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The Information War

Hakim Bey

Humanity has always invested heavily in any scheme that offers escape from the body. And why not? Material reality is such a mess. Some of the earliest “religious” artefacts, such as Neanderthal ochre burials, already suggest a belief in immortality. All modern (i.e. post-paleolithic) religions contain the “Gnostic trace” of distrust or even outright hostility to the body and the “created” world. Contemporary “primitive” tribes and even peasant-pagans have a concept of immortality and of going-outside-the-body (ec-stasy) without necessarily exhibiting any excessive body-hatred. The Gnostic Trace accumulates very gradually (like mercury poisoning) till eventually it turns pathological. Gnostic dualism exemplifies the extreme position of this disgust by shifting all value from body to “spirit”. This idea characterizes what we call “civilization”. A similar trajectory can be traced through the phenomenon of “war”. Hunter/gatherers practised (and still practise, as amongst the Yanomamo) a kind of ritualized brawl (think of the Plains Indian custom of “counting coup”). “Real” war is a continuation of religion and economics (i.e. politics) by other means, and thus only begins historically with the priestly invention of “scarcity” in the Neolithic, and the emergence of a “warrior

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Retrieved on 17th May 2021 from hermetic.com

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caste". (I categorically reject the theory that "war" is a prolongation of "hunting".) WWII seems to have been the last "real" war. Hyperreal war began in Vietnam, with the involvement of television, and recently reached full obscene revelation in the "Gulf War" of 1991. Hyperreal war is no longer "economic", no longer "the health of the state". The Ritual Brawl is voluntary and non-hierarchical (war chiefs are always temporary); real war is compulsory and hierarchical; hyperreal war is imagistic and psychologically interiorized ("Pure War"). In the first the body is risked; in the second, the body is sacrificed; in the third, the body has disappeared. (See P. Clastres on War, in *Archaeology of Violence*.) Modern science also incorporates an anti-materialist bias, the dialectical outcome of its war against Religion — it has in some sense become Religion. Science as knowledge of material reality paradoxically decomposes the materiality of the real. Science has always been a species of priestcraft, a branch of cosmology; and an ideology, a justification of "the way things are." The deconstruction of the "real" in post-classical physics mirrors the vacuum of irreality which constitutes "the state". Once the image of Heaven on Earth, the state now consists of no more than the management of images. It is no longer a "force" but a disembodied patterning of information. But just as Babylonian cosmology justified Babylonian power, so too does the "finality" of modern science serve the ends of the Terminal State, the post-nuclear state, the "information state". Or so the New Paradigm would have it. And "everyone" accepts the axiomatic premises of the new paradigm. The new paradigm is very spiritual.

Even the New Age with its gnostic tendencies embraces the New Science and its increasing etherealization as a source of proof-texts for its spiritualist world view. Meditation and cybernetics go hand in hand. Of course the "information state" somehow requires the support of a police force and prison system that would have stunned Nebuchadnezzar and reduced all the priests of Moloch to paroxysms of awe. And "mod-

confusion of sweet data and sweet dates — facts and feasts — wisdom and wealth. This is our economy — and our war.

ern science” still can’t weasel out of its complicity in the very-nearly-successful “conquest of Nature”. Civilization’s greatest triumph over the body.

But who cares? It’s all “relative” isn’t it? I guess we’ll just have to “evolve” beyond the body. Maybe we can do it in a “quantum leap.” Meanwhile the excessive mediation of the Social, which is carried out through the machinery of the Media, increases the intensity of our alienation from the body by fixating the flow of attention on information rather than direct experience. In this sense the Media serves a religious or priestly role, appearing to offer us a way out of the body by re-defining spirit as information. The essence of information is the Image, the sacral and iconic data-complex which usurps the primacy of the “material bodily principle” as the vehicle of incarnation, replacing it with a fleshless ecstasis beyond corruption. Consciousness becomes something which can be “down-loaded”, excized from the matrix of animality and immortalized as information. No longer “ghost-in-the-machine”, but machine-as-ghost, machine as Holy Ghost, ultimate mediator, which will translate us from our mayfly-corpses to a pleroma of Light. Virtual Reality as CyberGnosis. Jack in, leave Mother Earth behind forever. All science proposes a paradigmatic universalism — as in science, so in the social. Classical physics played mid-wife to Capitalism, Communism, Fascism and other Modern ideologies.

