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for

**Márton Pál Iványi's**

**The politico-economic and geopolitical structure, ideological consequences and free territories of the social force field of digital media**

Ph.D. thesis

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# CONTENTS

## I.    Research background and thesis topic justification

My research that constitutes the background of this dissertation has focused on the communication theoretical, social and political aspects of digital media in the course of my doctoral studies at the Corvinus University of Budapest and beyond.

As an Arab philologist and one interested in world politics, my attention from 2011 has turned towards a phenomenon of world political relevance, called the Arab Spring. Relevant experiences have contributed over time to identifying extensive historical, political, and politico-economic relations. All this combined not only inspired an interdisciplinary approach to digital media ranging across social sciences, but also resulted in a basic assumption that in the prism of the nexus of digital media and the Arab cultural sphere, a social force field emerges with interests of political economy and geopolitics.

This is also reflected by some of my early publications published in 2014, such as *The World System and World Wide Web. Facebook revolution as an orientalist insight?*, or *Social media and social movements*, the latter focusing on Syrian events and their web-based representation, or *Social media: electronic agora or a postmodern panoptic? Responses of the power to the challenges of social media*. Later, however, realizing that it might not be possible any longer to draw conclusions about the „Arab Spring" and *argumentum a maiore ad minus* about the role of digital media as valid in all respects and as demanding as scientific standards otherwise require, I decided to orientate towards other directions (see *Digital Realism: A dialectical approach to understanding digital media's social functions in view of ethnic identity-related online activism*, and: *Deconstructing netizenry: The transnational mission civilization conveyed by digital media*.)

This dissertation at hand is the synthesis of these researches carried out on this several-year horizon.

In the spirit of the foregoing and based on the critical tradition of communication theory (Craig 1999), this dissertation aims at mapping the social force field of digital media in two dimensions: 1) political economy and 2) international relations and geopolitical contexts, and posits the genesis of the hegemonic discourse of digital utopianism in their cross-section.

This metaphorical social field of force in question can be described in various historical, sociological, international relations and anthropological contexts, hence the interdisciplinarity of this dissertation. However, the overarching substantiation of the comprehensive criticism of digital utopianism cannot, however, invalidate domains of this social field of force where, in specific cases, information and communication technology (ICT) indeed make community activism possible.

In this spirit, we have been extensively involved in identifying those following factors and their combinations,

1) along which the transnational product chains and digital media are constructed, including the interaction between state and capital, and the contradictious, hybrid structure of transnational and state spheres;

2) which define the use of digital media, including tracking, surveillance and sanctioning patterns;

3) which determine the hegemonic discourse, which, while constantly competing the other discourses, represents the forces and interests identified in the context of 1) as totality. In addition and perhaps precisely because of this, it is biased towards and inconsistently represents 2);

4) which, although need to be taken carefully into consideration, still leave room for manoeuvre for online network activities in special cases.

The aim of the dissertation, which intends to follow the critical traditions of communication theory (Craig 1999) is to inspire further research that supports or challenges these identified points above.

## II.    The fundamental theses of the dissertation

Under digital media, a series of radically different virtual environments, Internet-based community applications and services are meant that share the potential of creating content by the user and networking which is their most important feature.

It is worth discussing the globally unilateral and/or transnational digital media within its social force field context, in which the former is shaped and reproduced according to the *first aspect of my triple hypothesis*. I use the notion of social force field as a metaphor throughout the dissertation for dominant (international) politico-economic, geopolitical, intellectual relations and formations, individual and community structures.

We postulate that tendencies of the global expansion of digital media are demonstrated both from the point of view of political economy (Arrighi 2007; Schiller 2014) and geopolitics (i.a. Negroponte 2013) at the macro- (or social) level of this force field that reaches beyond the user, and from the hegemonic discourse of digital utopia (Gramsci 1971) interacting with a normative regime (cf. Dardot-Laval 2013) having a potential effect on the micro- (or user) dimensions. These, although being interdependent, yet, collectively define the social force field of digital media.

Considering the hypothetical connections between modernity and capitalism, it is arguably relevant to examine this issue on the one hand in long historical perspectives. On the other, it seems reasonable to view this social force field from a world-system-theory point of view, with particular regard to the intellectual and politico-economic formations of the macro-level.

