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New media, play, and social identities

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Introduction

In this chapter I focus on the motivations behind the current relationship between new media, play, and social identities in a framework of general, sociological categories. In particular, I intend to situate my analysis at the juncture between ludic culture, social control, and the social construction of the "ir-responsible" identity. The reason for this choice is that contemporary ludic culture can be quite well understood in light of the current imposition of social control and the mass resistance that is building against it. I am interested in answering the following research question: what is the meaning and the social function of play in postmodern society? If this question can be answered, then a different perspective from which to analyze this triple relationship will perhaps emerge.

My hypothesis is that games can currently be understood as a new "opium" of the people (to draw from a Marxian expression) and an important piece of the political economy of gender. However, for this same reason, they also offer a field of experimentation for the emergence of a new counter-power on the part of the users. The recent ludic culture, which has developed in postmodern society, might be understood as one of the outcomes of this arm-wrestling between capital and multitude.

This chapter is structured as follows. After the introduction, I will discuss the culture of games and its social meaning in the shift to the capitalist system. Then in the second section, I will analyze how ludic culture has been reorganized for reasons of social control and valorization. The third section addresses the question of the social construction of the ir-responsible identity in postmodernity. Finally, I will present and discuss some data from various research projects I carried out on new media in the last two decades and advance some concluding remarks.

Ludic culture in modernity

The history and the meaning of ludic culture owe much to Johan Huizinga's seminal work Homo ludens (1955). According to Umberto Eco (2002), Johan Huizinga introduces two important concepts. These are the idea that culture is a whole of different social phenomena from art to sport, and the idea of the cultural invariant. These two concepts – which for that time were revolutionary – allow us to frame the notion of game in an original way.

Games represent forms of struggle and challenges against death (for example the funeral games practiced in northern Africa), against natural elements (cross-country games), against hostile forces (war games), and, finally, against oneself (challenging personal fear, weakness, doubts, and so on). They involve fight, risk (gamble) and pretense in a framework in which somebody wins and somebody else loses (Rovatti and Zoletto 2005). The winner and the loser represent the symbol of the fight between the forces of life and, in ancient Greek culture, those of death, the cosmic and biological conflict connected to the wheat cycle, presided over by the goddess Demeter. Games are a parallel and fictitious world, built as a complex system in which the totality of figures, symbols, rules, behaviors, and instruments matter. As Eco argues, both the laws of language

(Saussure) and logic as well as mathematics (from Wittgenstein to the theory of games) are based on a ludic structure (Eco 2002, xi). The various combinations of a game represent models and patterns of true life, but in a simplified fashion. However, the simplification and stability of the social order realized in the game and the sclerotization of the rule systems, action schemas, and combinatory matrixes of possible moves, which it pursues, have given support to the progression from nature to culture.

According to Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1966), since Greek and Roman times, every city has organized public games on the occasion of religious feasts, in which the allied cities participated. The ludic dimension had the function to resolve possible internal tensions, which were expressed and exteriorized through the social rite of games. The outcome was the strengthening of the unit of the group and the development of social cohesion. In the course of time, the social function of games was kept alive, by allowing the coagulation of the civic sense and the national feeling. Indeed, for the inhabitants of most cities and countries, public games are still used today to build a bond which recalls common interests and origins (for example the Olympic Games or World Championships). Private children's and adult's games replicate public games, but instead of developing social cohesion they serve to create a harmonious individual. In their study of children, Piaget and Inhelder (1966) note that play is the way in which they assimilate the real to the self without constrictions and sanctions.2 In fact, games activate the player's imagination and stimulate emotions, while the players exchange immaterial labor. For children in particular, the game is a rite of acceptation of the reality principle and it prepares their path towards adaptation to the real object. For the adult players, the game represents an occasion for investing their libido with the consequence that the game revitalizes their life.

The development of modern individuality has sacrificed the ludic aspect of life for the construction of the free and responsible individual (Huizinga 1996). In The autumn of the Middle Ages (1996), Huizinga describes admirably how medieval individuals with their formidable relationship with the ludic culture were obliged to make room for the modern individual. The new order of the original accumulation of capital swept away entire territories of ludic culture. The end of serfdom and the successive intervention of habeas corpus earned the old serf new rights, but also new responsibilities.3 And with individual responsibility came added concerns, which are the opposite of play.

Moreover, the development of the capitalistic system and the organization of its new social order introduced the lengthening of the working day and a discipline of labor that fought violently to suppress ludic culture. The reason is evident: ludic culture was seen as an enemy of the productivity of labor.

