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The Smart Society and Its Enemies. Meanings and Limits in the Criticism of Smartness

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Abstract. Distancing myself from unreflective appropriations, in this article, I trace a brief history of smartness by dwelling mainly on the differentiation of smartness itself from intelligence, digitization or simple competitiveness to propose an idea that focuses on the integration of people, environment, and technologies. Moreover, after analyzing some not insignificant misgivings about the delimitation of places and relations, I offer some useful elements to distinguish progressive criticism, which aims at the empowerment of the majority, from merely regressive and ultimately unhelpful criticism. I conclude by pointing out that smartness, in addition to helping the social sciences, particularly sociology, frame fundamental and still unresolved issues in new ways, is now an unavoidable topic for researchers.

Keywords: smart society, enemies, criticism.

Riassunto. Prendendo le distanze da appropriazioni irriflessive, in questo articolo traccio una breve storia della *smartness* che, a partire da una differenziazione del concetto di *smartness* da quelli di intelligenza, digitalizzazione e competitività, sviluppa una proposta interpretativa che si concentra sull'integrazione di persone, ambiente e tecnologie. Inoltre, dopo aver analizzato alcune criticità non trascurabili sulla delimitazione di luoghi e relazioni, offro alcuni elementi utili per distinguere la critica progressista, che mira all'*empowerment* della maggioranza, da critiche meramente regressive e in definitiva inutili. Concludo sottolineando che la *smartness*, oltre ad aiutare le scienze sociali, in particolare la sociologia, ad inquadrare in modi nuovi questioni fondamentali e ancora irrisolte, è ormai un tema di ricerca imprescindibile.

Parole chiave: smart society, nemici, critiche.

1. INTRODUCTION

Several years have passed since Karl Popper published his passionate defense of freedom against dogmatism and totalitarianism, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945). In that monumental work, Popper re-examined political thought since antiquity with a series of reflections that matured in the very particular cultural and political climate of World War II. I do not intend to discuss or even endorse Popper's ambitious perspective and point

of view here. Rather, I refer with obvious modesty to that title for two reasons.

First, I hold that the smart society, if conceived in a fully consequential way, can be an answer to the basic problem that animated Popperian thinking, namely the question, which is also much debated in the social sciences, of the balance between the individual's autonomy and self-actualization and society's power and maneuvering space. However, at a time when the dictatorships of the 20th century belong to our history and hyper-socialization and massification remain troubling realities, we also face various forms of hyper-individualization that threaten social solidarity and the very reproduction of cultures. As much as it is intrinsically linked to technologies employed in "smart" ways, the smart society brings back to the forefront the importance of social ties. In this way, it is reaffirmed and we are reminded that society is not an empty word or a mere abstraction.

Second, even at the risk of appearing to some too prone to speculation, I consider, like not a few other scholars, that it is useful or even indispensable to think about smartness not only or not so much from an engineering perspective. Rather, attention also needs to be paid to the plane of circulation of ideas and to the history and meaning of concepts as well as, of course, to the entry of ideas into common sense. There is, for that matter, now a widespread awareness in the social sciences that reasoning about algorithms and big data is by no means the exclusive prerogative of mathematicians and computer engineers. In this context, my goal is to show how smartnes – which is undeniably a novelty – reactivates, so to speak, stereotypical ways of reasoning and constructing alternatives that are hardly or not at all real.

To create distance from that unreflective appropriation and help shed at least some light, in the following pages, I first and briefly trace a kind of history of smartness, with particular reference to the differentiation of the latter from digitization or simple competitiveness. It will thus be possible to see how the distance separating the term "smart" from neighboring or synonymous terms, such as "digital" and "intelligent," has gradually become clearer.

Next, I consider some interesting and on the whole justified reservations that have been made about smartness, again in a concise way. In this context, however, the references are mainly to the debate around the smart city, reflecting the fact that the social sciences seem to be more easily able to think about this specific topic on a local and circumscribed scale – which is precisely a city – and struggle to refer to society itself, that is, to a larger scale.

However, not all reservations or criticisms that can be made about smartness are or could be shared. Therefore, I will try to make some distinctions to separate a progressive criticism, one that really aims for sustainability and empowerment, from a merely regressive criticism that is ultimately neither scientifically nor in the broader political sense useful.

