Sociology as a system of knowledge is context bound; historically embedded in a matrix of power relations. Sociological truth, in its complexity, cannot be advanced if the discourse of intellectuals conforms to a self-reproducing closed loop of hidden assumptions. However, the political problem of truth making extends beyond Karl Popper’s (1945, 1959) devotion to free and open communication, and his sceptical view of social change. To the contrary, the ultimate moral imperative for intellectuals remains rooted in the question: “who or what benefits” from the rigorous pursuit of truth.

It follows that before fashioning an argument, we contemplate for a moment the insight attributed to Mahatma Gandhi. To paraphrase: “Before asking the questions of human existence, first bring to mind an image of the most miserable person of your experience, and ask yourself whether what you are proposing is of any value to him (Freely cited in Alan Durning, 1990). What is termed herein, “the cybernetic revolution” is inextricably bound with questions of economic, political and social development; with peace and war; with exploitation and sustainability; with repression and freedom; with wealth and power. But its consequential worth will be judged by the standard of Gandhi’s higher truth.
Totalitarianism Old and New

In the now dated lexicon of cold war ideology, the term totalitarianism symbolized the maximal authoritarianism of a politically organized state, designed to control both the outer and inner dimensions of human existence. Embodied in post-war Orwellian imagery, the Stalinist state (among other political archetypes) was seen to exercise hegemony by means of the crude apparatus of regime terror and relentless propaganda. Although the imagery was transformed in the era of Khrushchev and his successors, at its core a heavily Americanized vision of bipolarity prevailed.

Bipolarity artificially divided the world into falsely fixed and immutable dichotomies - of command and market economies, of powerless masses and democracy, of state domination and the countervailing forces of civil society (Perdue, 1995: vii - xix). In the aftermath of Soviet world collapse, those who had embraced the orthodoxy of bipolarity rushed to declare a new dogma: that of unipolarity. Francis Fukuyama trumpeted the end of history and the triumph of “liberal democracy.” The arrogance had come full circle. Whether by transforming the world into two competing great power factions, or by declaring the victory of the West, the dominant paradigm of global relations had consigned the peoples of the South (and many others) to non-being. Alternative conceptions of authentic development and institution building, of values and ethics, were and continue to be, dismissed by ideological fiat.

It is the intention of this paper to advance the discourse of hegemony beyond the epistemological limitations of (1) political conceptions of totalitarian state coercion and (2) Gramscian views (1971) of class based ideological domination realized through the well-known institutions of civil society. In its essential form, the premise here is that the structural and ideological forces of globalization have transformed and weakened the institutions of both state and
civil society. This is not to say that such topics are unimportant for the political sociologist and philosopher. It is simply that these constructs are fitted for an earlier era and are thus the premises of yesterday’s debate.

This criticism applies also to the work of Jurgen Habermas (1973). The legitimation thesis, with its inherently statist assumptions, deals more with the consequences of global systemic crisis than with antecedent forces. Habermas, following the critical underpinnings of the Frankfurt School, recasts the Weberian problem of authority or legitimated power. He argues that state intervention in Western societies is historically grounded in the consensual claims of representative and parliamentary democracy.

In the most elementary form of legitimation crisis, state policy and action are sanctioned by voting rituals. Such political camouflage becomes transparent with declines in voting participation by powerless citizens who otherwise act in a largely private sphere. Further, in seeking to resolve the myriad of contradictions of interest and expectations, the state faces a dual dilemma. On the one hand, public resources are stretched to the breaking point. On the other, public planning and intervention infringes upon the insularity of civil privatism.

With due respect to one of the most influential works of the twentieth century, I argue that: above and beyond what Habermas would explain as the legitimation crisis of Western states - is a systemic crisis on a world scale (Perdue, 1993). It follows that the critique of hegemony in the twenty-first century cannot be restricted by Western state prototypical assumptions. These by necessity ascribe undue significance to territoriality and frontiers; as well as to social and national movements of the domestic sphere. In our era, the dictum of C.Wright Mills (1959) - that private troubles should not be disconnected from public issues - must be rethought. A new quality of mind, a new imagination, is necessary to grasp the essence of hegemonic crisis at the global/systemic level.
The Global System and Cyber hegemony

In contemporary sociology, the conception of international relations and state-based geopolitics has been transcended by the concept of a global system. The processes of globalization cannot be explained by recourse to paradigms rooted in conceptions of nations, states and societies. The fundamental process is economic/financial as exemplified in the world integrated structure of transnational corporations, banks and stock markets. According to the World Bank, the total value of world exports stood at 94 billion U.S.D. in 1965. By 1986, that figure had increased by some 1300% to 1365 billion U.S.D., and by 1996, an estimated 5,400 billion (Abercrombie, et.al.1994: 184; Time Almanac, 1999: 151.) The globalization of production, pioneered by transnational corporations - separates research, development, design, manufacture and marketing from national economies. More than twenty years ago, social scientists began to notice that the revenues of the largest TNC’s exceeded the total national income of smaller countries. Of course, TNC’s are primarily located in the United States, Western Europe and Japan; the three economic superpowers that account for virtually 50% of gross world product (Time Almanac, 1999: 150).

