



COMMUNICATIVE SOCIALISM/DIGITAL SOCIALISM  
Edited by Christian Fuchs

Table of Contents

- Communicative Socialism/Digital Socialism, pp. 1-31  
Christian Fuchs
- Democratic Socialists on Social Media: Cohesion, Fragmentation, and Normative Strategies, pp. 32-47  
Christopher C. Barnes
- Theory, Reality, and Possibilities for a Digital/Communicative Socialist Society, pp. 48-66  
Dimitris Boucas
- Rising With the Robots: Towards a Human-Machine Autonomy for Digital Socialism, pp. 67-83  
Christopher M. Cox
- Spaces of Struggle: Socialism and Neoliberalism With a Human Face Among Digital Parties and Online Movements in Europe, pp. 84-100  
Emiliana De Blasio, Michele Sorice
- Digital Socialism Beyond the Digital Social: Confronting Communicative Capitalism with Ethics of Care, pp. 101-115  
Donatella Della Ratta
- Left Populism and Platform Capitalism, pp. 116-131  
Nick Dyer-Witheford
- Digital Workerism: Technology, Platforms, and the Circulation of Workers' Struggles, pp. 132-145  
Sai Englert, Jamie Woodcock, Callum Cant
- The Utopian Internet, Computing, Communication, and Concrete Utopias: Reading William Morris, Peter Kropotkin, Ursula K. Le Guin, and P.M. in the Light of Digital Socialism, pp. 146-186  
Christian Fuchs
- A Global Revolutionary Class Will Ride the Tiger of Alienation, pp. 187-203  
Hardy Hanappi
- YouTube as Praxis? On BreadTube and the Digital Propagation of Socialist Thought, pp. 204-218  
Dmitry Kuznetsov, Milan Ismangil
- Brazilian Blogosfera Progressista: Digital Vanguard in Dark Times, pp. 219-235  
Eleonora de Magalhães Carvalho, Afonso Albuquerque, Marcelo Alves Santos Júnior
- Towards a Marxist Theory of Mediation: Contributions from Ibero-America to the Study of Digital Communication, pp. 236-253  
Joan Pedro-Carañana
- Slow Down! Digital Deceleration Towards A Socialist Social Media, pp. 254-267  
Jamie Ranger
- Communicating Communism: Social Spaces and the Creation of a "Progressive" Public Sphere in Kerala, India, pp. 268-285  
S. Harikrishnan

## Communicative Socialism/Digital Socialism

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**Abstract:** This introduction provides a preface to the contributions gathered in *tripleC*'s special issue "Communicative Socialism/Digital Socialism". It outlines how Marx conceived of socialism (Sections 2, 3, 4, 5), introduces a model of a socialist society that consists of three dimensions (Section 6), and shows how, based on Marx, we can conceptualise communicative and digital socialism (Section 7). Section 8 introduces ten principles of communicative/digital socialist politics.

**Keywords:** socialism, communication, digital, Karl Marx, communicative socialism, digital socialism, fully-automated luxury communism



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### 1. Introduction

*tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique*'s special issue "Communicative Socialism/Digital Socialism" asks: What is digital/communicative socialism? The special issue presents besides this general introduction 14 contributions that explore perspectives on digital and communicative socialism in respect to theory, dialectics, history, internationalism, praxis, and class struggles.

*Christopher C. Barnes* analyses how socialists use social media. He presents results from an analysis of interviews conducted with members of the Democratic Socialists of America. The DSA has supported Bernie Sanders' presidential campaigns. Socialist senator Alexandria Orcasio-Cortez is a member of this political organisation. Barnes shows how socialists use social media to advance political stories, humour as politics, and media criticism, but also that they find aspects of social media use frustrating and alienating.

*Dimitris Boucas* analyses the theory, reality, and possibilities of digital and communicative socialism. He gives special attention to the theorisation of post-industrial socialism and the scientific and technological revolution in the works of André Gorz and Radovan Richta. The paper reports empirical results of research on how Internet alternatives could look like and discusses these results in the context of digital socialism.

*Christopher M. Cox* engages with the concept of fully automated communism/socialism that has become popular in recent times. The author stresses the importance of autonomy in the context of automation and reminds us that one needs to talk about both autonomous technology and autonomous humans.

*Emiliana De Blasio and Michele Sorice* analyse the role of digital technologies in the policies of contemporary socialist parties and movements. The analysis focuses on France, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and the USA. They show that work remains to be done in the establishment of a framework of practices that go beyond digital capitalism.

*Donatella Della Ratta* analyses the status of the social in and beyond communicative capitalism. She argues that user-generated spectacles, free labour, and capitalist realism on the Internet have brought about new forms of alienation and exploitation. She criticises the understandings of digital socialism advanced by Kevin Kelly, Daniel Saros, and Evgeny Morozov as ideological and suggests basing digital socialism on the ethics of care.

*Nick Dyer-Withford* analyses left-wing responses to platform capitalism and in this context utilises Chantalle Mouffe's notion of left populism. He focuses specifically on left populism with respect to five topics: Internet speech and surveillance; the concentration of ownership of digital platforms; the regulation of working conditions in the gig economy; alternative models for the ownership of digital resources and platforms; and digital postcapitalism.

*Sai Englert, Jamie Woodcock, and Callum Cant* discuss aspects of what they call a digital Workerism. Inspired by Marx's and Italian Autonomist Marxism's method of the workers' inquiry, they ask how we can practice a similar method that fuses critical research and social struggles in the age of digital technologies .

*Christian Fuchs* discusses computing, communication, and communist utopias in the context of digital socialism in utopian literature, namely in William Morris' *News From Nowhere*, Peter Kropotkin's *The Conquest of Bread*, Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, and P.M.'s *bolo'bolo* and *Kartoffeln und Computer (Potatoes and Computers)*. The paper contributes to discussions about hi-tech communism and how to create a utopian, socialist Internet.

*Hardy Hanappi* argues that we live in the age of alienation. He outlines the development and consequences of the capitalist algorithm and how this algorithm has deepened the gap between the working class in and of itself to the point of the emergence of new forms of fascism and a Third World War. In this context, the contribution discusses the role of organic intellectuals for the development of socialist counterpower.

*Dmitry Kuznetsov and Milan Ismangil* analyse the socialist YouTube-based video community Breadtube and discuss its political potentials for challenging right-wing ideology and capitalism. The analysis is focused on four major left-wing YouTube content creators – Contrapoints, Philosophy Tube, Shaun, and Hbomberguy.

*Eleonora de Magalhães Carvalho, Afonso de Albuquerque, and Marcelo Alves dos Santos Jr* analyse Brazil's socialist blogosphere in the dark times of Bolsonaro. *Blogosfera Progressista* (Progressive Blogosphere, hereafter BP) is a leftist political communication initiative. It aims at bringing together an institutional form of organisation with networked forms of politics, doing so at the time of, and opposed to, the far-right Bolsonaro regime.

*Joan Pedro-Carañana* analyses mediation in the works of the three Ibero-American critical theorists Jesús Martín-Barbero, Manuel Martín-Serrano, and Luis Martín-Santos in terms of contributions to the critique of digital capitalism and foundations of digital socialism.

*Jamie Ranger* discusses how we can slow down/decelerate social media as a constitutive aspect of digital socialism. He draws on and extends Hartmut Rosa's theory of speed and the notions of deceleration, acceleration, and hypermodulation, as well as critical theories of digital capitalism.

*S. Harikrishnan* analyses how the experience of the communist governance of the Indian state of Kerala has inspired and enabled the communication of communism. The focus is on the analysis of spaces (such as public spaces, libraries, reading rooms, tea-shops, cultural associations, forums, etc.) in the communication of communism, a development that the author analyses based on Lefebvre's critical theory of space.

Marx and Engels saw socialism as the movement for a society that is based on the principles of equality, justice, and solidarity. They also term such a society a socialist society and the movement struggling for it socialism. They distinguish different types of socialism, of which communism is one, while reactionary socialism, bourgeois socialism, and critical-utopian socialism are others. Marx and Engels argue that socialism is grounded in the antagonistic class structure of capitalism that pits workers against capitalists. In the 19th century, the socialist movement experienced a split between reformist revisionists and revolutionary socialists. After the First World War, the Communist International and the Labour and Socialist International were created. After the collapse of the Second International, there was an institutional distinction between Socialists and Communists. Whereas reformism dominated the Socialist International, Stalinism became dominant in the Communist International. The notion of 'socialism' became associated with social democratic parties and the notion of 'communism' with communist parties. From a historical point of view, both Stalinism and revisionist social democracy have failed.

With the rise of neoliberalism, social democracy turned towards the right and increasingly adopted neoliberal policies. When Tony Blair became British Prime Minister in 1997, his neoliberal version of social democracy influenced social democracy around the world. The crisis of capitalism and the emergence of new versions of socialist politics (Bernie Sanders, Jeremy Corbyn, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Podemos, Syriza, etc.) has reinvigorated the debate about socialism today. Whereas the notion of communism is today still very often associated with Stalinism – though by the former term Marx did not mean terror and dictatorship, but the struggle for democracy (Marx and Engels 1848, 504) – there has been a new opening of and interest in the notion of socialism.

*tripleC*'s special issue explores perspectives on the digital and communicative dimensions of socialism today. It presents contributions that address one or more of the following questions:

- *Theory:*  
What is socialism today? What are the communicative and digital dimensions of socialism today? What is communicative/digital socialism? What theoretical approaches and concepts are best suited for understanding digital/communicative socialism today? Does it or does it not make sense to distinguish between digital/communicative socialism and digital/communicative communism? Why or why not?
- *Dialectic:*  
What are the contradictions of digital capitalism? How does digital/communicative socialism differ from and contradict digital/communicative capitalism?
- *History:*  
What lessons can we draw from the history of socialism, communism, social democracy and Marxist theory for the conceptualisation and praxis of digital/communicative socialism today?
- *Internationalism:*  
Socialism is a universalist and internationalist movement. What are the international(ist), global dimensions of digital/communicative socialism today?
- *Praxis and class struggles:*  
What strategies, demands and struggles are important for digital/communicative socialism? How can socialism today best be communicated in public? What class struggles are there around communication and computing? What is the role of communication and digital technologies in contemporary class struggles? What is the role of social movements, the party, and trade unions in the organisation and self-organisation of digital and communication workers' class struggles? What should class politics, unions and strikes look like today so that they adequately reflect changes of the working class and exploitation in the age of digital capitalism? What is a digital strike and what is its potential for digital socialism?

The remainder of this introduction focuses on a) how Marx conceived of socialism (Sections 2, 3, 4, 5); b) a model of a socialist society (Section 6); and c) how we can, based on Marx, conceptualise communicative and digital socialism (Section 7). Section 8 introduces ten principles of a communicative/digital socialist politics.

## 2. Socialism and Communism

Lenin (1917b, 472) argues that “the first phase of communist society” is “usually called socialism”. Marx (1875) spoke of a first and second phase of communism. In the first phase, private property and capital cease to exist and the ownership of the means of production is socialised, but wage-labour, money, the state and exchange continue to exist. In the second phase, wages, wage-labour, money, the state, exchange-value and all forms of alienation cease to exist. But Marx did not call the first phase socialism and the second phase communism. He rather spoke of two stages or phases of communism. Communism is not just a type of society, but also a political movement.

In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels (1848) speak of communism as a type of socialist movement. Besides communism they identify reactionary socialism, bourgeois socialism, and critical-utopian socialism as types of socialism. When one speaks of communism, one therefore means a type of socialism that aims at the abolition of class society and a democratic, worker-controlled economy within a participatory democracy. Given that Marx and Engels saw communism as a type of

socialism, Marxists often use the terms socialism and communism interchangeably. Strictly speaking, socialism is broader than communism.

### 2.1. Rosa Luxemburg on Socialism and Communism

Rosa Luxemburg (1925, 141-144) clarifies the difference between socialism and communism:

Socialism goes back for thousands of years, as the ideal of a social order based on equality and the brotherhood of man, the ideal of a communistic society. With the first apostles of Christianity, various religious sects of the Middle Ages, and in the German peasants' war, the socialist idea always glistened as the most radical expression of rage against the existing society. [...] It was in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that the socialist idea first appeared with vigor and force, freed from religious enthusiasm, but rather as an opposition to the terror and devastation that emerging capitalism wreaked on society. Yet this socialism too was basically nothing but a dream, the invention of individual bold minds. [...] The socialist ideas represented by the three great thinkers: [Claude Henri] Saint-Simon and [Charles] Fourier in France, [Robert] Owen in England, in the 1820s and 30s, with far greater genius and brilliance, relied on quite different methods, but essentially rested on the same foundation. [...] A new generation of socialist leaders emerged in the 1840s: [Wilhelm] Weitling in Germany, [Pierre Joseph] Proudhon, Louis Blanc and Blanqui in France. The working class, for its part, had already embarked on struggle against the rule of capital, it had given the signal for class struggle in the elemental insurrections of the Lyons silk weavers in France, and in the Chartist movement in England. But there was no direct connection between these spontaneous stirrings of exploited masses and the various socialist theories. [...] the socialist idea was placed on a completely new footing by Marx and Engels. These two sought the basis for socialism not in moral repugnance towards the existing social order nor in cooking up all kinds of possible attractive and seductive projects, designed to smuggle in social equality within the present state. They turned to the investigation of the *economic* relationships of present-day society.

Marx and Engels grounded socialism and the potentials of communism in the antagonistic class structure of capitalism that pits workers against capitalists. Marx saw the proletariat as the class that has the potential for "a revolutionary seizure of power for the realization of socialism" (Luxemburg 1925, 142).

### 2.2. The Split of the Second International as Split Between Communism and Socialism

In the 19th century, the socialist movement experienced a split between reformist revisionists and revolutionary socialists. On the one side, the revisionists believed in the evolutionary transition to socialism through victories in elections and an automatic breakdown of capitalism. On the other side, revolutionary socialists stressed the importance of class struggle, street action, mass political strikes, and fundamental transformations of society in order to establish a free society. In the Second International (1889-1916), the various factions of socialism were part of one organisation. The Second International collapsed during the First World War. Socialists were split between those who supported the War and those who radically opposed it.

After the First World War, the Communist International and the Labour and Socialist International were created. The latter was the forerunner of the Socialist International.

After the collapse of the Second International, there was an institutional distinction between Socialists and Communists. Whereas reformism dominated the Socialist International, Stalinism became dominant in the Communist International. The notion of 'socialism' became associated with social democratic parties and the notion of 'communism' with communist parties. From a historical point of view, both Stalinism and revisionist social democracy have failed. Today it is time to stop strictly separating between communism and socialism, and instead to argue for a communist socialism as a radical, democratic socialism that aims at substituting capitalism by the democratic control of society, which includes workers' control of the economy, citizens' control of the political system, and human control of culture and everyday life. Marx saw communism as a radical, democratic movement and form of socialism.

Communism is "the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things" and is grounded in "the now existing premise" of society, which means that it "presupposes the universal development of productive forces and the world intercourse bound up with them" (Marx and Engels 1845/1846, 49). Communism as "the abolition of private property" is a revolutionary social movement, the political "position as the negation of the negation" (Marx 1844, 306). For Marx, socialism is the positive movement or what Hegel terms the determinate negation (*bestimmte Negation*) that can follow the negation of the negation (Marx 1844, 305). This means that socialism is the society created by the communist movement on the basis, from the ruins, and as a transcendence of capitalism and class society.

For Marx and Engels, socialism is not an abstract idea, but has as its *precondition* the development of *productive forces* and the *socialisation of work*, is *grounded in class antagonisms* that it wants to overcome, and can only become *real* through *class struggles* that aim at abolishing class society and establishing a classless society. Socialism's *conditions* are class society's *antagonisms*, its *method* is *communist class struggle*, and its *goal* is a *classless, socialist society*. Society's productive forces are never independent from the social relations that organise how humans encounter each other and what type of society they live in. This means, for example, that the design, character, and use of technology depends on class and power relations that shape the character of society's structures and forces. Socialism is a sublation of the capitalist and class mode of the dialectic of the forces and relations of production so that a classless society based on the principles of equality, fairness, justice, solidarity, and cooperation emerges.

### 2.3. Class-Struggle Social Democracy

With the rise of neoliberalism, social democracy turned towards the right and increasingly adopted neoliberal policies. When Tony Blair became British Prime Minister in 1997, his neoliberal version of social democracy influenced social democracy around the world. The consequence was that social democracy became in many respects indistinguishable from conservative parties, especially in respect to class politics. We need a left social democracy that struggles for democratic socialism. Rosa Luxemburg practiced a class struggle social democracy that struggled for radical reforms, and combined mass strikes and parliamentary action (see Luxemburg 2008). Luxemburg practiced dialectics of party/movements, organisation/spontaneity, intellectual leadership/masses.

Bhaskar Sunkara (2019, 215-237) argues for a new class-struggle social democracy that aims at winning elections and taking power; combines social movements, trade unions and the party; realises transitional policies that move society "quickly from social democracy to democratic socialism" (Sunkara 2019, 221); acknowledges the



changes of the working class; embeds itself in working class struggles; and struggles for “dignity, respect, and a fair shot at the good life” through universalist, “democratic class politics” that unite individuals “against our common opponent and win the type of change that will help the most marginalized, all while engaging in a far longer campaign against oppression rooted in race, gender, sexuality, and more” (2019, 236).

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2017) term the convergence of unions and social movements “social unionism” (social movements plus unions). Social unionism organises social strikes that take place in a society that has become a factory at large. Social unions entail “organizing new social combinations, inventing new forms of social cooperation, generating democratic mechanisms for our access to, use of, and participation in decision-making about the common” (2017, xix). Hardt and Negri argue for the complementarity of the three political strategies: “The taking of power, by electoral or other means, must serve to open space for autonomous and prefigurative practices on an ever-larger scale and nourish the slow transformation of institutions, which must continue over the long term. Similarly practices of exodus must find ways to complement and further projects of both antagonistic reform and taking power” (278). Example projects that such a complementary left-wing politics could struggle for include guaranteed basic income as “a money of the common” and “open access to and democratic management of the common” (294).

Class struggle social democracy struggles for communism as a democratic socialist society by practicing dialectics of reform/revolution (radical reformism), party/movement (movement parties), organisation/spontaneity (organised spontaneity), and working class politics/societal politics (social working class politics).

We will discuss aspects of socialism along three lines: the economy (Section 3), politics (Section 4), and culture (Section 5). Communism is a democratic society that is based on equality, justice, fairness, solidarity, wealth and luxury for all, and participatory democracy.

### 3. The Socialist Economy

#### 3.1. Common Ownership

A key characteristic of a socialist society is that the means of production are the common property of the producers: “In this sense, the theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property. [...] When, therefore, capital is converted into common property, into the property of all members of society, personal property is not thereby transformed into social property. It is only the social character of the property that is changed. It loses its class character” (Marx and Engels 1848, 498; 499). For Marx, “communism is humanism mediated with itself through the supersession of private property” (Marx 1844, 341).

#### 3.2. Production and Labour

Toil is for Marx and Engels incompatible with a socialist society. They see the reduction of necessary labour and the abolition of hard labour as an important aspect of socialism: “The realm of freedom really begins only where labour determined by necessity and external expediency ends; [...] The reduction of the working day is the basic prerequisite” (Marx 1894, 958-959). Therefore, a communist society is only possible as a high-tech society that has a high level of productivity.

*What is the aim of the Communists?* Answer: To organise society in such a way that every member of it can develop and use all his capabilities and powers in

complete freedom and without thereby infringing the basic conditions of this society (Engels 1847a, 96).

[In communism] nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic (Marx and Engels 1845/1846, 47).

In a high-tech socialist society, where the division of labour is abolished, humans are enabled to freely choose their work activities and to be active as well-rounded individuals who engage in many different activities. This means that humans can freely use their capabilities. Labour turns into free activity without a struggle for survival and coercion by the market.

In a socialist society, production takes place based on the principle of human need and not based on the principle of profit (the need of capital). This requires some form of planning of production:

In communist society, where the interests of individuals are not opposed to one another but, on the contrary, are united, competition is eliminated. [...] In communist society it will be easy to be informed about both production and consumption. Since we know how much, on the average, a person needs, it is easy to calculate how much is needed by a given number of individuals, and since production is no longer in the hands of private producers but in those of the community and its administrative bodies, it is a trifling matter *to regulate production according to needs* (Engels 1845a, 96).

Part of the reason state communism failed was that the central planning of human needs and the economy failed. Economies are complex and have unpredictable features. Economic planning needs to be decentralised, which in a networked and computerised society can take on the form of a decentralised collection of the goods that individuals and households require. This information can then be sent to production units that thereby know how many goods are required during a certain period of time. Networking of production within industrial sectors enables the comparison of the available production capacities and productivity levels, which enables the production of the right amount of goods.

For Marx and Engels, socialism includes a democratic economy, in which the workers own the means of production in common. In such self-managed companies, decisions are taken in common:

Above all, it will have to take the running of industry and all branches of production in general out of the hands of separate individuals competing with each other and instead will have to ensure that all these branches of production are run by society as a whole, i.e., for the social good, according to a social plan and with the participation of all members of society. It will therefore do away with competition and replace it by association. [...] private ownership will also have to be abolished, and in its stead there will be common use of all the instruments of production and the distribution of all products by common agreement, or the so-called community of property. The abolition of private ownership is indeed the most succinct and characteristic summary of the transformation of the entire

social system necessarily following from the development of industry, and it is therefore rightly put forward by the Communists as their main demand (Engels 1847b, 348).

### 3.3. Circulation, Distribution and Consumption

Marx argues that a socialist society must reuse parts of the social product as means of production, whereas the other parts constitute means of consumption that need to be distributed among the individuals:

Let us finally imagine, for a change, an association of free men, working with the means of production held in common, and expending their many different forms of labour-power in full self-awareness as one single social labour force. [...] The total product of our imagined association is a social product. One part of this product serves as fresh means of production and remains social. But another part is consumed by the members of the association as means of subsistence. This part must therefore be divided amongst them (Marx 1867, 172-173).

Marx and Engels distinguish between two phases of a socialist society: crude communism as the first stage and fully developed communism as the second stage. In the first stage, there is the elimination of capital, profit and the private property of the means of production, but not necessarily the abolition of wage-labour, money, exchange, and commodities. The means of production are collectively owned, but the productive forces are not yet developed to the stage that allows the abolishment of necessary labour.

The first stage of communism has not “*developed* on its own foundations”, but develops “just as it *emerges* from capitalist society, which is thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birth-marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges” (Marx 1875, 85). In the first stage of communism, “the community is simply a community of *labour*, and equality of *wages* paid out by communal capital – by the *community* as universal capitalist” (Marx 1844, 295). A “given amount of labour in one form is exchanged for an equal amount of labour in another form. [...] The right of the producers is *proportional* to the labour they supply; [...] It recognises no class distinctions, because everyone is only a worker like everyone else” (Marx 1875, 86, emphasis in original). Marx writes elsewhere that in communism, money would immediately disappear: “If we were to consider a communist society in place of a capitalist one, then money capital would immediately be done away with, and so too the disguises that transactions acquire through it” (1885, 390). The implication is that there might be versions of lower-stage communism with and without money.

In the higher, fully developed form of communism, the means of production are highly developed so that necessary labour and exchange are abolished:

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and thereby also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of common wealth flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs! (Marx 1875, 87).

“From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs” is a central communist principle. In a fully developed communist society, there is no wage-labour and no compulsion to work. Everyone works as far as he can and work is largely self-fulfilment. Goods are not sold or exchanged, but given to humans freely as gifts. There is distribution not according to the possession of money, but according to human needs.

#### 4. Socialist Politics

*Communism as the positive transcendence of private property as human self-estrangement, and therefore as the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man; communism therefore as the complete return of man to himself as a social (i. e., human) being – a return accomplished consciously and embracing the entire wealth of previous development (Marx 1844, 296, emphasis in original).*

Freedom is an important principle of democratic societies. For Marx, socialism means the abolition of alienation and the realisation of true freedom that allows humans to fully develop their potentials. A socialist society is a democracy and a humanism, in which the freedom of all interacts with individual freedom. “In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (Marx and Engels 1848, 506).

It has often been argued that communism/socialism is totalitarian. But for Marx and Engels, democracy is a precondition of socialism. This circumstance becomes, for example, very clear in the following passages:

*Question 18: What will be the course of this revolution? Answer: In the first place it will inaugurate a democratic constitution and thereby, directly or indirectly, the political rule of the proletariat (Engels 1847b, 350).*

*Democracy nowadays is communism. [...] Democracy has become the proletarian principle, the principle of the masses. The masses may be more or less clear about this, the only correct meaning of democracy, but all have at least an obscure feeling that social equality of rights is implicit in democracy. The democratic masses can be safely included in any calculation of the strength of the communist forces. And if the proletarian parties of the different nations unite they will be quite right to inscribe the word ‘Democracy’ on their banners, since, except for those who do not count, all European democrats in 1846 are more or less Communists at heart (Engels 1845b, 5).*

Marx and Engels argue that communists do not oppose reforms, but argue for progressive and radical reforms that reduce the power of capital and forces that support domination.

Democracy would be quite useless to the proletariat if it were not immediately used as a means of carrying through further measures directly attacking private ownership and securing the means of subsistence of the proletariat. [...] Once the first radical onslaught upon private ownership has been made, the proletariat will see itself compelled to go always further, to concentrate all capital, all agriculture, all industry, all transport, and all exchange more and more in the hands

of the State. [...] Finally, when all capital, all production, and all exchange are concentrated in the hands of the nation, private ownership will automatically have ceased to exist, money will have become superfluous, and production will have so increased and men will be so much changed that the last forms of the old social relations will also be able to fall away (Engels 1847b, 351).

Progressive politics that socialists support include, for example, a “heavy progressive or graduated income tax”, the “[e]xtension of factories and instruments of production owned by the State”, the “[c]ombination of agriculture with manufacturing industries; the “gradual abolition of all the distinction between town and country by a more equable distribution of the populace over the country”, or the “[f]ree education for all children in public schools” (Marx and Engels 1848, 505).

## 5. Socialist Culture

### 5.1. Togetherness

A socialist society also changes social relations in the realm of culture. Whereas capitalist culture through the logic of commodity consumption advances a culture of isolation and individualisation focused on the individual consumption of commodities and the competition for reputation, socialist culture means the development of a common culture, where humans associate and produce and consume culture together:

When communist *artisans* associate with one another, theory, propaganda, etc., is their first end. But at the same time, as a result of this association, they acquire a new need – the need for society – and what appears as a means becomes an end. In this practical process the most splendid results are to be observed whenever French socialist workers are seen together. Such things as smoking, drinking, eating, etc., are no longer means of contact or means that bring them together. Association, society and conversation, which again has association as its end, are enough for them; the brotherhood of man is no mere phrase with them, but a fact of life, and the nobility of man shines upon us from their work-hardened bodies (Marx 1844, 313).

### 5.2. The Family

Socialist society also changes personal relations and the family. It reduces the dependence and power relations within the family and thereby advances equality:

What influence will the communist order of society have upon the family? *Answer:* It will make the relation between the sexes a purely private relation which concerns only the persons involved, and in which society has no call to interfere. It is able to do this because it abolishes private property and educates children communally, thus destroying the twin foundation of hitherto existing marriage – the dependence through private property of the wife upon the husband and of the children upon the parents (Engels 1847b, 354).

### 5.3. Internationalism

Socialist culture is inherently internationalist. All humans are seen as members of the global family of humanity. There is no place for the nation and nationalism in a socialist society. Humans have commonalities and differences. A socialist society advances a

culture that is based on global unity in diversity, a dialectic of common culture and differentiated lifestyles and norms.

The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got. Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself *the* nation, it is so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word (Marx and Engels 1848, 503-504).

Will nationalities continue to exist under communism? *Answer:* The nationalities of the peoples who join together according to the principle of community will be just as much compelled by this union to merge with one another and thereby supersede themselves as the various differences between estates and classes disappear through the superseding of their basis – private property (Engels 1847a, 103).

## 6. A Model of Socialism

For Marx (1844, 296), communism as revolutionary socialism is the “reintegration or return of man to himself, the transcendence of human self-estrangement”, “the real appropriation of the human essence”, “fully developed humanism”.

The human being is a socially producing being that produces its livelihood, which includes use-values (economy), collective decisions governing life (politics), and meanings that define life’s purpose (culture). Given that alienation goes for Marx beyond the economy and covers all realms of human production and life, including the economy and culture, Marx does not limit the notion of socialism to the economy, but sees it as the full development of humanism in society. Marx says that “abolition of private property and communism are by no means identical” (Marx 1843, 143) and therefore stresses that socialism means “the *abolition of class distinctions generally*” together with “all the relations of production on which they rest”, including all corresponding “social relations” and “all the ideas that result from these social relations” (Marx 1850, 127, emphasis in original).

Axel Honneth (2017, 106) stresses that socialism means the application “of the notion of social freedom to all three constitutive spheres of modern societies (not just the economy, but also politics and personal relationships)”: “Only if all members of society can satisfy the needs they share with all others – physical and emotional intimacy, economic independence and political self-determination – by relying on the sympathy and support of their partners in interaction will our society have become social in the full sense of the term” (107-108).

First, we need to add that Marx, as just argued, already saw socialism as a society, where freedom, solidarity and co-operation operate in the realms of the economy, politics, and culture. Second, Honneth’s third realm is restricted to the personal relationships of “the family and intimate relationships” (2017, 107). The realm of meaning-making in everyday life is much wider than this and, besides the family, includes: friendships, love and sexuality; aspects of life such as education, worldviews, religion, philosophy, science, morality, sports, entertainment, consumption, care, arts, health and medicine; or life and death. Third, society’s three realms (economy, politics, culture) are neither independent nor simply interdependent, but are all realms of social production that constitutes society’s materiality. Politics and culture are at the same time economic (realms of the production of collective decisions and meanings) and non-economic (Fuchs 2020a [Chapter 3], 2020b [Chapters 2 and 3]; 2017; 2016).

There are three dimensions of a socialist society: the socialist economy, socialist politics, and socialist culture. Whereas in an alienated, dominative, heteronomous class society, the three spheres of society are ruled by instrumental reason and particularistic interests, the three realms are in a socialist society shaped by co-operative reason and the common interest. Socialist society is organised in ways that benefit all. In class society, society only benefits some, and at the expense of others. Table 1 contrasts alienated society with socialist society. It shows three dimensions of socialism that are sublations of alienation.

	<b>Alienated society</b>	<b>Socialist society</b>
<b>Economy</b>	Class	Common, socialist economy: collective ownership of the means of production, abolition of toil and necessary labour, well-rounded individuality with free work, self-managed companies, production from each according to their abilities, distribution to each according to their needs, wealth for all
<b>Politics</b>	Dictatorship	Common politics: participatory democracy
<b>Culture</b>	Ideology, disrespect	Common culture: internationalism, culture of unity in diversity, self-realisation of all humans

Table 1: Three dimensions of socialist society and their opposition to alienated society

The common, socialist economy is the sublation of class society. The common politics of participatory democracy is the sublation of dictatorship. Common culture is the sublation of ideology and disrespect. Production in society is a dialectic of objects/human subjects that results in the creation of products. Table 2 shows how these dimensions look in a socialist society with respect to the three dimensions of society.

<b>Type</b>	<b>Subjects</b>	<b>Object</b>	<b>Products</b>
Economic socialism	Commoners, well-rounded individuals	Collectively owned means of production, self-managed companies	Common goods, wealth for all, self-fulfilment for all
Political socialism	Democrats	Participatory democracy	Common decisions and rights
Cultural socialism	Friends	Shared meanings and knowledge	Common, internationalist culture of unity in diversity, recognition and voice for all

Table 2: Subjects, objects and products in the three realms of socialist society

Erich Fromm shows that Marx saw economic democracy beyond necessity, political democracy and creative self-realisation as the three dimensions of socialism:

In socialism, the human being “produces in an associated, not competitive way; he produces rationally and in an unalienated way, which means that he brings

production under his control, instead of being ruled by it as by some blind power. [...] [Socialism] means, in short, the realization of political and industrial democracy. Marx expected that by this new form of an unalienated society man would become independent, stand on his own feet, and would no longer be crippled by the alienated mode of production and consumption; that he would truly be the master and the creator of his life, and hence that he could begin to make *living* his main business, rather than producing the *means* for living. Socialism, for Marx, was never as such the fulfillment of life, but the *condition* for such fulfillment. [...] Man, in Marx's view, has created in the course of history a culture which he will be free to make his own when he is freed from the chains, not only of economic poverty, but of the spiritual poverty created by alienation. Marx's vision is based on his faith in man, in the inherent and real potentialities of the essence of man which have developed in history. He looked at socialism as the *condition* of human freedom and creativity, not as in itself constituting the goal of man's life. [...]

Socialism, for Marx, is a society which serves the needs of man. [...] Marxist and other forms of socialism are the heirs of prophetic Messianism, Christian Chiliastic sectarianism, thirteenth-century Thomism, Renaissance Utopianism, and eighteenth-century enlightenment. It is the synthesis of the prophetic-Christian idea of society as the plane of spiritual realization, and of the idea of individual freedom. For this reason, it is opposed to the Church because of its restriction of the mind, and to liberalism because of its separation of society and moral values. It is opposed to Stalinism and Krushchevism, for their authoritarianism as much as their neglect of humanist values.

Socialism is the abolition of human self-alienation, the return of man as a real human being. [...] For Marx, socialism meant the social order which permits the return of man to himself, the identity between existence and essence, the overcoming of the separateness and antagonism between subject and object, the humanization of nature; it meant a world in which man is no longer a stranger among strangers, but is in *his* world, where he is at home" (Fromm 1961/2003, 50; 51; 55; 56).

Discussions about socialism in the 21st century have foregrounded the commons. The basic argument is that neoliberal capitalism has resulted in the commodification and privatisation of common goods that are either produced by all humans or that all humans need in order to exist.<sup>1</sup>

Slavoj Žižek (2010, 212-213) distinguishes between the cultural commons (language, means of communication, education, infrastructures), the commons of external nature (the natural environment), and the commons of internal nature (human subjectivity, our bodies and minds).

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2017, 166) argue that there are two major forms of the commons: the social and the natural commons. These forms are divided into five subtypes: the earth and its ecosystems; the "immaterial" common of ideas, codes, images and cultural products; physical goods produced by co-operative work; metropolitan and rural spaces that are realms of communication, cultural interaction and co-operation; and social institutions and services that organise housing, welfare, health, and education (2017, 166). For Hardt and Negri, contemporary capitalism's class structure features the extraction of the commons, which includes the extraction of natural

<sup>1</sup> See: Douzinas and Žižek (2010); Žižek (2013); Žižek and Taek-Gwang Lee (2016); Ali (2009); Badiou (2015); Dean (2012); Hardt and Negri (2009).



resources; data mining/data extraction; the extraction of the social from the urban spaces on real estate markets; and finance as extractive industry (166-171).

The advantage of such understandings of the commons is that they allow a popular critique of neoliberal capitalism and its undermining of the welfare state, nature, and cultural institutions such as the education system and hospitals. They also stress that the commons advance communist potentials from within the contradictions of capitalism, a “communism of capital”.<sup>2</sup> This perspective allows the reinvention of communism in the 21st century as commonism, a politics that struggles against the dispossession, privatisation, commodification and financialisation of the commons. But at the same time, the discussed definitions of the commons are not fully in line with Marx and Engels’ understanding of the commons as “common property, [...] the property of all members of society” (Marx and Engels 1848, 499) that is governed by “common agreement” (Engels 1847b, 348). All economic, political and cultural goods and structures can be turned into common goods that are controlled by all those who are affected by them. Tables 1 and 2 are based on this understanding of the commons as common economy, common politics, and common culture.

## 7. Communicative/Digital Socialism

### 7.1. Socialism and Technology

#### 7.1.1. The Antagonism of Productive Forces and Relations of Production

Capitalism is based on an antagonism between productive forces and the relations of production. Capitalist technology socialises labour; that is, it brings about new forms of co-operation and potentials for collective ownership, new common goods (such as the digital commons) and the reduction of necessary labour time: these are communist potentials, or what some term the communism of capital. Digital capitalism creates new forms and technologies of co-operation that are foundations of new common goods. But such forms and technologies are within class relations and capitalist means of exploitation and domination, and potentially common goods are often subsumed under the commodity form, class relations, and capital. In capitalism, new communist potentials cannot fully develop and technological development advances social antagonisms such as the rise of precarious labour and life. Marx and Engels describe this antagonism in the following manner:

The productive forces at the disposal of society no longer tend to further the development of the conditions of bourgeois property; on the contrary, they have become too powerful for these conditions, by which they are fettered, and so soon as they overcome these fetters, they bring disorder into the whole of bourgeois society, endanger the existence of bourgeois property. The conditions of bourgeois society are too narrow to comprise the wealth created by them. And how does the bourgeoisie get over these crises? On the one hand by enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces; on the other, by the conquest of new markets, and by the more thorough exploitation of the old ones. That is to say, by paving the way for more extensive and more destructive crises, and by diminishing the means whereby crises are prevented (Marx and Engels 1848, 490).

<sup>2</sup> See: Virno (2004, 110-111), Marazzi (2010), Bauwens and Kostakis (2014), Beverungen, Murtola and Schwartz (2013), Dyer-Witheford (2014), Lund (2017, 76-81, 298-328).

In *Capital Volume 1*, Chapter 32, Marx formulates the antagonism between productive forces and relations of production in the following way: “At a certain stage of development, [the capitalist mode of production] brings into the world the material means of its own destruction. From that moment, new forces and new passions spring up in the bosom of society, forces and passions which feel themselves to be fettered by that society” (Marx 1867, 928).

In the 21st century, information technology and the Internet are founded on an antagonism of class relations and the now networked productive forces. A good example is that the Internet allows the free sharing of information via peer-to-peer platforms and other technologies, which on the one hand questions the capitalist character of culture and so makes the music and film industry nervous, but on the other hand within capitalism can also constitute problems for artists who depend on deriving income from cultural commodities. Informational networks aggravate the capitalist antagonism between the collective production and the individual appropriation of goods and the antagonism between productive forces and relations of production. Productive forces that are tied up by existing relations do not necessarily or automatically fully develop. It is in no way assured that they can be freed. They can remain enchained and will remain enchained as long as individuals enchain themselves. Networks are a material condition of a free association, but the cooperative networking of the relations of production is not an automatic result of networked productive forces.

### **7.1.2. The Antagonism Between Productive Forces and Relations of Production in the *Grundrisse*'s “Fragment on Machines”**

Marx shows in the *Grundrisse*'s “Fragment on Machines” how modern technology reduces necessary labour time – the annual labour-time a society needs in order to survive – and thereby creates conditions for a socialist society, free individuality, and a life based on free time as a source of wealth, but at the same time is embedded into capitalist class relations that have to set labour-time as the source of wealth so that the antagonism between the ever-more-socialised productive forces and the relations of production deepens the enslavement of labour; unemployment; precarity, and the crisis-proneness of capitalism. The capitalist antagonism between productive forces and relations of production is an antagonism between necessary labour (that technology ever more reduces) and surplus labour (that capital tries to ever more increase):

Under the conditions of capitalist technology, the worker “steps to the side of the production process instead of being its chief actor. [...] as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth. The theft of alien labour time, on which the present wealth is based, appears a miserable foundation in face of this new one, created by large-scale industry itself. As soon as labour in the direct form has ceased to be the great well-spring of wealth, labour time ceases and must cease to be its measure, and hence exchange value [must cease to be the measure] of use value. The surplus labour of the mass has ceased to be the condition for the development of general wealth, just as the non-labour of the few, for the development of the general powers of the human head. With that, production based on exchange value breaks down, and the direct, material production process is stripped of the form of penury and antithesis. The free development of individualities, and hence not the reduction of necessary labour time so as to posit surplus labour, but rather the general reduction of the necessary labour of society to a minimum, which then corresponds to the artistic, scientific etc. development of

the individuals in the time set free, and with the means created, for all of them (Marx 1857/1858, 705-706).

### 7.1.3. Technology and Time in Capitalism and Socialist Society

Marx ascertains a capitalist antagonism between the tendency of technology to reduce necessary labour time and the capitalist tendency to turn all labour time into surplus labour and argues that modern technology creates the foundation of a socialist society, in which free time and free activity beyond necessity is maximised and the source of wealth:

[Capital] increases the surplus labour time of the mass by all the means of art and science [...] It is thus, despite itself, instrumental in creating the means of social disposable time, in order to reduce labour time for the whole society to a diminishing minimum, and thus to free everyone's time for their own development. But its tendency always, on the one side, to create disposable time, on the other, to convert it into surplus labour. If it succeeds too well at the first, then it suffers from surplus production, and then necessary labour is interrupted, because no surplus labour can be realized by capital. The more this contradiction develops, the more does it become evident that the growth of the forces of production can no longer be bound up with the appropriation of alien labour, but that the mass of workers must themselves appropriate their own surplus labour. Once they have done so – and disposable time thereby ceases to have an antithetical existence – then, on one side, necessary labour time will be measured by the needs of the social individual, and, on the other, the development of the power of social production will grow so rapidly that, even though production is now calculated for the wealth of all, disposable time will grow for all. For real wealth is the developed productive power of all individuals. The measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labour time, but rather disposable time (Marx 1857/1858, 708).

Marx adds that “[r]eal economy [...] consists of the saving of labour time” so that there can be “an increase of free time, i.e. time for the full development of the individual” (1857/1858, 711). Marx ascertains in the *Grundrisse* that a socialist society requires a technological foundation so that society can be based on the principle “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!”. Socialism is only possible as a computerised, high-technology, post-scarcity society that creates wealth and luxury for all.

Roman Rosdolsky (1977, 427-428) comments in his study of the *Grundrisse* on the importance of the technological foundations of socialism:

It is hardly necessary today – in the course of a new industrial revolution – to emphasise the prophetic significance of this enormously dynamic and essentially optimistic conception. For the dreams of the isolated German revolutionary in his exile in London in 1858 have now, for the first time, entered the realm of what is immediately possible. Today, for the first time in history, thanks to the developments of modern technology, the preconditions for a final and complete abolition of the ‘theft of alien labour-time’ actually exist; furthermore, the present period is the first in which the development of the productive forces can be carried so far forward that, in fact, in the not too distant future it will be not labour-time, but rather disposable time, by which social wealth is measured (Rosdolsky 1977, 427-428).

#### 7.1.4. Fully Automated Luxury Communism?

Aaron Bastani (2019) argues in his book *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* that new technologies such as information technology (“the defining feature of the Third Disruption” – by which he means a third technological revolution in the history of humankind – “is ever-greater abundance in information” (2019, 37); that AI-based automation, green energy technologies, space travel, 3D printing, gene therapy and editing, and synthetic food such as cultured meat will soon enable humans to overcome scarcity and to thereby create an abundance of free time, energy, space, health, and sustainable artificial food. He sees these technologies as the foundation of fully automated luxury communism, where “work is eliminated, scarcity replaced by abundance and where labour and leisure blend into one another” (50). Fully automated luxury communism is a “realm of plenty” (54) with “luxury for all” (192) and everything for all.

Bastani rightly reiterates Marx’s insight that communism requires material and technological foundations and can therefore only be a high-tech communism. His version of technological analysis avoids technological determinism because he is aware that communism does not automatically emerge from technology, but rather requires political-economic transformations. The book’s analysis is a techno-optimism without technological determinism. But such optimism is a new, 21st-century form of utopian socialism because it underestimates how capitalism results in the design of negative and destructive potentials into contemporary technologies. For Bastani, there are only positive potentials of technology and he seems to think that when communism comes, the same technologies can be used without humans having to transform and redesign many of them and having to abolish at least some of them. He also underestimates that technologies are complex systems which can in any society have unpredictable, negative consequences. Bastani’s technological analysis confers the image of a perfectly controllable technology. When he writes that “resources, energy, health, labour and food – just like information – want to be free” (2019, 216), he overlooks that only humans and not resources act and have interests. Freedom as want is a human want and interest that cannot be reduced to technology.

Automated technologies can involve programming or system errors that result in serious accidents and disasters. Space exploration is a part of geopolitical and military rivalries. Even in a communist society that is relatively peaceful, massive resource investments into space exploration may result in a lack of resources available for welfare. 3D home printing could result in the production of a massive amount of non-recyclable consumer goods that pose an environmental problem. Genetic engineering can cause new diseases and risks to health and life. The mass production of cultured meat could create unforeseen risks that do not make it clean meat, but rather dirty meat. Operating a vast number of labs for producing cultured meat could increase the world’s energy use. If a transition to renewable energy has at the same time not been achieved, total carbon dioxide emissions could increase. Communism is likely to reduce the risks of technologies that stem from cost cutting and profit imperatives, but collective ownership and non-profit production oriented on use-value is no panacea for the potential risks new technologies pose. A communist society requires prospective, critical technology assessment and communist tech ethics and tech policies that regulate new technologies. Technology is not just an economic issue, but also has political and cultural dimensions that are based on but not reducible to the economy.