Finally, the last section stresses that the concept of smartness allows social sciences, particularly sociology, to return with a new perspective to at least some of its major issues, which are also open problems. Therefore, without wishing to stand up as a champion of the new at all costs, I conclude with the hope that researchers will be able to interpret consciously the current framework, in which what we might call a "smart turn" is now looming.

2. TOWARD A BRIEF HISTORY OF SMARTNESS

When we think of smartness, we are first struck by the large number of meanings this word can have. The term "smart" has become almost ubiquitous, being used not only to speak about cities or working but also in reference to community, governance, home, people, politics, company, development, economy, environment, grids, land, manufacturing, and mobility. In short, society presents itself and has become conceptualizable as smart. Moreover, in continuity with a strand of research that began a few years ago in Japan and focused on fully exploiting technological platforms' potential, a discussion has begun of a «5.0 society» or «super smart society» (Holroyd 2022).

However, the multiplication and intensification of the expression does not always seem to be accompanied by complete clarity. The least that can be said is that in the wake of some valuable research already conducted (Iannone 2020, Sessa 2022), it is worth reflecting further on the brief history of a concept as crucial as it is promising. What is meant when one speaks of smartness?

It has been about a decade since Jucevicius (2013), certainly not incorrectly, noted that smartness was more a practical construct than a theoretical one. Indeed, focusing on the plane of theoretical reflection, the equating of digital and smart had prevailed and was still prevailing. We see this in exemplary manner in the analyses of Charles Levy and David Wong, two scholars who in 2014, noting with lively satisfaction that the United Kingdom was «becoming smarter» defined the concept we are dealing with in what in what they meant to be general terms. They proclaimed that a smart society is «one that successfully harnesses the potential of digital

technology and connected devices and the use of digital networks to improve people's lives» (Levy Wong 2014: 1). At the center of their perspective, then, was the ability to harness technology's full potential to enable human beings to become more productive by better spending their resources and energy and, in parallel, to produce improved health, well-being and quality of life, which is also equivalent to saying that in their view, the centrality unquestionably assigned to technology led, all things considered, to understanding smartness more or less as a synonym for intelligence.

However, in recent years, things have changed and perhaps, in part, had already changed before many of us realized it. Thanks in part to the deepening analysis of the fourth industrial revolution and cognitive capitalism, the issue under discussion has gradually been framed with greater clarity in light of the idea of reflexive modernity and, more generally, of an explanation fruitfully unrelated to any technological determinism. Therefore, awareness has grown of how the term "smart" should be understood in a much broader sense than the term "digital." Defining smartness not only entails defining its purely technological aspects but also the presence – already real but also to be strengthened – of an aware citizenship and a political power that takes justice, participation, and livability seriously.

Something similar can be said about the growing awareness of the distance between "smart" and "intelligent." On this specific point, the considerations of the peculiar symbolic power of ambiguity between two supposed synonyms certainly remain valid. After all, as Vanolo noted with specific reference to the "smart city" label, anyone claiming to be «not smart» would inevitably call themselves «not intelligent» and therefore «stupid» (Vanolo 2015: 114), which not only represents an obvious incentive for anyone to celebrate themselves as smart but on a more general level helps explain an unquestionable symbolic or, if you will, performative power amplified by a very frequent repetition and a remarkably wide range of uses. Smartness, in fact, is a succinct definition of the change that accompanies the revolution induced by new technologies and an imperative from which nothing and no one now seems able to escape (whether it be cities and communities, people and their ways of consuming, or other aspects that are anything but secondary, such as work and mobility). Yet, that ambiguity has been at least partly overcome by the idea that the term "intelligent" corresponds more to process innovation whereas "smart" would be more appropriate for product innovation (Fistola 2013: 49, Mezzapelle 2016). So it is not just and simply a matter of doing things differently but actually doing different things.