The reproduction of the working class was seen in terms of the mere reproduction of the energies that were necessary for the worker to return to workday after day and be productive. In capitalistic society workers' games were contrasted not only at the stage of the original accumulation of capital, but also in the following stage of the development of big industry. Indeed, when the survival of the ludic culture was allowed, it was mainly for children and partly for the women of the dominant classes, while almost the entire lifespan of proletarians was reduced to working time. Ludic culture was taken away even from children of the working class, who were sent to the factory to work from an

early age. Consequently, ludic culture went underground, but it was never defeated.

It was only with the great cycle of working-class struggles that reduced the hours in the working day that play re-emerged. Gradually, the working class earned a certain amount of time, subtracted from work, for personal enjoyment. The reduction of the working day opened the possibility for men in particular but also for children to enjoy time dedicated to play. The right to play became part of the struggle of the working class for improvement in their quality of life. This particular historical dynamic raises the important question about the relationship of women and games. While children re-appropriated games as a way to learn, and male adults re-appropriated games as a way to reaffirm their stronger social power over women, working class women had very little time to dedicate to play. This exclusion of women from games – more attempted than realized (see the playful component of fashion) – deserves to be stressed, because, as we will see below, the politics of games is part of the general politics in society carried out both by capital and the working class.

Strangely enough, Marx, who was a careful observer and critical analyst of capitalist society, never conceptualized the realm of the game as a field of struggle. In Marxian discourse, in fact, the game is never mentioned in the descriptions of the activities that are possible for one to experience once the revolution triumphs over the capitalistic system, that is to say, within a socialist or communist society. In his early writings, and especially in The German ideology (1846), Marx defines a multidimensional individual who is characterized by an exclusive sphere of activity, but who can hunt in the morning, go fishing in the afternoon, and be a critic in the evening, without becoming a professional hunter, fisherman. or critic (2005, 24). In this famous passage, Marx recalls Jonathan Swift (1677–1745), who believed that rest and amusement might be reached by changing one's activity rather than by not doing anything at all or by playing. Marx returns to this idea in the first book of The capital (1867) when he writes about future education. He argues that in the communist society the educational strategy for all children beyond a certain age will be to engage in productive labor alongside study and gymnastics with the purpose not only of increasing social production, but also of producing harmonious human beings (Marx 1867, 530). It is interesting to observe that children's need to play is totally ignored. Although he clearly recognizes the strategic importance of the reduction of the working day in communist society – which in the third book of The capital was viewed as the realm of freedom – Marx totally ignores games as this passage shows.

After his early writings – Economic and philosophical manuscripts (1844), The German ideology (1846), and Critique of the Gotha programme (1875) – Marx is very cautious in prefiguring the socialist (communist) society, although he frequently mentions that in a communist society there will be a free development of individuals inside a framework of rational relationships with other individuals. Even though the four books of The capital and also the Grundrisse contain very few elaborations on this topic, one concept arises very clearly: a fundamental condition for the advent of the realm of freedom is a reduction of the working day (1867, 933). The overall message of Marxian writing is that before accomplishing the revolution, there is no time to play, but only to fight. The Marxian argument that class struggle and revolution are serious matters (and not a gala dinner) is in a certain sense mirrored at the psychological level by

Freud. Freud (1920) argues that children do not actually know reality because they play with things, while it is only by working with things that one can understand the world. It is only through work that one can know and meet reality. The adherence to the principle of reality requires someone to be distanced from pleasure and play which conveys that reality. Becoming an adult involves the process of separating oneself from pleasure.

Ludic culture in capitalistic societies and the theory of social control

A good starting point for understanding the game in capitalistic societies is to consider the theory of social control (Gallino 1993). According to this theory, social control usually includes the mechanisms, reactions, and sanctions that a community elaborates and applies with the intention: a) to prevent deviance; b) to eliminate an already occurring deviance (in this case the aim is to compel the social actor to behave again according to the norm); and c) to impede the act of deviance from being extended to other people (see also Ross 1901). In light of this theory, the game can be seen as Gramsci argued (1948–51) as one of the mechanisms of social control in terms of the control of social imagination or cultural hegemony. More recently, Castells (2008) stated that the power over minds is the main power in democratic systems and becomes a strategic terrain of struggle. Other authors, such as Borrelli (2000), underline that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries one of the most powerful and effective strategies of social control was the production of a series of cultural tools (novels, pictures, movies, and so on), which had the effect of disciplining and controlling people's imaginations. The struggles for the reduction of the working day had the effect of leaving male workers a certain amount of time liberated from the factory, while women, who were becoming increasingly "housewives", were burdened with the problem of organizing the "reproductive" working day. In other words, there was the problem of dealing with the time dedicated to the production and reproduction of the labor force. Very soon, it became clear that this "leisure" time and all the activities connected to it – the family and the education of new generations – were terrains in which the working and the ruling class would have held opposing perspectives.

