Erasing Memory, Computing the Present: Playing Handmaiden to Plan X

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This paper attempts to explore a subtle epistemological shift that seems to have accompanied the proliferation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the recent past. The computational approach to the world is one in which solutions are sought to be 'computed', reducing the role of 'memory'. This approach to problem solving is problematic because it treats the world like a mathematico-logical derivation, where only the immediate steps are focused upon, while excluding a variety of other possible inputs to solutions. Further, an attempt is made to show that this computational approach complements and encourages the complex of tendencies of immediate profit and expediency that Raymond Williams has termed 'Plan X'.[1]

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Beyond the simplest of arithmetic, mathematical operations become increasingly abstract and non-referential with respect to the real world. The non-referentiality of abstractions makes for their easy manipulability, freeing them from the immediate burden of worldly weights and thus giving them the aura of a certain permanence and absoluteness. But this freedom comes at a price; moving from abstraction to further abstraction, one comes to dwell in a realm that is several removes from lived reality. Man has found clever ways of linking the abstractions of the mathematico-logical sphere to the material world, and this linking has enabled the creation of complex technological innovations. The transformation of an abstraction like a logic gate into an actual electronic component controlling the flow of electrons in predictable ways is an example. Volition, disciplined by the sphere of mathematical abstraction, is able to drive reality in seemingly magical ways and produce fantastically complex technological artefacts. Thus we come to tread a complex territory, shaped by the pulls of volition, by the discipline of the mathematical sphere, and the impingement of the everyday world of lived referential reality. As the artefacts produced by this process have achieved complexity, an inbred dynamics has emerged, whereby volition inter-breeds with the mathematical sphere to produce fantastic technological regimes, through the application of which the impingements of ordinary life are sought to be eliminated. The dangers of such a trajectory are many. First of all, it is unsustainable and iniquitous, as should only be too evident to anyone who takes more than a cursory look. Secondly, there is the danger, already much in evidence, that ordinary life will in the scheme of things come to be so distanced, that even to raise fundamental questions, to interrogate directions and meanings of it all, will be seen as despicable nay-saying not acceptable to, or not even acknowledged by, the prevailing regimes. Finally, the distancing of ordinary life creates the illusion of it having disappeared altogether, and the illusion of there being no constraints other than those of volition and the mathematico-logical sphere (which latter can be transcended by some cleverer computing out of solutions). This in turn feeds in unbridled ways the desires of man, which the great spiritual and philosophical systems of the world have sought to contain and rationalise in meaningful ways. Desire and volition by themselves can come to feed on each other, creating a destructive cycle.

One can however conceive of an alternative territory, not lacking in creative volition, but suffused with ordinary life and reality. In such a territory, the concerns of everyday life would not be seen as an impediment to the pursuit of some more immediate expediency, but would be guiding forces for man's desire to innovate. Present reality in such a realm would not be merely computed out, but would be informed by memory; memory being not merely the

remembrance of things past, but the whole repertoire of methods of problem-solving other than the computational.

It needs to be remembered that there are approaches to problem solving other than the computational – approaches characterised by holism, even altruism, and a concern for the impact of future outcomes; approaches tempered by wisdom, uninfected by the fevered excitements of the immediate present; approaches which require a memory, an active remembrance of things, characterised by a richness that cannot be reduced to algorithmic regimes.2

Computability works as a system of internal validation, a system based on a play of logical truths (of quasi-numerical "truth values") rather than on referential / existential truths. And the absence of memory aids in the constant living on the brink, the teetering towards 'X', the objective of Plan X, "a willed and deliberate unknown, in which the only defining factor is advantage."

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In seeking to understand the impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), a key attempt is to explore whether the processes unleashed by ICTs are merely a logical next-step in the earlier progression of Science and Technology (S&T), or whether their emergence constitutes a substantial enough shift, a variation from the earlier movement. As with any initial attempt to determine variation / likeness, what seems to emerge is what one is more inclined to seek; both variations and continuities seem to show up. Even so, so as not to bundle the present irredeemably with the faits accomplis of the past, it is worthwhile to look for fissures.

