

CHAPTER 4

Challenging the Network Ideologies

*L'anima s'immagina quello che non vede, che quell'albero, quella siepe, quella torre gli nasconde, e va errando in uno spazio immaginario, e si figura cose che non potrebbe se la sua vista si estendesse da per tutto, perché il reale escluderebbe l'immaginario.*¹

Giacomo Leopardi, *Lo Zibaldone*

4.1 Imaginary Networks

The narratives surrounding the histories of the Web and *Socrate* bring out the importance of a sort of unquestioned *faith* in and towards networks – historically interpreted as instruments of social progress and liberation – as determining factors of economic growth, as extensive and empowering forms for human communication, and as bearers of a positive, unstoppable cultural change. The ideological force of the Internet myth and network ideologies lies in their simple explanation of networking as a solution to reduce complexity. According to network ideologies, structure, infrastructure and social structure converge in the network ideal.²

On the one hand, the World Wide Web, thanks to the biographical accounts on its birth and its inventor, represents a synthesis of an imaginary of the future in which collective and egalitarian values such as cooperation, horizontality and openness can be realized owing to the new revolutionary system. On the other hand, *Socrate*'s infrastructure was narrated as a necessary condition for strategic issues such as the national entry into the information society, the digitization of information and the dissemination of multimedia contents and innovative services. In both cases the network, respectively through its distributed

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and centralized ideal-typical expressions, represented the sublimation of the desire for connectivity; in sum, the network has been interpreted as a primary social need for contemporary societies. Nevertheless, the narratives borne by scientists, futurologists and stakeholders were not realized; it does not matter if these projects were actually completed or not. The distributed model of the World Wide Web and the comprehensive infrastructure of the *Socrate* project remain just two projections of an *imaginary network*, a network that never existed in practice. Nevertheless, the network imaginaries embedded in these projects, as much as the imaginary of the *Iperbole* project, continue to play a key role, since they have changed and shaped the trajectories and the narratives of network history, playing at the same time a crucial part – for better or worse – in its evolution.

The narratives and the imaginaries conveyed by these different stories persist and continue to penetrate the present, but also the imagined future of networked societies. As permeable and enduring stories, both the winning and failed networks are embedded in the contemporary social imaginaries as much as in the material dimension of contemporary networks. Finally, it is because such narratives still have a deep influence on the development and the cultural representations of networks in societies that a theoretical reflection not only on the potential but also on the *limits* entailed in any *retiologic* perspective is much needed. To challenge and question the network ideologies means thus to look also at how specific narratives of networking persist over time, what these narratives tend to conceal from common people and critical thinking, and why they still permeate the contemporary world.

4.2 The Transitory Propriety of Network Imaginaries

Network-centred visions of the organization of society have a long history, which starts a long time before the naissance of modern computing. According to authors such as Pierre Musso (2017) and Armand Mattelart (2000), modern forms of retiology and network determinism originated during the first industrial revolution and then grew exponentially during the last century. Indeed, networks have often been imagined as the chosen models to construct and represent modern societies; physical and immaterial infrastructures such as the circulatory system and the brain, electric networks, telegraphic network, railway networks, highways networks, flight and navigation networks, computer networks, social networks, and, more recently, neural networks, have all been at the heart of political, technological and cultural programmes, deeply permeating collective thoughts and shaping public debates on the local, national and global scales.

However, according to authors such as Pierre Musso, we are currently facing a sort of saturation of the idea of the network as a theoretical reference model; nowadays, Musso says, the network ideology is reaching its final stage, and its

saturation is taking place after a long and circuitous path, characterized by a series of philosophical and ideological degradations:

Nowadays, beyond the technical issue, the network has become a solution to chaos, to disorder, and to dissipative structures. The network is a safety net that allows people not to think about the great problems of contemporary science. In my opinion, we are at the limit of this thought, which has been very pervasive for a long time thanks to management, which, drawing on the visions of engineering, continues to defend the network idea. In my opinion, however, we are at the limit; nowadays, we need new figures and shapes as references. [...] The network is a safety network, a defence mechanism from uncertainty and a way to understand the complexity of society, the brain, and the body. The network allows us, as Norbert Elias had seen, to tie and separate. It's a way to separate and bind, as Sherry Turkle says, 'alone together'. In order to think about this broken society the net is a useful figure but it has been exploited too much. It is more difficult to think of uncertainty, chaos; it is more difficult to think of complexity. Instead, the network gives order to things.³ (Pierre Musso, private communication, 8 June 2017)

