

Network Society

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Table of Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
Paolo de Nardis	
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>ix</i>
Chapter 1 Network Society. What is it?	21
Roberta Iannone	
Chapter 2 Network Society: Hypothesis of Solidity	77
Emanuela Ferreri	
Chapter 3 Networks and Spaces. Governance and political space in the European Union	107
Maria Cristina Marchetti	
Chapter 4 Network Society and Public Space. Latin American Migrants and the Linguistic Landscape of Rome	141
Laura Mariottini	
Chapter 5 Web, Network Society, and Transmedia in election campaigns: a case study on David Cameron (2014- 2015)	193
Manuela Cipri	
<i>Index</i>	<i>219</i>

Preface

Paolo de Nardis

What is the network society?

Roberta Iannone provides a complete and articulated definition of the concept of “network” that renders, in a clear and effective way, the descriptive content of the analysis, giving us at the same time a key to depict the contemporaneity. This perspective is enlarged and enriched by the interesting contributions of Cristina Marchetti, Laura Mariottini, Emanuele Ferreri and Manuela Ciprì.

This approach constitutes a way to avoid the traps inherent in an ontological method and to base the analysis of this relevant theme starting from an assumption: the “Network” can be realistically depicted as an element able to shape and define the contemporaneity.

Since last century 70s, I have always considered very interesting the attainment of this conception. It undoubtedly originates from functionalism, but overcomes it by including a strong axiological element based on reciprocity, collaboration and trust.

From a modern epistemological point of view, in my opinion, it is quite important to try to avoid the ontological approach in order to consider the concept of network society merely as a concept: an instrument to explain reality, rather than an instrument pretending to objectify an analytical category presenting it as the exact reality.

So we can say the network society is a powerful instrument to analyze contemporaneity – as demonstrated by the interesting works of the present research –, but without the pretension to exhaust all the ranges of the possible interpretations of reality. This should be read by making use of a large set of concepts, none of which really exclusive. All instru-

ments then must be checked according to the principles of verifiability, replicability and publicity of the results.

That said, the heuristic fecundity of the proposed concept could not be denied because deeply investigated and analytically founded on a large number of sociological literature on the subject, produced during the last quarter of a century both in Italy and abroad. The main contribution of this literature led to a fascinating and important idea: contemporary western societies, developing along the late segment of modernity, do not govern themselves according to the traditional scheme of the state-civil society (of political and business world) and according the mono-regulative top-down model, but they organize themselves according to a horizontal network.

Under this perspective, the horizontal self-organization of the societies plays a role of substitution and supplementation of public powers, whenever they are weak or completely missing in their essential functions of distribution, regulation and control.

This is a conception that gave birth to the “neo-corporative” conception of the social sphere and that redefines it in a neo-functionalistic and neo-morphological way. The old social pyramid squeezes and molding a horizontal-reticular society, with the consequent fall of old schemes and hierarchies.

The theoretical sources of this neo-pluralistic morphology of the social sphere, from both an ideological and cultural point of view, are part of the present research that, in identifying the sociological conscience implicit in this interpretation of reality, aims at redefining a snapshot of social life, on the grounds of the major cultural currents. Yet, the latter does not seem always conformed to such a geometrical approach, with quite clear returns to the past models, falling in the misleading vision of the so called autumn of the State and of its regulative function.

If we refer to the pluralistic approach in sociology, we find one of the most important author, Gurvitch. In his work, the organization factor of a social group has a fundamental role for the capacity of generating norms. Forerunners of this ap-

proach could be philosophers and law theorists, like Duguit, Van Gierke, Hariou and others. Moreover, along the lines of a sociological research on education, considered in connection with the organization factor, we can examine some important positions by Sellznick, a sociologist of law, who came from the sociology of organization. Here, it is possible to recognize the same pluralistic approach to the study the late-modern society, closely related to an explicit need to explain how complex organizations can be a vehicle to education and of expectations on justice and law.

In this case, the endo-organizational perspective makes room to a pluralism defined according to the principles of justice of an industrial kind that amounts to the reality of a complex organization.

Hence, reshaping the old vision of the classic pluralism with this new conceptual model, considering pluralism as a system, it seems we can affirm that beyond the absorption of values and norms coming from political power, it is at work the same mechanism of absorption emanating from the centers of economic and social power and from the media.

In this perspective, pluralism meets functionalism, giving birth to a way of modeling characterized by a functionalist neo-morphology of the social sphere.

On the light of these contributions and of the neo-pluralistic framework developed by these authors, in this research the aim is to go “further”, by applying a relational lens (rather than a proper paradigm) to the study of the network. The pluralistic fulcrum of the sociology of law and organization needs to be reconsidered and integrated, rather than contradicted, according to the most recent theoretical achievements on the relational sociology. In this sense, the aim of this work is to investigate the networks and their properties in terms of social capital and governance, with the goal to reconstruct the ideal conscience of the new reticular society in its shades and lights.

