

CONNECTIVITY/VULNERABILITY: Pt. 2

By Michael Ventura

August 22, 2014

A 19-year-old shot an archduke.

That happened on June 28, 1914, in a country that was then called Austria-Hungary and is now called Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Almost instantly, many dots collided and connected. As usual, most leaders expected a quick, predictable war. As usual, that was nonsense.

In a matter of weeks – by mid-August 1914 – more than 2.5 million young men maneuvered in France to kill each other. Most were French and German; 70,000 were British.

By September 10 – less than 11 weeks after that kid shot that duke – Germany and France between them sacrificed roughly 600,000 young men; Britain, 29,000. By the time it was all over four years later, with more than 30 nations sucked in, conservative totals for war dead numbered 10,000,000 soldiers and 15,000,000 civilians.

That averages out to about 17,000 killed each day. Americans now seem to measure suffering by 9/11, so think: more than five 9/11s every single day.

(Sometimes as many as 50,000 died on one day of one battle.)

That awful August of 1914, when the shooting started, some sensitive souls sensed that something enormous and unstoppable was headed their way. One was the English novelist and poet Thomas Hardy. He wrote: “The human race is to be shown as one great network or tissue which quivers in every part when one point is shaken, like a spider’s web if touched.”

Ah, the Web: our nickname for the Internet.

World War I is proof enough that, as Jazmin Aminian observes, “Connection, human interdependence, *is not safe.*”

It’s also unavoidable, essential, and very, very mysterious.

For underneath our confusion, and beneath our electronic incoherence and cacophony, there moves a force of change so pervasive and obvious that, while we are all aware of it, at the same time we hardly notice. The human species is making an enormous, and all but unconscious, leap into connectivity – on a scale never before imagined.

Whenever the new devices show up – be it in the United States or the caves of western Pakistan – a web of connectivity instantly establishes itself. Be it MoveOn.org or the Tea Party, whatever the seeming purpose, whatever the supposed reason, what is actually going on is that every one of our supposedly fragmented and/or opposing segments of the species is doing the same thing: obsessively establishing an unheard of, undreamed of connectivity that is everywhere redefining our most basic concepts.

The news is all about our differences, yet what is actually going on is a compulsive, simultaneous reaching out, one to another, in all directions, constantly and subversively.

Subversive, in part, to that fragile, cherished, and always endangered entity: the individual. But also mightily threatening to the linearity and sense of boundary that every society in history has believed necessary.

From roughly 1780 to 1980, the West operated through a reflexively agreed-upon cosmology we'll sloppily call Progress, metaphysically anchored in a white-centric, gender-centric two-headed dog: monotheism/nationalism. After 1980, it slowly became clear that an interconnected world is technologically inevitable. That's a crisis for monotheism, for "multi" is what we have to deal with from now on, and – philosophically, if you like – monotheism is subverted by multi. It's also a crisis for nationalism, which defines itself by borders and ethnicities. The challenge has driven Christian whites in America – and Jews and Muslims in the Levant – bananas. The devices they covet broadcast silently that the coming cosmology will be multi. Monotheism, nationalism, and panicky American white people can't handle multi.

The boundaries of everything are wavering and many are disappearing. Who can handle an environment where nothing can be kept secret and no information, whether true or false, can ultimately be proved or disproved in the public mind? Boundaries between real and unreal, fact and fiction, become less solid, less respected. Around the world entire libraries of culture are in danger of being swept away. Perhaps they shall be. It is no place for the timid, and we are, all of us, secretly timid.

If you've kept your sense of humor, it's sometimes comical – as when Republicans decry Democrats as "socialists." They don't know it, but the socialists Republicans most fear are themselves, steeped in social media like everyone else. Social networks make for social-ists of a new breed: connected to people they don't want to be connected to, sharing fates they don't want to share, exposed to shit they don't want to be exposed to. Inevitably, this must evolve an economic expression that looks very like socialism – not because of socialists real or imagined, but because ours is a social-ist technological environment. Politics and economics can't help but follow, in time, the technology that sustains both.

From an essay I wrote for Rosetta Brooks' *ZG* in 1988: "There are instruments in each home eating away at the [boundaries] of people who have become addicted to those instruments. Consciously, these are most often people who see themselves as normal, righteous and conservative, and they emphatically don't want ... to change. Yet something else is operative in them, some hunger that they follow without thought or plan, in which they indulge in activities that subtly but thoroughly undermine their most cherished assumptions. Politically and socially they are demanding more and more boundaries – yet, by choice, they fill their lives with things that cause them to live less and less within boundaries. They *want* these things ... so much so that they measure their success or failure by whether or not they have these things. But their very wanting is subversive to their way of life. It's fair, then, to assume that something other than consciousness, something deep within them, is doing this subversive wanting."

The writer Frank DeMarco, in an email to me last year: "I suspect that there is a meta-purpose unsuspected by most[.] ... Just as photos of the earth taken from space have gradually transformed human consciousness, and just as the existence of the internet [is] similarly transforming it, I suspect that all this elaborate interweaving of society, though done for its own nefarious and/or benign reasons, ultimately will prove to be laying the foundation for changes entirely unsuspected by anyone."

A revised paragraph of the 1988 essay, contributed to Nicola Palmarini's recent book, *Boomerang*: "Individually and collectively, the contemporary electronic environment seems to have been thrust upon us. But, collectively, we have made this world. And, both individually and collectively, we've eagerly welcomed each separate manifestation that has created the present: the internal combustion engine, light bulbs, movies, radio, TV, computers, cellphones, devices, games, apps – all the building blocks of contemporary life in all their manifestations have been seized upon everywhere in the world. It is not enough to blame this on capitalism or consumerism. The very eagerness of the world's embrace of this hallucinogenic technology by the most different sorts of cultures is evidence of a species-wide longing to connect – often expressed manically and hysterically, at present, and perhaps that's to be expected, but this desire to connect will have fateful, far-reaching, and very surprising consequences."

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