According to Musso, the network has become at the same time a *safety net* and a *net for capture*; networks are able to protect society insofar as they close the possibilities of critical thinking and, in turn, of an effective and productive imaginary. In a disenchanted world, new social imaginaries are much needed in order to collectively explore and design alternative futures, so as to face and problematize the overgrown complexity and the subtle uncertainty that characterizes our societies; networks, both in their *functional* and *fictional* aspects, provide an all too easy and simple self-fulfilling solution to the organization of complexity in a borderless and hyper-connected world.

The persistence and the influential role of network imaginaries – what we can call the *trans-temporality of network imaginaries* – are still evident if we look at the way in which technological, cultural and political players make use of the very same narratives analyzed in this work. Moreover, network imaginaries also penetrate different environments; an imaginary typically attributed to the academic field, e.g., the ideal of the distributed network among scientists, can also influence market strategies or political organizations; imaginaries, in fact, are not just trans-temporal, they can also cross social and cultural boundaries to permeate a variety of social spaces.

In order to stretch this *transitory propriety* of network imaginaries, two examples seem to be particularly meaningful. First, digital media corporations are a clear example of the trans-temporal dimension of network imaginaries and of their ideological function. Take for instance the corporate narrative adopted by some well-known giants such as Facebook and Google, two companies that have rewritten the history of digital media by replacing the terms Web

and social network with their respective corporate brands (Natale, Bory and Balbi 2019). Facebook's claim 'to make the world more open and connected' and Google's stated intention to be 'the closest thing the Web has to an ultimate answer machine' (Google 2007) are two clear examples of the extent to which the values and the distinctive concepts peculiar to the narrative path of Tim Berners-Lee and the World Wide Web have been gradually incorporated by digital media corporations. Notably, these actors use the same deterministic narrative according to which 'change' is a network/medium-driven process; both digital and physical network infrastructures of course, if handled by these enlightened companies, are the sufficient and necessary conditions for the cultural, economic and social growth of Western societies. What I called the dominant narrative of Internet history – which is based on a linear, positive and progressive evolution of networks – is constantly subsumed by these companies. These actors count on the conceptual fixity, or in Catoriadis' terms the institutionalization, of the Internet imaginary over time. From this point of view, the network of networks seems to be an untouchable and irreplaceable medium, a sort of everlasting, trans-temporal resource, or even, quoting Berners-Lee and colleagues (1992b), a unique 'universal system'. As the critical scholar Evgeny Morozov argues:

Still, there's something peculiar about this failure of our collective imagination to unthink 'the Internet.' It is no longer discussed as something contingent, as something that can go away; it appears fixed and permanent, perhaps even ontological—'the Internet' just is and it always will be. To paraphrase Frederic Jameson on capitalism, it's much easier to imagine how the world itself would end than to imagine the end of 'the Internet.' (Morozov 2013: 22)

As Morozov and several other critical scholars have shown,⁴ the Internet and the Web are gradually becoming the working components of new forms of hierarchy⁵ that are able to pragmatically overturn the horizontal ideology of networks while professing those values historically entailed in Internet-based systems. It is not by chance that these actors usually promote themselves as good, not evil ('Don't Be Evil', in Google's terms), promoters of socio-technical change. Symptomatically, companies such as Facebook make use of the same keywords and influential concepts adopted by Berners-Lee and colleagues to promote the Web.⁶ In a famous letter addressed to Facebook's investors, the CEO Mark Zuckerberg wrote:

People *sharing* more – even if just with their close friends or families – creates a more *open* culture and leads to a better understanding of the lives and perspectives of others. We believe that this creates a greater number of stronger relationships between people, and that it helps people

get exposed to a greater number of diverse perspectives. By helping people form these *connections*, we hope to *rewire* the way people spread and consume information. We think the world's information *infrastructure* should resemble the social graph – a *network* built from the bottom up or peer-to-peer, rather than the monolithic, top-down structure that has existed to date. We also believe that giving people control over what they share is a fundamental principle of this *rewiring*. (Zuckerberg 2017, emphasis added)

Wiring, infrastructure, openness, sharing of knowledge, bottom-up and peer-to-peer structures: through these keywords, Zuckerberg promotes Facebook as a horizontal and open world in which *social change* is the *social exchange* made possible by proprietary technologies; the network, again, is the determining variable of this process. Through the network ideology, and by subsuming the Internet myth in their self-referential narratives, corporate actors mask their real goals: profit and control.