In the global structural context, the mega corporations of hyper developed economies now rely on cyber power to manage the flow of instantaneous transnational capital and currency; to effect the systemic integration of global markets; and to disseminate world communication and economic information (including proprietary data bases) which drive decisions of investment and commerce. Modern industry increasingly relies on computer assisted design and production. And the projection of martial force on a world stage is facilitated by the means to dominate the electronic battlefields of the modern
era. Under such conditions, the human faces of those who are targeted by computer aided guidance systems are not seen, and the suffering of civilians is mystified by such euphemisms as “collateral damage.”

Globalization is not restricted to the productive sphere. Transnational media and telecommunications corporations, wire services and the explosion of the World Wide Web, together signal the modernization of ideological hegemony. The interrelated doctrines of growth, free trade, an international division of labour and markets, and hyper consumption permeate national cultures and psychological consciousness. Unless one happens to live in technological isolation, the inner world of consciousness, beliefs and values, is shaped by the global media of distraction and distortion. The development and diffusion of technology with marketing, advertising and consumption applications, is of particular concern. Such forces strike at the core of traditional cultures and alternative values, seeking in their place a new metaphorical paradise; one resembling a homogeneous, global, electronic shopping mall.

Thus at the cultural/ideological level, the coming integration of television programming, on-line consumption and technical forms of education by means of the world wide web compel social scientists and philosophers to attempt the reconstruction of ideological hegemony. It is essential to realize that those denied broad internet access will find that judgments about technological backwardness are easily transformed into stereotypes about cultural illiteracy. The whole array of ideological messages may flow more or less “one way” from the overdeveloped, hyper consumptive nations to their developing counterparts in the South; all of this occurring under the flag of “progress.”

Finally, technology implies power relations, in both its introduction and dissemination. In the information nexus of the post-modern world, the
exemplar of techno civilization is the cybernetic crucible of computing power - of multimedia, virtual reality, and the world wide web; of computer assisted design and of multiple and independently targeted re-entry missiles. At a more general level, the global system is producing and reproducing transnational managerial elite, sometimes referred to as the compradors of societies in the South. Whatever the hemisphere or stage of development, and whatever the economic, financial or political sector, the social relations of the new global elite are founded in a shared commitment to growth based modernization. If we refocus on what I have termed cyber hegemony, a particularly striking example may be considered.

**The Microsoft World**

*The fully developed information highway will be affordable - almost by definition...The net effect will be a wealthier world, which should be stabilizing. Developed nations, and workers in those nations, are likely to maintain a sizable economic lead. However, the gap between the have and have-not nations will diminish.* - William Gates, CEO, Microsoft Corporation.

In the fourth quarter of 1998, the total value of shares held in Microsoft Corporation came to surpass that of General Electric. This propelled the Seattle, Washington software giant into the top position among publicly held U.S. corporations. In its March 15, 1999 issue, Fortune Magazine estimated the value of stock held by co-founder and CEO William Gates alone at 76 billion U.S.D, with another 11.5 billion in his personal account and two large foundations (Serwer, 1999: 68, 70). This sum is almost 30 billion in excess of the 1996 GDP (adjusted for purchasing power parity) of the nation of Ireland. In a similar vein, Gates’ personal fortune is equal to 50% of the 1996 Gross Domestic Product/PPP of Austria, over twice that of Libya, and 80% that of Finland. More striking, Bill Gate’s individual wealth approximates
the combined GDP/PPP of the sixteen nations of Angola, Chad, Burundi, Bhutan, Benin, Botswana, Niger, Eritrea, the Central African Republic, Burkino Faso, Nicaragua, Haiti, Laos, Mali, Rwanda and Somalia (Time Almanac, 1999: 164-332)). This exponential explosion of wealth and cyber power is remarkable for the CEO of a corporation that went public only twelve years ago.