It is questionable that there can be ‘full’ automation. Automation will always have to remain under human control and can never fully replace humans. For society to exist, technologies and societies need to be built, repaired, morally judged and assessed, which only humans can do. And there are forms of human work, such as social

care and education, whose automation is morally undesirable if we want to exist in a humane society built on the principle of communist love. A posthuman technology without any human work would result in the technologically-induced breakdown of society, because once robots that repair robots encounter a system error or a power outage, humans have to step in. Posthuman ideology overestimates the capacities of technologies to automate human subjectivity. No robot will ever understand what love is. Therefore a robot cannot practice love. You cannot automate love. And artificial imitations of love are nothing more than cheap fakes. Communism requires technological foundations, but high tech alone is not enough. Communism's guiding principle is neither technology nor love of technology, but love.

Bastani advances a form of posthumanist communism. He does not give much attention to Marx's concept of well-rounded individuality in a communist society. One reason why work understood as the creation of use-values will not stop is that humans have a desire for self-fulfilment and creativity whose potentials cannot be fully realised in a class society. In a communist society, humans would be too bored if they sat on the couch all day watching television. They would engage in a multitude of social and productive activities, free from necessity and compulsion. For Bastani (2019), luxury populism is the opposite of neoliberal politics (185-200). But he leaves open whether or not, in his view, the nation continues to exist in communist society. He argues for internationalism and not for an alternative form of globalisation. The nation is an artificial, ideological construct. Populism does not appeal to the working class, but to a people. It is therefore mostly based on nationalism (Fuchs 2020c). But Marx and Engels knew that communism requires as its political foundation global solidarity. Communism needs working class politics that liberates humanity from class, capital, labour, toil, pollution, destruction, war, necessity, and so on.

It is encouraging that there is a new interest in the role of technology in communism and understanding communism as wealth and luxury for all. But such discoveries in themselves are nothing new.

In his 1892 manifesto *The Conquest of Bread*, Peter Kropotkin wrote about wealth and luxury for all in a communist society: "What is now the privilege of an insignificant minority would be accessible to all. Luxury, ceasing to be a foolish and ostentatious display of the bourgeois class, would become an artistic pleasure" (Kropotkin 1892/2012, 106). Kropotkin clearly built on Marx's insights and therefore argued that luxury and wealth for all requires a high-tech communist society: "It now remains for society, first, to extend this greater productivity, which is limited to certain industries, and to apply it to the general good. But it is evident that to utilize this high productivity of labour, so as to guarantee well-being to all, society must itself take possession of all means of production" (1892/2012, 88).

Murray Bookchin in the 1960s argued that we "of this century have finally opened the prospect of material abundance for all to enjoy – a sufficiency in the means of life without the need for grinding, day-to-day toil" (1986, 12). Liberatory technologies enable a "post-scarcity society", where "we can begin to provide food, shelter, garments, and a broad spectrum of luxuries without devouring the precious time of humanity and without dissipating its invaluable reservoir of creative energy in mindless labor" (12). Bookchin reminds us that not all technologies are liberating. Technologies need to be combined with and shaped by environmentalism and communalism. Bookchin argues for an "ecological approach to technology that takes the form of *ensembles* of productive units, energized by solar and windpower units" (46).

The list of theorists of socialist technology could be continued with names such as Herbert Marcuse (post-technology), Erich Fromm (humanised technology), Ivan Illich

(convivial technologies), André Gorz (post-industrial socialism), Ernst Bloch (alliance technology), etc. Luxury communism is a new discovery for – but not by – Aaron Bastani, but relatively old hat in the history of the radical theory of technology and society. Communist theory needs proper engagement with this history.

*Fully Automated Luxury Communism* is, despite its tendencies of idealist utopianism and historical blindness, good food for thought about the foundations of communism.

## 7.2. Socialism and Communication

### 7.2.1. Alienated and Socialist Culture

Given that socialist society sublates the economy, politics and culture, new relations of communication also emerge in such a society. The way humans think, work, live and communicate changes in such a society. Table 3 opposes knowledge and communication's roles in alienated societies to their roles in socialist society.

In a class society, knowledge and communication are privately controlled and owned by the few as private property, whereas in a socialist society knowledge and communication technologies are gifts and common goods that are collectively produced and owned. If one looks at the way that contemporary media corporations are run, then one sees that the decisions are made by a small class of CEOs and managers who control these companies' decision-making processes in a dictatorial manner. Privately owned companies are economic dictatorships. In contrast, socialist politics implies that organisations in the culture and communication industry should not only be owned by their workers, but should also have democratic decision-making structures, where everyone working in the organisation or affected by it can participate. While alienated cultural systems produce ideologies and reputational hierarchies, socialist culture creates togetherness, respect for all, recognition of all, and unity in diversity of identities and lifestyles.

	<b>Alienated Society</b>	<b>Socialist Society</b>
Economic system	Knowledge and communication as commodities, exploitation of knowledge labour, means of communication as private property	Knowledge and communication(s) as commons, co-ownership and co-production in self-managed knowledge-creating companies
Political system	Dictatorial control of knowledge and communication processes	Participatory knowledge and democratic communication
Cultural system	Ideological knowledge and communication	Humanist knowledge and communication that advances togetherness, unity in diversity, and recognition of all

Table 3: Alienated and socialist forms of knowledge and communication

### 7.2.2. Public Service Media and Community Media

In contemporary capitalism, we can already find forms of media and culture that operate outside and in opposition to capital accumulation. The two most important social

communication forms operating outside of capital are public service media and community media. Both operate on a not-for-profit basis. The difference is that public service media are organised and financed with the help of state legislation. They are independent from capital and the state, but are organised based on laws that regulate their remit (such as creating public service content) and their funding (e.g. in the form of a licence fee). Community media are citizen media that are run and operated by citizens who act as citizen journalists and citizen media producers.

The political economist of communication Graham Murdock (2011, 18) argues that the three political-economic possibilities in the media and cultural sector are ownership by capital (the commodity form of communications), by the state (the public service form of communications) and by civil society (communications as gifts/commons). Public service media tend to reject the logic of the commodity. They make use of state power for collecting licence fees or parts of taxes in order to fund their operations. Alternative, citizen and community media such as open channels, free radio stations, the alternative press, or alternative Internet platforms are run by civil society groups. They do not embrace but rather reject the commodity logic. They tend not to want to sell content, technologies and audiences. Given that they reject exchange-value, they have to look for other sources of funding if they want to exist within capitalism. Such sources are, for example, voluntary unpaid labour, state funding, donations, endowments from foundations, and so on. Table 4 presents a distinction between a) capitalist media, b) public service media, and c) community media. These media are respectively based on a) information commodities, b) information as public good, and c) information commons. Information is owned in specific ways and has a specific cultural role, in which it allows humans to inform themselves, communicate, and organise social systems.

	<b>Capitalist media</b>	<b>Public service media</b>	<b>Community media</b>
<b>Economy (ownership)</b>	Corporations	State institutions	Citizen-control
<b>Culture (public circulation of ideas)</b>	Content that addresses humans in various social roles and results in meaning-making	Content that addresses humans in various social roles and results in meaning-making	Content that addresses humans in various social roles and results in meaning-making

Table 4: Three political economies of information

The Slovenian critical media and communication scholar Slavko Splichal provides a concise definition of public service media: “In normative terms, public service media must be a service *of* the public, *by* the public, and *for* the public. It is a service *of* the public because it is financed by it and should be owned by it. It ought to be a service *by* the public – not only financed and controlled, but also produced by it. It must be a service *for* the public – but also for the government and other powers acting in the public sphere. In sum, public service media ought to become ‘a cornerstone of democracy’” (2007, 255). Community media “is usually run on a not-for-profit basis and provides community members with an opportunity to participate in the production process” (Rennie 2006, 3), and has democratic governance structures.

There is a tension and contradiction between public service and community media on the one hand and capitalist media on the other hand. Capitalism is expansive, imperialist and colonising – it tries to subsume everything under the commodity form and to destroy realms of life that do not adhere to the commodity logic. It can therefore be difficult for public service media and community media to exist in capitalism. Community media are, in capitalism, often based on voluntary, self-exploitative, unpaid or low-paid labour. The history of alternative and community media is a history of self-determined but precarious labour and resource precarity. Such media tend to lack resources. Although alternative media represent common communications that transcend capitalism they lack the capital of the common needed for effectively challenging capitalist communication corporations. Culture, information and other goods and services can be de-commodified by social struggles and thereby turned into public or common goods. The more the logic of the commodity asserts itself, the more difficult is the existence and survival of public service media and community media. The more this logic is constricted, the more these alternative forms of organisation can flourish. In socialist society, there are no capitalist media, and information and culture have no commodity form.

Marx spoke about the importance of alternative, non-capitalist ways of organising the media. He writes that the “*primary freedom*” of the media “*lies in not being a trade*” (1842, 175, emphasis in original). Marx feared that the capitalist control of communications limited the freedom of speech and expression and colonised the public sphere. In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels say that one of the political measures that communists aim at implementing is the “[ce]ntralisation of the means of communication and transport in the hands of the State” (Marx and Engels 1848, 505).

In the 20th century, many states held monopolies over telecommunications, broadcasting networks, railways, and the postal service. These are large infrastructures of communication. Organising them as public services enables fair, universal, affordable access. Today, there is a need for public service Internet platforms, such as a public service YouTube run by a network of public service companies, in order to challenge the monopolies of the digital giants Google, Facebook, Twitter, etc. Alternatives to communication services that store and process lots of personal data, such as Facebook, should be organised as self-managed community platforms because too much involvement by the state poses a certain danger of state surveillance potentials directed towards citizens. The same can be said of the press: self-managed newspapers are preferable to newspapers owned and operated as public services by institutions that are located close to the state. Public service media should also have news departments where independent journalists work. It is important that public service media are truly independent from the state, economic forces, and ideological forces.

### 7.2.3. Rosa Luxemburg: The Freedom of the Press in Socialist Society

Immediately after the 1917 October Revolution, the Bolsheviks set up the Revolutionary Press Tribunal, which had the power to censor or suspend publications and to deprive those responsible for them of their liberties, deporting them from Russia in cases where the Tribunal found that “crimes and offences [...] against the national through the use of the press” were committed (Lenin 1917a, 206). The freedom of the press was abolished.

Rosa Luxemburg on the one hand supported the need to replace the Czarist regime by a socialist society and on the other hand stresses the need for the democratic character of such a society. She commented that:



Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party – however numerous they may be – is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently. Not because of any fanatical concept of ‘justice’ but because all that is instructive, wholesome and purifying in political freedom depends on this essential characteristic, and its effectiveness vanishes when ‘freedom’ becomes a special privilege” (Luxemburg 1918, 69).

Luxemburg criticised the curtailment of the freedom of expression in Russia under Lenin. She stressed that “universal suffrage, freedom of press and assemblage” and “the whole apparatus of the basic democratic liberties of the people” constitute the “right of self-determination” (1918, 48). Luxemburg spoke of “freedom of the press, the rights of association and assembly” as “the most important democratic guarantees of a healthy public” (66). Without “a free and untrammelled press, without the unlimited right of association and assemblage, the rule of the broad mass of the people is entirely unthinkable” (67).

A democratic socialist society needs to guarantee the freedom of expression, assembly, association and the press. Corporate media monopolies have to be dissolved by expropriating the capital of the owners and handing over the ownership of these organisations (including publishing technologies) to workers and citizens. In such a society, groups of citizens need to have the right and the technological and organisational opportunity to create their own media, collectively owned and operating as self-managed companies that are not operated for profit, pursuing the goals of informing and educating. The socialist public does not consist of state-controlled media, but a vivid public sphere that operates as a multitude of public service media organisations and self-managed media organisations.

#### 7.2.4. Democratic Communications

In his book *Communications*, Raymond Williams (1976, 130-137) distinguishes between authoritarian, paternal, commercial and democratic communication systems (communications). The first three communication systems are political, cultural and commercial expressions of instrumental reason. Authoritarian communications involve state control, manipulation and censorship of the media. The “purpose of communication is to protect, maintain, or advance a social order based on minority power” (1976, 131). Paternal communications are authoritarian communications “with a conscience: that is to say, with values and purposes beyond the maintenance of its own power” (131). In such communication systems, there is ideological control that aims to impose certain moral values on audiences. The controllers of paternal communication systems assume that specific morals are good for citizens and that the latter are too silly to understand the world. In commercial communications, there is commercial control: “Anything can be said, provided that you can afford to say it and that you can say it profitably” (133). All three forms are instrumental: they instrumentalise communications as tools for control and domination.

In contrast, democratic communications are, for Williams, based on co-operative rationality. Such media systems are based on the freedom to speak and the free choice of what to receive. Such communications are a “means of participation and of common discussion” (1976, 134). Williams argues for a cultural democracy that combines public service media, cultural co-operatives and local media.<sup>3</sup> Such a democracy establishes

<sup>3</sup> See also Williams (1983, 65-72).

“new kinds of communal, cooperative and collective institutions” (1983, 123). The core of Williams’ proposal is “that public ownership of the basic means of production [the means of communication and cultural production] should be combined with leasing their use to self-managing groups, to secure maximum variety of style and political opinion and to ensure against any bureaucratic control” (1979, 370): “The idea of public service must be detached from the idea of public monopoly, yet remain public service in the true sense” of public service content (1976, 134). Instrumental and co-operative media are contradictory forces. Only cultural forms of class struggle can drive back the capitalist colonisation of communications. Democratic communications are the dominant form of communication in a socialist society, in which “the basic cultural skills are made widely available, and the channels of communication widened and cleared, as much as possible” (1958/1983, 283).

### 7.2.5. Socialist Journalism

Béla Fogarasi (1891-1959) was a Hungarian philosopher. In his essay “The Tasks of the Communist Press”), Fogarasi (1921/1983) distinguishes between the capitalist and the socialist press. He argues that the capitalist press is “an ideological weapon in the class struggle” (1921/1983, 149) utilised by the bourgeoisie in order to “dominate the ideology of the ensemble of classes” (149): “What the capitalist press seeks is to shape the structure of the reader’s consciousness in such a way that he will be perpetually unable to distinguish between true and false, to relate causes and effects, to place individual facts in their total context, to rationally integrate new knowledge into his perspective” (150). Fogarasi implicitly applies Georg Lukács’ (1971) critique of reified consciousness to the capitalist press. In the capitalist press, the focus is often not on the dialectic of totality, particularity and individuality, but merely on individual, isolated pieces of news. According to Fogarasi, strategies of the capitalist press include reporting a multitude of isolated facts that quench the readers’ thirst for knowledge; de-politisation and sensationalism that work “systematically in the service of such diversion” (1921/1983, 150); and pseudo-objectivity. In contrast, the socialist press tries to advance the consciousness of society as totality and of the relation of single events with each other and broader contexts, the unmasking of the capitalist press, and the participation of readers as producers of reports (1921/1983, 151-153).

Fogarasi not only applied Lukács’ (1971) concepts of reification and the totality to journalism, but also in 1921 anticipated Walter Benjamin’s (1934, 777) idea of turning “consumers [...] into producers” and “readers or spectators into collaborators” as well as Bertolt Brecht’s (1932, 42) idea of a radio that lets “the listener speak as well as hear”. Fogarasi’s essay also anticipates some elements of Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky’s (1988) propaganda model. Herman and Chomsky identified some dimensions of how bourgeois journalism creates reified presentations of reality. Corporate media use five filters that limit the freedom of the media: corporate ownership and monopolies; advertising; selective sources; effects of lobbying; and ideology.<sup>4</sup>

### 7.2.6. Digital Commons

Computers and computer networks enable new ways of organising information, communication and co-operation. Given that computing has become a central resource in modern society, the use of computers for organising cognition, communication and co-operation has become a human need. Humans have certain cognitive needs (such as

<sup>4</sup> For discussions of the relevance of this propaganda model today, see the contributions in Pedro-Carañana, Broudy and Klaehn (2018).

being loved and recognised), communicative needs (such as friendships and community) and co-operative needs (such as working together with others in order to achieve common goals) in all types of society. In a digital and information society, computers are a vital means for realising such needs. But given that computers are always used in societal contexts, computer use as such does not necessarily foster the good life, but can also contribute to damaging human lives.

Digital capitalism at the same time deepens exploitation and creates new foundations for autonomous realms that transcend the logic of capitalism. There is an antagonism between the networked productive forces and the class relations of digital production. This antagonism is also an antagonism between digital labour and digital capital and between digital gifts and digital commodities.

Table 5 provides a summary overview of the dimensions of the digital commons. The typology presented in Table 5 is structured along the three realms of society (economy, politics, culture), which allows us to distinguish between three types of commons and three types of digital commons. The commons are the Aristotelian-Marxian vision of a good society. They form the essence of society, which means that the digital commons are part of digital society's essence. For Hegel and Marx, the essence is often hidden behind false appearances, and that actuality means the correspondence of essence and appearance. One needs to distinguish between the essence of digital society and the false appearance and existence of digital society as digital class society and digital capitalism. Class society is the false condition of society-in-general. Digital class society is the false condition of digital society. A critical theory of the digital commons needs to have not just a vision of a good digital society, but also a critique of digital capitalism and digital alienation. Table 5 therefore also features two columns that outline dimensions of alienation-in-general and digital alienation.

	<b>Commons in society</b>	<b>Digital commons</b>	<b>Lack of common control in society (alienation)</b>	<b>Lack of common control of digital society (digital alienation)</b>
<b>Economy</b>	Economic commons: wealth and self-fulfilment for all	Economic digital commons: network access for everyone, community is in control of technology, digital resources as common goods	Private property	Digital commodities, digital resources as private property
<b>Politics</b>	Political commons: participation and democracy in decision-making	Political digital commons: common decision making/governance of ICTs	Dictatorship	Dictatorial governance and control of ICTs
<b>Culture</b>	Cultural commons: voice and recognition of all	Cultural digital commons: use of ICTs for fostering learning, recognition and community activities	Ideology	Digital ideology: Ideologies of and on the Internet

Table 5: Three dimensions of the digital commons

## 8. Conclusion: Ten Principles of Communicative/Digital Socialist Politics

Communism and socialism are often associated with Stalin and Mao, whose ideas and societies had little to do with Marx and Engels' democratic vision of society. Socialism is a framework for society and a movement towards a good society for all.

Common property, computerised high technology, a post-scarcity society that creates wealth and luxury for all, well-rounded individuals, distribution according to human needs, participatory governance, a common culture, and internationalism are some of the aspects of socialist society.

Capitalism is shaped by the antagonism between productive forces and relations of production, which takes on new relevance in the age of networked productive forces.

Commons-based communication is an alternative to alienated communication. Public service media and community media are two not-for-profit models. They face specific contradictions in capitalist society. In socialist society, communication and culture take on a common character. Socialist means of communication feature common control, common decision-making, and a common culture. Socialist communications are truly democratic communications.

Socialist politics should engage with and not ignore communication politics. A good society needs to be a socialist and commons-based society, which includes the perspectives of communicative and digital socialism. Socialism is a political-economic movement that has its economic foundations in socialised aspects of the economy already within capitalism and has its political foundations in class struggles against capitalism and for socialism. Socialist politics should think of both public services and civil society as the realms from where alternatives emerge.

There are ten principles of communicative/digital socialist politics:

### 1. Techno-dialectics:

Socialist communication politics avoids techno-optimism/techno-euphoria as well as techno-pessimism. Instead, it asks: How can technology and society be shaped in manners that benefit all humans, workers and citizens and develop the positive potentials of society and humanity?

### 2. Radical reformist communication politics:

Socialist communication politics is neither reactionary reformism that bows to bourgeois interests nor utopian revolutionary romanticism. It advances a dialectic of reform and revolution (radical reformism). It struggles for measures that simultaneously bring about immediate improvements and advance the possibilities and resourcing of alternative non-capitalist projects, and it struggles for communicative/digital socialism. Socialist communication politics operates both at the level of political parties and social movements. It brings about co-operations of both in the form of a politically co-operating multitude.

### 3. United class struggles of communication workers:

Communication corporations exploit different kinds of workers. Alternatives to communicative capitalism can only emerge out of class struggles. Socialist communication politics supports the digital and communication workers of the world in uniting. In order to make this struggle effective, we need national and international trade unions that unite all the different communication workers across branches, occupations, countries, corporations, cultures, etc. in one union of communication workers.

The class struggles of communication workers are often fragmented. In order to fight global capital in general and global communication capital in particular, communication workers of the world need to unite, avoid and fight the ideologies of fascism, nationalism, racism and xenophobia wherever they appear (including in communication networks), and develop strategies of international solidarity and joint struggles.

Capitalism exploits different kinds of workers, including unwaged workers who produce the commons and social relations. Unpaid workers' interests are not best served by the demand for an individualised wage, but by the demand for a social wage in the form of a corporation-tax-funded, redistributive basic income guarantee.

#### **4. Collective control of the means of communication as means of production:**

In digital and communicative capitalism, communication technologies such as computers, apps, software, hardware, data, and content are means of production. Capital controls and commodifies communication resources. Where these resources matter in the context of labour, it is an important political task that workers demand, struggle for and obtain the collective control of the means of communication as means of economic production.

#### **5. Break-up of communication monopolies:**

Corporate communication monopolies centralise economic power and are a threat to democracy. Socialist communication politics argues for and works towards breaking up corporate monopolies. It neither favours national over international capital (or vice-versa) nor small or medium-size capital over large capital (or vice-versa), but no capital, public goods and common goods instead of capital.

#### **6. Privacy friendliness, socialist privacy:**

Public and commons-based communications should respect users' privacy and minimise their economic and political surveillance as well as other forms of surveillance. Personal data collection and storage should be minimised to the data that is absolutely necessary. The surveillance capacities of the state should be re-directed from the constant surveillance of citizens towards the policing of tax-avoiding corporations and white-collar crime. An important task and demand is to criticise and demand abolishment of the surveillance of workers and the mass surveillance of citizens. Socialist privacy means that data collection is minimised, information and communication systems are designed in a privacy-friendly manner, and surveillance is directed against powerful corporations in order to increase the transparency of their economic and financial operations.

#### **7. Public service media and communications co-operatives:**

The struggle for socialism needs to be fought in the territories of public services, the state, and civil society. The political Left should struggle for three forms of collective communication services: those that are publicly operated or enabled by the state, those that are collective-owned by worker co-operatives, and those that are organised as public/commons-partnerships (partnerships of public institutions and civil society).

Services that involve lots of sensitive personal data (such as political opinions) ought not to be operated by the state in order to reduce the risk of state surveillance of political opinions. Services that involve the need for high storage capacity can best be operated by public institutions and public service media. Practically speaking this means, for example, that there should be a public service YouTube and a civil-society-

based Facebook platform co-operative. The state should legally and economically enable public service media to create digital public services and digital public service corporations. Newspapers should best be operated as non-profit, advertising-free, self-managed companies. Press subsidies funded out of taxation should only be given to non-profit, advertising-free, non-tabloid newspapers. Alternative funding mechanisms for public service and commons-based non-profit, non-commercial media should be sought. They include, for example: corporation taxes; taxing online advertising and advertising in general; licence and media fees paid by users of public service media; donation models; a digital service tax for large transnational digital corporations; and so on.

### **8. Democratic, public sphere media:**

The logic of communicative capitalism and the commodity form favours superficiality, high-speed flows of information and news, the personalisation of politics, tabloidisation, one-dimensionality, and partiality in the interest of the bourgeoisie. Alternatives decelerate information flows (slow media), foster informed political debate and learning through collective creation, and participation in spaces of public communication that are ad-free, non-commercial, and not-for-profit. Such spaces enable both professional media and citizen media as well as the dialectical fusion of both. Socialist communication politics supports the creation and sustenance of media that have the potential to help to advance critical, anti-ideological thought by fostering engagement with content that stimulates critical, dialectical, anti-ideological thought and debate, and opposes classist, fascist, racist, xenophobic and sexist discourse.

### **9. Political and protest communication:**

Communication technologies are not the cause of protests, rebellions and revolutions, but they are an important part of protest communication. Socialist communication politics seeks to use communication technologies for spreading socialist politics to a broad public. Wherever possible, it supports the development and use of non-commercial, non-profit media for organisation and public communication. It aims to avoid creating 'alternative ghettos' of resource-poor alternative media that are based on precarious labour. For this purpose, one requires a politics that focuses on channelling resources towards alternative media.

Political education in schools and other educational institutions is also an aspect of political communication. Political education will enable humans to critically reflect on society as well as engage in complex, dialectical and independent thinking.

### **10. Self-managed, democratic governance:**

Socialist communication politics supports, believes in the necessity of and advances the democratic and participatory governance of media organisations, so that the workers producing in these companies and representatives of everyday citizens affected by these media's operations participate in the decision-making process.

The ethics of the commons is political because it requires praxis and the struggle for alternatives to capitalism in order to make humans and society flourish and realise their potentials. The society of the commons transcends capitalism because it goes beyond the latter. Love is the principle of the society of the commons.

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# Democratic Socialists on Social Media: Cohesion, Fragmentation, and Normative Strategies

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**Abstract:** This essay focuses on members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) political organisation in the US and the ambivalence of using social media as a primary means of communication for socialist information and culture. Relying on in-depth interviews with fifteen active members and leaders in DSA, this essay asks: How does socialist communication on social media encourage both cohesion and fragmentation for activists within the DSA? Locating and analysing key tensions felt by DSA members in response to their use of Facebook and Twitter, this project sheds light on the ways in which socialism is presently communicated to publics and counterpublics and identifies important challenges for the expansion of the socialist movement.

**Keywords:** Democratic Socialists of America, digital socialism, critical internet theory

## 1. Introduction

Many politically active and engaged individuals in the United States currently adopt a socialist political identity in their digital communication and participation. The expansion of digital information about socialism in the US in recent years emerges from important contemporary political campaigns and victories, such as those of Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, but also from political continuities rooted in progressive social movements since the late 1990s and the recent proliferation of socialist magazines, podcasts, and journalism.

This contribution to *tripleC*'s special issue "Communicative Socialism/Digital Socialism" focuses on members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) political organisation in the US and the ambivalence of using social media as a primary means of communication for socialist information and culture. Relying on in-depth interviews with fifteen active members and leaders across the US in the DSA, this essay asks: How does socialist communication on social media encourage both cohesion and fragmentation for activists within the DSA?

Locating and analysing key tensions felt by DSA members in response to their use of Facebook and Twitter, this project sheds light on the ways in which socialism is presently communicated to publics and counterpublics and identifies important challenges for the expansion of the socialist movement.

Building on perspectives from alternative media and Critical Internet Studies, this essay explores challenges DSA members face as they are compelled to use social media platforms to advance their visions of socialism while simultaneously contending with structural conditions often inimical to developing a strong socialist culture. Alternative media theorists recognise the potential for digital communication to expand access to information for activists (Downing 2001), and acknowledge the ways in which the Internet blurs the boundaries between mainstream and alternative media (Atton 2003). Social media platforms in particular offer potential for social movement organisations to develop their narrative capacities, building cohesion through their shared

struggles and radical political frames (Tufekci 2017; Wolfson and Funke 2014). However, within these commercialised spaces, where user data is commodified and sold to third party advertisers and corporations dictate the structures for participation, significant challenges arise for activists invested in cultivating and spreading a socialist worldview.

Digital communication tools carry the potential to advance grassroots socialism, but this potential is antagonistically entangled in the dominant structures of informational capitalism (Fuchs 2009a). Even among socialists, the commercial affordances of social media encourage individuation and fragmentation as users contend with pressures encompassing the accumulation of likes, retweets, shares, and the production of sensationalized and isolating messages. Socialist cultures developed online can undermine face-to-face organising efforts as status hierarchies and infighting emerge in digital spaces, constituting barriers which discourage participation. Furthermore, the overwhelming flood of information circulating online, often decontextualized and partial, challenges activist organisations as users rely on affective strategies to navigate political communication within structures that favour individual political opinions over listening and collective coordination (Andrejevic 2013; Dean 2009; Fenton 2016). Despite these structural limitations, socialist media consistently circulates through digital spaces.

DSA members consume and produce critical media most often at the level of content rather than form. These media tend to include critiques of capitalism, domination, and oppression, and regularly present marginalised voices while providing information absent from corporate sources (Fuchs 2010). Although the modern socialist movement in the US includes many competing versions of socialism, DSA members working in leftist media outlets such as *Jacobin* regularly question how to best introduce socialist ideas into mainstream discourse, and this requires at times abandoning prefigurative production practices of anarchist and other radical media to ensure mass circulation and appeal (Fuchs 2010; Sandoval and Fuchs, 2010). Decisions and debates about using platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to advance socialist politics cohere around similar themes as DSA members recognise the significant limitations and risks associated with social media but are compelled to use them in order to disseminate socialist political information. This ambivalence positions activists to develop normative strategies to navigate social media affordances in ways that minimise fragmentation and infighting in favour of building a culture of solidarity online for socialist organisations.

This essay proceeds in four sections. First, I describe the DSA as an organisation, and offer a brief picture of the participants in this project and their media habits. Second, I detail aspects of social media use that promote cohesion and solidarity among DSA members through media criticism, humour, and the distribution of socialist narratives. Third, I explore how social media produces fragmentations among these socialists, focusing on frustrations felt by users who contend with significant barriers to participation in the larger discourse on socialism. Next, I discuss normative strategies developed by socialists to mitigate the problems surrounding social media use and connect this to the growth of socialist media institutions. Finally, I offer suggestions for the DSA, as the organisation develops, to organise around the decommodification of communication.

Overall, this project attempts to contribute initial empirical research that explores the following questions: What are the advantages and limitations of social media use for socialists in the DSA? And, what strategies do DSA members develop in response to the structural constraints of social media platforms?

## 2. The Democratic Socialists of America

The DSA is the largest socialist organisation in the United States with approximately 56,000 dues-paying members. The organisation is not a political party but an activist organisation that mobilises members and coalitions in both local and national contexts to fight for political gains for the working class through electoral campaigns, direct action, and political education. In 2016, DSA made enormous membership increases initially as a result of the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign, and later in the aftermath of Donald Trump's victory. Bernie Sanders himself is not a member of DSA, but identifies as a "democratic socialist" and aligns with many of the organisation's positions on issues such as universal healthcare, housing justice, and addressing the climate crisis.

During his first presidential campaign, DSA endorsed Sanders and held a coordinated "We Need Bernie" campaign, growing the membership from 6,500 members in the fall of 2014 to 8,500 on election day of 2016 (Schwartz 2017). Although the connection to Sanders supported the growth and development of the organisation, the ascendancy of the political right also fuelled DSA's recent explosion in membership. The day the United States elected Donald Trump as its president, 1,000 new members joined DSA, followed by over 13,000 additional members from November 9<sup>th</sup> to July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017 (Schwartz 2017).

Although mainstream media discourse often makes sense of the DSA through the prism of progressive political legislation in the US, such as the Medicare for All campaign or the Green New Deal, the organisation contains a complex array of political ideologies and varies considerably from chapter to chapter across the country. DSA's positions, strategies, and tactics are not necessarily products of broad consensus within the organisation, but instead emerge through intense contestation among a constellation of Marxists, anarchists, social democrats, and others, all with a variety of visions for successful socialist strategy in the twenty-first century. Despite these rich political varieties and differences, there are certainly generalisable patterns within DSA's politics. For the most part, the political culture of the DSA disregards prefigurative theoretical and revolutionary requirements for members and instead attempts to "meet people where they are at", in terms of their everyday working lives to make socialism as accessible and universal as possible.

Many view the recent interest in DSA as a generational phenomenon, citing the fading memory of the Cold War, the financial crisis of 2008, and the material conditions and diminishing future prospects of millennials and generation Z in the US. Along with these explanations, people outside of the organisation also tend to see it as disproportionately white and male, often conflating inaccurate stereotypes of Bernie Sanders supporters ("Bernie Bros") with DSA membership. Although there are certainly aspects of truth to these ideas, they also function to erase the consistent labour in the organisation from marginalised identities and obscure the generational continuities between contemporary socialists and the socialist tradition in the US.

The fifteen voices of DSA members and leaders included in this project reside in many different local contexts and chapters across the country, including New York City, Austin, Chicago, and Denver. Many of these DSA members joined the organisation after the 2016 election, feeling compelled to "do something" in response to Trump's victory. Often disillusioned with the mainstream democratic party establishment, these members sought out a political organisation that offered new possibilities for progressive gains in the US. Some members adopted a socialist political identity before joining the DSA, but others started paying dues to the organisation with a curiosity, experi-

mentation, and openness about their political identification and only later called themselves socialists after sustained time within their chapters. Certain members felt driven to the DSA by particular issues, such as housing justice, and then expanded their repertoire of socialist positions through conversation, discussion, organising, and political education in their local chapter. Other members developed their socialist politics earlier, through prior activism such as participating in the Occupy Wall Street movement. Most of these participants encountered leftist media in the US prior to joining the DSA, and cited examples such as *Democracy Now!* and *The Nation* as contributing to their developing socialist political identity.

In terms of their everyday media habits, the majority of these fifteen activists primarily use Twitter and Facebook to communicate about socialism, to consume socialist information, and to learn about activist events. Although most of these participants consume a wide variety of alternative and mainstream news sources, including, for example, *Jacobin*, *The Intercept*, and *In These Times* along with *The New York Times*, all of these media are typically filtered through social media. The dependence on social media for socialist information produces significant ambivalence for these DSA members, who recognise many of the inherent restrictions of these platforms but also find them necessary for a variety of practical purposes. The following sections of this essay detail the cohesion and fragmentation produced as DSA members struggle to build socialism using social media, contending always with their structural constraints.

### 3. Cohesion

Digital media and their affordances provide practical ways for activists to meet their communication needs. Alternative media theorists cite the potential for digital communication tools to allow “working people, sexual minorities, trade unions, protest groups”, and “people of low status in terms of their relationship to elite groups” a chance to speak for themselves, even if this speaking is done through the use of dominant forms of technology (Atton 2002, 11; Downing 2001; Downing 2003). Modern activists certainly utilise a variety of Internet tools consistently to distribute media and capture audience attention, to collaborate among networks and coalitions, to share strategies and best practices, and to develop political knowledge and awareness (Fenton 2016). Activist communities in particular depend on social media for affective and informational purposes. Facebook and Twitter fulfil basic desires to connect with reference networks, which allows users to feel a sense of belonging (Tufekci 2017). Social media provides opportunities for users to reveal “private preferences to one another and discover common ground”, a type of practical communicative activity that serves the explicit political purpose of letting people know they are not alone in their dissent (Tufekci 2017, 48). Related, activists rely on social media to frame and spread their worldview through narratives that reframe hegemonic political understandings (Tufekci 2017; Wolfson and Funke 2013). Of course, these affordances exist in tension with the recognition of the profit motive and commercial nature of social media platforms. Socialist activists in particular recognise the compulsion to use popular commercial communication tools, such as Facebook and Twitter, in attempts to “meet people where they are at”, and to present socialist narratives and propaganda.

Although DSA’s recent explosion in membership resulted partially from presidential politics, many DSA members joined the organisation after encounters with leftist media

on social media. Maria Svart<sup>1</sup>, DSA's National Director, explained to me that media sources play a significant role in the organisation's membership growth. She clarified, "Twitter is a huge source of membership [...] When we ask people why they join, a lot of people answer Twitter". Of course, DSA maintains a strong social media presence (@DemSocialists, for example, has over 217,000 followers on Twitter, as of 15 November 2019), but when members talk about joining as a result of Twitter they most likely are referring to the broader socialist discourse on the platform that includes both official DSA accounts as well as unaffiliated individuals or institutions that share DSA's politics. Maria acknowledged both the benefits and limitations of this reality, describing how the resulting demographics in DSA skew younger but increases in dues-paying members become somewhat self-sustaining as members invite their connections to participate.

This perspective is consistent with DSA members around the country, many of whom experienced the idea of socialism initially on social media. Marco, a member of the Denver chapter, told me that leftist book groups on Facebook helped him realise his socialist identity because he witnessed "all these other people who also identified as socialists and shared these values". Another member, Ava, told me that when she became active in her DSA chapter in Texas, other members from around the country followed her Twitter account and made her feel welcome in the organisation through likes, supportive messages, and retweets.

DSA members appreciated forms of socialist media criticism that occur within social media platforms. Members valued how their fellow DSA members reacted to certain news items on Twitter and Facebook because it provided a "socialist lens" on mainstream accounts of politics. Dylan, a member who lives in New York City, described how horrified he felt after Trump ordered a missile strike on a Syrian airfield in April of 2017 and cable news in the US adopted a tone of reverence and amazement in response<sup>2</sup>. He cited a segment on *MSNBC*, when Brian Williams described the missile strike as "beautiful", explaining that moments like this show "a seismic splinter between true leftists and corporate Democrats who are okay with the US exercising our military might for really no good reason". At the time, Dylan quickly discovered that his network of connections online, including the leftist media he followed, shared his disgust in this moment.

DSA members also disclosed that they cherished the leftist humour that regularly circulated through their social media networks. Humour binds socialists together often through sardonic criticism of mainstream liberals, corporate Democrats, and liberal journalists. Miguel explained to me that socialist humour online, either from other social media users or leftist media accounts, often points out the "contradictions or obvious inaccuracies or oversights in mainstream accounts", which can help you to "maintain sanity when you're dealing with depressing topics". Other members felt that leftist humour also normalised socialist ideas by translating feelings of anxiety that accompany the adoption of a radical political identity into welcoming entry points. Meagan Day<sup>3</sup>, for example, explained to me how a specific Twitter account, @LarryWebsite, contrib-

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<sup>1</sup> Interview participants in this project who are also public figures consented to use of their full names. I indicate each time this occurs throughout the essay. All other participants are identified using pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> See Greenwald's (2017) article for a description of the bi-partisan praise in mainstream media of this missile strike.

<sup>3</sup> Meagan Day is a staff writer for *Jacobin* and an important figure in the DSA and the American socialist movement.

uted in part to her eventually becoming a member of DSA. Similar to much of the socialist discourse on Twitter, @LarryWebsite was not an official DSA account but it shared many of the organisation's politics and goals through its content. Using memes and other forms of humour, the account advocated strongly for Bernie Sanders over Hillary Clinton in the 2015 Democratic Party primary, and brought levity to the difficulties surrounding Sanders' unfair treatment and eventual loss. She explained to me,

It was just funny and fun, and it felt like a way of uniting socialists. It felt like we had a shared language, and we were funnier than our enemies in the Democratic Party. It made me feel like not only could I be a socialist, but that it could also be fun, and that there were other people that I could laugh with. It really created a sense of community.

Similarly, Marco recounted for me that the first time he met the other comrades in his local chapter at a DSA social event, he already knew all of their jokes and style of humour because he had encountered it on Twitter.

For DSA members, social media can also help to amplify socialist narratives and perspectives. Thomas, a leader in his chapter, described social media as "the biggest microphone we've got for our politics", explaining that without these platforms DSA could not reach large audiences. He cited two examples of viral videos distributed via social media showing DSA members confronting politicians in response to the Trump Administration's "zero tolerance" immigration policy that involves family separations. In one, DSA activists confronted Mitch McConnell, the Republican Speaker of the House outside of a restaurant in Louisville, Kentucky chanting, "Abolish ICE!" and shouting, "Where are the babies, Mitch!?" (Selk 2018; Schwartz 2018). In another, DSA activists in Washington DC confronted Kirstjen Nielsen, former secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, at a local restaurant demanding the end to family separations (Chappell 2018). Both videos allude to DSA's position that advocates for the US to open its borders to all migrants seeking asylum and demands an end to the global capitalist system that allows for the international free movement of capital but not of people (DSA 2018). DSA members viewed public abhorrence over family separations in the US as an opportunity to promote socialist narratives that express moral outrage over family separation, while also offering an analysis that connects these policies to the international rise in nationalism, US imperialism, and global capitalism.

The circulation of socialist perspectives through social media, including media criticism, humour, and the promotion of socialist narratives, certainly serve important functions for the DSA as the organisation continues to grow. Effectively, these practices amount to critical reception of mainstream news and culture, as DSA members "transcend the ideological character of media" and "question the commodified character of the world in which they live" (Fuchs 2009b, 397). The distribution of socialist narratives on social media accomplishes a similar goal, as video footage of demonstrations and protests emphasises the array of socialist political demands. Both critical receptions and socialist narratives stimulate affective bonds between comrades in the DSA, who signal to one another their shared values and common goals. These affective purposes, however, speak more to the plurality of human-centred communication needs, and the pressures exerted on these needs, rather than the particular technological affordances offered by social media. Communicative behaviour is fundamentally part of our species-being, and bound to the "material activity and the material intercourse" of humans (Artz 2006; Macnair 2009; Marx 1932/1978, 154). Social media operate through a dual character of responding to social communication needs felt directly by

users in this historical moment, while also corresponding to structural pressures and limitations brought about by the colonisation of society by informational capitalism (Williams 1972/2003; Fuchs 2009a, 76). The recursive desire for affective cohesion and solidarity within activist communities online exists as immanently embedded in the contradictions of contemporary communication practices.

#### 4. Fragmentation

Although many DSA members cited aspects of social media that they found essential, most of the activists I spoke with expressed intense frustration about these digital tools. Certain members described their activist communication online as exhausting, pointing to constant critiques from users on both the right and left. Thomas, for example, recognised that social media “heightens the degree of emotional labour that goes into being a socialist because you’re constantly exposed to your opponents and other people that have very different views than you, and people are pretty vicious on social media”. Meagan Day recounted to me how her decision to leave Twitter for a time resulted from the constant criticism she received from other users. She explained,

It was actually detrimental to my ability to do what I felt like I should be doing, which was writing articles that put forth a socialist perspective. I was so troubled by the way that social media colonised my daily life [...] The range of antagonists and protagonists it presented to me. It was very distracting. When you have critics from the left who constantly take pot shots at everything you do, it warps your perspective and you lose the ability to see the real enemy which is the capitalist class.

Any value that social media brings to the DSA comes at significant costs, often exerting strong pressures against activists to contribute in meaningful ways to advancing a socialist worldview.

Other DSA activists recounted feelings of alienation and exclusion in response to particular aspects of socialist communication on social media. Many of the DSA members I talked to reported spending significant time on social media platforms but rarely posting their own messages. Often, they cited feelings of anxiety about posting the “right kind of message” which frequently precluded them from participating in socialist discourse using their own voice. Marco disclosed to me that he is not “much of a poster” on Twitter. When I asked why, he explained, “It gives me some anxiety, socially. I just feel like there’s a lot of pressure to say something witty or whatever and that’s hard for me to do, so I’d rather just not worry about that”. Emma recounted times she felt a desire to participate in discussions online, but worried about posting links to news articles that may not be from a “socialist approved media source”. She also remembered a desire to occasionally make a joke but feared that her humour might not be “politically correct”. She continued,

I feel like I have to be perfectly on and never say anything wrong, and even if I’m not saying the wrong thing, making sure that’s it’s worded so that it’s clear what the joke is...

As we’ve seen in this essay, humour plays an important role in forging affective bonds between socialists through political criticism and differentiation often against liberals and members of the Democratic Party in the United States. Humour, however, also



involves forms of exclusion that, according to members, hold the potential to prevent the expansion of the socialist movement.

Popular forms of socialist humour in the DSA often cohere around leftist social media accounts that use irony and satire to criticise mainstream liberal Democrats and liberal journalists. The typical demographics of people who participate in these forms of humour skew young, male, well-educated, and very well informed on current events and the latest political news. Forms of exclusion emerge as these demographics develop particular codes and inside jokes that enhance affective bonds within the group but alienate outsiders. Paul elaborated on this point, explaining that socialist humour online “creates community that keeps us all clued in to shared jargon and shared inside jokes”, but it is also “absolutely repellent to anybody who’s not part of it”. This description speaks to the emergence of socialist filter bubbles on social media, which reinforce pre-existing views and intensify the exclusionary features and fragmentation of communities online through algorithmic and network structures (Pariser 2011). The risk associated with too many insider-jokes is the foreclosure of universal entry points, undermining the intention of leveraging these platforms to reach mass audiences with socialist perspectives.

Caustic styles of humour among socialists online can promote a type of cohesion when directed against class and political enemies, but the activists I spoke with pointed to the danger of these same tactics used against fellow socialists in the DSA. Micah Uetrict<sup>4</sup>, a member in Chicago, told me how he felt that the negative aspects of socialist humour online can sometimes encourage infighting between socialists in the DSA:

It becomes impossible to just interact, especially with people who are your comrades. It bleeds over into people within the DSA interacting with each other. They don’t know how to do it in a way that’s not dunking on each other and using humour to try and smack somebody down.

