

For a Humanism Amid Hypermodernity: From a Society of Knowledge to a Critical Knowledge of Society

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Abstract The reflection on science seems to be linked today with the concept of hypermodernity which refers to a society of excesses without any global alternative model. In this article, my aim is to show how the modernisation of our societies was connected with scientific development, and what place science may be expected to occupy in hypermodern societies—societies built around the notion of risk. After presenting the concept of hypermodernity, I propose an analysis of the inherent risks involved by the development of technology in our societies, and what limits may be desirable in order to prevent an excessive or partial valorisation of a “society of knowledge,” a notion itself not without its problems. Finally, I remind of the possible contribution humanities and social sciences can make to maintain balance in what is today called a knowledge economy.

Keywords Economy · Humanism · Hypermodernity · Knowledge · Modernity · Postmodernity · Risk · Sciences · Technology

In resolving to make itself the most competitive society in the knowledge economy within the next ten years, the European Union gave itself a highly ambitious goal at its 2000 Lisbon Conference, not only because this would mean augmenting its budget for scientific research over the coming decade, but inquiring as well into what other steps might be necessary for achieving this objective. It was with these considerations in mind that it launched the MIRRORS project, which has the mandate of determining Europe’s capacity to fulfill this stated objective and foreseeing what obstacles might lie in its way (Coniglione 2009).

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With the MIRRORS project at work on sorting out this ambition, and remembering its formal invitation of outside contributions, it may be worthwhile, especially in the context of my current research into the concept of hypermodernity (Charles 2007), to consider how modernity has evolved in tandem with scientific logic, and to determine what place the sciences might be expected to occupy in hypermodern societies—societies built around the notion of risk—and moreover what limits might be desirable to prevent too excessive or too partial a valorization of “knowledge”, a notion itself not without its problems. My contribution here will be to question the motivations behind this European ambition. This will begin with a reflection on the concept of hypermodernity—one that seems appropriate to thinking about the privilege that science have in our day—and lead from there to an analysis of the inherent risks of this somewhat erratic development of technology in our societies, as well as a reminder and exhibition of the mounting importance of the contribution the humanities and social sciences make to the perpetual need to restore and maintain balance in what is today called a knowledge economy.

1 What is Hypermodernity?

1.1 From Postmodernity to Hypermodernity

Let us begin by attempting to clarify this concept of “hypermodernity”, a word strongly resembling baffle-gab. Concept inflation is no doubt a trait of our societies, and a phenomenon surely not unrelated to the reign of publicity and the structuring of the social according to the logic of fashion, for which all that is everyday must be frantically made over (Lipovetsky 1987). In this respect, notions like “postmodernity” and “hypermodernity” may seem like nothing but trendy intellectual products guaranteed to disappear soon and be replaced by whatever newer notion should happen to better suit the atmosphere. But while the concept of “postmodernity” may now seem to be the tired victim of much criticism, it should not be forgotten that “postmodernity” did stand for an era, and that concepts like these serve primarily to describe historical and social situations, thus being destined by their very nature to be succeeded by other ones, which is no a priori disqualification of their possible relevance.

The specific concept of “postmodernity” is interesting on two accounts. Somewhat as the concept of an “Enlightenment” was coined by philosophers of that era, so too were they intellectuals in the years 1970–1980 who gave philosophical sense to the concept of postmodernity, thereby baptizing their own present rather than waiting for posterity to define it—a move perhaps not inappropriate to the logic of postmodernism, with its insistence on the importance of the present. Moreover, it is also remarkable that, although it was adopted by many intellectuals of the era and is still used today, the term “postmodernism” has never been met with unanimous agreement, as though it has never been thought adequate to the period it would define (Boisvert 1998).

