BIOPOWER, FREEDOM AND CONTROL

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Introduction

As Mosca sharply points out in his brilliant treatise on power included in *Elementi di Scienza politica*:

«Among the trends and recurrent facts that can be found in every political organism, one can easily be made evident to anybody: in every society, starting from the least developed that have just come to the primordial stages of civilization, going to the most learned and strong ones, there exist two classes of people: that of the governors and that of the governed. The first, which is always the least numerous, performs all political functions, monopolizes power and enjoys all the advantages deriving from the latter; while the second, which is more numerous, is directed and regulated by the first one in a more or less legal way, that is more arbitrary and violent, and, at least superficially, provides it with the material means of support as well as with those materials that are necessary for the vitality of the political organism»[1].

Summing up the above thesis and threading the same path, we can affirm that there have always existed two fundamental individual classes, which, according to Mosca's terminology, correspond to the so-called *political class* or *ruling class*[2] and the ruled mass. The *ruling class* or elite is clearly not to be looked at as a monolithic totality, on the contrary it has, in the most ancient as well as in the modern and post-modern systems, a composite and heterogeneous nature, which ensures its efficiency and flexibility. In the Indo-European political systems, for instance, where a vision of the society divided into classes referring to a pyramid principle dominates, there was some sort of power sharing between the sacerdotal and the military/warlike castes[3], which was re-elaborated in terms of philosophers and guardians[4] in Plato's *Republic*. When modern States are at issue after the

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[1] G. Mosca, *Elementi di scienza politica,* Fratelli Bocca Editori, Torino, 1923, p. 52.

[2] «In everyday life practice we all recognize the existence of this ruling or political class, as we defined it elsewhere» (*Ibidem*).

[3] See G. Dumezil, *Mithe et Épopée I.*, Gallimard, Paris, 1995.

[4] See Plato, *Republic*, trans. by R. Waterfield, Oxford University Press, Oxford – New York, 2008.

French revolution, instead, though this rigid subdivision is basically overcome by a more fluid social organization, there is still a subordinate ruling class, beside an *elite* in the strict sense of the word, which all political and economic decisions depend on. This (subordinate ruling class) allows command to be executed within any sectors of social life, by directly operating through its technical competences as well as indirectly by contributing to building up shared opinions and a common *forma mentis*[5]. However, since the mid-twentieth century, changes can be seen that noticeably reduce the importance of this intermediate class from the political and social viewpoint. Totalitarian regimes had already quite successfully started out experimenting, according to the patterns masterfully expressed by Orwell[6], forms of command, of consensus construction and (individual and collective) identity, which were intended to wipe off the existence of such intermediate class. Nevertheless, the hierarchical control of a totalitarian type set in an atmosphere of intolerable anguish and solitude as well as of obsessive conformism and uniformity, inspired by monolithic anthropological and political models, which do not tolerate any individual deviance, difference and originality at all, could not but cause a complex set of reactions, which soon decreed the end of those political formulas[7]. A new and more sophisticated control form, instead, stood out on a global scale, due to new technologies and mass communication systems, which our society can dispose of since the mid-twentieth century. Avoiding as much as possible the exercise of a totalitarian control marked by the gloomy atmosphere typical of a military conception of power, the elites, structured in pressure groups (lobbies), today tend to exercise a different type of control over the mass, as was acutely prophesized by Huxley[8]. In this case, it is not about driving the individual choices in an ideological way or imposing uniform consumer behaviors; Western technological society is indeed pluralist, tolerant and free. Control is now exercised based on subtle formulas involving the body and the soul in their temporal-space dislocation as well as in their intentional and planning

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[5] «Below the first layer of the ruling class another one, and thus also in autocratic regimes, is always present, which is more numerous and includes all the ruling capacities of the country. Without it any organization would be impossible, since the first state would not suffice to frame and manage the action of the masses. Therefore the consistency of any political organism depends on the grade of morality, intelligence and activity of such second layer. Such stability is usually as bigger as more is the pressure that the sense of collective interests of the nation or the class is able to exercise over the individual cupidity of those belonging to it» (G. Mosca, *Elementi di scienza politica,* op. cit. , p. 412).

