

TRADING VIRTUAL LEGACIES
(MANAGEMENT OF TRADITION FROM ALEXANDRIA TO INTERNET)

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ERIM REPORT SERIES <i>RESEARCH IN MANAGEMENT</i>	
ERIM Report Series reference number	ERS-2000-36-ORG
Publication status / version	draft / version September 2000
Number of pages	21
Email address first author	Smagala@fbk.eur.nl
Address	Erasmus Research Institute of Management (ERIM) Rotterdam School of Management / Faculteit Bedrijfskunde Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam PoBox 1738 3000 DR Rotterdam, The Netherlands Phone: # 31-(0) 10-408 1182 Fax: # 31-(0) 10-408 9640 Email: info@erim.eur.nl Internet: www.erim.eur.nl

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REPORT SERIES *RESEARCH IN MANAGEMENT*

BIBLIOGRAPHIC DATA AND CLASSIFICATIONS		
Abstract	Will the reconstructed library of Alexandria prevent a forthcoming clash of civilizations? Inventing and re-inventing traditions requires total quality management and multiple networking in shifting alliances in the information space. Stock exchange of cultural forms has long abandoned the golden standards of Enlightenment and follows a theory of cultural relativity and an international political economy of attention.	
Library of Congress Classification (LCC)	5001-6182	Business
	5546-5548.6	Office Organization and Management
	5548.7-5548.85	Industrial Psychology
	HD 6951	Industrial Sociology
Journal of Economic Literature (JEL)	M	Business Administration and Business Economics
	M 10	Business Administration: general
	L 2	Firm Objectives, Organization and Behaviour
	M 19	Business Administration : other
European Business Schools Library Group (EBSLG)	85 A	Business General
	100B	Organization Theory (general)
	240 B	Information Systems Management
	80 H	Social aspect of culture and society
Gemeenschappelijke Onderwerpsontsluiting (GOO)		
Classification GOO	85.00	Bedrijfskunde, Organisatiekunde: algemeen
	85.05	Management organisatie: algemeen
	85.08	Organisatiesociologie, organisatiepsychologie
	85.08	Organisatiesociologie, organisatiepsychologie
Keywords GOO	Bedrijfskunde / Bedrijfseconomie	
	Organisatieleer, informatietechnologie, prestatiebeoordeling	
	Organisatiesociologie, Culturele verandering, Informatiemaatschappij	
Free keywords	Virtual legacies, detraditionalization, re-enchantment, management of meaning, cultural relativity, political economy of attention, information space	
Other information		

Trading Virtual Legacies
(Management of Tradition from Alexandria to Internet)

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Abstract:

Will the reconstructed library of Alexandria prevent a forthcoming clash of civilizations? Inventing and re-inventing traditions requires total quality management and multiple networking in shifting alliances in the information space. Stock exchange of cultural forms has long abandoned the golden standards of Enlightenment and follows a theory of cultural relativity and an international political economy of attention.

Key words:

Virtual legacies, detraditionalization, re-enchantment, management of meaning, cultural relativity, political economy of attention, information space

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Trading Virtual Legacies **(Management of Tradition from Alexandria to Internet)**

Motto:

Museums, schools, universities, concert halls – have come to take on more and more trappings of the cathedrals of consumption: Museums have high tech, interactive displays, encompassing shopping malls, and have opened outlets in conventional malls; universities have theme dorms, food courts in student unions, and offer virtual courses in virtual universities that are largely indistinguishable from cybermalls. As a result it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between high- and low-culture settings; the distinction between them grows increasingly meaningless.”(Ritzer 1999:192)

“The Dome is not a building. It is not even a dome. It has the profile of a shallow dome, but none of its structural properties. It looks something like a tent, but it is not a tent either... A knitted web, a network, an envelope, its structural tensions make explicit the turning point of time it has been designed to mark”(Elizabeth Wilhide, cf. after Lightfoot, Lilley, 2000:1)

Abstract:

Reconstructing the library of Alexandria, modern cultural and political elites make a symbolic gesture – counterballancing the bellicose prophecies about the clash of civilizations. Inventing and re-inventing traditions requires total quality management and a network of alliances to mobilise managerial competence and resources. Networking and exploiting opportunities in the information space results in traditions being dropped or re-engineered. The stock exchange of cultural forms and values has long abandoned the golden standards of Enlightenment (a Bretton Woods of the cultural trade between French revolution and the fall of the Berlin Wall). A theory of cultural relativity is called for in order to facilitate the comparative analysis of cultural forms and to support an international management of meaning. International political economy of attention allows for a comparative analysis of traditions and their maintenance. The making and breaking of cultural traditions and a geographical re-distribution of symbolic treasures are among the predictable and expected outcomes.

1. Low fires and high ideals

Governments in general and national political elites in particular display a profound loyalty to the symbolic gestures in stone, concrete and steel. Instances abound. Blair's labour government, supported by cultural elites and business companies, constructed a Millennium Dome in London before inventing the uses to which it might be put in a sustainable way (1). The Egyptian government, supported by the European Union and the UNESCO, had embarked upon an extravagantly expensive Alexandrian library project. The main task of the project is to construct a huge modern library, which – when finished - should be the largest object of its kind on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea in terms both of the number of physical volumes and of the virtual and eBooks. Built in Alexandria, whose hidden archeological treasures are continuously recovered from under the ground and from the bottom of the sea, the library is a nostalgic reminder of one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Yet it is not a reconstruction of the original library building we know little about (most of the experts suspect it belonged to some temple complex). Another, thoroughly modern building has been designed, and the key word is “access” of the global (literate) masses to bibliographical resources. It will open some 1360 years after the famous predecessor went up in smoke. The collection of books and prints will also be different. The predecessor contained books and scrolls, which from today's point of view would qualify as predominantly theological speculations. Religions of the book prompted book writing, Christianity of the first millennium promoted specialist scriptural research. Hence the cultural significance of the Alexandrian library, hence its role as a cultural symbol for all civilizations of the ancient world. The library assembled the records of a long and difficult process of inventing, defining, changing and re-engineering some of the world's most widespread religions. Who is to blame for burning it down? Blaming the followers of one of those religions easily becomes a very powerful instrument in a management of a clash of cultural civilizations (which, contrary to what Huntington predicts, has already happened around the Mediterranean between the rise of Islam and the fall of Constantinople). If civilizations fail to clash, a struggle for hearts, minds and span of attention of human individuals makes modern media managers re-engineer traditions and reconstruct forgotten symbolic episodes.