While comparing ICTs with the earlier innovations in S&T:

a) The crudest approach would be to talk of the pervasive reach of the ICTs. But even here, the reach that earlier technological innovations have achieved in the past may be no less impressive: electricity, the internal-combustion engine, the mechanical clock, agriculture... And each of these innovations may be theorised about as not merely having caused changes in the material pattern of life, but as having had very fundamental epistemological impacts.

b) One could talk likewise, in terms of the effects on the material world, i.e. the environmental impact. ICTs appear to be very 'clean' technologies, and are often marketed as such, but the real environmental costs of ICTs are phenomenal. But then so have been the environmental impacts of the internal-combustion engine, of CFCs, or indeed of agriculture.[3]

c) One might be tempted to talk of ICTs as very different types of 'machines' from those of the past. The fundamental building blocks of ICTs are after all 'logic gates': theoretical logically-functioning devices that can be combined to construct algorithms, and which are currently physically realised as combinations of semiconductor devices (transistors, diodes etc.) embedded microscopically on a 'chip' of silicon. These logic gates, being abstract, mathematico-logical entities to begin with, might be seen as very different sorts of building blocks, only incidentally realised in physical form as computers and other ICT devices. But closer thought shows that even this distinction does not stand, for gear-wheels and escapements are just as much theoretical devices, until their (arguably no less incidental) realisation as bits of metal. A combustion-engine is as much a theoretical entity to begin with, until realised as a piston-pumping (noxia-exuding!) metallic chamber. A lesson in all this is that present-day questioning must not be a mere by-product of ephemeral anxieties

that live only as long as an innovation is **not**(?) 'domesticated'. It has to be the product of a constant interrogation of all that is around us, even after it may have been domesticated. Thus a questioning of ICTs can be a point of departure, leading to a questioning of other S&T processes that predate ICTs. Also to be remembered is that even if no fissure, no difference, can be espied between present processes and past progression, this does not imply that the shape of the future is an inevitability, though it might point to likelihood and tendency.

d) The process of regularisation and organisation of diverse aspects of human life that ICTs bring about can also be seen as simply a furtherance of a process begun much earlier by S&T. It has been suggested that what constitutes a shift with the ICTs is a certain 'organisability criterion' whereby only that which is organisable by the ICT regimes is classed as *knowledge* while all else is excluded.[4] But a similar process can be seen at work earlier with Science, whereby all that was organisable through the methodology of science was classified as scientific, whereas all that could not be included under this rubric was non-scientific, and therefore by implication when not by direct indictment, 'un-scientific'.[5]

As already indicated, to trace past precedent for the present is not necessarily to thereby render the present automatically acceptable. But it is to remind ourselves that the fissures we seek may be subtler and harder to capture. Or on the contrary, they may indeed be grosser, and may reside in magnitude of the changes involved. For changes of a certain magnitude are no longer changes of degree but those of substance.

Either way, the fodder that feeds Plan X is already in evidence in the S&T to ICT progression - the creation of a mathematico-logical domain in which the focus of energies becomes the correct computation of the present, while the keeping in abeyance of wider concerns ensures a further narrowing of that focus. This progressively narrowing focus enables the production of certain remarkable technologies, which in the absence of active efforts to the contrary, inevitably end up assisting a Plan X politics.

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Much of human endeavour may be seen as a creative denial of death. And by death in this case is implied not merely cessation of life, but all possible constraints upon human life, all little quotidian deaths. A good 'philosophy of ordinary life' then is one that permits man to creatively play with the forces of life/death, while at the same time acknowledging their power and presence, and not seeking to deny them, not seeking to participate in elaborate pretences of their effacement from the human realm.

There are many ways of constructing elaborate edifices of self-deception and denial, and the more misanthropic among us may be tempted to consider the whole of human history as a chronicle of progressively greater self-deception. To evade such wholesale and debilitating misanthropy, one seeks to discover fissures in the narrative of human drama, points of compacted and definitive shift in ideas, values and activities.