[6] See G. Orwell, *1984, New American Library*, New York, N.Y., 1983.

[7] As regards the concept of political formula, see G. Mosca, *Elementi di scienza politica,* op. cit., p. 73-75.

dimension. It is not a control that directly limits freedom of action, nor that compels each one to have predefined behaviors, since modern freedoms are carefully respected in principle; it is rather a capillary electronic and cybernetic surveillance, connected with a spectacular pedagogy[9] that steers the needs, the consumptions and the desires of the governed multitude. Many authors have tackled this issue referring to very heterogeneous paths, styles and methodologies, but almost all have undoubtedly raised the problem of control as an element that can heavily reduce human, at large, and individual freedom, in particular. Such control, by extensively spreading, allows to transform the social hierarchy with increasing efficacy, laying aside the traditional pyramidal structure of class division to the benefit of a reticular structure[10]. The globalized world, since social control is exercised more directly by the worldwide ruling classes, reveals as such a tendency to radicalize the polarization between the elite and the multitude[11], which, though apparently resembling the traditional distinction between bourgeoisies and proletarians typical of the XIX and of the early XX centuries, actually differs from it in substance. This planetary multitude, indeed, contrary to what Hardt and Negri[12] think, does not have a specific identity and is not a revolutionary political subject either. It rather represents a heterogeneous set of human groups that have in common only the fact of basically being at the mercy of an economic and technological system obeying to the rules of capitalism and to a desire of unlimited scientific progress. In other terms, globalization as an extension of the same economic rules to the whole planet as well as of the technological and performative[13] mentality itself, gives rise to a systemic uniformity, which however does not prevent, but paradoxically favors the identity fragmentation of the political body at a global level

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[8] See A. Huxley, *Brave new world & Brave new world revisited,* Harper & Row, New York, 1965.

[9] See G. Debord, *The society of the spectacle*, trans. by D. Nicholson Smith, Paperback edition, New York, N. Y, 1999 and *Comments on the society of the spectacle*, trans. by M. Imrie, Verso, London - New York, 1990; H. Marcuse, *One-dimensional man: studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1991.

[10] See P. Bellini*, Identité européenne, pouvoir politique et globalisation,* in Metabasis.it, number 5, year III – May 2008 (www.metabasis.it); *Mitopie tecnopolitiche. Stato-nazione, impero e globalizzazione,* Mimesis, Milano – Udine, 2011, pp. 69-103.

[11] See M. Hardt – A. Negri, *Multitude: war and democracy in the Age of Empire*, Penguin Press, New York, N. Y., 2004.

[12] *Ibidem*.

[13] See P. Bellini, *Mitopie tecnopolitiche. Stato-nazione, impero e globalizzazione,* Mimesis, Milano - Udine, 2011, pp. 41-68.

and the appearance of ethnic conflicts of every kind. If on the one hand we are witnessing an anthropological, massive mutation, which, by making the human body subject to any kinds of technological performances, tends to change its nature by hybridizing it with the machines[14] in order to colonize its physical and mental depth, on the other hand, this standardizing hybridization does not necessarily express a common identity so strong to prevent the rise of identity differences that are often each other conflictual. Though, for instance, a European, a Chinese and an Arab man share the same technological and economic horizon, they nonetheless keep very different cultural codes and lifestyles at the same time, as a simple observation of their religious beliefs, dietary habits and daily behaviors ranging from individual interaction to collective rituals testify to. Therefore white is still the color used in case of mourning in India[15], while in Italy and in the other Western countries black is the favorite choice[16]. What seems necessary to be understood is that, if the interaction with the new technologies makes up a *brainframe* and a *forma mentis* that have a standardizing vocation, while the cold capitalistic logics making the world a global market homogeneously spreads, this does not necessarily imply any basic uniformity in cultural contents, which instead differ extremely clearly. For example, though the English language has become a sort of universal *lingua franca* that everybody should learn to facilitate international exchanges and reciprocal understanding between different people and cultures, at the same time each one strikingly asserts his own linguistic identity, since his own cultural and ethnic specificity is conveyed through it[17]. Maybe someone thinks that these differences are secondary or rather superficial when compared to a standardizing structural dimension of an economic and technological type; yet, as far as they are considered irrelevant, they engender very important effects in the interaction between the individuals and the social groups. They contribute to determining the emergence and the

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[14] See G. O. Longo, *Il simbionte. Prove di umanità futura*, Meltemi, Roma, 2003 and P. Bellini, *Cybefilosofia del potere. Immaginari ideologie e conflitti della civiltà tecnoloigica,* Mimesis, Milano - Udine, 2007, pp. 124-138.