The burning of the great library of Alexandria belongs to the greatest horror stories of human civilization. Patiently assembled collection of precious books, a great treasure of learning, goes up in flames. Cultural heritage goes up in smoke. Centuries have been spent on making this library what it was, hours were sufficient to turn it to ashes. In fact, there was – probably - no single spectacular destruction. No large scale burning of all the books at the same place and at once ever took place. Almost 700 years earlier some books were burned, indeed, by Julius Cesar. However, these were copies of the books from the Alexandrian collection, made for the rich Roman clients, ready to be shipped off to Rome. They were stored in the harbour magazines and awaited shipment. When Julius Cesar had to withdraw his legionists and to evacuate them by sea, he thought that setting fire to these magazines will slow down the Ptolemeian troops allowing him to save most of his own soldiers. This was not, thus, a great auto-da-fe Europeans were having nightmares about. Who has, then, done it? Christians – followers of an uncertain, young

religion, fighting for souls and making a point against “pagan” scriptures? Most experts return with the verdict “not guilty”, but Christians are not quite exonerated at this historical trial. Some experts suspect that the burning in question might have been conducted by an angry Christian crowd incited by one of the bishops. Luckily for the Christian partisans, evidence pointing towards the muslim invaders is stronger. There are literary, written documents which fit the plausible hypothesis of a smoking muslim gun.

A much more plausible explanation of the ultimate destruction of the great library of Alexandria has linked it to the conquest of this city by the Arab forces in 640 A.D. Having conquered Syria, the Arabs set off to conquer Egypt. Their emir, Amrou, acting upon orders of caliph Omar residing in Bagdad, took Alexandria and tore down her defense walls, but refrained from pillaging the city. Having met one of the most famous commentators of Aristotle, John Philoponus, who asked him to spare the rare collection, the emir wrote a letter to his superior asking him what to do with this particular part of the war trophies collected in Alexandria. While books awaited in sealed rooms guarded by the Arab warriors anxious to lay their hands on the riches of a city with four thousand palaces and four thousand public baths, the letter to the caliph was dispatched by the envoy. The answer from Bagdad sealed the fate of the books:

“As for the books you mention, here is my reply. If their content is in accordance with the book of Allah, we may do without them, for in that case the book of Allah more than suffices. If, on the other hand, they contain matter not in accordance with the book of Allah, there can be no need to preserve them. Proceed, then, and destroy them.”(Canfora, 1989:98).

Emir Amrou realized that books would allow him to keep all the four thousand public baths running for six months. He was right. According to Ibn-al-Kifti, an Arab historian of an Egyptian descent, they did. The library of Alexandria ended not with a bang but with a whimper (or with a sizzle). Some historians claim that the books of Aristotle were spared, because Amrou wanted to pay a small courtesy to the learned librarian. Most agree that it was a low, local fire in four thousand fireplaces, which consumed the seventh wonder of the ancient world. Young, aggressive religion (prophet Mohammed died only eight years before) was not yet ready to become a tradition which can be periodically re-written and reengineered. Its soldiers destroyed most of the evidence that a much older, Christian religion had already been busy reinventing itself. Christian bishops of these times have been busy remodelling and rejuvenating their 607 years old tradition. They searched for the assistance of the older, philosophical writings and they looked for allies within a network of Mediterranean cities (with Christian communities).

This networking of the Greek philosophy, of the post-Roman urban, communicational and legal infrastructure and of the gradually reinvented and modified Christian doctrine (the doctrine of Trinity appeared clumsy to the learned muslims and yet allowed access to a much broader theological database than a single holy scripture with no abstract puzzles and logical paradoxes) made books and libraries matter. So much so, as a matter of fact, that some, more “populist”-minded Christian bishops considered burning pagan books a legitimate move in theological disputes. The majority of bishops, however, went on

reading and writing them, expressing solidarity with the literate elites extending far beyond the theological warzones.

However, there are some historians, who express their doubts about the above report on the destruction of the library of Alexandria. Gibbon – who had his own reasons to blame rather Julius Cesar than Omar and Amrou – wrote that:

“The rigid sentence of Omar is repugnant to the sound and orthodox precept of the Mahometan casuists: they expressly declare that the religious books of the Jews and Christians, which are acquired by the right of war, should never be committed to the flames.”(Canfora,1989:110)

Perhaps, then, the virtual legacy of the first library of Alexandria- contrary to the accepted version of the events – does not contain an anti-muslim message. Maybe the real story does not announce the inevitable clash of religious civilizations. It does not announce the inevitability of a conflict which might lead to either crusades – Western world-wide modern civilization conquering anachronistic peripheries - or perhaps to the Jihad threatening the western McWorld. Maybe the Alexandrian library has, to a certain extent, always been virtual. Some historians and archeologists think there were, in fact, many libraries in Alexandria’s palaces and temple complexes. The actual positioning of the largest and the most famous collection is still hotly debated. It is not implausible that most of the ancient authors agree on the great fire because of its value in attracting attention of readers, but do not actually know where exactly the famous building is supposed to have stood. Archeologists and historians locate the great Alexandrian library in different places in the city (near the port, in the Museon, in the Ramesseum temple complex, which must have looked like the one in Thebes). In other words, perhaps we should view the story of the burning of the Alexandrian library with the same scepticism with which we compare various reconstructions of the library’s possible location.