What, then, was the term really supposed to designate? Borrowed from the architectural domain where it was born in the 1950s and applied to a cultural

dimension of the 1970s, in particular after the efforts of Jean-François Lyotard to that end, it came to describe a mutation in the modern world. For Lyotard, postmodernity implied a rupture with modernity's founding logic and driving narratives (the Revolution, Progress, Happiness), and a mutiny against its justification of all kinds of present sacrifices in the name of the future (Lyotard 1979). On a factual level, his report seemed accurate: we were indeed witnessing a real disenchantment with politics and what it promised itself able to achieve, and, instead of revolution, a turn toward incremental reforms; and present-day concerns did indeed seem to be gaining day by day on any promising tomorrows (Boisvert 2000). In spite of this, however, one could also see at the factual level that the great modern narratives had not all disappeared—that of human rights, for example, remaining current—and that long-term preoccupations remained, if no longer as a horizon attainable only by a revolution still and always to be made, but rather in the form of a catastrophe announced by the devastating ecological effects of the model of production and capitalist consumption. These two restrictions on the “postmodern” analysis would inform the lack of unanimity toward adopting its namesake concept in the years after the analysis was first enunciated—although neither did this lead to its abandon.

What did motivate its abandon was its failure to satisfy on a theoretical level. To speak of postmodernity was to tell of our having left modernity behind. But what, then, had characterized modernity? Putting it briefly and schematically, modernity had organized itself around four fundamental elements put in place around the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. First, “modernity” was the inauguration of a new manner of governance based above all on the notion of a social pact that conferred inalienable rights upon its contract-holders, as well as the view that democracy is the best regime for this kind of legal contractualism; second, it was a new manner of thinking that would make reason and scientific invention central to the functioning of society; third, it was a new manner of production and consumption based on capitalist laws of the market; and fourth, it was a new way of living in which the individual trumped the collective. And far from all four elements having since been invalidated in some newer, postmodern era, these elements still do, in fact, structure our present. Yet they have become radicalized: they have passed over into a logic of excess, to the point where no counter-power seems able to oppose their frenetic development at any point in the foreseeable future.

From the moment of their emergence, the brakes would be applied to these elements of modernism by the power of the royalty, by the Christian religion, and by the sway of ancestral custom: democracy was not imposed until after the American and French revolutions, Galileo's audacious theories were condemned by the Church, modern mercantile logic was unanimously critiqued, and the traditional family structure maintained a statutory difference between men and women. Today, however, not only does no institutional power oppose these elements, but we witness their radicalization: the democratic logic deepens, as evidenced by the growing power of civil society over the State; mercantile logic extends itself indefinitely; techno-scientific gadgetry abounds; society is conceived more and more instrumentally; and ongoing social atomization reinforces individualism. A regime of such immoderation and excess calls for speaking not of a postmodernity, but of a hypermodernity: a modernity qualifiable as radical in its no longer having

any sufficiently organized counter-powers, nor offering any credible alternative model (Charles and Lipovetsky 2004).

One then better understands why the idea of postmodernity, implying by definition a quitting of modernity, can no longer satisfy as a characterization of our present. In reality, not only have we not left modernity, but it actualizes itself more and more as ancient defences against its spread stop working, or even existing—out of which conditions arises the bafflegab “hypermodernity”. The prefix “hyper” captures this feeling that we live in societies marked by a climate of immoderation, exacerbation, and forward-fleeing. Hypermodernity is then distinguished primarily by this dynamic of excess: we feel that modernity is rather more in excess than at fault. The proof is that the very foundations of the modern world, far from being eclipsed, have become radicalized, one by one. After all, if modernity is a system founded on the individual, democracy, the market, and science, who does not see these four principles still making up the heart of our societies today? It is certainly true that the latter two principles, the market and science, are strongly criticized in our time, garnering no small measure of mistrust; but a credible alternative economic model to market logic is still lacking, political power seems only to need further limits and to be more equitably distributed, and in spite of our mistrust of science, no one questions the legitimacy of scientific research and discovery, than being given ethical parameters seeming to be all that is important.

