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The age of landslides

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I

In his book the “Age of the Extremes” the English historian Eric Hobsbawm named the last quarter of the passed century the “time of landslide”. For him, this was the period after the golden age of Fordism and its central characteristic was an economic one: The triumph of neoliberalism and its main project of privatization of formely state, public or social properties:

1. Huge sectors of the traditional public infrastructure (energy, water, traffic, education, communication, culture) were privatized and the transformation of the state property into private property in a large part of the world has led for the first time in history to a truly global totality of capitalist property conditions;
2. Secondly, there is a total new quality of privatization – the proprietarization of nature (“patenting life”);
3. And thirdly, there is the commodification of the processes of production, circulation and distribution of immaterial goods (knowledge, culture, information, data). A huge volume of intellectual property rights came into being in just three decades.

[Let me give you just one example. It is hard to believe but up until 1998, the law of the United States belonged to an American company, the West publishing house. West, in effect, owned the American law. Well - the opinions of the US Federal Court and of the other courts surely belonged to the public domain and could be published by all of them time and again. But the company possessed the copyright on the paginization of the court cases. Whoever wanted to quote had to quote the page numbers, and these reference numbers were owned by a private company. In 1998, their earnings thereof came to 1.3 billion \$.]

As you all know, the Internet is the most important example for this new commodification.

Four decades ago the Internet came into being as a non-commodified and public artefact. In a second phase its physical or material transmitting infrastructure was privatized and became a commodity. At present, we are in the midst of a third periode: the commodification of content. The information and communication function of the Internet is changing now, Net content is becoming more and more private intellectual property.

Thus we can see the same development as we witnessed with other media in the past, such as the radio or TV.

And the Internet is not just a distribution medium like radio or TV: as a “general medium” the Internet exists within all important so-cial systems of our society. It is the new universal and core tech-nology of global capitalism, it has become the required condition of the technical base the now postfordist capitalism has developed on a global scale. Its function is to make possible the globalization of the postfordist capitalism. The internet functions as a “general medium” (Karl Marx), paralleling money in the field of commo-dities. Battling over over the privatization and commodification of the Internet means struggling over the ownership and control of the core technology of the globalized capitalism in the future.

This new extension of the private property form characterized by Eric Hobsbawn as a “landslide” stands in the center of the histori-cal project of the transformation of the world into a commodity.

It has been described with reference to the historical privatization of the common land as the second great enclosure movement aim-ing at the enclosure of till now public and shared intellectual property and including non-economic natural goods like genetic informations.

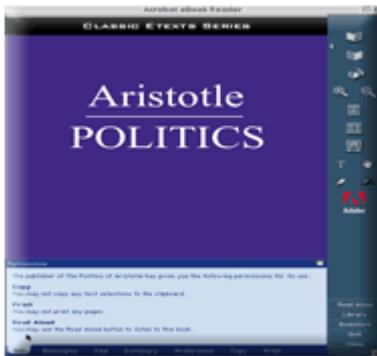
The first enclosure movement started in the late 15th century in England. During the following decades, about 4000 laws, acts and ordinances in the English parliament were passed which effected the appropriation of approx. 7 million acres of common land. About two thirds of this terrain consisted of fields owned by farm-ers till then, the remainder included woods and moorland.

At the time around 1876, half of the agrarian soil of England and Wales was owned by a mere 2 250 persons. This was the result of the first enclosure movement.

The second enclosure movement has just started. This landslide has just begun. You can see this landslide in every country in Europe and beyond; just have a look at the website of the World Bank called “Private Sector Development” or at George W. Bush’s speech at West Point in June 2002: For Bush, “the respect for... private property” is “non-negotiable”. And if we look around we can see that there is a global struggle here: The fight for a public or private form of the new digital property.

But there is a prehistory of this second enclosure movement.

In 1710 there was a statute in England which said that copyright should be limited for 14 years. This statute only controlled print-ing. How many people had printers? You could do what you wanted with these works. All things protected were free code. You could take the works of Shakespeare



and read the source--the source was the book. There was Transparency. You didn't need the per-mission of someone else to take a product, to use it and build upon it.

14 Years – this was 1710.

In 1790 it went to 28 years, then in 1831 it went to 42, then in 1909 it went to 56, and then since 1962, the american congress has extendend the copyrights for existing works eleven times. In 1976 it went to 76 years and in 1998 a new Copyright Extension Act tried to extend it to 98 years.

The Idea of this is: culture is nothing but proprietary code. If you want to use it, you get under control. It`s not only about produc-tion or invention. It`s about use. It is not about printing, but it is about reading.

Let me give you an example for this, I stole it from a wonderful article of Lawrence Lessig. Here's my Adobe eBook Reader. Here's George Eliot`s (Mary Anne Evans) Middle March; this is a work in the public domain. Here are the "permissions" that you can do with this work in the public domain: You are allowed to copy ten selections into the clipboard every ten days and you can print ten pages of this 938 pages page book every ten days, and you are allowed to feel free to use the read-aloud button to listen to this book. Now, Aristotle's Politics, another book in the public domain [that was] never really protected by copyright, but with this book, you can't copy any text into the selection, you can't print any pages, but feel free to listen to this book aloud.