Perhaps opening a new Alexandrian library in a predominantly muslim country with the assistance of the predominantly Christian former colonial powers (Italy, EU in general) signifies a symbolic burying of hatchets. Is it far-fetched to speculate that the opening of the new great library of Alexandria will be one of the factors contributing to the prevention of a clash of civilizations? Is it too far fetched to expect that building this library we are turning Huntington’s prophesy into a self-destroying one? Perhaps opening a new international library in a predominantly muslim city will manifest a mature cultural relativity, which will facilitate trading traditional legacies, real and virtual, in a less hostile, more tolerant mode. One should not continue worrying what happens if Salman Rushdie’s “Satanic Verses” are downloaded (and illiterate muslims incited to burn the new library as well). One should start worrying what happens if we continue to polarize the world, as Huntington does, into a western and non-western civilizations, which provide values for essential choices in politics, economics and culture. The author of “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order” assumes that:

“the conflicts that pose the greatest dangers for stability are those between states or groups from different civilizations”(Huntington, 1996:36)(2)

However, he does not offer arguments – simply lists the political events of the past decade which conform to his thesis. Needless to say, in the very same period dangerous conflicts could be observed between countries belonging to the same cultural civilization – equally disruptive of the world order and equally dangerous for a broader international community. A conflict between India and Pakistan is hardly a clash of civilizations, yet few critics would question its dangerous nuclear dimension. An Islamic Iran fought a bloody war against equally Islamic Iraq – the war had cost one million people their lives, which hardly qualifies it as a second-rate family quarrel. Assuming a priori that some of these conflicts are more dangerous than the others focusses our attention on primary suspects sought outside of the circle of one's civilizational allies. This assumption becomes hard to sustain if we notice that civilizations are continuously re-engineering themselves in response to emergent challenges and fortunes of history. Virtual legacies of cultural civilizations can be selected (criteria of selection are changing, making choices less predictable), traditions can be revised (thus becoming infinitely flexible with respect to the actual influence upon behavioral patterns), responses can be detraditionalized and controlled (control can also be exercised in a flexible, less obtrusive way).

If clashes can be prevented, negotiation and management of meaning are becoming increasingly important. The new Alexandrian library could become a hub of cross-cultural networking for many professional communities. This would require a new approach to the virtual libraries, innovative yet simple enough to make "Alexandria.com" as recognizable among the printed and e-printed librarian resources as "Amazon.com" is among the electronic booksellers. Alexandrian eLibrary could easily become a postmodern symbol of free access to the literary treasures of a library, a "bibliothèque imaginaire" comparable with the imaginary museum Malraux had once wanted for works of visual arts. However, one should keep in mind that this Alexandrian library will emerge in a former third world country exposed to the traumas of colonialism (the last ill-fated Anglo-French military attempt to deprive Egyptians of income from the Suez canal fees took place in 1956). The library will open in a country recently subjected to the neocolonial economic dependence on IMF and WB (without foreign direct investment capital-intensive oil and energy sectors – essential for Egypt's development - could not grow). Finally, the library will open in a country which hosts the Arab League headquarters and faces disturbing increase of popular support for the Muslim grass-roots organizations reinventing political Islam. Will the virtual library run a danger of becoming isolated – for instance by virtue of conducting its business in English among the Arabic speaking population? Will it not be looked upon with suspicion as an instrument in hands of the world's capitalist "core" states and multinationals and their scientific representatives? Should such doubts be dismissed when embarking upon the library project? Can the allies of this library prevent partisans of Muslim parties from viewing it as a Western implant? Is there a point to their critique? Can virtual networks actually replace a direct control imposed by a military conquest or by an indirect trade-based neocolonial dependence? Should we start assessing the library project by "deconstructing", i.e. critically interpreting and understanding the latest forms of rationalization and modernization – McDonaldization, "shop-mall"-ing or Las Vegasification? Should we start a critical movement attracting people to other forms of

catering than fast food, other forms of purchasing than visits to shopping malls (which begin resembling theme parks), other forms of experiencing the unique taste of their lives than becoming a tourist in Las Vegas? Instead of waiting until somebody mobilizes the masses and wages a jihad against these manifestations of western modernity (and postmodernity) - could we demonstrate successful alternatives, defuse potential cross-cultural clashes? Is it not safer to resort to a mutual detraditionalization instead of an aggressive launching of a succession of competitive re-enchantments?