Hypermodernity thus amounts to a *radical* modernity characterized by the exacerbation and intensification of that modern logic by which human rights and democracy have been made into mandatory values, by the market having become a global economic reference system reaching the remotest places on the planet and invading every sphere of our existence, and by science as an only partly controllable instrument that now throws even the notion of humanity itself into question by opening the possibility of human cloning. Modernity was supposed to bring a happy ending to its own excesses, a glorious future in which humanity would achieve peace with itself, the disappearance of exploitation and inequality, and international cooperation and universal harmony. Hypermodernity, inversely, hands us a modernity bereft of any such element of transcendence and unable to justify or mitigate its own workings.

Such are the findings from which Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy have been led recently to write of hypercapitalism, hypertechnification, hyperindividualism, and hyperconsumption (Lipovetsky and Serroy 2008). By “hypercapitalism” they mean a limitless extension of market logic not only at the geographic level, but also the level of shared references, even these now becoming market-based, as though neither culture, education, nor politics were immune to a capitalist redefinition of their means and ends, nor indeed anything able to escape the laws of supply and demand anymore. By “hypertechnification” they mean the accelerating spread and permanent installation of all manner of gadgetry and the tightening grip of a scientific logic on all ways of living and thinking. In a way, technology now plays the role once held by philosophy or politics: it is now technology that informs the terms in which the day’s burning issues are debated, the stakes of which are the survival of our species, if not the planet; and so too in technology does humanity foster its dreams and illusions of itself, the idea of political revolution now having

been overtaken by one of technological revolution (Jacques 2002), and technology now promising, if not immortality, certainly a previously unimaginable longevity in the disappearance of genetic illnesses and the rectification of the body, if not the disappearance of the latter as well (Le Breton 1999). By “hyperindividualism” they name the emergence of an individual more estranged than ever from ancient and traditional forms of socializing, called as never before to assert his autonomy in choosing political positions, moral values, products for consumption, and self-identificatory references, notably any religious ones (Hervieu-Léger 1999). And finally, by “hyperconsumption” they mean one that is highly individualized, erratic, and emotional, and carried out in a sprawling retail universe where to consume is not just an aspect of life, perhaps a point of social prestige, but *is* life itself: life in a universe where to exist is to consume.

Not only has the hypermodernist regime set in, but there seems to be no global alternative. One might lament certain trends in democratic populism, the mounting clamour of individualist demands, the pernicious effects of capitalist logic, or the dangers of the techno-scientific model, but their replacement by something else hardly seems likely, and their being better regulated seems all that remains to be aspired to. What characterizes hypermodernity is this very lack of a coherent alternative. Of course, this is not to claim that its model is ideal, or impenetrable to criticism: to the contrary, hypermodernity is the age of hypercriticism: a proliferation of piecemeal criticisms that would endlessly modify the model without ever destroying it, and indeed calling for measures that often only deepen it—the call for greater individual rights, for example, or for more democracy, or for reinforcing the right to work, or for curbing certain forms of scientific research, all of which amount to using the very tools first put in our hands by modernity itself.

1.2 The Instability of Hypermodernity

Hypermodernity’s taking the form of excess is surely then why *instability* is the term that best describes hypermodern societies, societies which value permanence and stability least of all, instead preferring competition, flexibility, mobility, and adaptability—all characteristics of what Zygmunt Bauman hails as *liquid modernity* (Bauman 2000). In brief, the sign of hypermodernity is deregulation in all areas, which goes back to explaining its general climate of instability. Along with the ascent to extremes goes the modification or outright loss of those ancient and traditional pillars that once lent clarity and coherence to the social fabric: the family, the land, slow-moving historical processes, traditions based on social, political, or religious affiliations, and national solidarity. In this way, hypercapitalism has forced the welfare state to redefine its mandate, notably with respect to social protection (Rosanvallon 1981, 1985); and its market deregulation and ensuing financial frenzy have likewise undermined the role of national governments, leaving them to assume that, given the deepening entrenchment of a global market, their own importance could only be diminishing—that in their submission to the greater laws of the marketplace they could no longer chart out long-term collective projects—which in turn only leaves the citizen feeling powerless to help shape the direction of the world. Meanwhile, in the penetration of core capitalist values like performance and