Post-classical science also proposes a set of ideas meant to be applied to the social: Relativity, Quantum “unreality”, cybernetics, information theory, etc. With some exceptions, the post-classical tendency is towards ever greater etherealization. Some proponents of Black Hole theory, for example, talk like pure Pauline theologians, while some of the information theorists are beginning to sound like virtual

Manichaeans.¹ On the level of the social these paradigms give rise to a rhetoric of bodylessness quite worthy of a third century desert monk or a 17th century New England Puritan — but expressed in a language of post-Industrial post-Modern feel-good consumer frenzy. Our every conversation is infected with certain paradigmatic assumptions which are really no more than bald assertions, but which we take for the very fabric or urgrund of Reality itself. For instance, since we now assume that computers represent a real step toward “artificial intelligence”, we also assume that buying a computer makes us more intelligent. In my own field I’ve met dozens of writers who sincerely believe that owning a PC has made them better (not “more efficient”, but better) writers. This is amusing — but the same feeling about computers when applied to a trillion dollar military budget, churns out Star Wars, killer robots, etc. (See Manuel de Landa’s War in the Age of Intelligent Machines on AI in modern weaponry). An important part of this rhetoric involves the concept of an “information economy”. The post-Industrial world is now thought to be giving birth to this new economy. One of the clearest examples of the concept can be found in a recent book by a man who is a Libertarian, the Bishop of a Gnostic Dualist Church in California, and a learned and respected writer for Gnosis magazine:

¹ The new “life” sciences offer some dialectical opposition here, or could do so if they worked and through certain paradigms. Chaos theory seems to deal with the material world in positive ways, as does Gaia theory, morphogenetic theory, and various other “soft” and “neo-hermetic” disciplines. Elsewhere I’ve attempted to incorporate these philosophical implications into a “festal” synthesis. The point is not to abandon all thought about the material world, but to realize that all science has philosophical and political implications, and that science is a way of thinking, not a dogmatic structure of incontrovertible Truth. Of course quantum, relativity, and information theory are all “true” in some way and can be given a positive interpretation. I’ve already done that in several essays. Now I want to explore the negative aspects.

is never inert or “neutral”, but it can be both “good” and “evil” (or beyond them) in countless variations and combinations. We, finally, are the artists of this immeasurable discourse. We create values. We do this because we are alive. Information is as big a “mess” as the material world it reflects and transforms. We embrace the mess, all of it. It’s all life. But within the vast chaos of the alive, certain information and certain material things begin to coalesce into a poetics or a way-of-knowing or a way-of-acting. We can draw certain pro-tem “conclusions,” as long as we don’t plaster them over and set them up on altars. Neither “information” nor indeed any one “fact” constitutes a thing-in-itself. The very word “information” implies an ideology, or rather a paradigm, rooted in unconscious fear of the “silence” of matter and of the universe. “Information” is a substitute for certainty, a left-over fetish of dogmatics, a *super-stitio*, a spook. “Poetic facts” are not assimilable to the doctrine of “information”. “Knowledge is freedom” is true only when freedom is understood as a psycho-kinetic skill. “Information” is a chaos; knowledge is the spontaneous ordering of that chaos; freedom is the surfing of the wave of that spontaneity. These tentative conclusions constitute the shifting and marshy ground of our “theory”. The TAZ wants all information and all bodily pleasure in a great complex

coming. But also true that it has played the role of the eternal rebel against all orthodoxy, and this makes it interesting. In its libertine and revolutionary manifestations the Gnosis possesses many secrets, some of which are actually worth knowing. The organizational forms of Gnosis — the crackpot cult, the secret society — seem pregnant with possibilities for the TAZ/Immediatist project. Of course, as I’ve pointed out elsewhere, not all gnosis is Dualistic. There also exists a monist gnostic tradition, which sometimes borrows heavily from Dualism and is often confused with it. Monist gnosis is anti-eschatological, using religious language to describe this world, not Heaven or the Gnostic Pleroma. Shamanism, certain “crazy” forms of Taoism and Tantra and Zen, heterodox sufism and Ismailism, Christian antinomians such as the Ranters, etc. — share a conviction of the holiness of the “inner spirit”, and of the actually real, the “world”. These are our “spiritual ancestors.”

this unity has always received the insults, bad press, scriptural condemnation, and economic persecution of the “spirit”-half. The self-appointed representatives of the spirit have called almost all the tunes in known history, leaving the body only a pre-history of primitive disappearance, and a few spasms of failed insurrectionary futility.