Interactions between political economy (Gramsci 1971, Harvey 2003; Overbeek 2004; Arrighi 2007) and state agenda appear on all relevant time horizons within the social force field. These include the post-World War II era (Amin 2009; Schiller 2014), then the post-Cold War epoch (Brzezinski 2012; Kagan 2015) and later the end of the first decade of the 2000s (Hardt-Negri 2009, Stiglitz 2010, Mignolo 2011) which all become relevant vis-a-vis our basic assumptions in terms of the various adjustments and strategies employed to address challenges arising from the crisis of hegemony (Harvey 2003; Brenner 2006; Schiller 2014; Juutinen – Käkönen 2016).

My research therefore concentrates on two theoretical plateaus of one and the same reality, which are the contexts of (international) political economy and geopolitics. Although relevant forces in the global and transnational spheres appear and affect simultaneously, but, for structural reasons, I describe them as separate aspects, except where their encounter is obvious: some power formations that suggest structural fusions and recent global political developments.

The social force field can be approached both from a state-centered logic and from a post-sovereign transnationality beyond the former, but arguably the coexistence of the two aspects and ideas based on the interdependence of the capitalist and state expansion (Harvey 2003, Robinson 2004, Overbeek 2004; Schiller 2014) seem to be the most intriguing and adequate when discussing the relations at hand.

Such an intersection is not only reflected by certain global motions and the emergence of the transnational technocratic élite (cf. Robinson 2004; Overbeek 2004; Hardt-Negri 2009; Dardot-Laval 2013), but also in the context of the hegemonic discourse of digital utopianism (Gramsci 1971, Stuart Hall 1982, Croteau-Hoynes 2003: 165-168).

According to the second part of my hypothesis, this social force field also has ideological consequences. The public dominance of digital utopia is arguably the result of the structures presented above and their social interactions (Gramsci 1971, Overbeek 2004). This indicates an orientation towards critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995, 2006) later on.

This digital utopianism can evolve and reproduce spontaneously and in consonance with power (i.e. international politico-economic and/or geopolitical) power relations, as generated within the same social force field.

Some cultural products and manifestations (cf. Negroponte et al., 2013; Ghoneim 2013; CFR-publications 2016-7), related to state power and the transnational forces (Harvey 2003; Robinson 2004), are continually strengthening, multiplying clichés constructed by digital utopian discourse and making them self-sufficient also in public life (Gramsci 1971, Stuart Hall, 1982).

Power relations, however, are not only reflected by the discourse, but also in terms of Internet surveillance and the realities of censorship, which is also relevant for our subject. This makes it possible to formulate two more propositions under my hypothesis when discussing the specificities of the social force field. On the one hand, these technologies indicate patterns of control and governance (Morozov 2011, Ghoneim 2013, Webster 2014, Iványi 2014b, Dornfeld 2016, Douzet 2016). On the other hand, the contextualisation of digital media fits in with the modernist technology paradigm (Mignolo 2011; Aouragh 2012; Massad 2015) serving and enforcing an interplay of powerful state powers and transnational interests (Schiller 2014, cf. Rice 2011, Negroponte 2013, Iványi 2017).

The modern functions of digital technology mediated by power, are simultaneously enforced in the context of the so-called Ascalaphus States (Iványi 2014b) and in view of a wider framework of world politics i.e. cyber-diplomacy (Schiller 2014; Dornfeld 2016; Douzet 2016). The former (Ascalaphus State) category signifies political organs of power that, for various reasons, are interested in obtaining and processing information about their citizens. Whilst the latter (Global Panopticum) is the global expansion of this surveillance with the consequences that Edward Snowden and Julian Assange (2012) revealed. In this respect, these terms for these well-known concepts are introduced by this dissertation.

On the one hand, digital utopianist ideology is inseparable from the political economy (Mueller 2010, Schiller 2014) and geopolitical (Negroponte 2013; Kagan 2015) determinants of the free flow of information and accordingly, appears in world politics as well as in everyday life.

At the same time, digital media also allows counter-hegemonic activism, possibly also in dictatorial sociological environments. Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that the use of digital media can also provide users with means of community engagement and room for manoeuvre in representing diverse attitudes.

### III.     The novelty of theses and their contributions to contemporary debates

First and foremost, the dissertation introduces a differentiated model of the social force field that distinguishes the social (macro) and the user's (micro) dimensions. The

dissertation at hand predominantly focuses on the former whilst the latter remains more implicit throughout our exploration until further researches.