success into every aspect of social relations, the weight employees' professional status comes to weigh more heavily upon them, heightening job insecurity while fostering anguish toward tasks (Aubert and Gauléjac 1991). As Alain Ehrenberg has rightly shown, the rising influence of liberal values should not obscure the individual and public price of the autonomy and responsibility demanded of social actors by a society uninterested in losers, since the making of a winner is of a piece with the creating of losers, and even a winner both climb and slip on the ladder, all at once or by turns—as shown by the increase of social dislocation or anti-social behaviours, notably in the rising number of cases of depression and of myriad addictions, these too being signs of the absence of those standards and markers once provided by the older forms of socializing (Ehrenberg 1991, 1995, 1998).

Clearly the notion of deregulation, coextensive with that of instability, has not only touched the economic sphere, but also translates itself at both the collective and the individual levels. At the collective level, we have witnessed the virtual disappearance of the homogenous social classes of the previous century, the loosening of individuals' ties to political parties, a greater concern for a community belonging than for a national one, and the ebbing of the value of the public in favour of the private, with personal comfort trumping public investment. At the individual level, the old norms—Foucault's object of study—have lost their structuring agency, leaving ever-widening margins for individual freedom while at the same time making identificatory processes more difficult. Here the telling examples are provided in issues of sexual differentiation, or by the emergence of the reconstituted family: of highest importance now is the conscious choice made by the individual unconstrained by any social norms, making sexual orientation or the family far less decisive categories of identification than they once were, with the consequence that the individual is veritably weakened, something that can only accentuate itself if the collectivity no longer plays its emotionally and morally supportive role.

Returning, then, to the question of postmodernity versus hypermodernity, it was, again, clearly not about the scoresheet that the “postmodernity” analysis was mistaken, but about the rupture with modernity that postmodernity supposedly represented. Postmodernity is not something else, something apart or other than modernity, but simply modernity without the institutional checks that would impede its guiding principles from so fully flowering. Viewed in this way, postmodernity is a concept we might retain, as long as its scope is limited to the years 1960–1980, a period marked by the collapse of the great traditional discourses against which modernity as a movement to free the individual from all subjugation was partly conceived. What would later become visible as the tensions proper unto a hypermodern society were covered over during this rather celebratory period when older communal and authoritative structures retreated under the advance of newly emergent lifestyles, illusions of attaining total freedom, confidence in a future of full employment, the extension of social well-being to all layers of society, and the boundless growth of a middle class—all of which factors have since disappeared.

To finish the point, the ongoing disintegration of tradition amid hypermodernism is no longer pursued as a project of emancipation, but rather as a kind of shrivelling. It is fear that rules as we face an uncertain future, a globalist logic indifferent to individuals, an exacerbated liberalism of competition, the deepening of inequalities,

a hectic engineering of information technologies, and a volatilization of labour with stagnant and worryingly high levels of unemployment in the wake of spiralling financial crises that seem as though never to end. The reign of hedonism surely continues unabated, entertainment options explode, but these fail to offset that rising anxiety that is so characteristic of hypermodernism (Lipovetsky 2006). Hypermodern society is thus a complex and paradoxical one, continuing to stimulate pleasures even while generating pathological and anxious behaviours. Its paradox is due to the fact that heightened levels of leisure and entertainment are accompanied by an ever-greater difficulty of living, and that material wealth knows a concomitant poverty. In the age of hypermodernism, the deliverance of each individual over to his own freedom is also his submission to paradoxical demands for hedonism while also for liability, the consequence of which is a kind of schizophrenic society caught between a culture of excess and the praise of moderation.