Rome, February 2016.

PAGES MISSING
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Index

A

a posteriori, 70
a priori, 40, 45
A. Riles, 100
A.N.T., 87
ab origine, 64
actants, 91
Alain Touraine, 24
alienation, 25
Andean, 163
Andean countries, 163
Angelo Mai Altrove
 Occupato, 183
Arab Springs, 104
arcana imperii, 75
Ariadne, 91
Augé, 117, 119, 145
Australopithecus, 95
avatar, xviii
axiological, ix, 70

B

Barbieri, 60, 77
Barnes, 32, 77
Barney, 23, 24, 25, 30, 31,
 77, 115, 127, 128, 145
Baths of Diocletian, 179
Baudrillard, 26
Ben Rafael, 158
Bettini, 71, 77
bilingualism, 162, 163
billboards, 155, 158, 160,
 162, 163, 188

Blair's true heir, 211
Bobbio, 70, 72, 73, 74, 75,
 77
Boissevan, 32, 77
Boschma, 34, 122, 145
Bott, 32, 77, 90
Boudon, 68
Bourdieu, 56, 67, 77, 104,
 110
Bracalenti, 157, 164, 203,
 204
Bracalenti et, 157, 164
Brussels, 132, 139, 149,
 162
bureaucracy, 29
Burt, 32, 64, 77, 80

C

C.M., 68
Cabinet Council, 216
Caméra d'Or, 86
capitalism, 25, 27, 126,
 127, 154
Capitoline, 177, 183, 186
Castells, xiv, 23, 27, 30, 77,
 115, 122, 123, 124, 125,
 126, 127, 128, 131, 132,
 145, 146, 153, 154, 204,
 233, 234
Catalunyan, 23
Cavalli, 39, 78
cellular automata, 209

Center of Excellence of the
University of Siena, 157,
163
chaos theory, 209
Choe, 68, 79
Cipriani, 71, 78
Civil Society Contact
Group, 143
Coleman, 32, 56, 65, 78
Colle Oppio, 176, 177, 179
Coluccia, 60, 78
Commission of the
European Communities,
134, 135, 136, 149
computerization, 25
CONCORD, 142, 143
conformity, ix, 45
*Consequences of
modernity*, 117
contemporaneity, ix, 41
cosmos, 69
Cotesta, 71, 78
CSOs, 139, 141
cybernetics, 209
cyberspace, 27

D

Daniel Bell, 24
David Cameron, 209, 210,
214, 215, 216, 224, 231
Davis, 67, 80
de Nardis, ix, 71, 78
dematerialisation, 122
dematerialization, xi, xiv,
129, 153
de-spatialisation, xiv
de-spatialization, xi

dichotomic, 43
dichotomy, 211
diktat, 37
discourses, xiii, 108, 154
do ut des, 41
Don Chijote, 75
Donati, 32, 59, 60, 72, 78
Donolo, 38, 78
Duguit, xi
Durkheim, 89, 106, 118,
146

E

E. Ferreri, 31
Ecuador Amazónico, 176,
177
eLife, 95
Ellul, 24, 78
Emanuela Ferreri, i, xii, 83
entropy, 209
epiphenomena, 57
epistemological, ix, xiv, 85
Esquilino, 163, 165, 196,
205
essentialist, 26
ethnographic, xii, xiv, 87,
89, 93, 108
Ethnography, xiii, 94
ethnolinguistic, 161
European Economic, 141,
142, 149
European Economic and
Social Committee, 141,
149
European Forum for the
Arts and Heritage, 142

European *Governance*, xi,
 xv, 116, 137, 148, 149
 European Public Health
 Alliance, 142
 European Transparency
 Initiative, 139
 European Union, xv, 115,
 116, 132, 133, 137, 139,
 140, 143, 145, 146, 147,
 148, 149, 226
 European Women's Lobby,
 142
 European Youth Forum,
 142
ex novo, 98
 Expreso Latino, 167

F

Facebook, xviii, xix, 95,
 113, 215, 216, 232
facto family, 90
 falsifiable, xiii, 108
*Family and Social
 Networks*, 90
 Fiestas Patrias, 181
 Fijian, 100
 Filipino, 180
 Flavian Amphitheater, 176
 followers, xix
Fordism, 24, 25
 Forgiveness, 209
 Frida Kahlo, 184, 185
 Friedman, 69, 78, 112
 Fukuyama, 57, 58, 78, 79
 functionalism, ix, xi

G

Giddens, 57, 79, 117, 118,
 146
globalization, ix, x, xii, xiv,
 24, 26, 27, 73, 74, 163
 Goffman, 119, 120, 121,
 146
 Gombo, 196, 197
 Granovetter, 43
 Green Wall, 103
 Green10, 142
 Griffin, 163
 Group on Human Rights,
 142
 Guía Latina, 167
 Gurvitch, xi

