

Chapter 2

The Social Construction of Doxa

Habitus and the Propensity to Self-maximize

One of the classical concepts that modern sociology has revived is habitus. It is the base of the cognitive faculties where an individual's dispositions and cultural tastes are deposited. To a considerable extent, habitus is determined by early life experiences and includes the framing of the personality that typically class-based conditions of the social surroundings install in the individual. This means that habitus principally is formed on the subconscious level, where it is modulated by the cognitive capacities as these develop within a path dependent social framing. It thus becomes a person's socialized temperament and dispositions through which the impacts of the world are absorbed and from which reactivity arises.

When habitus has formed and solidified, it will determine how social interpretations—dominant in the surrounding social class or other contexts of socially determined sub-groups—are integrated into the individual's life experiences, as well as determining how the elements of socialization combine into patterns of habitual attitudes, heuristics, and action modalities.

Behavioural economics, notably prospect theory, has experimentally shown that there exist a number of human characteristics playing significant roles in shaping economic preferences. They include aspects such as risk tolerance and endowment effects (the experimentally verified tendency to put a higher subjective value on an owned object than on an identical non-owned object), as well as responses driven by a sense of fairness. Prospect theory hasn't taken any position on how these characteristics arise, but just pointed out that they contravene an objectivist rationality assumption upon which expected utility—the core element of neoclassical economics' rational actor theory—is built.

Projecting the findings of behavioral economics into more general views suggests that the activity patterns—such as risk aversion, etc. that violates the rational actor assumption—reside in the habitus. They will therefore appear with different strength, and in different patterns from individual to individual.

The preference-shaping characteristics residing in the habitus that are in contravention of the dictates of the rational actor hypothesis might also select opportunities based on ethical attitudes or concern for the impact on the ecology of one's activities. Such attitudes can obviously sharply reduce an individual's scope and propensity to self-interest maximize. This stands in contrast to the neoclassical maxim that when faced with scarcity (or other consumption constraining factors) we are not inclined to attempt to deal with the scarcity by reducing our own consumption of the scarce resource or good, but rather by producing strategies that ensure that we, as self-maximizing individuals, will have more access to the scarce good than others.

It is not necessary to determine to what extent such differences in attitudes are caused by upbringing, social class, or other factors embedding predispositions for specific choice patterns in order to observe that non-maximizing strategies are ubiquitous components of the revealed habitus of large numbers of individuals that even at times can be identified as coalescing into social groups or movements. It is thus widespread attitudes encountered in the social fabric that contravene the neoclassical axiom of the universality of rationality and its portrayal of rational self-maximization as the driver of all aspects of socialized behaviour.

It should be noted that the aspects of actions governed by habitus are different from ordinary habitual actions of the well-known repetitive type such as for instance smoking pipe or going to the bakery every morning to buy bread; in other words, routinized habits in the common sense of the word. Habitus governs reactions to social impacts, how we internalize information and impulses into action triggers. The difference can be adduced from the fact that if a person has the habit of smoking pipe it is incidental to how he or she reacts to social and political news. Conversely, habitus is not incidental in this respect: it exists as a mental disposition that merges beliefs and attitudes in a combination that is specific to the deeper personality that the individual has formed, and is therefore instrumental in forming reactivity to events in the social fields.

Misrecognitions and Doxical Beliefs

Experiences and observations of the world are presumably processed by the part of consciousness in which factual knowledge and logical thinking resides: the mental universe where analyses of verifiable facts and discourse according to the logic of argument drive our interactions with the world. This is at least how we prefer to view our own relationships with the surrounding social fields, and it is certainly how standard economic theory assumes that its (representative) agents engage in society's economic activities, and how they form their preferences and arrive at decisions to buy and sell.

But as with many other things, when faced with reality, delusions come to naught. In no other cases is that so than with the delusions we have about how we ourselves come to grips with the world around us. Instead of reacting to facts with logic and arguments, we often react driven by habitus (for instance, whether reacting aggressively or not) and rest upon preconceived beliefs. Pierre Bourdieu, a sociologist who developed habitus into its modern meaning, also gave another classical concept, doxa, a new life as a descriptive term for the preconceived beliefs that guide our interactions with the world.