Entertainment corporations continuously build and re-build increasingly complex and sophisticated generations of casinos in Las Vegas trying to re-enchant and re-seduce the consumers, but failing to make consumer experience more significant, more individual, more open, less predictable, less controlled, less commercialized as a sequence of unique events. If the only game in town is these games in these casinos, the only purpose of competition can be to attract attention, sustain and maintain it, and make sure that an attentive consumer demonstrates enough loyalty to win the loyalty management costs back. Winning attention becomes especially difficult when the supply side's overkill (nowadays modern media surround consumers with meaningful messages 24 hours a day assaulting all his or her senses at once: the sun above networked media empires truly never settles) turns attention into a scarce commodity. Competing for scarce attention requires an insight into the laws of demand – into the political economy of attention (cf. Franck, 1998) or information (Boisot, 1995). None of the two abovementioned authors offers hypotheses about the laws of attracting attention (though both are sensitive to the role of the celebrities, brands and trademarks in attracting and holding attention of a consumer). Franck analyzes the economic implications of the fact that paying a famous actor, actress, sportsman or sportswoman to appear in a commercial ad on TV guarantees an almost automatic alertness of viewers. He does not share the pragmatic belief that the media in general and TV in particular are in the business of selling audiences to advertisers, since he focusses on factors (personal fame of a celebrity) which mobilize the audience in the first place. Boisot would be more comfortable with this pragmatic belief, claiming that the media corporations are exploiting celebrities by monopolizing some channels of disseminating information. However, both Franck and Boisot are aware of the role of cultural identities and cultural competence in an ongoing social communication and in the making, maintaining and breaking of virtual communities. Franck suggests that we should view fame (notoriety, visibility, celebrity status) as a different type of a capital, as an ability to attract attention of many individuals at once. Celebrities are like powerful investment banks, but instead of holding financial capital, they hold another type of capital – an ability to draw much broader attention than most other, less famous human individuals. They can cash in on their capital (thus becoming capitalists in the traditional meaning of the term and selling their ability to draw and mobilize attention for extravagant fees), they may cash in on their fame in the political world (either by winning support of people whose attention they attracted for somebody else or for themselves) – thus trading fame for power, but their original resource and core competence, their “capital” – is an ability to draw attention. Boisot focussed less on mobilizing attention as a precondition for successful dissemination of culturally significant products, and more on the uses to which it could be put when mobilized. As opposed to Franck, he was more interested in the mechanisms of exchange (diffusion)

and communication (exploring – finding or inventing and processing – codifying and abstracting).As Boisot himself formulates it:

“In the information space, culture emerges as a particular configuration of flows and structures, as the expression of information production and sharing strategies that take place within and between social groups. It follows that a political economy of information – i.e. the theory of its production and exchange – is coextensive with a theory of culture.”(Boisot, 1995:6)(3)

In other words, low fire consuming books from the Alexandrian library in the furnaces of the muslim baths should be studied by experts in the theory of culture and by specialists in the political economy of information in order to determine how heritages are lost, found and reinvented (re-engineered).

2. Political economies of heritage crusades

Religious, political, artistic or business organizations all produce and exchange products, services and staged events. Business process re-engineering can be traced relatively easily in theological disputes, political struggles, aesthetic avantgardes or commercial activities. European Christianity underwent a number of major re-engineering processes. First, the secular power of the Popes became separate from the earthly power of the emperors and kings (as opposed to Byzantine tradition where the emperor was automatically assuming the office of a pope). Second, the protestant revolution resulted in a reform of the church and its radical democratization, which split the western European Christianity into two traditions, none of which had been strong enough to suppress another. Finally, western European Christianity survived the Enlightenment’s crusade against religion as a superstition left over by former, less rational episodes of social history. The French revolutionaries dismantled medieval cathedrals to pave roads with the recycled stones. The Berlin Wall fell down after Polish catholics and German protestants recycled their moral doubts experienced collectively in churches. Churches (for instance the Catholic Church), redefined themselves in the era of networked media and global communications. Christianity is no exception, either.

All great world religions are being continuously reborn. Political islam at the end of the second millennium reinvented itself in order to become an “ersatz” Marxism for the frustrated, often illiterate masses of the third world. What Huntington tries to do from “above” - developing a theory of the inevitable clash of civilizations, poor people’s political islamic movements try to develop from “below” - organizing for the inevitable struggle against the global reach of a non-muslim civilization. These movements are a response to social processes perceived as a threat to the way of life sanctioned in a home civilization but difficult to protect when exposed to a critical public discussion. Generally speaking, these responses cannot be easily predicted. Iranian religious leaders have banned individual satellite TV antennas, hoping to limit access to the global media. Having lost this battle, they had to respond to a challenge they would not have felt, had they succeeded in isolating their society’s information space. Hence a gradual

liberalization, and a cautious upgrading of a civic status of women, for instance in judicial system. All modern muslim societies are reinventing an islamic legal system, hoping to preserve the legitimizing appearance of continuity and immutability, but succumbing to the global pressures of states (and interstate organizations) and markets (including international market regulators or supranational corporations).

The Catholic Christianity re-invented papacy when the Polish Pope facilitated the fall of the communist empires and started coaching their populations back into the fold of the Christian civilization. Religious communities are based on a management of meaning – Popes apologize for the excesses of the Inquisitions and comment on genetic research on homosexuality, thus trying to influence the rationalized debates of modern western world. Mullahs allow women as witnesses in penal cases in Iran, and islamic politicians attempt a regional North African and Middle Eastern economic integration, thus trying to use common religious background as a standardizing and trust generating device.

Reconstruction of the great library of Alexandria, with the Egyptians, the Italians and the UNESCO joining forces, is expected to produce a modern, neutral, objective and multipurpose informational/educational/cultural storage and retrieval, trading and distributing center. It is still being called a “library” – in spite of the fact that:

“the forms of organization of knowledge in electronic media do not resemble those of the traditional codex book. (...) Where the library has traditionally been one of a few such enterprises cooperating (if sometimes at arm’s length) with a finite community of publishers (and thus both together functioning as gatekeepers on a limited set of narrow information pathways from authors to readers), a community is now growing in which there will be as many publishers as readers.”(O’Donnell,1998:43)

Librarians in this new library will be busier staving off “infochaos”, predicts O’Donnell, than facilitating access. They will be gatekeepers of knowledge and information flows regulated by public institutions and private users, but they will be less concerned with keeping the gates than with damage control caused by floods and other un- od de-regulated flows. They will have to issue statements and take part in ongoing debates. This broad influence upon human communities means that a professional body of librarians will have to manage the controversial meanings. They will have to decide how to respond if threatened with cultural conflicts. They will have to decide how to repackage a heritage in order to prevent crusades and facilitate debates.

