JANNIS KALLINIKOS, THE CONSEQUENCES OF INFORMATION

Reviewed by E. P. Brandon

Kallinikos, Jannis. The Consequences of Information: Institutional Implications of Technological Change. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2006. pp. ix + 205. ISBN: 978-1-84720-500-1.

This is primarily a work of sociological analysis and speculation, focussing on the unprecedented and apparently self-generating increase in ICTs. Kallinikos aims to characterise the nature and implications of digital technologies and the Internet for the organisational forms of the economy and, to a certain extent, the polity. The speculations concern the possible outcomes of these trends for the structuring of human life in coming decades, the dissolution of the traditional boundaries between work, family, and community.

Capitalism thrives on standardisation, millions of identical pins rather than a few hundred hand-crafted idiosyncratic pins. Kallinikos observes that digital technology pushes this to the limit, since everything it touches turns ultimately to binary code. As he winningly puts it, the "transformation of the thick texture of organizational operations that are by necessity heavily embedded in local contexts to a dissolvable, informatized and module-made ensemble of processes and services is opening a new realm of enlarged resource mobility, transferability and combinability, of which financial services stand as the exemplar" (38). There is much more of this style of social analysis and discussion of the notion of networks and networking.

One context in which Kallinikos approaches traditional philosophical matters is in making a distinction that he wants to characterise as a contrast between information and knowledge. It seems that information for him is typically ephemeral (though it can become solidified as data) and informative (one man's news is another's commonplace). Knowledge on the other hand, or what is taken to be knowledge, "entails elaborate and durable cognitive structures that form the basis upon which the world is comprehended. . . . The durable character of these structures suggests that knowledge cannot adequately be understood in terms of novelty and the quality of 'news' . . . even though the difference could be seen as one of degree rather of kind" (55). Kallinikos' further remarks on this contrast do little to counter my doubt that it is wise to erect a conceptual distinction upon what is ultimately a question of degree of value. The quantum of my bank balance at a moment of time, or to take something of more global significance, the exchange rate between Euros and US dollars at a particular moment, is an item that tells us how things are, just as a law of nature does. The former may be restricted to a short time span, and so have little interest or value for ever after, but as representations of how things are or are not, they are identical. Obviously one wants to insist on the differences in value between items of knowledge, but I am not convinced it is useful to suppose that some of them might not be knowledge at all.

Bureaucracy as "the institutional form of modernity" (136) rarely gets a good press, but Kallinikos reminds us of Weberian themes – the separation of bureaucratic structures from family and other forms of partiality: "bureaucracy has represented a key means to embody formality and govern social relationships in the modern world" (126). The pre-modern world relied on an inclusive view of a person and his or her life, "[t]hough present in various forms, the differentiation of personal, social and working aspects of identity was rudimentary in the agricultural, feudal world" (136). Now that wifi and the Blackberry have destroyed any rationale for a 40-hour working week, networking

provides an opportunity for a resurgence of quasi-feudal relations between the human beings caught up in it. Kallinikos duly warns that the status of the labour contract is very much threatened by the developments he is charting.

As these couple of topics indicate, there are interesting ideas here, but unfortunately they are mired in an almost impenetrable jargon. I would also like to think that Kallinikos has underplayed the potential for challenge that is provided by these same technological developments, the fear that leads oppressive states to try to regulate the Internet, much as Canute sought, so legend has it, to retard the tides.