Doxa, in this interpretation, is the basic layer of beliefs that people develop about the social relationships they perceive to exist in the world around them. Such beliefs emerge partly on basis of previous experiences, partly in consequence of situational roles in socially structured fields. But, most importantly, their active forms are often

shaped by inculcations inserted into the social domains by various factors, such as inherited class-distinctive norms, culturally dominant narratives, political spin, etc.

Quite commonly, doxa represents beliefs that have become so deep-seated that their validity or appropriateness for the encountered social and economic contexts are seldom, if ever, re-examined. Thus, doxa is the beliefs and misrecognitions that have been transfixed into inflexible states in the minds of the participants in a social continuum. Moreover, doxa shared by dominant social groups (dominance in this respect can be both a quantitative or a social power measure) has a strong impact upon how economic, social, cultural and political structures shape society's forward transformations.

Habitus, the deeper level of dispositions that drive interactions with the world, will decide to what extent a person engages in social encounters on the basis of critical and fact-based discourses (in its broadest sense), and shape communication and preferences selections in social and economic fields as positive engagements. Conversely, a person's habitus might allow doxical beliefs to push fact-based discourse to the background, in which case participation in public discourses becomes disruptive by being impervious to facts, and empirical states of the involved social fields and relationships. Typically, it will be dismissive of the arguments that others bring forward even when these are based on factual observations and states of the world.

If people have developed strong repertoires of doxical beliefs, it progressively will block their ability to deploy the faculty of logical thinking in the examination of observable facts and their relations to knowledge (taken to be a body of falsifiable memory data). Thus, a habitus containing a strong repertoire of doxical beliefs will also determine how social skills are deployed, having the potential to severely suboptimize skills by misdirecting them and causing stagnation of facultative abilities to set in.

Habitus, as noted, determines the extent to which stated opinions, rationalizations, and heuristic (in their role as mental models that guide actions in the social fields) either are constituted by doxa, or by critical discourse and fact-based arguments. Bourdieu depicted the division between doxa and logic of arguments in the figure 2-1.

Moreover, as doxical beliefs take over and erode the ability to employ arguments of reason, this lack is often seen compensated for by aggressive attitudes during social encounters and participation in the discourses of civil society.

An important characteristic of doxa is that it plays a fundamental role in constituting social groups. In general, social groups are formed by people who share certain socially constituted commonalities. These can be of a passive nature, such as living in a given neighbourhood, working in the same workplace, being born in a country with a specific set of cultural norms, belonging to an ethnic minority, etc.; or they can be of an active nature, such as having joined a social sub-group because of shared opinions or life-style interests, or, perhaps, perceptions of having shared economic interests.

When someone, for whatever reason, has become part of a socially structured group it creates shared experiences, which when retained in the common memory (as group specific enabling myth-histories, narratives, etc.) will create a socialized path

history of the group. In turn, the group will produce social paroles: a set of speech and other symbolic markers that signal shared beliefs about the social world, its order, and interpretations of its observed events. The symbolic markers can be both physical objects but also, as indicated, specimens of speech, defined broadly as combinations of coded vocabulary. Finally, social paroles often contain certain patterns of publicly exhibited attitudes, tastes, comportments, and action-rituals. Doxical group identification is thus exemplified by the way the adherents of specific ideologies or narrative-dependent social sub-groups are able to identify each other, not only by visible symbol markets, but also by couching communication and interactions in specific social paroles, broadly conceived.

