



Geopolitics of Chaos: Internationalization, Cybercul- ture & Political Chaos

By **Ignacio Ramonet**. (translated from
French by Andrea Lyn Sacara).
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Reviewed by: Felix Stalder
Faculty of Information Studies,
University of Toronto.
<http://www.fis.utoronto.ca/~stalder>

Geopolitics of Chaos is a collection of nine essays. Some of these have originally been published in the monthly *Le Monde Diplomatique*, one of the leading European political journals of the left, where Ramonet serves as editor-in-chief. In these essays Ramonet diagnoses four interrelated crises: intellectual, economic, political and cultural.

The intellectual crisis is manifest in the hegemony of what Ramonet calls *la pensée unique*, a phrase inadequately translated as "politically correct thinking". However, what it really means is "homogenized thinking", or as it has been translated elsewhere, One Idea System [1]. The one idea system is characterized by the belief in the Market as the solution to all problems. Alain Minc, who introduced the term information society to the western discourse in the late 1970s, formulates the one idea as: "Capitalism cannot break down, it is the natural state of society. Democracy is not the natural state of society, the market is." (quoted p. 81). Endlessly repeated through the mass media, from the Wall Street Journal to the CNNfn, the One Idea System brushes away social concerns as sentimental or even counter productive. Naturalized as "realism" or "pragmatism" the system has effectively insulated itself against any critique and has achieved a hegemonic status, accepted by politicians of all flavor.

Under the impact of a forced globalization, under guidance of organizations like the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (the former GATT), the economic crisis deepens for all but the few winners. For larger and larger segments of the population, even within the industrial world, this means long-term unemployment or labour without insurance or benefits at minimum wages which are constantly sinking under the pressure of the global division of labour. The result are what Manuel Castells calls "black holes of informational capitalism", regions from where there is, statistically speaking, no escape from suffering and deprivation [2]. The Maastricht Treaty, for example, which set the timetable for the launch of the Euro, the new European single currency, imposed an austerity program on all signatory governments with devastating social consequences: 20 million people unemployed, 50 million reduced to poverty of which 10 million live below the poverty line of 60FF per day (-US\$10), localized in the *banlieu*, the social ghettos at the outskirts of all major European cities.

The political crisis effects from the encroachment of the nation-state by global financial markets, whose power can no longer be controlled through the institutions of the liberal democracy, and free trade agreements which effectively limited the state's power to conduct an independent economic and social policy. More and more vital decisions are made entirely outside the influence of democratic institutions. In effect, decision-making has been privatized. The economic and political crisis are deeply related, "because misery is an insult to human rights, such large scale shredding of the social fabric destroys a certain conception of the republic itself" (p. 84).

The inclusion of culture into the globalizing economy leads to the creation of a global culture of commodified consumerism, dominated by American media conglomerates. The result is an homogenization and Americanization previously distinct (European) cultures.

The essays present a European perspective with a distinct French twist: the view of the nation-state as the embodiment of rationality, the concern for the welfare state as the essential framework of an inclusive democracy, the anxiety of losing one's sense of history and culture under the onslaught of global capitalism, which is viewed as something, by and large, foreign.

Some of the essays are excellent, particularly *The Rise of the Irrational* (pp.87-100) highlights brilliantly the connections between global capitalism and the re-birth of occult thinking. However, over the length of a book Ramonet's essayistic style reveals some limitations. The statements are too sweeping and each essays addresses all four crisis at once, thus there is a certain repetitiveness in the book as a whole. But the most problematic aspects is that Ramonet seem entrenched in a backwards nostalgia of strong but rational and benevolent state institutions upholding purified national cultures, moral values and the utopia of prosperity for everyone. All this is waning and is being replaced, according to Ramonet, by chaos and desperation. In form of a single essay, such a dire view can serve as a wake-up call, repeated in 9 essays, it leave one wanting for at least one ray of hope. But Ramonet doesn't offer much, because his view, particularly on culture, is too simplistic. The Internet, for example, is simply deepening the homogenization of culture brought by TV. Mass culture, which destroyed the Republic of Letters, is nothing but "an enormous quantity of messages that are constantly destroying each other, scrambling and garbling, transforming themselves into 'noise'" (p.145). This is particularly wanting for a book that carries *Cyberculture* in its subtitle.

The book, nevertheless, is a forceful reminder of the blindspots of mainstream (American) discourse, but the \$21.75 might as well be invested in a subscription to *Le Monde Diplomatique*, which is now also available in English. ♦

[1] Ramonet, Igancio. (1995). *One Idea System* (translated by Patrice Riemens). CTheory. http://www.ctheory.com/e-one_idea_system.html

[2] Castells, Manuel (1998). *The End of the Millennium, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Vol. III. Cambridge, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