Spirit has ruled — hence we scarcely even know how to speak the language of the body. When we use the word “information” we reify it because we have always reified abstractions — ever since God appeared as a burning bush. (Information as the catastrophic decorporealization of “brute” matter). We would now like to propose the identification of self with body. We’re not denying that “the body is also spirit”, but we wish to restore some balance to the historical equation. We calculate all body-hatred and world-slander as our “evil”. We insist on the revival (and mutation) of “pagan” values concerning the relation of body and spirit. We fail to feel any great enthusiasm for the “information economy” because we see it as yet another mask for body-hatred. We can’t quite believe in the “information war”, since it also hypostatizes information but labels it “evil”. In this sense, “information” would appear to be neutral. But we also distrust this third position as a lukewarm cop-out and a failure of theoretical vision. Every “fact” takes different meanings as we run it through our dialectical prism¹¹ and study its gleam and shadows. The “fact”

pagan polytheism and shamanism, as well as extreme forms of monotheism such as Ismailism or Ranterism, based on “inner light” teachings. “All is one”, therefore, can be spoken by any kind of monist or anti-dualist and can mean many different things.

¹¹ A proposal: the new theory of taoist dialectics. Think of the yin/yang disc, with a spot of black in the white lozenge, and vice versa — separated not by a straight line but an S-curve. Amiri Baraka says that dialectics is just “separating out the good from the bad” — but the taoist is “beyond good and evil”. The dialectic is supple, but the taoist dialectic is downright sinuous. For example, making use of the taoist dialectic, we can re-evaluate Gnosis once again. True, it presents a negative view of the body and of be-

The industry of the past phase of civilization (sometimes called “low technology”) was big industry, and bigness always implies oppressiveness. The new high technology, however, is not big in the same way. While the old technology produced and distributed material resources, the new technology produces and disseminates information. The resources marketed in high technology are less about matter and more about mind. Under the impact of high technology, the world is moving increasingly from a physical economy into what might be called a “metaphysical economy.” We are in the process of recognizing that consciousness rather than raw materials or physical resources constitutes wealth.²

Modern neo-Gnosticism usually plays down the old Manichaean attack on the body for a gentler greener rhetoric. Bishop Hoeller for instance stresses the importance of ecology and environment (because we don’t want to “foul our nest”, the Earth) — but in his chapter on Native American spirituality he implies that a cult of the Earth is clearly inferior to the pure Gnostic spirit of bodylessness:

But we must not forget that the nest is not the same as the bird. The exoteric and esoteric traditions declare that earth is not the only home for human beings, that we did not grow like weeds from the soil. While our bodies indeed may have originated on this earth, our inner essence did not. To think otherwise puts us outside of all of the known spiritual traditions and separates us from the wisdom of the seers and sages of every age. Though

² Freedom: Alchemy for a Voluntary Society, Stephan A. Hoeller (Wheaton,IL: Quest, 1992), 229–230.

wise in their own ways, Native Americans have small connection with this rich spiritual heritage.³

In such terms, (the body = the “savage”), the Bishop’s hatred and disdain for the flesh illuminate every page of his book. In his enthusiasm for a truly religious economy, he forgets that one cannot eat “information”. “Real wealth” can never become immaterial until humanity achieves the final etherealization of downloaded consciousness. Information in the form of culture can be called wealth metaphorically because it is useful and desirable — but it can never be wealth in precisely the same basic way that oysters and cream, or wheat and water, are wealth in themselves. Information is always only information about some thing. Like money, information is not the thing itself. Over time we can come to think of money as wealth (as in a delightful Taoist ritual which refers to “Water and Money” as the two most vital principles in the universe), but in truth this is sloppy abstract thinking. It has allowed its focus of attention to wander from the bun to the penny which symbolizes the bun.⁴ In effect we’ve had an “information economy” ever since we invented money. But we still haven’t learned to digest copper. The Aesopian crudity of these truisms embarrasses me, but I must perforce play the stupid lazy yokel plowing a crooked furrow when all the straight thinkers around me appear to be hallucinating.

Americans and other “First World” types seem particularly susceptible to the rhetoric of a “metaphysical economy” because we can no longer see (or feel or smell) around us very much evidence of a physical world. Our architecture has become symbolic, we have enclosed ourselves in the manifestations of abstract thought (cars, apartments, offices, schools), we work at “service” or information-related jobs, helping in

³ Ibid., p. 164.