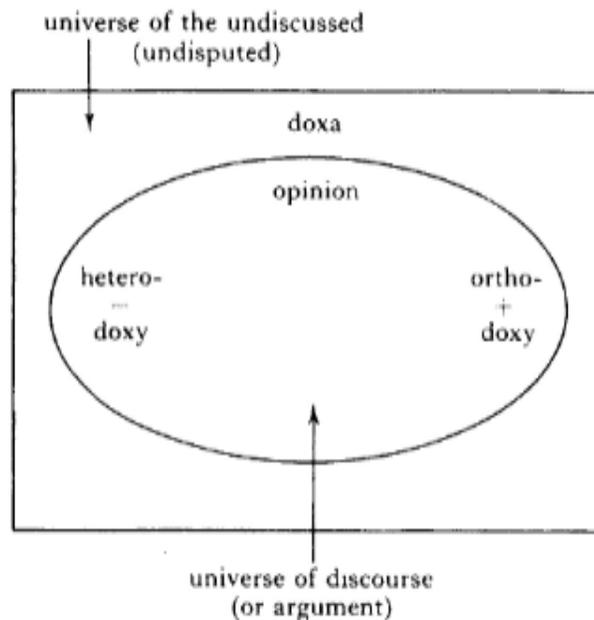


Figure 2-1. The relationship between doxa and discourse.
 From: Pierre Bourdieu, "Outline of a Theory of Practice" (1972).

The shared opinions formed by social path history—whether established through direct experience, or by enabling myths linked to a general culture or a specific social sub-group—will in turn influence key parts of the forward reconfiguration of the doxa deposited in the members of the group. It will shape the doxa, or the beliefs inculcated as part of social existence that have become a second nature; in other words, views and beliefs that no longer are discussed or doubted but taken for granted in the context of the group. This means that social sub-groups can be defined by attributes of shared doxa; that is, the mostly unquestioned beliefs that are identifiable by the symbolic markers and social paroles adopted by the group.

This indicates that there is a reflexive relationship between doxa and habitus: how one's continuing life experience evolves shape personality dispositions and beliefs, which thus are bounded by each other. In this way, we will find that individuals who, say, work on Wall Street, or are doctors volunteering for "Doctors Without Borders", or belong

to a biker gang, all will have, most likely, class-based habitus that have led them toward the specific character of the engagement with the world that these disparate activities entail. Furthermore, during engagement in the chosen activities, the habitus and indicated social beliefs that at first steered them to the specific social engagement will often tend to become cumulatively reinforced.

Since doxical beliefs and misrecognitions typically contain large elements that are formed by the subconscious layers of cognition, they tend to be very stubborn. Thus, doxa that controls actions and reactions during social encounters are seldom changed in any major way, even when the subjects repeatedly are being confronted with observations and experiences that contradict the misrecognition; that is, confronted with a reality in which the doxa-dependent behaviour never reaches the expected goals.

If changes to doxa occur, it is therefore normally not because of being persuaded by the logic of arguments put forward by others, or even by everyday observable facts (since these are already subsumed and thus neutered by the misrecognition), but only if adverse experiences prove to be so costly (in a material or a mental sense) that the fallacious nature of action or attitudes demanded by the doxa becomes inescapable.

As modern vocabulary, the concepts of doxa and habitus originated within sociology. While ignored by economics, behavioural sciences are increasingly coming to similar conclusions. Thus, a 2010 article, "How facts backfire", details how recent research, which included neurological studies, confirms the existence of cognitive reactions similar to the ones indicated by the concept of doxa:

"[we] like to believe that our opinions have been formed over time by careful, rational consideration of facts and ideas, and that the decisions based on those opinions, therefore, have the ring of soundness and intelligence. In reality, we often base our opinions on our beliefs, which can have an uneasy relationship with facts. And rather than facts driving beliefs, our beliefs can dictate the facts we chose to accept. ... Worst of all, they can lead us to uncritically accept bad information just because it reinforces our beliefs. This reinforcement makes us more confident we're right, and even less likely to listen to any new information."

"...[i]t appears that misinformed people often have some of the strongest political opinions."

"...[when] 1,000 Illinois residents were asked questions about welfare...more than half indicated that they were confident that their answers were correct — but in fact only 3 percent of the people got more than half of the questions right. Perhaps more disturbingly, the ones who were the most confident they were right were by and large the ones who knew the least about the topic. (Most of these participants expressed views that suggested a strong anti-welfare bias)."¹

The conclusion is that social preferences to a large extent are governed by doxa and thus inflexible, even in situations where adverse outcomes repeatedly occur. While unyielding beliefs in some cases can underpin useful heuristics and practical social

¹ "How facts backfire. Researchers discover a surprising threat to democracy: our brains". By Joe Keohane. Boston Globe, July 11, 2010.

http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/07/11/how_facts_backfire/

responses, in most cases the main result is to reduce the ability to respond positively to new facts and arguments. By such reductions, they lower the flexibility needed when confronted with new or emerging problems. Therefore, strong doxical inculcations often cause social groups to form inadequate responses to new challenges arising in the surrounding world.