Moreover, it can be said that deeper and closer examination has brought into focus the crucial difference that exists from competitiveness. Politicians and administrators possibly seek to make their cities or communities smarter to make them more competitive or attractive in domestic and international markets. Likewise, nothing leads to the a priori exclusion that a smart society will be more prosperous or attract more investment. However, in this case, it is more important than ever not to confuse cause with effect, as the essential point is not, or should not be, to beat more or less real or imaginary competitors but to seek new balances and solutions that become possible and necessary today. Roberta Iannone made this very clear by discussing an integration of people, environment, and digital technologies. With apologies in advance, I quote her very interesting thoughts extensively:

> *thinking smart is first of all thinking in an "integrated" way and the main integration is that which is realised between people, environment and technologies […] In this sense […] the smart society is the real protagonist and it is only within a systemic logic that it is possible to think and act "smart' […] The impression is that, beyond the often very fascinating rhetoric of the smart world as a technological and competitive world, nothing can ever be truly "intelligent" if technology and economy do not find their place in society […] It is a question of rethinking the cultural and social sense that economy and technology have not only with respect to the needs of order, but also for progress (more and better than growth) […] The concept of "integration" must therefore be recovered and given back to the literature on smartness in all its undoubted centrality* (Iannone 2020: 2-5).

This analysis has the merit of countering any one-sided emphasis on technological and economic aspects. Moreover, with its reference to the environment, it brings to prominence the existence of a strong link to sustainability, an issue that many are grasping in its dramatic topicality today. However, even at the risk of appearing drastic, I would comment on it as follows. As useful as it may be from an analytical point of view to break down any concept to investigate its specific dimensions or fields of application separately, either smartness is a useful social concept for talking about society and orienting it, or it is a term destined to remain vacuous. If smartness is indeed a social concept, it imposes a broad and inclusive perspective that can reveal the mass of social actors, without, of course, neglecting the environment and hence the very urgent issue of environmental sustainability.

3. SOME PERPLEXITIES AND WELL-FOUNDED RESERVATIONS

When considering the reservations and not ungrounded objections to smartness as a whole, at least two observations can be made. First, demonstrating how little we still think in terms of a smart society, we find mostly criticisms directed at a smaller scale, such as the smart city. Second, all or most of the perplexities relate, on closer inspection, to the lack or incompleteness of integration between the parts just mentioned: people, environment, and technology.

I only mention the possibility of a criticism moved from the environmental point of view (Ahvenniemi *et al.* 2017). In this case, the fundamental question is to what extent can urban agglomerations that increasingly rely on technology and energy-consuming devices really be sustainable? In other words, even leaving aside the danger that concrete concern for the environment will give way to mere green ideology, to what extent is a smart city also a green city? It is true that sustainability is certainly something broader than simple concern for ecology and that «a city cannot be called smart if it is not sustainable as well» (Sessa 2022: 8). Nonetheless, it remains legitimate to ask to what extent technologies, by definition energy-demanding, can act as a driver for a more environmentally friendly development. In short, the danger of a disastrous paradox must be averted. Although the goals and rhetoric of smartness have undeniably benefited from widespread environmental apprehension and ecological sensitivity's entry into common sense, it may also be that, thinking on a larger or global scale, "smartification" intensifies the exploitation of available resources and even aggravates pollution.

Moving on to examine at least briefly the criticisms made on the integration side referring to people, it is worth mentioning at least some of the analyses that have emphasized the danger of people succumbing under the crushing weight of purely neoliberal logics. Such is the case with Vanolo's perspective on the effects of "smartmentality," conceived as a discourse that deprives people of the ability to make decisions about their own lives by «broadening the field of action of technicians, consultants and private companies» (2014: 884). Vanolo clearly grasps the link between the focus on the smart urban development model and the economic crisis that began in 2008. At a time when the economy is struggling and especially traditional sectors, such as construction, are finding themselves in trouble, the restyling of cities and even more so the exploitation of new territories under the banner of smartness become valuable opportunities for capitalist accumulation and fruitful investment (2015: 116-117). Moreover, Vanolo again observes that the smartness discourse has been and is accompanied by a series of utopian or dystopian visions but is still far or very far from the idea of a citizenship comprising conscious and politically active individuals. From this point of view, the problem for people seems twofold.