2 Scientific Instability: The Uncertainty Principle

The sciences provide a paradigmatic example of this shift from modern optimism to hypermodern anguish. To notice just how little we dream anymore of an unlimited growth in technical knowledge leading to the emancipation of mankind and collective happiness, it is enough to re-read Descartes, who had bestowed upon science the ambition of making man the master and possessor of nature. But again, the modernists had believed that science would serve only peaceful ends, and thought that its growth would be proportionate to the growth of human happiness. On these two points the future would prove them wrong. We now know that science is without conscience, and that while it may be capable of serving the highest humanist ambitions, so too can it serve the worst of designs. In particular, we have seen what technology in the service of a political ideology can bring, and thus we can no longer share the optimism of our predecessors. We also know that, far from contributing to happiness, the rather uneven growth of contemporary science has actually given birth to new fears, which must lead us to ask what place it ought to occupy in our hypermodern societies.

Let us take as our point of departure Lyotard's remark in *La condition postmoderne* that the question of legitimacy is what lies at the heart of the problem. Legitimacy is about knowing which source has the authority to say what is true. In traditional and modern societies alike, such a source would have been clearly identified: depending on the epoch, it lay in the words of ancestors, priests, or men of science, their greatest texts having the function of legitimizing the existing order. But according to Lyotard, with these traditional texts having lost all credibility and toppled over in postmodern society, the most recent of these sources, the words of science, with its pretence of having supplanted all authority that had preceded it, had itself fallen into crisis, coming up against the limits of its own language and its own validity. Scientific discourse had exhausted itself into an infinity of dialects as diverse and exclusive as the scientific disciplines themselves, and no longer responded to a humanist outlook as it once had, but only to research whose goal is

profit. For Lyotard, this mutation in goals assigned to modern science explained at once the crisis in knowledge and that of its transmission.

It is true that the evolution of the sciences and of technology has in large part ruined the ideals of modernity. On one front, information and communication technologies have effected a dissolution of modernist humanism by abetting the precedence of short-term, pragmatic, rationalistic outlooks over longer-term concerns for collective happiness. On another front, mass media have brought about a diversification of information and a multiplicity of messages that render all unitary discourse impossible and problematize the existence of unanimously shared values. The effect of all of this is that technological progress is no longer thought to hold the promise of emancipation, thus in the same blow ruining the idea of an end of history, or at least a history unified by the idea of technical progress. But merely to have discarded modernist illusions about scientific progress in no way changes the essential place of the sciences within the processes of modernization. Only the notion of technological progress as a continuous humanist improvement in the conditions of life has disappeared, replaced by a rationalistic, instrumental one. All of this has contributed to the delegitimization of scientific discourse and to new worries about it.

The same ascent to extremes characteristic of hypermodernity is what now occludes any form of optimism toward scientific development. Technology and the sciences are submitted to the same climate of excess and immoderation as are the other pillars of modernity (the market, democracy, and individualism), their contemporary accentuation all occurring in unison. Techno-scientific development furthers the phenomenon of hyperindividualism by enabling the individualization of commercial products and services; individualism in its turn leads to the increasingly frequent invocation of participatory democracy, a form of democracy not without links to the reflexive structure taken by the capitalism of today; this, in turn, is reliant upon what the techno-sciences can supply in the interest of productivity and profitability (Veltz 2000). It is this interwovenness of the phenomena of hypermodernity that lets one speak of a knowledge economy, or a cognitive economy (Waliser 2000) in which all knowledge from all spheres of social life is mobilized while being forever up for review (Beck et al. 1994). The tightening grip of scientific rationality as a global mode of thought thus produces a knowledge society on the very basis that individuals and groups are brought up against situations of greater and greater complexity; and this complexity is nothing foreign to the entrenched innovatory processes of a knowledge society, which in turn only compound social complications. Moreover, when tradition fails to offer the guidance needed in facing unprecedented situations, what comes to be indispensable is thought, and especially techno-scientific thought, which alone seems fit for dealing with novelty, thus creating a special place for the sciences within the reign of hypermodernity. In this respect, the development of game theory and other theories of complexity are an excellent example of the need felt for turning to scientific logic in order to tackle this growing social complexity (Dupuy 1997).