The interest of the capitalist system was to take control of the social imagination and to organize all these activities in a way that had to be functional to maintain the status of the working class and social order generally. In capitalism this could only be achieved by making imagination, emotion, and affection like commodities. This strategy meant first of all the inclusion of the domestic sphere inside the overall process of valorization, by constructing a double register. This process apparently had to continue to be represented as natural, while in reality it was included in the general process of surplus value. The result was that the sphere of reproduction of the labor force grew in size and relevance. In the second volume of Grundrisse (160ff.), Marx argues that the costs of information and communication (as well as of transportation) and the surplus labor they require should be included in the production process. This means that they should be seen as spheres of valorization, which work as a bridge between the spheres of production and reproduction. Moreover, in the era of globalization, social, reproductive wealth is capitalized to a very high measure and almost all the individual's needs are increasingly put as social, in the sense that they have to be satisfied by means of an individual exchange. The current

stage of the capitalist system describes this specific relationship between the capital and the general, collective conditions of social production (including labor force reproduction), as I argued elsewhere (Fortunati 2007). Last, but not least, immaterial labor is carried out to a different degree by men and women, and by children and adults: there are those who consume more (children, adult males, the elderly) and those who continue to perform more of this type of labor, namely women (Bonke 2004). Negotiation over the division of domestic labor continues to be open, even if in the last two decades there has been a kind of stalemate in negotiations between men and women. What I mean by "stalemate" is that negotiations between men and women have remained at an individual level, because of the decline of the feminist movement in Europe and the US. The lack of collective negotiation has meant that the division of labor inside the family has registered very slow progress, whereby in other spheres of everyday life there is a stagnation (e.g. with regard to political participation and representation), if not a regression (e.g. in relation to women's security). In this stalemate, the spread of new technologies in the home has often been used by men as a way of getting out of doing domestic work, thus establishing a kind of presence-absence in their relations with their partners and children.

Secondly, the commodification of the reproductive life has meant the reorganization of immaterial labor. Marx can help us understand the meaning of this reorganization. In the fourth book of The capital, Marx observes that the capitalist system does not adapt well to certain types of immaterial production such as art and poetry and he insists it is very important to conceive of material (and immaterial) production in their historical determinate forms (1867, 445). Towards the end of this book, he distinguishes two forms of immaterial production: the former consists of material goods (books, pictures, etc.), and the latter consists of final products, which are not separable from the act of production itself. Examples of this second kind of immaterial production are those performed by artists, orators, actors, teachers, doctors, priests, and so on. However, Marx concludes this discourse by stating "all these manifestations in this field are so insignificant, if we compare them to the whole of production, that they can be completely ignored" (1961, 610-1). On the contrary, if we analyze the immaterial production in the particular historical moment since the end of the Second World War, it shows that postindustrial capitalism has led to an expansion of immaterial production (Hardt and Negri 2000). Moreover, this recent expansion of immaterial labor has been characterized by a shift from the second type of immaterial production – production of material goods such as books, etc. – to the first – production of goods that are not separated from the act of production itself (Fortunati 2007). The immaterial production whose products are commodities that are acquired outside the home and consumed in the domestic sphere has become more popular. Games are a good example of this change. Games in fact, while not being inseparable from the act of production, often require support. Think, for instance, of toys that serve to sustain games. These supports have become increasingly technological devices, by means of which consistent parts of reproductive immaterial labor have been outsourced, "machinized," and industrialized.

The industrialization of cultural and entertainment products has made possible a pervasive control of the content conveyed and thus of the diffusion of the ruling-class ideology. Owning and controlling the production structures of

information, communication, entertainment, and knowledge has given the ruling classes enormous power to shape the beliefs of people. On the opposite side, the interest of the working class was to use the "reproductive" time for developing a political awareness of their conditions of life and organizing struggles to improve it, for fighting and expressing their needs and desires, for gaining information and tools to develop knowledge and sociability. Ludic culture has become a field in which capital tries to use all the articulations of the process of immaterial production to its advantage, while the multitude were doing the same, but from their own point of view.