On the one hand, smart cities are the theater and the product of trends that reward a few economic actors' overwhelming power at the expense of ordinary actors. On the other hand, the image of a «smart citizen» as a being fully integrated into a whole and a non-conflicting person has been established. Therefore, some of Vanolo's reflections that sound almost like a manifesto for critical researchers:

> *in sum, what seems to be missing from the smart city imaginary is the idea of citizen* empowerment *and effective participation in urban matters. Restoring an idea of centrality to the voice of ordinary citizens in the production of urban space—including those who are poor, weak, and technologically on the margins—means imagining a credible way to produce a coupling between technological development and the city that truly increases the sphere of action of citizens, respecting their desires and hopes This is probably a difficult but important step to produce more progressive thinking and instill a sense of confidence and optimism in our becoming "smart citizens," and in this regard, geographical imagination can certainly make a significant contribution* (Vanolo 2017: 14, our translation).

Though aimed at geographers, this consideration can easily be extended to all social scientists and scholars. In the absence of committed, progress-oriented analysis, campaigns promoted by old and new economic powers (utopias) and fears that agitate common sense (dystopias) operate undisturbed. In both cases, however, people are in no way encouraged to think of themselves as active participants in a city – or society – that uses technologies to enable everyone to live better and pursue sustainability as a common goal. As a result, the gap can only remain and even increase between those who know how to take advantage of technologies to integrate themselves better into the new reality – or perhaps just to stand out and make their voices heard more loudly (such as, exemplarily, influencers) – and all the others, who are too poor, marginal, or old or even simply resigned.

In the next section, in discussing some differences between a progressive and a regressive critical perspective, I will again refer to Vanolo's idea of empowerment. Now I would like at least to mention two views that, in addition to offering important insights, seem comparable to Vanolo's in raising the alarm against the danger of smartness becoming a kind of cover for neoliberalism's logics and interests. I refer first to Hollands, who

propounded an extremely interesting and, in his way, pioneering point of view although not based on meticulous empirical evidence and lacking even simple «work on data» (Sessa 2022: 67). Attempting «to provide a preliminary critical polemic against some of the more rhetorical aspects of cities labelled as smart» (Hollands 2008: 304), he highlighted not only the considerable distance between self-celebrating as smart and being smart but also the variety of trends and choices that can hide under the "smart" label. Moreover, Hollands revealed how much the goal of inclusiveness remains mostly in the background as far as technologies are concerned whereas competitiveness and exaggerated entrepreneurship prevail and end up pushing in the opposite direction of equal participation.

Second, some analyses can be recalled that take a cue from IBM's «smarter» campaign to demystify the storytelling associated with the implementation of urban technologies (Söderström Paasche Klauser 2014). Here again, the authors lament that participation and inclusiveness remain at best empty and marginal words in an exquisitely marketing discourse whereas smartness essentially becomes the spring that induces territories to compete to avoid succumbing. From their perspective, what has been introduced into the public agenda and debate is actually a new «value economy» (Boltanski and Thevenot 2006), that is, a new way of conferring value on places, things, and people. As a result, «cities at the bottom» are urged «to climb up the smart city ladder» (Söderström, Paasche and Klauser 2014: 317), thereby committing resources to technological development that perhaps could be better deployed in other ways.

The aforementioned analyses should be juxtaposed with others that focus on the alarm raised by possible threats to privacy, an issue that appears central in societies for not a few dominated by «surveillance capitalism» (Zuboff 2019). The smart model is possible because of and at the same time produces an enormous amount of big data, widely available for the management of everyday problems or even challenges considered strategic for various reasons. As a result, not only is an undesirable trend such as «technocratic governance» manifested or accentuated, but the smart city is also vulnerable as it is «hackable» and «panoptic» because it is founded on spying on everything and everyone (Kitchin 2014). In short, far from implementing the ideal of concrete solidarity, which can also promote political participation, the new hyper-technological model of the city would likely give rise to forms of control that are completely antithetical to well-being, involvement, and democratic coexistence itself.

4. OVERCOMING A MERELY REGRESSIVE CRITICISM

The brief review presented above shows the importance of what is at stake. Inequality, passivization, exploitation, and danger to democracy are indeed issues that have some connection to smartness. They are probably not inevitable consequences of it, but they are certainly well-founded reasons researchers should not abandon smartness to economic powers or to experts entirely in agreement with the political sphere. In any case, it seems hard to deny that there are forms of aversion about which, recalling the presented quote from Vanolo (2017), one can say that they do not have a progressive sign and do not in any way induce optimism or self-confidence in most people. They may be representations present in popular culture or even analyses that are meant to be radically critical of existing and capitalism that, perhaps without even employing the word "smart," in various ways manifest hostility toward ICTs and economic and political powers' use of such technologies. Without wanting to generalize, but still deeming it useful to try to distinguish progressive from merely regressive criticism, at least four aspects also represent false dichotomies to focus on: old/new, natural/artificial, human/technological, and us/them.