[15] See J. Chevalier – A. Gheerbrant, *White* in *Dictionary of symbols*, trans. by J. Buchanan-Brown, Penguin Books, London – New York, 1996.

[16] See *Black*, in op. cit.

[17] See H. Walter, *L'anglais domine et rehabilitee le latin,* in *L'atlas des mondialisations*, La vie -Le Monde Hors-Série, 2010-2011, pp. 76-77 and B. Giblin, *Le cultures nationales sont-elles menacées ?* La vie -Le Monde Hors-Série, 2010-2011, pp. 110-111 ; A. Dieckhoff *La nation dans tous ses états : les identités nationales en mouvement,* Flammarion, Paris, 2002.

enduring of often bloody conflicts or the radicalization and the recovery of traditional identity, which amplifies cultural differences in spite of structural uniformity. The war that has just followed through between the various ethnic groups making up the political body in the ex-Yugoslavia, the eternal conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, the fight of the Tibetan people against the Chinese, the linguistic conflicts between Europeans within the Union are all symptomatic of an identity desire of belonging, which technological and economic globalization has not appeased, but has instead amplified as a reaction to its unifying project. In such a context it is easy to observe how worldwide ruling classes are directly summoned up to govern a fragmented, heterogeneous and internally conflicting multitude at a political and economic level. These elites seem to react by constantly amplifying control and surveillance, which comes true in a disquieting transformation and alteration of the idea of freedom. We are paradoxically in the presence of two contrasting phenomena that unrelentingly follow and overlap each other: on the one hand there is a uniforming tension of a structural type, which, by limiting free will through a possible totalizing control of actions and plans thanks to the hybridization with the machine that makes the *cyborg* (cybernetic organism) emerge as a dominant human type[18], reduces freedom from control so much to let us fear to change our societies into rigidly organized, electronic beehives; on the other hand, there is a basic amplification of the differences between various human groups, which foreshadow any kinds of conflict.

The modes of surveillance

It is necessary to proceed in order by identifying the two fundamental modalities of control and surveillance. The first one, typical of totalitarian regimes, submits the population to a pervasive surveillance, which consists not only in trying to colonize consciences through the manipulation of information and the imposition of a single ideology, but also in punishing any behavior that is considered eccentric and different from the standards and lifestyles expressed by the official ideology[19]. To such type of surveillance national socialism and Soviet communism (in its Stalinian version) as well as dictatorships like fascism that can be assimilated to semi-totalitarian regimes

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[18] See P. Bellini, *Cybefilosofia del potere. Immaginari ideologie e conflitti della civiltà tecnologica,* op. cit. pp. 109-138 and P. Bellini, *Mitopie tecnopolitiche. Stato-nazione, impero e globalizzazione,* pp. 41-68.

have historically resorted massively and more moderately respectively. These power systems, beside asserting a single thought which was claimed to be spontaneously reactivated by everyone, also professed a single possible modality of need satisfaction; such necessities, furthermore, had to comply with the socially dominant, or as such supposed, human type. Hence, for instance, according to Soviet communism all men subject to such regime had to conform to the model expressed by the image and symbology of the proletariat, which offered a totalizing experience, including any possible expression of existence, to the subjugated multitude. The image of the perfect Arian likewise represented to Nazism a symbolic ideal that anybody had to strive to stick to, even by molding his body in compliance with the canons of beauty consistent with such figure.