⁴ Like Pavlov’s dogs salivating at the dinner bell rather than the dinner — a perfect illustration of what I mean by “abstraction”.

neither to fetishize nor demonize “information”. Instead we try to establish a set of values by which information can be measured and assessed. Our standard in this process can only be the body. According to certain mystics, spirit and body are “one”. Certainly spirit has lost its ontological solidity (since Nietzsche, anyway), while body’s claim to “reality” has been undermined by modern science to the point of vanishing in a cloud of “pure energy”. So why not assume that spirit and body are one, after all, and that they are twin (or dyadic) aspects of the same underlying and inexpressible real? No body without spirit, no spirit without body. The Gnostic Dualists are wrong, as are the vulgar “dialectical materialists”. Body and spirit together make life. If either pole is missing, the result is death. This constitutes a fairly simple set of values, assuming we prefer life to death. Obviously I’m avoiding any strict definitions of either body or spirit. I’m speaking of “empirical” everyday experiences. We experience “spirit” when we dream or create; we experience “body” when we eat or shit (or maybe vice versa); we experience both at once when we make love. I’m not proposing metaphysical categories here. We’re still drifting and these are ad-hoc points of reference, nothing more. We needn’t be mystics to propose this version of “one reality”. We need only point out that no other reality has yet appeared within the context of our knowable experience. For all practical purposes, the “world” is “one”.¹⁰ Historically however, the “body” half of

¹⁰ “The ‘World’ is ‘one’” can be and has been used to justify a totality, a metaphysical ordering of “reality” with a “center” or “apex” : one God, one King, etc., etc. This is the monism of orthodoxy, which naturally opposes Dualism and its other source of power (“evil”) — orthodoxy also presupposes that the One occupies a higher ontological position than the Many, that transcendence takes precedence over immanence. What I call radical (or heretical) monism demands unity of one and Many on the level of immanence; hence it is seen by Orthodoxy as a turning-upside-down or saturnalia which proposes that every “one” is equally “divine”. Radical monism is “on the side of” the Many — which explains why it seems to lie at the heart of

I find myself very much in sympathy with the author's critique of media here, yet I also feel that a demonization of "information" has been proposed which consists of nothing more than the mirror-image of information-as-salvation. Again Baudrillard's vision of the Commtech Universe is evoked, but this time as Hell rather than as the Gnostic Hereafter. Bishop Hoeller wants everybody jacked-in and down-loaded — the anonymous post-situationist ranter wants you to smash your telly — but both of them believe in the mystic power of information. One proposes the pax technologica, the other declares "war". Both exude a kind of Manichaeic view of Good and Evil, but can't agree on which is which. The critical theorist swims in a sea of facts. We like to imagine it also as our maquis, with ourselves as the "guerilla ontologists" of its datascape. Since the 19th century the ever-mutating "social sciences" have unearthed a vast hoard of information on everything from shamanism to semiotics. Each "discovery" feeds back into "social science" and changes it. We drift. We fish for poetic facts, data which will intensify and mutate our experience of the real. We invent new hybrid "sciences" as tools for this process: ethnopharmacology, ethnohistory, cognitive studies, history of ideas, subjective anthropology (anthropological poetics or ethno-poetics), "dada epistemology", etc. We look on all this knowledge not as "good" in itself, but valuable only inasmuch as it helps us to seize or to construct our own happiness. In this sense we do know of "information as wealth"; nevertheless we continue to desire wealth itself and not merely its abstract representation as information. At the same time we also know of "information as war;"⁹ nevertheless, we have not decided to embrace ignorance just because "facts" can be used like a poison gas. Ignorance is not even an adequate defense, much less a useful weapon in this war. We attempt

⁹ Indeed, the whole "poetic terrorism" project has been proposed only as a strategy in this very war.

our little way to move disembodied symbols of wealth around an abstract grid of Capital, and we spend our leisure largely engrossed in Media rather than in direct experience of material reality. The material world for us has come to symbolize catastrophe, as in our amazingly hysterical reaction to storms and hurricanes (proof that we've failed to "conquer Nature" entirely), or our neo-Puritan fear of sexual otherness, or our taste for bland and denatured (almost abstract) food. And yet, this "First World" economy is not self-sufficient. It depends for its position (top of the pyramid) on a vast substructure of old-fashioned material production. Mexican farm-workers grow and package all that "Natural" food for us so we can devote our time to stocks, insurance, law, computers, video games. Peons in Taiwan make silicon chips for our PCs. Towel-heads in the Middle East suffer and die for our sins. Life? Oh, our servants do that for us. We have no life, only "lifestyle" — an abstraction of life, based on the sacred symbolism of the Commodity, mediated by the priesthood of the stars, those "larger than life" abstractions who rule our values and people our dreams — the mediarchetypes; or perhaps mediarchs would be a better term. Of course this Baudrillardian dystopia doesn't really exist — yet.⁵ It's surprising however to note how many social radicals consider it a desirable goal, at least as long as it's called the "In-