How to decide what is old and what is new? And, above all, why believe that what is established, however unpleasant or perfectible it may be, is preferable to a new way of living and thinking that has to be consolidated? Yet the regressive criticism of smartness generally tends toward nostalgic retreat, in the more or less conscious belief that only in a mythically transfigured past reigned authenticity and a simplicity now irretrievably lost. Contributing to this, in all likelihood, is an entirely naive way of posing the ecological question, which demonizes modernity and longs for a return to nature that is not possible, regardless of being desirable.

A similar argument can also be applied to the alternatives natural/artificial and human/technological. Because technique can also be thought of as an expression of the instrumental rationality typical of modernity, an ultimately regressive critical approach may hold that the return to fully human reality and values requires a rejection of what is artifactual and therefore "unnatural." Nonetheless, social sciences teach us that human beings are anything but natural beings, living immersed in an "artificial" culture that they produce and by which they are endlessly produced. It is true that critical discourse on technique boasts illustrious precedents starting at least with Heidegger and progressing through Adorno and, more recently, Bauman. However, although technique itself is obviously not neutral and does not

represent a panacea, it can be an element that produces or at least facilitates changes for the better. This means that although overcoming the digital divide and conscious control of technologies by users should be concretely promoted and demanded, rejection and distrust of technology per se are expressions of an ultimately counterproductive anti-modernism scientifically and in a broader political sense. Again, the perspective to be taken is to integrate technologies with people and, of course, with the environment and certainly not to revive some form of Luddism.

Finally, regarding the us/them opposition, we should keep in mind that although interest and hope for the smart model is now present in almost all parts of the world, projects and experiments are not everywhere equally widespread. Because Asia as a whole seems to be more advanced, the idea that smartness is something foreign to a supposed Western tradition can be formed, which can also happen by contrasting the United States – presumably more hypermodern and technological – with a Europe with a more authentic culture or by contrasting Northern Europe, supposedly "cold" not only because of climate, with a Southern Europe characterized by a warmer humanity. Because globalization and localization are closely intertwined, it can be well understood that some areas claim their own distinctiveness and difference in the face of an intended global model such as smartness. However, it is not reasonable to think of being cut off from the development of technology or exempted from the issue of sustainability.

In any case, even beyond these or other false dichotomies that may be identified, what seems to be missing in the critical regressive approach is a contribution to citizen/people empowerment. One can reason whether this is due to a fundamentally pessimistic implicit anthropology that leads to a lack of trust in subjects or to the belief that, under current social and economic conditions, there remains little or no room for bottom-up dynamics. However, the result does not change, and it is the vision of masses of individuals who are weak, manipulable, incapable of asserting their rights, and lacking control over themselves and their future, which definitely induces more discouragement than willingness to change for the better.

On the contrary, it could be said that we should all be exigent in the face of smartness. It is a matter of reclaiming a smart model that is less uncritically subservient to economic powers than it probably is today and more attentive to territories, which clearly do not all have the same needs or desires. At the same time, it is a matter of aiming for real digital inclusion for all, including people on the margins or with disabilities (Kolotouchkina, Barroso and Sanchez 2022), thus banishing the specter of a «globalization of exclusion» or an expanding gap between «empowered individuals» and «non-empowered individuals» (Russo 2017). To this end, it is necessary to invest in policies that increase the widespread capacity to control the new technologies without encouraging a conformist, passive posture (Townsend 2013, Kitchin 2015, Isin and Ruppert 2015). In this context, education clearly also needs to be rethought in an innovative way, especially acknowledging that our educational systems are becoming increasingly less school-centric. Moreover, with the advance of cognitive capitalism, lifelong learning has become an inescapable necessity. To contribute to a truly smart society, everyone should be able to benefit from adequate schooling but also from subsequent opportunities for inclusion and socialization that should be well-funded and secure.