To give an example on the social macro level, pre-modern religions often inculcated adherents with beliefs that supported high rates of childbearing. This formed a rigid, but important social heuristic in earlier times when modern health technologies were not available, and high rates of child mortality and short lifespans made matching high rates of child bearing a necessity for the perpetuation of the tribal or ethnic group. In modern times, however, Western medicine have spread rapidly throughout the world, with substantial impacts on child mortality rates, even in the most impoverished and isolated nations. As result, child mortality rates have dropped dramatically all over the world. Western medicine has in effect created a mismatch between traditional norms for childbearing and child mortality rates, causing populations to grow at explosive rates in many developing nations where traditional norms encapsulated in strong doxical misrecognitions (often embedded in religious narratives, which tends to make misrecognitions particularly stubborn) combine with low literacy rates to impair access to new information. Together, such conditions severely counteract knowledge about, and execution of, family planning and population control strategies. Consequently, in some developing nations populations growth rates are unsustainably high, in some cases doubling in cycles as short as twenty years. Coupled with widespread initial poverty, the resultant population pressures have proven to defeats all economic development strategies, in the process creating dysfunctional states, as well as causing extremist movements to emerge in response to the dysfunctions, which, as we have seen it, instead of formulating viable new social strategies often double down on the inherited misrecognitions.

Feedback Loops and Doxa Circles

When preferences crystallize into actions in the social world, they will often create effects that rebound as inputs to the next set of activities, or the next cycle. Incorporating Bourdieu's view of the dichotomy between doxa and logical discourse, the circular cumulative nature of these processes is tentatively shown in the figure 2-2 on the next page.

The ovals at the top, consisting of an oval within an oval, represent the cognitive faculties of an individual (as depicted in fig. 2-1, above). The individual, under the influences of the social relations existing in the fields in which he or she are network participants, develops preferences, some of which are manifested by decisions to communicate and engage in actions in social fields.

When preferences are executed, they will however also encounter constraints and countervailing forces, which will impinge upon the effects that the actions entail in the interlocking social fields, and within ongoing cycles of socio-economic activities.