It is important to note that this narrative does not apply only to technologies such as search engines and social media. Even artificial intelligence, probably the most discussed innovation of the last and future years, is depicted as a technology that will solve human problems through networks. Corporate players like Google DeepMind depict their AI as a neural network capable of processing and solving complex problems 'through a number of different network layers containing millions of neuron-like connections' (DeepMind 2020). The brain, one of the first and most used analogies of the network ideologies, becomes a new form of objectification of the future; it is the reproduction of the brain, the primary human network, the new 'technology of freedom' professed by the tech giants of the digital market.

At the political level, the contemporary Italian context offers one of the most interesting expressions of the intertwining between the horizontal model of the Web and the broadcasting model of networks entailed in projects like *Socrate*. The 'Five Star Movement' – *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S) – is a new political organization, created in 2009, which has rapidly become one of the main competitors of the so-called traditional political parties. Guided by a famous comedian, Beppe Grillo – who, curiously, based his earlier career on television shows – and by the techno-enthusiast Gianroberto Casaleggio, the M5S was founded with the idea that '*The Net – La Rete*' and the people who inhabit its environment have a unique possibility for direct democracy; in this process, the Web (or 'the Net' or 'the Internet' indiscriminately) is conceived as the selected instrument for a cultural revolution (Turner 2013) that will overthrow the corruption of the Italian political system and return decisive power to citizens. Furthermore, the M5S has consistently based its public communication on the contrast between the old hierarchical broadcasting model, represented by vertical traditional parties, and the distributed model characteristic of its

horizontal and bottom-up political organization. As Simone Natale and Andrea Ballatore have shown, this contrast is usually represented through a metaphoric war between the old broadcasting media (read ‘old politicians’) and the new networking structure of the Internet (read new generations or, ‘the People of the Net’ – *il Popolo della Rete*) (Natale and Ballatore 2014).

Notwithstanding the undeniable novelty and the initial achievements of the political activities of local groups throughout the territory (Diamanti 2014), the tension between the vertical and the horizontal models of organization has recently turned against the very structure of M5S; in fact, the authority of the top of the distributed network formed by citizens (a theoretical paradox by itself) – represented by Grillo, Casaleggio (who died recently and has been replaced by his son) and those members of the parliament who must take rapid decisions and ‘bring votes’ for M5S’ very survival – contrasts sharply with the direct and participative democratic principles professed by the movement itself. Curiously, the brief history of the M5S includes almost all the characters at the heart of this work. First, one of the biggest enemies of the M5S is Telecom Italia; especially during the first stage of his political career, Grillo criticized and attacked the Italian telecommunication company, condemning its incompetent leadership and its incapacity to provide Italy with an efficient broadband infrastructure.⁷ The M5S’ criticisms are mainly addressed to the economic *élite* who still control Telecom Italia by exploiting and taking personal advantage of the company’s investors. In Grillo’s view, the vertical and elitist organization of the company bears the main responsibility for ‘disconnected Italy’.⁸

Concurrently, the rhetoric and the narrative of change promoted by the M5S follows quite closely the political discourses of the *Iperbole* founder Stefano Bonaga. Actually, Bonaga has recently claimed that Grillo is bringing back his political programme of the mid-1990s, re-using in a trivialized way a twenty-year-old political paradigm. For his part, Grillo has never completely recognized this theoretical legacy.⁹

As happened to the Web in its late stage, the reticular model of the M5S is now dealing with centralization, a process that characterizes several forms of organization when they turn from an embryonic, chaotic, state to an institutionalized one. Centralization, as authors such as Barabási (2002) and Buchanan (2003) explain, is usually a process that takes place when networks extend and increase their internal complexity and their number of nodes; new strategic *hubs* for decision making are thus created to manage complexity and to organize networks when they extend and multiply their activities. According to these scientists, the more the network increases its number of nodes, the more communication and decision making processes are slowed down.