In this type of regimes each individual is absolutely and totally not free both formally and substantially. He cannot choose how to live, he cannot express his opinions freely and cannot enjoy his own goods with certainty either, since, also in those cases where the abolition of private property is not exercised, power can always confiscate it or limit its use without any justification according to discretional or arbitrary modalities. In these cases, political power is not bound in his action by any limitation; it can do anything and decrees a truth which must be shared and accepted by anyone. Any kind of freedom that is not bound to the positive obedience to a shared ideology is not feasible at all under such conditions; the individual, indeed, loses his rights to the benefit of a general will expressed by either a charismatic leader, or a power group or a particular class, which claims the right to absolutely assert an ideological paradigm where a conception of good, truth and justice as absolute as the latter prevails. The second one is about the ultimate developments of Western civilization and the impact that technologies have at a social level, implementing as they do more fluid control forms which aim at both the interior (thought) and exterior (actions) space. All Western political systems, in fact, legally and actually respect a quite large set of individual freedoms regarded as negative freedoms, that is as personal freedom areas within which the individual is not subject to any limitation by the community. Thus rights as freedom of thought and opinion, the press and association, as well as the good propriety, for instance, are, within the limits established in the various legal orders, basically safeguarded and protected. In other terms, assuming, though debatable, Berlin's analysis on the difference between positive and negative

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[19] See H. Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism,* Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, 1968.

freedom[20] – the first regarding the individual free from any ties that can affect his actions or thoughts, while the second concerning the principle that rules the choice of political formulas (government practices and value systems) determining what the individuals can or cannot do – all Western liberal-democracies tend to systematically build up a balance between the principle of majority referred to by the laws that regulate social life and the limit that these laws can never exceed. Therefore, in every Western countries it is asserted that if, on the one hand, sovereignty belongs to the people, who delegate it to their representatives, on the other, such sovereign power is not and must not be considered absolute, since its scope ends up at the presence of certain individual rights, such as life, propriety and freedom of thought, which are considered inalienable. Thus no one will miss that many of the legal warranties enjoyed by the individuals have a potential subversive load which must not be neglected. Indeed, being able to freely express one's own thought and thus enjoy a virtually unlimited right to criticism, being able to freely gather and associate to pursue various kinds of collective aims, being able to accumulate wealth with no danger that this can be arbitrarily confiscated, as well as being able to choose to conduct one's own existence as best as one thinks, liberally determining one's own behaviors as far as they do not violate the others' rights, means having the opportunity to consequently criticize collective rituals, value systems and consolidated traditions as well as having the right to challenge all those political systems that do not allow such individual freedom. This parade of rights and freedom, which were granted to each individual as a person, has long represented a very powerful conceptual and political bank against the interference of power in the individual's conduct in modern history, this not depending on its source of legitimation, be it based on the strong concept of popular sovereignty, on the concept of divine right or on an autocratic conception. It is no accident that the first formulation of liberalism, considered in its classical concept, was carried out in England in the XVII century, during the struggle against absolutism and in strict connection with the political and

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[20] «I shall call the 'negative' sense, is involved in the answer to the question. What is the area within the subject – a person or a group of persons – is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be without interference by other persons? The second, which I shall call the 'positive' sense, is involved in the answer to the question. What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that? The two questions are clearly different, even though the answers to them may overlap» (I. Berlin, *Liberty*., ed. by H. Hardy, Oxford University Press, Oxford – New York 2002, p. 169).

social forces that were opposing this[21]. Though rights and freedoms are historically considered valid in principle for any individual regardless of his social *status*, it happened that, in XIX-century Europe in particular, they were actually exercised only by the top classes, such as the bourgeoisie and nobility, while the rest of the population did not actually benefit from them because of its objective miserable conditions. In other terms, individuals with no culture, and with no adequate means of support, compelled by their own poverty to ceaselessly work, will hardly exercise freedom of thought and opinion, though these are legally recognized rights, and will also hardly have the opportunity to improve their material conditions by accumulating goods and wealth; they will not have the possibility to freely choose their existence either. After World War II, however, the material causes that prevented the full exercise of individual freedoms and political rights in Western societies were substantially chipped off through a process of increasing capillary mass education, wealth expansion and tendency to the liberal consumption of any kind of goods.

Under such conditions an authentic freedom of thought and criticism could have flourished as never before; however such exercise still remained the privilege of a minority. The Western world, and very soon also the whole planet, were indeed definitely entering the *biopower* era, meant as a new form of surveillance, control and limitation of freedom.