H

Hagen, 68, 79
 Halal food, 196
 Hargadon, 64, 79
 Hariou, xi
 Harris's materialism, 97
 Hayek, 69, 79
 Healey, 33
hegemony, xiii, 71, 108
 Held, 73, 79
 heterotopy, 87
 heuristic, x, 32
hic et nunc, 37, 58
 hierarchy, xiv, 123, 129,
 144
 Hobbes', 97
 holism, x
 Holland, 162
 Homans, 32, 79

Homo Naledi, 95, 96
Homo sapiens, 95
 Hörl, 40
 hubs, xiv, 123, 154
 hybridization, 26, 197
 hyperuranio, 75
 hyponymy, 218
 hypothesis of solidity, xii

I

Iannone, 62, 79, 80, 112,
 153, 154, 201, 234
idem sentire, 64
in embryo, 62
in loco, 100
 inalienable, xii, 26, 108
 individualism, x
 individuation, x
 industrialism, 24, 27
 Infocracy, 29
Information Age, 77, 115
 information society, xii,
 24, 25, 28, 125, 149
 informational society, 125
 informationism, 27
 insertion, xix
 interdisciplinary, xiii, xix,
 85, 93
 inter-identity, xiii
 internationalization, xiv
 intra-identity, xiii
 intrapsychic, 88
 Iran Freedom, 103
 Istat, 157, 162
 ISTAT, xvii

Italy, x, 35, 36, 157, 162,
 165, 166, 167, 172, 184,
 187, 193, 230

J

J. Law, 87
 Jerusalem, 162
 Jones & Gorge J. M., 67

K

Keynesian, 25
 kinship, 37, 89
 Knoke, 64, 80
 Knowncrazy, xix
 Kogut, 65, 82
 Kolm, 59, 80
 Kwok-Bun, 26

L

L. Berger, 95
 L. Mariottini, 29
 Landi, 71, 78
 Latin, xv, xvi, xvii, 153, 157,
 160, 163, 165, 166, 167,
 168, 169, 170, 171, 172,
 173, 174, 175, 176, 177,
 179, 180, 181, 182, 183,
 187, 188, 190, 191, 192,
 193, 194, 196, 198, 199,
 200, 201, 202
 Latour, 85, 87, 91, 102,
 107, 112
 Latour B., 87
 Lazarsfeld, 57, 80
 Lehman Brothers, 98
 Leiss, 25, 80

Leonardis, 38, 78
 Levy Strauss, 97
 lexicons, xviii
 Linguistic Landscape, xv,
 xvi, xvii, 153, 160, 163,
 203, 204, 205
 LinkedIn, 95
 Lipparini, 66, 80
 LL, xvi, 160, 161, 162, 163,
 164, 182, 200, 205
 lobbies, 139
 Luhmann, 70

M

M. Callon, 87
 M.C. Marchetti, 29
 Maanen J. Van and Schein,
 57
 Madrassas, 218
 Magatti, xiv, 129, 147
 mailing lists, 209
 mainstream, 30, 84, 86
 Manichean, 43
 Manuela Cipri, ix, xvii
 Marcuse, 24, 80
 Maria Cristina Marchetti,
 i, xiv, 115
 Mayer, 67, 80
 McIver, 31
 Merleau Ponty, 117
 meronymy, 218
 Merton, 57, 80
 Meyrowitz, 118, 119, 120,
 121, 122, 147
 Michel de Certeau, 117
 Minc, 25, 81
 Minor, 32, 77, 80

Miranda July, 86
 Mitchell, 32, 77, 90, 110
 mobile robots, 209
 Mongardini, 33, 58, 71, 78,
 80, 81
 Montreal, 162
 moulding, xvi
 multidimensional, xi, xix,
 73
 multilingualism, ix, xvi,
 155, 162, 164, 204, 205
 multimedia, xix
 Mutti, 60, 81

N

National Geographic
 Society, 95
 neo-corporative, x
 neo-functionalism, x
 neoliberal, 25
 neoliberalistic, 127
 neo-morphological, x
 network, ix, x, xii, ix, x, xi,
 xii, xiii, xiv, xv, xviii, 23,
 24, 25, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32,
 33, 34, 35, 37, 38, 39, 41,
 43, 45, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57,
 58, 63, 64, 65, 66, 68, 69,
 71, 81, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87,
 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 95,
 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 103,
 105, 106, 107, 108, 113,
 115, 116, 122, 123, 124,
 125, 126, 127, 128, 129,
 130, 132, 133, 137, 139,
 140, 144, 146, 147, 148,
 156, 159, 166, 190, 191,