While the exact timing of such definitive shifts would be moot, that such shifts do punctuate the equilibrium of everyday life is not to be denied. One way then of participating in the formation of a felicitous future is to attempt to locate and understand such shifts, and having sought to understand them, to muster and contribute our creative energies towards shaping appropriately the still-becoming present, and the yet-to-come future.

Notes and References

1) "Plan X and the Alternative" in Raymond Williams' *The Year 2000*, 1983. See the excerpt appended at the end of this paper.

2) It should now be very clear that the distinction between 'computability' and 'memory' that I have set up is an epistemological rather than literal one. It certainly should not be confused with the physical memory storage devices associated with the ICTs; the capacities of these memory storage devices have been growing by leaps and bounds. But there is an interesting corollary to all this: The memory in many of these ICT artefacts is also stored algorithmically; clusters of logic gates are made to function as logical devices that have the property of keeping the value assigned to them, thus becoming endowed with a simple binary 'memory'. A very large set of such arrangements are combined to form storage devices for ICT artefacts. Memory too is literally 'computed out' !

3) Intellectually, the argument conceived from perceived-ill-effects seems to be the least interesting. But this should not detract from its importance. It is a conceptually less attractive approach only because the perceptual reality in many cases is so stark (and ill) that the conceptualising intellect is confronted with the possibility that its effort is perhaps unnecessary, inadequate, or even escapist. (William James : "the intellectual life of man consists almost wholly in his substitution of a conceptual order for the perceptual order in which his experience originally comes"). But these discomfiting possibilities must be constantly confronted and resolved, if the intellectual effort is to go beyond mere ideation and result in a programme of action.

4) Foundational paper by Sunil Sahasrabudhey titled "Dialogues on Knowledge in Society". I agree of course with the larger implications of the shift that he points to; the creation of new spaces for possible leverage as the old order is dismantled.

5) *Ibid*. Sahasrabuddhey makes a distinction between 'content' and 'organisation' (i.e. 'substance' and 'formalisation'). He suggests that with ICTs a "shift from content to organisation and production to communication has taken the world of thought by a storm...The world of things is being replaced by a world of representation, structure and meaning." While it may be accepted that such a shift might indeed have taken place with respect to earlier science, it can at the same time be contended that science itself did something similar to still older ways of dealing with perception. In other words, the distinction between content and formalisation may only be a relative one. Yesterday's form is today's content. Ask a shaman what science did to the 'content' of his world. See "The Ecology of Magic" by David Abram (available at www.primitivism.com). My intention once again is merely to show that even the organisability criterion ascribed to ICTs has a precedent in the processes of science.

APPENDIX

Plan X and the Alternative

(excerpted from *The Year 2000* by Raymond Williams; written in 1983)

It is usually taken for granted that to think about the future, as a way of changing the present, is a generous activity, by people who are not only seriously concerned but also, in those familiar adjectives, forward-looking, reforming, progressive. All the good ideas are on this side; all the bad or disappointing practice on the other. There is a question of how far we can go on with this easy assumption. As things now are, all the good ideas, and especially the ways in which they connect or might connect with how people are actually living, have to be rigorously re-examined.

Yet there is another check to the assumption. It used to be taken for granted that the opposing forces were not themselves forward-looking: that they were, in those equally familiar adjectives, conservative, regressive, reactionary. Many of them indeed still are, but we misread the current situation if we rely on this easy contrast. There is now a very important intellectual tendency, with some real bases in political power, which is as closely concerned with thinking and planning the future as any reforming or progressive group. Within this tendency the signals are not being jammed but are being carefully listened to. Yet there is then the deliberate choice of a very different path: not towards sharing the information and the problems, or towards the development of general capacities to resolve them. What is chosen instead, intellectually and politically, is a new hard line on the future: a new politics of strategic advantage.

