Last week the Italian edition of Networks Without a Cause came out. It has a preface of Vito Campanelli and was translated by Bernardo Parrella and published by AGEA in Milano. In Italian it is called L'OSSESSIONE COLLETTIVA (THE COLLECTIVE OBSESSION). Mid June I will do a small book tour in Torino, Milano and Bologna. In the print and online edition of the Italian newspaper Corriera della Sera there is an interview with me. It was conducted by Nicola Bruno on May 11, 2012. Here is the orginal version in English:

NB: Given that hundreds of million of people are using social-networks every day, how come that they became obsessed with identity and self-management? Maybe because they find in social media something they don't get anymore from other offline social agencies?

GL: If we want to understand the seductive power of Facebook, Twitter and other social media, we need to go back ten years ago and analyze the bankruptcy of the dotcom e-commerce model of internet and the failure of the original open, public internet in general, which was corrupted by spam, viruses and flame wars amongst users. Why did so-called protected and 'trusted' virtual environments come up in the first place? Some would blame this on the too fast growth and failure to absorb newbies. It is a story of failed democratization, if you like. In my view both models of internet as marketplace and public space didn't work (yet) and were not accepted by the great influx of new users back then. That is when blog software came up, made for self-promoting individuals. People didn't like the large anonymous forums anymore. The general atmosphere on email-based lists and on Usenet in the late nineties was pretty sick. The pioneering period had come to a close. The original 'cyber' community idea was gone and people were looking for smaller, more manageable software alternatives. Blogs appeared on the scene as easy to use personal websites, and social networks turned the attentions to your immediate friends. The idea was no longer that you would communicate with anyone. You were given control over your personal contacts. With this came the disappearance of the Net as an open public sphere, and the loss of privacy. In exchange for free services. In the end what we're lured into is the idea of a self-managed safety zone in which we explore the edges of our social network. Needless to say that traditional social institutions such as the village or suburb, the church, work, trade union or political party can no longer offer this. We feel trapped there. They appear random, closed and claustrophobic. This is why we so blindly run into the hands of these new institutional forms, of corporations such as Google

and Facebook. It is hard for average users to see the new power play that unfolds there.

NB: You criticize the "Like" buttons, as they are far less intentional than linking. How the like-culture is changing the way in which people express their opinions online? And what has the "retweet" in common with the "like"?

GL: Criticize? Sure, but I think we first have to analyze, and ask questions. Right now a growing group of scholars, theorists and critics are trying to get a better understanding how Facebook and Twitter operate. It is one thing to demand a 'dislike' button, and this is what literary millions of Facebook users have done so over the past years (there are already three waves of this protest). We are now forced into this New Age regime where we can only be positive. How are we supposed to like people divorcing ("relationship status has changed"), earth quakes, friends who get sick or get involved into an accident? Linking already had the same problem. You didn't link to a person or a statement you didn't like. Why would you do that? The best way these days to destroy a person or a cultural product that you do not like are to ignore it. I consider the retweet a poor cousin of the forward function in email programs. It redirects URL pointers and micro-opinions and observations to others who were originally not addressed by the sender. There is nothing wrong or evil about that. I, and many others with me, have a more general problem with Twitter: it is a bad platform for debating. Its informality destroys the public character of the Net. Compared to email lists and forum software is it not discursive enough, which means that it does not really allow to develop an argument. It wasn't designed for that anyway so what are we talking about? In these times of crises what we need are tools that help us to organize people and structure debate.

NB: You say that real-time web is all about impulsiveness and reactivity. How can we react to this new kind of tyranny? The only option is to encourage slow communication or we can find other ways to better manage real-time information?

GL: The real-time Web is amazing and has, in my opinion, yet to be fully discovered. Just think of the collaborative video aspect: a common skype meeting with hundreds of participants, why not? Peer-to-peer communication really only works in real-time. Now the internet is all about short messages, impressions, likes and similar impulsive consumer responses. I do not see this as a tyranny; it is just a pity that the Web

development as a whole gets narrowed down to the corporate strategy of a handful of companies that misuse a (in principle) public infrastructure to maximize their own profits.

NB: You don't like too much offline romanticism. What's the best way to balance online/offline activities?

GL: I am not a lifestyle guru. It is not up to theorists like me to tell how people should live their busy lives. Having said that, I do think it is not healthy to take your entire office in your pocket or handbag with you 24/7, having to work wherever you go. Personal communication is different. Constant status updates can drive people nuts and make them lose their attention, and ability to concentrate and we teacher feel the consequences of that decline in general knowledge indeed. Maybe it is not so bad yet in Germany? Who knows? It's a shame because in that way they can no longer properly study thick and complex books and on the long term fail to reflect on society. But young people will also fail to encounter others who sit next to them, also staring at their smart phones, and fall in love, and then have to sign up for dating sites. Whatever. I am quite optimistic that it will be uncool very soon to check your smart phone all the time in public. That's so 2011. It would be good smart phones get out of fashion again. We should not forget that social media is anyway only a tiny spectrum of what's going on in the tech industry. These days people think that social media and internet is one and the same, but that's not at all the case.