200, 201, 209, 218, 233,
234
Network Society, i, ix, xi,
xv, xix, xxi, 23, 77, 82, 83,
115, 128, 145, 146, 148,
149, 153, 204, 209
New Economy, 205, 209
Nodes, xiv
nomos, 37, 69
Nora, 25, 81
NS, xi, 23, 26, 27, 29, 30,
68, 153

O

Offe, 69
Olos, 107
Olson & Zanna, 67
Onda Latina, 167
ontogenetic, 44
ontological, ix, 97
open-source
 programming, 209
Ottavia Trecca, 157

P

Panebianco, 69, 81, 139,
147
paradigm, xii, xvi, 24, 34,
59, 72, 133, 144, 145
paradigms, x, 92, 93
Peru, 166, 169, 170, 171,
172, 173, 182, 200
Peruvian, xvii, 166, 168,
172, 189, 199, 200, 202
Peverelli, 26

phenomena, xvi, xvii, 39,
69, 72, 73, 76, 99, 131,
143, 166
Phenomenologie de la
 perception, 117
phylogenetic, 44
physical space, xiv, 87, 116,
118, 119, 122, 161
Piazza della Repubblica,
179
Piazza Mancini, 179, 180
Pietro Canonica Museum,
184
Pinson, 76, 81
Piselli, 62, 63, 81, 87, 91,
93, 113
Pizzorno, 61, 81
pluralism, xi, 71
polarizing, xiii, 108
Portes, 32
post-industrialism, 24, 25
posts, xix, 215, 216
prassi, 138
profiles, xix, 214, 215, 216,
217
Progetto Sur, 183
projections, xviii
propaganda, xviii
pseudo, 71, 187
Putnam, 36, 58, 81

Q

quantum, 40
quid pro quo, 42

R

Radcliffe-Brown, 31

reality TV, 209
 re-spatialisation, xiv
 re-spatialization, xi
 reticular, x, xii, 35, 38, 54,
 59, 61, 74, 166
 reticularity, xi, 34, 43
 Riporto qualche
 istruzione, 103
 Rising Star, 95
 Roberta Iannone, i, ix, xi,
 23
 Rousseau's political
 philosophy, 97

S

Sacco and Zamagni, 36
 Schein, 57, 68, 82
 Schmitt, 75, 81
 Schoorman, 67, 80
 Scott, 30
 Scuderie del Quirinale,
 184
 Sellznick, xi
 Sentir Latino, 167
 Shan, 65, 82
 Simmel, 32, 38, 39, 40, 43,
 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50,
 51, 52, 53, 81, 83, 113,
 118, 148
 Smismans, 136, 137, 148
 snapshot, x
 social capital, xii, x, xviii,
 32, 35, 53, 72
social circles, ix, 32, 43
 Social Committee, 141,
 142, 149

social space, xiv, 98, 101,
 116, 118, 119, 120, 122,
 154, 159, 202
 sociolinguistic, xvi, 154,
 157, 159, 161
 sociology, xi, xii, xiv, 38,
 39, 55, 57, 59, 87, 118
 Sombartian, 71
 Sotho, 95

,

'space of flows', 30, 153

S

Spain, 162
 spatial, x, xi, xvi, xvii, 27,
 64, 117, 118, 123, 124,
 145, 172, 173, 210
 Stakeholders, 138
 Statistical Bureau of the
 City of Rome, 157
 Stephen Ullman, 226
 structuralism, 97
 substrates, xiii, 108
 sui generis, 60, 119
 supranational-state, 133
 Sutton, 64, 79
 synonymy, 218
 synthetic, 25

T

talk shows, 209
taxis, 69
 Taylorism, 25
 Technopolitics, xvii
 Termini, 165, 200

territorialisation, xvii
The Economist, 210
 the Ecuadorean, xvii
 thermodynamics, 209
thesis, 23, 24, 69, 115, 119,
 164
 toponymy, 155
 transnationalism, ix, 154
 Treaties, 138, 141
 Treaty of Lisbon, xv, 116,
 137, 138, 141
 trends, xviii, 234
 Triepel, 71, 81
 Trigilia, 60, 81
 tweets, 215, 217
 Twitter, xviii, xix, 95, 103,
 214, 215, 216, 225

U

Ufficio di Statistica, xvii
 Ummah, 209
 United Nations Fourth
 World Conference, 100
uti singuli, 36

V

Van Dijk, 27, 28, 29, 33, 82,
 128
 Van Gierke, xi
vergesellschaftung, 39
 Via di Portonaccio 212,
 194
 Vickstrom, 32
 voluntary associationism,
 42

W

Wacquant, 56, 77
 Walker, 65, 82
 web logs, 209
 web rings, 209
 Weberian, 70
 Westphalian, xv, 116
 White Paper, xv, 116, 134,
 135, 136, 137, 139, 145,
 146, 149
 Witwatersrand University,
 95

Z

Zamagni, 59, 80