The novelty of this work lies above all in the complexity and detailedness of its points of view, and in its contribution to contemporary debates surrounding digital media, that extends the scope of international political economy-related and other critical antecedents to the present (i.e. end of 2017). Although digital media has widely been discussed in Hungary mostly focusing on ethical, regulatory history-, marketing communication-, psychological, etc. aspects, there is almost no critical approach to the power and social determinants of the tools and applications in question. The *differentia specifica,* that distinguishes our basic assumptions in international terms, including the digital capitalism of Dan Schiller (2014), which is a world system theory-based approach to whom the complex hypothesis of this dissertation otherwise owes a great deal for having been inspiring and highly influential, is related to the ideological consequences of this social force field in question. Schiller focuses predominantly on the politico-economic structures and not on the discursive tendencies (subsection VI.1) and community activity (see subchapters VI.2-3) scrutinized by our case studies. In addition, despite its extremely important conclusions, it may also be unintentionally characterized by a special American exceptionalism (see Hardt - Negri 2009: 209; Chomsky - Martin 2015), so we considered including some other authors important to support our conclusions of global relevance (Quijano 2007 ; Amin 2009; Hardt-Negri 2000; 2009; Mignolo 2011; Massad 2015).

By introducing the concept of the Ascalaphus State and by describing its relation to the Panopticon, this dissertation also aims to address contemporary debates. The Panopticon and the Ascalaphus State, in fact, are not synonymous, yet, have party similar meanings. As mentioned before, the former constitutes a world-wide extension of the surveillance routine that Ascalaphus States practice in their "own" frameworks *within* a larger global *status quo*.

The dialectical approach and field of view of this dissertation, which itself has not spread in international literature (except for the achievements of Christian Fuchs Miriyam Aouragh, Austrian and Moroccan-Dutch researchers, respectively), integrates the experiences of a largely unconsidered, but especially actual online activism on

behalf of the Bilingual South Slovakia [Kétnyelvű Dél-Szlovákia - KDSz] movement and Facebook page.

We present to what extent is the role of contextualization important vis-à-vis some alleged free zones. From this point of view, we also demonstrate how fundamentally differing are some interpretations concerning the so-called "Arab Spring" phenomena and how the digital utopian narrative which is rooted in both the modern capitalist, technology paradigm and politico-economic structures. This narrative and its object are in a particular, dialectical relationship. Accordingly, we are also attempting to interpret and deconstruct the modernist technology paradigm, its projection surface and topos, the so-called "Facebook Revolution" in light of the social force field presented by the dissertation.

### IV. Theoretical background

In the literature that I have reviewed and my theses are based on, five common factors are outlined to which we anchor our understanding of the social environment of the digital later on. All of the reviewed literature items:

1) view the world we live in from a historical perspective (Amin et al. 1982; Braudel 1992; Overbeek 2004; Amin 2009; Hardt-Negri 2009; Mignolo 2011)

2) identify capitalism based on capital (accumulation) as central to understanding social circumstances (Amin et al. 1982; Arrighi 1994, 2007; Harvey 2003; Robinson 2004; 2011; Webster 2006; Hardt-Negri 2009; Mignolo 2011; Prashad 2013; Dardot-Laval 2013; Piketty 2014; Schiller 2014; Žižek 2016)

3) draw on global range processes (Amin et al. 1982; Arrighi 1994; 2007; Overbeek 2004; Robinson 2004; Amin 2009; Wallerstein 2010; Dardot-Laval 2013)

4) try to clarify the hegemonic relationships on the basis of these assumptions above (Amin et al. 1982; Arrighi 1995; 2007; Harvey 2003; Aouragh 2012; Schiller 2014);

5) identify transnational companies (Lyotard 1984, Deetz 1992, Arrighi 1995, Overbeek 2004, Robinson 2004, Hardt-Negri 2009, Aouragh 2012, Dardot - Laval 2013, Schiller 2014, Webster 2014) as today's key political economy (f)actors.

All in all, therefore, no matter which one we choose from these contradictory world views, theoretical universes, frameworks of interpretation etc. above, in fact all of them are related to the exercise of power in some form, which seems to be a general principle across authors and directions. In this respect, transnational corporations can be identified as relevant formations across the specific opuses in each, or in fact, all timeframes of the present and the past. This indicates the importance of a more thorough scrutiny of the ICT sector and harbinges the forthcoming geopolitical and ideological implications (Aouragh 2012; Schiller 2014; Iványi 2014a; Massad 2015; Iványi 2017); raises the relevance of cultural hegemony (Gramsci 1971; Croteau-Hoynes 2003). In the following, we are not bound by any of the theories above. Instead, we build up our own theoretical construction from some of their elements.