Biopower

According to the definition provided by Hardt and Negri: «Biopower is a form of power that regulates social life from its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it, and rearticulating it. Power can achieve an effective command over the entire life of the population only when it becomes an integral, vital function that every individual embraces and reactivates of his or her own accord. … The highest function of this power is to invest life through and through, and its primary task is to administer life. Biopower thus refers to a situation in which what is directly at stake in power is the production and reproduction of life itself»[22]. We can interpret *biopower* as a form of social and political organization that does not necessarily cancel individual rights and freedom

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[21] See *Liberalisme,* in *Dictionnaire de philosophie politique,* sous la direction de P. Raynaud et S. Rials, P.U.F., Paris 1996, pp. 338 – 344 ; N. Bobbio, N. Matteucci e G. Pasquino, *Liberalismo*, in *Il dizionario di politica,* UTET, Torino 2004, pp. 513-528.

[22] M. Hardt – A. Negri, *Empire*, Harward University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts – London, England 2000, pp. 23-24.

formally, where these are present. It rather keeps them down and absorbs their effects, which can potentially destabilize the order and the geometry that the worldwide ruling classes have decided to imprint in the planetary technological civilization and in the political body made up of the individuals and the multitudes that are subject to them. Such *biopower* can also be understood as a sort of cybernetic control and surveillance, which extend to both the natural world and to man intended as a political and social subject. *Biopower*, based on the machines, on scientific logics and on performative skills of a technological order, is intrinsically connected with a modality of control and surveillance of a totalizing type, since the latter belongs to the rationality of the machines that cannot choose, but limit themselves to replying to the inputs according to specific rules, which are determined by their maker. This is the case with both mechanic and electronic devices such as the computers, which execute programs that are endowed with pre-determined rules, languages and protocols. This logics of surveillance and control in turn extends to man and to the society where he lives and operates. It is no accident that the expansion of new technologies formidably increases the capacity of action and behavior control, and, only partially, that of influencing each individual's thought. On the one hand, indeed, the mediatic (be it a TV or a computer) screen contributes to the education of each individual since his early infancy, while on the other, virtual dimension, which is efficaciously managed by computers, by connecting billions of individuals and creating spaces for communication that are easy to be watched and controlled, allows to bring thoughts and opinions to surface. These were previously concealed with jealousy by the individual, who used to share his most intimate beliefs with a limited group of people. Thus in the virtual group of friends one can share thoughts and opinions, nourishing the illusion that these will remain private only because it is possible to limit access to such information, by handing it in only to people that we like and trust.

As a matter of fact this information is instead tracked and kept and is therefore always available, though the law limits its access and utilization. Not only, an interesting and curious phenomenon must be added to the above, which can be defined as electronic narcissism and that leads many individuals to advertise their opinions and actions as much as possible as a consequence of their anxiety to appear. Mediatic appearance thus becomes a substitute for existence, and by inverting the traditional terms of the discourse *one does not appear because he exists, but he exists because he appears*, changes it into a widespread mass voyeurism. If then from thought, which still escapes from a total electronic hold and from a disquieting surveillance, one moves on to action, to

behaviors and to the dialogic exchange of information, we can observe that in the orbit of the technological and reticular civilization, both everyday communication means like mobile phones, and the use of any kind of credit cards and videocameras located anywhere allow to potentially control individual and collective acts and lifestyles. Electronic eyes watch drivers everywhere to avoid even the least violation to the highway code; credit cards allow to completely track down our purchasing behaviors in principle, mobile phones indicate our location in space and time, not to speak of how progress in the field of biomedical sciences allows to have an ever more control capacity on the materiality of the body and on its purely organic existence. If then we consider, for a while, the fact that the human body has become the ultimate frontier of technological colonization, so that it inexorably slips towards an ever more considerable hybridization with the machines, wondering about the meaning of freedom in relation to control and surveillance does not appear as a pure academic and intellectual exercise, but rather as what is deemed to determine our future of self-conscious beings that are free to choose.