Under such circumstances, it is easy to understand why William Gates sees the information highway as the path to progress. However, from a critical perspective, the case of Microsoft Corporation can be conceived as an exemplar of concentrated ownership of the means of cyber-hegemony; yet another stage in technological apartheid within the post-industrial global system. Microsoft is thus simultaneously a microcosm for higher systemic forces, and a metaphor for new forms of hegemony. It is difficult to overstate the significance of the post-industrial revolution exemplified by Microsoft. Knowledge and information processing at present amounts to sixty percent of the U.S. economy (Time Almanac, 1999: 554),

**A Heuristic Critique**

This brief argument can be concisely re-examined by means of a heuristic and sensitizing critique; informed by a continuing self-conscious attempt to look at the cyber world from a South perspective.

1. **The Error of Unintended Consequences**: The systemic nature of global relations, transformed by the interdependence and speed of the cybernetic revolution, magnifies the error of unintended consequences by many orders of magnitude.
2. **Cyber dependency**: As a corollary of the first error, cyber technology has propelled the integration of world financial and currency markets to a disturbing stage. What we see today is the globalization of the hair trigger, where absolutist and totalistic decisions are made in a brief, if not instantaneous moment. In the cyber world, there is little time for discriminate, cautious and qualified decision making - with due regard for consequences. When the new technology is used by speculators to affect a run on a nation’s currency, the same technology facilitates the rapid disinvestment by external capital. As recently demonstrated in the Asian nations of the Pacific Rim, the ripple of crisis soon cascades throughout a region with local authorities impotent to act. Currency devaluation and hyperinflation are not abstract forces. The decline in purchasing power translates into increasing levels of human misery.

3. **The Higher Alienation**. There is a social psychological dimension to this brave new world wide web. It is a means for further transforming social relations among human subjects into objective relations among strangers. Following Jean Baudrillard (1981 passim), social relations are transformed into simulations; society becomes surreal; and interpersonal interaction is impoverished. Human existence is confined to the artificiality of the electronic gesellschaft.

4. **The Closed Loop**. Scientific and intellectual development depends on the *sharing* of knowledge. The ideology of Northern democracy often dismisses crucial problems associated with the proprietary nature of knowledge in hyper developed societies. Expressed in the conflict over intellectual property rights, cybernetic advances are transformed into carefully guarded secrets. Truth is thus compromised by the constraining imperatives of growth and profit. Paranoid conceptions of national defense also sustain this closed
loop of information technology - a thought world impervious to alternative input.

**Conclusion**

The prime difference between critique and cynicism is found in the implications for hope and action. Heraclitus noted that we do not step in the same river twice. If the only constant is change, this principle does not apply only to science, technology, and wisdom. It applies also to power relations.

I am not proposing a new Luddite rebellion, or any such attempt to somehow stop the cybernetic revolution. Such fears would simply reproduce the errors of technological determinism. However, if we can identify the darker side of the forces we confront, perhaps we can more effectively speak for the unheard. To illustrate, the alternative to the error of unintended consequences, is thoughtful and careful consideration of decisions, and an end to hair trigger action by global opportunists and short-term profiteers. This means that those who stand to be directly impacted by external decisions must have a voice. Those who drive investment and trade must share power with those who open their economies and who provide the labour and resources.

As to the question of cyber dependency, the cybernetic revolution cannot be divorced from the wider context of world-systemic inequality. William Gates’ call for cheaper hardware and software, as well as wider access to the information superhighway is more clearly beneficial to the development of Microsoft than the development of the South. The contradiction originates with the modernization model. In keeping with that model, poorer nations have historically been required to borrow money in order to purchase the ever expanding technologies that promise to reduce the gap between rich and poor. Our experience thus far, is that the resultant global debt burden has been a more
certain consequence than the narrowing of the North/South gap. The debt burden is deadly for the weakest members of the world’s peoples. It should be systematically forgiven, not reproduced in the name of a new liberation.

This does not mean there are no potential benefits for the South. Cyber technology will continue to facilitate scientific growth and rapid communication through the collapse of time and space. However, for these forces to benefit the many, it is the technology that must ultimately be liberated - from monopoly, from commodification, from hyper consumption and from martial force. Let the word go forth that the ordinary peoples, who share this planet, await a global revolution in universal values. And that chief among these are peace, social justice, the preservation of nature, cultural diversity and the respect for human dignity.

However, the quest for such values can only be tested in the crucible of concrete action. Peace demands systematic, global disarmament; social justice mandates an end to the debt burden, trade embargoes and the bias of unequal exchange; the preservation of nature requires sustaining the environment, not its simple reduction to resources; cultural diversity means fair Southern access to global media discourse and the right to preserve indigenous heritage; and the imperative of humanism is that no one life, or people, or hemisphere - is born to domination or submission. Perhaps a fitting close to my argument is found in the paraphrasing of a question that unites the world’s great religions and philosophies: “What shall it profit, if a person gains the whole world, but loses his own soul?
Bibliography