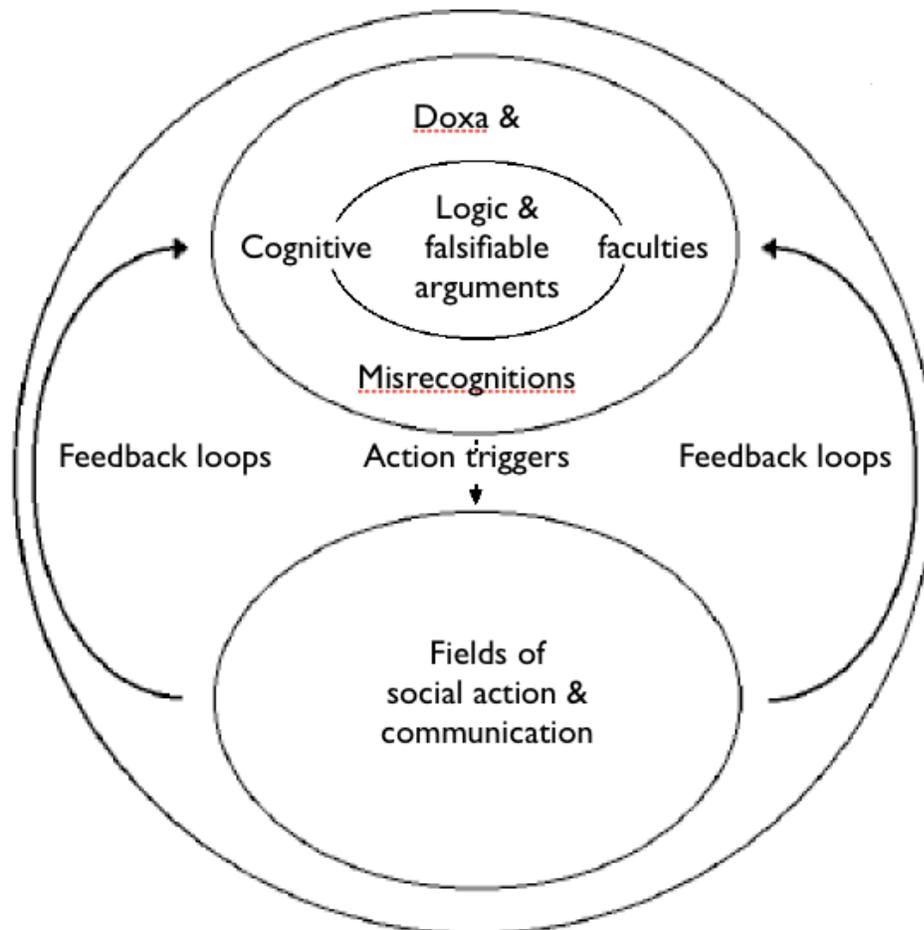


Figure 2-2. A doxa circle with feedback loops.

The decision faculty of humans that produce activities can in this way be seen as constituted partly by doxical beliefs, that acts as a filter before inputs (information and observations) are subjected to critical thinking based on the logic of arguments and falsifiable knowledge. The combinations and differences in the weights there exist between these mental aspects can, as indicated above, be radically different from individual to individual; primarily dependent upon the individual's habitus, as this has been modulated by social group and class relations. Some people filter all preference-guiding information and data through a thick layer of doxa, others let common sense, and recourse to facts and objective knowledge dominate in the processes that lead to the formation of preferences and actions.

According to the balance of these aspects, people will form heuristics—or set patterns of operational approaches—to recurring decision problems, which will be based on what they perceive as practical and, in their mind, sensible solutions to

recurring problems and decision situations, notwithstanding whatever level of doxical misrecognitions the solutions in fact might be based upon.

When decisions are formed, they create impulses to actions and communication. The loci of action and communication are the social fields, represented by the lower oval. In the social fields, actions intertwine with the actions of other individuals, and are subjected to the constraints and the power structures existing in the fields. How path dependent structuration under the conditions of the real world embeds purposes into the fields are in this respect important for the way that the modalities of actuation engage. To give a simple example, if one wants to buy a loaf of bread, the operational approach will be different if the field of relevant actuation is framed by bazaar markets or by modern supermarkets.

The effects of actions are also exposed to exogenous impacts (war, crime, natural disasters, financial crises, etc.) that can burst into a field of activities with effects that totally can throw current heuristics and expectations off the track. However, since, in the nature of things, such occurrences are seldom predictable they insert a so-called 'black swan' factor into all expectations to normal events: they are very unlikely to occur, but if they do, everything changes. These conditions of the social fields are among the factors that create the uncertainty that always exist between decisions and the goals of actions, and are partly responsible for the inevitable combination of intended and unintended consequences that all actions incur.

When non-fulfilled consequences of an action enter into a feedback loop, they will impact existing preferences and the next set of decisions with the potential to set cycles of cumulation in motion. In many cases, if a preference is based on a strong doxical belief, and action triggered by the preference therefore doesn't produce the expected result, a common tendency is to stubbornly repeat the action in the forlorn hope that the repetition will produce a different result. However, such stubborn repetitions of activities directed by doxical misrecognitions can cause vicious cycles laden with down-spiralling effects to dominate.

Doxa-Triggers in the Postmodern Triviality

As indicated, doxa plays an important role in the formation of social groups. Nationality and culture bind people together not only by language, but also by sets of customs and social norms that are based on shared conceptions about how social events and structures interrelate. When shared conceptions contains misrecognitions, perhaps in the form of belief in relationships that once had positive content but during the process of history have lost all factual relevance, they solidify into doxa that might accumulate within a social group, or more broad-based within a culture, or some other definable social stratum of individuals. They become "that which goes without saying"², which might create strong effects of coherence within the given social group (at

² A favourite phrase used by Bourdieu to explain doxa.

whatever level it operates), but in reality—because of a basis in misrecognitions, or belief in a social relationships which history has made non-relevant—becomes a barrier to progress.