The point is that control is built into the technology. Never has culture been more controlled ever. Never in our history have fewer people controlled more of the evolution of our culture. Never.

And here is what a certain Bill Gates wrote about software pat-ents: "If people had understood how patents would be granted when most of today's ideas were invented and had taken out pat-ents, the industry would be at a complete standstill today." I am sure that you all 100 percent agree with this. But for Gates, this is a problem. And he has an idea how to solve this problem: "The so-lution is patenting as much as we can. A future startup with no patents of its own will be forced to pay whatever price the giants choose to impose. That price might be high. Established compa-nies have an interest in excluding future competitors."

II

But there is more to come. I am not quite sure yet, but I suspect there is another landslide on its way.

Tony Judt described this development in the New York Review of Books in terms of a new global divide: "Our world is divided in many ways: rich/poor; North/South; Western/non-Western. But more and more, the division that counts is the one separating America from everyone else." Paul Kennedy, the author of the book "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers", stated only some weeks ago: "Nothing has ever existed like this disparity of power; nothing." Suddenly, the position of Europe has changed: "Welcome to the rest of the world" (Bello).

If you have fundamental doubts about this, just have a look at the new „National Security Strategy of the United States of America”, published on 17th September 2002 or read the article "American Primacy in Perspective" in: Foreign Affairs by Brooks / Wohlforth. They are convinced: "The United States has no rival in any critical dimension of power."

The global control of media and information systems is one of these critical dimensions of power. The new grand strategy of the present Bush Administration is not only about global military superiority and preemptive actions or about preventive military strikes. It is also about securing the new global disparity within a wide spectre of power-relations, and in this view (and it is more or less the view of the present neoconservative American government) the disparity of communication power is one of the most important global inequalities which has to be maintained in the interest of something, which more and more has been named an "American Empire". And if we talk about a new global disparity of communication power, we must take into account that in the last decade a major turning point was reached in the realm of media.

Whereas media systems had been primarily national before the 1990s, a global commercial media market has emerged. In many ways the emerging global media system is an extension of the U.S. system, and its political economy and culture shares many of the attributes of this system. The global media market has come to be dominated by seven multinational corporations: Disney, AOL-Time Warner, Sony, News Corporation, Viacom, Vivendi, and Bertelsmann. Of the seven, only three are truly U.S. firms, though all of them have core operations there. These seven companies own the major U.S. film studios (and the global film industry is the province of seven firms); all but one of the U.S. television networks; the global music industry is dominated by five firms, all but one of which (EMI) belong to this group; the preponderance of satellite broadcasting worldwide; a significant percentage of book publishing and commercial magazine publishing; all or part of most of the commercial cable TV channels in the U.S. and worldwide; a significant portion of European terrestrial (traditional over-the-air) television. The global media market is rounded out by a second tier of four or five dozen firms that are national or regional powerhouses, or which have strong holds over niche markets, such as business or trade publishing. About one-half of these second-tier firms come from North America. In combination, these sixty or seventy giants

control much of the world's media: book publishing, magazine publishing, music recording, newspaper publishing, TV show production, TV station and cable channel ownership, cable/satellite TV system ownership, film production, motion picture theater ownership, and newspaper publishing.

What does this mean? Let's see what an internal memo from Michael Eisner, CEO of The Walt Disney Corp. says: "We have no obligation to make history. We have no obligation to make art. We have no obligation to make a statement. To make money is our only objective. [quoted from Mickey Mouse Monopoly-Disney, Childhood & Corporate Power]. Blair Levin, a telecommunications industry analyst with Legg Mason who was chief of staff to Clinton's FCC chair Reed Hundt, says it's a question of pure economics: "If you own the pipe, you can make a certain amount of money," he says. "If you own the pipe and the content, you can make more money." "It's a question of who owns the customer--who gets the customer dollar and how it's divided up between the different content providers: cable, digital, movie studios and the recording industry".

A whopping three-quarters of global spending on advertising ends up in the pockets of a mere twenty media companies. The coordinators of this \$350 billion industry are five or six super-ad agency owning companies that have emerged in the past decade to dominate totally the global trade.

"Advertising is the art of arresting the human intelligence just long enough to get money from it." - [Chuck Blore, a partner in the advertising firm Chuck Blore & Don Ruchman, Inc., quoted by Ben H. Bagdikian, The Media Monopoly, Sixth Edition, (Beacon Press, 2000), p.185].

III

The first landslide: the neoliberal project of privatization and commodification. The second landslide: the strengthening of the new global division.

How to deal with landslides?

- You can try stabilizing the situation and help preventing the landslide: This appears to be sensible – but it's too late;
- You can get out of the way: But where to go if this is happening on a global scale and there is no outside? (...there is no place to go?)
- You can move very fast ahead of the landslide which means: Just try becoming a part of this landslide and be a young pro-american neoliberal; just forget these old ideas of public, community, communality, common property and the "general" interest;
- Or: ***You can try resisting.***

Literature

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<http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/policy/2002/08/15/lessig.html>

Robert W. McChesney, Dan Schiller: The Political Economy of International Communications: Foundations for the Emerging Global Debate over Media Ownership and Regulation. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Paper prepared for the UNRISD Project on Information Technologies and Social Development, as part of UNRISD background work for the World Summit on the Information Society, April 2002

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