During multiple interviews, DSA members described the risks of alienating older generations, the working class, and women and other minorities with these forms of humour. Maria Svart even recognised the exclusionary dangers that these forms of socialist culture pose. “It’s alienating because it’s a club”, she explained, “and if we’re trying to build a mass movement we can’t have a club – we just need to speak the language that the people speak”.

Members also illustrated socialist discussions on socialist media as radically different than face-to-face communication at DSA meetings. Jenny, a DSA member in New York City, told me that although she found the socialist discourse online quite important, she also described significant incongruences between communication on social media compared to the welcoming atmosphere of physical DSA meetings. Throughout our conversation, Jenny expressed that the characteristics of socialist communication on social media could prevent people from joining DSA because of the tension it can produce. She questioned whether or not people who may be interested in the burgeoning socialist movement may see the discourse on social media and decide not to participate in DSA as a result:

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<sup>4</sup> Micah Uetrict is currently *Jacobin*’s Managing Editor and the author of *Strike for America: Chicago Teachers Against Austerity*.

[The] level of bad faith and ill will and shittiness online is massive [...] there are times that I look at the discourse and I'm like "Uggghhh, I fucking hate this shit". You know, I'm like, "I don't want to tweet. I don't want to interact with these people. Somebody's just going to bite my fucking head off. No thanks. My life is stressful enough".

Although social media offers socialist opportunities to develop counterpublic identities and present socialist narratives, it also produces forms of exclusion and alienation that work against universal participation in the socialist discourse online.

The ambivalence described above results from the structural constraints of social media. As critical perspectives on the Internet recognise, affordances that allow everyone a voice through digital communication contribute to the endless flood of data online which often supersedes listening, dialogue, and true interaction (Andrejevic 2013; Dean 2009; Fenton 2016). The resulting inundation of opinions and perspectives does not lead to transformative political power nor does it produce significant and sustainable political voices (Fuchs 2009a). Despite the horizontal and chaotic nature of the Internet, platforms hierarchise certain messages over others to populate individually curated user feeds. Particular structural biases, such as the "comment bias" that promotes visibility of quarrels and fights to increase user engagement, shape political communication on social media (Tufekci 2017).

Furthermore, although we must recognise the political potential of humour in alternative media forms (Downing 2001), we also must address the forms of exclusion that arise from what effectively amounts to niche entertainment circulating through commercial media systems and understand the risk of how these forms of communication can displace the hard work of on-the-ground socialist organising (Dean 2009). Additionally, as research on the digital divide shows consistently, Internet users are more likely to be younger, more highly educated and wealthier than non-users, more likely to be men than women, and more likely to live in cities (Fenton 2016). Exclusion along these demographic lines poses a threat for the expansion of the socialist movement to develop universal entry points.

The specific responses from DSA members that detail feelings of anxiety, disgust, and discomfort with presenting their viewpoints on social media emerges in contradiction to liberal notions of digital communication. Socialists on social media contend with unrealised and unfulfilled promises of communicative freedom online. Liberal visions of communication suggest ideas and individuals should have equal access to make public use of their reason and voice their own political opinions. With digital technology, users gain affordances that allow forms of production and consumption that appear as "equal access" but in truth manifest significant forms of hierarchy and dominance.

The multiplicity of perspectives on social media platforms, imbricated by metrics of engagement, popularity, and entertainment values, produces substantial barriers to participation. In effect, though we have gained certain prosumer abilities, we have not freed ourselves from commercial communication that focuses on the "egositic" individual and fragments users from one another and their social communities (Marx 1844/1978). Communicative emancipation must recognise the true interconnective fabric of all social relations and must refuse a conception of people as isolated from one another.

## 5. Normative Strategies

The ambivalence felt by DSA members about social media is well known in the organisation, and there is consistent debate among intellectuals, leaders, and rank-and-file

members about how socialists should use social media. Strategies for social media use among DSA members seem to parallel other political tactics in the organisation, including work in the electoral realm. DSA differentiates itself from other socialist organisations through a commitment to electoral work and the understanding that elections are the spaces where politics occurs for the majority of ordinary Americans. Thus, in attempts to mainstream socialist ideas, DSA invests significant time and energy into electoral campaigns for candidates that often express explicitly socialist policies and ideals. This is of course not uncontroversial within the organisation, which includes a variety of political perspectives that argue DSA should abandon electoralism entirely. However, these positions do not represent the dominant ideology in DSA, which seeks to shift cultural connotations surrounding “socialism” onto the terrain of everyday life. When I asked about DSA’s communication strategy, Maria Svart explained, “The narrative we’re promoting is that there’s an alternative to capitalism, so our strategies are about normalising democratic socialism, explaining it, puncturing the myths of capitalism and keeping it in the minds of audiences we’re trying to reach”. This is a struggle that necessarily involves social media.

DSA members and leaders are aware of certain limitations of Facebook and Twitter but feel a political compulsion to use these platforms to “meet people where they are at”. The national organisation maintains social media accounts on Twitter and Facebook and chapters around the country run their own accounts with a significant degree of autonomy. Of course, individual DSA members also use social media to communicate about socialism, interacting with DSA posts nationally and locally, but also taking part in the larger discourse on socialism on these platforms. As we have seen, DSA members adopt individual strategies for coping with their own discontents with social media, often avoiding participation despite their desires to connect. Socialists also spend significant time thinking through best practices for using social media for themselves and their organisations, and debate the question of its value for the health of the socialist movement.

Two recent articles published in *Jacobin* addressed the question of social media for the socialist movement directly. In “Log Off”, Benjamin Fong (2018) argued that socialists should advocate for the abolishment of social media platforms, given their tendency to decrease empathy, increase loneliness, and intensify narcissism and cruelty. In response, Meagan Day’s (2018) “Unfortunately, We Can’t Log Off” acknowledged the significant drawbacks of social media outlined by Fong but argued that socialists must not relinquish these tools to the capitalist class and instead infuse them with a socialist perspective. The strategy she outlined involves socialists adopting particular forms of social media use that retain the promotion and distribution of socialist narratives and politics to large audiences but encourage individual socialists to use institutional accounts and pages instead of personal avatars. Much of the infighting, criticism, turmoil, and antagonism on social media occurs between individual avatars, leaving activists exhausted and distracted. Thus, spreading this obligation between multiple socialists in the same organisation or institution, such as a local DSA chapter, mitigates the damage caused by social media platforms that encourage petty disputes, sensationalised drama, and misinformation. In her words, “Socialists therefore have to toe a fine line: we must maintain a strong and vibrant social media presence, but we can’t allow it to atomise us, as it’s designed to do” (Day 2018, para. 24).

For Day, this strategy also holds the potential for socialists to develop an ethic and responsibility in the ways they treat their comrades in digital spaces. During our interview she emphasised her above argument, explaining that we should “stop thinking

about social media as a form of personal expression of individual socialists, and instead as a medium where groups of socialists can come together to further our perspective". She continued,

I think that people should translate their energies to institutional accounts because it naturally involves taking on a sense of responsibility that we ought to have in our [digital communication] [...] The sense of responsibility that people take on to speak on behalf of all socialists.

Countering the pressure for individual socialists to accrue status through platform rewards, or to build up their personal "brand" through Facebook and Twitter, Day's perspective encourages a form of digital solidarity that recognises the marginal position of the socialist movement while attempting to create universal access points for ordinary users. Day's position also speaks to the current context profoundly by gesturing to the contemporary expansion of socialist media institutions.

The recent increase of socialist media institutions in the US is worthy of its own article- and book-length treatment, but the subject holds particular relevance to the growth of the socialist movement in relation to digital communication. Each interview participant in this project mentioned following socialist media outlets regularly and highlighted the ways in which these media contribute in positive ways to their political identification with socialism. Current socialist media include a vast array of institutions including podcasts (e.g. *The Dig* and *Chapo Trap House*), political magazines (e.g. *Current Affairs*, *In These Times*, and *Jacobin*), and even video and television (e.g. *Means TV* and *Novara Media*).

Many of these outlets adopt a subscription-based funding model, releasing them from problems endemic to liberal public media that tend to tailor their content to their donor class. These media also utilise social media to promote their content, interact with audiences, and to solicit funding. The advantages of a broad variety of leftist media counter many of the problems associated with unorganised socialist discourse circulating on social media platforms. These outlets build audiences, treat political issues typically in a much longer form than Facebook or Twitter posts, and offer avenues to transcend the exclusions often present in fragmented socialist discourse on social media.

An additional benefit to emerging socialist media institutions and organisations are their focus on international relations and the socialist struggle around the world. At the national level, DSA has an active International Committee (2019) that seeks to "connect in solidarity with like-minded activists, workers, movements and parties worldwide" (para. 1). At the 2019 DSA National Convention, the organisation voted to strengthen the International Committee and its efforts connecting to socialists around the world. In addition, the organisation passed resolutions committing to solidarity with Palestine and Cuba, and adopted official anti-imperialist positions that advocate for self-determination, full sovereignty, and decolonisation for countries occupied or exploited by the US. Despite this, the DSA members I spoke with do not seem to interact with socialists in other countries using social media on a regular basis, which constitutes another form of exclusion and fragmentation. However, as audiences of leftist media, these members have consistent opportunities to learn about the international socialist struggle. *Jacobin*, for example, offers significant and essential international coverage. Micah Uetricht, *Jacobin's* Managing Editor, emphasised to me that they "insist on going beyond the hegemonic role that the US plays in global politics." DSA as a national organisation and socialist media institutions are positioned well to develop

interest about the international socialist struggle for individual DSA members, who often cannot learn about these topics through mainstream commercial media in the US, and who may be restricted by the ways socialist discourse on social media retains a national focus.

Alternative media theorists contend that “alternative media” differentiates itself from “mainstream” media through deprofessionalisation, decapitalisation, and deinstitutionalisation (Atton 2002; Hamilton 2001). What we see, however, with emerging socialist media institutions in the US is a commitment to professionalisation, institutionalisation, and the utilisation of commercial techniques to capture the attention of large audiences. For the burgeoning socialist movement in the US, these commitments from socialist media institutions may offer an avenue to overcome marginality, where reaching a broad audience is necessary for the large-scale social transformation desired by socialists (Fuchs 2010; Sandoval and Fuchs 2010). Furthermore, institutionalisation, professionalisation, and the ability to mobilise financial resources afford opportunities to expand the scope of content to include significant projects, such as international coverage focusing on socialist issues and politics around the world. Unlike the unorganised socialist discourse circulating through Facebook and Twitter, socialist media institutions and socialist social movement organisations also offer opportunities for activists to distance themselves from the negative effects of individuals shouldering the promotion and distribution of socialist narratives and information. Normative strategies that suggest socialists should participate in social media through institutional and organisational accounts and pages pushes against the ideological character of social networking that encourages “capitalist individualisation, accumulation, and legitimisation”, while gesturing to an alternative where platforms would “allow group profiles, joint profile creation, group blogging” explicitly oriented to social justice and collective goals (Fuchs 2009a, 84). This idea, however, comprises only an incipient socialist strategy focused on social media that must be developed to specifically include the labour relation involved in capitalist social media.

## 6. Conclusions

The emergence of social media represents a development in informational capitalism where disposable time is colonised by productive forces, where attention is monetised, and where user data is sold to third party advertisers (Fuchs 2015). Critical Internet theorists demonstrate how users labour for social media platforms through their online activity and digital communication. These perspectives build on Dallas Smythe’s (1981) foundational research which theorised how audiences become commodities under commercial mass media systems because, as “audience power is produced, sold, purchased and consumed,” it “commands a price and is a commodity” (1981, 25). In effect, this is an extension of the notion that media consumption is the prolongation of work, where audience members “work” for advertisers by learning how to buy goods and spend money through the exposure to advertising (Smythe 1981). Audience members labour for advertisers while reproducing their own labour power through leisure time, which is consistently filled with mental and physical work masquerading as “free time” (Smythe 1981).

Christian Fuchs (2012, 146) demonstrates how social media users, as they upload photos, write posts and comments, and send messages, function as double objects of commodification: “They are first commodified by corporate platform operators who, sell them to advertising clients, and this results, second, in an intensified exposure to commodity logic. They are permanently exposed to commodity propaganda presented by

advertisements while they are online”. This is, of course, also true for socialists who use social media platforms.

Throughout the interviews I conducted for this project, I did not encounter perspectives from DSA members and leaders that defined social media use as labour. Many members articulated intense ambivalence, and at times incendiary criticisms, of social media platforms and their profit motives. For example, Miguel, a DSA member from the Denver chapter, explained to me how all media dependent on advertising revenue, from television to social media, catered to “an addiction” that people have for sensational and superficial information. He described these media as “sweets, candy, or like crack, or whatever to get people to watch [...] that’s clear also in the types of things that get like the most clicks on Facebook or Twitter too – it’s like bubble gum, absolute garbage”. Similarly, Maria Svart recognised risks associated with DSA members using social media focusing on its profit motive. Citing Facebook as an example, she described the platform as “very authoritarian, privately held, and totally driven by profit [...] at any moment [they] could decide to turn their algorithms against us [...] it’s a private sphere and that’s incredibly dangerous”.

DSA members recognise how commercial media operates, and they often can articulate in sophisticated terms how capitalist media systems damage democratic ambitions. However, the DSA members and leaders I spoke to did not explicitly discuss the labour relation embedded antagonistically between social media platforms and their users. My questions to interview participants focused on the advantages and limitations of social media for the socialist movement, and, as an open-ended in-depth discussion on socialism and communication, I did not explicitly prime respondents with particular topics such as digital labour. Future research should carefully consider avenues to explore how socialists think about digital labour in relation to their greater political ambitions. Furthermore, the lack of discussion around digital labour from participants in this project demonstrates important opportunities for critical media researchers to support organisations like the DSA by exploring and developing socialist strategies for using social media.

A version of “meeting people where they are at” could involve developing issue campaigns centring on social media and mobilising the intense antipathy towards Facebook and Twitter to fight for democratic controls that preserve the potentials to build cohesion and militate against the structures that promote fragmentation. It certainly seems feasible to conduct activist campaigns against social media online, such as A Billion People’s call for a digital strike and a series of disruptions against Google, Amazon, and Facebook in September of 2018 (A Billion People 2018). However, organising around these issues could also occur in physical DSA meetings through in-person discussions on the political economy of social media and socialist strategies for digital communication.

In *The Idea of Socialism*, Axel Honneth (2017) argues that the socialist movement must advocate for the removal of all barriers to communicative freedom to enhance the potential for socialism to articulate itself to social freedom through experimentation and documentation of past attempts at economic collectivisation. Additionally, Honneth (2017) advocates that socialists must finally abandon the proletariat as the revolutionary figure in future iterations of the movement.

The perspectives presented in this project, however, demonstrate the need to *retain* and *expand* contemporary understandings of the proletariat. Socialists today must certainly fight for the removal of barriers to free communication in digital realms, but this can only occur through clarifying the labour relationships entrenched in digital communication and organising users to fight against the authoritarian restrictions that remove

users from participation in shaping the structures that regulate our social lives (Andrejevic 2009). Ordinary users possess the power to bring “corporate social media to a standstill” by withholding their labour through a digital strike or another form of collective disruption (Fuchs 2015, 39).

In general, organised media activism within the DSA could take a number of forms involving strategies such as labour organising, electoral campaigns, and direct action. Currently, DSA does not have a national working group dedicated to media activism, but this does not necessarily mean these goals are not a priority for individual members and chapters around the country. The New York City chapter, for example, includes a “Tech Action” working group that advocates for organising workers in the technology and media industries, and offers a variety of positions and critiques ranging from implementing public control over corporate and government data systems, to exploring the political possibilities of a public Internet infrastructure (Tech Action Working Group 2019). The working group recently collaborated with Julia Salazar, a DSA-endorsed state Senate candidate in New York, to develop a political platform for technology that included, among other positions, making high-speed affordable Internet accessible to all New Yorkers; advocating for “gig” and contract workers to organise and gain collective bargaining rights; providing recourses for platform co-ops, owned and operated by workers; and demanding that technology companies pay their fair share of taxes (Malmgren 2018; Salazar for State Senate 2019). These examples offer important models for socialist media activism on a national level.

Many of the demands socialists could make in respect to digital capitalism involve supporting and imagining policies that transfer resources and power away from social media giants to ordinary users and alternative platforms. Confronting the oligopolistic structures of social media companies requires activists to capture state power and leverage it to tax these firms and channel those resources to non-commercial media institutions and platforms, which would mark an important first step in strengthening the public sphere (Fuchs 2014). At a time when burgeoning socialist media institutions and content begin to attract large audiences through their unique political perspectives and imaginative critical analysis, the possibility of regulations that limit the power of digital oligopolies in favour of non-commercial alternatives seems both timely and necessary.

Demanding greater democratic controls over social media platforms for individual users and social movement organisations could mitigate the challenges experienced by activists as they disseminate their politics and interact in digital realms. Many DSA members work tirelessly online to promote their narratives and events in the face of intense criticism and structural conditions that divide socialist communities. These users, and all users, should have a voice in shaping the rules for engagement on social media. As the socialist movement grows, and as the DSA continues to advocate for the decommodification of housing and healthcare as human rights, the movement should demand the decommodification of communication as a human right.

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## About the Author

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Christopher C. Barnes is a PhD candidate in Media Studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder. His dissertation explores the communicative practices, structures, and texts central to the resurgence in activist efforts to bring political legitimacy to democratic socialism in the current historical moment in the United States, focusing on the Democratic Socialists of America.

# Theory, Reality, and Possibilities for a Digital/Communicative Socialist Society

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**Abstract:** Digital capitalism is guided by the organising principles of digital automation, information processing, and communication. It rests on the consolidation of relations of exploitation of digital labour based on flexibility and generating precarity. It makes profit from user data under conditions of surveillance. What would an alternative paradigm look like? This paper aims to sketch a possible socialist society resting on digital technology but organised on a different logic, namely that of autonomous production, leisure, and social engagement. It draws on relevant theories of the Left, evaluates them against the reality of digital capitalism, and suggests structural and user practice alternatives that can pave the way towards a digital/communicative socialism. This paper engages with the works of Czech philosopher Radovan Richta (1924-1983) and Austrian-French philosopher André Gorz (1923-2007). It shows that their ideas on the scientific and technological revolution and post-industrial socialism are highly relevant for the analysis and discussion of digital/communicative socialism.

**Keywords:** digital socialism, digital capitalism, Internet, digital labour, platforms, monopolies, surveillance, social production, user practice, Radovan Richta, André Gorz

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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary capitalism is to a large extent determined by the pervasiveness of digital technologies of automation, information processing and communication. Such technologies have established a networked informational capitalism. This form of capitalism rests largely on the layered Internet infrastructure which is a *sine qua non* for communication, organisation, business, economic, social, political, and cultural activity.

Contemporary capitalism has deployed information and communication technologies (ICTs) to perpetuate and deepen social relations of exploitation of (digital) labour in the organisation of a global production and delivery of products and services. It has done so partly by exploiting the flexibility offered by digital technologies to drive down work and pay levels. It has also engaged effectively the general citizen/consumer in a global interconnected system where online activity generates data, which become the currency of business models of large monopoly high tech corporations in the media and communications industries.

What seems to be absent, under these circumstances, is a possibility for an alternative digital paradigm that could harness digitisation for purposes of autonomous production, increased leisure and emancipation from the limitations of wage labour. Such an alternative paradigm could be termed digital/communicative socialism or digital/communicative socialist society.

The aims of the paper are: Firstly, to set the contours of a possible digital socialist society drawing on conceptualisations of the Left provided by Radovan Richta and

André Gorz. Secondly, to project these conceptualisations to the contemporary character of digital capitalism. Thirdly, to identify ways in which the contemporary, platform and monopoly-based capitalism can gradually give way towards what might be in the future become a form of digital/communicative society.

The argument in the paper is that although digital capitalism in its current form falls short of the emancipatory promise of technological development, a digital socialist society is possible. However, it will be premised on radical transformation of the existing infrastructure of digital capitalism, as well as change in user engagement with digital technologies.

The next section will sketch the dimensions of digital socialism as they have emerged from selected theorisations of the Left on technological development and the post-industrial society. Section 3 will measure these dimensions up to the reality of contemporary digital capitalism. Section 4 will explore the possibilities of alternatives and pathways towards what can gradually resemble a digital/communicative socialist society; in doing so it will draw on recent intellectual attempts towards this direction and, to a small extent, on survey data about user engagement with the current Internet. Section 5 will conclude, summarising theory, reality, and possibilities.

The paper draws more specifically on the theorisations on the post-industrial society by Radovan Richta and André Gorz.

Richta, a Czech philosopher, was born in Prague in 1924 and died in 1983. He was a pivotal figure in the communist reform movement in Czechoslovakia around the time of the Prague Spring and the blatant military intervention of the Soviet army forces.

During World War II, he was part of the communist resistance against the Nazis. Imprisoned for several months, he was rescued by the Red Cross as he was suffering from tuberculosis. After the War and between periods of illness, he organised an interdisciplinary research team, whose most famous work was *Civilisation at the Crossroads*, a collection of articles first published in Czech and Slovakian in 1967, then in an English translation in 1968 and a French one in 1969. Richta's name is associated with the concept of the scientific and technological revolution (Richta 1967).

Gorz, an Austrian/French social philosopher and journalist, was born in Vienna in 1923 as Gerhart Hirsch and died in 2007. In 1949, he moved to Paris, and started working for *Paris-Presse* under the pseudonym Michel Bosquet, and subsequently for *L'Express* as an economic journalist. In the 1960s and 1970s, he became part of the New Left movement that was inspired by humanist Marxism and promoted a left agenda in issues of work, including equality, justice, liberation and a guaranteed social income. In 1961, Gorz entered the editorial committee of *Les Temps Modernes*. In 1964, he co-founded *Le Nouvel Observateur* weekly. He befriended Herbert Marcuse and Ivan Illich and brought their works to a French audience. Gorz followed closely the events of May 1968 in Paris that he saw as having the potential to realise his humanist socialist vision. Throughout his life, he engaged with a number of topics, as evidenced in his diverse books, such as *Ecology as Politics* (Gorz 1979), *Paths to Paradise* (Gorz 1985) and the famous *Critique of Economic Reason* (Gorz 1989). His work *Farewell to the Working Class* (Gorz 1982) is the most relevant for the purposes of our analysis.

The paper draws on the work of these two thinkers as they had a lot in common: both were Marxist/socialist humanists, both were heavy critics of the Soviet Union regime, and both were proponents of a humanist/democratic socialism.

More importantly, both Richta and Gorz seem to have been “displaced” from the mainstream literature on information society. Their names are not entirely absent. Richta is mentioned as a key theorist of the growing importance of information technology in society in Beniger's (1986) book *The Control Revolution*. However, more

established textbooks on theories of the information society (e.g. Castells 1996; Webster 2014) have not engaged with the works of Richta and Gorz. In this sense, the current paper redresses the balance by bringing their ideas forward in a discussion of the contemporary character of the digital society; and in the imaginaries of the future digital/communicative socialism.

## 2. Theory: The (Socialist) Digital/Communicative/Information/Network Society

Already in the *Grundrisse*, Marx (1973) is eloquent about the importance of scientific and technological evolution for the development of capital's productive forces, the ensuing application of science to production and the increasing significance of knowledge labour. The so-called *Fragment on Machines*, in particular, highlights the effect of technology in reducing necessary labour time and creating conditions for communism, free time as a source of wealth and the development of a rounded personality (artistic, scientific and so on) during the freed time. But, it also stresses that this emancipatory potential is embedded in a context of capitalist class relations where the socialised productive forces clash with the relations of production leading to lack of autonomy, precarity and unemployment (see Fuchs 2015).

Since the early 1950s and 1960s, the left thinking has sought to come to terms with the increasing presence of science and technology in production but also in all spheres of economic and social human activity. Radovan Richta (1969) provides one of the early visions of the “scientific and technological revolution” as a “new foundation for civilisation” (65). Whilst industrial production was characterized by increasingly complex machines in production, together with a growing army of labour, the application of science and technology *to other spheres of human activity* [emphasis added] was limited. This, for Richta, is about to change: the scientific and technological revolution has a more transformative event throughout society overall; not only the objective means of production (e.g. raw materials, capital, labour) change, not only the structure and dynamics of the productive forces, but also the “subjective, human factor” (56).

Richta points to the possibilities for the scientific and technological revolution to overcome the capitalist logic, which determines that labour be broken down into simple operations and that the growth of consumption be restricted. At the heart of his argument is that the advancement of science and technology enables a stable level of production and accumulation. The implication is that labour can possibly escape the routine of mechanised work, while at the same time, forces could be liberated and used for other social purposes (i.e. non-commercial, non-profit and non-accumulation). This is a hopeful prospect: “Only the all-round advance of the scientific and technological revolution can give rise to a new form of civilisation which, as regards both level of development of labour and consumption, corresponds to the requirements of communist society” (65). However, Richta notes that for society to benefit from the scientific and technological revolution, a “revolution in social relations is essential” (61).

Richta's work has been seen as pioneering but also different from the mainstream of communist Czechoslovakia. He saw the scientific and technological revolution as a basis for the transition from capitalism to communism but also from authoritarian to human-centred communism (Fuchs 2015). At the same time, his use of the scientific and technological revolution went beyond the orthodox idea that communism on its own would release the technological forces. He placed emphasis on the new paradigm of services in civilisation and the role of a new service class in the transformation, breaking away from the idea of the working class as central to the coming of the socialist society (Mattelart 2003).

The logic of Richta's argument is not dissimilar to that of Daniel Bell, the early theorist of the post-industrial society. Bell traces a historical continuity from the pre-industrial to the industrial and post-industrial society by means of rationalisation, which brings greater efficiency and increased productivity within each stage and enables the passage to the next. Rationalisation leads to superfluous labour and increased profits and consumption, driving society first from the agrarian mode to manufacturing (industrial society) and then to services (post-industrial society). In the first stage, it is manual labour and physical power that defines work and societal organisation. In the second, it is technology and the use of energy that constitutes the fundamental social parameters and determines the content of jobs. In the third stage, it is organised knowledge that defines social relations and labour occupations. The decline of manufacturing with the decrease in the number of manual workers, the generation of a number of new service sectors and the overall increase in information-handling tasks and specialities lead to more white-collar occupations and the predominance of information and knowledge (Bell 1973; Webster 2014; Boucas 2010).

Despite similarities with Richta's approach, however, Bell was almost inimical to the Left. A one-time Trotskyist, he later denounced socialism and became over-critical of Marxism and the "European neo-Marxist theoreticians" (including Richta), whose aim, he felt, was "not to illuminate actual social changes in the society but to "save" the Marxist concept of social change and the Leninist idea of the agency of change" (Bell 1973, 39-40).

What constitutes Bell's criticism, though, seems to make Richta's account powerful and different. He certainly claims that automation can free man "altogether from direct participation in the production process. It relieves him from of his role as a mere cog in the machine system and offers him the position of inspirer, creator, master of the technological system, able to stand apart from the immediate manufacturing process" (Richta 1969, 112). Richta (1969, 114) adds: "Then, when man stops doing the things that things can do for him, he is offered the prospect of creative activity as the normal occupation through which he can exercise all his powers – activity imbued with scientific elements, discovery, invention, pioneering and cultivating human powers". What is implied in his account, additionally and importantly, is that these developments are far from automatic. "the secret of the present scientific and technological revolution [...] the most effective means of multiplying the productive forces of society and of human life is inevitably found to be *the development of man himself*, growth of his abilities and creative powers – development of man as an end in itself" (Richta 1969, 43, emphasis in the original).

Science, then, does not develop on its own but is rather the result of human endeavour. Technological and scientific development relies not on structure but agency; Richta's account is humanist Marxism par excellence.

In his book *Farewell to the Working Class* (1982) André Gorz envisages a society where automation frees up time from work (done for remuneration) to be devoted to other activities that are not for money, but "for the interest, pleasure, or benefit involved". Gorz, however, argues that whatever the social organisation, capitalist or communist, individual autonomy and fulfilment will be always limited and subsumed by the collective societal organisation, market or state. The undermining of personal autonomy and pluralism under socialist doctrines limits socialism in the imagination of the many. It is this sphere of personal autonomy and freedom of expression "against all pressures and external obligations", a sphere of family life, do-it-yourself, personal in-

terests, communication, relationships, love that should be protected: “a sphere of sovereignty wrested [...] from a world governed by the principles of productivity, aggression, competition, hierarchical disciplines” (Gorz 1982, 80).

Gorz quotes from Marx’s *Grundrisse*: “As soon as labour in the direct form has ceased to be the great well-spring of wealth, labour time ceases and must cease to be its measure, and hence exchange value [must cease to be the measure] of use value. [...] With that, production based on exchange value breaks down, and the direct, material production process is stripped of the form of penury and antithesis. The free development of individualities, and hence [...] the necessary labour of society to a minimum, which then corresponds to the artistic, scientific etc. development of the individuals in the time set free, and with the means created, for all of them” (Marx 1973, 705-706; see also the quote in Gorz 1982, 81).

For Gorz, as for Richta, “[t]he manner in which the abolition of work is to be managed and socially implemented constitutes the central political issue of the coming decades”. Gorz advocates a guaranteed basic income for all and welcomes a future where “the autonomous production of use-values becomes a real possibility for everyone” (Gorz 1982, 4). At the same time, he argues that the complete abolition of industrial production and the associated “heteronomous” work is not possible. One reason for this is that the tools necessary for the exercise of autonomous work can only be produced by industry, as Illich (1973) proposes. Rather, what is to be aspired to is a considerable reduction in that sphere, accompanied by the augmentation of “autonomous” work. Consequently, Gorz endorses a dual, synergistic societal organisation which will aim at a diminishing share for the heteronomous and an increasing one for the autonomous mode of production through the liberation of time by technological evolution.

This is not going to happen automatically. Only “if it is combined with effective possibilities for autonomous production will the liberation of time point beyond the capitalist logic, wage system and market relations” (Gorz 1982, 5). Autonomous production is incompatible with public or private industrial, commercial or professional monopolies: “Effective possibilities for autonomous production cannot exist for everyone without a policy providing adequate *collective* facilities for that purpose” (Gorz 1982, 5, emphasis added). Gorz places special emphasis on the role of the state to enlarge the sphere of autonomy at the expense of heteronomy. In parallel, he argues that investing in alternative technologies and practices and experimentation in social production is quite important. The emancipatory promise of technological progress, coming from the writings of Gorz and Richta, then, can be summarised as follows:

- humans will need to work less, particularly in mundane/mechanical work tasks
- humans will be able to engage more in socially beneficial work
- humans will have more opportunities for autonomous, peer production
- humans will have more opportunities for leisure and consumption

In the next section we assess the degree to which such premises correspond to the reality of the contemporary society.

### 3. Reality: The Contemporary Digital Capitalist Society

The theorisation of the scientific and technological revolution and the post-industrial society can be compared to the reality of contemporary digital society. The assessment of the possibilities for socially purposeful activity (i.e. producing social value), and the

prospects and limits to autonomous production, cannot be conducted without an evaluation of the contemporary digital/communicative society. The early socialist theorists of the information society, as mentioned, were not technological determinists. They argued that science, technology, and information do not generate a new state of affairs by themselves. Richta and Gorz did acknowledge that a transformation of social relations would be necessary for the potential of science and technology (and the digital society) to be harnessed for a socialist agenda and social framework.

Castells, the foremost theorist of the “network society”, writing thirty years after Richta and fifteen years after Gorz, has argued that the network society is a new type of societal organisation with its own logic (the network logic) imposed on social and political processes, reconfiguring and redefining them. In this way, the economy becomes informational, global, and networked. The firm is transformed into the network enterprise. Work and employment adopt flexible patterns and continuous occupational mobility. Relationships of production become globalised, labour segmented and social classes less coherent. Consumption patterns become diversified, individualised and unequal, with growing social polarisation. Organisational hierarchies in all organisations are challenged. Culture and meaning become increasingly fragmented (Castells 1996; Castells 1997; Castells 2001).

Castells has been influenced by Alain Touraine and his theory of post-industrial society, which resembles the theory of Bell. He explains that the capitalist crisis of the 1970s coincided with the development of new information and communication technologies, which were put in the services of the dominant capitalist mode of production and transformed society from an industrial to an information mode of development (Castells 1996). This rejuvenated and consolidated the failing capitalist system of the time. The emergent digital society held distinctive capitalist features.

Broadly speaking, Castells belongs to the structuralist school of neo-Marxism and has been influenced by structuralists such as Althusser and Poulantzas, at least regarding his theory of the “network state”. It is no coincidence, then, that there is no mention of either Richta or Gorz, who belong to the humanist Marxist school and pay more emphasis on agency and praxis, rather than structure.

In any case, what comes out of Castells’ analysis is that the transformation of social relations predicated by Gorz and Richta has not happened. Frank Webster, in a respectable book on theories of information society, identifies global informational capitalism as the dominant force shaping contemporary society. While he does signal differences of this contemporary form from corporate or laissez-faire capitalism, he still argues that there is a continuity with previous societal stages, in that commercialisation and the business and profit logic have been extended and accentuated (Webster 2014).

It is under these present circumstances that the four dimensions of a possible digital/communicative socialist society emanating from Richta’s and Gorz’s work can be put to the test.

### **3.1. Humans Will Need to Work Less, Particularly in Mundane Tasks**

Contemporary thinkers on the left have often engaged with the automation discourse. Srnicek and Williams, for instance, argue that the recent wave of automation will transform the labour market, as “it comes to encompass every aspect of the economy” (Srnicek and Williams 2015, 112). Yet, “automation should entail humanity’s liberation from toil, but because we live in a society where most people must work in order to live, this dream may turn out to be a nightmare” (summarised by Benanav 2019, 6). Left accelerationism, a group of thinkers who argue that automation will resolve social

problems, is also represented in Aaron Bastani's (2019) book *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* that envisages a society where artificial intelligence and robots liberate humans from labour, where all the needs of humans are met, where there is time for personal fulfilment, non-remunerative careers, unlimited public services and consumer commodities for all. Bastani draws on various thinkers, including the management Guru Peter Drucker but does not mention the work of Gorz and Richta.

Notwithstanding the vision behind his writings, Gorz was not very optimistic about the post-industrial neo-proletariat, which is positioned in an environment of increased automation, faces abolition of work tasks, precarity of work (with utmost flexibility and no security) and, eventually, unemployment. "Technological development does not point towards a possible appropriation of social production by the producers. Instead it indicates further elimination of the social producer, and continuing marginalization of socially necessary labour as a result of the computer revolution" (Gorz 1982, 72).

The implication is that labour becomes more individualised (and without collective class consciousness), each worker focusing on their individual development. At the same time, precarity conceals the real redundancy of labour, and removes the possibility of liberation from it and from the system of social relations that sustains it. Rejection of the accumulation ethic – and human agency towards this goal – is, for Gorz, the only way out of the logic of capital and the system it has generated, which has reached its limits.

It is evident that neither Gorz nor Richta could have anticipated the degree to which digital technological developments have pervaded all industries. The technological landscape has evolved so rapidly that to come to terms with it is an insurmountable task. Indeed, this complexity is demonstrated in the various streams of literature: science and technology studies, management and organisational studies, innovation and critical media literature, to mention a few (Finn 2017; De Nardis 2014; Lobet-Maris 2009).

One dominant feature that stands out is the omnipresence of the Internet, which, understandably, could not have been analysed by Richta or Gorz. To be sure, it is hard to conceive of standalone technologies in contemporary capitalism any longer. The Internet infrastructure, on the whole, is no less than the essential backbone for the digital society to exist. This infrastructure in itself is complex enough, not least because of its layered architecture (Van Dijk 2012). Significantly, it has redefined business strategies, it has given rise to new business models and has reshaped the space of competition and profit-making in the economy.

Furthermore, digital and Internet-based capitalism is globalised and involves a variety of traditional and new forms of labour. Its pervasiveness entails the introduction of digital functions as part of production, delivery and service processes. These developments have led to an explosion of digital work. Following Fuchs (2014), we adopt the following definitions and differentiation between *digital work* and *digital labour*.

"Digital work includes all activities that create use-values that are objectified in digital media technologies, contents and products generated by applying digital media" (Fuchs 2014, 352); "Digital labour is alienated digital work: it is alienated from itself, from the instruments and objects of labour and from the products of labour. Alienation is alienation of the subject from itself (labour-power is put to use for and is controlled by capital), alienation from the object (the objects of labour and the instruments of labour) and the subject-object (the products of labour) [...] Examples are slave workers in mineral extraction, Taylorist hardware assemblers, software engineers, professional online content creators (e.g. online journalists), call centre agents and social media prosumers" (Fuchs 2014, 351-352). One can extend the above notions by including



also in *digital work* activities that use to a small or large extent digital means to produce non-digital products or services. The smart methods and tools in agriculture, the use of computers in production processes for automobiles and airplanes, and the variety of online services (e.g. customer services) are cases in point.

*Digital labour* is digital work placed in the framework of capitalism and class society. Such an extended notion embraces a variety of possible forms of labour in digital capitalism and enables a better assessment of where digital labour stands.

In the *realm of production*, the pervasiveness of the Internet, the deployment of robots, artificial intelligence and smart technologies have given rise to the so-called “Industry 4.0”<sup>1</sup>. Automation in the existing capitalist context has generated new forms of organisation of industrial production based in a global organisation of digital labour, which includes factory workers working on products with more or less digital content or engaging with digital means of production.

In the *realm of service provision*, a lot of repetitive and mundane service labour has been eliminated or replaced by automated or robotic processes, e.g. in customer services. A parallel development is the increasing deployment of *platforms*, namely “products, services, or technologies that act as a foundation upon which external innovators [...] can develop their own complementary products, technologies, or services” (Gawer and Cusumano 2014, 417). Companies like Apple, Microsoft, Google and Amazon provides their platforms for other parties to use and create business ecosystems. Service provision is often mediated by such platforms, e.g. transport services like Uber and delivery services like deliveroo build their service on platforms such as Google and the Apple iOS; in the process they engage the drivers and delivery workers, the platform labour.

It should also be mentioned that a great deal of service provision has been transferred to the consumer, becoming thus *self-service*. Businesses organised as platforms have appropriated digital technologies to provide interfaces whereby consumers can perform a variety of service functions – booking, ordering, buying, paying and so on. State authorities have replicated the model in electronic government services. The performance of these actions – often repetitive, often time-consuming – amounts to consumer labour, namely processes where consumers become value-generating workers. What emerges can be termed a “self-service economy” where the worker/employee is gradually abolished and the surplus value appropriated by the business is provided by the customers themselves.

These aspects of global production and service provision suggest that the claim that “humans will work less and will work less on mundane tasks” has not been realised. While, in theory, technology socialises labour, in the reality of digital capitalist society people depend on wages and the global digital economy depends on labour, which through the flexibility of digitalisation and conditions of under-investment has become precarious and under-employed (Benanav 2019). This is exactly the contradiction identified by Marx: the antagonism between productive forces and productive relations within a capitalist class-based framework results in technological development acting as a non-emancipatory force (Fuchs 2015). If anything, labour has been

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<sup>1</sup> Industry 4.0 is a term denoting a whole reconfiguration of industrial processes that goes beyond the single automation of a single operation, or set of operations, and involves the digitisation of all physical assets and integration in an ecosystem that includes the firm and its business partners. It involves digitalisation and integration of horizontal and vertical value chain, digitisation of products/services offered, digital business models and enterprise-wide data analytics (Geissbauer 2016).

extended into the leisure sphere, as consumers have become labourers engaged in the repetitive and mundane tasks dictated by the digital interfaces of the self-service economy.

### **3.2. Humans Will Be Able to Engage More in Socially Beneficial Work**

The corollary from the previous discussion is that the circumstances for engagement with more socially-oriented or socially beneficial work are not in place. Under-employment in the capitalist economy, by definition, frees up time (though not due to automation but due to the reduced amount of paid labour). This provides flexibility and generates some opportunity for occupying one's time in alternative ways, many of which could be socially beneficial. However, under-employment in practice means reliance on more than one paid jobs to generate what can resemble a full salary. Precarity and under-employment are part of the picture that Bauman has so eloquently identified in his theorisation of "liquid modernity" and "liquid life" (Bauman 1990; Bauman 2005).

In addition, flexibility and the modular character of work, together with lack of security, create a state of consciousness which eats up the psychological background needed for humans to exercise their social nature. "The individual becomes an isolated monad always looking for new forms of socialisation, which instead of providing safety and welfare, increase the gap between man and the Self and between man and the other. It is a social system that –despite being in possession of increasingly innovative means to communicate and interact with their fellows- generates discomfort and loneliness" (Palese 2013, 2).

This is not cultivation of the individual sphere of creativity, as Marx and Gorz would advise. It is rather the plunging of individualism into consumerism to resolve unhappiness: "The exit from a state of unhappiness can [...] only be through an operation committed by happiness-seekers on themselves, and each one on their own, not by the many seekers after happiness putting their heads together to design the shape of a better world and then joining ranks and working together to make it better" (Bauman 2005, 132).

This does not mean, of course, that individualism has pervaded the entire social fabric. Individualism is a generalisation with limits and there are (and always will be) pockets of social community. It makes sense, then, to consider the organisational premises within which communities (and also individuals) can exercise their productive capacities.

### **3.3. Humans Will Have More Opportunities for Autonomous Peer Production**

Peer production (often also "P2P production") "has been broadly portrayed as a generic form of self-organization among loosely-affiliated individuals that volunteer on equal footing to reach a common goal" (Bauwens, Kostakis and Pazaitis 2019, 4). Peer production is mostly associated with creative and knowledge-based work, as it is often organised through distributed means of production (e.g. computer and Internet resources) and is based on information, which is naturally abundant and can be shared without cost. In these circumstances, the argument is that peer production presents advantages over markets, privatisation of information, and managerial or state planning (Benkler 2006).

Autonomous (individual and) peer production rests on at least two suppositions: firstly, a reasonable degree of autonomy and secondly, the presence and availability of knowledge (for personal use and for sharing among peers). As mentioned, autonomy from the necessity of work-for-income does not exist under the present circum-

stances of digital capitalism. As autonomous peer production is premised on the availability of distributed information and communication resources, the question becomes whether the Internet could compensate by providing the necessary degrees of freedom for autonomous production and availability of knowledge.

In its original conception and decentralised organisation, the Internet gave such opportunities for peer-to-peer engagement and knowledge sharing. Indeed, one might be tempted to argue that the World Wide Web's interface with its ubiquitous access to information, as well as the presence of platforms on which users can generate and share content, obey the premises of autonomous and peer production. Critical analysis, though, suggests that autonomous peer production cannot be reconciled with the current character of the Internet. This is for (at least) two reasons: online surveillance and the privatisation of knowledge.

John Bellamy Foster and Robert McChesney (2011) describe in vivid strokes the ways in which the Internet has become a colonised space for capitalist activity and profit-making. They focus on the processes of Google, Microsoft, Apple and a handful of other companies capitalising on network effects on their platforms through applications and reaping increasing monopoly benefits by creating barriers to entry for competitors: "Competitive strategy in this sphere revolves around the concept of the lock-in of customers and the leveraging of demand-side economies of scale, which allow for the creation of massive concentrations of capital in individual firms" (Foster and McChesney 2011, 26).

By exploring the close connections between government policy and monopoly power in the form of the capitalist state's deregulation policies, Foster and McChesney also emphasise that neoliberalism has advanced the demise of a basic pillar of liberal democratic theory, i.e. the separation of public and private interests. The close alliance between corporate power (interested in profits) and state power (interested in surveillance) have shrunk the sphere of political liberty.

Surveillance is indeed a key feature of the contemporary digital society and one that has been well-documented in literature. Lyon (2007) analyses the explosion of personal data through Internet traffic and the processes through which states deploy them for social sorting and profiling in the name of citizen safety, particularly in the post 9/11 era. Power and politics are accompanied by economic processes whereby customer data are invited, stored and traded as valuable commodities in the "surveillance society" (Lyon 2007). The more communication and knowledge are mediated by big corporations that monopolise vital Internet activities (search, social networking, user-generated digital content, etc.) the more opportunities exist for any individual (online) activity to be recorded, monitored, endlessly stored, recombined, analysed, targeted, etc. with the help of large databases stored on server farms and AI-based algorithms.

Zuboff (2019) sees surveillance as the key distinctive feature of the present digital society. Her focus is on what she calls "behavioural surplus" which is the outcome of online activity and which is utilised by Google and other digital companies as "surveillance assets": "These assets are critical raw materials in the pursuit of *surveillance revenues* and their translation into *surveillance capital*. The entire logic of this capital accumulation is most accurately understood as *surveillance capitalism*" (Zuboff 2019, 94, emphasis in the original).

Understandably, not all production and activity takes place online. However, subjecting online communication and knowledge tools to the checks and monitors of platform capitalism (Smicek 2016) severely restricts the possibility of autonomous production.