However, notwithstanding this tendency to centralization, social control over digital, but also political, networks can be still organized in a democratic way. An example is the Spanish city of Barcelona, which is trying to remunicipalize corporate power and protect citizens’ and municipal data as common goods, as public digital resources owned by the local and regional governments. These

kind of projects, that share many points in common with the story of *Iperbole* and the story of the *Digital Stadt* in Amsterdam, show that the key issue for local governments is how the complexity of the contemporary digital system can be handled by means of democratic processes and through transparent public decisions oriented towards the common interest. Challenging the network ideologies of our time, these projects show how the network structure is not the determining variable, but rather that social, political and cultural values, as much as more egalitarian and anti-capitalist policies and active citizenship, are the true core of the 'social' network.

In relation to the rapid growth of the M5S, one key question is why the old distributed network rhetoric has had such an impact on Italians. One hypothesis might be that the digital gap in Italy somehow facilitated and preserved the perception of novelty embedded in networking systems such as the Web and the Internet. However, there is another key point of connection between the broadcasting model, deeply embedded in the Italian imaginary, and the distributed one. Beppe Grillo, who came from the TV world, started his political activity using a blog, probably one of the most vertical communication platforms of the Web. According to the President of the Chamber of Deputies Roberto Fico:

The blog was a form of broadcasting, but it was also an authoritative source of information for us. Without the blog and without Beppe, none of this could have happened. (Roberto Fico, private communication, 24 September 2015).¹⁰

As this quote shows, a centralized-vertical form of communication and a distributed one still co-exist and shape each other; verticality and horizontality are not mutually exclusive.

These are only two historical examples of how network imaginaries not only contribute to the collective reception and representations of the so called 'new media' and their networking infrastructures, but also to social life, political actions, institutions and business strategies. Moreover, imaginaries are productive and dynamic; they combine elements from the past to create new ideas of the future insofar as they are also 'ways of representing the non-representable' (Klein 2013: 12).¹¹ In sum, they are powerful and creative, but they can also institutionalize and repurpose the ideas of the past in a different guise and often with a different – whether positive or negative – goal. However, a collective imaginary stubbornly oriented towards the *limitlessness* of networking systems may compromise the collective capacity to change and co-shape the future by means of informed collective and political actions. The supposed limitlessness of networks is the strength but also the Achilles's heel of network ideologies. In order to show the weakness of this deterministic stance it is thus essential to recognize the limits of networks so as to be aware of how these limits can be used and reframed to challenge the status quo and the oligopolistic dominance of the Internet today.

4.3 The Power of Limits

In *The Net Effect*, the media scholar Thomas Streeter stresses the deep impact of the network imaginary on the spread of the Internet during the 1990s. According to Streeter, the spread of the Internet was more a *consequence* of the collective imagination than a primary *cause* of change:

The fact is, the Internet that appeared in 1993–1995 period wasn't just a technology; it was the enactment of a hope. The changes of 1993–1995 were very much *anticipatory*, changes based on what people *imagined could happen*, not what had already happened. In the early 1990s, the Internet did not so much cause new things to happen as it served to inspire people to *imagine* that new things would happen. [...] Many of the things said and done in the name of the Internet in the 1990s we now know to be misjudgments, some of them colossal ones; those misjudgments, however, were not random. They were part of a pattern of shared collective vision, and that vision had an impact even if it was based on some shaky foundations. (Streeter 2011: 135)

As this work has tried to show, the imaginative power described by Streeter does not apply only to the Internet or to the Web, but to networks generally. The imaginaries of the Web and *Socrate* include both common and contrasting features, schemes and reference models. However, most importantly, these examples share a common faith in the realization of new societal organizations by means of networking systems and infrastructures.

Starting from the 1990s, contemporary retologies have claimed that networks – whether we call them the Internet, Web, clouds or even neural networks – cannot be dominated; they will autonomously continue to grow and flow, building up a future of global connectivity among humans. The media theorist Wendy Hui-Kyong Chun has recently taken one of the most extreme stances towards this idea. In her book *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (2016) Chun argues that we live in an individualistic world provoked by networks; the new media *promise* of a better future is interpreted by Chun as a *habitual form of thought* able to prevent alternative collective behaviours and real change. Theoretically, Chun's critical stance can be seen as an extremization of the 'banalization' of the sublime as described by Vincent Mosco, according to whom:

it is when technologies such as the telephone and the computer cease to be sublime icons of mythology and enter the prosaic world of banality – when they lose their role as sources of utopian vision – that they become important forces for social and economic change. (Mosco 2004:6).