I call this new politics 'Plan X'. It is indeed a plan, as distinct from the unthinking reproduction of distraction. But it is different from other kinds of planning, and from all other ways of thinking about the future, in that its objective is indeed 'X': a willed and deliberate unknown, in which the only defining factor is advantage. It is obvious that this has connections with much older forms of competitive scheming and fighting, and with a more systematised power politics. There are all too many precedents for its crudeness and harshness. But what is new in 'Plan X' politics is that it has genuinely incorporated a reading of the future, and one which is quite as deeply pessimistic, in general terms, as the most extreme readings of those who are now campaigning against the nuclear arms race or the extending damage of the ecological crisis. The difference of 'Plan X' people is that they do not believe that any of these dangerous developments can be halted or turned back. Even where there are technical ways they do not believe that there are possible political ways. Thus while as a matter of public relations they still talk of solutions, or of possible stabilities, their real politics and planning are not centred on these, but on an acceptance of the indefinite continuation of extreme crisis and extreme danger. Within this harsh perspective, all their plans are for phased advantage, an effective even if temporary edge, which will always keep them at least one step ahead in what is called accurately enough, the game plan.

The first obvious signs of Plan X politics were in the nuclear arms race, in its renewal from the mid-1970s. It was by then clear to everyone that neither staged mutual disarmament (the professed ultimate aim) nor any stable strategic parity (the more regular political ramification) could be achieved by the development of radically new weapons systems and new levels of overkill. Many sane people called these new developments insane, but within Plan X thinking they are wholly rational. For the real objective is neither disarmament nor parity, but temporary competitive advantage, within a permanent and inevitable danger.

There were further signs of Plan X in some of the dominant responses to the rise in oil prices. Other groups proposed a reduction in energy consumption, or a reduction in dependence on oil, or negotiations for some general stability in oil and other commodity prices. Plan X people think differently. Their chosen policy is to weaken, divide and reduce the power of the oil producers, whatever the long-run effects on supply, so that a competitive advantage can be retained. To argue that this cannot be a lasting solution is to miss the point. It is not meant to be a lasting solution, but the gaining of edge and advantage for what is accepted, in advance, as the inevitable next round.

Again, Plan X has appeared recently in British politics. As distinct from policies of incorporating the working class in a welfare state, or of negotiating some new and hopefully stable relationship between state, employees and unions (the two dominant policies of post-1945 governments), Plan X has read the future as the certainty of a decline in capitalist profitability unless the existing organisations and expectations of wage-earners are significantly reduced. Given this reading, Plan X operates not only by ordinary pressures but where necessary by the decimation of British industrial capital itself.

This was a heavy and (in ordinary terms) unexpected price to pay, but one which had to be paid if the necessary edge of advantage was to be gained or regained. Again many sane people say that this policy is insane, but this is only an unfamiliarity with the nature of Plan X thinking. Its people have not only a familiar hard drive, but one which is genuinely combined with a rational analysis of the future of capitalism and of its unavoidable requirements.

In this kind of combination, Plan X people resemble the hardest kinds of revolutionary, who drive through at any cost to their perceived objectives. But the difference of Plan X from revolution is that no transformed society, no new order, no lasting liberation seriously enters these new calculations, though their rhetoric may be retained. A phase at a time, a decade at a time, a generation at a time, the people who play by Plan X are calculating relative advantage, in what is accepted from the beginning as an unending and unavoidable struggle. For this is percentage politics, and within its tough terms there is absolute contempt for those who believe that the present and the future can be managed in any other way, and especially for those who try to fudge or qualify the problems or who refuse the necessary costs. These wet old muddlers, like all old idealists, are simply irrelevant, unless they get in the way.

Does it need to be said that Plan X is dangerous? It is almost childish to say so, since it is, in its own terms, a rational mutation within an already existing and clearly foreseeable extremity of danger. There is often a surprising overlap between the clearest exponents of Plan X and their most determined political opponents. The need for constant attention to the same kinds of problem, and for urgent and where necessary disturbing action in response to them, is a common self-definition by both groups. The difference, and it ought to be fundamental, is that Plan X is determined solely by its players' advantage. Any more general condition is left deliberately undefined, while the alternative movements see solutions in terms of stable mutual advantage, which is then the principle of a definable and attainable general condition: the practical condition which replaces the unknown and undefined X.