The other premise of autonomous production is the availability of free knowledge. Broumas discusses the “intellectual commons”, which are related to “terrains of mainly intellectual, as demarcated from those of chiefly manual, human activity” and include “social structures related primarily to intellectual work in terms of the production, distribution, and consumption of information, communication, knowledge, and culture, which are subject to dynamic change” (Broumas 2017, 1510).

Broumas identifies the expansion of intellectual commons in processes and instances such as open hardware design, open standards, free and open source software, online content under creative commons licenses, and various collaborative media. All these Internet-mediated activities create a “kaleidoscope of sharing and collaborative innovation”, which “constitutes our digitized environments not as private enclosures but as shared public space, a social sphere divergent from the one reproduced by the market and the state” (Broumas 2017, 1507-1508).

The question, however, remains one of the relative weight and presence of such practices compared to profit-making and knowledge-enclosing and privatisation processes and practices over the Internet. We will return to this issue in our discussion of alternatives in Section 4.

### 3.4. Humans Will Have More Opportunities for Leisure and Consumption

The expansion and generalisation of the Internet has meant that many leisure and consumption activities take place in the online environment. Examples include online social communication, online entertainment through a variety of media, or online formation of communities in the realm of leisure.

The present character of the Internet mediates such activities in particular ways and for particular purposes that have nothing to do with the original intention of those (citizens and consumers) who engage in such activities. The question then becomes: what kind of leisure and what kind of consumption can one enjoy in digital/surveillance capitalism?

As with the case of work, leisure presupposes conditions of autonomy. However, digital capitalism has managed to occupy the space of individuality. One consequence is that work and leisure become intermingled. Christian Fuchs notes: “The convergence of work and free time is not automatically a problem in itself if it means that work becomes more playful, social and self-determined. The problem under neoliberalism and capitalism is, however, that productive labour tends to enter and soak up leisure time, resulting in absolute surplus-value production, not the other way round” (Fuchs 2016, 59).

A second consequence is existential in more general terms. Zuboff analyses digital existence in surveillance capitalism, or, in other words, the ways in which surveillance capitalism has conditioned human practice and behaviour. She illustrates how the technologies of digital capitalism act to achieve a programme of “behaviour modification”. A quote from one of her company interviewees declares: “The goal of everything we do is to change people’s actual behaviour at scale. We want to figure out the construction of changing a person’s behaviour, and then we want to change how lots of people are making their day-to-day decisions. When people use our app, we can capture their behaviours and identify good and bad [ones]” (quoted in Zuboff 2019, 296).

Perhaps this role of digital technologies is not something new. As science, technology, and society studies have demonstrated in the last thirty years, the technological artefact, or, even more so, the technological order shapes human behaviour (Bijker, Hughes and Pinch 1987). What is nowadays distinctive, though, is the extent of reach of the digital in all spheres of everyday human existence and the insatiable appetite of

digital capitalism to generate revenue out of the data of the users (people, citizens, consumers) in all possible ways. As Zuboff notes: “The allure of surveillance revenues drives the continuous accumulation of more and more predictive forms of behavioural surplus” (Zuboff 2019, 296).

Leisure and consumption are not exclusively online activities. However, in the present digital society, as with the case of work, many of these activities have a digital component. This generates user data and possibilities for surveillance. The answer, of course, is not to deny digital technology and engagement with the Internet, but, rather, to seek an alternative organisation of the Internet.

#### 4. Alternatives: Changes of Structures and Practices

If contemporary capitalism has harnessed digital technologies for profit maximisation through circumstances of rampant competition; if user engagement with the Internet goes through the obligatory passage points of commercialisation, monopoly, and surveillance; if these dimensions can modify and shape human behaviour, then what remains of digital socialism or the digital/communicative socialist network society?

Our argument is that the socialist network society is possible, provided that there are changes both in social structures and human practices. Giddens’s structuration theory has taught that there is always a dialectic between changes in practices and changes in structures (Giddens 1984).

The work of Richta and Gorz can be insightful in the consideration of alternatives, as they both emphasise humanist agency, which takes place within existing structures.

At the level of social structures, material resources and social organisation the commons provide a model towards alternative social arrangements that go beyond market and central state organisation. Yochai Benkler argues: “It is the feasibility of producing information, knowledge, and culture through social, rather than market and proprietary relations – through cooperative peer production and coordinate individual action – that creates the opportunities for greater autonomous action, a more critical culture, a more discursively engaged and better informed republic, and perhaps a more equitable global community” (Benkler 2006, 92).

Benkler explains that commons-based peer production, and social production more generally, are sustainable and efficient ways of organising information production. This is because the information infrastructure is, to all intents and purposes, universally distributed, while the raw materials of the information economy (information and knowledge) are naturally public goods. Here Benkler makes a strong case that the most prudent course for any society is to start from the assumption that the Internet should be fundamentally outside the domain of capital. In doing so, he echoes Foster and McChesney (2011), who apply the Lauderdale Paradox of classical political economy – the contradiction between public wealth and private riches – to the Internet sphere.

Bauwens, Kostakis and Pazaitis (2019) have recently formulated the Commons Manifesto, in which they outline the premises of a peer-to-peer set of production arrangements and social relations in networks where “participants have maximum freedom to connect” (Bauwens, Kostakis and Pazaitis 2019, 1). Their use of the term “freedom” reflects “the material possibility for many-to-many communications on a global scale and the ability of people (peers) to connect, communicate, organise and engage in shared value creation, with little to no restrictions regarding location and time” (Bauwens, Kostakis and Pazaitis 2019, 85). Their model includes a technological infrastructure, which enables a new mode of production (the commons) and the potential for transition to an economy that can be generative, as opposed to extractive.

Gorz, while somewhat pessimist, would appreciate the commons structures, processes and practices as a possible vehicle for change towards a more socialist digital society. As his humanism is grounded on pragmatism and awareness of the limits to emancipation, his endorsement of alternatives would tally with the current co-existence of intellectual enclosures of knowledge and commons-based sharing and peer production. He would likely have emphasised the importance of the social struggle between the forces of commodification and commonification, the result of which is the intellectual commons (Broumas 2017). Richta (1969), on the other hand, would have seen intellectual commons as the terrain where “the development of human powers” (90) and the “cultivation of human capacities” (44) can materialise through sharing and co-production of information and knowledge.

All the above point to the centrality of the Internet as a space where the emancipatory promises of digital socialism can be realised. Given the low costs of reproduction of information, digital socialism might be easier to achieve in the realm of the production of digital goods than in the realm of the manufacturing of physical products. There has indeed been ample critical engagement with the possibilities of the Internet for debate, critique, agency, and emancipation (e.g. Atton 2004; Couldry and Curran 2003; Chadwick 2006).

However, social production necessitates a recasting of the character of the Internet.

Morozov (2019), for instance, outlines his prerequisites for a possible “digital socialism”. He grapples with more concrete proposals about the ownership of user data and the deployment of Internet infrastructure in ways that enhance solidarity, non-market relations, as well as decentralised planning. His analysis is based on what he calls “the feedback infrastructure”, namely the data collected by big corporations (Internet service providers, search engines, social media) through countless traces of online activity – or what is commonly termed “big data”<sup>2</sup>.

Morozov’s claim is that, instead of being a profit generation mechanism, this infrastructure could be used to identify social problems, either of local or of more general importance. Drawing on the work of Stafford Beer’s work on the Chilean Cybersyn-project under the socialist Allende government in the early 1970s, Morozov argues that decentralised public and civil society institutions, deploying the free and available to all digital infrastructure, could arrive at better solutions than the logic of the market and competition à la Hayek and neoliberalism. Radical democracy should be combined with “radical bureaucracy” and take advantage of the planning and coordination capacities offered by the information infrastructure. Democratisation of artificial intelligence and the socialisation of the feedback infrastructure would be necessary to put user data and the technological mechanisms (algorithms) acting upon them to more socially beneficial use.

Benkler’s and Morozov’s views are complementary and point to the direction of democratic network/communicative digital socialism. What they are missing, though, is a roadmap through which such a transformation can start. Our argument is that for the above structural changes to happen a change in user practice is also indispensable. This claim is grounded on the work of Gorz and Richta.

Recently, we conducted an online survey<sup>3</sup> on users’ concerns over the current Internet and their views on possibilities for alternatives. The intention of the survey was

<sup>2</sup> We prefer the term “digital means of production” as the technologies of the feedback infrastructure are obviously digital, while the result of their operations is (production of) user data.

<sup>3</sup> Acknowledgement: The results reported are the outcome of work as part of the EU Horizon 2020 project netCommons: Network Infrastructure as Commons, <http://netcommons.eu/>, grant agreement number: 688768.

not to provide representative results, but rather to elicit the opinions of selected groups of knowledgeable, competent and frequent Internet users (academics/researchers, young people/students, university administrators, IT professionals). With that in mind, the recruitment of the participants was carried out through relevant mailing lists<sup>4</sup>.

The responses of the survey on the dominance of Google as search engine and Facebook as social network echo critical literature on the issue: Google and Facebook functioning as single information sources with particular kinds of bias and selectivity algorithms involved; Google and Facebook enjoying a monopoly dominance with significant power as social influence forces; Google and Facebook using business models and practices that are informed by advertising and commercialisation, thus promoting a consumerist culture. They paint a picture of reality-shaping through control of information, the creation of a stratified attention economy (Introna and Nissenbaum 2000), lack of transparency (Lobet-Maris 2009), and surveillance (Andrejevic 2007).

When it comes to the level of practice and preparedness of the user to engage in alternative practices, however, the picture is more ambiguous and equivocal. The relevant questions in the survey read:

- “Would you consider using alternative platforms instead of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or Google, if this choice would provide better control of your data and privacy?”  
46% mentioned they already used or would use *privacy-friendly alternative platforms*, 43% said that changing to alternatives would depend on the behaviour of their friends.
- “Would you consider using alternative platforms instead of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, or Google, if this choice would mean receiving no advertisements?”  
41% already use or would use *advertising-free alternative platforms*, 45% have said changing to such alternatives would depend on the behaviour of their friends.

Respondents also provided open-ended answers which illustrate this ambivalence further<sup>5</sup>. Many express their dislike regarding Facebook, but still consider it necessary for communication. Their aversion can be due to commodification, advertisements, policies, or aesthetics (r124, r345). They show awareness that interactions are monitored for targeted advertising but still use it as a platform enabling them to stay in touch with

<sup>4</sup> The design of the online survey questionnaire has been based on the inclusion of different categories of questions, separated in five sections labelled from A to E. After a short explanation of the aims of the questionnaire and the provision of the relevant consent form (in A), Section B, drawing on other similar surveys, includes a set of questions about the Internet usage and the digital skills of the respondent. Subsequently, Section C, which can be seen as the core section of the questionnaire, addresses various concerns that the respondent might have as an internet user, relating to areas such as: a) privacy and data control, b) digital labour and advertising c) monopolies of information provision, d) Internet governance and electronic democracy. Section D explicitly asks respondents to consider community networks as an alternative and also seeks to elicit their views as to the potential of such networks. Finally, Section E includes demographics of the respondents, as well as certain attitudes that they might have towards life and society, which might be indicative of the likelihood to support community initiatives. The full results of the survey are available as open data under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial NoDerivatives International 4.0 License (CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0) at: <https://zenodo.org/record/1294040>.

<sup>5</sup> Some of the statements are provided here in direct or indirect speech with the respondent number in parentheses. However, this is only a fraction of responses to illustrate the tensions and ambiguities in using digital media platforms.

friends worldwide (r525, r529, r1059). Many respondents confess that “there is little I can do but submit to it” (r201); “If most people use Facebook, what can I do?” (r63). Despite their concerns many users feel they cannot pull out of Facebook (r801, r807) and that they will accept the terms of service (r884). Not being on Facebook is equivalent with exclusion from the professional and social groups and their dynamics (r353). It becomes almost compulsory to use it and use nothing else (r431).

As a result, many users are prepared to compromise the security of their data and privacy for the sake of convenience, though they do not like this (r702, r1160). Others do not even think in terms of privacy and data security, but rather of the opportunities for communication provided (r712), or understand the business model and try to be selective with the data that they post (r1469).

We also found ambiguous results when it comes to use of Google services. Google is generally considered a superior search engine. Some respondents, however, are aware that other search engines are available (r649, r924, r1148) and that one is free to choose (r707). Many, however, are not informed of the alternatives that exist (1310, 2050) or do not know where to find them (815). The fact that there are not visible or used shows that people do not care (305). Some respondents stress that it is a matter of personal choice and one should understand that they should be careful and decide to what extent they want to share their data and make use of the services of these large corporations (r567). They point to the degrees of freedom that users have with regard to Google: from ignoring the ads to not looking into the top results, which include the Google preferences, or not clicking into those results (843).

What emerges from the survey is a tension associated with users’ engagement with Facebook and Google that points to a more generalised ambiguity of user practice vis-à-vis the Internet. One side of the ambiguity is the possibility of choice. Greenfield summarises it in an eloquent, albeit one-sided manner: “Nothing forces anyone [...] to sign up a profile on Facebook, search with Google, or use Apple computers, and there remain wide swathes of the planet where one can go weeks without overtly encountering any of their products and services. What’s more, even in their core markets their dominance is of a relatively recent vintage, and it’s unwise to ascribe to these particular enterprises a long-term tenacity and persistence they have yet to demonstrate” (Greenfield 2017, 284). None the less, from the perspective of the user, “choice” is accompanied by non-participation and social exclusion and these effects are more pronounced in particular demographics, not least the young generation which relies more on social media than any other form of communication. The pseudo-choices available can be seen as coercion and they force users to comply and participate under the terms and conditions dictated by the Internet monopolies.

These results are relevant in a discussion about the possibilities of alternative Internet organisation. User practice generates networks effects and reinforces the business models of large monopoly corporations that dominate the Internet and ascribe to it its current commercial, monopolistic, privatised and surveillance form. By the same token, the absence of these networks effects would render the very monopoly power void. As every user engagement with the artefact (the platform, the search engine, the social network, the software code) is, in the final analysis, negotiable and not absolutely stable and determined (Bijker, Hughes and Pinch 1987), the character of the Internet can possibly change leading to potential transformations in the overall digital/communicative capitalist society as is currently experienced.



## 5. Conclusion

On the basis of the above discussion, the contemporary digital society, in its current form, cannot serve the emancipatory promise inherent in technological development. The promises of digital/communicative socialism for less work, more time, more social engagement, more autonomous production and more leisure have not been hitherto realised.

The non-severance of the work/income relationship means that liberation of time is accompanied by precarity of work. In parallel, the flexibility of digitalisation is linked to the rise of the self-service economy and increases the bureaucratic and administrative demands on the individual.

The conditions of autonomous production are absent, or at least not satisfactory, in a digital society with increased surveillance and insufficient ownership (through artificial scarcity) of information.

Leisure is delimited by the intrusion of work in daily life with the “always on” condition of network and digital connectivity.

Individualism boosted by precarity and competition seals the tomb of social engagement which is diminishing in observable ways (or becomes framed by the rules of the game of Google and Facebook).

Work, production, and leisure are all subjected to the same regime of behaviour manipulation and colonisation of subjectivity, a digital form of alienation dictated by online engagement mediated by powerful monopoly and commercial interests which rely on the private feedback infrastructure of user data.

Whilst departure from digital technologies is not a possibility, departure from the current state of affairs should be kept in sight as the only route towards the digital/communicative socialist society. Gorz’s analysis of alternatives and the co-existence of heteronomous and autonomous spheres leads to the importance of the commons as alternative societal organisation and philosophy. The emphasis on human powers, placed by Richta in his discussion of scientific development, needs also to be central in the imaginary of digital socialism. Praxis and agency are at the heart of Richta’s and Gorz’s post-industrial socialist-humanist theories. We argue that the change can start from the digital infrastructure itself and the ways of engagement with it.

This departure can only be achieved by a combination of policy emanating from state and decentralised authorities at the regional, local and community level, together with changes in user practices at the individual, group, and family level. Gorz himself emphasised the role of the state: “The existence of a state separate from civil society, able both to codify objective necessities in the form of law and to assure its implementation, is thus the essential prerequisite to the autonomy of civil society and the emergence of an area outside the sphere of heteronomy in which a variety of modes of production, modes of life and forms of cooperation can be experimented with according to individual desires” (Gorz 1982, 112).

This will entail a strategy that gradually introduces in the digital infrastructure elements of collective and social production aiming at serving the information and communicative needs of the citizens/users in the most democratic ways, in accordance with the premises of the commons. It will require regulation but also investment in production facilities and digital education and skills to be able to articulate better those user needs. That digital education needs to be part of the policy is the echo of the writings of both Richta (“cultivation of human capacities”) and Gorz (who draws on Illich’s “tools of conviviality”).

User praxis can generate the demand for this strategy, as it can create a void in user engagement with dominant corporations and a call for the conceptualisation and

establishment of alternative software, applications, platforms, and social organisational entities to carry those out. As the “behavioural surplus” feeds the current digital means of production, a change of practice on the part of the user is able to generate negative network effects, reduce monopoly power and gradually collapse the business models of big data-handling corporations. Alternative Internet user practices, peer production, and coordination with state structures (including municipal and local ones) will be necessary for imagining and realising a more “digital/communicative socialist” network society.

While the outcome is uncertain, the struggles for strengthening the digital commons are far-ranging. Such struggles pose possibilities for achieving a gradual but great disruption of the Internet towards digital socialism. Assuming the continuing significance of Internet infrastructure for business and communication, such struggles might be part of a grand socio-economic disruption of society as totality.

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# Rising With the Robots: Towards a Human-Machine Autonomy for Digital Socialism

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**Abstract:** This essay is concerned with conceptualising digital socialism in two ways. First, this essay typifies digital socialism as a real utopian project bringing together the utopian potential of “full automation” as tied to socio-economic imperatives indicative of socialist aims. Second, in recognition of a critical gap between full automation and an emerging technological autonomy, this essay argues for a human-machine autonomy that situates autonomy as a shared condition among humans and machines. By conceiving of humans and automated technologies as autonomous subject aligned against capital, pursuing the aims of digital socialism can anticipate and avoid capitalist ideologies that hinders possibilities for autonomous pursuit of digital socialism.

**Keywords:** digital socialism, robots, robotics, fully-automated communism, full automation, human-machine autonomy, Autonomist Marxism, Autonomism

## 1. Introduction

This essay attempts to answer the question “how do recent debates about ‘full automation’ and postcapitalist socioeconomics establish a foundation for conceptualizing digital socialism?”

Since 2015, debates about socialism have exhibited a resurgence among public consciousness and electoral politics in the western world. From the election of “Marx-admiring socialist” (Danner 2015) Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the UK Labour Party to successive Bernie Sanders U.S. presidential campaigns foregrounding “democratic socialism” as a series of comprehensive socio-economic reforms aimed at creating an economy that “works for all, not just the very wealthy” (Frizell 2015) to the surge of 13,000 new members and 100 new chapters of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) (Schwartz 2017), “socialism” is increasingly mobilized by political actors.

Concurrently, the emergence of *Jacobin* as the “leading intellectual voice of the American left” (Matthews 2016) and the publication of *The Socialist Manifesto: The Case for Radical Politics in an Era of Extreme Inequality* by *Jacobin* founder Bhaskar Sunkara (2019) – and its coverage in mainstream news outlets from *Wall Street Journal* (Swaim 2019) to *Slate* (Weissman 2019) – have contributed to “more interest in – and support for – socialist ideas than at any time in recent American history” (Nichols 2015, xxv).

Alongside increasing socialist consciousness and mobilisation, the latter part of the 2010s gave rise to the era of “automated connectivity” (Van Dijck 2013, 23), as automated processes built into digital platforms and techniques became significant forces in the production, governance, and maintenance of social life (Gillespie 2014; Bucher 2018). Since 2015, in tandem with the increasing interest in socialism, “full automation” has become increasingly central to imagining life beyond capitalism and thinking through the material means of reconstituting the production and provisioning of labour, goods, and services.

To better understand the relationship between contemporary automation and socialism, this essay teases out critical strands among recent scholarship to, first, define the imperatives of “digital socialism” and, second, interject concerns for technological autonomy otherwise neglected among full automation debates. In doing so, the essay argues for digital socialism to be understood as a “real utopian” (Wright 2010) project, outlines the imperatives of digital socialism, and stresses the opportunity to conceive of autonomy as a shared condition among humans and machines to better solidify and anticipate class solidarity amidst the struggle to achieve socialist ends. The essay proceeds as follows:

- Digital Socialism: Full Automation as Real Utopia (section 2)
- Socialist Imperative 1: Shifting Values and Ethics Associated with Labour (section 3)
- Socialist Imperative 2: Centralised Planning (section 4)
- Socialist Imperative 3: Basic Services (section 5)
- Digital Socialism: Strategic Imperatives and Critical Opportunities (section 6)
- Dualities of Autonomy: Oppositions Between Human and Technological Autonomy (section 7)
- Becoming AutonomoUS: Human-Machine Autonomy (section 8)
- Human-Machine Autonomy and Solidarity Against Capital (section 9)

## 2. Digital Socialism: Full Automation as Real Utopia

Socialism is a socio-economic system predicated on maximising cooperation, democratic participation, and egalitarian outcomes in all spheres of life. Communism is a successive stage of the socialist project that enables all property and means of production to be held in commons (i.e. communally-owned), basic necessities to be apportioned based on a person’s needs, and a centralized source (often conceived as the government) to maintain the mechanisms for communal ownership and equitable distribution. In and outside the United States, the terms “socialism” and “communism” tend to be equated with Maoism, Stalinism, and other national communisms that installed totalitarian ideologues who amassed and wielded power through a form of “state capitalism” (Sperber 2019) ill-suited to ennobling the proletariat and resolving class struggle through democratic participation. On this front, the contemporary promulgation of “socialism” is at least somewhat attributable to the fact that it is no longer subject to “the burden of being associated in the propaganda systems of East and West with Soviet tyranny” (Chomsky 2016), a circumstance that enabled the East to maintain power through the aura of socialist aims and the West to demonize socialism and communism outright.

Socialism has long been associated with utopian thought, leading Engels to distinguish between utopian socialism (prominent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and the historical materialism of Marx’s “scientific socialism” (Engels 1880). Utopia is a broad term that encompasses a range of ideas about idealised conditions for society. In most cases, utopia is a place, one that is less a physical destination and more of a hypothetical realm where a harmonious society can be realised. Utopianism, in this sense, is a mode of thinking that attempts to imagine the conditions enabling social harmony, particularly in the context of governmental and economic relations. Utopian socialists in the 1880s attempted to foster social harmony by “devising plans to make society more cooperative, production more efficient, and distribution more fair” (Paden 2002, 68). These plans did not account for class politics and struggle and thus, for Marx and Engels,

failed to represent the interests of any class, much less the proletariat forced into inevitable contact with capitalist ownership (Paden 2002, 68). For Engels (1880), then, “scientific socialism” entails similar ideas about cooperation and equity rooted in “the materialistic conception of history and the revelation of the secret of capitalistic production through surplus-value” (305) such that socialism is primarily concerned with “the necessary outcome of the struggle between two historically developed classes – the proletariat and the bourgeoisie” (304).

Others attempt to mitigate the ethereal qualities of utopianism with a more pragmatic perspective on concrete political relations. Notably, Ernst Bloch focused on the spiritual aspect of utopia and the ability for political change to alleviate material burdens that undermine spiritual fulfilment in lived experience. For Bloch, utopia entails “the *world* of the soul, the *external, cosmic* function of utopia, maintained against misery, death, the husk-realm of mere physical nature” (Bloch 1918/2000, 3) [emphasis in original]. Bloch’s utopianism is not an exotic hideaway or a proverbial Shangri-La but an inward journey of reflection and recognition of the universal conditions underlying the disillusion and disaffection experienced by many in modern capitalism. By reflecting on this spiritual condition of modern life, the journey inward illuminates the potential for a “utopian reality” (Bloch 1918/2000, 179) envisioned as the ability to strive for a realm of fulfilment capable of being actualized in the material world. The recent emergence of a “real utopia” works from a similar register.

As devised by Erik Olin Wright, a “real utopian” project seeks practical opportunities to restructure social institutions to instantiate alternatives to capitalism and materialise “radical democratic egalitarianism” (2010, 22). By anchoring the large-scale optimistic imaginings of utopian thinking with “specific proposals for the fundamental redesign of different arenas of social instructions” and “immediately attainable reforms of existing practices” (Wright 2010, ii), real utopianism pursues new models for egalitarian practice predicated on their viability and achievability. While Marx and Engels criticise utopian socialists for a reactionary tendency to appeal to working masses with a religious zeal that harkens towards “castles in the air” rather than grounded political struggle (1848, 516-517), the real utopian project squares the circle by situating utopian visions as an outward projection from the fruits of viable material intervention. In doing so, discourses around full automation conceive of automated technologies as “vectors for new utopias” (Hester 2018, 8) and oppose the seeming unfeasibility and immobility of revolutionary traction, calling for “the futural orientation of utopias” combined with “real tendencies of the world today” to devise a feasible starting point for life beyond capitalism oriented towards continued progress and development (Srniczek and Williams 2015, 108). In this way, contemporary ideas about full automation epitomise the spirit of real utopianism by, first, specifying contemporary conditions that make economic and social reconfigurations strategically viable and, second, leverage “full automation” as frame for utopian imaginings.

As a real utopian project, the emerging digital socialism seeks to avoid the technological determinisms often associated with the “California ideology” (Barbrook and Cameron 1996; Turner 2010) and other similar utopian ideas that stress free enterprise and marketplace expansion as the primary means of creating innovative technologies poised to change society for the better. Instead, real utopianism prioritises structural changes to policies and ideologies about the interrelationships of work, ownership, resource planning and allocation. By typifying the specifics of digital socialism as it emerges from debates about full automation from 2015-2019, the goal here is to clarify the lay of the land as it is, rather than argue for what it should be. Key works emerging during this timeframe include *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without*

*Work* (Srnicsek and Williams 2015), *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism* (Frase 2016), *The Automatic Society: The Future of Work* (Stiegler 2018), *Xenofeminism* (Hester 2018), *Fully-Automated Luxury Communism* (Bastani 2019), and *Inhuman Power: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Capitalism* (Dyer-Witheford, Kjøsen and Steinhoff 2019). All of these monographs in their own ways and to varying degrees – engage with full automation in conjunction with describing socio-economic conditions necessary to imagine a postcapitalist world reflective of socialist aims (whether or not the term “socialism” is explicitly used). While I ultimately take up the task of more forcefully arguing for a solidified conception of human and technological autonomy, the first step is to collate and clarify the specifics of digital socialism as it currently stands. In doing so, I identify and specify three socialist imperatives significant to current ideas around full automation:

- Generating New Ethics, Values, and Arrangements for Labour
- Centralising Economic Planning
- Implementing Basic Services

### 3. Socialist Imperative 1: Shifting Values and Ethics Associated With Labour

In the case of the first socialist imperative, Srnicsek and Williams (2015, 125) decry the capitalist work ethic’s insistence that “renumeration be tied to suffering” and suffering the indignities and inequities of capitalist exploitation is “the only means for true self-fulfillment”. To their minds, the ability to implement full automation must account for the long-standing desire to attain status through work, even if said work is seen as undesirable. Significant cultural shifts around the work ethic can not only help underscore the possibilities for personal and collective fulfillment beyond market demands but also mitigate the precarity and turbulence of labour markets increasingly apt to diminish the abundance, variability, and remunerative sufficiency of work prospects. As a viable starting point, shortening the hours of the formal work week could reduce the amount of hours in the five-day week or institute a permanent three-day weekend (Srnicsek and Williams 2015, 116).

In a similar vein, xenofeminism situates automation and other technologies as the means to reconfigure cultural notions of work. Xenofeminism is a recent strand of technofeminism that seeks to abolish the imposition of gender binaries and overturn essentialist gender ideologies associated with biological and social reproduction (Hester 2018). Xenofeminism’s pursuit of gender abolition and anti-naturalism stresses “post-industrial automation” (Hester 2018, 8) and related techno-materialisms as a means of changing concrete relations among gender, work, and social institutions (such as the family). Understood as a “multiply gendered world” (Hester 2018, 30), xenofeminism’s gender abolition seeks to enlarge the range of gendered expression and concomitantly undo expectations of domestic labour as tied to gender. Shifting cultural ideas about the constructed and contested nature of gender is part and parcel of undoing “culturally weaponised markers of identity that harbor injustices” (Hester 2018, 30), including the necessity of child labour as a potentially dangerous bodily labour undertaken by women and ensuing expectations around childrearing and domestic caretaking. Beyond undoing gender naturalism and expectations around domestic and biological labour, Hester offers Donna Haraway’s (2016) notion of “kin” as a “means of prioritizing the generation of new kinds of support networks” (Hester 2018, 63) to realise new forms of collaborative work and care, a “counter-social reproduction” envisioned as “*social reproduction against the reproduction of the social as it stands*” (Hester 2018, 64) [emphasis in original].



Offering full automation as an orienting force for collectivist formation and harmony, Bernard Stiegler (2018) situates capitalist automation as an entropic force that generates ever-increasing uncertainty, disorder, and instability in capitalist markets and society at large. These sentiments are internalised by everyday people who come to envision the future as inhospitable and devoid of the potential for widespread prosperity. For Stiegler (2018, 7), full automation is an opportunity for “dis-automatization”, the harnessing of energies previously-dedicated to formal wage labour and recalibrated towards “*collective investment* of the productivity gains derived from automatization” (Stiegler 2018, 15) [emphasis in original], a collectivism predicated on a negentropic perspective that offsets the disarray of capitalism’s automated entropy and engenders possibilities for egalitarian order and harmony. “Collective investment” also speaks to the need for economic and personal investment in work arrangements to be understood in terms of cooperation and plurality, eschewing the individualistic drives of capitalism to amass capital in defiance of the common good.

In their critique of full automation that foregrounds the role of artificial intelligence (AI), Dyer-Witheford, Kjosen and Steinhoff’s (2019, 153-156) “communist orientation to AI” attempts to reconfigure the relationship between postcapitalist futures and automated technologies. Rather than positing full automation as an opportunistic moment or tool to be seized and applied towards the break from capitalism, a communist orientation to AI prioritises “liquidating the structural dynamics of capital” (153) undergirding the development of automated technologies and the ethos built into these technologies by companies driven to patternise forms of social interactivity antithetical to socialist solidarity. To these authors’ minds, the goal should be to expropriate capital from AI, collectivise ownership of AI, and retrain AI to function in accordance with collectivised values and structure to enact a “true democratization of AI” (Dyer-Witheford, Kjosen and Steinhoff 2019, 154). Among such collectivised values, collectivised ownership is a central facet of the second strategic imperative of digital socialism.

#### 4. Socialist Imperative 2: Centralised Planning

Similar to the way “full automation” is situated as a touchstone for charting a course beyond the confines of capitalism, “post-scarcity” is a similar touchstone among advocates of centralised planning (Fraser 2016; Bastani 2019; Phillips and Rozworski 2019) who attempt to reconcile the technological ability to produce an uncapped abundance of goods and services with the artificial limits placed on production and dissemination by private ownership. Central planning entails a production of goods and services as directed by a governmental source to equitably allocate these goods and services. Even as some aspects of centralised planning receive more analysis than others, one of the recurrent themes among central planners is the ability to generate an abundance of goods and services equitably doled out through such planning, thereby transcending scarcity as a circumstance of private accumulation. One of the common threads about central planning advocacy is that forms of privatised central planning already in place are useful structures capable of being refashioned to equitably allocate resources.

One of the central tenets of Aaron Bastani’s (2019) advocacy for a fully-automated luxury communism is the necessity of demanding “the intentional, conscious planning at the heart of modern capitalism be repurposed to socially useful ends rather than socially destructive ones” (227). Bastani shows a particular concern for finance, foregrounding centralised banking and “municipal protectionism” (207) as two interrelated facets of central planning. Whereas central and private banks currently prioritise the administration of loans and other fiduciary mechanisms based on the assets held by a

borrower and the likelihood of lending as a profitable venture, nationalised central banking shows the potential to guard against the inequities of capitalist finance by overseeing an informal network of locally-owned businesses and banks. In this context, “municipal protectionism” refers to the pursuit of localised businesses owned by workers that can better mitigate inequality through a wider range of ownership models (210). Tied to finance emanating from local banks and credit unions and mitigated by a centralised national bank tasked with ensuring equitable allocation, these types of businesses can protect against micro forms of capitalist domination within the workplace and macro forms of capitalist domination in society at large (211).

In Leigh Phillips and Michael Rozworski’s (2019) monograph-length case study of Wal-Mart’s internal central planning, they stress “openness and cooperation along the supply chain” as fundamental to planning and the ability to continuously replenish resources (2019, 38). By arguing for Wal-Mart’s internal supply chain structure as a centralised mode of production and distribution predicated on collaboration and cooperation among participants, Phillips and Rozworski highlight institutional and political practices already at play that offer a viable means of recalibrating towards socialist ends. In their conception, central planning is not the purview of a small group of planners, programmers, or algorithmic calculations but, instead, relies on democratic participation at all points of production and consumption, if “computer-assisted, decentralized, democratic economic decision making” is to be realised (Phillips and Rozworski 2019, 213).

By treating the possibility of full automation and (post)scarcity as a given, Peter Frase (2016) outlines four possible future scenarios based on recomposed dualities of dualities of hierarchy/egalitarianism and scarcity/abundance: communism (egalitarianism and abundance), rentism (hierarchy and abundance), socialism (egalitarianism and scarcity), and exterminism (hierarchy and scarcity). Planning is but one of many facets impinging upon the extent to which resources are centralised for equitable allocation or concentrated for hierarchical control and, concomitantly, the extent to which resources are produced and replenished. Central planning and allocation also underlie efforts to instantiate and provide basic services.

### **5. Socialist Imperative 3: Basic Services**

One of the most widely and frequently discussed ideas related to full automation is the possibility of a basic income (BI), often conceived as a universal or unconditional basic income (UBI). A basic income is the allocation of a nominal sum of money on a recurring basis to individuals who are not required to provide labour in exchange for this income. Much like the recent resurgence of socialist thought in mainstream political discourse, basic income is an old idea that has received considerable recent attention in correlation with full automation. Since 2015, a veritable cottage industry of popular press and trade books have outlined the case for basic income (Stern 2016; Van Parijs and Vanderborght 2017; Bregman 2017; Lowery 2018), with UBI serving as a cornerstone of Andrew Yang’s 2020 presidential campaign (Yang 2019).

Advocacy for (U)BI tends to stress the increased power workers can enjoy when economic livelihood is not solely tied to wage labour, often stipulated as a necessary condition to address the diminishing need for human labour amidst the rise of full automation. With a UBI in place, workers could potentially choose not to work for certain periods of time, thereby increasing their individual negotiating power and the holistic power of labour (Srnicek and Williams 2015, 120). So long as it is sufficient to provide basic sustenance, allocated unconditionally, and a supplement to welfare programs

(rather than a replacement), the working class can experience greater “voluntary flexibility” as opposed to precarity, instability, and insecurity (Srnicek and Williams 2015, 119; 212). At the individual level, UBI could function as a mechanism for providing universal access to resources while guarding against overuse (Frase 2016).

Criticisms of UBI stress the possibility of UBI as a salve to libertarian and neoliberal ideologies intent on replacing welfare programs with a lump monetary sum, a “full marketization of the welfare state” (Bastani 2019, 225). The concern is that pairing UBI with full automation does not alter the relationship between ownership and labour and, rather than augmenting the power of labour against ownership, risks a “miserable penury” for people whose labour potential is seen as useless and cordoned off from further economic and social mobility (Dyer-Witheford, Kjølseth and Steinhoff 2019, 150-151).

In addition to Srnicek and Williams insisting on UBI as a supplement to welfare programmes, Bastani (2019, 215, 217) accounts for UBI as a compliment to five essential basic services provided on an unconditional basis: housing, transport, education, healthcare and information, wherein “information” is understood as “media production and connectivity”. Under Bastani’s model, the state plays an indispensable role in “procurement with local worker cooperatives building homes, hospitals and schools as well as performing catering, maintenance, cleaning, and support services,” indicating a continued role for private ownership with the caveat “the leverage of anchor institutions will only expand”, given the role of worker-owned businesses more suited to address the common good (217).

## 6. Digital Socialism: Strategic Imperatives and Critical Opportunities

At this point, we can now more specifically sketch “digital socialism” as a real utopian project advocating for full automation as a utopian beacon enjoined with the viable and practical pursuit of the following:

- Generating New Ethics, Values, and Arrangements for Labour
  - Undoing the capitalist work ethic and gendered associations with domestic labour
  - Shortening the formal working week
  - Pursuing collectivity as a means of instituting social harmony, reshaping institutional arrangements, and ensuring collectivist values can be built into automated technologies
- Centralised Planning
  - Planned allocation predicated on democratic participation from contributors and recipients of goods and services
  - A network of localised worker-owned businesses, banks, and financial services operating under a “municipal protectionism” that guards against capital flight
  - Central federal banking that supports and protects localised businesses and finance
- Basic Services
  - Universal access to publicly-developed education, transport, housing, healthcare, and media connectivity and production
  - A basic income apportioned unconditionally as a supplement to universally-available basic services

From this foundational point, the foremost opportunity in pursuit of these goals is to ensure ideas about the relationship of full automation to socialist imperatives do not fall into traps laid by cultural ideas about the nature of autonomy and technological autonomy as an inevitable threat to workers.

## 7. Dualities of Autonomy: Oppositions Between Human and Technological Autonomy

“Autonomous technology” refers to both a long-standing cultural fear about the social implications of technological progress and the functional ability for technologies to operate free from direct human intervention. In terms of the latter, degrees of automated capacity are often described in terms of technological autonomy. A fruitful example is self-driving cars, often referred to as “autonomous” cars. Levels of automation designated by the Society of Automotive Engineers (SAE) range from “zero autonomy” to “full autonomy” along a successive scale of automated capability running from zero to five (with zero as “no automation” and five as “full automation”) (NHTSA 2019). Achieving full automation means that, in the case of self-driving cars, the vehicle can perform driving tasks that do not require a human to operate or intervene (although the technology may allow for human manual operation). As a cultural fear, autonomous technology refers to a belief that technology has “gotten out of control and follows its own course, independent of human direction” (Winner 1977, 13). One of the primary concerns of functional technological autonomy is the realisation of such fears as reinforced by pop culture depictions (i.e. the *Terminator* and *Westworld* franchises), mainstream news headlines declaring “The Future Has Lots of Robots, Few Jobs for Humans” (McNeal 2015), and popular press books such as *Our Final Invention: Artificial Intelligence and the End of the Human Era* (2013).

Even as recent scholarly discourse stresses the utopian potential of full automation, other pervasive cultural discourses about the dystopian “hegemonic” or “apocalyptic” implications of technological autonomy advance ideas about the possibilities for widespread social control or “agents of doom” posing an existential threat to human vitality (Nye 2004, 171). Where the cultural fear of autonomous technology is primarily “the question of human autonomy held up to a different light,” (Winner 1977, 43), one of the primary fears about self-driving cars and other present-day autonomous technologies is the direct threat to posed to the autonomy of human labourers.

Books such as *The Second Machine Age: Work, Progress, and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies* (2014) and *Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future* (2015) stress the increasing capability of intelligent machines to perform cognitive tasks once believed to be the unique purview of human intellect. Postulations about a forthcoming “automation wave” (Ford 2015) posit an impending tide of machines poised to “steal” the jobs of human labourers and threaten to deepen levels of socio-economic inequality as human workers are displaced – and replaced – in corollary with the escalation of automation towards technological autonomy. The threat to the autonomy of human labour supposed by technological autonomy epitomises many of Marx’s concerns about strife and competition within the working class and the intensification of this circumstance when capitalist production pits machines against humans.

In *Capital*, Marx describes the labouring capacity of machines as pitted against human workers and, because of this competition: “The self-valorization of capital by means of the machine is related directly to the number of workers whose conditions of existence have been destroyed by it” (Marx 1867, 557). Just as, with respect to commodities, “the *devaluation* of the world of men is in direct proportion to the *increasing*

*value* of the world of things” (Marx 1844, 271) [emphasis in original], Marx posits a similar corollary relationship between humans and machines whereby the ability for human workers to seek and procure payment for their labour is invariably diminished the more ownership turns to machinic production. Ever the foresighted critic, Marx recognised that “machinery necessarily throws men out of work in those industries into which it is introduced, it may, despite this, bring about an increase of employment in other industries” (Marx 1867, 570). While technological innovation has historically led to the emergence of new industrial paradigms that reconfigure the types – rather than the amount – of labour required (Bastani 2019), the contemporary narrative that “this time is different” indicates an unprecedented and inalterable risk of permanent displacement due to the humanlike intelligence of increasingly autonomous technology (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014; Ford 2015).

Thus, despite the worthiness of drawing out the utopian potential of full automation amidst recent debates, such debates neglect the tendency of full automation to connote fearful notions of autonomous technology and what it portends for the potential of workers to direct their individual and collective capacities towards fruitful socio-economic gains. In this vein, foregrounding full automation risks reinforcing and unintentionally capitulating to Marx’s concerns about competition between humans and machines and its potential to agitate intra-class strife among human workers. Applied towards socialist pursuits, the dichotomy between human and technological autonomy is a critical gap between the ability to imagine the utopian potential of full automation and pursue a democratic egalitarianism that can realise strategic imperatives that make full automation a viable venture.

To mitigate this gap, I offer human-machine autonomy (Cox 2018) as a conceptual frame for recognising that autonomy is not couched in a singular entity, be it human or machine. Within this mindset, understanding human-machine autonomy as a shared condition among humans and highly-automated technologies resists misconceptions about autonomy as an innately dominating force and capitulation to capitalist ideologies around labour and class composition. The next section unpacks aspects of autonomy amenable to this line of thinking, before pulling from autonomist Marxism theory to stress autonomy as a shared condition between humans and technologies and human-machine alignments against capital.

## 8. Becoming AutonomoUS: Human-Machine Autonomy

Ideas about technological and human autonomy as separate and discreet forces existing in negative correlation arise from illusory notions of autonomy as the sole province of an individualistic self. Autonomy is a “political or moral conception that brings together the ideas of freedom and control” often conceived as the ability to be “self-governing, independent, not ruled by an external law or force” (Winner 1977, 16). Scholars of technology and identity, however, reject the conception of an individual self as the source and purview of autonomous potential, particularly on the grounds that the autonomy of the self is a politics of domination. In her “Cyborg Manifesto”, Donna Haraway problematises autonomy as emerging from the relationship between the self and the other. For Haraway, the self is one who is not dominated, a non-domination understood only in relation to the dominance of the other. The supposed ontological nature of the self is “to be autonomous, to be powerful” (Haraway 1990, 219). The ability to experience freedom and control is therefore tied to the ability to impose one’s will onto others, a “tragedy of autonomy” that valorises the supremacy of the self through the domination of the other (Haraway 1990, 219). In their recent critique of technology as a “surrogate humanity”, Atanasoski and Kalindi (2019, 136) attempt to

further liquidate notions of autonomy in relation to a dominating self, citing the “myth of the autonomous human” as the product of a “racial fetish of post-Enlightenment thinking” emanating from colonialist histories built on subjugation and servitude and attendant notions of autonomy as a possibility for those who possess mastery and control over the subjugated and servile.

Such ideas about autonomy as a dominating self extends to technological autonomy, as the cultural fear of autonomous technology expresses itself as not only the loss of control over machines but as “the style of absolute mastery, the despotic, one-way control of the master over the slave” (Winner 1977, 20). Viewed through this lens, the fear of autonomous technology can be understood as bound up in the perceived inability for humans to dominate a technological other and the ability for a technological other to exert the same type of domination humans pursue through autonomous will.

In other words, for all that the illusory concept of autonomy as the purview of the self imparts about the politics of domination, one of the most critical points is that humans and technology share the same root conception of autonomy. Human and technological autonomy is not a matter of “here” and “there” but a shared condition inadequate to delineation along lines of a human or machine and, instead, invokes the same questions around the pursuit and application of power, freedom, and control. As Haraway notes, technology is not an object to be “animated, worshipped and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment” (Haraway 1990, 222). Where autonomy “cannot simply be understood as freedom from others” (Baker and Hesmondhalgh 2013, 40), these “others” include both human and machine counterparts. Moreover, instead of conceiving of autonomy as self-set life against or apart from an “other,” recognizing that we are “socially constituted by others beyond themselves” (Baker and Hesmondhalgh 2013, 40) imparts of a sense of how our autonomous potential is truly a question of *our* autonomy. In other words, conceived in opposition to dualistic conceptions, autonomy is always a shared condition among humans and between humans and machines, even though autonomy is not equitably afforded or experienced. This does not entail a deterministic relationship, however, as economic relations, culture, legal frameworks, and other vectors constitute the circuitry that gives human-machine autonomy its variable charge. Notions of autonomy with respect to capitalist relations and technology underscore human-machine autonomy as a shared condition among humans and machines the way capitalism organises and patternises possibilities for autonomy among ownership, workers, and machines.