Social construction of the irresponsible identity and the political economy of gender

After the Second World War, class struggles were so powerful that social and political control over the reproductive time of the proletariat was very difficult, although a strong development of the industrialization process of immaterial labor had taken place. One way of keeping or obtaining hegemony at the social level by capital was through the commodification of ludic culture. In the attempt to re-take social and political control over the working class, which was becoming a variable increasingly independent from economic development, ludic culture has been absorbed by the process of value production. A pivotal moment of this process has been the construction of the "ir-responsible" identity of men. If in the modern development of the capitalistic system the construction of the workers' identity was carried out in the direction of individual responsibility, at this precise moment a different identity was created, what I have termed ir-responsible. In modernity, play was reduced and disciplined, while in late modernity it has become a place of control (and re-elaboration of social conflicts), development of the capacity to work, and the shaping of ephemeral social identities. Alongside a serious worker identity, the individual – especially the male – was then allowed to cultivate a ludic pleasure during his spare time. This basically had two consequences: 1) the legitimation of the masculine right to play; 2) the re-imposition of a new lengthening of the working day for all (men and women) by using the entertainment industry.

In regard to the first aspect, an important change was affected by the social construction of gender identity. A peculiar ludic culture was in fact developed at a particular historical moment – the 1990s – in which there was a strong request by women to share with their husbands, brothers, and sons the domestic burden in a more equal way. However, the division of domestic labor in Europe, which was unequal (Bonke 2004), continued to remain that way. The information and entertainment industry was able to take advantage of men's interests in embracing the new electronic, ludic culture. These industries acted as sirens capable of attracting and legitimating, through technological charm, men's reluctant behavior towards women's requests. In reality this was not only an economic operation, which aimed to acquire new sectors for the market, but it was also a political operation. Men gained social legitimacy to play and thus did not have to share equally in the housework with women, children, ill people, and elderly. This strategy had two very important advantages: on the one hand, it kept women subordinated in society and in the family, and on the other hand, it allowed the psychic control of males. A male who plays inside an IT framework is a male who probably is less available to fight or to be supportive of the class

interests of the other weak parts of the population. It is a male who probably has less time to devote to political debates and civic awareness. What is more functional to the capital of a man who defends his old social privilege of being able to dedicate part of his time to the reproduction of games (see, for example, the masculine tradition of games in pubs and bars such as cards and darts)?
In fact, electronic ludic culture also had the effect of discouraging further class solidarity between men and women. Instead of assuming an equal part of the domestic burden, many men began to dedicate much of their domestic time to games. The social legitimation of this behavior was subdued, but effective in recognizing for men the traditional "right" to dedicate part of their spare time to games, with the real consequence of a significant number of domestic labors being drawn to work in Western Europe from eastern countries. For example, migrant women from Ukraine, Moldova, and Romania have contributed to fill the holes of men's ir-responsibility at a domestic level, by caring for the elderly, children, disadvantaged people, and the sick.

In a second moment (in the last decade) the use of the entertainment industry to re-take the social and political control over the multitude was addressed more ecumenically to men as well as to women, to children as well as to adults. Capitalist penetration into the world of games has radically changed the dimension, structure, and social meaning of the game, attempting to affirm its hegemony also in this field. Private games have become isolated, sedentary, machinized, and designed with an industrial logic. This is no surprise, as Latour (1988) suggests, since technological artifacts are politics pursued by other means. In global societies the process of submission of games to the capitalist logic has been accomplished, also thanks to the fact that, as Sennett (1999) argues, the capitalistic organization of everyday life is characterized by the myth of labor as a totalizing dimension which presides all the time over life. The way in which these tools are designed also concurs with this ir-responsibility. In fact, users generally do not know how computers and the Internet work. This, of course, means a devaluation of the sophisticated intelligence that is embodied in these tools.

Contemporary society has developed a divergent view of play: the new organization of immaterial labor builds on the one related to play which is one of the most prosperous postindustrial sectors and so it has a strong interest in compelling all people to play. However, the general logic of social production requires that play is disciplined and compatible with the overall organization of everyday life, with the consequence that today individuals are subject to an ambivalent, political, and social strategy which, on the one hand, strongly stimulates them to play and, on the other hand, discourages them from doing so. This ambivalent strategy has an economic motivation that explains and supports it. As Marx argues at the end of the first volume of the Grundrisse, capital tends to create free time for society, minimizing the necessary labor and at the same time pushing the labor to its boundless limits (1857-58, 414-8). The pursuit of social control through games, however, is a quite complicated strategy, which risks, as we saw, becoming difficult to govern.