In Chun's terms, technologies like the Internet, rather than becoming banalized, replicate and make *habitual* the sublime, forbidding the emergence of new

forms of resistance to the dominance of a neoliberal thought that exploits the very process of technological sublimation in order to spread endlessly, with no resistance. Although this work tends to agree with this critique, the constant sublimation of networks is interpreted here as a long-term phenomenon related to a network-centrism that is historically rooted in the delegation of power to specific structures and players. Rather than being situated in a recent paradigm, retiology is something that goes beyond the Internet-based media by embedding other media, sciences and societal structures.¹²

When it comes to digital networks such as the Web and *Socrate*, the idea that 'the structure is everything' (Berners-Lee 2000: 13) is combined with the idea that technology is in turn the foundational structure of social life, no matter whether it is centralized, as in the case of *Socrate*, or decentralized, like in the ideal promoted by the Web. In this regard, to look *beyond* networks means to acknowledge the social environments made of institutions, stakeholders, charismatic leaders and common users that create the narrative on which digital networks have been constructed, disseminated and re-interpreted over time. To do so, it is necessary to acknowledge that networks are not endless; they are always imagined and limited by people in different ways, by different socio-cultural and political contexts, and by spatial and time constraints. From a philosophical perspective, when it comes to network imaginaries, it is necessary to stress the seeming paradox that limitations are encompassed in the very idea of the 'unlimited' network. Accepting the infinite extensive propriety of networks means delegating the future to a technological and structural self-fulfillment. When interpreting the role and the impact of technology on society, a collective imaginary that chooses destiny and fate – rather than the complexity and incoherence that is embedded in the case studies analyzed so far – tends in fact to *limit itself*.

According to this perspective, one last assumption should be questioned and challenged to understand the importance of the imaginary for the construction of the network ideology, but also for the potential reinterpretation of the future and the past. It is a commonplace idea that imagination has no limits; nevertheless, human imagination needs to recognize a limit in order to imagine something that does not exist, but can happen in the future. To recall an expression adopted by the Telecom Italia manager Umberto de Julio, to accept the destiny and the self-fulfillment of networks means to leave people 'abandoned in the sea'; but humanity should instead navigate, so as to see, and to cross the horizon.

4.4 Beyond Networks

The 1990s represents a turning point in network histories. Indeed, this decade is commonly perceived as a watershed moment in the history of technology; it was a time when networks, together with computing and digital media, entered domestic spaces (and, in a second phase, individuals' pockets) and changed

drastically our social life. Events such as the birth of the Web and the launch of *Socrate* and *Iperbole* are respectively glorified as forgotten histories of this time. But notwithstanding social memory, they represent theoretical containers in which longstanding ideas of networking co-existed, converged and conflicted, penetrating and shaping both the social imaginary and reality. This process of imaginary appropriation of networking technologies took place thanks to a re-elaboration and a constant dialogue with the past, which in the present work has been illustrated by elements such as the familiar narrative tropes of the hero's journey; the constant reference to old media structures, functions and practices; the superimposition of pre-existing infrastructures upon new networks; the constant conceptual and pragmatic shifts between centralized, de-centralized and distributed models; and, last but not least, the unconditional faith in technology and technical innovation as the ultimate causes of change. However, the latter aspect is not a prerogative of networks. Past and contemporary ages share this belief – the belief in technology (and in turn in innovation and, especially, innovators) as change-makers. Today, this assumption allows big tech companies and powerful political and economic actors to promulgate and legitimize their hegemonic power. Hannah Arendt revealed this phenomenon better than anyone else in her masterpiece *The Human Condition*. According to Arendt:

[...] indeed, among the outstanding characteristics of the modern age from its beginning to our own time we find the typical attitudes of the *homo faber*: his instrumentalization of the world, his confidence in tools and in the productivity of the maker of artificial objects; his trust in the all-comprehensive range of the means-end category, his conviction that every issue can be solved and every human motivation reduced to the principle of utility; [...] finally, his matter-of-course identification of fabrication with action. (Arendt 1998: 305–306)

The parallel between fabrication and action is comparable to the equation between networking and social change lying at the foundations of the network ideologies. As media studies have long asserted, communication depends only in part on the capacity of the means to reduce distance, time and the weight of messages. Instead, what network ideologies have professed so far, with the voluntary or non-voluntary contribution of inventors, politicians, scientists and stakeholders, is a world in which connectivity *is* communication and, even more relevant, networking *is* action. To understand the extent to which action has been historically delegated to technological structures and infrastructures is a first essential step towards a renewed human-centred vision that maintains a critical distance from the idealistic utopia of a promised net, an imaginary network that never existed.