The pursuit of a techno-scientific logic does not offset all the difficulties tied to the complicating of the social—for the simple reason that it itself contributes to them! As François Ascher has rightly shown, even as the sciences produce solutions

they create new problems, problems which in turn demand solutions apt to create still more problems (Ascher 2005). Thus the sciences are tied to uncertainty, and for three main reasons: first, because the rapidity of their evolution and the difficulty of foreseeing its having any finality creates genuine uncertainty over what effects their evolution may bring; next, because they have been responsible for questionable, indeed dangerous current practices, notably at the environmental level, thus undermining the public's confidence in them; and finally, because they overinvest in forecasting and prediction, as is shown by the relatively new science of *cyndinics*, or the science of risk.

The future of hypermodernity is no doubt the management of uncertainty and risk (Luhmann 1993). It therefore becomes important to assess what its scope should be; to determine what risks are acceptable, and to know how to maintain a level of risk within reasonable limits. It must first be understood that the uncertainty inherent to hypermodernity is due to the augmentation of a scientific knowledge that gives birth to previously unsuspected risks, unsuspected for the very lack of instrumentation or theory that would enable their diagnosis. This phenomenon by which the cultivation of knowledge not only fails to diminish the perception of risks but actually reinforces it goes toward explaining our ambivalence toward the sciences, which both fascinate and frighten. These could be called the Spinozan and Pascalian faces of science, respectively. On the Spinozan face of it, knowledge of the world is the path to liberation from false beliefs and superstitions; on the Pascalian face, this same knowledge is a source of anguish, for it only bears solutions to problems that it indefinitely creates, and gives birth without end to new questions. The two aspects are inextricable: the fact of knowing much more about the universe and the human being because of scientific advancements has contributed nothing to the happiness of humanity, nor even to the disappearance of ancient superstitions; its most immediate consequence is above all the complication of the world and of existence. The biological necessities of life (eating, drinking, sleeping, dreaming, reproducing) have all been infiltrated by scientific discourse, with its constant progression of suggestions and recommendations, rendering the least human activity problematic. As knowledge advances, so too does anxiety, and the increase in the sources of anxiety is indissociable from the discovery of the dark face of technological development, which, contrary to the simplistic view of scientific rationality, contributes nothing to making human existence a surer thing, but leads rather to a multiplication of risk factors, and to transforming our societies, as Ulrich Beck has rightly seen, into “societies of risk” (Beck 2001).

Indeed the role played by the sciences in hypermodernity is fundamental: they accentuate risk by broadening the range of possible individual freedoms with the extraordinary diversity of options they open up, by underpinning the worldwide spread of a cognitive capitalism, the essential tool of which is innovation, and by prejudicing a participative democracy, notably by the device of the Internet. They may be a force for social progress, but they also threaten it, for the management of the risks that they occasion demands greater and greater degrees of control, posing formidable problems of political governance: the launching of ethical committees to oversee scientific research on humans, for example, or of health agencies mandated to securitize human existence.

The problem of the mastery of scientific development is clearly among the major issues of hypermodernism. This can be partly explained by the lengthening delay between scientific discoveries and the dawning upon politics of the consequences of such discoveries, which suggests that politics will always lag behind the sciences, forced to react rather than act; it can also be partly explained by the fact that scientific progress still presents itself as a promethean enterprise of potentially immense benefits, and thus not to be impaired or opposed. The ambiguity of our feelings towards scientific progress, our fascination and our anguish, is itself a form of permission for its uninterrupted development, as if, in spite of everything, we refused to allow ourselves to break with a great modern narrative and sacrifice it on the altar of our utopias. Contrary to the expeditious judgment of the postmodernists, technological progress would still lead us to a revolutionary utopia, is the only remaining modern narrative still able to lay claim to a radical transformation of existence, the promotion of individual liberty, and collective equality, namely in the suppression of death. Whereas political and religious narratives can no longer present themselves as universal cures for human suffering, science appears as the last remainder of our past illusions.