Notably, Andrew Feenberg describes “operational autonomy” as a facet of capitalist ownership that incorporates autonomous potential into organisation, machinic, and workflow processes:

Operational autonomy is the power to make strategic choices among alternative rationalizations without regard for externalities, customary practice, workers' preferences, or the impact of decisions on their households. Whatever other goals the capitalist pursues, all viable strategies implemented from his peculiar position in the social system must reproduce his operational autonomy. The ‘metagoal’ of preserving and enlarging autonomy is gradually incorporated into the standard ways of doing things, biasing the solution to every practical problem toward certain typical responses. In industrial societies, strategies of domination consist primarily in embedding these constancies in technical procedures, standards, and artifacts in order to establish a framework in which day-to-day technical activity serves the interests of capital (Feenberg 2002,76).

Understood in this light, capital implants self-serving notions of autonomy into processes that carry through to the fabric of material existence so that the autonomous potential of capital is reproduced and enhanced. To the extent that operational autonomy is a hegemonic imposition of capital, workers possess a counterhegemonic potential, a “reactive autonomy” that Feenberg (2002, 84) otherwise refers to as a “margin of maneuver”. This reactive autonomy entails the ability of workers to leverage capitalist technology for the purposes of “controlling work pace, protecting colleagues, unauthorized productive improvisations, informal rationalizations and innovations” (Feenberg 2002, 84), and otherwise countervailing the operational autonomy of ownership. Reactive autonomy is a margin of manoeuvre because the degree to which workers exercise autonomy can expand or contract, as can the operational autonomy of capital. Much like autonomy among humans and technology, operational, and reactive autonomy are not bracketed off from one another and instead exist as co-constituted forms of autonomy inflecting upon one another even though it is not supposed that reactive autonomy ever exceeds operational autonomy or reactive autonomy is the exemplar way for workers to attain and experience autonomy. Automation plays a variable role in this dynamic, as it

increases management's autonomy only at the expense of creating new problems that justify workers' demands for an enlarged margin of maneuver. That margin may be opened to improve the quality of self-directed activity or it may remain closed to optimize control (Feenberg 2002, 96).

To the mind of the capitalist, regardless of the degree of freedom or control afforded to labour, capitalist exchange “maximizes autonomy in general, promising liberation of the human essence from fixed definitions” (Feenberg 2002, 162), since ongoing acquisition and accumulation are infinite and therefore entail a range of shifting arrangements that increase both operational and reactive autonomy in the aggregate.

Of course, this does not hold up to baseline Marxian scrutiny, as reactive autonomy is an autonomy conceived and experienced only within the auspices of capitalist exploitation, alienation, and expropriation of surplus-value, as if operational autonomy was a natural phenomenon ensconced in some ineffable firmament and not the result of historical processes predicated on vouchsafing power and control in the hands of a dominant few. Nonetheless, reactive autonomy reinforces the central idea of human-machine autonomy: autonomy is a shared condition experienced with varying intensities relative to critical socio-economic inputs shaping how autonomy is conceived, pursued, attained, and experienced. Furthermore, reactive autonomy shines a light on the autonomy of labour, understood by Autonomist Marxism as not only the autonomous potential of labour within capital, but the recognition that labour already possesses the ability to be autonomous from capital.

While the preceding stresses the autonomy of human-machine autonomy as one resistant to traditional notions of autonomy as the purview of the dominating self and, instead, a shared condition among humans and technology shaped by relations to production and other critical vectors, the final section draws from Autonomist Marxism to recalibrate a particular strand of Autonomist thought that considers technology as the means for capitalist domination and the autonomy of workers as the potential to overcome such technology through class conflict. Rather than positing capitalist technology as the dominating force, or the force that must be dominated, the goal in this final section is to reframe this argument in terms that seek to illuminate how dichotomies of human/technology and domination/control are apt to reinforce the individualistic drives

of capitalist competition that pit workers against one another and fracture opportunities for solidified class struggle. Conceiving of autonomy as a shared condition among humans and machines emphasises the commonality already at hand among labour and the ability to draw from the shared potential for autonomy to maximise its potential in work arrangements and the overarching struggle against capital. By doing so, the ability to align full automation with strategic imperatives for socialism can evade technological dystopia, maximise utopian potential, and otherwise resist capitulation to strife among labour entities (human and machine).

## 9. Human-Machine Autonomy and Solidarity Against Capital

Autonomist Marxism is a branch of Marxian inquiry that affirms the potential of labour distinct from capitalist arrangements (Negri 2005; Berardi 2009; Tronti 1966/2000), foregrounding labour's "creative human energy" and the labourer as the "active subject of production, the wellspring of the skills, innovation and cooperation on which capital depends" (Dyer-Witheford 1999, 65). Autonomy, in this context, also refers to "labor's fundamental otherness from capital and *also* the recognition of variety within labor" (Dyer-Witheford 1999, 68). The variety within labour speaks to the recognition that capitalist labour is not a uniform series of functions and workers can strive for circumstances best suited to differentiated skills, innovation, and cooperation, even as wage labour imposes itself as a restrictive force for worker autonomy. Labour's "otherness" from capital, on the other hand, recognises the ability of the working class to exist apart from capitalism, while capitalism cannot exist without the working class. Since capitalism can only instantiate and maintain power through the institutionalisation of its aims, the autonomous potential of labour lies in a "non-institutionalized political power" unique to the working class (Tronti 1966/2000, 247), whose position as the subject of production entails an innate power un beholden to institutional forms or the auspices of capitalist accumulation.

The Autonomist position on technology tends to correspond to the notion of autonomy as the grounds for domination. On one hand, technology is the means for capital to control and dominate workers while, on the other hand, capitalist technology is the thing that should be dominated, as through class conflict workers can upend capitalist technology and subsequently remake it in the image of socialist ends, leveraging the ability for workers' autonomous potential to break from capital and harness their "invention power" (Dyer-Witheford 1999, 69-71). From this perspective, Autonomist views of digital technologies reinforce the way emerging technologies are developed and deployed to be amenable to capitalist relations. In his description of the emerging "cognitariat", Berardi (2009, 35) cites digital technologies and network connectivity as giving rise to the ubiquity of cognitive labour performed without deference to formal work arrangements or social existence, a "creation of technical and linguistic interfaces ensuring the fluidity both of the productive process and of social communication". Matteo Pasquinelli's read on information technology entails a similar transformative process, with regard to Marx's organic composition of capital: "*living information* is understood as continuously produced by workers to be turned into *dead information* crystallized into machinery and the whole bureaucratic apparatus of the factory" (Pasquinelli 2015, 55).

In both cases, digital technology is conceived as a tool to exacerbate capitalist domination. Therefore, it should be surmounted by working class revolution. I do not necessarily quibble or find fault with these assessments but, rather, point out the opportunity for the Autonomist perspective to apply its foundational spirit to digital tech-



nologies and recognise human-machine autonomy as an opportunity to consider political revolution as a coalition of human and technological workers based on their common subjectivity as labouring entities and the recognition for the mutual endeavours of humans and automated technologies to help realise the aims of digital socialism. If the original aim of Autonomist thought was to foreground the autonomy of workers as an inherent feature of class struggle, extending Autonomist thought outwards towards potential socialist futures demands consideration of another possibility: full automation need not be a choice between a tool to shed capitalist dominion or an inert infrastructure awaiting a political revolution to rewire its programming. Instead, a third option emerges: automated technologies as co-constituted with human workers and the working class. By understanding autonomy and autonomous production as a shared condition, human-machine autonomy can frame the struggle against capital as a form of solidarity among autonomous production undertaken across lines of human and technological performance based on their shared position against capital. This position is best illuminated through Mario Tronti's problematisation of a working-class ideology and the "strategy of refusal."

Tronti describes the unnecessary of developing an ideology unique to the working class, since the working class is a "a reality antagonistic to the entire system of capitalism", an ontological position that means workers exist irrespective to capitalism and are not inevitably bound to circumstances enabling the development and persistence of capitalist exchange (Tronti 1966/2000, 6). The working class possesses the potential to exist beyond capitalism, whereas capitalism cannot exist without the exploitation of the worker. Should the working class accept the necessity of ideology, their struggle would become a "*passive* articulation of capitalist development" (7) [emphasis in original]. If the working class needs no ideology, and the pure fact of their autonomous production is sufficient, they are allied with machines as non-ideological and autonomous workers freighted with ideological dimensions by capital. Rather than conceive of technologies as allied with capital by virtue of their operational deployment against workers, we should recognise that ideology is neither a necessity for workers nor machines and both are subject to the imposition of capitalist ideologies with respect to the ways work is arranged and carried out.

Humans and automated technologies are both programmed to perform computational tasks carried out in accordance with the imperatives encoded into such programming (Bucher 2018). Computers are programmed via the input of computer code that dictates how to operate, just as human behaviour is directed by technological and social codes that impart ideas about how humans should operate. In the context of work, any worker striving to build the latest iteration of AI or leverage AI in formal work arrangements occupies an allied subjectivity with technology insofar as both are inflected with ideologies about capitalist work in spite of the shared unnecessary for ideology or work to be undertaken in accordance with capitalist principles. To attempt to break from capitalist technologies is to break from entities allied with workers, as this break is to affirm ideologies about the ontological existence of technologies and their "passive" position within capitalist orders. Further, to break from technology is to revert back towards the ideology of autonomy that insists upon domination as the means for political freedom. Extending Tronti's "strategy of refusal" offers a means to refuse ideological assumptions about autonomy and the split between the autonomous productivity of humans and machines.

The strategy of refusal acknowledges the ability for the working class to halt capitalist production by refusing to carry out capitalist demands or undertakings. Understood as both "the refusal to collaborate actively in capitalist development, [and] the

refusal to put forward a positive programme of demands” (Tronti 1966/2000, 255), this strategy spotlights the autonomy of the working class to exist apart from capitalism and therefore use collective labour power as a means to advance the power of labour. Power, in this context, is the political power to recognise the autonomous potential to refuse capital and the power to cease productive activities that accord economic and social power to capital (Tronti 1966/2000, 256). By expanding the political valence of this refusal to consciously incorporate technological counterparts, the working class aligns all possible autonomous production as part of its refusal strategy and thwarts ideological ideas about autonomy as a source for domination and control. Solidarity with automated technologies, then, is not only possible; it is critical as a means of evading dystopian conceptions of technological autonomy, resisting ideological assumptions about autonomy, and undertaking political praxis geared towards maximising worker autonomy within capitalist as a means to move beyond its horizons.

## 10. Conclusion

While the preceding offers a foundation for typifying digital socialism and incorporating a human-machine autonomy that stresses the shared conditions humans and machines occupy with respect to capital, opportunities abound from this foundation. Scholars should consider relationships between eco-socialism (Pepper 2002; Huan 2014) and full automation, especially potential oppositions between raw resources necessary to develop such technologies and the environmental consequences of continued technological development. Additionally, while the politics of full automation largely corresponds to postcapitalist perspectives, Blockchain advocates imagine Blockchain automation as a source for Libertarian autonomy conceived as liberation from central banking and the state (Greenfield 2017; Swartz 2017), indicating a critical need to consider the Blockchain’s decentralised structure and politics with an eye towards socialist imperatives.

To stress the utopian and joyous potential of digital socialism, human-machine autonomy should also be used to expand ideas around “acid communism” (Gilbert 2017; Fisher 2018). Acid communism is a “provocation and a promise” (Fisher 2018, 757) oriented towards recapturing the joyous spirit and harmonious possibilities of counter-cultural politics and lifestyle. Where neoliberalism established itself as a sensible form of individualism defined in contrast to ideas of collectivity and communal living emerging out of the 1960s counterculture, acid communism urges re-establishing counter-cultural pursuits for “the convergence of class consciousness, socialist-feminist consciousness raising and psychedelic consciousness, the fusion of new social movements with a communist project, an unprecedented aestheticisation of everyday life” (Fisher 2018, 758). It is, in other words, a recuperation and continuation of a cultural project otherwise stripped of its revolutionary potential and grouped into a libertarian ethos underpinning the emergence and global expanse of Silicon Valley (Turner 2010). Human-machine autonomy, then, can stress the collective reservoirs of autonomy already at hand for a collective consciousness that simultaneously seeks to stand down capitalist power imposition and uplift the ability to live a joyful life of meaningful pursuit indicative of Marxian aims for a worker’s paradise.

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# Spaces of Struggle: Socialism and Neoliberalism With a Human Face Among Digital Parties and Online Movements in Europe

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**Abstract:** This article aims to illustrate the complexity of the relationships between digital participation spaces and organisations related to the Southern-European and US socialist traditions. Digital communication and, in particular, the various platforms of digital participation have been long living between the illusion of techno-libertarian thrusts and the technocratic tendencies framing the New Public Management approach. The suspicion of socialist-inspired parties but also of post-Marxist social movements towards the digital is connected on the one hand to the organisational structure of the parties and on the other hand to the capacity of neoliberalism to incorporate digital innovation in its cultural horizon. Participation platforms have often been functional to the emergence of a neoliberalism with a human face, capable of offering potential spaces of participation that depoliticise civic activism and transform it into a mere technical tool of minimal governance. In recent years, however, digital party experiences have developed in the context of left-wing organisations. In other cases, digital platforms have been used as tools of mobilisation and even as instruments for the creation of a new sentimental connections with the increasingly fragmented “popular classes”. Digital has thus become a “space of struggle”, in the same meaning it was used in the 1980s by Stuart Hall. This article presents the first findings of a research project on the use of digital platforms by: a) parties of socialist inspiration in Italy, France, Spain, Portugal and the USA; and b) bottom-up social movements. The analysis follows an empirical approach based on: a) the analysis of organisations; b) content analysis (Evaluation Assertion Analysis) of political and policy documents on the use of digital as a tool for political struggle; c) in-depth interviews to digital activists of social movements.

**Keywords:** platform party, socialist parties, social movements, neoliberalism, Marxism

## 1. Introduction

Politically, the broad masses only exist insofar as they are organized within political parties. The changes of opinion which occur among the masses under pressure from the determinant economic forces are interpreted by the parties, which first split into tendencies and then into a multiplicity of new organic parties. Through this procedure of disarticulation, new association and fusion of homogeneous entities, a more profound and intimate process of breakdown of democratic society is revealed. This leads to a definitive alignment of conflicting classes, for preservation or for conquest of power over the state and productive apparatus (Gramsci 1921, in Forgas 1999, 121-122).

Gramsci's statement, which first appeared in *L'Ordine Nuovo* on 25 September 1921, accurately describes a process of disarticulation that – in other forms – has been representative of the distinctive character of the transformation of political parties Gramsci himself had been developing the idea of the party as a collective intellectual, an element of a complex society in which the concretization of a collective will is recognized and partially established in action (see Gramsci Prison Notebook 13, 1; now in Forgacs 1999, 238-243). The party, in this sense, carries out an educational function and political direction of the class it represents: this function is possible only because the party is a “collective”.

The processes of parties' transformation – and in particular those of the socialist tradition – have made the collective dimension marginal, favouring the aggregation of individual requests. In this scenario, digital technologies can play different roles:

- a) they can function as mere tools to support consensus building;
  - b) they can become organizational facilitation tools;
  - c) they can constitute a terrain of political struggle for hegemony;
- and, finally,

d) they can promote the development of a new digital socialism, also helping to reconnect people with politics. However, these roles are not always necessarily alternative.

This article aims at discussing the role of digital technologies in the political life of some European left-wing parties and in the organisational models of radical left social movements. In particular, here we present the first findings coming from the study of policy documents on digital technologies produced by some socialist/labourist/left-wing parties and the very first considerations taken from some of the many in-depth interviews with digital activists of a number of social movements.

In the following sections we will try to shed light on: a) the role of socialist parties in the framework of transformations of representation, trying to identify the relationships among intermediate bodies, processes of depoliticisation and development of the so-called post-representative politics (section 2); b) the role that technologies play in these processes and, in particular, how the techno-enthusiasm forms are functional to a capitalism with a human face but still hardly neoliberal (section 3); c) the role of platform parties on the one hand and digital technologies for communication as different outcomes of political re-organization processes on the other hand (section 4); d) the role and function of social movements in the emergence of new forms of re-politicisation which is indispensable for the emergence of a new digital socialism.

## 2. Political Parties in a Post-Representative World

The many different theorisations of representation (Pitkin 1967; Brito Vieira and Run-ciman 2008; Pettit 2009; Saward 2010) choose different perspectives. Both the bipartition between Pitkin's (1967) standing for and acting for, and the new perspectives, which are less focused on a binary logic, seem in part unfit for interpreting the change in the dynamics of relations between representatives and represented, in particular in the scenario of the media politics. The different theorisations, however, keep open the old question of political representation and its relationship with liberal democracy. The mandate of the elected can only be free (since assuming a delegation contract means making the individual's autonomy disappear) but, at the same time, the elected must place themselves in the position of being controlled by the voters. In other words, representatives play an active role (legislative function) and must therefore enjoy a certain autonomy, being capable of going beyond the electoral exercise. At the same time, precisely because of this role, they must in some way “depend” on the electorate. The

paradox is evident: if the representatives had an imperative mandate, they should only respond to a client (theoretically plural, in practice traceable in the leader) or respond only to themselves (and in this case they would be totally released from any control). That is, representative democracy works only if we avoid an opposition between imperative mandate and free mandate (Urbinati 2013), making sure that the latter is tempered by some form of popular control. The political mandate, in other words, still needs parties (or similar organizations), as explained very clearly by Nadia Urbinati (2013, 99).

Representation has a very strong connection with another concept that cannot be underestimated: citizenship. Representation, in effect, is a relationship between a social group and a representative who shares the group's interests, expectations, values, problems, territorial emergencies and so on. It can be affirmed, at this point that without social inclusion – made possible by the logic of political representation or similar processes – citizenship does not even exist and therefore that no representation can exist without representation. It is a syllogism not without ambiguity but substantially correct.

One of the outcomes of the democracy of organised distrust is represented by the emergence of new forms of social surveillance and political militancy. Among the latter, significant positions belong to advocacy groups, expressions of active citizenship (Moro 2013), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), observatories on specific issues and campaigns (in many cases organized through digital platforms) and the results of actions in the territory (such as the Stop-TTIP, No-Ceta, etc. campaigns). In many cases, these organisations (campaigns first and foremost but also different advocacy groups) do not “represent” in the traditional sense, do not have membership structures, and are mostly single-issue (i.e. oriented to a specific cause). They carry out activities of influence and, in some cases, activities of lobbying (Ceccarini and Diamanti 2018, 351). In light of new organised forms, representative democracy seems to give way not only to counter-democratic demands but also to what John Keane (2009) calls *monitory democracy*. A monitoring carried out both through lobbying practices and through the legitimization of tools coming from the tradition of deliberative democracy (Elstub and McLaverty 2014), such as citizen juries, deliberative polls, city assemblies, online consultations, petitions, and finally through organizations for monitoring and protection, such as consumer movements or associations for human rights. The Internet constitutes a “workplace” that facilitates the emergence and rooting of these experiences, although it does not constitute an activation element.

The *monitorial citizen* (as in the expression of Michael Schudson [1998]) tends to effectively replace both the citizen voters and even the critical citizens (Norris 1999). In this new scenario, representative democracy – based on a direct relationship between citizens and legislative assemblies – gives way to post-representative politics (Keane 2013), in which citizens can experience forms of creative activism that are not always consistent with the traditions of political representation through party organizations.

At this point, we already have some critical elements. We have probably entered a political phase that can actually be defined “post-representative”, in which forms – sometimes very controversial – of “direct representation” (De Blasio and Sorice 2019) emerge. At the same time, the institutional fabric of liberal democracies is still based on the mechanisms and logics of representation. Hence the need to consider political parties is inescapable, although their credibility and their own social legitimacy have been severely tested both by economic crises (Morlino and Raniolo 2018) and by the (alleged) crisis of institutional representation. This is an almost paradoxical situation



that has affected, however, most severely those parties that had a strong organisational root and were deprived of both their social legitimacy and their ties to the territory in one fell swoop. In this framework, the parties inherited from those of mass integration – essentially the parties of the socialist / social-democratic and communist tradition – were the most affected, precisely because their “heavy” organisation did not lend itself to transformations that were too rapid.

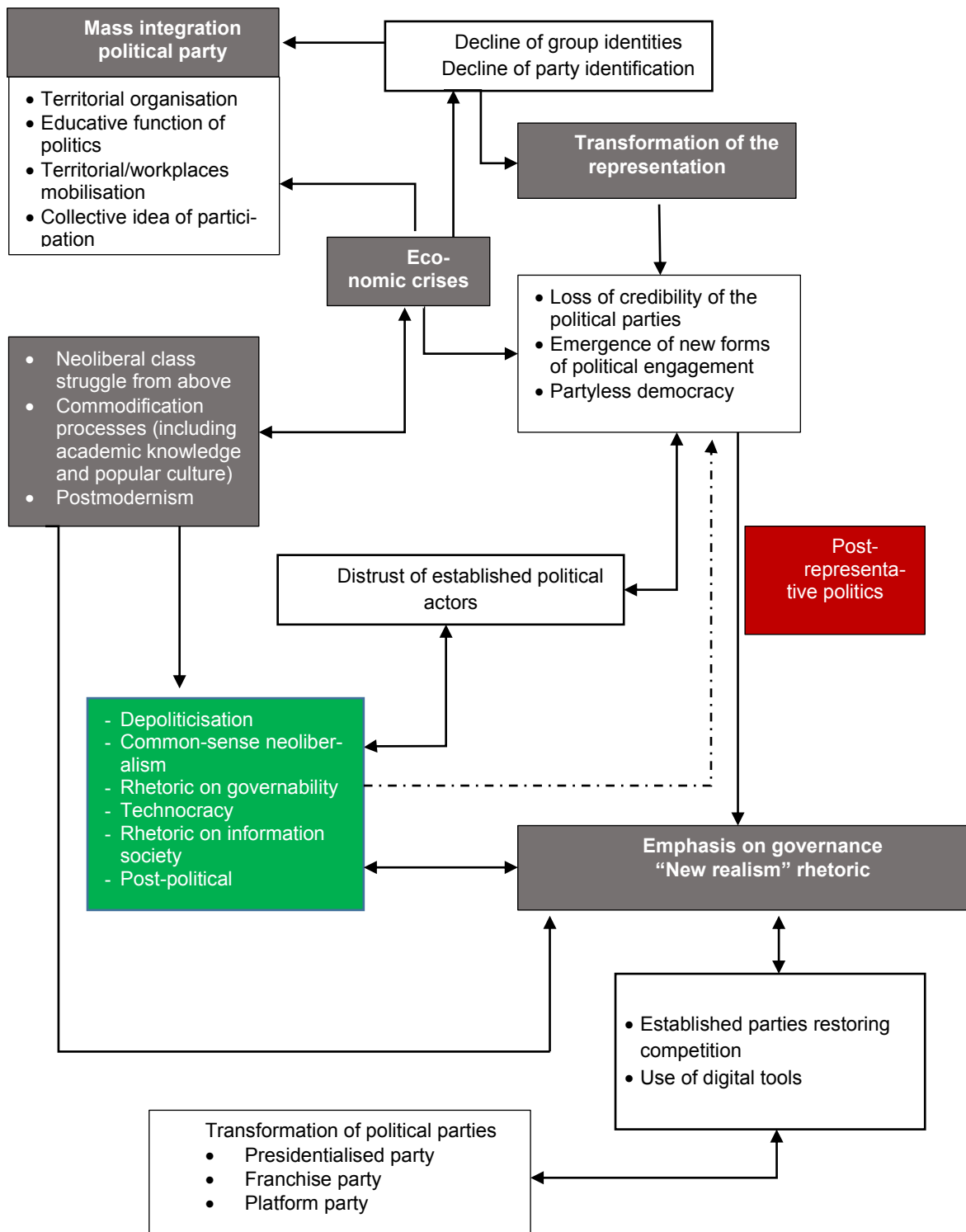


Figure 1: Political parties, depoliticisation and post-representative politics

However, we must also consider some forms of political dealignment that have affected the socialist/labourist parties. The use of the discursive strategy of economic “realism”, for example, has certainly represented an element of criticality. This aspect, however, had already been noted by Stuart Hall in 1988, when the expression “new realism” was used to indicate a substantial transformation of the Labour Party, capable of aggregating electoral consensus but not activating “sentimental connection”:

It [the Labour Party] can mobilize the vote, provided it remains habitually solid. But it shows less and less capacity to connect with popular feelings and sentiments, let alone to transform them or articulate them to the left. It gives the distinct impression of a political party living on the capital of past connections and imageries, but increasingly out of touch with what is going on in everyday life around it (Hall 1988, 207).

A simplified graphic representation of the transformation involving the mass political parties is presented in figure 1. It is evident how different factors influence or have a role in this transformation. At the same time, it is useful to note that these transformations could be better understood if we study them in the frame of neoliberal ideology’s rising. The emphasis on technology and on the insurgence of the “information society”, for example, are the outcomes of a neo-capitalist approach and the left-wing parties across Europe have under-evaluated the role of communication in the intricate relationships among state, market and social actors, as clearly stated by Dallas Smythe more than forty years ago (Smythe 1977)<sup>1</sup>.

### 3. Political Parties Between De-politicisation and Digital Enthusiasm

Moreover, over the last thirty years storytelling about overcoming the “old” categories of right and left has become hegemonic, to the point of being considered a trait of cultural “modernity” and even scientifically based. The idea that the political categories of right and left were outdated was preceded by the development of a broad literature on the “end of ideologies” (Fukuyama 1992): several positions developed within it, some more distinctly technocratic, others that identified in the development of shared deliberative processes and in the affirmation of collaborative governance the only elements necessary for the qualitative increase of democracy. The success of economic approaches such as that of the Chicago School or of paradigms such as New Public Management has favoured the legitimacy of these positions.

The beginning of the 21st century, however, has been characterised by various phenomena:

- a) the revival of nationalisms and religious fundamentalisms;
- b) the explosion of the economic crisis of the Western world, that was generated precisely by those economic recipes that had achieved media and political success but proved to be unsuitable for solving the structural problems of the world economy (Crouch 2011);
- c) the rebirth of the various populisms and the emergence of the “challenger parties” (mainly right-wing), often connected precisely to the criticism of the liberal system;
- d) the onset of several popular protest movements, which attacked the outcomes of liberal democracy precisely by demanding more participatory political processes and, generally, “more democracy”.

<sup>1</sup> Christian Fuchs (2014, 14) correctly notes that “the role of mediatization, ICTs and knowledge work in contemporary capitalism was anticipated by Marx’s focus on the general intellect”.

This last aspect, in particular, has brought to light the democratic short circuit: not only the historical inconsistency of the alleged overcoming of right and left but also the apparent paradox of a criticism conducted towards liberal democracy because perceived as being rather insensitive to requests for people participation.

The processes of de-politicisation have been studied by different authors (Mouffe 2005; Rancière 2010; Žižek 1999) with components that are sometimes different but always referable to the idea of a substantial loss of centrality of politics as belonging and project: in other words, politics has often been reduced to only a dimension of policy, with a substantial marginalization both of the ideological conflict and of polity as a project community.

Colin Hay (2007) has clearly highlighted the relationship between the so-called anti-politics, the tendencies of the resurgent populisms and some aspects of the neoliberal turning point. The process of depoliticisation has thus been framed within the development of complex social phenomena, some of which underpin the post-political tendency that seems to have characterized the last decade of Western democracies. In this scenario, we can see how some of the political-institutional innovations theoretically oriented to the growth of participation (such as, for example, the experiences of collaborative governance, some variations of e-government and different public consultation tools) have been absorbed into internal trends of substantial anesthetization of any forms of social conflict and, in general, of popular participation.

In fact, these innovations have proved to be mechanisms of political legitimisation for the political *élites*, obtaining on the one hand their own failure with respect to the objectives (increasing the amount and awareness of popular participation) and on the other hand, their rejection by the popular classes that have interpreted them (not without some reason) as “top-down” tools also perceiving them as strategies of the *élites*. To the forms of innovation – often however supported in good faith by local administrations and scholars – some institutional reforms have been added, and are often used as tactics and tools for the affirmation of a post-political neoliberal projects (Flinders and Buller 2006). Both institutional reforms and some experiences of democratic innovation have thus turned out to be “mechanisms used by politicians to depoliticise issues, including delegation, but also for the creation of binding rules and the formation of discursive preference shaping” (Fawcett et al. 2017, 5)<sup>2</sup>.

In this situation, the semantic shift from the idea of “government” to the notion of “governance” should also be considered: it constitutes one of the elements that accompanies the emergence of the so-called “post-political” and of the reduction of politics to only economic concerns.

These post-political tendencies are outcomes of the depoliticisation, and they have been very often accompanied by the phenomena of re-politicisation within the rhetoric of “governability”. This last component has been often wrapped in a “common sense neoliberalism”, fed by the rhetoric on the “light state”, that of efficiency<sup>3</sup> at the expense of the quality of democracy and of the commodification of citizenship (Crouch 2003). The “common sense neoliberalism” that emerged in the late 1990s could be contrasted only re-discovering the educative role of politics. “Politics, as Gramsci insisted, is always ‘educative’. We must acknowledge the insecurities which underlie common sense’s confusion and contradictions and harness the intensity and anger which comes through in many of the readers’ comments” (Hall and O’Shea 2015, 65).

<sup>2</sup> Johan Hartle (2017), studying the political ontology of Lukàcs and Debord, analyses the process of reification as a form of structural de-politicisation.

<sup>3</sup> In many fields of social life, the concept of efficiency has been supported by the rhetoric on “meritocracy”, coherently functional to the neoliberal project (see Littler 2017).

On the other hand, the insurgence and development of digital technologies for communication have deeply changed the scenario. The old techno-libertarian tendencies of the sixties re-emerged, merging with the (fundamentally technocratic) rhetoric of technology as an instrument of democratization of capitalism and of improving administrative efficiency. The new “participatory culture” (Fuchs 2016, 87) would also be capable of replacing elective assemblies and giving more (presumed) power to citizens. This techno-enthusiast ideology is an “expressions of the capitalist fetishism of technology that Marx criticised” (Fuchs 2016, 207).

In this way, digital technologies have entered the imaginary at two levels: the first level is a hyper-optimistic techno-enthusiasm that has fundamentally considered the digital as a shortcut to recover the participation that had diminished in the territory; the second, more critical level, has identified in the digital technologies the tools for a technocratic control of the organization of the State and of political life.

#### 4. Towards the Platform Party

Very often digital technologies and, in particular, their applications to the e-government have been functional to the New Public Management approach (De Blasio and Sorice 2016), activating an ideological transformation of the “public” (perceived as old) in the efficiency idea of the state-company (Crouch 2011; Sorice 2014).

There are also many parties of different orientations which adopt platforms of democratic participation: significantly, however, the wealth of possibilities for online deliberation remains confined to a few exceptions.

The thesis that the Internet would have led to the emergence of claims and the development of political movements from the non-leading horizontal structure does not actually find empirical confirmations but has instead been contradicted by numerous studies. In a rather hasty manner, digital activism was considered to be the characterizing aspect of the new political movements and to be the outcome required of digital media; in fact, many studies have shown that movements with a strong online presence have at least as strong a presence within a territory (Kreiss 2012; della Porta and Rucht 2013). Another common place idea is that the movements would always be horizontal, without a hierarchical structure and without a leader, by virtue of the fact that they would borrow not only the dynamics of transmitting messages but also the modalities of the adoption of decisions. In fact, in the study conducted by Donatella della Porta and Dieter Rucht (2013), diversified forms of power and conflict are also identified in the global justice movements, while Paolo Gerbaudo (2012) spoke of a “choreography of the assembly” in which the collective dimension of the protest is organised and staged by an elite group of activists. These frame elements are useful for understanding the scenario in which both the forms of online participation “from below” and the so-called platform parties are born and develop.

The studies on platform parties are the result of a long reflection on the transformation of the political parties. From the classifications of Duverger (1951) to those of Kirchheimer (1966) up to the fundamental work of Stein Rokkan (1970) to finally the analysis on the emergence of the “cartel parties” (Katz and Mair 1994), various studies on the organizational form of the so-called intermediate bodies have taken place. The development of personal, presidentialised, liquid-presidentialised parties (Prospero 2012) and even franchise-parties (Bardi, Bartolini and Trechsel 2014) have marked the last decades, framed by the crisis of legitimacy of the traditional parties. The rhetoric of participation (“participationism”) has also accompanied the emergence of new organizational forms of politics, although such rhetoric has been reduced to a generic “openness to society” and programmatically refuses an internal organization based on

deliberative and participatory logics. In this context, even the use of primary elections (in small as in large scale) responds to a rhetoric of participation but often ends up being just a tool for legitimizing the party elite. The accentuation of the refusal to participate or a distrust in politics and, in particular, in the political parties by the citizens is not surprising in this context

Very often it was thought – in a somewhat naive manner – that to favour participation and to increase the internal democracy of a party it would be enough to enlarge the selectorate of the party itself<sup>4</sup>. In reality it is not enough to enlarge the selectorate, as is evident from the crisis of credibility (and sometimes even legitimacy) that has hit the traditional parties – and often precisely those with more deep-rooted popular traditions – in the Western representative democracies over the last twenty years

One of the responses to the representation deficit – and to the related refusal of participation through the only electoral delegation – has come in recent years from the adoption of communication technologies, in particular those connected to the Internet and, more generally, to the opportunities offered by the development of democratic participation platforms (De Blasio 2018). In many cases, these technologies have been framed as neutral tools, but “far from being considered only as tools, media and communication technologies have become a site of struggle in their own right, and as such are subject to object conflicts” (Hess 2005, 516, cited in Milan 2013, 2).

In this scenario, we have been focused on the rise of the so-called platform party (also defined as the “digital party”<sup>5</sup>). This type of party finds new organisational methods in Internet tools and in participatory platforms. Platform parties are born from participative logic. However, in many cases they are revealed as results of the hyper-representation phenomena. The leader (the supreme representative of all the people) creates a symbolic connection with the super-people (the superbasis in the analysis of Gerbaudo [2019]), the one represented by the active people in platforms of digital participation. The participation evoked in this type of party is of a dualistic nature. The emphasis on direct democracy, however, often delegitimises any form of participatory democracy. There are obviously many types of the platform party and they are affected by national peculiarities and electoral systems. However, they are a response to the growing popular need for participation, albeit in intermittent forms and with a personal and daily commitment (Ceccarini and Diamanti 2018). In essence, platform parties use technology as an organisational mode and as a structural architecture. At the same time, they use digital participation platforms as mobilisation tools, as spaces for policy making (the presentation and discussion of proposals) and as places for decision making (voting on proposals and policy decisions). In some cases, a platform party can also take on a stratarchical type of structure.

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<sup>4</sup> The selectorate is the set of individuals that can choose a candidate (as in the case of the primaries) or elect him/her (in the case of an electoral procedure). The selectorate goes from a maximum (when it totally overlaps with the electorate) to a minimum (when it concerns only a power oligarchy or, indeed, the only leader). The selectorate of “open” primaries is theoretically the entire electorate (the practice is very different for a number of reasons); what decides candidates in an electoral system with blocked lists and without preferences is instead constituted by a small elite or by the sole party leader.

<sup>5</sup> Theoretically, anyway, there would be some differences between platform and digital party, even if in the current political debate, the two expressions are usually overlapped. We can simplistically say that a platform party is always digital whilst a digital party is not necessarily platform.

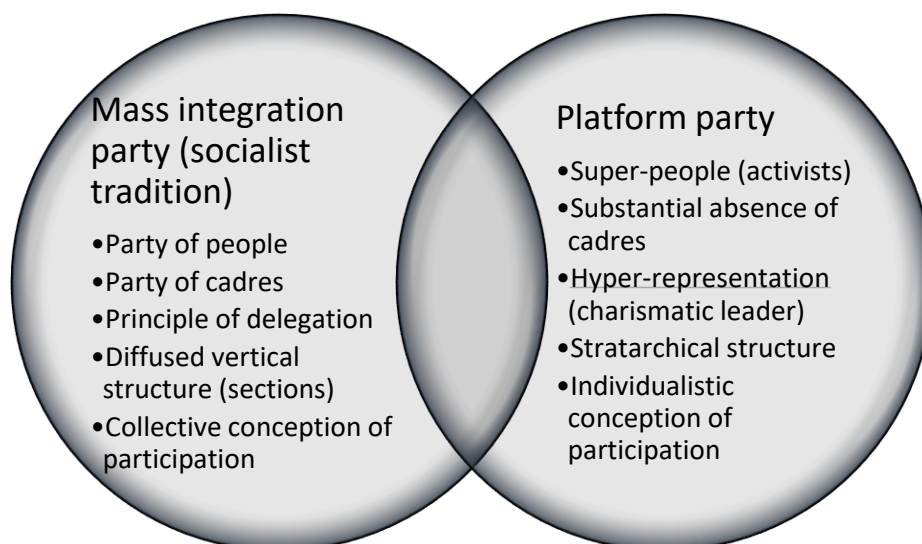


Figure 2: Characteristics of the mass party and of the platform party.

Technologies respond efficiently to three different tendencies of contemporary politics. In fact, they can:

- a) influence the organizational models of participation;
- b) accelerate the processes of deconstruction of intermediary bodies;
- c) feed the perspective of liquid democracy (a really controversial concept, usually overlapping with that of “delegative democracy” – a merging of representative and direct democracy – based upon the use of digital platforms, such as, for example, Liquid-Feedback<sup>6</sup>).

These three tendencies are not necessarily opposed to each other. Digital technologies, in fact, can contribute to the deconstruction of the “old” intermediate bodies and, at the same time, favour new organisational model of participation that are at the background of new party structures. At the same time, the so-called “liquid democracy”, and, in general, the use of digital participatory platforms can activate new forms of participation but also contribute to a radical change in the party’s organisation. Digital technologies can be tools for: a) mobilisation, b) policy making, c) decision making.

Country	Political Parties
<b>France</b>	<i>Parti Socialiste</i>
	<i>France Insoumise</i>
<b>Italy</b>	<i>Partito Democratico</i>
	<i>Liberi e Uguali</i>
<b>Portugal</b>	<i>Partido Socialista</i>
	<i>Partido Comunista Português</i>
<b>Spain</b>	<i>Partido Socialista Obrero Espanol</i>
	<i>Podemos</i>
<b>USA</b>	<i>Democratic Socialists of America</i>

Table 1. Political parties analysed.

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://liquidfeedback.org/> on the experiences of the Pirate Parties across Europe. There are also some connections between liquid democracy and the idea of liquid modernity (Bauman 1999).

Following this simple taxonomy, we have been studying the use of digital platforms by a) parties inspired by socialism in Italy, France, Spain, Portugal and the USA; b) bottom-up social movements. The analysis has been framed in an empirical approach based on the analysis of organisations on the one hand and on the content analysis (Evaluation Assertion Analysis) of the political and/or policy documents on the use of digital as a tool for political struggle.

The analysis has been conducted in respect to the political parties listed in Table 1.

The Democratic Socialists of America have been considered only as a “control variable”. Any comparison with the left-wing parties of Southern Europe is in fact almost impossible<sup>7</sup>.

	Name	Mobilisation	Policy making	Decision making	Organisational tool	W	A
<i>Parti Socialiste</i>	Conseil Citoyen (*)	YES	YES	NO	YES	Y	N
	Social media	YES					
<i>France Insoumise</i>	Plateform d'action	YES	YES	YES	Partly	Y	N
	Social media	YES					
<i>Partito Democratico</i>	Bob (**)	NO	NO	NO	YES	N	Y
	PdApp	YES	YES	NO	Partly	N	Y
	Social media	YES					
<i>Liberi e Uguali</i>	Un partito di Sinistra (***)	YES	YES	NO	NO	Y	N
	Social media	YES					
<i>Partido Socialista</i>	Social media	YES					
<i>Partido Comunista Português</i>	Youtube channel	YES				Y	Y
	Social media	YES					
<i>Partido Socialista Obrero Español</i>	miPSOE	YES	YES	NO	YES	Y	Y
	Social media	YES					
<i>Podemos</i>	Participa	YES	YES	YES	YES	Y	N
	Social media	YES					
<i>Democratic Socialists of America</i>	Social media	YES			YES		

(\*) = Initiative launched by Benoît Hamon, presidential candidate at 2017 Presidential Elections

(\*\*) = Launched in 2017, then discontinued

(\*\*\*) = Semi-official platform (LeU is not a party but a cartel of left-wing parties)

W = web; A = App

Table 2: Tools used by political parties for functions and type

The first element to underline is the substantial absence of co-ordinated digital actions. Mostly, the tools are functional to mobilisation practices and work essentially as elements of support for political communication. Democratic platforms of participation are

<sup>7</sup> The DSA constitutes an interesting example of the merging of two workplaces: the web (as a space of struggle) and the local communities (through the “community chapters”) as a site of proposal and organisation.

constitute a minority in the total number of technologies employed. In the Iberian peninsula there are the most radical developments: on the one hand, the use of digital technologies has taken root in Spain thanks to the success of Podemos (Caruso 2017) and the ability of the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE, the Socialist Party) to intercept a demand for innovation. Podemos was over time transformed from a party-platform to a party that uses a platform; PSOE, tried to use social media and its app (and a web-based platform too) as tool of a counter-storytelling to offer a partly different answer to Podemos.

On the other hand, there is Portugal (a country in which, moreover, there are many platforms for participation for civic uses) where left-wing parties (winners of the 2019 political elections) seem to devote more energy to activity in offline space and the (very active) use the dominant social media platforms. In particular, the Socialist Party uses Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, has a YouTube channel and even a Pinterest account; the Communist Party uses Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, has a YouTube channel and also WhatsApp as source of information (similarly to how PSOE in Spain uses a Telegram channel).

In France, the “participatory programme” experiments launched by Benoît Hamon in 2017 did not find a follow-up in the Socialist Party's projects (perhaps due to the party's electoral decline). However, the platform launched by *France Insoumise* moves from the level of mobilisation to spaces where concrete proposals are developed and active deliberation processes take place. At least in part the platform is an aspect of France Insoumise's organisational modality<sup>8</sup>.

There is a substantial absence of specific documents and policies on the use of digital technologies, above all at the organisational level. This seems apparently contrasting with the parties' effort to activate consensus and mobilisation through social media<sup>9</sup>.

Greater attention seems to be given to digital participation in Italy, where, however, the socialist-inspired parties have not had (at the moment) great successes in the adoption of digital technologies: alongside social media – a “continuous bass” of all parties' communication activities – there are only the apps produced by the Democratic Party (but not a web platform<sup>10</sup>) and the interesting but unsuccessful attempts of the *Liberi e Uguali* (LeU, Free and Equal) platforms (and even before that of *Sinistra Italiana-Italian Left*, one of the small parties that then gave life to LeU in 2018) .

In none of the parties under analysis – at least in the official documents concerning the use of digital and its relations with political organisation and with the exception of the Portuguese parties – there are references to the use of a Marxist (or post-Marxist) perspective on technology and communication, although in Marxist theory there have been many reflections on this topic from the first stage of Cultural Studies, to some approaches of political economy of the media (Smythe 1977), until the most recent

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<sup>8</sup> Our analysis only takes into account the possibility of the different dimensions. No analysis has been conducted on their effective achievement.

<sup>9</sup> This part has been realised treating the parties' organisational documents as political discourse and using a simplified form of Evaluative Assertion Analysis. Due to the limited presence of the discourse “on digital”, the semantic evaluation differentials are not discriminatory. This is, anyway, an important outcome, even if not as expected.

<sup>10</sup> This fact is even more contradictory considering that the Democratic Party (directly or through initiatives promoted by their MPs) was one of the first to launch some pioneering web-based platforms of participation. Other Italian experiences of the use of digital platforms are those of the small Pirate Party and of Five-Star Movement: this article, anyway, focuses only on parties coming from or belonging to the socialist tradition.



perspectives of the Marxian study of social media and digital technologies and, more in general, of Internet studies. A very comprehensive and accurate overview of the Internet Studies in a Marxian perspective is available in Fuchs and Dyer-Witheford (2012; see also Fuchs 2014, 73)<sup>11</sup>.

Different perspectives are present in the area of social movements and, in particular, in those positioning themselves “on the left”. Both in the first interviews conducted with the activists of various social movements and in the results of similar research that we have conducted over the last three years, a different awareness has emerged with respect to the role of digital communication technologies. Along with positions of suspicion towards communication (which appear minoritarian anyway), there is growing awareness that digital ecosystems are spaces for struggle, as we will try to argue in the next section.