However, political economy of attention makes heritage crusades inevitable. Roots are investigated, invented, displayed, compared, recycled and changed. Large networks of organizations embark upon a successive heritage crusade. The construction of the new Alexandrian library is a case in point. We are dealing with a “Reconquista” of a common cultural heritage of mankind and we want a guarantee of access to all (*access2all* in the newly developing idiom of dotcom customers). Little thought is devoted to the analysis of the contents of the original library (since nobody considers a reconstruction of the original collection to be among the priorities, even though only such reconstruction would actually mean that a rebuilding of this library has a profound historical

significance). Some more attention will be devoted to the contents of the new one (Egypt's Supreme Council of Culture has a large censorship department, while Al-Ahzaar university sends students from all over the world to the streets if a re-issuing of an old Syrian novel awakes their religious suspicions). The new library – if it is to meet our expectations - will have to surpass the library of congress in the USA and to offer online access to everything written in the book format. The whole printed and virtual world of book-alike containers has to be brought to the masses. Since we cannot predict infinite numbers of contexts in which these books and eBooks will be read – a proliferation of contrary readings will almost certainly follow. Increasing numbers of different interpretations will stimulate demand for guidelines - negotiations on the management of meaning are bound to follow. Everybody should be able to construct his or her own meaning, heritage, tradition, legacy. In information space (both real and virtual) of a modern library collective identities open up individualized tracks for tracing one's "roots" (or making them up, even entirely faking them). Opening up these new areas of interactive access to the information space means individualization of cultural consumption (comparable to the one which happened after the invention of print and after the spread of mass literacy). Literate individuals exposed to conflicting values and validity claims cannot easily be disciplined and mobilized into ideological support services of a religious/political army of voters or demonstrators.

It is ironic that an attempt to organize a center with the most modern ICT (information and communication technologies) results in a building of a public library in Alexandria, one and a half millenium after the first library (built because similar inventions of a collective religious, theological heritage around the Mediterranean Sea prompted educated members of the elite to start individual book collections) disappeared. Then, in the middle of the first millenium, theological arguments were honed to dignify the dogmas. Libraries flourished. Nowadays "the electronic environment has the power to defeat dignification" (O'Donnell, 1998:142) and postmodern, ICT-supported libraries replace the lost ones – not in order to hone sophisticated theological arguments but in order to sustain an ongoing debate of almost everybody with everybody else. Do libraries flourish? Instead of large crusades of the past, organized by huge mobilization effort spread over the continent, many more local or individual crusades are being launched and re-launched every day. Ecological, feminist or consumer protection crusades can result in different outcomes: in crusaders becoming candidates for US presidency (Ralph Nader), in crusaders founding a movement to protect the whales, and to watch oil companies' environmental record (Greenpeace) or in crusaders delivering a generation of brilliant writers, performers and politicians (Green and Bruntland, Atwood and Thatcher, Madonna and Lady D.). Needless to say, there are very many smaller scale crusades waged every day. Virtual and real communities collect components of heritage as easily as they collect eBooks and other forms of electronic publications. The idea of a permanent education can be re-examined in a new light after the emergence of the internet: participating in the communications and forming virtual communities we are exposed to many more windows of opportunity for reflexion and goal-setting. Our internet communications are voluntary, open-ended, subject to conflicting interpretations – a truly learning situation and geographically a footless one.(4) Writing on the heritage

crusades of the present period, David Lowenthal draws our attention to the hazards of heritage glut:

“Heritage today is more substantial, more secular and more social. Three dimensions of its enlargement merit attention: from the elite and grand to the vernacular and everyday; from the remote to the recent, and from the material to the intangible.”(Lowenthal,1998:14)

The influence of the new virtual library, arising from within the traditional one, will probably mean further shift along the lines indicated by Lowenthal. From the elites to the masses and from material to the intangible (or virtual). Is it possible that the Islamic counterelites will respond to the danger of a loss of monopoly on spiritual upbringing of the masses? It is possible that attempts at the creation of a new elite, focussed on the past and snobistically rejecting virtual meltdowns of reality will also happen? A kind of a Luddite anti-PC, anti-www, anti-western uprising? But virtual libraries are already there. They can oppose any attempts of the local elites by tempting the reading masses with an easy global access to uncontrolled, unplugged, uncensored information. Writers, preachers, activists and other interpreters of tradition nowadays face a much broader virtual community of “readers”. No philosophy of science and no sociology of academic communities can allow us to plan the growth of knowledge, design a new religious revival or prognose a development of new forms of criticism.

It has always been the case that a critical reinterpretation of tradition (detraditionalization happens immediately if we start articulating traditions, as Bauman rightly observes) used to follow even the most orthodox attempts to close the books, to maintain the doctrine absolutely unchanged and to render it immune to further criticism and change:

“The noun “tradition” moves now, verb-like, from the past to the future tense, from the rhetoric of the forever-given to the rhetoric of the perpetually uncertain. It is no more the self-assured silence, but the anxious continuity of speech that makes tradition possible, though it is exactly the opposite which, when speaking of tradition, the speech speaks about. Tradition vanishes in the same discourse which purports to make its presence tangible.”(Bauman, 1996:49)