There is much work ahead for historians and social scientists, as there is still space for new narratives that will be essential to the construction of an

informed and productive social imaginary. In this sense, an effective study of network histories would feed a renewed perception of the past and the future. An overview of the diverse trajectories of the Web and other network histories, from the very beginning up until their global spread, would provide an interpretative set of tools able to avoid a huge risk: that of losing the collective and individual capacity to re-read history. Thus it should become possible to change, juxtapose and challenge its dominant narratives and, most importantly, to wisely write down the future, and the role, of networking technologies in our societies.

Notes

- ¹ AT: ‘The soul imagines what it does not see, what that tree, that hedge, that tower hides to it, and it goes astray in an imaginary space, and things are formed that could not be if its vision is extended everywhere, because the real would exclude the imaginary.’
- ² In Marxist terms, the base and the superstructure become inseparable.
- ³ OT: Oggi, aldilà della problematica tecnica, la rete è diventata una soluzione al caos, al disordine e alle strutture dissipative. La rete è una rete di sicurezza per non pensare ai grandi problemi della scienza contemporanea. Per me siamo al limite di questo pensiero che è stato molto forte a lungo per causa del management, che a partire dall’ingegneria, continua a difendere quest’idea di rete. Secondo me però siamo al limite, abbiamo bisogno di nuove figure e forme a cui pensare oggi. La rete è una rete di salvataggio, un meccanismo di difesa dall’incertezza ed è un modo per comprendere la complessità della società, del cervello, dell’organismo. La rete permette, come Norbert Elias aveva ben visto, di legare e separare. È un modo per separare e legare, come dice Sherry Turkle ‘insieme ma soli’. Per pensare questa società spezzata la rete è una figura utile ma per me è troppo utilizzata. È più difficile pensare all’incertezza, al caos, è più difficile pensare alla complessità. Invece, la rete dà ordine.
- ⁴ Besides the works of English-speaking authors, French-speaking scholars such as Benjamin Loveluck (2016), and Italian scholars such as Andrea Miconi (2014) offer interesting and theoretically nuanced contributions to the analysis of power and hierarchical structures embedded in networked cultures.
- ⁵ Authors such as Hindman, Tsioutsoulis and Johnson (2003) talk about *Googlehierarchy*.
- ⁶ Almost two decades ago, Berners-Lee himself expressed his concerns about the possible development of the Web, especially towards the possible evolution of the semantic Web, one of the key projects subsumed by Internet giants such as Google. According to him: ‘The Semantic Web, like the Web already, will make many things previously impossible just obvious. As I

write about the new technology, I do wonder whether it will be a technical dream or a legal nightmare.' (Berners-Lee 2000: 198)

⁷ E.g., in 2006 Grillo organized a campaign to demand the resignation of Telecom Italia's CEO and senior executives. See: <http://www.beppegrillo.it/shareaction/> (Accessed 20 January 2020)

⁸ E.g., see several posts on Grillo's blog against Telecom Italia written between 2005 and 2007: http://www.beppegrillo.it/2006/05/litalia_disconn.html (Accessed 20 January 2020)

⁹ A video shared on Youtube shows Bonaga and Grillo debating this issue in Bologna. Grillo claims 'I know you did this stuff, and I'm grateful to you for this. Still, 20 years ago the Internet did not even exist.' See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xu2aHsYqusA> (Accessed 20 January 2020)

¹⁰ OT: 'Il blog era una forma di broadcasting, ma era anche una fonte di informazione autorevole per noi. Senza il blog e senza Beppe tutto questo non sarebbe potuto accadere.'

¹¹ OT: 'C'est un mode de représentation de l'irreprésentable.'

¹² In the first half of the last century, social theorists such as Georg Simmel (1976) and Robert K. Merton (1976) already tried to highlight the kinky side of modern individualistic cultures based on vertical structures. Even if they did not mention networks – and notwithstanding their antipodal approaches – such scholars criticized the perverse effects that structures such as the networked metropolis and the vertical ideal promoted through the self-made-man model have on societies.