Ludic culture in global societies and concluding remarks

Can it then be concluded that the contemporary ludic culture represents only a capitalist initiative? Not at all. The resistance against labor and its sabotage often

has a name: game. There is a large amount of literature on the fact that people at work play online games during their breaks to alleviate stressful situations. People try to transform the disciplinary world in a big play, in whose interstices unsuspected protagonists nestle, such as the group of elderly women playing with a mobile phone investigated by Carla Ganito (2007). There is in fact a liberating pleasure from the bottom up inside the game, which can also become prevalent and therefore dysfunctional. For example, as many research projects report, users have redesigned information and communication technologies, conceived and designed to inform and to communicate, for amusement. A recurrent metaphor in the research on the images of the new media was in fact the "toy" (Fortunati 1995). According to a survey, amusement is one of the three main reasons people use information and communication technologies, in addition to the organization of social relationships and time management (Fortunati 1998). A survey I carried out in 1996, and partially replicated in 2009, on the diffusion and appropriation of ICTs in the five most populous and industrialized European countries – Italy, France, Germany, Spain, and the UK –shows that the information and communication technologies are used to amuse, in addition to facilitating social relationships and helping time management. For instance, in 1996, the mobile phone was perceived by Europeans first of all as a time management aid (M=3.03, SD 1.53), then as a facilitator of social relationships (M=2.76, SD 1.54) and, finally, as an amusement tool (M=2.44, SD 1.47) (Fortunati and Manganelli 1998). While in 2009, the rankings had changed; the mobile phone was most appreciated as a facilitator of social relationships (M=3.38, SD 1.34), then as a time management aid (M=3.25, SD 1.37) and, finally, as an amusement tool (M=3.08, SD 1.38). Although the amusement use of the mobile phone had remained in third place, it must be noted that the mean increased from 2.44 to 3.08 and that this was the highest increase obtained in the evaluation of these three purposes. People, therefore, increasingly use the mobile phone in order to amuse themselves.

However, when we consider Beijing, China, the assessment of the mobile phone as a tool of amusement is lower than in Europe since it reaches a mean of 2.95 (SD 1.56) (Fortunati, Manganelli, Law, and Yang 2008a). However, in Beijing the importance of the mobile as an instrument of amusement emerges as a predictor both of the amount of mobile calls and text messages (Fortunati, Manganelli, Law, and Yang 2009). This result shows that those who play with the mobile are not subject to the danger of de-socialization, but that on the contrary gaming is an activity which is associated with a more intense relational use of this device. Other results of the regression analysis for the amusement function of the mobile phone show that as one's education level decreases, the use of this device for amusement increases. This means that lowly educated users find the mobile phone more useful to amuse themselves. If, at this point, we evaluate the Internet, for a comparison, it ranks first in terms of amusement (M=4.11, SD 1.29), given that online games are extremely popular in China. With regard to the Internet, the respondents who are most likely to rate the amusement it might offer most highly are males, including those with high levels of education, those from urban backgrounds, the young as well as the affluent.

This comparison between Europe and China shows that cultural differences should be taken into account carefully in order to understand specific approaches to new media in respect to ludic culture. Gender differences also need to be

closely investigated since they cross cultural differences and are very sensitive to historical changes.

Finally, if we look at the mobile phone from a qualitative point of view, it is clear that the play component is also supported by other aspects, such as fashion (Fortunati 2005; Ling 2003, Katz and Sugjyama 2005), music (May and Hearn 2005), and games (Phillips, Butt, and Blaszczynski 2006). These playful aspects may be seen as peripheral to the mere communication process, but in reality they are structurally constitutive of the image of the mobile phone and represent a prominent part inside the construction and negotiation of contemporary human social identities.

From this analysis it can be clearly seen that a battle is underway today between capital and the multitude over the social meaning of the game. Games are now a commodity and as such their production and consumption have changed. The definition that emerged from Huizinga's work of the game as cultural invariant must come to terms with socio-economic concepts like "commodity", "immaterial labor", "capitalist system", and so on.

Notes

1. I am very grateful to Roberto Albarea for devoting time to reading this paper and giving me precious feedback on it.
2. Furthermore, they pose the problem of the rules of a game as social institutions and of their transmission from one generation to the next.
3. "The Habeas Corpus Act 1679 is an Act of the Parliament of England (31 Cha. 2 c. 2) passed during the reign of King Charles II by what became known as the Habeas Corpus Parliament to define and strengthen the ancient prerogative writ of habeas corpus, whereby persons unlawfully detained cannot be ordered to be prosecuted before a court of law" (from Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habeas_Corpus_Act_1679).

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