Is this bound to happen with the traditions present in the minds of those who have restored the world’s largest library to the city of Alexandria? Cautious predictions can be made only with respect to some historical analogies. The invention of print in China facilitated a consolidation of the mandarin class and a standardization of the body of knowledge subjected to a systematic but controlled (and limited) reinterpretation. Radical detraditionalization has been prevented – management of meaning was conducted within a strictly controlled and politically privileged group (McNeill,2000). In Europe, a few hundred years later, the reinvention of print meant a breakdown of the monopoly of textual interpretations maintained by the clergy. It also meant an emergence of the rival claims of the new communities gaining access to new knowledge (Giordano Bruno’s trial marks the last major resistance of the church, deeply regretted now). The new, secular communities of knowledge began both to generate new interpretations of the classical

texts and to produce the new ones. New groups gaining access to the written word were establishing new forms of communications, mixing the oral, the written and the printed in a seamless web. By the time of the French revolution, these new, imperfectly contained and monitored media of written information were overlapping and knitting themselves together in a communication system able to support a major political transformation:

“The Old regime, as we imagine it, may appear as a simple, media-free-world-we-have-lost, a society with no telephones, no television, no e-mail, Internet and the rest. In fact, however, it was not a simple world at all. It was merely different. It had a dense network of communications made up of media and genres that had been forgotten – so thoroughly forgotten that even their names are unknown today and cannot be translated into English equivalents: *mauvais propos*, *bruit public*, *on-dit*, *pasquinade*, *Pont Neuf*, *canard*, *feuille volante*, *factum*, *libelle*, *chronique scandaleuse*. There were so many modes of communication and they intersected and overlapped so intensively, that we cannot reconstruct the system in its entirety.” (Darnton,2000:43).

Perhaps developing a political economy of Internet chatting, tracing or simulating the patterns of mobile phone gossiping and chatroom timing, we should be able to register and predict similar consequences in our times? Perhaps new social groups, new potential communities and emergent virtual chatting crowds are already slowly gathering under the cloak of electronic darkness, waiting for their historical chance to become agents of change making their heritage as they go along?

3. Trading legacies: towards the theory of cultural relativity

Modern societies contain many real and virtual communities of practice, communication and values. Increased traffic in communications accompanies not only political and commercial dealings, but also cultural exchanges and attempts to redefine cultural identities. The latter are being built vis a vis the powerful trends in globalized transmissions of ready-made, standardized products. The more standardization, the more deregulation and localization. Trading legacies we are all involved in an ongoing process of hybridization of our cultural softwares. For instance, starting an MBA program at a university, we have to choose a legal framework for the commercial program (different from an undergraduate program which is paid for by the taxpayer), to design a curriculum for more pragmatically oriented students (different from students who follow higher educational pattern within the European university systems), and to issue a diploma which is not legally protected by the government (MA and PHD are, MBA is not). While representatives of some paradigms have no qualms about engaging in MBA-related activities, others can protest against a bastardization of scientific knowledge, barbarian simplification of methodology and stimulation of commercial profit-seeking behaviour at the expense of a properly academic attitude towards one's higher, research duties. Meanwhile, due to the growth of the educational industry, gate-keeping function of the representatives of the dominant paradigms has been compromised and rival paradigms are able to establish themselves and attract young academic “converts” to their cause.(5)

This leads, among others, to the proliferation of paradigms in academic centers, to the rapid change in the styles of producing art within the artistic communities and to the evolution of life-styles in the course of an on-going de-regulation of private lives. This de-regulation (shops open on Sundays, because individual consumers randomize their access to commodities and services at the expense of collective standards) supports an even greater differentiation and individualization of interactions. Freed from the “tyranny of the cousins”, or from the constraints of tradition imposed by members of extended family on one another, individuals associate with more distant communities, instead of interacting in prescribed patterns with their relatives. They prefer elective affinities with – for instance – environmental protectionists, football fans or researchers of organizational symbolism to the “inherited” solidarity and rituals of family ties. This preference for elective affinities at the expense of the inherited, traditional ones, has already been noticed by sociologists of the early XXth century: Tönnies, Durkheim and Simmel. Simmel thought that this was the inevitable consequence of the increasing rationalization and calculability of modern life, which subjects individuals to the requirements of money economy. Increasing calculability and rationalization, in turn, turned not only capital, but also furniture, labor, and – as we would say today – knowledge (Simmel spoke of cultural forms) – into something mobile. Finishing his opus magnum, “The Philosophy of Money”, Simmel remarked that:

“The more life of a society becomes dominated by monetary relationships, the more the relativistic character of existence finds its expression in conscious life, since money is nothing other than a special form of embodied relativity of economic goods that signifies their value. Just as the absolutist view of the world represents a definite stage of intellectual development in correlation with the corresponding practical, economic and emotional conditions of human affairs, so the relativistic view of the world seems to express the momentary relationship of adjustment on the part of our intellect.”(Simmel, 1978:512)(6)

Relativity, of which Simmel is speaking, results among others from an increasing freedom of an individual to form elective affinities (both social and cultural). Individuals forming elective affinities have no legacies, heritages, precedent cases they can consult for guidance. They are inventing their relationships, they are inventing the rules of the game as they go along. This ability to start networks by design, to base communities on a random contact - contributes also to a relative increase in freedom of individuals to change the form of socializing altogether. If we survey the growth of the media of communication, beginning with the variety of oral and printed forms networked by the third estate and its literary and political elites (the future French revolutionaries) and ending with the globally networked chatrooms of internet’s virtual spaces, we will notice that media have become a message in themselves. In other words, they have acquired an autonomous status of a distinct determinant of types of social interactions and ceased to be simple extensions of “his master’s voice”, neutral carriers of information controlled by the senders. They have started to trade legacies, to become a marketplace of re-engineered identities. A society of the spectacle emerged (cf. Debord,1992). Individuals followed this mediated development of virtual, simulated realities from the times of