The world system theory (Amin et al 1982, Arrighi 1994; Wallerstein 2010; Schiller 2014) describes how capitalism produces global hierarchical relationships and a dominative logic according to which the preclusive power of core countries vis-à-vis the periphery has been exercised for centuries (Amin 1982; Wallerstein 2010). From this perspective, American global dominance over digital systems and services, i.e. the ICT sector, is just another layer reinforcing the "previous" model (Schiller 2014).

The crisis of hegemony (Arrighi 1994; Brenner 1998; Wallerstein 1984): a series of readjustments forms part and parcel of the so-called post-Fordist long downturn which is valid at all levels of the hierarchical system. One of them is market liberalization from the end of the '70s, an experience which is otherwise confirmed by a number of authors who are not or are not necessarily world-system theorists (Dardot-Laval 2013; Overbeek 2004). The rise of the emerging transnational ICT sector can be deduced from the crisis of American hegemony, the future trajectory of which raises far-reaching questions (cf. Webster 2007).

Digital capitalism (Schiller 2014): Schiller devotes an entire book entitled *Digital Depression* (2014) to describing the political economy of the ICT sector. He also examines the ways how the United States enforces its own state agenda-related interests and those of the most influential business groups in the US on the world stage along the geopolitical preferences and ideological and cultural references of the free flow of information.

Cultural hegemony (Gramsci 1971): cultural hegemony, and consensus in this context, are very important to understand the emergence and survival of digital utopianism. The dominant groups of society strive to have their world view accepted (consensus) by all members of society as a universal way of thinking. Institutions such as the media help them exercise cultural control as the sphere in which we reproduce the mindset of society. This is neither permanent nor impregnable nor "ready" nor unchangeable (cf. Althusser 1977). Gramsci's hegemony supposes a process that is always shaped. A whole critical theory, namely, neo-Gramscianism has sprung up in the academic discipline of international political economy (IPE) from this track of thought.

Postmodern cultural theory (Stuart Hall 1980, 1989; Griffin 2003): this theory suggests that the media is involved in the preservation of the dominance of those already in power. The relevance of cultural theory is that it draws attention to the role of the media in maintaining the current *status quo*. From this abstraction arises one of the paradoxes of the topic, as digital, alternative, civil, etc. media can be considered a means of breaking not only the monopoly of the state press but also that of corporations and media conglomerates (cf Deetz 1992; Bagdikian 2012) and, in fact, also of the corresponding ideology (Stuart Hall, 1980) mediated thereby. Thus, it can be viewed as a guarantor of the *ius murmurandi*.

However, at the same time, assumptions that digital media, just like audiovisual media, are not independent of political economy or other power relations, carry truth as well. Here lies the inherent dualism of the digital media

The new way of the world (Fr.: La nouvelle raison du monde) (Dardot-Laval 2013): accordingly, a normative universality has been extended to a global range, which in a narrower sense means the state-centered empowerment of competitive market liberalization, which has been accompanied by the expansion of the transnational capital and especially the ICT sector across the political, economic and social spheres. In a wider sense, it is a system of complex, political, social and anthropological consequences that has a strong influence both on the social force field's micro and macro dimensions.

Transnational class (Robinson 2004; Overbeek 2004): A transnational class which is rooted in the hegemonic nation states of the world-system permanently seeks to ensure its hegemony and intends to exert ideological control correspondingly.

Capitalist imperialism (Harvey 2003) is a "contradictory fusion" of two components: firstly, "the politics of state and empire" and "the molecular processes of capital accumulation in space and time". The former component refers to "the political, diplomatic and military strategies invoked and used by a state (or some collection of states operating as a political power bloc) as it struggles to assert its interests and achieve its goals in the world at large". This struggle is driven by a "territorial logic of

power", a logic, that is, in which command over a territory and its human and natural resources constitutes the basis of the pursuit of power. The second component, in contrast, refers to the flow of economic power "across and through continuous space, towards and away from territorial entities ... through the daily practices of production, trade, commerce, capital flows, money transfers, labor migration, technology transfer, currency speculation, flows of information, cultural impulses, and the like". The driving force of these processes is a "capitalist logic of power", a logic, that is, in which command over economic capital constitutes the basis of the pursuit of power.

## V. My complex hypothesis and its relation with relevant theories

1) First part of my complex hypothesis: there is a social force field with its own intellectual and political formations in which digital media is created, operating and reproduced.