## 5. Digital Socialism: A Challenge for Social Movements and Political Parties

The crisis of legitimacy of the left – and especially of the socialist/labourist and/or social-democratic parties – derives from many factors, not least their acquiescence to the economic dictates of neoliberalism and the progressive marginalisation of themes such as socialism, social justice, equality, and the democratisation of society in their political programmes and agenda. The complex question of the cleavage of the sentimental connection (Gramsci, *Quaderno XVIII*, now in Gramsci 1971, 135-136) between parties that stand in the socialist tradition and the popular classes constitutes one of the most important points of discussion among scholars and also politicians. The new tools of democratic participation represent a great opportunity for developing dynamics of inclusiveness. It is not enough to adopt the structure of the party-platform. Rather, instead, it would be useful to merge the dimension of the net (as a tool) with a territorial presence in the offline world capable of starting from the needs of society.

One of the elements that left-wing parties have not always understood is that there is no contradiction between the practices of digital democracy and the processes of participation in territorial realities offline. Digital participatory platforms can be used alongside “apps” for facilitating the involvement of citizens and activists. A greater territorial involvement can in turn determine the growth of active individuals online and offline, creating a virtuous circle of participation that may be intermittent but not occasional. In this perspective, digital platforms can offer tools for mobilisation, can act as spaces for facilitating policy making and, finally, they can favour the adoption of more democratic decision-making mechanisms.

Mobilisation, shared formation of public policies and decisions taken with a democratic method are characteristic and peculiar elements of the socialist tradition. Digital technologies can be extraordinary tools for rooting and spreading socialist values. It is necessary to place communication technologies and architectures within shared rules of transparency and to enable democratic access in order to avoid the drift of the platform parties that preach direct online democracy to erase participatory democracy and the development of a real egalitarian democracy. In other words, it is necessary to remember that technologies are not neutral and their use – in one sense or another – is a political act. Adopting these technologies to the logic of online deliberation, for example, and not to the aggregative logic of online direct democracy (Mosca 2018), would mean, moreover, empowering the voices of the people who are without voice

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<sup>11</sup> Some prejudices on Marx’s work (see Eagleton 2011) are probably present also in many “post-marxist” political parties.

and often without representation. But also the risk of the “platformization” of society is very strong (van Dijck, Poell and De Waal 2018).

Probably the most lively and plural area in the political use of digital technologies is that of social movements. In this area – as effectively noted by Stefania Milan (2013) – different ways of using communication technologies can be identified. It is no coincidence that also in the academic field different definitions have been used, often partially overlapping, sometimes clearly distinct: in fact, alongside the use of the expression “media activism”, we find works that can be framed in the field of “alternative media” or even “non-mainstream media” (Pasquali and Sorice 2005), or those that refer to the effective category of “emancipatory communication practices” (Milan 2013), or as well as those that tend to relate media research to the studies on democratisation.

In our analysis, we found very different experiences of social movements, which in some cases have developed bottom-up democratic innovation practices: from civic engagement groups (halfway between social movements and active citizenship practices) to one issue pressure groups that also carry out lobbying activities without necessarily acting as interest groups (as in the case of Stop-TTIP movement<sup>12</sup>). The examples include fair trade organisations, struggles for housing rights or for “riders’ rights”. They have some common characteristics, such as a participatory and non-centralised organisation (della Porta and Rucht 2013, 2), a polycentric and inclusive organisation, and the production of knowledge about digital capitalism (Pavan and Mainardi 2019). Such movements are agents of democratic communication. This last point is very important for our purposes because these movements adopt democratic practices that are not limited to the logic of representation. At the same time, social movements can be defined by referring to the fact that: 1) they are mainly informal interaction networks; 2) they have shared beliefs and activate dynamics of solidarity; 3) they mobilise around conflicting issues; 4) they adopt various and differentiated forms of protest, often of a “creative” type (Micheletti and McFarland 2016) and very often use digital technologies as tools and spaces of struggle.

This last point is very important because digital tools and more generally communication practices play a key role in social movements. Donatella della Porta (2013, 92) notes that

in recent reflections linking communication and participatory democratic quality, the focus of attention is not so much (or no longer) on the abstract “power of the media”, but more on the relations between media and publics: the ways in which “people exercise their agency in relation to media flows” (Couldry 2006, 27). Media practices therefore become central, not only as the practices of the media actors, but more broadly as what various actors do in relations with the media, including activists’ media practices.

One of the respondents in our interviews argued in this context:

The point is not to use social media or not; it is clear that those are for profit and are functional to the logic of capitalist accumulation [...] they impose their ideology [...]. They are spaces to be used tactically. But at the same time, we should

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<sup>12</sup> This type of movement is also playing an important role in “re-politicising the institutional politics”. In this perspective, for example, we can interpret the recent action at European Ombudsman, activated by Stop-TTIP and No-Ceta activists, who have also played an information role for the European Parliament. An innovative case of “re-politicisation” of the representation promoted by social movements with an impact on parliamentary institutions.

try to organise alternative spaces of struggle, but this is only possible in an international perspective (F, 27)

There are several interesting experiences that go beyond the contrast between mass integration parties to which almost all socialist political parties belong and platform parties. Social movements are interesting field of social research. They could also constitute an important site to re-connect media studies with the Marxian approach that was too hastily abandoned in the second half of the 1980s by postmodern and culturalist approaches.

## 6. An Open Conclusion

We must admit that we are unable to provide a clear answer on the use of digital communication by different collective actors such as political parties inspired by socialism and radical social movements. Some of the data is contradictory, so more research is needed. The transformative dimension of capitalism makes exhaustive analysis difficult. The very transformative nature of capitalism has allowed the use of expressions such as “digital socialism” on the part of the “owners” of media/technology companies (Morozov 2019). In many cases, capitalism “with a human face” has offered spaces that are economically profitable and that digital capital presents as democratic achievements but that given their subsumption under capital have a limited potential as spaces for struggle. Neoliberal ideology has succeeded in incorporating tools and experiences of online participation. Platforms of participation have often become instruments of mere consultation used by capitalist organisations and bureaucracies so that digital technologies are reduced to function as tools that make capitalism and public administration more efficient. This is the perspective of the New Public Management approach that does not aim at providing spaces for citizens’ democratic participation.

There are three reasons why left-wing parties have not managed to come up with alternatives: 1) there is an organisational similarity among these parties that produces the homogenisation of perception and the idea that old structures cannot be modified; 2) participation is practiced and understood in manners that do not really encourage participation, but only promote engagement; 3) there is a weakness of deliberative processes. A further hypothesis to test is that the model of online participation is so steeped in digital capitalism that it leaves no way out.

In this scenario, left-wing parties do not yet seem to have succeeded in providing an alternative framework for digital communication that goes beyond digital capitalism and, sometimes, do not even understand the importance of communication not just in the transformations of capitalism that have resulted in the emergence of digital capitalism but also in and for a renewed socialist project.

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# Digital Socialism Beyond the Digital Social: Confronting Communicative Capitalism with Ethics of Care

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**Abstract:** This paper analyses the role of the “social” in communicative capitalism. It shows how the digital social is situated in the context of ideology, exploitation, and alienation. Based on the ethics of care, the essay outlines foundations of an alternative concept and reality of the social in digital socialism. It borrows the key concept of “care” from feminist theory and ethics and uses it to explore alternative paths to rethink “digital socialism” in the age of social media ubiquity and the pervasiveness of communicative capitalism. We need imaginative efforts to think beyond “capitalist realism” as a “pervasive *atmosphere*” (Fisher 2009, 16) that impacts not just the economy and cultural production, but also the domain of the ideas to the extent that it seems “impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it” (Fisher 2009, 2).

**Keywords:** digital socialism, communicative capitalism, social media, care economy, feminist theory, ethics of care

*Sharing is the mildest form of socialism*  
Kevin Kelly, 2009

## 1. In the Rubble of the Commons, the Triumph of the “Social”

“[I]t is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism”, Mark Fisher wrote in 2009, inspired by Jameson and Žižek’s reflections in addressing what he dubbed as “capitalist realism” (Fisher 2009, 2). Fisher describes capitalist realism as “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it” (Fisher 2009, 2). Capitalist realism is such a “pervasive atmosphere” that it does not only invest the domain of economy and cultural production, but also affects and infects that of the imagination, colonizing the latter to the point that “there is no alternative”<sup>1</sup>, not even in conceiving ideas opposing the current hegemony.

Ten years after Fisher wrote his seminal essay – and two years after he tragically took his own life<sup>2</sup> – the seeming ineluctability of capitalist realism has been further strengthened by what today manifests as its quintessential appearance, its octopus-

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Thatcher’s famous slogan.

<sup>2</sup> Capitalist Realism frames the problem of depression, a disease of which Fisher himself suffered, within the dysfunctions of capitalism, something that cannot be properly healed if conceived as a private problem. “I want to argue that it is necessary to reframe the growing problem of stress (and distress) in capitalist societies. Instead of treating it as incumbent on individuals to resolve their own psychological distress, instead, that is, of accepting the vast *privatization of stress* that has taken place over the last thirty years, we need to ask: how has it become acceptable that so many people, and especially so many young people, are ill? The ‘mental health plague’ in capitalist societies would suggest that, instead of being the only social system that works, capitalism is inherently dysfunctional, and that the cost of it appearing to work is very high” (Fisher 2009, 19).

like aspect, i.e. communication. With her conceptualisation of “communicative capitalism”, Jodi Dean (2005) provides a powerful description of both the material infrastructure lying beneath networked communications technologies, and of the ideological formation materialising values – such as participation, inclusion, access – that are “heralded as central to democracy” (Dean 2010, 4). Other scholarly reflections offered, such as “platform capitalism” (Srnicsek 2016), “data capitalism” (Mayer-Schönberger and Ramge 2018), or “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff 2019), all attribute a central role to the (control over the) production and distribution of communicative in shaping contemporary capitalist realism.

The ever-expanding communicative dimension of contemporary capitalism becomes even more pervasive as it embraces the form of self-disclosed, user-generated and peer-produced bits of content circulating over social networking sites. As McKenzie Wark notices, today’s “spectacle”, far from being the top-down managed formation described by Debord (1994), whether in its “concentrated” or “diffused” version, is rather “disintegrating” (Wark 2013) in that it is being produced and re-produced by users themselves. The “spectacle 2.0” (Briziarelli and Armano 2017) is the offspring of an environment where the imperative of participation, enabled and empowered by the technological infrastructure of web 2.0 (O’Reilly 2005) and imposed by the business model of the sharing economies<sup>3</sup>, has pushed users to generate a never-ending stream of data.

Capitalist realism thrives on these seemingly endless communicative exchanges produced by all sorts of digital labour – paid and unpaid, under-paid and volunteer work –, in which those formerly known as passive spectators are finally turned into “proactive makers of their own subjugation disguised as free choice and creative expression” (Della Ratta 2018, 181). Users are rendered into peer-creators of this networked spectacle that has replaced “the monologue of appearances (of the traditional spectacle) with the appearance of dialogue” (Wark 2013, 6), paving the way to a “political-economic formation in which there is talk without response” (Dean 2009, 24). While these peer-produced and shared communicative exchanges constitute the non-stop engine thanks to which communicative capitalism thrives, those who generate them are caught into a Sisyphean mechanism where they are condemned to unending activities of constantly making, sharing, and circulating content. In the pursuit of what is rendered into daily, repetitive tedious tasks<sup>4</sup>, such as updating, posting, and sharing, users become cogs within what Byung-Chul Han calls the “burnout society” (Han 2015), blaming themselves for not coping with the latter’s demanding pace.

FOMO, or the fear-of-missing-out, which results in a compulsive drive toward non-stop online engagement, is an increasingly common side effect of the contemporary approach to the digital<sup>5</sup>. In a recent ethnographic research that I have conducted with

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<sup>3</sup> Originally, the sharing economy as a concept formulated by Lessig (2008) hints at an economy based on non-monetary exchanges. However, as this essay will show, the original concept has been dramatically impacted by business models introduced by platforms such as AirB&B that maintain the word “sharing” in their slogan but have capitalised on relationships and human exchanges. Lessig himself has acknowledged the failure of the sharing economy in a lecture given at John Cabot University in March 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wgj1WJTtp1g>

<sup>4</sup> My ethnographic research shows that these are increasingly described as “tedious”, “repetitive” actions even by generation Z, and often depicted as “tasks”, something closer to work obligations than fun and leisure activities. See Della Ratta (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> See Murphy (2013).



my undergraduate class “Selfies and Beyond: Exploring Networked Identities”, a student wrote:

a large portion of my anxiety and subconscious impulse to engage in social media is the fear of losing touch. It is difficult to grasp how such a culture rooted in interconnection could result in losing contact with people, but this sense of a constant flow of information and communication makes me feel as though I need to always be on top of things, or else I will fade into the background (Della Ratta forthcoming).

Another student concluded, after admitting being haunted by ghost buzzing, as if her phone would continuously notify her with new (inexistent) messages:

I have never tried to be offline. I know it's completely impossible, and I know my existence would be much more serene and relaxed. Free from any kind of anxiety or tension. I remember when it seemed a miracle to have unlimited minutes and messages in the phone tariff. Now, the only thing that should not have an end is the Internet (Della Ratta forthcoming).

Far from being a liberating environment, thriving on free expression and creativity, the domain of digital communicative exchanges seems to be haunted by new, increasingly complicated forms of stress, depression, and anxiety disorders. As envisaged by Fisher, these statutes are largely processed as individual diseases or disabilities, never as endemic forms to contemporary capitalism, or as features inherent to its way of functioning. Albeit a certain awareness of its dysfunctionality consciously manifests – “I know my existence would be much more serene and relaxed (being offline)”, my student writes –, yet a sense of ineluctability appears to be connected to the hegemonic form of contemporary capitalist realism, i.e. communication.

Ten years after Fisher’s gloomy reflections, the rise of social networking sites – and their hegemonic take over all aspects of digital communication – has made capitalist realism look even more inescapable. Paradoxically, it is in the communicative appropriation of the (once political) form of the “social” that this take over has been accomplished and made more pervasive. “What is the Social in Social Media?”, Geert Lovink asks in his 2016 essay *Social Media Abyss*, mourning the loss of the primacy of politically engaged, class-related understandings of the social, in favour of mundane connotations rather evoking “interpersonal rubble [...], a loose collection of ‘weak ties’” (Lovink 2016, 16).

Baudrillard (1983) located “the end of the social” as we know it in the combined action jointly performed by the masses and the media<sup>6</sup>. In Baudrillard’s system of simulacra, the mass has turned into an abstraction, a sign that no longer has a material referent (the class, the proletariat, etc.) but only takes statistical existence in surveys and polls for measurability and predictability in the hands of “political demagoguery” (Baudrillard 1983, 4). Meanwhile, media, the realm of the quintessentially spectacular, has abandoned the domain of meaning to embrace a mode of “constant emulsion” (Baudrillard 1983, 24), a non-stop dynamic of permanent transmission of messages

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<sup>6</sup> “The mass and the media are one single process. Mass(age) is the message” (Baudrillard 1983, 44).

that, by virtue of this permanent circulation, are condemned to become mere contributions to the data stream<sup>7</sup>. This phenomenon of “total dissemination, of a ventilation of individuals” generates a “space of connection” where “the rational sociality of the contract” (between the state and civil society, between the public and the private) abdicates in favour of the (spectacular, or post-spectacular) “sociality of the *contact*” (Baudrillard 1983, 83, my emphasis).

And yet it is only with Silicon Valley’s techno-utopian dream of sharing at all costs, and with the participation by all means enabled by the so-called “social web” (O’Reilly 2005) that Baudrillard’s prophetic idea of the sociality of the contact takes material shape becoming a set of productive relationships based on unpaid, underpaid, or volunteer labour developing free of charge and free of rights user-generated content to be circulated freely and *gratis* by virtue of crowdsourced tools such as ranking, hashtagging, liking, commenting. Here “sociality” is defined in terms of “making visible – and therefore commercially exploitable – the once hidden patterns of individual connections” (Della Ratta 2018, 184) that take the collective form of a network merely at a visual level. In reality, only a loose connection is established between the sociality of the contact and any sort of collective formation.

It is in Silicon Valley’s utopian dream of techno-enabled sharing cultures, in its libertarian ideology of tech-powered free speech and democratic progress<sup>8</sup> that the social hegemonic manifests – social is “the new black” of the digital – to be fully accomplished in what I call “the networked image” (Della Ratta 2018). The networked image is a visual (and political) formation defined by its sociality, that is its circulation, its exchange value, its capability of spreading itself throughout the social web, of establishing (social) relations with the latter’s infrastructure, indifferently made by human or post-human subjectivities, algorithmic entities, databases, etc. Spreadability and visibility are the features defining the sociality of the networked image, together with the inner violence ingrained in the process of circulation<sup>9</sup>.

Violence is inherently connected to visibility, whether in the form of hypervisibility granted to widely circulated data – “poor images”, as Hito Steyerl (2009) calls it –, or in the lack thereof, as content is redacted and forever extirpated from the online domain when non-complying to the platforms’ terms-of-services and guidelines<sup>10</sup>. The uneven union between violence and visibility is no longer an exceptional situation peculiar to crisis zones. Syria is probably the most evident example where the hypervisibility of content circulation and the invisibility of content deletion are both present at the same time. Violence constitutes a feature of today’s emerging visual political economy, characterised by a sociality that should be achieved at all costs and in spite of everything. It’s the business and revenue model, the inner infrastructure of today’s social platforms, in fact, that dictates the imperative of sharing, commodifying the latter in the exact moment in which the participation process happens.

Sharing economies are no longer what the founder of Creative Commons, Lawrence Lessig, so brilliantly conceptualised more than a decade ago, i.e. economies that are run alongside ideas of solidarity and non-monetary exchanges, and that could eventually coexist with commercial ventures forming an “hybrid economy” (Lessig

<sup>7</sup> Contribution is the word used by Dean (2010) to describe the process of voiding messages from meaning that takes place by virtue of non-stop circulation over the web 2.0.

<sup>8</sup> Barbrook and Cameron (1995) dubbed it “the Californian Ideology”.

<sup>9</sup> I have extensively dealt with violence and visibility of the networked image in my analysis of the socially-mediated Syrian conflict in Della Ratta (2018.)

<sup>10</sup> On the politics of commercial content moderation see Roberts (2019), Della Ratta (2020), and the documentary work “The Cleaners” (2018) by Hans Block and Moritz Riesewieck.

2008). “Sharing is caring”<sup>11</sup> used to be Creative Commons’ motto to encourage content exchange under a more flexible copyright regime. Paradoxically, today Creative Commons’ licensed items have ended up being collected and used – lawfully – by commercially driven corporations to train facial recognition algorithms likely to be employed for military research projects and authoritarian repression<sup>12</sup>.

And yet what recently happened to Creative Commons databases is not an isolated episode or a flaw of the system, but rather a feature of the infrastructure of the sharing economy as it has been reconfigured by the private and commercially oriented platforms controlling the business of sharing. Today’s sharing economy has managed to redefine the concept itself of sharing and inject the idea of monetary transactions and commodification within domains once exclusively devoted to solidarity and non-commercial exchanges<sup>13</sup>. This new hegemonic understanding of the sharing economy is private and commercially oriented *by design*.

Far away from the digital utopias that have characterized the first phase of the web 2.0 and its deep roots in the “Californian ideology” (Barbrook and Cameron 1995), today we witness the disruption of the digital commons. We mourn their disappearance within the domain of the sharing economy. We lament the loss of the social in the exact moment when the latter becomes the new triumphant, hegemonic media form.

## 2. What is Digital Socialism?

At the same time when the social becomes the “new black” of the digital, socialism is also subject to an operation of rebranding 2.0. Kevin Kelly, the founding executive director of Wired magazine and “a futurist adviser”<sup>14</sup> on Steven Spielberg’s nightmare on surveillance cultures “Minority Report”, marks the beginning of this process of upgrading the common sense with his seminal 2009 Wired piece “The New Socialism: Global Collectivist Society is Coming Online” (Kelly 2009).

In his semantic taking over of the concept and emptying it of all things political and class-related, Kelly argues that the emerging form of socialism is “uniquely tuned for a networked world” and far away from “your grandfather’s socialism [...] It is not class warfare. It is not anti-American” (Kelly 2009). In Kelly’s cyber-utopian rhetoric, digital social becomes in fact “the newest American innovation”, a type of “socialism without the state”, running over “a borderless Internet” and “designed to heighten individual autonomy and thwart centralization” (Kelly 2009). In his colourful techno-language, digital socialism replaces the tedious bureaucracy of the five-year plans with the “brilliant chaos of a free market”, refashioning state factories into “desktop factories connected to virtual co-ops”, and exchanging national production with peer production, “government rations and subsidies” with a “bounty of free goods” (Kelly 2009).

In his apology of digital socialism, Kelly feels to have to justify the choice of “such an inflammatory heading” and “redeem” it, as “technically it is the best word to indicate a range of technologies that rely for their power on social interactions” (Kelly 2009). In his over excitement for all things tech, when the masses “contribute labor without wages and enjoy the fruits free of charge” (Kelly 2009), that’s socialism. As much as Amazon’s Mechanical Turk is socialism, real-time Twitter and RSS feeds are socialism,

<sup>11</sup> One of the mottos of Creativecommons.org. I was Creative Commons’ community manager for Arabic speaking countries from 2007 until 2013.

<sup>12</sup> One of this (in)famous databases, MS Celeb, contained 10 million faces, and was used to train facial recognition systems for countries such as China (Murgia 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Take for example the commodification of the domain of hospitality by AirB&B. See Morozov (2018).

<sup>14</sup> That’s the definition given by his Wikipedia page.

unlimited free cloud computing and passionate opinions on the Huffington Post are socialism of the digital type that Kelly heralds as the new, perfect form of “cultural OS” elevating “both the individual and the group at once” (Kelly 2009).

One might excuse this over-enthusiastic apology by looking at the time in which it was authored, 2009, a year that was, for many, still full of digital promises and utopias. But Kelly believes so staunchly in digital socialism that he makes sure to declare his long-term view over the matter. Even if this phenomenon has not yet reached the mainstream at the time of his writing, “clearly the population that lives with socialized media is significant”, Kelly emphasises. “The number of people who make things for free, share things for free, use things for free, belong to collective software farms, work on projects that require communal decisions, or experience the benefits of decentralized socialism has reached millions and counting” (Kelly 2009). And, he vigorously concludes, “revolutions have grown out of much smaller numbers” (Kelly 2009).

Ten years after this passionate attempt to redefine the meaning of socialism, the USA’s enemy number one China seems to have learned the guru’s lesson and embedded it into institutional forms, implementing an up-to-date version of state-led digital socialism. In 2020, the so-called “social credit system” will standardise the assessment of citizens’ reputation producing a mechanism for ranking them according to their social and economic behaviours and sanctioning them if they fail to pay taxes on time, as much as if they do not show up after having booked a restaurant table or a hotel room. In this dystopian, Black-Mirror like<sup>15</sup> framework, the Chinese government seems, in its turn, to have borrowed mechanisms of control and surveillance not from repressive institutions or authoritarian regimes, but precisely from the new digital social of social networking platforms. A way to visualise and quantify, therefore to evaluate, control, and sanction social relationships, that is possible to adopt at a state level and in such a pervasive, dystopian fashion only after the mechanism has become not just acceptable and familiar but, also, desirable for the global masses.

While this semantic redefinition is carried out, albeit in different ways, both by Silicon Valley’s libertarian utopians and by China’s new institutional form of authoritarianism concealed under the more attractive guise of the digital, the European Union responds to the hegemonic re-appropriation of the social by emphasising its citizens’ rights to own their data and to protect their privacy. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)<sup>16</sup> is probably the most striking example of such a timid, apprehensive reaction to the takeover of the social, which reveals a lack of a proper understanding of this phenomenon happening at a global scale. GDPR attempts at building a defence against the aggressive pervasiveness of the digital social by giving individuals the (illusion of) control and ownership of their data, upon which they would enjoy the right to request a portable copy and also, under certain circumstances, the possibility to have them erased. However, this promise of opening “the algorithmic ‘black box’ to promote challenge, redress, and hopefully heightened accountability” (Edwards and Veale 2017, 18) might just result into yet another “transparency fallacy” (Edwards and Veale 2017, 43), as there are complicated legal and infrastructure-related issues that might prevent the granted rights to be properly exercised by their holders.

And yet even these legal or infrastructural impediments are not what is really at stake with the GDPR and similar policies. Its underlying problem is rather, in my view,

<sup>15</sup> See the series episode ‘Nosedive’ from season 4.

<sup>16</sup> See the official document <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9565-2015-INIT/en/pdf>

an approach responding to the pervasive appropriation of the digital domain that renders all things digital “social” by simply reaffirming values such as ownership and property. The stark contradiction between data that have constantly to move and circulate – that have to be “spreadable” (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013) – as per the business model of all things social, and the right to own and control such fluctuating, pervasive, and ever-multiplying immaterial goods, becomes apparent here. It’s the overall acceptance of a giant money machine and revenue-making system in the hope of regaining control of it by tweaking some small details. It’s a David and Goliath situation, where the actual little stone being thrown at the latter’s forehead does not affect the whole gigantic immaterial apparatus firmly in place.

The contradiction inherent in a GDPR-like approach is that while we struggle to regain little bits of ownership and control over our data, the “feedback infrastructure” (Morozov 2019) stays firmly in the hands of platform capitalism. This rights-based attitude and the values themselves that it claims to defend and protect – property, ownership and privacy – are the core of the problem, not its antidote. Claiming back ownership and privacy does not challenge the system, instead it seeks to mitigate the worst effects of communicative capitalism, protecting small territories of individual freedoms against a market that stays as greedy as ever (if not more), appealing to individual personal rights and responsibilities rather than addressing a political collective.

How is it possible to redefine socialism if we are still acting within the domain of individual rights rather than collective solidarity? How can we be pleased and satisfied with such small, insignificant forms of counterbalancing the over power of the social hegemonic, if these very forms still pertain to the domain of communicative capitalism and its values? How can we rework socialism into a brand-new digital arrangement if we are entrapped within capitalist realism, so enmeshed in its perverse and pervasive mechanism that we are unable to unleash our imaginative power?

### 3. What Digital Socialism is Not: Beyond the Knowledge Economy

In the imaginative effort we should undertake to imagine a form of digital socialism that goes beyond Silicon Valley’s techno-utopianism à la Kelly or China’s dystopian ranking system, the starting point is to take a distance from the knowledge economy<sup>17</sup>. We do not know what digital socialism is or could be, yet surely it has nothing to do with knowledge production. If the latter, in fact, lies at the very core of communicative capitalism functioning as its nurturing engine, then how can it be at the same time constitutive of digital socialism? Is a different form of knowledge, just because of it being supposedly built around a collaborative and peer-produced process, the right antidote to communicative capitalism? Are Wikipedia, and the over celebrated collaborative aspect behind its “wikinomics”<sup>18</sup>, the only possible shape that a “socialist” digital environment could eventually embrace, the face of the upcoming digital socialism?

I want to shift the perspective of the conversation and look for something else than an allegedly more “socialist” form of immaterial knowledge production to imagine the foundations of digital socialism. I would like to engage in an exercise of creative imagination to go beyond the constraints of capitalist realism and, instead of locating an alternative way, a more collectively oriented mode of knowledge production, just take a detour and think outside the box of this very knowledge production. In my view, the

<sup>17</sup> For a critical discussion of the knowledge economy see Peters (2019, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> This “wikinomics”, an economy based on networking, collaboration and peer production, is heavily criticized by Fuchs (2008) not only for supporting a regime of accumulation that brings about precarious labour, but also because of its ideological aspects.

problem lies precisely within the so-called knowledge economy, a fundamental trait of contemporary capitalism condemning labour to produce and distribute “information, communication, social relationships, affects” (Fuchs 2010, 142).

In the early days of web 2.0<sup>19</sup>, a literature enthusiastically supportive of a networked, cooperative, peer-based production had imposed itself<sup>20</sup>, putting forward an idea of value rooted in social relations and pushing the belief that “new forms of technological-enabled openness, especially emergent social media that utilizes social networking, blogs, wikis and user-created content and media” (Peters 2019, 3) would provide the ground for a radically new conception of knowledge based on the “sharing and caring” for the commons. However, not only has Silicon Valley’s platform capitalism dramatically changed the overall meaning of the sharing economy and transformed the once happily collaborative crowd of volunteering “peers” into an army of frustrated unpaid or underpaid labour that has now to deal with the unintended, disastrous consequences of finding the commons commodified and exploited. Furthermore, the fact of understanding the commons merely in terms of juridical zones regulated by a less rigid intellectual property and by a more relaxed attitude toward ownership, does not take distance from a rights-based approach, therefore stays relegated within the domain of capitalist realism.

The problem of “equalising access to communication services” focuses on just one aspect of the question, without eliminating or even weakening “other types of inequality” (Morozov 2015). Quite the opposite, in fact: by helping the socialisation of knowledge, open access, together with the participation, collaboration, and peer production that it enables, and combined with a more flexible approach to intellectual property, this model ends up strengthening the sharing paradigm upon which communicative capitalism thrives. Therefore, the web-powered socialisation of knowledge and “knowledge socialism” (Peters 2019) do not equal socialism. Rather, these developments push forward the apparently innocent face of a “don’t be evil”<sup>21</sup> capitalism, hiding its stellar profits under the banner of the Californian ideology’s freedom of speech and participation dreams. Open access to knowledge and the wikinomics is definitively not what will lead us toward digital socialism. We have to look elsewhere.

In a recent piece in which he attempts to locate digital socialism in the computational age, Morozov criticizes the “new deal on data” (a GDPR-like approach) as something aiming at introducing a “modicum of fairness” in the far west of the digital economy, and selling the fantasy of “imagining users as anything other than passive consumers” (Morozov 2019, 33-34). Such initiatives, Morozov maintains, are “important to guarantee the future of digitalized capitalism” (Morozov 2019, 34) by tweaking it without undermining its very structure, as they frame the main problem of the latter’s inequalities always in terms of ownership and individual property rights, which are in fact the pillars of the liberal personhood. While these initiatives focus on regaining (some) control over these rights, they fail to consider the fact that “the ownership and operation of the means of producing ‘feedback data’ are at least as important as the question of who owns the data itself” (Morozov 2019, 52). Ultimately, they ignore the feedback infrastructure and the firm hands of the very few tech giants controlling it.

Rightly emphasising the fact that no radical transformation is ever going to take place if the feedback infrastructure remains under the current Silicon Valley private-ownership model, Morozov’s piece engages in sketching out a plan for the progressive

<sup>19</sup> The definition ‘web 2.0’ comes from a blog post authored by O’Reilly (2005).

<sup>20</sup> See for example Benkler (2006) or Lessig (2006, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> Google’s former motto, once at the top of the company’s code of conduct. In 2015, after the restructuring into Alphabet Inc., the motto was changed into “Do the right thing” (Barr 2015).

left to find ways “to deploy ‘feedback infrastructure’ for new, non-market forms of social coordination” (Morozov 2019, 54), and to discover “other social arrangements, apart from competition” (Morozov, 55). He suggests three possibilities to do so: firstly, using “solidarity as a discovery procedure” as to “detect new needs and ways to satisfy them through non-market mechanisms” (Morozov 2019, 54). Hackathons, a sort of tech marathons based on the idea that a certain issue identified by some actors (e.g. NGOs) will find a solution if socialised with a group that has a specific knowledge, is the example brought up by Morozov to suggest that solidarity could lead the process of problem solving through altruism rather than through competition. Secondly, “designing non-markets” (Morozov 2019, 57) to coordinate matters of social interest going beyond the price mechanism, which Morozov illustrates by pointing out Alvin Roth’s work on matching organ donors with potential recipients. And thirdly, focusing on coordination in the economic sphere by putting into place what he calls “automated planning” (Morozov 2019, 55).

This is, perhaps, the essay’s most visionary section where Morozov builds on American radical economist Daniel Saros’ work, which he calls “‘guild socialism’ in the era of Big Data” (Morozov 2019, 63). Saros’ path toward a socialist economy for the digital age is kind of tortuous, involving the building of a “‘General Catalogue’, something in between Amazon and Google, where producers, who are organized in guild-like ‘worker councils’ –worker-run startups if you will – list their products and services in a way that would be familiar to users of Apple’s App Store or Google’s Play Store” (Morozov 2019, 64). Without going too much into the details of a complex system where users have to register their needs during a specific production period and then try to stick to those envisaged needs in order to get some bonuses (which are given also to those who consume less than average or to those who stay in the same job for a long time), the issue with Saros’ model is not just, as Morozov underlines while still praising the economist’s work, that it offends “the eco-socialist creed” by emphasising consumption, or that it involves the “much-maligned quantification” as it heavily depends on feedback mechanisms and ratings (Morozov 2019, 64-65).

Actually, a much bigger issue lies with the formulation of Morozov’s argument itself. His language and theoretical apparatus are entirely (and, probably, unconsciously) borrowed from communicative capitalism, even when they attempt at defining how socialism would look like. Expressions such as feedback mechanisms, ranking system, matching, or worker-run start-ups are the offspring of the colonisation of the imagination (and of language) pushed forward by the hegemonic social and the values of the contemporary sharing economy. The continuous references to an Amazon-like planning system or to services designed alongside the model of the Apple or Google’s app stores reveal the challenge of imagining anything beyond capitalist realism, even in the context of a sophisticated essay of critical theory aimed at defining digital socialism.

In a recent workshop carried out in the Roman neighbourhood of Torpignattara by the collective Human Ecosystems Relazioni (H.E.R.)<sup>22</sup>, co-founders Salvatore Iaconesi and Oriana Persico have underlined the troubles encountered in attempting to collectively design an A.I. functioning with relational, non-extractivist data. “When we ask people to brainstorm about how they would like their neighbourhood A.I. to be and to do, they cannot but imagine something service-oriented. Thinking about data as resources that are extracted from us in exchange of free services is so deeply rooted in us that it’s extremely challenging even to just imagine how relational-data would look

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<sup>22</sup> See their website <https://www.he-r.it>

like”<sup>23</sup>. “It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism”, Jameson bitterly noticed (2005, 199).

Morozov’s piece, although trying to locate possible paths toward re-appropriating the feedback infrastructure in the direction of non-market non-competitive exchanges, remains entrapped within the language, metaphors and imaginative power of communicative capitalism. Furthermore, all the examples given to illustrate those possible paths operate within and not outside the latter, within the boundaries of knowledge production and not beyond. They are deeply rooted in computation and quantification centred beliefs, and hint at a cybernetic model of society.

I agree with the end goal of Morozov’s essay and therefore I wonder: why should we take inspiration of a planning system from Amazon? Why should we borrow the language through which we describe our desires and wishes for a non-market centred society from capitalism itself? Is it possible to envisage and advocate for a capitalism-free way of rethinking digital socialism?

The biggest problem with Morozov’s formulation of the latter is his emphasis on knowledge production, albeit of a different nature. The biggest problem with knowledge production is that it overemphasises the symbolic aspects and the immateriality of the commodity, shaping an ideology of the digital being “non-rivalrous, infinitely expansive, discrete, aspatial, and recombinant” (Quah, in Peters 2019, 2). Thinking about digital socialism requires, instead, to get beyond immateriality and abstraction – therefore, beyond knowledge production – and rather focus on the material production of subjectivities and their ways of being in the world.

Queer philosopher Paul B. Preciado identifies a shift in contemporary capitalism from knowledge production toward what he calls “the pharmapornographic control of subjectivity” (Preciado 2013, 39) and its making, implemented through a set of technologies of the body (from endocrinology to genetic engineering) that are “microprosthetic” and “incorporated” (Preciado 2013, 77-78). They can be “inhaled” and “injected” (Preciado 2013, 77), they penetrate and infiltrate our body taking control until it “no longer inhabits disciplinary spaces but is inhabited by them” (Preciado 2013, 79). For Preciado, it is precisely when technology is no longer an extension of man but rather the other way around, and when the organic needs technology in order to be (re)produced as organic, that the body’s political potential can finally unfold. His mutant body is a living testimony of the latter, as in the very moment in which it needs the pharmapornographic regime to become a subject and be recognised as subjectivity, it revolts against it by hacking its system of binaries and embracing multiplicity and queerness.

The body and the production of subjects and subjectivities are today’s battlefield. Taking a distance from the knowledge economy and its emphasis on immateriality and abstraction, I want to follow the path explored by queer and feminist theories to engage with the materiality of contemporary capitalism in order to locate spaces that contemporary socialism could possibly inhabit. Reinventing the social and rethinking socialism should have less to do with tweaking the process of knowledge production and regaining control over the ownership of its end product (data). Instead, it should be more focused on the production of the body, subjectivities, and the ways in which they materially exist in the world.

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<sup>23</sup> Personal interview, January 2019, Rome.



#### 4. What Digital Socialism Could be About: Ethics of Care

Queer and feminist scholarship and analyses might prove useful antidotes to the violence of abstraction that is inherent in the data-driven knowledge-economy. They can provide ways to look at contrasting communicative capitalism not from the perspective of individually-centred property-based rights, but from collective and relational modes of being in the world. They can help us to locate digital socialism in spaces other than the production of the immaterial.

A concept that I would like to borrow from feminist scholarship engaged in rejecting “traditional male reasoning” (Koehn 1998, 4) and underlying the latter’s embeddedness in norms and stereotypes of patriarchal societies, is that of care. As “care is both value and practice” (Held 2006, 9), care and the work of care cannot be separated: they are deeply connected and interdependent. The work of care has traditionally occupied disadvantaged workers – women, migrants, people of colour – in activities related to social reproduction and reproductive labour, i.e. “the set of tasks that together maintain and reproduce life, both daily and generationally” (Hester 2018, 345), spanning from the care for others (childcare, elder care, etc.) to the maintenance of the infrastructure necessary to support life and work life (cleaning, etc.) to species reproduction (bearing children).

Whether being carried out in private spaces such as the household by unpaid workers, or in public places such as hospitals and remunerated, reproductive labour cannot be separated from the idea of an ethics of care. This has been made the object of several theoretical reflections in feminist studies<sup>24</sup>, many of which emphasise them being “a serious and important alternative to dominant Kantian and rights-based ethics” (Robinson 2011, 21) and, in general, a powerful antidote against the “quasi-mathematical form of ethical reasoning” (Koehn 1998, 2) imposed by male philosophers. Ethics of care are characterised by an understanding of the self that is relational rather than individualistic, placing human and intimate relations at the centre of life, in stark opposition to “legalistic contractual thinking, so favored in traditional analyses” which might in fact “alienate persons, rather than draw them together” (Koehn 1998, 6).

This emphasis on relations rather than rights, on sociality rather than individuality, on interdependence rather than independence, on particularity, connection, and context rather than the universality and abstraction of legalistic contractual thinking, is what I would like to offer to the reflection on digital socialism. Ethics of care present a radical critique of liberal individualism and its values<sup>25</sup>. The work of care in itself – through which work at large is made possible, through which all of us are made possible as workers and humans – is a reminder that the independent, autonomous, rational individual is a fantasy deeply imbued with patriarchal ideologies. Care work is, in fact, “dependency work” (Held 2006, 14), as it puts into bold relief how we all depend one on another, how we are all connected, related and interdependent. It makes a powerful detour from the rights-based approach, from the abstraction and immateriality of the knowledge economy. It restores materiality and relationality as central elements to the discussion on how digital socialism could be looked at, instead of just being imagined as a timid reformist attitude within the domain of communicative capitalism’s knowledge economy.

Apart from it shaping an ethics that is not abstract and universal but contextual and intimately connected to labour – care *and* the work of care, care *is* the work of care – there is an aspect of contemporary care that offers another interesting angle to the

<sup>24</sup> A good overview can be found in Koehn (1998) and Held (2006).

<sup>25</sup> See for example Held (2006, 13-15).

debate on digital socialism. Reproductive labour, which has been traditionally understood as women’s work, and which is increasingly occupying a crucial sector in contemporary market economies to the extent that we can speak of a “care economy” (Hester 2018, 346-347), is threatened by the growing automation that is causing an impending “crisis of work” (Hester 2018, 344). This dramatic technological change in the job market is investing not just high-income economies, but also developing countries, further strengthening power inequalities that are already in place.

The domain of the care economy, which once seemed the exclusive territory of feminised (paid, underpaid, or unpaid) work, is now at risk of being colonised in its turn by the abstraction and immateriality of automation. The *New York Times* refers to a recent experiment in France where Zora, a robot caregiver, has replaced humans in assisting elderly people (Satariano, Peltier, and Kostyukov, 2018). Care.Coach, a “game-changing innovation for aging and geriatric care that leverages the best of both human and technological capabilities”<sup>26</sup>, is successfully providing patients with pet avatars that assist with psychosocial support 24/7 and from a distance, while “conversations of a clinical nature are automated through software algorithms that implement clinical best practices”<sup>27</sup>.

“The care.coach approach is a thoughtful combination of digital technology and genuine human connection...a creative solution to the shortage of qualified caregivers in the US”<sup>28</sup>, says Tom Grape, chairman and CEO of the Benckmark Senior Living company. Actually, rather than due to a shortage of qualified caregivers, the business of automated care is on the rise because of its cost-effectiveness in a healthcare market, like the US, which is highly commodified and competitive. “Human contact is now a luxury good” (Bowles 2019), the *New York Times* has titled, hinting at the increasing phenomenon of automation and screen-mediation taking over all domains of human life for the working class. In stark contrast, elites enjoy the privilege of disconnecting when they wish to take a distance from technology, still being able to purchase non-automated, more costly human labour.

Automation’s takeover of all aspects of human life, including that of care which once was the domain of women’s labour and of relational, interdependent, sociality-centred ethics, certainly rings an alarm bell. However, considering the matter more closely, a striking similarity emerges between the expanding market of automation and the contemporary care economy. Often times, in fact, tech-powered automation requires some sort of human labour to function properly. Care.coach’s virtual pets, for example, are voiced by staff working in the Philippines (Mannion 2017), a country increasingly becoming, as Sara T. Roberts’ (2019) brilliant work highlights, a world hub for operations related to commercial content moderation, from “cleaning”<sup>29</sup> the web from pornography, violence and hate speech, to contributing to tasks of low-level automation, such as the ones required by automated healthcare.

In both cases, such duties are performed by underpaid labour, migrants and women, or people located in developing nations – the case of the Philippines is exemplary of a country in which an entire sector of the population significantly works according to the time zone and the cultural values of another country, the US (Roberts 2019). Often times, this exploited, cheap labour is subject to psychological repercussions for the kind of sensitive work they have to perform on a daily basis, whether cleaning the

<sup>26</sup> See the website <https://www.care.coach/about.html>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.care.coach>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.care.coach>

<sup>29</sup> As the title of a recent documentary on this topic, “The Cleaners” (2018) by Hans Block and Moritz Riesewieck.

web from child pornography and terrorism-related content, or assisting elderly people with depression and all sorts of syndromes. Almost always, this workforce is invisible. Not only because it disappears in the eyes of the end user by virtue of the automation process, but also as the workers are obliged to sign non-disclosure agreements with the company who hires them and who does not wish them to address these practices in public<sup>30</sup>.

It is precisely in this invisibility that we should be able to find a connection, following Anne Boyer's insight: "the work of care and the work of data are quiet, daily, persistent, and never done" (Boyer 2015). We do not get to see the women, the migrant, the unprivileged who perform the care work in the form of unpaid or underpaid labour, often in private spaces, far away from public eyes. These figures are erased by the ideological glossiness of the knowledge economy presupposing and assuming the existence of independent, completely autonomous individuals – a fiction embedded in contemporary neoliberal capitalism. As much as we do not get to see the exploited workers from the Global South or from unprivileged and poor areas of the Global North, who are constantly monitoring and cleaning our social media posts, which we understand as textual manifestations of our rights to freedom of expression; or those who assist our elderly remotely at any time of the day, disguised as coloured tech avatars as if they were lacking material existence, empty stomachs to fill, families to feed, bills to pay. The work of care and the work of data go unnoticed until they are missing. "A dirty house attracts more attention than a clean one" (Boyer 2015), and the work of "cleaning" the web from the obscenities of free speech should never be paused, as otherwise the toxic waste of our alleged freedom of expression would immediately emerge to the surface.

In automation, in the quantification process, these postcolonial bodies are erased and condemned to disappear, subject to the violence of abstraction that is inherent in data and knowledge production. Where does the non-quantifiable go? How does the non-quantifiable inhabit the domain of the digital? How do we restore the materiality of these bodies, how do we rehabilitate personhood in the digital, through the digital?

Capital is trying to colonise our bodies and render them into data and abstraction, into invisible yet functioning units. It is at the intersection between the work of care and the work of data that we should initiate a reflection on digital socialism, in this very material overlap of flesh and bones, bits and pixels, melted together into a concrete political formation that we have not fully explored yet.

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<sup>30</sup> Which makes this subject extremely difficult to study (see Roberts 2019).