Lumiere's first show to 3D displays of the latest virtual communities centered much more often around consumption rather than production. The theory of a passage from a production dominated society to a consumption dominated one became an established dogma of mainstream sociology, although strictly speaking there has never been a conclusive debate on this topic. The development of the globally networked media shifted the research fashion towards the focus on consumption and a tacit removal of Marxism from the mainstream social sciences after the breakdown of the state socialist system did the rest.(7) It was Baudrillard rather with his concept of simulacra than Debord with his much more elegant concept of a society of a spectacle, with his straightforwardly Marxian idiom and extreme political sympathies and activities within the situationist international, who had influenced the introduction of this dogma to the sociological discourse, nowadays preached by the authors of sociological bestsellers on macdonaldization and lasvegasification:

“In an earlier era, it was means of production that were predominant, but today it is the means of consumption that gained ascendancy. The shopping mall has replaced the factory as the defining structure of our age, Like it or not, our future lies mainly in consumption and the means that allow, encourage, and even coerce us to consume.”(Ritzer, 1999:172)

Means of communication are crucial for trading legacies. First, they are they are both means of production and of consumption. Media are means of production of disseminated images, broadcasts, commercials, visual and audial products. They are also providers of services, for instance, they are baby-sitting poor masses, they are warming audiences up and making them receptive for commercial advertising of the corporations. Mass media are also means of consumption, providing chewing gum for the eyes, feeding us our daily load of visual experience, patterning individual consumption, influencing value systems, etc. McLuhan was right that the medium shapes the message, but he has paid less attention to the reverse processes. Messages shape the media as well – for instance, by influencing the technological choices. A development of the new medium for recording popular music for predominantly young audiences – compact disc – happened at the expense of the older plastic record and is a case in point. Was it not for the tremendous interest in rebellious and innovative music on the part of the young audiences – compact discs would not establish themselves as a standard and could share the fate of the Philips pre-VHS video tape or HRTV (high resolution TV) projects (none of which has made it to the market as of the present writing).

The media can be the messages (TV as a babysitter of household environment), but messages can also be converted to become the new countermedia, to shape the new media which will carry them (antiauthoritarian, democratic message of internet communications is slowly shaping the technology of interactive cable TV liberating consumer from strict dictatorship of the large Tv network programmers). Religious revivals, triggered by a powerful message of a leader can build a new sect, church or religious community. Alternative countercultures, appealing to the receptive audiences, can influence behaviour in politics (protests against carefully orchestrated public events), or economics (empowered consumers with increased range of do-it-yourself options can

force an environment-friendly innovation at the manufacturing plants). Subversive media can also be used to mobilize virtual communities for action if the established media are employed to suppress or marginalize the latter. Theoretical explanations of the media, for instance, the mediology proposed by Régis Debray, offer the first glimpses of what should and could be done in order to understand the daily packaging of the legacies prior to their trading in the daily spectacle of the media (Debray suggests that we speak of mediations and not media or medium, because we should notice “all intermediary procedures and bodies that interpose themselves between a producing of signs and a producing of events”, cf. Debray, 1996:17).(8)

Listening to the Internet chatting, one hears – among others – the following voices:

“Values, meanings, relevances are the intangible “real” correlations between what we recognize in the “now” and anticipate as being pertinent to our lives – in some fashion or another – in the future. (...) We need the stability of some extent of day-by-day value structure, but, to exist using the essential quality of Evolution, humanity’s survival will rely on (...) an adaptive ability. A comfortableness with moving through a variety of “local” value (organization) arrangements... and priorities.”(Rose,2000:2,3)

In order to safeguard a possibility to take liberties in individual choices and in plotting of the future interactions, individuals are willing to submit their values to a regular, closer (or, rather, closer in proximity, but more open and thus less closed in nature) scrutiny instead of depositing them in an institutional “bank” (a church, a museum or an academy of science). The theory of cultural relativity – should it emerge on the interface between sociology, cultural anthropology, social psychology, sciences of communication and economics – would have to focus on the patterns and rules of a regular re-valuation of values. Some preliminary attempts to understand these patterns can be found in early sociology, but academic division of labour prevented Georg Simmel (whose “Philosophy of Money” constitutes an early attempt to analyze the influence of market economy upon re-calculating of a value of particular, successively traded and replaced cultural values), from gaining academic ground. Simmel focussed on market relations and their influence upon individual freedom. He noticed the emergence of a permanent cultural change (which he conceptualized as a new dynamic relationship between a subjective and objective culture) resulting from a continuous re-engineering, re-examining and re-arranging of values and their translation into norms. He has noticed that the subsequent process of applying norms in order to structure preferences, choices and actual behaviour has also been subjected to an on-going negotiation in increasingly frequent interactions in urban settings. These interactions result, among others, in an increased trade in legacies, heritages, traditions – in a society of mediated spectacle, in which even the management of tradition is becoming increasingly transparent.(9)

In order to keep track of transparent (school curriculae, museum exhibitions) and less transparent (family traditions, bias and stereotypes) management of legacies, a theory of cultural relativity should be developed. A theory of cultural relativity would have to explain a changing role of the cultural banks (universities, musea, libraries, performance spaces) in the new communicational (internet, mobile phones, satellite TV) environment.

The reconstruction of the library of Alexandria would then be explicable as the making of a new Tower of Babel with a top in a virtual cloud. This library could truly become a symbol of an international clearing house for cultural legacies, which deals with cultural relativity without breaking the continuity of an ongoing cooperation. Will it suffer the same lot as the original one? Not if trading virtual legacies we remember that we should not “seek to possess truth but to create it collectively”(O’Donnel,1998:149). Not, if the proof of the virtual pudding is in an interactive, flexible networking.