World system theory describes the global perspective and historical horizons of this. The order of endless capital accumulation has led to the need for continuous technological development and to the constant expansion of the boundaries of the system (Wallerstein 2010). Such a theoretical framework provides a basis for understanding the structure of the social force field.

Transnational class: Robinson (2004) also provides guidance to the conceptualization of the social force field's political economy. According to this, although the state itself does not cease to exist ontologically and does not dissolve in networking, it indeed becomes transnational to a certain extent. The observations of the Amsterdam School (Overbeek 2004) suggest that within this hybrid and controversial structure, capitalist groups of the hegemonic nation-state transnational class emerge and rival with other actors also in terms of ideologies (*beheersconceptties*).

2) Second part of the hypothesis: the social force field has ideological consequences.

According to the cultural hegemony theory (Gramsci 1971), dominant players seek to enforce their own power by reaching consensus and are achieving that by spreading dominant ideologies.

Stuart Hall (1980)'s encoding/decoding model engages in the dominant (i.e hegemonic definitions) of a given society by focusing on the surrounding power relations and social system on a Marxist / Gramscian basis.

3) In line with the third part of my complex hypothesis, arguably, beyond the politico-economic and geopolitical forces and constraints of the social force field, free zones and room for manoeuvre still remain to express and enforce diverse user attitudes on behalf of individuals and communities.

According to Kathleen M. Carley and Jürgen Pfeffer (2012), in the world of digital media, mobilisation of larger groups, faster coordination, raising awareness on special issues and the provision of information about them become possible.

## VI.    Case studies and corresponding methods

**Egypt**

Based on statements by leading opinion leaders such as Wael Ghoneim (2013) or Mohamed al-Gawhari (2015), arguably, digital technologies indeed played a significant, although still unclear role in the events in question, yet, far from the extent which is insisted by these descriptions.

The case study therefore reflects the very different contextualization and interpretation possibilities of the complex relationship between digital media and Egyptian events, on the one hand, as an empirical example of the practical realisation of the theoretical potential inherent in digital media.

On the other hand, the projections of hypothetical power relations are also reflected on it, assuming that views of the democratising, emancipatory, new public sphere-related etc. functions of the digital media are created along politico-economic forces and interests.

The methodology of this case study relies on the critical discourse analysis of a major cultural product and an interview. Both intend to identify and separate the supposed, direct politico- economic ties vis-à-vis the former and juxtaposing the latter's experience therewith.

**Syria**

This inquiry intends to point out that the premise and the teleological assumptions of digital utopianism according to which the otherwise Western technological apparatus inevitably leads to democratic movement (cf. Morozov 2011) that overthrows dictatorial systems are reductive interpretations.

The Syrian case study and the accompanying phenomenon in question, which has not really drawn academic attention until, also provides a new layer for understanding digital media functions.

Methodology is, in this case, is content analysis and the tracking of certain user trends.

**Bilingual South Slovakia (Kétnyelvű Dél-Szlovákia - KDSz)**

The study of the Bilingual South Slovakia online movement and the specific case of the corresponding Facebook group seeks to clarify in the context of the third part of the hypothesis, whether there could be realms within the social force field of the digital media, where civic participation and freedom of expression are enabled without explicit and direct politico-economic and geopolitical ties.

From a methodological point of view, the case study evaluates anonymous answers to eleven relevant questions of an online questionnaire conducted in 2017 among KDSz group members, the majority (90.6%) of whom are ethnic Hungarians living in South Slovakia.

## VII. Research results

Egypt: Critical analysis of the relevant discourse indicated correlation between the digital utopianism and the political economy structure previously described. In the analysis, we point out the exaggerated representation of the role of digital media in the context of the Egyptian events in questions, which can at the same time be interpreted as a unique manifestation of the social force field.

The case study points out that a large part of the alleged "Facebook generation" had actually identified with the regime in the framework of relevant pages and groups included in the content analysis. Sceptical attitudes of a significant proportion of this "FB generation" in Syria towards the opposition movement suggests that, even in the case of dictatorial (cf. Negroponte et al., 2013) sociological environments, patterns of spontaneous mobilisations may be observed.

Bilingual South Slovakia (KDSz): According to a survey conducted among the members of the KDSz Facebook Group, social networking sites indeed can occasionally provide active fora for the representation of *causes célèbres*, and for the validation of collective identity intertwined therewith. In this particular case, digital activity i.e. community participation proved to be effective in the long-term maintenance of a given case (the Hungarian language use case in Upper Hungary) on the agenda without being compromised by any direct (identifiable) politico-economic and / or geopolitical interests.

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