In this way, social activities are often modulated by beliefs embedded as commonly shared doxa among the actors involved in a given role-actuating network. As a function of the strength of the misrecognitions, doxa can, as indicated, feed into social macro processes of cumulative causation that turn into vicious cycles.

Propaganda and advertising—the first aiming at social and political preferences, the second mostly at economic preferences—are two related phenomena that employ techniques that influence people by creating memes attempting to change the direction and strength of current preferences, or to prod new preferences to emerge. These techniques are based on behavioural research that often as a primary technique search for ensembles of already existing doxa, for instance by exposing focus groups to variously formulated messages carrying the sought impact, in order to gauge how different formulations most effectively connect to existing perceptions and biases. On this basis, memes are created that then attempt to create trigger effects that release shifts in beliefs and preferences in a desired direction. It often means that existing misrecognitions (and in particular negative misrecognitions, even those fueling discriminatory attitudes) are exploited and strengthened. The power of negative misrecognitions is that they often link to unfulfilled aspirations, feelings of inferiority, etc. that people might develop during participation in the social world, which has proven to produce strong emotional responses when prodded. If memes can piggyback on such misrecognitions, they often will gain in efficacy.

The doxa-trigger technique appears to become particularly effective under socially stressed conditions, a case in point is how fascist propaganda of the 1930s successfully exploited the stressed social conditions created by the Great Depression. In the field of politics, propaganda is a common method for creating or sustaining existing doxa so that it will produce support for social structures that are misaligned by power relations favouring specific minority interests (often an entrenched elite class), or a competing social group vying for power. Chances of success rise exponentially if the propaganda is able to exploit widely shared beliefs and social norms. For instance, by exploiting people's aversion against paying taxes, or car-owners' aversions against street-level public transport, conservative memes and spin have been very successful in massively strengthen certain existing misrecognitions, to the point where people persistently oppose their own interests, if these were to be evaluated in broader perspectives based on facts and critical thinking.

In modern societies, the reproduction of the attitudes upon which propaganda and marketing feed is increasingly the domain of the corporate entertainment industries. In this connection, commercialized entertainment creates two distinct impacts. First, the entertainment industry, including the new element of the digital gaming, in their direct content often tend to reproduce negative social attitudes—for instance, violence as problem solver, unsafe driving, consumption fetishism, etc.—since such content creates more titillating entertainment that moreover has proven easier to produce (plots can be

very simplistic and characters stereotypes), and equally easy to marketing. In the name of mass-market appeal, the formats of modern entertainment have thus consistently trended towards the lowest common denominator of plots and contents, in the process reducing genuine artistic creations to the odd exception.

In a second, and equally important effect, commercial entertainment—which probably seldom is created with specific underlying social or political intent—contain a strong indirect political effect by dissipating people’s attention and turning it away from existing political and social problems. An important facet of this attention-dissipative function is the entertainment industry’s ability to create celebrity idols out the accidental stars who perform roles in the entertainment products, whether it be in movies, music, sports, or the participants in the increasingly popular unreality of reality shows, etc. The resultant phenomenon of celebrity infatuation sometimes turns into pathologic states, where each ‘news’ about the celebrity chosen to be the pathological focus is received with anxious anticipation. When the celebrity idols’ life-styles—in most cases characterized by openly mindless and ostentatious consumption—become an object of adoration, it legitimates class distinctions and the undisputed right of the rich to indulge in ostentatious and wasteful consumption. A good example of how the celebrities most faithfully perform their duty as role models for the neoliberal mindset is the answer that the good-looking Russian tennis star, Maria Sharapova, gave to a reporter after she had signed a \$70 dollar contract with Sony: “Money is never enough. There is no limit of how much you can make.”³

In this way, the entertainment industry have in recent decades been pivotal in developing attitudes among the general populace that lead to acceptance of the increasingly preposterous and widening differences in income and consumption levels that the current economy, governed by neoliberal political and cultural ideals, perpetuates. This lends an important political function to the entertainment industry as manufacturer of a distracting virtual reality—the 'spectacle' in the words of French situationist Guy Debord⁴—that inculcates doxa and spur attitudes that accepts social inequalities and consumption with large ecological footprint as unquestioned, even desirable, facets of the modern social dimension.