Notes:

- (1) Critics of the Millenium Dome point out that symbolic significance of a modern construction is not easy to sell to the public, by saying, for instance, that: “It is the faux educationalism of arrogant leaders who will provide ‘what works’ for others only if it is first accepted that their elevated positions indicated self-evidently that they know what works best”(Lightfoot, Lilley, 2000:14) and quoting the press as saying that: “The dome began as a Tory project, the last resounding belch of a dying regime.”(ibid.)
- (2) Huntington is not very clear about the concept of a civilization, admitting freely that “Civilizations have no clear-cut boundaries and no precise beginnings and endings... Civilizations are nonetheless meaningful entities, and while the lines between them are seldom sharp, they are real””(Huntington, 1996, 43) A much more precise definition is provided by Wallerstein on methodological grounds: “The concept of civilization (singular) is a Newtonian idea. The concept of civilizations (plural) is consonant with understanding that order emerges out of chaos, that chaos is itself creative.(...) A civilization refers to a contemporary claim about the past in terms of its use in the present to justify heritage, separateness, rights.”(Wallerstein, 1991, 234-235)
- (3) Boisot, as opposed to Franck, does not speak of individual human agents in his information space: he means collective actors, like companies or governments: “Neither bureaucracies nor the markets can deal comfortably with discontinuous change. They reduce rather than absorb uncertainty by trying to bracket it and convert it into calculable, i.e. codifiable risk. Clans and fiefs on the other hand,

operating lower down the I-space, confront uncertainty on its own terms, absorbing it through social relationships that promote trust and commitment rather than a narrow adherence to rules.”(Boisot, 1995:443)

- (4) “Technologies such as the internet are serving to increase the capacity for both the reciprocal and non-reciprocal communication. These new conditions challenge individuals and organizations to seek out new possibilities for reciprocal bonding and collaboration, and to create opportunities which were previously only associated with the common locale.”(Slevin, 2000:90) Slevin quotes Poster and Rhinegold who notice the social and political potential of the internet in facilitating a new bonding (and mobilizing) mode for the emergent virtual communities and concludes that what is still missing from virtual communities in order to acquire a social legitimation is some element of stability: “One way in which modern communities have generated a cloak of permanence is by reflexively organizing the horizons of possible activity, for example by inventing a variety of traditions and modern rituals, or by drawing up rules of conduct.”(Slevin, 2000:94).
- (5) The present text has originally been written as a conference paper and presented at the 18th international annual SCOS conference “Premodern Legacies for the postmodern Millenium” on July 5-9, 2000 in Athens, Grece. The very origins of SCOS (Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism) are to be found in a rebellion of social constructivists and postmodernists against the paradigmatic (usually neopositivist) dictatorships in their home universities. Hence an annual conference, a periodical and a minimal self-organization. There is no joint declaration or, in fact, any membership fee (one pays for conference participation directly to the organizers and for the periodical directly to the editors). Most of the participants in SCOS conferences would agree that the critical theory of management calls for the analysis of and a guide to the management of meaning. As Sievers puts it: “motivation only became an issue – for management and organization theorists as well as for the organization of work itself – when meaning either disappeared or was lost from work (...) the loss of meaning is immediately connected with the way work has been, and still is organized in the majority of our Western enterprises.”(Sievers, 1986:338). They would also agree with Mats Alvesson’s list of themes and issues which tend to get obscured, lost or watered down in the mainstream organizational theory: “the universalization of managerial interests and suppression of conflicting interests; the domination by the instrumental and eclipse of competitive, reasoning processes; and hegemony, the way consent becomes orchestrated.”(Alvesson,2000:84)
- (6) Simmel writes this in the last subchapter of the last chapter of “The Philosophy of Money”, entitled “Money as the historical symbol of the relative character of existence”: “There is no more striking symbol of the completely dynamic character of the world than that of money. The meaning of money lies in the fact that it will be given away. When money stands still, it is no longer money according to its specific value and significance. The effect that it occasionally exerts in a state of repose arises out of an anticipation of its further motion. Money is nothing but a vehicle for a

movement, in which everything else that is not in motion is completely extinguished. It is, as it were, *actus purus*; it lives in continuous self-alienation from any given point and thus forms the counterpart and direct negation of all being itself.(Simmel, 1978:510-511)

- (7) One of the most interesting critiques of the postmodernist thinking is linked to the latter's celebration of the fall of Marxism along with the fall of the Berlin Wall. As one of the British leftist dramatists, David Edgar observes, the postmodernist thought aims: "to pursue the individual ends of the counter-culture while abandoning the more traditional collective means of social democracy, to celebrate the diversity of the new social forces of the 1960ies and 1970ies at the expense of the challenge they posed to dominant structures, to privilege personal choice over collective action, to validate an individual emotional response to liberal and psychological impoverishment while devaluing the conventional structures of political activity, to break the ideological links between oppositional intellectuals and the poor."(cf. after Eagleton, 2000:128)
- (8) The case of Debray's "mediology" is particularly interesting because the author was a devoted Marxist guerilla fighter and served a prison term in Bolivia after he was captured with Che Guevarra's companions. Debray suggests that we have been through the period of logosphere and graphosphere, but at present we have arrived in the "videosphere" and should understand what makes it different from its predecessors.
- (9) International management of war legacies and national heritage is already taking place, for instance in the form of a joint French-German or Polish-German historical handbooks commission. This type of commission supervises school history handbooks dealing with the neighbouring countries' past wars and preventing nationalistic propoganda from finding its way to the young generation's minds. Even if such commissions are lacking, for instance, between India and Pakistan, modern communications make it difficult for any party to impose its management of tradition on the whole society, as a recent case of a scientist's protest against Pakistani curriculum (which presumably incites children's hatred against India) indicates.

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