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# Left Populism and Platform Capitalism

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**Abstract:** This paper contextualizes and analyses the policy proposals of new “left populisms” (Mouffe 2018) for the regulation and reform of the “platform capitalism” (Srnicek 2017) that increasingly organizes digital communication. The era of the 2008 crash and subsequent recession saw the emergence in North America and Europe of new left-wing electoral initiatives, either as new parties or fractions within older parties. These include, in the USA, Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Democrats; in the UK, Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party; in Spain, Podemos; in Germany, Die Linke; in France, La France Insoumise. While many of these groupings might be described as socialist, or democratic socialist, they often also distinguish themselves from older socialist or social democratic formations; so, for lack of a better term, we call them left populisms. Left populisms are connected in contradictory ways to the appearance of platform capitalism, a corporate model exemplified by Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon and Uber, deploying proprietorial software as a launch-point for user activities accessing commodified or advertising-driven goods and services. The rise of left populism correlates with the ascent of platform capitalists. Left populist parties emerged from the anti-austerity movements (Occupy in the USA, the Indignados in Spain, student campus occupations in the UK) organized with the help of social media platforms. However, it is also the failures and scandals of platform capitalism have been important to left populism. Edward Snowden’s revelations of ubiquitous surveillance and the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica-Russian hacker imbroglio around the 2016 US election have fuelled a “techlash” against giant digital corporations that is now an important component of left populist sentiment. Drawing on policy documents, manifestos, speeches, position paper, this paper analyses the policy platforms in which left populist parties confront platform capitalism around issues of content regulation; concentration of ownership; the rights of digital workers; alternative ownership models; and proposals for a high-tech driven transition to “postcapitalism” (Mason 2016). It considers the similarities and difference between and within left populist parties on these issues; the extent of their departure from neoliberal policies; and their differences, and occasional erratic similarities, with right-wing populisms, such as that of Trump. It then reviews critiques of left populism made from Marxist and ecological anti-capitalist positions, with particular reference to technological issues. The paper concludes with a summary of the opportunities and problems for a left wing “data populism” (Morozov 2016) in the current political conjuncture.

**Keywords:** left populism, platform capitalism, digital networks, capitalism, socialism, populism

## 1. Introduction

In the last decade, amidst economic crisis and recession, a wave of new left electoral parties or party fractions has appeared in Europe and North America. These include, in Europe, Spain’s Podemos; Germany’s Die Linke; France’s La France Insoumise, and in the UK, Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party. There are also parties that once might have been termed “left”, for whom that designation now seems dubious, such as Greece’s Syriza, and Italy’s Five Star movement. In the United States, supporters of Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and (by some reckonings) Elizabeth War-

ren constitute a left resurgence within the Democratic Party. In Canada, Québec Solidaire adds to the roster. Some of these parties and party fractions (henceforward, for economy, “parties”) self-describe as “socialist”, or “democratic socialist”. However, other of the new formations wish to distinguish themselves from older socialist or social democratic parties whose current conservatism they repudiate. Some observers speak of “movement parties against austerity” (Della Porta et al. 2017), but this formulation is both awkward and too broad, because different, right-wing tendencies have also emerged from the era of austerity. A more useful concept is Chantal Mouffe’s (2018) “left populism”, designating electoral parties claiming to represent the people against alien interests, interests that for right populisms are liberal elites or foreign migrants but in left populisms are corporate oligarchies.

Amongst the corporate oligarchies that left populisms oppose are those of “platform capitalism” (Srnicek 2017), the masters of the software and hardware infrastructures on which users rely to work, shop, sell, socialize and conduct ever-growing portions of everyday life. From such activities, proprietors of these “platforms” draw revenues via commodity sales, advertising, and data extraction. This business model, exemplified by Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon and Uber, has spread from search engines and social media across the economy, driving the ascent of what are today some of global capitalism’s most highly valued corporate giants. The idea of platform capitalism has been widely adopted by media and communication scholars. It has, however, been criticised for inadequately addressing the social conflicts surrounding the emergence of the new digital oligopolies (van Dorn 2017). This essay addresses that omission by examining left populist responses to platform capitalism, their proposals for its reform or supersession, and the problems and possibilities of such programs.

## 2. From Street to State via Social Media

Left populisms and platform capitalism are closely connected. Both emerged over the same period, from about 2004 to 2016<sup>1</sup>. The major connector is the Wall Street crash of 2007/2008, and the decade-long recession in the Global North that followed. The economic meltdown propelled capital’s search for a new growth sector, which it found in already nascent “platforms” (Srnicek 2017; Mosco 2017). Left populisms emerged as response to austerity, recession, debt, unemployment, precarity, and inequality, social problems that these platforms accentuated. But left populist parties were born from social movements that used capitalist platforms to protest these injustices. Many of such parties had origins in “occupy” or take the “square movements” ignited by the crash; *Podemos* in the Indignados’ occupation of the Puerto del Sol in Madrid (Delclós 2015); Sanders’ 2016 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in Occupy Wall Street (Gabbatt 2015; Stewart 2019); Momentum, the ginger group for Corbyn’s ascent, from UK campus occupations of 2010-2011 (Earle 2018); Québec Solidaire

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<sup>1</sup> On a purely impressionist basis, compare these chronologies. On the left populist side: Syriza was founded in 2004; Die Linke in 2007; M5S in 2009; Occupy movements were active from 2011 to 2014; Podemos was founded in 2014; Corbyn won Labour leadership, and Sanders ran his presidential nomination bid, in 2015; La France Insoumise was founded in 2018, and in that year Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was elected to the US Congress; Sanders and Warren both bid for Democratic presidential nomination in 2019. On the platform capital side, Google launched its Initial Public Offering (IPO) in 2004, and Facebook did so in 2006 Apple sold its first iPhone in 2008; Twitter made its IPO in 2013; in 2017 Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Google, Microsoft occupied five spots amongst the top global corporations by market valuation; 2019 saw the IPOs of Uber, Lyft, and Pinterest.

from French-Canada's "Maple Spring". Such movements famously organised via social media platforms. "Facebook revolutions" is undoubtedly a hyperbolic phrase, but one containing a grain of truth.

As the tide of occupations ebbed, some activists turned "from the streets to the state" (Gray 2018), and from "changing the world without taking power" (Holloway 2002) to taking parliamentary power. In doing so, they applied their familiarity with digital media to electoral politics. This dynamic is analysed by Paolo Gerbaudo (2019) in his *The Digital Party*, which examines both the strengths and weaknesses of such organising. Gerbaudo acknowledges the speed, scope and precision of digital campaigns, and its obvious appeal to youth completely familiarised with networked environments. But he also charts unexpected consequences, such as a tendency to polarise party structures between what he terms "hyper-leaders", whose charismatic image is built around carefully cultivated online presence, and "super-bases" of followers prone to rapid networked endorsements of their initiatives.

This paper does not, however, deal further with these tactical campaigning and organisational uses of digital media by left populist parties. Rather, it focuses on the strategic issue of the programs left populists have proposed for the reform or supersession of platform capitalism. For although left populisms organise via digital platforms, their rise coincides with great scandals about such platforms: Edward Snowden's surveillance revelations; the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica-"Russiagate" imbroglio; multiplying issues of hate speech, network toxicity and privacy abuse. Further, for millennial youth, the employment practices of Uber, Mechanical Turk, Task Rabbit, Deliveroo and CloudFlower typify the worst of a precarious gig-economy. All this has informed a mounting "techlash" (Feroz 2018) underway since 2017. In this context, what Evgeny Morozov (2016) terms "data populism" – a critique of the oligopolistic powers of digital giants – became an important part of left populism.

These proposals for reforming or even dismantling platform capitalism have many strands. Some issues are specific to particular nations. For example, in the United States, Sanders and his supporters were active in protests against the Trump administration's 2017 revocation of "net neutrality" – the principle that Internet service providers (ISPs) treat all data equally and not speed or slow it for profit (Coldewey 2018). The fight for net neutrality was in the US a major cause, and a bellwether for other struggles over digital policy. But while left populists in Europe and Canada are concerned about the US precedent (Orsini 2017), no similar attack on net neutrality has yet been mounted in these regions, so the issue does not have the same salience.

Yet despite such differences, left populists have common proposals about platform capitalism. These commonalities can be tracked through party programs; policy statements; position papers; and speeches and books by party leaders, members, advisors and sympathisers. Drawing on such sources, I outline five themes:

- a) calls for the regulation of Internet speech and privacy (Section 3);
- b) "trust-busting" legislation to break up concentrations of ownership (Section 4);
- c) regulation of gig economy working conditions (Section 5);
- d) forms of alternative ownership of digital resources, including nationalisation, municipal digitalism, open-source institutions, and platform cooperatives (Section 6)
- e) plans for a digitally-driven transition to "postcapitalism" (Mason 2015; Section 7).

### 3. Internet Speech and Digital Surveillance

Issues of Internet speech regulation and privacy protection are the least distinctive area of left populist policy proposals, but only because these concerns have suddenly become widespread. Since 2016 there has been a surge of concern across the political



spectrum over hate speech and also at least ostensible expressions of outrage at the scope of commercial privacy invasion. In Europe, such concerns are now widely adopted by the political centre. In the US, Mark Zuckerberg himself called for government rules for social media content as the price of preserving his private empire (BBC 2019). Here left populism has contributed to “mainstreaming” of policy ideas unthinkable only a few years ago, but now conventional wisdom.

Left populist perspectives on speech regulation do however have inflections that separate them from centrist and conservative positions, largely to do with concerns about the national security state. While generally supporting regulation of hate speech and other toxic Internet content, left populist parties have criticised reliance on corporate-run semi-automated screening systems, and the danger of blacklisting all forms of dissent. Thus in 2009, Die Linke opposed Germany’s “access” legislation for blocking content such as child pornography on the grounds that “a largely uncontrolled technical censorship infrastructure is in principle incompatible with fundamental rights” (Feilner 2009). In Spain, Podemos’ leader Pablo Iglesias denounced prosecutions of artistic works, including online content and retweeted jokes, for alleged “glorification of terrorism” under the conservative governments notorious “gag law” (López-Terra 2017; Jones 2018)

Left populists have also highlighted platform capital’s collaboration with the unconstrained surveillance projects of state intelligence agencies and police forces. In the US, Sanders opposed the Patriot Act, warrantless wiretapping and overly broad government surveillance as blatant overreaches of government power, and has recently has denounced the police use of facial recognition technologies (Lutz 2019). When Jeremy Corbyn (2016) launched a “people’s charter of digital liberties”, it pledged to protect British citizens from “unwarranted snooping on their online activities by the security services”. Such concerns are particularly acute for left populist parties because some, of them, such as Podemos and the Labour Party, have themselves been subject to state surveillance (Nikandrov 2015; Evans 2017). However, these parties have also sometimes themselves been criticised by surveillance activists for compliance with state authorities around digital monitoring of terrorist or separatist threats (Ball 2016; López 2019).

#### **4. Concentration of Ownership**

Digital trust-busting – breaking up Google, Facebook and other digital giants – is a natural issue for left wing parties. Leaders such as Sanders and Corbyn regularly denounce monopolistic capital, including that in the media and communication sector. It is, however, another sign of recent “techlash” that left populist parties are today far from alone on this question. Anti-trust activities have returned to the policy repertoire of even centrist institutions. Since 2016, the European Union has fined giant US platform capitalists for anti-competitive practices, such as Google’s abuses in the mobile phone, shopping-comparison and online-advertising sectors, Facebook’s melding of personal data gathered from its various subsidiaries, and Apple’s tax evasions (Stavis-Gridneff 2019) – even if these multibillion penalties are minor relative to the wealth of their targets, and payment indefinitely delayed by litigation.

However, the issue takes on a more serious complexion in the USA, where legislation could, hypothetically, actually divest Alphabet/Google or Facebook of corporate holdings. The argument for such action has historical precedent. If “data is the new oil”, why not apply the same logic that made Rockefeller’s empire the target of early twentieth century trust-busting? Despite Sanders’ long anti-monopoly record, it is Elizabeth Warren (2019) who has made digital anti-trust a central policy plank of

her campaigns and indeed one of her central claims to being counted as a “left populist”. Her proposal to structurally separate the corporate operation of a digital platform from sale of its own products (for companies with over \$25 billion in annual global revenue) updates the classic regulatory principle of division between “carriage” and “content” (Dayen 2019). It explicitly has Amazon Marketplace, Google’s ad exchange, and Google Search in its sights. Warren’s proposal is reinforced by promises to investigate and reverse anti-competitive mergers and acquisitions in the digital domain, naming Amazon, Google, and Facebook as probable targets (Warren 2019; Dayen2019). Sanders has endorsed the idea of breaking up Facebook.

The anti-trust attack on the “bigness” of Big Tech has become a new horizon for progressive activism in the US. One should not, however, overstate its radicalism. As Warren herself makes clear, anti-trust is not inherently anti-capitalist; rather, it protects the so-called free-market against its self-destructive tendencies. The breakup of the regulated telecommunication monopoly of AT&T can be regarded as a founding act of neoliberalism (Lüthje 1993). Indeed, on anti-trust, left populism overlaps with right populism. Trump has made forays into this area, posing as a tribune of the people in his highly personalized feud with Jeff Bezos’ Amazon. His administration is now taking a more systematic approach to the issue, with Department of Justice investigations into anti-competitive platform practices recently announced (The Economist 2019a). Ironically, “legacy” media moguls such as Rupert Murdoch support the breakup of their digital competitors (Scola and McGill 2019). Despite left populism’s embrace of “anti-trust”, there can be no assumption its outcomes would be democratising. All depends on what alternatives might be available to fill the space created by diminishing the oligopolies of platform capitalism. I turn to this question in a moment, but first we should look at the related issues of digital labour conditions.

## 5. Gig Worker Rights

Left populist parties are virtually unanimous in their critique of the low wages, precarity and lack of benefits suffered those who work for platform capitalists. Amazon fulfilment centres, with their reliance on temporary workers and zero-hour contracts, relentless digital monitoring, mental and physical stressing of employees, and poor health and safety conditions epitomise the problem. Left populists also target so-called “lean platforms” (Srnicsek 2017) such as those of Uber, Lyft, and Deliveroo that rely on algorithmic management to coordinate workers using their personal equipment (cars or bikes), and classifying them as “self-employed” agents to avoid responsibility for training, safety provisions, health insurance, holidays and other benefits.

In this regard, La France Insoumise (LFI), a party whose appearance was directly related to protests against the liberalising of France’s labour laws under Sarkozy and Macron, is exemplary. LFI uses the term “Uberisation” to identify “a breakdown of work structures” that is “due to the emergence of a model organized around digital platforms”. It declares Uberisation a “social regression” characterised by “wild deregulation of professions and sectors” and “fraudulent and widespread circumvention of fiscal and social rules”. Uberisation “causes workers’ rights to disappear [...] through massive recourse to self-entrepreneurship” producing “an unprecedented deterioration in working conditions” and accumulating profits” while “squeezing wages and social rights” (LFI 2017). LFI’s leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon has also argued that “Uberisation” is gender-coded and especially injurious to women because “Uber’s world is that a self-employed worker without rights, who thinks he’s smart as long as he’s healthy and has no children” (Durand and Goldberger 2018).

LFI therefore explicitly situates itself on the side of recent labour protests in France – taxi drivers protesting Uber, bicycle courier collectives formed after the sudden closure of the Tok TokTokTake and Eat Easy – and also of worker movements in the US and UK fighting to “reclaim their pseudo-independence and combat over-exploitation”. It proposes that precarious and so-called self-employed workers be given full access to the “general social security scheme”; “every worker performing his or her work in a situation of economic dependence [...] must be presumed to be an employee, and thus enjoy the rights attached to it”. LFI also proposes that platform capitalists be subject to “approval procedure that will make it possible to verify that they meet the social, fiscal and regulatory obligations in force” (LFI 2017).

Similar statements and policies can be found from almost all left populist parties. Die Linke’s 2011 platform declares the party against “replacement of the regular workforce by temporary agency work or bogus self-employment”; a later “digital agenda” advocates redistributing the benefits of advanced digitalisation, including a 30-hour working week, a basic income, and at least two sabbaticals during every working lifetime (Offerman 2017). UK Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn accuses “unscrupulous bosses” of using technology to undermine workers’ rights; declares that the gig economy, depicted as “modern and dynamic”, actually denies “both employees and customers basic protections” and harms workers’ mental health; and urges young people to join a trade union to protect their rights. A Labour government would, he says, make it easier for unions to go on strike and extend full employee rights to all workers in the gig economy – such as sick pay, parental leave and protection against unfair dismissal. (BBC 2017). In the US, Bernie Sanders in 2018 drafted a Stop Bad Employers by Zeroing Out Subsidies (Stop BEZOS) Act, a proposal for a tax on large corporations equal to the federal benefits their low-wage employees would have to claim to make ends meet (Heater 2018). His recent Workplace Democracy plan has promised the abolition of the “independent contractor” status of workers in companies such as Uber and Lyft. Both Sanders and Warren have supported the struggle for California’s historic Bill AB 5, an important step in this direction (Corbett 2019).

## 6. Alternative Ownership

Left populist parties have many ideas about diversifying control of digital platforms, part of their wider reconsiderations of what social ownership of the means of production might mean today (Beckett 2019). An important statement of this approach is the 2017 study of “Alternative Ownership” commissioned by the UK Labour Party. This envisages reviving and revising traditional models of industry nationalisation, adding higher levels of transparency and accountability to public-sector ownership; fostering economic activity by municipalities and locally-led social enterprises; encouraging worker’s co-operatives and other employee ownership plans. This is a general plan, not one specific to digital platforms. But all of these alternative ownership approaches – and some more beside – have application to platform capitalism, and have been taken up, with varying inflections and intensities, by other left populist parties.

### *(i) Public Sector Platforms:*

The Alternative Ownership paper per se actually has little to say about digital industries, though it cites the UK postal services, alongside railways and the energy sector, as privatised services to be re-nationalised under its new model. But Labour leadership speeches, policy statements and think tank pieces fill out the picture. A “British Digital Corporation” (BDC), a sister to the BBC, would host non-profit services rivalling those

of digital corporations, including a Facebook alternative (Jones 2018; Lunden 2018; Watson 2019). Other public service applications promised in the Labour Party's (2016) Digital Democracy Manifesto include a guarantee to "deliver high speed broadband and mobile connectivity for every household, company and organisation in Britain from the inner city neighbourhoods to the remotest rural community"; a free-to-use on-line hub of learning resources for the National Education Service; an "open-knowledge" portal where "the findings of all state-funded research to be made available without charge" and enabling online voting, and even public meetings, in elections. In a similar vein, La France Insoumise pledges to oppose corporate platforms with "public platforms of general Interest" dealing with both "physical services (public transport, local product distribution networks, etc.) and immaterial services (access to law, transparency of data, etc.)," and ensuring that "the value created by an ecosystem is paid back to society, not captured in financial form" (LFI 2017).

The most dramatic initiative on public sector initiatives from a left populist party to date is, however, the announcement by the Labour Party in its 2019 election Manifesto that it would provide full fibre broadband service to everyone in Britain by 2030 (Labour Party 2019, 51). This "British Broadband" service would be created by nationalising the digital network arm of the private company BT (British Telecom), compensating shareholders to the tune of about \$15 billion (Fildes and Pickard 2019); the costs for operating the new network would be paid for by "taxation of multinationals, including tech giants" (Labour Party 2019, 51). The pledge elicited an alarmed counterattack by the Conservative Party, the tabloid press and BT spokespeople, all claiming it underestimated costs of the project. At the time this article was finalised, the UK election campaign was still underway.

### (ii) *Digital Municipalism:*

Progressive digital municipalisms has been pursued especially vigorously in Spain by Podemos and its city-level political allies, such as *Barcelona en Comu* and *Más Madrid* (Baird and Junque 2019; Romanos and Sádaba 2016). In Barcelona, during the mayoralty of Ada Colau, the city's chief technology officer, Francesca Bria (2018) and her colleagues developed "a new social contract for the digital age". Data gathered from services such as transportation would be a publicly owned and protected asset, used for urban planning purposes; a TOR-encrypted whistle-blower tool shielded public workers denouncing corruption; urban 3D-printing maker labs were set up; and a special online platform enabled citizens to participate in civic policy making (Bria 2018; Barcelona Ciutat Digital 2019).

In Madrid, under the mayor Manuela Carmena and her *Ahora Madrid* party, Spain's capital experimented with similar initiatives, including the use of the Decide open source platform for participatory budgeting, citizen policy proposals and consultation processes (DeJohn 2017). These metropolitan projects supported a network of smaller municipal initiatives in Spain, and internationally. Not all these efforts have been successful, and recent municipal elections saw setbacks for left parties in Barcelona and Madrid. Recent assessments of prospects for a left digital urbanism strike a soberer tone than earlier utopian visions (Morozov and Bria 2018). Nonetheless, these experiments have provided practical laboratories for the digital policies of left populism, and are critically important in suggesting alternatives to corporate led "smart city" plans, such as Google/Alphabet's infamous "Quayside" appropriation of Toronto's waterfront.

### (iii) *Open Source Institutions:*

Many left populist manifestos mention the progressive potential of “open source” software and hardware. For example, soon after its formation Die Linke took a pro-open source stance (Feilner 2009), and just before the 2017 German federal elections published a document titled “10 Points For a Digital Agenda” (Kipping et al. 2017). Its authors, three of whom previously worked for the Pirate Party, rearticulated the aspirations of the Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) movement for “digital cooperation, collaboration, sharing and re-use” within the framework of a socialist electoral project (Offerman 2017). The realisation of FOSS ideals, they said, depends on an institutional framework that not only provide the necessary legal protections but also encourage widespread adoption of open source and open standards software. Without such an institutional context, big data and machine learning and other computing innovations threaten the emergence of a digital feudalism. However, a left government could legislate the conditions in which cultural products and scientific knowledge would become free and available to all as open data. In contrast with Germany’s “Industry 4.0” policy of intense automation, they posit the creation of “Social State 4.0”. All public networks would be based on open-source infrastructures; internet access should be free; all software used in political processes would be open source. “We want,” the manifesto says “to uninstall the neoliberal version of platform capitalism and create a new drive system” (Kipping et al. 2017).

### (iv) *Platform Cooperatives & Inclusive Ownership:*

An important strand in left populist ownership plans is the digital extension of left traditions of Co-operativism. Platform co-operatives are businesses based on computing platforms, but owned and governed workers and users. Many such projects currently exist, though generally on a small scale (Scholz and Schneider 2017). The concept is widely supported by left populist parties as an alternative to the exploitative path of the gig economy. It has been embraced La France Insoumise, supported in the progressive municipalism of Podemos allies, and celebrated by Corbyn (2017): “imagine an Uber run co-operatively by the drivers, collectively controlling their futures, agreeing their own pay and conditions, with profits shared or re-invested”.

The Co-operative Party, an affiliate of the Labour Party, proposes large scale digital systems to assist workers and consumer cooperatives, including platform cooperatives (Lawrence et al. 2017). Platform Co-operativism has been criticised for underestimating the difficulties small enterprises confront in face of the massive network-effect advantages enjoyed by established platform capitalists (Srnicsek 2017), condemning worker- and user- owned alternatives to the “dwarfish forms” Marx saw as the fate of all co-operatives within capitalism.

However, left populist plans include state support for cooperatives, including platform cooperatives, by, for example, financing through special investment banks. How far this would be sufficient to give platform co-operatives a fighting chance to compete with the Ubers and Googles is, to say the least, uncertain. However, it is also important to note that left populist programmes also include methods of advancing worker ownership that do not depend on the co-operative form but aim at similar goals. These include the idea of “Inclusive Ownership Funds” (IOF) by which a small percentage of companies’ shares would be regularly transferred to workers up to a set cap (say 10%), and idea with roots in postwar Sweden’s labour-led “Meidner Plan” (Gowan and Viktorsson 2017). The funds would, in many firms, soon make the workers the largest

single shareholder, able to elect their own trustees and directly influence company decisions. This idea has been most developed by the UK Labour Party, but was also recently adopted by Sanders (Blackburn 2018; Gowan 2018; Bruenig 2019b). Such plans – a variant of an earlier tradition of “fund socialism” (Bruenig 2019a) – are not specific to platform enterprises, and lack some of the DIY appeal of platform cooperatives, but do offer a gradual route to somewhat collectivizing ownership of behemoths of platform capitalism.

## 7. Postcapitalism

While anti-trust legislation, gig worker protections and alternative ownership plans would be important reforms, they are not the most audacious left populist ideas for dealing with platform capitalism. For these, we have look to a group of left intellectuals broadly in the orbit of Corbyn’s Labour Part.; Nick Srnicek, not only an originator of the term “platform capitalism” but also co-author with Alex Williams *Inventing the Future* (Srnicek and Williams 2015); journalist Paul Mason, advocate for *Postcapitalism* (Mason 2015); and Aaron Bastani (2019), proponent of *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*. These thinkers are united by the idea of a left populist politics with a programme based on the rapid development of a high-tech economy which, they believe, opens a path to a society of abundance in many respects beyond capitalism.

The major process enabling this transition would be the erosion of the need for wage labour by artificial intelligence (AI), robotics and other advanced forms of automation. Paid work would be progressively replaced by either Universal Basic Income (UBI) (Srnicek and Williams 2015; Mason 2015), or a comprehensive range of Universal Basic Services such as health care, transportation, housing, education (Bastani 2019). To this Mason and Bastani adds the idea that a digital economy will inevitably generate more and more free goods, as point and click reproduction reduces marginal costs to zero. As the freely available goods include will include tools for communal planning, the possibility for a society that is both freed of wage labour and increasingly capable of democratized decisions, and hence substantially “beyond capitalism” will, it is claimed, emerge.

This “left accelerationist” (Williams and Srnicek 2013) vision of a postcapitalism attained by speeding up high-technology has classic Marxist roots in the idea that capitalism will be destroyed by the tension between the force and relations of production, and also in the famous “Fragment on Machines” in Marx’s *Grundrisse*, which appears to predict dissolution of the wage form by automation. It is also in a way the digital-era successor to Lenin’s enthusiasm for the assembly line and definition of communism as ‘the soviets plus electricity’ – with one important difference: it dispenses with the messy business of revolution, substituting an evolutionary, tech-driven path to postcapitalism.

“AI plus UBI (or UBS)” [Artificial Intelligence; Universal Basic Income; Universal Basic Services] has become a mantra for some strands of left populisms. It has a complex relation to left populism’s other major societal vision, that of a “Green New Deal” responding to climate emergency, an idea most energetically advocated in the US by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, but echoed in the UK Labour Party, La France Insoumise and other left populist formations. Fully Automated Luxury Communism (FALC) and a Green New Deal (GND) can be seen as compatible, *if* the latter is interpreted solely as an eco-modernising project, dependent entirely on developing large scale solar, wind and other renewable energy systems. However, there is an obvious tension between the “automation now”, “post-work version” of FALC and the New Green Deal emphasis on “green jobs”. And the potential contradictions between the two increase sharply if a

GND is understood as including any de-growth component that would curb aggregate production and consumption, undercutting the promise of abundance integral to FALC.

It thus cannot be taken for granted that an effective NGD is fully compatible with either the “automation” or the “luxury” of Fully Automated Luxury Communism. In regard to digital networks, many eco-modernist proposals for high-technology solutions to global explicitly rely on big data monitoring of energy consumption and use (Bratton 2019), and could be expected to entail state-led surveillance, social media nudging and admonition aimed at shaping such behaviour. It is, again, uncertain how far such an element of a GND would be compatible with the commons, privacy protection and freedom from surveillance made in the “new data deal” (Bria 2018) that left populist parties also advance.

## 8. Conclusion: Problems and Possibilities

Left populism presents an amalgam of policies to change platform capitalism. Some are modest neo-social democratic steps (Watkins 2016), others more ambitious. This mix is, as we will discuss, problematic. But it nevertheless marks a significant incursion on neoliberal “common sense”, opening a window to ideas of public ownership of technologies and network governance in ways not seen since 1970s. This shift in the wind has been registered by opponents of the left. *The Economist* (2019b) reports on the rise of “millennial socialism” with alarmed condescension; in the USA, Republican attacks on figures such as Alexandria Ocasio Cortez manifest both confidence “socialism” can’t win – so should be talked up – and fears it might – so must be run down.

Left populism is however also controversial on the left. Mouffe is a declared “post-Marxist” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). The turn to a parliamentary strategy and a disavowal of a specifically class politics characteristic of left populist parties has led some Marxists to declare it “pseudo-socialist” (López 2019). Many see populism as almost inherently right-wing (Dean 2017; Revelli 2019). Others, while critical of post-Marxism, nonetheless believe a left populism drawing on the concept of “the people” – as in “the popular front”, or “the people united shall never be defeated” – has communist and socialist potential (Rancière 2013; Sotiris 2019). This debate is joined and cross-cut by autonomists, communisers, anarchists and horizontalists of all stripes, often opposed to any party form or parliamentary strategy. Bearing these entangled discussions in mind, I conclude with a brief review of three criticisms of left populist strategies towards platform capitalism.

First, and most pragmatically, left populist ideas are still a long way from the corridors of state power. So far, no left populist party has achieved a national electoral victory, other than Syriza, which in 2014 marked its success by abdicating its anti-austerity mandate, and Italy’s Five Star party, which promptly entered a disastrous coalition with the far right. Since then the torch passed to first to Podemos, now in decline, then to the British Labour Party, currently mired in Brexit problems, and to the US, where at the time of writing, Sanders and Warren, though important contenders in the Democrat’s nomination race for the presidential election of 2020 are still widely considered unlikely to win. Parties formed in the period of acute crisis following the Wall Street crash have faced a more difficult terrain during the subsequent slow and ambivalent economic recovery – and will face another changed situation in any future recession.

The issues of the digital industry and network policy discussed here are probably by no means the most significant in determining left populist electoral success or failure, which may hinge far more on health care, education, debt, trade and immigration.

In particular, it is unclear how much traction long-view promises of a high-tech post-capitalism have with households immediately concerned about low pay-cheques, skyrocketing child-care and education costs and diminishing welfare rates.<sup>2</sup>

Second, were a Corbyn or a Sanders to win electoral victory, as David Broder (2019) observes, “their difficulties would only begin”. The left turn “from the street to the state” since Occupy has reignited a series of debates about the problems of any electoral transition to socialism that for Marxists go back to the arguments of Lenin, Bernstein, Kautsky and Luxemburg at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to those of Poulantzas and Miliband at its mid points. As Broder remarks, there is a “dismal record” of supposedly socialist governments which, rather than reforming or abolishing capitalism, were instead themselves “reformed” to become “mere administrators of the existing system”. This is often explained in terms of the class backgrounds of politicians and civil servants, but ultimately the problem is structural. In capitalism, state revenues depend on national capital and ensuring that capital’s continued profitability is a compulsion; without it “the state itself would collapse” (Bolton and Pitts 2018, 143). For a left populist government to quietly erode capitalism from within, without bringing the house down on its own head in a crisis that would require a far more revolutionary response, would be extremely difficult. It is not hard to imagine, for example the resources that a Google or Facebook could throw against policies aimed at their expropriation. This is a point about which the most lucid supporters of left populists (such as Broder) are very well aware, but to which they do not necessarily have a good answer (see also Sunkara 2019; Blanc 2019).

The third critique, however, is that despite its apparent radicalism, left populism has already, prior to election, conceptually made deep pre-emptive compromises with capitalism. Left populist parties generally assume and advocate a social path of high technology, high productivity modernity. And even though these policies are termed “postcapitalist”, they are sometimes, virtually in the same breath, advocated both as leading “beyond the market” *and* as a way capitalism might “escape” from its current economic stagnation (Mason 2015, loc. 144). Left “accelerationist” ideas of a post-work society based on state-supported “fourth industrial revolution” development, with a UBI to pacify surplus populations, could well be an enabler of, rather than an alternative to, large scale capitalist AI development (Dyer Witthford, Steinhoff and Kjoson 2019). Ecosocialists might also suggest that the idea that human emancipation is identical with the advance of a high-production, high-technological networked society is precisely what is thrown into question by global heating and other environmental-crises, and by the critique from the South of extractivism and low-cost microwork. There is a real question as to how far political platforms for “socialism with an iPad” (to use a phrase of Corbyn’s shadow chancellor, John McDonnell) are adequate to the scale of today’s planetary crisis (Davey 2016).

In raising these points, I by no means propose a blanket rejection of left populism. On the contrary, I think it is an important, substantive project. I do want, however, to suggest it be understood as a moment in a long arc of post-crash politics. Left populist parties were born out of struggles, as a response to the defeat of occupy movements. Their development will depend on further struggles, both within the broad left, and against its opponents. Any electoral left populist success would probably unleash pan-

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<sup>2</sup> Adam Greenfield (2017, 109-110) reports a cautionary episode in which a well-intended attempt to establish a 3-D printing lab in an impoverished area of Barcelona on the site of a former community food bank was angrily resisted by residents!



icked reactions, violent in both overt and subtle ways, from the most conservative sections of capital and the neo-fascist right<sup>3</sup>. It would also catalyse conflicts within the left, between those who wish to contain electoral victory within a first world social democratic frame, and those seeking yet more equalitarian and ecologically viable outcomes. In this sequence, the electoral bot and party blog are followed by the return of the red hack and the mobile phone coordinated riot. Seeing left populisms not as an endpoint of struggles, but as a relay or node in an ongoing cycle of conflicts that has flowed from the street to the state and will likely flow back again, is perhaps the most productive and realistic way to understand these parties and their relation to platform capitalism.

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<sup>3</sup> I owe some of these reflections to remarks by James Woodcock, at a workshop on class composition, held at the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Berlin, on March 6, 2018.

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### **About the Author**

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# Digital Workerism: Technology, Platforms, and the Circulation of Workers' Struggles

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**Abstract:** The use of digital technology has become a key part of contemporary debates on how work is changing, the future of work/ers, resistance, and organising. Workerism took up many of these questions in the context of the factory – particularly through the Italian *Operaismo* – connecting the experience of the workplace with a broader struggle against capitalism. However, there are many differences between those factories and the new digital workplaces in which many workers find themselves today. The methods of workers' inquiry and the theories of class composition are a useful legacy from *Operaismo*, providing tools and a framework to make sense of and intervene within workers' struggles today. However, these require sharpening and updating in a digital context. In this article, we discuss the challenges and opportunities for a “digital workerism”, understood as both a research and organising method. We use the case study of Uber to discuss how technology can be used against workers, as well as repurposed by them in various ways. By developing an analysis of the technical, social, and political re-composition taking place on the platform, we move beyond determinist readings of technology, to place different technologies within the social relations that are emerging. In particular, we draw attention to the new forms through which workers' struggles can be circulated. Through this, we argue for a “digital workerism” that develops a critical understanding of how the workplace can become a key site for the struggles of digital/communicative socialism.

**Keywords:** Workerism, operaismo, socialism from below, Deliveroo, digital economy, digital socialism

## 1. Introduction

Digital technologies – whether platforms, automation, artificial intelligence, or other novelties – are increasingly dominating the debate on work and how it is changing. In particular, the topic is increasingly referred to as “the future of work” something that either explicitly or implicitly sees little role for workers agency in this supposed future. In this article, we prefer thinking about the future of workers and the central role they play in struggling over and reshaping work. Instead of predicting how many workers' jobs may be “lost” to automation (Frey and Osborne 2013), considering whether their work is “decent” (Berg et al. 2018) and classifying workers according to whether they are “low” or “high” skilled, we want to draw attention to the new skills, tactics, and strategies that workers devise in their struggles against digital capitalism.

This article focuses on what we term “digital workerism”, an approach that seeks to return to the premise of workerism that workers and their experiences matter to the critique of capitalism, while updating its methods into a digital context. This is explicitly

an attempt to force workers agency back into the future of work, specifically while experimenting with what digital socialism could mean in practice.

In order to achieve this, we first return to workerism to consider what tools and frameworks can be salvaged for this project. Second, we consider how these could contribute to a “digital workerism” and would it would entail. Third, we apply this to the case study of Uber, both specifically in the UK and more widely in a global con-text. This involves thinking critically about class composition in light of new technolo-gy, platforms, and the circulation of workers' struggles. Then, finally, the article con-cludes by using this approach to discuss what a “digital socialism” could entail – par-ticularly when drawing on these struggles as a guide.

## 2. Learning from Workerism

The use of digital technology has become a key part of contemporary debates on how work is changing, the future of work/ers, resistance, and organising. Workerism took up many of these questions in the context of the factory – particularly through the Italian *Operaismo* – connecting the experience of the workplace with a broader struggle against capitalism. The Italian workerists began from a fundamental perception that a gulf was emerging between the struggle of workers in the rapidly developing high tech production sectors of Italian capitalism (particularly automotive, technological and chemical manufacture) and the politics of working-class parties, such as the Italian Communist Party (PCI).

The first evidence of the developing gulf was a wave of near-insurrectionary struggle against the conference of the neo-fascist MSI party that broke out in Genoa in 1960. It was led by young factory workers who became known as the “striped T shirts” [*magliette a righe*]. Their militancy was not restricted to the streets, but also increasingly bled over into the workplace. It was in this context that the workerists began to publish their first cohesive journal, *Quaderni Rossi* [Red Notebooks], in which they attempted to theorise how this gulf had emerged, and what it meant for socialists (Wright 2017). It was in this context that operaismo developed its theory of empirical research into the workplace through the idea of workers' inquiry.

Workers' inquiry did not begin with *operaismo*. Its history can be traced back directly to Marx and then, depending on the genealogy employed, via Lenin, Mao, the Johnson-Forrest Tendency, and *Socialisme ou Barbarie* before it arrives in 1950/60s Italy. However, it is in its Italian context that workers' inquiry had perhaps its most influential 20th-century iteration. Turin-based dissident Marxist Danilo Montaldi was the first to connect the Italian movement to the work being carried out by other currents abroad through the translation of *The American Worker* (Romano and Stone 1946), one of the first inquiries to be produced by the American Johnson Forrest Tendency. In his introduction of the Italian translation, he stressed that the text “expresses with great force and profundity this idea, practically forgotten by the Marxist movement after the publication of the first volume of *Capital*, that the worker is first of all someone who lives at the point of production of the capitalist factory before being the member of a party [...] and that it is the productive process that shapes his rejection of exploitation and his capacity to build a superior type of society [...]” (Montaldi 2013)

In its operaist form, workers' inquiry became a mode of scientific investigation into the balance of class forces in the rapidly-developing sphere of production (rather than the narrative exploration of working-class life, as most earlier forms of labour studies had been). In a period of transformation, it would allow Marxists a way to connect with the reality of working-class struggle and develop their ideas accordingly.

The results of workers' inquiry were primarily comprehended through the framework of a theory that has (largely postfacto) been expressed as "class composition". This framework is built around a close attention to what Marx identified as the three "simple elements" that make up any labour process: the "(1) purposeful activity, that is work itself, (2) the object on which that work is performed, and (3) the instruments of that work" (Marx 1990, 284). These factors are understood as the technical composition of the working class: that is to say, the way that labour power is organised with capital to produce a productive process. This technical composition, which includes patterns of cooperation is then understood as creating the basis for a leap into resistance. This resistance, organized on a collective basis and utilising forms and tactics that emerge from the technical composition, is then understood as the political composition of the working class. Recent work has also extended this approach by considering factors beyond the labour process under the heading of "social composition" (Notes from Below 2018).

In the last ten years, there has been a renewed interest in workerism, particularly through the approach of workers' inquiry. The financial crisis of 2007-8 led to a wave of political contention that catalysed the development of a generation of Marxist intellectuals who acted as the *avant garde* of what Milburn (2019) has called "generation left" In the search for new theoretical and methodological tools with which to understand the re-emergence of overt class struggle, many of these intellectuals happened across Italian workerism – often through the lens of Steve Wright's history of the workerists, *Storming Heaven* (2017) and the work of German Workerists associated with the journal *Wildkat* and the Hotlines call centre inquiry project undertaken by Kolinko (2002).

This move was perhaps one of the first indications of a wider tendency towards a revitalised 21st-century workerism that has been expressed through an increase of workers' inquiry publishing. For example, the special issues of *Ephemeria* (see Woodcock 2014), the launch of *Viewpoint* and *Notes from Below*. For the *Notes from Below* project this re-articulation of workerism in the contemporary context means using a practice of workers' inquiry to understand workplaces from the working class' point of view and then interpreting the results of that inquiry through a theory of class composition, understood as:

a material relation with three parts: the first is the organisation of labour-power into a working class (technical composition); the second is the organisation of the working class into a class society (social composition); the third is the self-organisation of the working class into a force for class struggle (political composition) (*Notes from Below* 2018).

### 3. What is "Digital Workerism"?

The main aspects, as discussed above, that can be inherited from workerism provide a starting point for thinking about class composition and work today. However, class composition has shifted in profound and differing ways, meaning that many of the questions need to be taken up very differently today. If the tools and the frameworks of workerism provide the starting point, we also need to start charting a new path forward in the context of digitalisation.

This paper is not the first to propose thinking about what a "digital workerism" could involve. For example, Brown and Quan-Haase's (2012) call for a "Workers' Inquiry 2.0" examined digital labour, drawing on Bruns's (2008) portmanteau of "produsage" – pro-



duction and usage. They studied Flickr, a website that hosts a picture gallery with aspects of social media. The core of their argument is about how these are not “users”, and this is a “complete misnomer”, as they are “producers [...] willing to produce content at no cost to the owners of these domains at the same time as these sites generate massive profits” (Brown and Quan-Haase 2012, 488).

While this is an interesting endeavour, we seek instead to return the focus to the workplace specifically in our formulation of digital workerism. For example, their study does not interrogate the conditions or struggles of the workers paid to ensure the operation of the platform, upon which the produsage takes place. Brown and Quan-Haase (2012, 494) conclude that “the mode of produsage should be considered hyper-exploitative because it does not even offer its legions of workers a wage in exchange for their labour power and time.” While they are right to identify new methods of exploitation, there is a risk that this loses focus on exploitation through the wage relation. For example, as Dyer-Witheford’s (2015, 93) notes, it is right to:

reject a direct equivalence between the experience of, say, the dagongmei and Facebook users. But vampire bites come in many ways. Facebook posting is a form of exploitation, which, without explicit violence, is nonetheless parasitic. It does not replace the “normal” structures of daily class exploitation at work and home, but is added to and superimposed upon them, to constitute a regime in which the user is habituated, on pain of exclusion from social worlds, to surrendering the elements of their personality – identity, creativity, sociality – to enhance the circulation of capital. This submission is not the same as the brutal bodily discipline inflicted on the dagongmei, but it is a form of subjectification that is both infiltrative and extroversive in the abject submission to the commodity form it elicits.

While some of those involved in Italian *Operaismo* went on to look for new social subjects everywhere, including within a boundless “multitude” (Hardt and Negri 2000), there is a risk here in forgetting about the continuing importance of exploitation at work. We risk falling into the post-workerist trap of looking for the new social subject everywhere but the workplace. While making sense of digital capitalism from this lens does offer some insights, it says nothing about the work, infrastructure, and capital required for the activity to take place. Our focus is not on the “free labour” (Terranova 2000) of Internet users, despite the the “nascent evidence that this hyper-exploitative relationship is causing producers to organise struggles against it” (Brown and Quan-Haase 2012, 458). These have been focused around what they describe as the “frequent up-roars occurring on social networking sites regarding the violation of one’s privacy [which] have time and again resulted in controversy”.

There are similar comparisons that could be made with the conflict in videogames over modifications (or mods). Valve and Bethesda decided to try and monetise mods on the digital distribution platform Steam. In response, as Daniel Joseph put it, the “mod community then collectively lost its shit”, convincing the company to reverse its decision. This ties into a longer history of modding, resistance, and forms of “playbor” (Kücklich 2005) within the videogames industry – something which later formed the backdrop of worker organising in the industry (Woodcock 2019). However, it would not make sense to base an understanding of class struggle in the industry only from the free labour of modders. We see digital workerism as a return to a focus on workers, albeit integrating an understand of how different forms of labour feed into their struggles.

For a “digital workerism”, there are a series of studies that have already begun to sketch what it could mean in practice – although none of these have yet used the term – which move away from either a focus on technology or users, and instead privilege the self-activity of workers. Arguably, one of the first in this vein was the Kolinko (2002) collective’s inquiry that examined class composition in call centres, taking aim at how technology was being used by management to recompose precarious workers. This approach was taken up by Woodcock (2017) in his ethnographic inquiry into working conditions, technology, management, and resistance in a call centre in London. Call centres have proven to be an important testing ground for changing forms of digital work, experimenting with new technological methods of surveillance and control, which have then been applied more widely in other industries and sectors (Woodcock forthcoming). This means that the prelude to thinking about a digital workerism involved finding ways to understand digital technologies from the perspective of workers experience of the workplace.

