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EDITORIAL

A Decentralized Sociology for Digital Society

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As we continue our reflections about and for the digital society, it is important to be reminded that the 'elements' of said society include more than just humans *using* digital devices. A digital society is also composed of technical artefacts with varying degrees of agency, institutions, and nature, as the scope and range of discussions appearing in this journal testify.

That society's composition goes beyond human beings, and their individual and group dynamics, is no news and is well documented and theorized in sociology. Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT) (Latour, 2005) is an eloquent example of how to enlarge the basket of what legitimately belongs to a society. Simply put, in his view, society is a network composed of *actants*, from humans to natural elements, and does not presuppose a privileged position of humans within the network. Notwithstanding the influence of Latour's thinking and his legacy in the social studies of science, it is fair to say that other domains still conceptualize any enlarged societal network as having a clearly identified center: us, human beings. This view, moreover, is possibly still dominant in the public understanding of society, actively shaping our relations with other human beings, nature, and artefacts.

But scholarship in the humanities and social sciences has long challenged our centrality. We may recall again Latour, who in *Facing Gaia* (Latour, 2017) expressed the consequences of this for climate change matters. And it is worth recalling the work of 'multispecies anthropologists' (Descolas, 2013; Kohn, 2013; Tsing, 2015; Viveiros de Castro, 2014) too, who have contributed to redesigning the contours of the discourse on 'man', which is not pivoted on the human in isolation, but rather on the human in its relations and interactions with nature and with artefacts.

We thus come to the very concept of a digital society, which should not be a reproduction of our old anthropocentric concept of society, simply updated and applied to the digital era. Rather, the digital revolution, as discussed by

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philosophers of information (Floridi, 2014; Russo, 2018), comes with deep ontological, epistemological, and ethico-political changes. Part of these changes not only concern how to *understand* our role and positioning in a network including artefacts as well as nature, but how we should *leverage* this new understanding of our role and position within the system to maintain and possibly improve the infosphere that we inhabit.

A striking tension between these 'decentralised' sociologies and anthropologies and the regulatory effort for the digital society becomes apparent. In regulatory and legal documents, we humans remain the center of the discourse, the center of interest, and of attention. It is in this spirit that the EU is developing directives and regulations for a *human-centered* AI. And when arguments are made for the urgency to counteract climate change, it is for its threats on *human* health and well-being. Knowledge and legal frameworks produced in the Global West and Global North constantly put the human, and a quite specific type of human, at the center—again a view that is challenged in areas such as decolonization and feminist studies (Haraway, 2008; Ludwig et al., 2021; Roothaan, 2019).

Now, an approach such as ANT correctly *describes* flat networks, in which actants of different natures, and even hybrids co-habit and interact with one another. However, I submit, that the network is not flat anymore if we look at it from a more normative perspective. In fact, all actants are not equal if consider them from the perspective of responsibility and of care. Or, differently put, whilst we are not at the center of the network, we do have more responsibility than others within it. There is, in fact, an important asymmetry between centrality and responsibility. The philosophy of information has long argued that we humans have lost our central position as the sole organisms capable of processing information—this is, in essence, the digital revolution. But it remains true that we are the informational organisms (or, *inforgs*) that, more than any others, impact, affect, and alter, the infosphere. Whilst no longer central in a network, we possess an advantaged amount of power to influence and affect any other actants in the network whether informational or not. And from this, we hold responsibility not only towards ourselves and other human beings, but towards the environment at large. We are the ones producing knowledge and regulations, and this automatically puts us in a privileged position, but we should use this privilege not to re-assert, time and again, our centrality, but rather to ensure that the network, an enlarged eco-socio-technical system, is properly taken care of. Our poietic power thus come with great responsibility, and to repeat, does not entail centrality.

It is worth contextualizing this claim about power and responsibility with respect to the feminist and decolonial scholarship mentioned above, which has long tried to deconstruct the centrality of humans, and specifically of the white supremacist, capitalist, and patriarchal model. But in the context of regulatory and engineering practices, it is not enough to denounce and deconstruct. We need to proactively construct and promote alternative values. What is at stake is more than 'plugging in' the right values in the artefacts (analogue or digital), it is precisely to change the perspective (epistemological, methodological, and normative) that is foundational to our engineering, scientific, regulatory practices. This, I submit, is the idea of a decentralized sociology for the digital society.

The digital society is not for the future; it is already here. So, thinking about a decentralized sociology is urgently needed work to embed in our regulatory and engineering practices. How to do so is the challenge to address. Sustainability science is, in this case, a role model, because it has strived to integrate in scientific and regulatory processes different angles and perspectives (Caniglia et al., 2023). Not just the position of Global North/West scientists vs the position of indigenous people, but all of this in the context of an eco-system, in which humans co-habit, respect, and care for Nature. As the digital society blurs the boundaries between nature and artificial, it is high time to use our privileged position *not* to reclaim more rights as technologies advance in their sophistication (and, in light of current discussions about generative AI, also in their dangers), but to identify and, most importantly, perform the *duties* we have to our network(s).

This is a fundamental reflection that, I think, must go hand in hand with an interrogation of the values promoting technological innovations. Innovations for what? For whom? If we retain our central position, the digital society will resemble the old society, just with more digital artefacts and an increasing level of digitalized processes. Worse even, if we don't radically decentralize our position in the digital society, digitalized processes, and their associated regulations, will provide the conditions to ossify the unjust relations and systems of domination that come from an anthropocentric view of society that are already present. It is high time to take seriously the valuable scholarship produced in the humanities and social sciences, and to work towards a transition to a *new, decentralized* concept of a 'digital society'. It requires both bottom-up and top-down strategies, substantially rethinking, education and training at all levels, as well as revising our legal provisions. *Digital Society* —it is my hope—can be a hub for reflecting and fostering such change.

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Declarations

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