NB: Why you think Twitter is just a good PR tool for politicians and cannot halt the growing crisis of political legitimacy or make politicians any more directly responsive?

GL: This is not what I think. It is a daily observation that you and I all make. I never believed that technologies as such, as they are, decentralized and distributed or not, would change a political system, overthrow a dictatorship, and undermine capitalism and so on. New media change society, for sure, but not always in a direction that we like, and that we expected. Politicians are not more accountable, or get a better idea through Twitter how migrants live, or what it means to be unemployed. The problem of Twitter is that politicians are forced to participate in the real-time news industry and have to constantly react. I want politician who initiate, who are active. I am not interested so much in their opinions. What we need to do is disassociate them from the current public relations industry. That's where the real problem is. Most students in media and communication disappear into that

vast network of consultants, copy editors etc. We need to reserve that stream and think of ways how young people can start to make a living with investigative journalism and background research, not managing the Twitter stream of some bobo CEO.

NB: Talking about online activism you say that the trouble with current media activist strategies is the absence of a painful setback in the encounter with the powers to be. Why most popular social media do not encourage that struggle-with-defeat option that you consider necessary for political activity effectiveness?

GL: The main reason is the unprecedented rise of perception management, also in the established circles of the green-left parties and NGOs. There is this tyranny to remain optimistic, the straight-out censorship of anything negative out of a fear to lose your so-called public image and acceptance of the 'general public'. This is why the radical left, and old Marxist parties have such good chances again these days: they at least have the guts to precisely tell what is all about, who is in charge, who makes the money, what capitalism is all about. They have less fear to attack and do not think that you can only criticize something if you have a working alternative in place. Social media should open up and break down their walls of informality and be turned into public forums that emphasize on debate. Their current architecture in my view merely reproduces the known old media vs. new media antagonisms and do not question the hegemony of the public relations apparatus (which is the real driver of the current ban on critique and negativism and analysis in general).

NB: Your critique of Wikileaks is quite ambivalent. You say that it is not wiki at all; it's like a monarchy, obsessed with conspiracies, an elitist attitude, and a cult of secrecy. At the same time you say also that Wikileaks principle is here to stay. So what's the future of Wikileaks? How the next-Wikileaks will be like?

GL: I like it that you call it ambivalence. I am very much part of the same scene and have been following Wikileaks from the start. Let's say that I do not support the celebrity approach of Julian Assange, and there are many others with me who think that the Wikileaks case has been focused too much, too long on the personality of this one guy. In part he has not been able to do much about that, but in many other cases we (if I may say that...) think that he hasn't handled the (old) media very well. But if you look at the current show he is presenting on that Russian satellite channel RT, that's not

bad, isn't it? It is still a pity that he did not resolve the Stockholm case immediately. We differ in opinion about the chance that he is going to be extradited from Sweden to the USA, but that's a legal issue. I think he should have supported a decentralized structure of national Wikileaks chapters, much like Wikipedia, and now the Pirate Party. Assange seems to be impossible to work with. Close collaborators leave his entourage all the time, and that's a pitty because in that way you cannot build up a sustainable organization. The smell of intrigues and secrecy might be exciting for outsiders but is detrimental for those who are closely involved. It is really sad that he is not able to collaborate and delegate. In the meanwhile Anonymous has taken over. That's a real network of autonomous cells of (outside) hackers, very different though from the facilitating character of Wikileaks, which originally focused on helping out the (inside) whistleblowers. To get information from outside is really different, in terms of legitimacy, in comparison those taken from inside. But anyway... that's a question of tactics. No matter how, there will be more and more data becoming available to the general public. What we need to organize are small units of dedicated researchers that are able to do something with all that information. We cannot depend on the journalists to do that work.

NB: Do you use any social network? Why you decided to "kill" your Facebook profile?

GL: I left Facebook in May 2010 as part of the international Quit Facebook Day. I didn't just do that to protest against their privacy politics, although that was enough of a reason. The point is that the internet as such, an sich und fuer sich, is already a social network, and has been for me, ever since I got into it, in 1989 when I got into BBSes, and then properly in 1993 with the start of hacktic.nl and then xs4all.nl and the Digital City. The social movements that I was part of in the 1980s were also social networks. Squatting in Amsterdam was a feast of social networking, even if we did not use Twitter back then (we did use the first personal computers, though). Please forget this ridiculous reduction to a few American platforms. The social element was and will always be there. Look at the history of our own country, Italy! We don't need to tell you anything what the social was, is and could become.