socrates' interlocutors and Socrates' own opinions, which marked the times and manners of that philosophical dialogue, exceedingly fruitful for democracy, required more than 140 characters to be appropriately justified and argued); if in cyberspace we watch helplessly as new forms of violence on minors that we call cyber-bullying spread; if the Web becomes deprivation (sometimes even ostentatiously and personally sought) of all private, all intimacy, and all modesty, thus re-proposing the same dynamics of a totalitarianism that governs not only the social and public sphere but also infiltrates especially in the personal one and if finally, as the father of the browser Tim Berners-Lee writes

in the era of the social network the network (which was supposed to be the equivalent of merchants connecting between various villages) becomes increasingly a single, totalizing village and poses extreme barriers to exit for those within it as in the worst models of dystopia and utopia (Berners-Lee, 2020, p. 81),

then perhaps we can hypothesize that the global village, precisely because it is a tribal village, is currently far from the forms of a hypothetical global polis that should finally be founded in all its cultural, theoretical, pedagogical, and even urbanistic dynamics, albeit virtual. Exiting the global village to build a global polis (Arsena, 2018) may mean realizing an anthropological, pedagogical, and philosophical evolution of the human despite the involution into which we have been rapidly thrown.

It means recovering that historical and literary memory that has already shown, recorded, investigated, and described, in the most diverse ways and times and terms, the risks of the totalizing and hypnotizing condition of the closed place.

Literature has long been a sounding board for the need, or the dream, of man to escape, to move away from the narrow dynamics of the village or the small town: the escape, not so much and not only physical but intellectual, moral, and cultural, becomes salvific at the moment it allows immersion in those relational dynamics that see man unbound by the perpetually judging gaze of the community in which he found himself born and living; liberating and liberating dynamics that provoke the man the exhilaration of immersing himself in the vast world, of shipwrecking in the universe, of floating unknown to most.

5. Conclusions

Therefore, hypothetically, an educational and philosophical gesture that wants to confront the relational and social complexity of the Net, with its prerogatives, with its characteristics, and that wants to lead towards the construction of a global polis as a place of recognition of the value of singularity, could guide the inhabitants of the global village, and in particular adolescents, who are more exposed than all to the risk of encountering the totalizing harassments of the new tribalization, to the recovery and recognition of the value of that theoretical and existential dimension that leads to the protection of dignity, away from the chatter and dynamics of the Sports Bar, as Umberto Eco would have said.

A philosophy and a pedagogy immersed and thrown into the Net and that confront it (Nuzzaci, 2017), could, for example, indicate to adults and adolescents the narrow and infrequently traveled path (and today truly revolutionary) that leads to taking daily custody of a small fragment of one's life (for example a frame, a lived moment, a face, a thought) and to protect it, without divulging it, without sharing it, without exposing it, without immediately giving it up to the gaze of the community, leaving it a private fragment and not immediately public or social. An educating community, aware of the value of defending the interiority and heir of all the literary and philosophical tradition that denounces the cultural claustrophobia of the closed society, rather than chasing, sometimes breathlessly, adolescents on social platforms, could first of all invite to perform a theoretical and ethical gesture consisting in the gradual but uninterrupted recovery of one's own interiority because it is valued and protected: "today this video and this photo that portray me will remain only in my possession. I will not immediately make a fragment of myself strange, remote to myself, but I will guard it even just for a short time, even just for the duration of this day". Through small exercises of recovery of a self that dialogues with itself and finds and explores the regions of the self, the inhabitants of the global village could have the opportunity to rediscover and recover that authentic dimension of man, as called by Heidegger (1927) which distinguishes it from the dimension of "chatter" (Gerede), which alone could lead to the restoration of that fabric of subjectivity from which we have seen the rise of Paideia in the West.

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