However, even the above is not enough. In fact, inclusion is a universal problem that affects the whole world and concerns not only digital technologies. The following quote effectively sums up this idea:

> *even if for many inhabitants of the Earth scientific and technological development certainly meant personal gains regarding security, access to modern world facilities as education, medical services, recreational and cultural activities or other goods and services, another face of the same reality is that also exist large categories of population confronting with starvation, civil wars, lack of access to education or medical services. What are the odds for the second group to benefit from the improvements brought by technological innovation? How smart can their societies become? Will the gap diminish or grow? These are still unanswered questions and social responsibility should and may be a clue in addressing these issue»* (Pogan 2019: 179).

In short, thinking seriously about a smart society means taking on a great responsibility in a world where there is much inequality between rich and poor countries. Does it really make sense for some to race to become smarter while many others are precluded from a decent existence? No, at least not if one takes a truly global view of environmental issues and if one takes the concept of sustainability seriously. If smartness is not to be reduced to a mere boast or marketing slogan, those making choices must look far in time, going beyond short – or medium – term calculations but also far in space, adopting as universal a perspective as possible. After all, this is precisely the challenge that the process of globalization poses to us. At a time when social relations are called on to expand globally, an enormous effort of a new kind becomes indispensable (Pendenza 2000). Exclusivist solidarity, limited to members of a circumscribed community, proving dramatically insufficient, is urged

to make way for a broader solidarity, strongly linked to a generalization of trust (Iannuzzi 2020).

5. CONCLUSION

In addition to being an extremely demanding challenge when taken seriously, smartness is a valuable opportunity to exercise the sociological imagination, going to or back to the heart of major issues that are much debated but still open. Thinking, for example, of culture understood in its broadest sense, one can ask whether it is not a paradox to expect cohesion and inclusion from technologies that in other ways promote individualization or, taking up Simmel, to ask how to counter the danger of the objective spirit taking over the subjective one. Nor should we miss the opportunity to reflect more deeply on the link between the global and local today (an aspect that, as mentioned, is inextricably linked to sustainability) or on the conditions that make collective learning and true inclusion possible. We could perhaps also define the smart society as the one that relentlessly pursues reflexivity or, especially in the wake of Habermas, as the dimension in which communicative action can finally find its spaces and opportunities.

However, it is not only out of obvious and dutiful modesty on my part that I do not wish to overemphasize the parallelism between the vision Popper expresses in his seminal work and the one I offer in these few pages. My intention is not to set myself up as a champion of the new smart society but rather to suggest, as far as possible, to take seriously the idea of emancipatory potential and the horizon of authentic sustainability implicit in smartness itself. It is therefore neither a question of converting to a prophecy or utopia nor of sounding the alarm against a disturbing dystopia but rather of questioning, as lucidly and systematically as possible, the objective trends and the translation of these tendencies into the most common feeling and ways of thinking.

Whether one likes it or not, and whether or not they do so with full awareness of what is really at stake, analysts and the broader public will continue to designate and think of a whole range of objects and contexts as smart, ranging from the city to work, from the environment to the economy, from people to the environment, from governance to mobility, from commodities to living. Nor could it be otherwise, because toward this direction push not only cultural fads or interests of the moment, but also powerful economic actors who profit immensely from digitization in all its forms and now, almost ironically, also from the idea/ideal of a green, sustainable economy.

In the face of all this, it would be futile and even unscientific to pretend that nothing is happening. Frequent repetition and symbolic power impose, so to speak, an agenda on researchers. It may be that the smart form, as it is taking shape, hides various reiterations of old substances, such as the exploitation of human beings and natural resources or the alienation and weakening of solidarity. However, even if it were only ideology, like any ideology smartness would not be nothingness. Rather, it would be a viewpoint on reality that would require a twofold critical re-examination. On the one hand, the viewpoint or ideology should be urged to approach reality; on the other hand, however, the obstacles that prevent reality itself from approaching the viewpoint should be concretely highlighted and hopefully removed. In other words, willingly or unwillingly, the social sciences today face a kind of "smart turn". It is up to all of us to make sure that this does not remain a missed opportunity because smartness may perhaps change its name, but it does not seem in essence destined to leave our horizon very soon.

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