And this is proven by the exceptional importance that hypermodern societies still grant the sciences. Because of their engagement in the production and commercialization of new medicines and other remedial tools, the sciences have a public health mission as well as a socio-economic purpose, the application of these technological innovations enabling productivity and creating new markets. Beyond their economic exploitative value, the sciences slowly but surely gain ground over all other domains of existence, notably those of education and culture. And then there is their ever-more-manifest presence in private life: houses and vehicles that only get “smarter”, cellphones, the Internet, DVD players, game consoles, and other gadgetry of which we cannot let go. The technical dimension of life would seem to know no limits, even as its method of operation impresses itself as the one best suited to respond to our social difficulties. We come to consider all problems to be technical ones, and seek to resolve technically those difficulties inherent to human existence (Fukuyama 2002). Suffering and death were once integrated in symbolic, philosophical, or theological systems that attempted to make sense of them, but in our time they are first thought in strictly technical and economic terms.

Of course, one must not make too extremist an interpretation: science is not merely reducible to a force of alienation: it also infuses culture with such properly scientific qualities as rational demonstration and proof, openness of spirit, and the questioning of the given, all qualities that nourish the public space of our societies. Science is also what fundamentally structures the permanent revolution of our societies, endlessly launching new inquiries and challenges and deeply modifying our ways of living and thinking, much more than our politicians or artists do. Such is the paradox of techno-science, that highly rational activity forever overturning the signposts of our world.

Our democracies are not totally unequipped to face this continuous renewal of discovery and inquiry: they enjoy a sufficiently high level of reflexivity to consider and confront it, as was done with the hole in the ozone layer, or with cloning. There is cause for hope in the responses that hypermodern societies can bring to problems

posed by the unfolding of the techno-sciences, which are often resolved at the practical level by those sciences themselves. Vigilance must not be allowed to lapse, of course, and the tools must be used that would limit or contain the development of scientific research while still respecting it: the technical revolution may be only likely to intensify, but it can still be steered in more than one direction, and the current putting in place of public structures and ethics committees to master its development augurs well for the future. But this can only happen if our democratic ideals, guarantors of our freedom and equality, are maintained in their current state, and humanism preserved as a shared value. The point is not to oppose technical progress, but to orient it in whatever way would augment our humanity, and not just relieve our tired bodies. And this requires that education be open to humanist ideas, and to the criticism of all-powerful technicity.

It is on this point, one that strikes me as being of capital importance, that I wish to conclude. If the pure sciences and the skills they inspire contribute to instability and the spread of uncertainty, then the social sciences have an essential role to play. With its having lost all normativity, we know that science is not what will deliver happiness to humanity; while it may create some of the needed conditions, it cannot be the sole instrument. This disappointing impotence explains once again the importance of a revival in the social sciences, since these enable us to reflect on the challenges thrown up by scientific development and to draw the boundaries it should not cross. And we are much in need of this type of thought—rational argument, public debate and critique, reflection on the good life—that we may respond to the challenges posed by the sciences. To campaign for a new humanism would be to call for restoring the possibility, the liberty, and the desire to think the world as it really is, in all of its problems and challenges, as well as the wish to build the most sensible and happy life possible. And on this point the sciences have nothing to tell us: they are silent on all that concerns their own value, or the value of life and of thought, and contribute nothing to spiritual fulfillment; for technical progress has no bearing on the domain of morality, the domain of wisdom—the domain of the search for personal equilibrium and salvation. There is therefore much to be hoped that technical development will only be proportionate to that of the humanities, which alone can give it a horizon of intelligibility and an ethical framework—a sign that the social sciences should have as bright a future as the pure sciences do in a hypermodern world, and that a knowledge economy worthy of its name implies a knowledge that does not economize on humanist reflection.

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