Freedom of control and surveillance

Being free within a dimension where control and surveillance dominate is not the same thing as being free against a horizon where these are not present. We can rather affirm that where surveillance spreads, freedom tends to change into its negation. Indeed, despite being permissive and meticulously respecting individual freedoms, as well as ready to grant a certain degree of autonomy to his members, any society can nonetheless change into a powerful totalitarian mechanism, as far as it tends to invade each one's privacy subjecting the individual to a surveillance that, though benevolent, alters the concepts of free choice, will and action themselves. It is indeed possible, in this respect, to express a banal and predictable consideration, which seems to be ignored by the surveillance and control proponents, who like better the easy assumption according to which if one does not take actions contrary to shared ethics and law, there is nothing to fear from a more and more extended and capillary surveillance. This quite obvious consideration can then be expressed by saying that preventing from breaking a law or a social rule when a control mechanism, which makes the punishment or public stigmatization of the culprit highly possible, is either absent or present is not the same. Therefore, for instance, it is easier refrained from stealing because one is deeply convinced of committing a wrong action mining the bases of peaceful cohabitation, than

refrained from performing the same action because a series of surveillance mechanisms would make almost certain, or at least very probable, punishment following such a behavior. In the first case, choice comes from a critical, consciously assumed reflection, which decides to accept and introject the rules of socially shared ethics; in the second case, pure punishment, the preoccupation of being caught, which inevitably puts the sense of an individual choice in the shadows, dominates. Acting under the menace of an impending punishment cannot but encourage a slavish and irresponsible attitude, which in the long term can wipe off the effort of a critical reflection over one's own acts and that hands the human subject over to a dimension of foolishness, dulling and oblivion. Surveillance, therefore, denies freedom of choice since it solves the difference between good and evil and between right and wrong in the dichotomy between control and absence of control, any time prompting to act in connection with a perverse mechanism, where moral and ethical values are substituted with the mere dialectics between reward and punishment, costs and benefits, which risks ending up with a substantial incapacity to break even the most absurd and senseless rules. It's no accident that in the world designed by Orwell and dominated by a suffocating electronic surveillance, not only there is not any possibility to act following one's own beliefs, but these also even cease to exist. Only the Big Brother has the task to think for everybody, standing up as a tutelary deity with the function of directing collective existence[23]. Our civilization therefore poses the problem relating to the limits of surveillance and control with strength. Such issue needs elaborating a subsequent theory and practice, which cannot merely be responded by first establishing some fundamental freedoms, and then subjecting the individual to a strict surveillance. It is not sufficient, indeed, to decide that each one has the right to have his own opinion and to autonomously choose his own lifestyle, if contemporarily he is subjected to a strict electronic control, which actually compels him to behave according to the socially received rules, without any real possibility to deviate from the path mapped out by collectivity. We therefore think that there is a lot to fear from the uncontrolled expansion of sophisticated electronic tools that are able to watch citizens. This can in the long term lead the human species to tread a disquieting path, marked with a substantial incapacity to freely exercise one's own will and right of claiming original ideas and choices that are basically different from common sense. However we do not think that the safeguard

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[23] See G. Orwell, *1984,* op. cit. .

of human dignity, of freedom and self-consciousness[24] necessarily goes through the renunciation of the new electronic technologies; rather, both a substantial limitation of the latter's use in the sphere of surveillance over the behaviors and the most important choices, and a more ample spreading of suitable tools of defense from control and surveillance seem necessary. Such tools are firstly mental and cultural, since only a civilization deeply rooted in the values of individual freedom and personal responsibility can have the necessary antibodies to avoid totalitarian mechanisms. Obviously, they are also of a technological order, since they should induce us to build machines with a limited capacity of surveillance over thoughts and human actions. As usual, the enhancement of technological power needs a critical attitude that can limit and drive its use in order to as much as possible harmonize the hybridization of man and the machine in a double process of reciprocal colonization, which can safeguard the existence of a self-consciousness that is endowed with free will.

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[24] « *Self-consciousness* is the truth of consciousness: the latter is a consequence of the former, all consciousness of an other object being as a matter of fact also self-consciousness. The object is my idea: I am aware of the object as mine; and thus in it I am aware of me. The formula of self-consciousness is I = I: … » (G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of mind*, trans. by W. Wallace, http://www.class.uidaho.edu/mickelsen/Phil%20310/ToC/Hegel%20-%20Philosophy%20of%20Mind.htm).