If we put it in this way the general choice ought to be simple. Yet we are speaking about real choices, under pressures, and we have then to notice how many elements there are, in contemporary culture and society, which support or at least do not oppose Plan X. Thus the plan is often presented in terms of national competitive advantage: 'keeping our country a step ahead'. In these terms it naturally draws on simple kinds of patriotism or chauvinism. Any of its damaging consequences to others can be mediated by xenophobia, or by milder forms of resentment and distrust of foreigners. Very similar feelings can be recruited into the interests of a broader alliance, as now commonly in military policy. Again, at a substantial level, there is a deep natural concern with the welfare of our own families and our own people. That they at least should be all right, come what may, inspires extraordinary effort, and this, in certain conditions, can appear as Plan X. Moreover, from the long experience of capitalist society, there is a widespread common sense that we have always to look to our own advantage or we shall suffer and may go under. This daily reality produces and reproduces the conditions for seeing Plan X as inevitable. It has then made deep inroads into the labour movement, which was basically founded on the alternative ethic of common well-being. When a trade union argues for a particular wage level, not in terms of the social usefulness of the work but, for example, in terms of improving its position in the 'wages league table', it is in tune with Plan X.

There are also deeper supporting cultural conditions. Plan X is sharp politics and high-risk politics. It is easily presented as a version of masculinity. Plan X is a mode of assessing odds and of determining a game plan. As such it fits, culturally, with the widespread habits of gambling and its calculations. At its highest levels, Plan X draws on certain kinds of high operative (including scientific and technical) intelligence, and on certain highly specialised game-plan skills. But then much education, and especially higher education (not only in the versions that are called business studies) already defines professionalism in terms of competitive advantage. It promotes a deliberately narrowed attention to the skill as such, to be enjoyed in its mere exercise rather than in any full sense of the human purposes it is serving or the social effects it may be having. The now gross mutual flattery of military professionalism, financial professionalism, media professionalism and advertising professionalism indicates very clearly how far this has gone. Thus both the social and cultural conditions for the adoption of Plan X, as the only possible strategy for the future, are very powerful indeed.

At the same time Plan X is more than any one of these tendencies; it is also more than their simple sum. To emerge as dominant it has to rid itself, in practice, whatever covering phrases may be retained, of still powerful feelings and habits of mutual concern and responsibility, and of the very varied institutions which support and encourage these. Moreover, to be Plan X, it has to be more than a congeries of habits of advantage, risk and professional play. This is most evident in the fact that its real practitioners, still a very small minority, have to lift themselves above the muddle of miscellaneous local tendencies, to determine and assign genuine major priorities. At the levels at which Plan X is already being played, in nuclear-arms strategy, in high-capital advanced technologies (and especially information technologies), in world-market investment policies, and in anti-union strategies, the mere habits of struggling and competing individuals and families, the mere entertainment of ordinary gambling, the simplicities of local and national loyalties (which Plan X, at some of its levels, is bound to override wherever rationally necessary) are in quite another world. Plan X, that is to say, is by its nature not for everybody. It is the emerging rationality of self-conscious elites, taking its origin from the urgent experiences of crisis-management but deliberately lifting its attention from what is often that mere hand-to-mouth behaviour. It is in seeing the crises coming, preparing positions for them, devising and testing alternative scenarios of response, moving resources and standbys into position, that it becomes the sophisticated Plan X.

To name this powerful tendency, and to examine it, is not to propose what is loosely called a conspiracy theory. There are many political conspiracies, as we eventually learn when at least some of them are exposed, usually after the event. Elements of Plan X are inherently conspiratorial. But we shall underestimate its dangers if we reduce it to mere conspiracy. On the contrary, it is its emergence as the open common sense of high-level politics which is really serious. As distinct from mere greedy muddle, and from shuffling day-to-day management, it is a way - a limited but powerful way - of grasping and attempting to control the future. In a deepening world crisis, it is certain to strengthen, as against an older, less rational, less informed and planned politics. But then the only serious alternative to it is a way of thinking about the future, and of planning, which is at least as rational and as informed in all its specific policies, and which is not only morally much stronger, in its concern for a common well-being, but at this most general level is more rational and better informed. For the highest rationality and the widest information should indicate a concern for common well-being, and for stable kinds of mutual general interest, as the most practical bases for particular well-being and indeed for survival.