⁵ Although some might say that it already "virtually" exists. I just heard from a friend in California of a new scheme for "universal prisons" — offenders will be allowed to live at home and go to work but will be electronically monitored at all times, like Winston Smith in 1984. The universal panopticon now potentially coincide one-to-one with the whole of reality; life and work will take the place of outdated physical incarceration — the Prison Society will merge with "electronic democracy" to form a Surveillance State or information totality, with all time and space compacted beneath the unsleeping gaze of RoboCop. On the level of pure tech, at least, it would seem that we have at last arrived at "the future". "Honest citizens" of course will have nothing to fear; hence terror will reign unchallenged and Order will triumph like the Universal Ice. Our only hope may lie in the "chaotic perturbation" of massively-linked computers, and in the venal stupidity or boredom of those who program and monitor the system.

formation Revolution” or something equally inspiring. Leftists talk about seizing the means of information-production from the data-monopolists.⁶ In truth, information is everywhere — even atom bombs can be constructed on plans available in public libraries. As Noam Chomsky points out, one can always access information — provided one has a private income and a fanaticism bordering on insanity. Universities and “think tanks” make pathetic attempts to monopolize information — they too are dazzled by the notion of an information economy — but their conspiracies are laughable. Information may not always be “free”, but there’s a great deal more of it available than any one person could ever possibly use. Books on every conceivable subject can actually still be found through inter-library loan.⁷ Meanwhile someone still has to grow pears and cobble shoes. Or, even if these “industries” can be completely mechanized, someone still has to eat pears and wear shoes. The body is still the basis of wealth. The idea of Images as wealth is a “spectacular delusion”. Even a radical critique of “information”

⁶ I will always remember with pleasure being addressed, by a Bulgarian delegate to a conference I once attended, as a “fellow worker in philosophy”. Perhaps the capitalist version would be “entrepreneur in philosophy”, as if one bought ideas like apples at roadside stands.

⁷ Of course information may sometimes be “occult”, as in Conspiracy Theory. Information may be “disinformation”. Spies and propagandists make up a kind of shadow “information economy”, to be sure. Hackers who believe in “freedom of information” have my sympathy, especially since they’ve been picked as the latest enemies of the Spectacular State, and subjected to its spasms of control-by-terror. But hackers have yet to “liberate” a single bit of information useful in our struggle. Their impotence, and their fascination with Imagery, make them ideal victims of the “Information State”, which itself is based on pure simulation. One needn’t steal data from the post-military- industrial complex to know, in general, what it’s up to. We understand enough to form our critique. More information by itself will never take the place of the actions we have failed to carry out; data by itself will never reach critical mass. Despite my loving debt to thinkers like Robert Anton Wilson and T. Leary I cannot agree with their optimistic analysis of the cognitive function of information technology. It is not the neural system alone which will achieve autonomy, but the entire body.

can still give rise to an over-valuation of abstraction and data. In a *pro-situ* zine from England called NO, the following message was scrawled messily across the back cover of a recent issue:

As you read these words, the Information Age explodes ... inside and around you — with the Misinformation Missiles and Propaganda bombs of outright Information Warfare. Traditionally, war has been fought for territory/ economic gain. Information Wars are fought for the acquisition of territory indigenous to the Information Age, i.e. the human mind itself ... In particular, it is the faculty of the imagination that is under the direct threat of extinction from the onslaughts of multi-media overload ... DANGER — YOUR IMAGINATION MAY NOT BE YOUR OWN ... As a culture sophisticates, it deepens its reliance on its images, icons and symbols as a way of defining itself and communicating with other cultures. As the accumulating mix of a culture’s images floats around in its collective psyche, certain isomorphic icons coalesce to produce and to project an “illusion” of reality. Fads, fashions, artistic trends. U KNOW THE SCORE. “I can take their images for reality because I believe in the reality of their images (their image of reality).” WHOEVER CONTROLS THE METAPHOR GOVERNS THE MIND. The conditions of total saturation are slowly being realized — a creeping paralysis — from the trivialisation of special/technical knowledge to the specialization of trivia. The INFORMATION WAR is a war we cannot afford to lose. The result is unimaginable.⁸

⁸ Issue #6, Nothing is True, Box 175, Liverpool L69 8DX, UK