A main effect of the excessive infatuation with entertainment products (including gambling) is, as indicated, to push interactions with the social world into a state of passivity. Under such circumstances, political spin are accepted without subjecting it to critical discourse, often simply because the ability to mobilize the needed attention span has been eroded. Entertainment absorption thus functions as a cognitive blocker that stymies the accumulation of objective knowledge; a condition that, if sustained, will push the dispositions embedded in the habitus farther away from critical discourse and self-actualizing activities, and instead into a realm of mind-states that are heavily populated

³ http://english.pravda.ru/society/showbiz/24-08-2006/84072-Maria_Sharapova-0/ (Link dead July 2012).

⁴ This was first described by the French situationist, Guy Debord, in the seminal “Society of the Spectacle” (1967), which were to wield a strong influence on the 1968 student uprising in France. My own contribution “[A Short Ontology of the Spectacle](#)” can be found at

with misrecognitions and driven by urges to constantly engage in consumption of products with low content of true utilities and aesthetic elements.

In this environment, the new phenomenon of social networking through digital communication tools has entered the scene, producing the capacity to cascade opinions and attitude verifications very rapidly through large population segments. Text messaging, Facebook, Twitter—the whole plethora of new instant messaging tools—have inserted abilities to develop feedback cycles of cascading attitude reflections that either solidify or dissipate the established perceptions and doxa elements they encounter. Obviously, this can produce positive as well as negative cascades, but also the third possibility, which emphatically has moved to the forefront of current social dimension: cascades of attention hogging trivialities.⁵

Noteworthy is that the development of recent entertainment trends stands in contrast to the first cycle of the entertainment culture (the 1950s and 1960s), which still required the entertained to be anchored to an outlet (a venue of performance, a cinema, a stationary radio, a TV-set, etc.). Likewise, communication by telephone (or telex) needed a stationary connection point. These requirements left considerable time during an average day unmolested by the spectacles of this phase's commercial manifestations. In contrast to this, the new modes of wirelessly transmitted entertainment and social networking have broken this constraint. They enable the modern citizen to fill all the otherwise moments of boredom that might be encountered during the day with the trivialities of the last cycle of commercially manufactured spectacles. Incidentally, it also enhances the stress level that many people experience by having created an urge to be connected 24/7, and by creating working conditions where the requirement of work never is left totally behind during time off, holidays, etc.

Certainly, social networking has its positive side, but it is becoming obvious that it—by its attention-hogging power—also can be an obstacle to liberation practices and a roadblock on the path to creative and self-actualizing life-styles.

The citizens of the present society thus face the accelerating cultural breakdown of the neoliberal society where true culture increasingly is replaced by postmodern trivialities. They are met by commercialized cultural products that are not activating as true cultural objects should be, but inducing passivity and containing high levels of memes that trigger subconscious shifts towards doxical acceptance of over-consumption as a coveted life-style, and—on the political level—the corollary of manufacturing indifference to the politics of economic inequalities. The constant flow of pseudo-information that postmodern culture and its media outlets produce have caused perceptions of the states of the world to turn into caricatures that are observed once-removed from true reality by the media feeds of a constructed, faux reality. When the doxical beliefs combine with a constant capture by the postmodern trivialities, it fosters assumptions—with basic premises never questioned—about society and the modes of possible actuation of life-styles. In such an environment, social values

⁵ "Have smartphones killed boredom (and is that good)?" Doug Gross, CNN, Wed September 26, 2012 <http://www.cnn.com/2012/09/25/tech/mobile/oms-smartphones-boredom/index.html>

are increasingly copies of expressions taken from a commercialized culture embedded in neoliberal political institutions. This has become 'that which goes without saying'.