The rapid growth of the gig economy and platform work has provided a focus for new forms of digital workerism. As discussed previously, platform work has become symbolic of many of the far reaching – and potential future – changes in work. Too often, the focus is not on new forms of class composition this entails, but becomes narrowly concerned with technologies and algorithms. However, the workers’ inquiry method has increasingly been applied, both in *Notes from Below* and elsewhere, to begin understanding the new composition on gig work platforms in London. For example, Waters and Woodcock (2017) put forward a co-written inquiry into working for Deliveroo, drawing on the experience of Waters, as well as digital methods including self-tracking and multimedia representation. This approach of co-writing has been followed up with Aslam and Woodcock (forthcoming), covering the history of driving for Uber, the story of organising, and the struggles against both the company, the regulator, and in the courts.

Both Cant and Woodcock (as well as the other editors of *Notes from Below*) published a series of interviews and reports from the front lines of the gig economy, including worker bulletins and strike reports. The most recent piece includes a polemic against other reports that keep talking about the emergence of resistance in platform work, arguing instead that the key is now understanding in which ways it will develop (Cant and Woodcock 2019). Cant (2019) has recently published his workers’ inquiry into Deliveroo, interrogating these changes within a framework of class composition. Similarly, albeit in a different industry, Woodcock (2019) has applied this framework to the videogames industry.

Across all of these, there are substantial challenges in thinking about, or even carrying out, these kinds of projects from an academic institution. This is particularly due to ethics review boards discouraging this kind of research process, as well as an emphasis on legal liability that disadvantages critical research (Badger and Woodcock 2019). This makes intervention from an academic context a challenge, something that is not an optional add on for workerism, but core to the practice. However, there is a powerful example of how HCI (Human Computer Interaction) can influence thinking about intervention. Irani and Silberman’s (2013) *Turkopticon* project established a software plug in to support micro-workers on Amazon Mechanical Turk. It provides a way for workers to rate those giving out the tasks, reversing the panopticon like process that Mechanical Turk uses to organise and regulate this digital work. In addition, *Turkopticon* provides a way to bring workers together to discuss their work, focusing on a bottom up organising approach.

Across these examples, the possibilities of a digital workerism emerge. However, it is important to remember that workers' inquiry has two central concerns: first, the relationship between technical and political composition; and second, the synthesis of research with organising. For “digital workerism”, this means following *Notes from Below* to introduce the third aspect of social composition, while in the latter part, drawing attention to the politics of technology when considering co-research. It is to the application of this framework that we now turn.

#### 4. The Case Study of Uber

We use the case study of Uber to discuss how technology can be used against workers, as well as repurposed by them in various ways. By developing an analysis of the technical, social, and political re-composition taking place on the platform, we move beyond determinist readings of technology, to place different technologies within the social relations that are emerging.

Much of the research on Uber has focused on technology, a narrow aspect of the technical composition of Uber. For example, many studies have focused on the use of algorithms in general (Pasquale 2015; Lee et al. 2015), and at Uber in particular (Rosenblat and Stark 2016; Rosenblat 2018) as well as critiques of this new mode of work organisation (Slee 2015; Scholz 2017). In part, this is due to the highly visible example of technological change that Uber represents. While there have been other examples of significant management-led technological change, Uber is one that many people have direct experience of as customers or can access very easily through the smartphone app interface. There was a similar starting point for Ravenelle's (2019) study of gig work, having come into contact with these workers as a customer.

It is clear that aspects of algorithmic surveillance and control are key to understanding the shifting composition in platform work (Woodcock forthcoming), including the mediation of work via a platform, the use of data, ratings by customers, and so on. However, there is a risk with many accounts of Uber that these are seen as totalising methods of control that provide little ability for workers to contest or subvert these. Instead, through inquiry with workers it is possible to pick apart these aspects of the labour process to understand how they work in practice. In particular, this draws attention to the material parts of the work, including the kind of car used and the relationships through which it is owned. In London, the majority of cars are leased Toyota Prius hybrid cars, locking drivers into high weekly payments for a specific car, preventing cheaper options. In addition, Uber drivers have to hold a private hire license, issued by TfL (Transport for London). This means a large proportion of drivers work full time to cover their costs and attempt to make a living. This is different to parts of the US, where drivers are not licensed and can use a much wider variety of vehicles, meaning part time work is more common. This means that while there might not seem to be a workplace (at least analogous to those found by the original workerists), drivers share the roads and the city, often with common meeting points.

In London, the social composition of Uber drivers is shaped by the pre-existing relationships within the taxi industry – particularly the two-tiered distinction between Black Cabs and minicabs. While Black cab drivers have to pass “the knowledge” test of geography and routes, and drive the differentiated Black cab, minicab drivers have a much lower bar to entry. They do not need to pass additional tests, but are required to have a private hire license. Many of these minicab companies are based out of offices with radio controllers, recruiting from migrant groups. There is also a clear split in racial composition between the white British Black Cab drivers and (often migrant)

BME minicab drivers. When Uber was established, it targeted minicab drivers, recruiting these drivers and their licenses. This meant that there were many pre-existing relationships and networks that were imported into Uber, including friendship groups and migrant organisations. These form the basis of the “invisible organisation” (Alquati 2013) that preceded more formal organisation of Uber drivers.

As detailed by Aslam and Woodcock (forthcoming), there is already an on-going history of struggle in Uber in London. This first began in 2013 with WhatsApp groups of drivers that started to discuss problems with working for Uber and having initial meetings with the platform. By 2014, the drivers began having organising meetings and launched LPHADA (London Private Hire App Based Drivers Association), after which Uber stopped communicating with them. The following year, LPHADA was folded as the drivers joined the GMB union, which then supported the employment tribunal case against Uber in 2016. However, the drivers were dissatisfied with the approach of GMB, launching a network of drivers called UPHD (United Private Hire Drivers). After an election within GMB was cancelled, the drivers then left and affiliated to the IWGB. At each stage, there has been a moment of political recomposition as drivers have experimented with different forms of organisation - and different organisations - as well as moving targets from only Uber, to the courts, and most recently targeting the regulator (TfL) as well as the mayor of London. Throughout this process there have been different points of contestation, as well as moving from networks to strikes and protests. As Yaseen Aslam has explained: ‘When we first started organising people said we would never succeed – included trade unionists, academics, and journalists that we thought would be on our side’ (Aslam and Woodcock forthcoming). Instead, the drivers have had to learn their own approach to becoming organisers - leading to a complicated route as they begin to find ways to successfully resist. Most recently, drivers began coordinating internationally to strike and protest Uber’s IPO. This latest moment of political recomposition is spreading across national borders.

What this analysis of Uber highlights is that the shifting technical composition of platform work is not only led by capital. Uber engages with previous forms of work, relationships, and organisations. As such, it is not just a “disruptive” business model and technological innovation, but instead is mediated through existing pressures within capitalism. This also returns a focus to the agency of workers – who after all the platform needs to actually driver the cars, despite the use of bogus self-employed status.

## 5. Forming a “Digital Socialism”?

In particular, we draw attention to the new forms through which workers’ struggles can be circulated. Through this, we argue for a “digital workerism” that develops a critical understanding of how the workplace can become a key site for the struggles of digital/communicative socialism.

The focus of Italian workerists on the self-activity of workers and their political agency emerges out of a longer-term commitment at the heart of Marxism. Indeed, Engels (1888, 517) famously wrote in his introduction to the communist manifesto that “the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself”. In doing so, he was rephrasing interventions by Marx (1875) in his *Critique of the Gotha Program* and their joint drafting of the International Workingmen’s Association’s *General Rules* (Marx 1871; see Hal Draper 1971 for an overview of the concept of self-emancipation in the Marxist tradition). This foundational idea served as the cornerstone of the work of both men and their vision for a transformation of the capitalist world-order through struggle from below and worker self-organisation.

Equally important was the fact that Marx and Engels theorised this approach in opposition to different strands of socialism that were developing in their lifetime. On the one hand, they polemicised against utopian socialists who believed that the unleashing of the productive and creative potential of capitalism, this time under workers' control, would liberate humanity from the material limitations of its natural environment. On the other hand, both men took on the growing influence of reformist ideas and their heavy reliance on a teleological reading of history that would inevitably lead from within the existing infrastructures of capitalism to workers' power (see the above-mentioned *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Marx 1875).

What both traditions had in common, despite their deep-seated opposition to each other, was a reliance on the development of technology, a lack of engagement with the realities of workers' struggles, and a confidence in an inevitable socialist future that would emerge from the entrails of capitalist society. Against this, Marx and Engels would argue for the need to rupture with the old order and identify the working classes' strategic position in production as the key to make this rupture possible. There was nothing pre-determined about socialism – it could only be achieved through a ruthless struggle against capital and its erstwhile representatives.

Unfortunately, while this tradition of self-emancipation remained important within Marxism, from Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg to C.L.R. James and Angela Davis (to name but a few, alongside the Workerists discussed above), the history of 20th-century socialist movements was marked by the twin dominance of Stalinism and social democracy. Both approaches succumbed to the siren call of technological determinism and historical teleology and abandoned the agency of working people as the driver of social transformation and the only potential route towards a classless socialist society. It is these traditions that Draper defined as “socialism from above”, because of their belief that socialism could be imposed by “socialist governments” once they had captured the state, in opposition to “socialism from below”, which were those traditions that continued to foreground workers' struggles and self-organisation contra capital and the state (Draper 1966).

Similar questions continue to confront social movements today. From the hopes surrounding the emergence of new self-proclaimed socialist electoral projects in Europe (see for example Watkins 2016) to the emergence of new utopian techno-centrist accounts of a socialist future (Bastani 2019), contemporary activists and theoreticians continue to propose routes out of capitalism that bypass workers' self-organisation, struggle, and ultimate collective democratic control over production. The debates surrounding digital platforms and their future, discussed above, run into comparable issues: stuck between technological determinism and the illusion of disappearing workers they imagine and theorise change while writing worker agency out of the picture.

So, what about digital socialism? What we have outlined in the first sections of this essay is the approach of “digital workerism” and its application to Uber. However, one of the challenges of workerism has always been the leap from the technical to the political. In this section, we want to consider how “the refusal” (see Tronti 2019) and other tendencies of struggle can connect to a political horizon. In the case of Uber, where the technological aspects of technical composition are particularly sharp, we consider how such composition can be considered on the political terrain. Before turning to discuss how struggles of Uber drivers can be connected to a digital socialism, it is first worth considering what other approaches are already underway when thinking of platform work specifically and how they inscribe themselves within the traditions of the workers' movement that fail to foreground worker agency.

The first example is one that attempts a synthesis between theory and practice: the Fairwork Foundation. Both Sai and Jamie have been involved in the early phase of this project – and the experiences inform our thinking about practice in various ways. The basic aim of the project is to improve working conditions of platform workers through a certification process (Graham and Woodcock 2018; Woodcock and Graham 2019). This is an attempt at impact-orientated research – albeit one more attuned to the idea of measurable impact that has become popular in British universities, which is a very different fusion of theory and practice to workerism. The core of the Fairwork project involves scoring platforms against five principles of fair work – pay, conditions, contracts, governance, and representation – out of a total of ten points (with two points available for each of the five principles). The project had some initial success in refusing to follow the platform operator logic that workers were self-employed – as well as encouraging one platform in South Africa to agree to recognise a union should one be established. The first is part of winning a wider argument about the platform economy being underpinned by bogus self-employment, while the latter is an example of how research can help to encourage worker self-organisation.

As neither of us continue to work for the project, we have now had the space to reflect on the tensions and contradictions of a certification project. These kinds of projects rely – at least to some extent – on the voluntary engagement of the company to be certified. This has reached limits with certification in other industries. For example, the Fairtrade certification – targeted at commodities like coffee and chocolate – continues to disintegrate (Subramanian 2019) – as well as never having rigorously engaged with workers’ rights as a core concern anyway – as companies decide to opt out. Fairwork, like other certification approaches requires funding in order to continue, as well as maintaining relationships with the certified organisation for access to data and so on. This means that checks and balances are key to ensuring that workers’ concerns are heard above the other pressures. For example, with Fairwork, each stakeholder is given a say over changes to awarding a score each year (for example raising the level of pay to receive a point), which means that while workers have a say, but so do platforms, academics, policy makers and so on. This means a necessary watering down of the thresholds to make the scoring palatable for a range of stakeholders, rather than giving primacy to workers.

The second approach is that of platform co-operatives or co-ops (Scholz 2016). At first glance, platform co-ops seem like an exciting shortcut to the challenges of contemporary class struggle. After all, socialism could be conceived of as a “free association of producers” in which the means of production are no longer privately held, but held communally and co-operatively. Many traditionally industries present substantial barriers to workers simply setting up their own co-operative alternatives, for example, factories require high levels of capital outlay. Platform co-ops, or so the argument goes, are an easy alternative. Instead of needing capital intensive infrastructure, a taxi co-op would just need a co-operative app as the drivers already own the capital (in the form of the car and smartphone and so on). This argument is presented as a technological solution and shortcut to fairer work – there is not even any need to have conflict with the existing capitalist enterprise.

Platform co-ops are clearly influenced by the FLOSS (Free, Libre and Open Source Software) movement, and inflected by the technological determinism and libertarian optimism that can be found amongst some of their proponents. Like open source, if workers can make something just as good (or even better) as those projects funded by capitalists, why would users not choose to switch over to the more ethical alternative? The problem with a platform co-op version of Uber is that the real cost of taxi

transportation in London is often much higher than the advertised price to users – and more often even higher than that paid to drivers. Given the strategic importance of London to Uber there has been heavy spending of venture capital as subsidies.

A platform co-op would have to compete with – and indeed out-compete – a capitalist platform like Uber. While an ethical platform might seem to be an easy sell versus a company like Uber, the latter has a vast marketing budget and already has the user base. The ability for venture capital platforms to run at a loss to ensure monopoly (or near monopoly) status, means that they have the resourcing to be vicious competitors. The only successful alternatives have been able to operate when regulators or legal changes have banned capitalist alternatives. However, a broader question about what a co-op involves can also be found here. For some proponents of platform co-ops, it is simple as having the digital platform infrastructure as no longer privately owned – or at least no longer profit seeking. This means it does not have to involve worker democracy or other aspects of more radical co-ops that we might associate with a “free association of producers”.

Workers have neither called for platforms to be rated as fair, nor have Uber drivers in London campaigned for a platform co-op alternative. There was only one abortive attempt to set up a co-op between the GMB (a union that organises Black Cab drivers and at one point had Uber driver members, although they later left to join IWGB) and NEF (the New Economics Foundation – a progressive think tank).

What marks out both of these approaches is that they are, to adapt Draper's terminology, both approaches for fairer work that are devised and implemented “from above”. They draw on expertise from academics, rather than from workers. Rather than wishing to engage in lengthy polemics, we use these as warning points that can help us make sense of what a digital socialism “from below” could look like. As Draper (2019, 10) explains, “socialism from above” is “*handed down* to the grateful masses in one form or another, by a ruling elite which is not subject to their control”. Whereas, “socialism from below” starts from the “view that socialism can be realized only through the self-emancipation of activated masses in motion, reaching out for freedom with their own hands, mobilized ‘from below’ in a struggle to take charge of their own destiny, as actors (not merely subjects) on the stage of history” (Draper 2019, 10).

The risk with thinking about digital socialism is that it can tend towards “from above” given the technological solutionism that often accompanies discourse in this area, often imbued with the “Californian ideology” of neoliberal technological determinism (Barbrook and Cameron 1996; Sandoval 2019). However, rather than falling into the somewhat obvious trap of thinking that digital socialism could be built with an “Uber for X” – the now common refrain that the platform model can, and should, be applied to everything (Srnicek 2017) – we should instead identify where, how, and under what conditions digital socialism can be built from below.

Callum has argued that the strategy through which we could achieve a digital socialism from below is “platform expropriation”. The hypothesis of this strategy is that a transferal of capital ownership from bosses to workers in the platform sector, achieved through an escalating cycle of political struggle (a cycle that has already been the subject of significant inquiry), would be the optimal way to prevent market competition from undermining different forms of worker-run platforms.

This transformation of ownership, however, is not enough in and of itself. Management of the platform has to be placed in the hands of both tech and delivery workers, in conditions of workers’ control. But rather than commodity production under workers’ control, which would remain just a strange form of distributed ownership capitalism, the real socialist possibility in such a reorganisation lies in the decommodification of

the platform through its integration into a programme of universal basic services. Rather than maintaining the current market niche of food delivery to relatively well-off urban white-collar workers, this people's Deliveroo would be actively re-designed to produce the greatest possible social use value. By taking control over their daily activity, exploited platform workers could increasingly become the co-producers of a de-commodified urban food system – one premised on the socialist transformation – and collectivisation – of the relations of social reproduction.

These far-reaching changes are only possible to win through a digital socialism from below. As the instances of workers struggle in platform work continue to rise – as well as increasingly connecting on a transnational level – the task ahead is to connect these struggles against platforms to the fight against digital capitalism much more broadly. The fight of Uber drivers in London, Bangalore, Sao Paulo, Cape Town, San Francisco are beginning to converge. The struggles of these workers, both locally and internationally, are key to understanding capitalism today. Like the struggles of factory workers for the Italian *Operaimso*, we can begin to see the germ of an alternative that emerges from the refusal of platform workers. However, if we propose forms of digital socialism from above, we risk not only missing these radical germs, but also encouraging the viral spread across the digital economy and beyond.

Digital workerism, therefore, goes beyond just theorising digital capitalism to engage in the theory and practice of workers' struggle. While we may start with a traditional method, like Marx's (1880) famous postal questionnaire, the intention is not just to collect data. Marx's survey was also intended to make contact with workers, seeking to use the research process as the starting point to organising. Digital workerism too can start with research, but it must involve the meetings, picket lines, WhatsApp groups, and Facebook pages. It requires supporting actual workers struggles, experimenting with new forms of co-research that give primacy of the workers viewpoint and action. It is from this base that digital socialism can be won.

## 6. Conclusion

Throughout this article, we have sought to chart out an approach of digital workerism. This is not to be able to say what a digital socialism would look like, but rather to begin plotting how resistance in digital capitalism can become central to its overcoming and shaping an alternative future. Our final thought here is about the limits of talking about socialism. Too often today, socialism is taken to mean "socialism from above", something to be achieved by voting for someone else to enact it. No doubt, a digital socialism from above would be markedly better than the current economic and social conditions. However, if we are to win a future in which the fruits of technological development are freed from the imperatives of capital and shared across society, the vibrant and chaotic forces of digital socialism from below will either be needed to help deliver on electoral policies, or force its own agenda onto the horizon. The starting point is still one taken from workerism, that understanding and supporting workers struggles is key to building an alternative – whether the work is digitally mediated or not.

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# The Utopian Internet, Computing, Communication, and Concrete Utopias: Reading William Morris, Peter Kropotkin, Ursula K. Le Guin, and P.M. in the Light of Digital Socialism

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**Abstract:** This paper asks: What can we learn from literary communist utopias for the creation and organisation of communicative and digital socialist society and a utopian Internet? To provide an answer to this question, the article discusses aspects of technology and communication in utopian-communist writings and reads these literary works in the light of questions concerning digital technologies and 21st-century communication. The selected authors have written some of the most influential literary communist utopias. The utopias presented by these authors are the focus of the reading presented in this paper: William Morris's (1890/1993) *News from Nowhere*, Peter Kropotkin's (1892/1995) *The Conquest of Bread*, Ursula K. Le Guin's (1974/2002) *The Dispossessed*, and P.M.'s (1983/2011; 2009; 2012) *bolo'bolo* and *Kartoffeln und Computer (Potatoes and Computers)*. These works are the focus of the reading presented in this paper and are read in respect to three themes: general communism, technology and production, communication and culture. The paper recommends features of concrete utopian-communist stories that can inspire contemporary political imagination and socialist consciousness. The themes explored include the role of post-scarcity, decentralised computerised planning, wealth and luxury for all, beauty, creativity, education, democracy, the public sphere, everyday life, transportation, dirt, robots, automation, and communist means of communication (such as the "ansible") in digital communism. The paper develops a communist allocation algorithm needed in a communist economy for the allocation of goods based on the decentralised satisfaction of needs. Such needs-satisfaction does not require any market. It is argued that socialism/communism is not just a post-scarcity society but also a post-market and post-exchange society.

**Keywords:** communicative socialism, digital socialism, communist utopias, concrete utopia, utopian socialism, communism, communication studies, Marxist literary studies, Karl Marx, William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, Peter Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*, Ursula K. Le Guin, the ansible, *The Dispossessed*, P.M., Hans Widmer, *bolo'bolo*, *Kartoffeln und Computer*, *Potatoes and Computers*, communist allocation algorithm

## 1. Introduction

This article discusses the following question: What can we learn from literary communist utopias for the creation and organisation of communicative and digital socialist society and a utopian Internet?

To provide an answer, the article discusses aspects of technology and communication in utopian-communist writings and reads these literary works in light of questions concerning digital technologies and 21st-century communication. The selected writings include utopian outlines of a future communist society and communist novels. Due to limited space, a selection of important communist literary utopias had to be made. The selected authors have written some of the most influential literary communist utopias. The utopias presented by these authors are the focus of the reading presented in this paper: William Morris's (1890/1993) *News from Nowhere*, Peter Kropotkin's

(1892/1995) *The Conquest of Bread*, Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, and P.M.'s (1983/2011; 2009; 2012) *bolo'bolo* and *Kartoffeln und Computer (Potatoes and Computers)*.

There are many other relevant books that could be included, but we have to leave it to other occasions to engage with further utopian-communist works. The present author also hopes to inspire other scholars to conduct comparable studies.

William Morris (1834-1896) was a British artist, activist and communist. He inspired the arts and crafts movement, founded the Socialist League, and played a major role in the League's newspaper *The Commonweal*. Morris's *News from Nowhere* is a utopian-communist novel that is set in a future communist society in the year 2102. Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921) was a Russian anarchist, scientist, writer, and activist. He is widely seen as the most influential theorist of anarcho-communism. Kropotkin's *The Conquest of Bread* outlines what a future anarcho-communist society could look like. Ursula K. Le Guin (1929-2018) was an American science fiction author. Her novels and short stories are often set in future anarcho-communist societies on distant planets. *The Dispossessed* is one of Le Guin's most widely read books. It describes life on the two planets Anarres and Urras. On the first planet, there is an anarcho-communist society. On the second planet, there are capitalist societies. P.M. is the pseudonym of the Swiss author Hans Widmer (born in 1947). Besides writing utopian novels, other literature, theatre performances, and radio plays, P.M. has also been an activist in autonomous and eco-socialist projects and movements. *bolo'bolo* is P.M.'s most well-known book. Reminiscent of Kropotkin, *bolo'bolo* outlines how a future grassroots communist society without capital and the state could look. *Kartoffeln und Computer (Potatoes and Computers)* is an update of *bolo'bolo*'s vision written almost thirty years later.

Raymond Williams (1978/2005) argues that utopian fiction often features the world altered by natural events, or by willed human transformations or technological transformations of society that result in or make visible aspects of paradise. Dystopian fiction has the same features, but they make visible aspects of hell. The article at hand focuses on utopian communist writings.

What is a utopia? What is utopian socialism? In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels speak of critical-utopian socialism and communism as a kind of literature and a type of political movement in the late 17th and the early 18th centuries associated with Saint-Simon (1760-1825), Fourier (1772-1837), and Owen (1771-1851). Marx and Engels write that these authors' visions of communism and their social experiments took place in a period when "feudal society was being overthrown" and the "first direct attempts of the proletariat to attain its own ends" necessarily failed because of the "then undeveloped state of the proletariat" and "the absence of the economic conditions for its emancipation, conditions that had yet to be produced, and could be produced by the impending bourgeois epoch alone" (1848, 514). For Marx and Engels, these visions of a communist society came too early and could not be realised at the time they were conceived: "Such fantastic pictures of future society, painted at a time when the proletariat is still in a very undeveloped state and has but a fantastic conception of its own position, correspond with the first instinctive yearnings of that class for a general reconstruction of society" (1848, 515-516). Marx and Engels understand utopias as fantastic visions of future society that cannot be realised in a realistic manner under the current societal framework or in the near future. They criticise the abstract character of utopias; but they also state that "these Socialist and Communist publications contain also a critical element. They attack every principle of

existing society. Hence, they are full of the most valuable materials for the enlightenment of the working class” (1848, 516).

In *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Engels (1880, 290) writes that utopian socialists are “drifting off into pure phantasies”. He argues that utopian socialism is moralistic and lacks a scientific analysis of capitalism and its contradictions: “The Socialism of earlier days certainly criticized the existing capitalistic mode of production and its consequences. But it could not explain them, and, therefore, could not get the mastery of them. It could only simply reject them as bad” (1880, 305). Engels thinks that Marx’s works, Marx’s approach of historical materialism, and the notion of surplus-value helped to turn socialism into a science:

These two great discoveries, the materialistic conception of history and the revelation of the secret of capitalistic production through surplus-value, we owe to Marx. With these discoveries Socialism became a science. [...] To accomplish this act of universal emancipation is the historical mission of the modern proletariat. To thoroughly comprehend the historical conditions and this the very nature of this act, to impart to the now oppressed proletarian class a full knowledge of the conditions and of the meaning of the momentous act it is called upon to accomplish, this is the task of the theoretical expression of the proletarian movement, scientific Socialism (Engels 1880, 305, 325).

Georg Lukács argues that although classical utopian-communist literature

[in its] step beyond Capitalism follows fantastic paths, its critical-historical basis is nonetheless linked – especially in the case of Fourier – with a devastating critique of the contradictions of bourgeois society. In Fourier, despite the fantastic nature of his ideas about Socialism and of the ways to Socialism, the picture of Capitalism is shown with such overwhelming clarity in all its contradiction that the idea of the transitory nature of this society appears tangibly and plastically before us (1962, 28).

The 20th century showed that science and technology and their class character have played a role in the advancement of exploitation, inequality, unemployment, precarity, environmental degradation, genocide, extermination, manipulation, etc. In addition, both social-democratic reformists, such as Bernstein, and Stalinists used the notion of scientific socialism for arguing that capitalism automatically collapses due to its internal contradictions, which behave like natural laws. They tried to transfer insights from the natural sciences to the social sciences, disregarding the differences between nature and society, and used naturalistic, deterministic and reductionist models of society for justifying pure reformism and state capitalist terror respectively. The natural science fetishism of revisionist social democracy and Stalinism has discounted and degraded the importance of class struggles. To speak of socialism as a science has become problematic, but the political perspective of socialism has remained highly important to this day.

Critical Marxist theories of technology make use of dialectical analysis in order to avoid the determinism inherent in revisionist and Stalinist theories. In light of the rise of authoritarian capitalism (Fuchs 2018; 2019), socialism needs not only brilliant analyses of what is wrong in society, but also visions of 21st-century socialism that show how society can be transformed and what it can look like in the future in order to inspire contemporary class struggles. Perhaps contemporary socialist thought is sometimes too analytic. We need new inspirations from concrete-utopian socialism, from stories,

visions, literature and popular culture, that tell us how socialism could work today and in the near future as communicative and digital socialism. Such stories can influence and inspire contemporary socialist strategies and class struggles.

Utopia is a word that has its origin in the combination of the two Greek words *ou* ('not') and *topos* ('place'). A utopia is a non-place, the place of nowhere. On the one hand, nowhere is a place that only exists in fantasy as dreams that will never be possible and therefore never come true. But on the other hand, utopias are also visions of society as a better place. Such socialist visions can become reality and inspire not just our dreams, but also our collective struggles for a better world.

Socialist science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson (2018a) argues that the difference between utopias and dystopias is that "utopias express our social hopes, dystopias our social fears". He argues that both utopias and dystopias often have an ideological character. Ideological dystopias tend to communicate that nothing can be changed and therefore to advance defeatism. Robinson therefore argues for the dialectical mediation of dystopias with socialist utopias:

These days I tend to think of dystopias as being fashionable, perhaps lazy, maybe even complacent, because one pleasure of reading them is cozying into the feeling that however bad our present moment is, it's nowhere near as bad as the ones these poor characters are suffering through. [...] utopia is the idea that the political order could be run better. Dystopia is the *not*, being the idea that the political order could get worse. Anti-utopias are the *anti*, saying that the idea of utopia itself is wrong and bad, and that any attempt to try to make things better is sure to wind up making things worse, creating an intended or unintended totalitarian state, or some other such political disaster. *1984* and *Brave New World* are frequently cited examples of these positions. [...] One way of being anti-anti-utopian is to be utopian. [...] An adequate life provided for all living beings is something the planet can still do; If dystopia helps to scare us into working harder on that project, which maybe it does, then fine: dystopia. But always in service to the main project, which is utopia" (2018a).

Robinson argues that utopias and science fiction tell us something about the time they were written in. They are manifestations of potentials, potential futures, hopes, and structures of feeling about society's reality at a certain time: "When you talk about the future you're always talking about history. A novel always does this, but science fiction does so explicitly, through thought experiments: 'If we do this we'll get here. If we do that we'll get there.' [...] science fiction is the realism of our time" (Robinson 2018b, 88). Science fiction is "describing the feel of our time. [...] It's not a factual analysis of the situation. It is not trying to predict the future. It is trying to say how this moment feels and what human history means right now" (Robinson 2017).

Ernst Bloch (1995) distinguishes in his book *The Principle of Hope* between abstract and concrete utopias. Abstract utopias outline impossible being. They remain stuck in "dreaminess" (1995, 146) and are "world-blind hope" (1995, 1039). Concrete utopias outline the not-yet of society, being that is possible but does not yet exist. They deal with "the Real-Possible" (146) and the "Not-Yet-Become-Good" (146). Concrete Utopias give grounds for "militant optimism" (146) and the "active hope" (241; 1197) of class struggle. The "concretely utopian is an objective-real degree of reality on the Front of the occurring world, – as Not-Yet-Being" (205): "Concrete utopia stands on the horizon of every reality; real possibility surrounds the open dialectical tendencies and

latencies to the very last” (223). In concrete communist utopias, the good life in communist society shines forth (*Vorschein*). The concrete communist utopia “is concerned to deliver the forms and contents which have already developed in the womb of present society. Utopia in this no longer abstract sense is thus the same as realistic anticipation of what is good; which must have become clear” (623). Concrete utopias aim at, as Marx writes, “making the world aware of its own consciousness, [...] awakening it out of its dream about itself”, the “reform of consciousness not through dogmas”, and making “evident that the world has long dreamed of possessing something of which it has only to be conscious in order to possess it in reality” (1843, 144).

The work at hand reads and interprets concrete utopian elements in the analysed communist writings in the light of the concrete potentials that the means of communication and digital technologies pose in the 21st century. Through an engagement with communist fiction it identifies elements of communicative and digital socialism that humans can collectively possess tomorrow if they manage to realise a socialist society through class struggles. My readings of Morris, Kropotkin, Le Guin, and P.M. uncover as-yet unrealised potentials of the contemporary means of communication that are real possibilities and give grounds for militant optimism and active hope for class struggles in and against digital capitalism that aim at the creation of communicative and digital socialism.

Section 2 focuses on Morris’s *News from Nowhere*, Section 3 on Kropotkin’s *Conquest of Bread*, Section 4 on Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, and Section 5 on P.M.’s works *bolo’bolo* and *Kartoffeln und Computer (Potatoes and Computers)*. Each of these sections contains three sub-sections discussing a) communism in general; b) technology and production in communism; and c) communication and culture in communism. Section 6 briefly introduces some other novels about post-scarcity communism. Section 7 draws some conclusions.

In the age of authoritarian capitalism, it is important that we dream about, imagine, talk about, envision, communicate, discuss, and struggle for concrete socialist utopias. In the 21st century, such socialist consciousness needs to pose the question of the digital in order to envision and realise concrete utopias. The proponents of neoliberal ideology and authoritarian capitalist ideology want to make us believe that there are no alternatives to capitalism and digital capitalism. It is precisely in this situation that it is of crucial importance, as Frederic Jameson (2005, xii) reminds us, that concrete utopian-communist thought recovers “its vitality as a political slogan and a politically energizing perspective” that advances “the dialectic of Identity and Difference” and inspire a politics that “aims at imagining, and sometimes even at realizing, a system radically different from this one”.

## 2. William Morris’s *News from Nowhere*

### 2.1. Communism in General

In Edward Bellamy’s (1888/2007) novel *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*, Julian West falls asleep in the year 1887 and wakes up in a socialist United States in the year 2000. In this society, all industries are nationalised, humans retire at the age of 45, citizens receive an equal share of goods and a credit of equal size provided on a debit card that is used for shopping, those performing unpleasant or dangerous labour work fewer hours than others, there is an industrial army performing compulsory labour in an efficient manner, education up to the age of 21 and the level of college is free, all types of labour are seen as being of equal importance, poverty and starvation do not exist, there is a low level of crime and disease, and there is free entertainment.



Bellamy's novel was first published in 1888, which means that he could not envision computer technology, robots and a digitally automated economy, so that the economy he depicts is labour-intensive. Individuals retire early, but perform hard, highly disciplined labour as part of a compulsory labour service. The character Julian West comments: "[Y]ou have simply applied the principle of universal military service, as it was understood in our day, to the labor question" (1888/2007, 36). Dr Leete, who explains to West how American society works in 2000, comments that labour is organised as "a disciplined army under one general" like "a fighting machine" (143). In this society, labour is toil and therefore alienated. High productivity is not achieved by the humanistic design and use of machines, but by the disciplining and military organisation of the workforce, which is an expression of inhumanity. In a foreword published in 1960, Erich Fromm commented on *Looking Backward*:

It is a society which not so much because of technical inventions, but rather through the rationality of its organization can produce enough to satisfy everyone's economic needs. [...] There is no effective democracy; only those over forty-five and not connected with the industrial army have the right to vote. The administration is organized according to the principles of an army. [...] it is nevertheless a society in which the majority of the citizens are subject to the commands of industrial officers, and have little chance to develop on their own initiative. [...] The aim of socialism was individuality, not uniformity; liberation from economic bonds, not the making of material aims into the main concern of life. Its principle was that each man is an end in himself, and must never be the means of another man (Fromm 1960).

Bellamy's fetishism of toil reminds us of Stalin, who wrote into the 1936 Constitution of the USSR: "In the U.S.S.R. work is a duty and a matter of honour for every able-bodied citizen, in accordance with the principle: 'He who does not work, neither shall he eat'" (USSR 1936, Article 12).

The British socialist writer, artist and activist William Morris reviewed *Looking Backward*. He wrote that

the *impression* which he [Bellamy] produces is that of a huge standing army, tightly drilled, compelled by some mysterious fate to unceasing anxiety for the production of wares to satisfy every caprice, however wasteful and absurd, that may cast up amongst them. [...] In short, a machine-life is the best which Mr Bellamy can imagine for us on all sides; it is not to be wondered at then that his only idea of making labour tolerable is to decrease the amount of it by means of fresh and ever fresh developments of machinery. [...] Now surely this ideal of the great reduction of the hours of labour by the mere means of machinery is a futility. The human race has always put forth about as much energy as it could in given conditions of climate and the like, though that energy has had to struggle against the natural laziness of mankind: and the development of man's resources, which has given him greater power over nature, has driven him also into fresh desires and fresh demands on nature, and thus made his expenditure of energy much what it was before. [...] I believe that the ideal of the future does not point to the lessening of men's energy by the reduction of *labour* to a minimum, but rather to the reduction of *pain in labour* to a minimum, so small that it will cease to be a pain; a gain to humanity which can only be dreamed of till men are even more completely equal than Mr Bellamy's utopia would allow them to be, but which will most assuredly come about when men are really equal in

condition.[...] That variety of life is as much an aim of true communism as equality of condition, and that nothing but an union of these two will bring about real freedom (Morris 1889).

Based on his critique of Bellamy's novel, one year later Morris (1890/1993) published his own utopian communist novel *News from Nowhere*. *Looking Backward* started "the train of thought" that "led to his writing *News from Nowhere*" (Thompson 2011, 542). Frederic Jameson (2005, 144) argues that "Bellamy's industrial state (modeled on the army) is refuted by the anarchistic 'withering away' of the state in Morris, while the account of labor in *Looking Backward* (something like Marx's 'realm of necessity' opposed to the 'realm of freedom' of non-work and leisure time) is challenged by Morris's notion of a non-alienated labor which has become a form of aesthetic production". *News from Nowhere* is "not merely a contrasting utopia to Bellamy, it is a campaign against the whole mechanization of existence" (Bloch 1995, 613).

In *News from Nowhere*, the Victorian socialist William Guest wakes up and finds himself in a socialist society in the year 2102. He wanders through this society and learns about it from Dick Hammond, Dick's great-grandfather, and others. In the end, it turns out that the visit to communism was a dream, but one that is a vision of a better society that can inspire humans in their struggles for a better world.

In the future socialist society William visits, there is no capital, no private property of the means of production, no exchange, no wage-labour, and no money. It is a classless society. There is no dull compulsion of the market forcing humans into wage-labour and class relations. They work voluntarily with the "freedom for every man to do what he can do best" (Morris 1890/1993, 123). Use-value shapes the economy, and humans produce for society's real needs, not for the accumulation of profit. The social environment and goods are beautifully designed so that beauty is a general principle of society. There is no poverty and all individuals are generally happy and beautifully dressed. There is gender equality. The overcoming of alienation and exploitation has enabled longevity and has drastically reduced crime, which has allowed the abolishment of prisons. A participatory democracy ("the whole people is our parliament" [107]) has replaced government, parliament, and the state. In *News from Nowhere*, there are separate houses for individuals and families, indicating that Morris considers privacy and individuality in a communist society to be important.

## 2.2. Technology and Production in Communism

In *News from Nowhere*, there is no compulsory labour. Everyone is very industrious, conducts self-chosen work that results in beautiful results, and is happy doing so. One of the depicted society's principles is "Thou shalt work in order to live happily" (1890/1993, 112). The novel features the work of weavers, housekeepers, "genuinely amusing work, like house-building and street-paving and gardening" (68), pot-making, glass-blowing, road-mending, hay-harvesting, or carving that workers experience as very pleasurable. For example, a road-mender working with a pick, says: "[it] is good work for hardening the muscles, and I like it; though I admit it is pleasanter the second week than the first" (83). And haymaking is presented as "easy-hard work" that "tries the muscles and hardens them" and "is always pleasant if you don't overdo it" (195).

One of the novel's basic assumptions is that making and creating something beautiful automatically makes workers happy. There is undoubtedly a certain truth to the claim that work that enables a high level of creativity can be self-fulfilling for humans. But not all work involves a high level of creativity, is pleasant, and creates beauty. Think for example of the cleaning of public toilets, the collection of garbage, and the

inspection and cleaning of sewage ducts and sewage plants. Morris leaves open the question of how dirty work is conducted. In *News from Nowhere*, there is a certain idealisation of hard and mundane physical labour such as road-mending, street-paving, house-building, haymaking, or housework.

Morris (1884, 98) himself questioned that “all work is useful”. He writes in the essay *Useful Work Versus Useless Toil* that it is an ideology to think “all labour is good in itself” (1884, 98). There is useless toil that is a curse and that humans should refuse (98). In this essay, Morris stresses the feasibility of the communist design and use of science and machines for automating and reducing toil:

Science duly applied would enable them [humans] to get rid of refuse, to minimize, if not wholly to destroy, all the inconveniences which at present attend the use of elaborate machinery, such as smoke, stench, and noise. [...] In a true society these miracles of ingenuity [labour-saving machines] would be for the first time used for minimizing the amount of time spent in unattractive labour, which by their means might be so reduced as to be but a very light burden on each individual. All the more as these machines would most certainly be very much improved when it was no longer a question as to whether their improvement would ‘pay’ the individual, but rather whether it would benefit the community (Morris 1884, 115, 117).

But in the same essay, there is also a passage that claims that certain forms of toil could be made pleasurable so that machinery could be replaced by human work: “So much for the ordinary use of machinery, which would probably, after a time, be somewhat restricted when men found out that there was no need for anxiety as to mere subsistence, and learned to take an interest and pleasure in handiwork which, done deliberately and thoughtfully, could be made more attractive than machine work” (Morris 1884, 117-118). Raymond Williams stresses that “Morris wanted the end of the capitalist system, and the institution of socialism, so that men could decide for themselves how their work should be arranged, and where machinery was appropriate” (Williams 1960, 167).

On the one hand, we find indications in *News from Nowhere* that science and technology are used in the way Morris pointed out in his essay *Useful Work Versus Useless Toil*. In the conversation between William Guest and old Hammond, the latter describes how the economy works in the communist society in the year 2102: “All work which would be irksome to do by hand is done by immensely improved machinery; and in all work which it is a pleasure to do by hand machinery is done without” (Morris 1890/1993, 127). As a result, “all work is now pleasurable” because it results in “honour and wealth” even if the “actual work is not pleasant”, or work “has grown into a pleasurable *habit*”, or “there is the conscious sensuous pleasure in the work itself; it is done, that is, by artists” (122-123).

Given that Morris wrote in the late 19th century, one cannot expect him to envision computing and robotics. His insight that communist science should develop and advance communist machinery that allows automating irksome and unattractive labour is an important principle of communism. Morris would agree that it is important that in a communist society there are robots that are capable of cleaning sewage and toilets.

In *News from Nowhere*, there is, however, also hard physical labour such as mundane housework, the mending of roads, the laying of bricks, and the harvesting of hay that he thinks can be made pleasurable in a communist society. In a communist soci-

ety, there should not just be toilet- and sewage drain-cleaning robots, but highly efficient, ultra-fast washing machines available in every house or block of houses, dishwashers, robot vacuum cleaners, robot lawn mowers, robotic builders creating and mending roads and houses, agricultural robots, etc. Labour that is not itself pleasant should in a communist society be automated as far as possible. If someone enjoys hoovering floors, cleaning toilets, and washing dishes by hand, they will be able to do so and to volunteer to conduct such work not just for themselves but also for others. But a decisive aspect of a communist economy is that there are machines available that *can* conduct labour that is unattractive, irksome, annoying, or dangerous for humans.

In *News from Nowhere*, work is scarce (Morris 1890/1993, 81), but Morris does not give much attention towards describing the use of science and technology, although he makes clear that both are important in a communist society. There are factories without energy supply, where humans conduct hand-work (81). Roads are mended with picks (82-83). There was “the great change in the use of mechanical force” that led to the abolishment of manufacturing centres (102). In the story Morris tells, the revolutionaries have consciously decided to replace lots of activities carried out by machines by handicraft. Therefore, they speak of the end “of the machine period” that brought about “the transition from the makeshift work of machines [...] into the new handicraft period” (199-200). “[M]achine after machine was quietly dropped under the excuse that the machines could not produce works of art, and that works of art were more and more called for” (201). The communist society that William visits is “not an age of inventions” (192). Although it is not ruled out that machines are used for replacing unpleasant human labour, overall the society that Morris describes in *News from Nowhere* is a pre-industrial, agricultural socialism, where humans enjoy hard physical labour and beauty is the abundant result of handicraft.

It is reasonable to doubt that in a communist society many people find hard labour such as brick-laying, haymaking, road-mending, or street-paving pleasurable. Morris underestimates the humanistic potentials of modern technologies in communist society. It is a romantic idealisation to think that once private property and class relationships have disappeared, humans suddenly find joy in hard, exhaustive, monotonous physical labour.

What we can learn from Morris’s utopian communist society is the importance of the principle of abundant beauty and the advancement of possibilities for creative work and work as art and play. Morris underestimates the potentials of modern technologies and could not envision a post-industrial socialism, where computing technologies and knowledge work play an important role and may enable the end of toil, unpleasant and dangerous labour and the maximisation of free, self-determined time used for leisure, creativity, social engagement, political debate, art, and human togetherness.

If it turns out in Morris’s utopia that large groups of humans find physical labour cumbersome and unpleasant and stop doing it, and machines are not available for replacing them, then the economy could easily enter crisis, which could be a foundation of the return of a class society. A highly productive post-industrial socialism where robots and computing are used for providing possibilities to automate dangerous, unpleasant, stupefying, monotonous, and physical labour is less likely to return to a class society and more likely to provide happiness for all. Morris overestimated the interest and capacity of humans to find pleasure in mundane, hard physical labour. In a highly productive digital-communist society, humans can volunteer to conduct hard labour if they indeed find it pleasurable, but a decisive feature of such a society is that there are

machines available that can to a significant degree conduct such work or make it less alienating.

### 2.3. Communication and Culture in Communism

In *News from Nowhere*, humans communicate with each other in a very polite manner. They are very friendly, open-minded, caring, and solidary. They call each other “neighbours”. Here is an example from the book, where William in a shop receives a beautiful pipe and Latakia tobacco as gifts:

‘I advise you to cram your bag, because you may be going where you can’t get Latakia. Where is your bag?’ I fumbled about, and at last pulled out my piece of cotton print which does duty with me for a tobacco pouch. But the girl looked at it with some disdain, and said: ‘Dear neighbour, I can give you something much better than that cotton rag’. And she tripped up the shop and came back presently, and as she passed the boy whispered something in his ear, and he nodded and got up and went out. The girl held up in her finger and thumb a red morocco bag, gaily embroidered, and said, ‘There, I have chosen one for you, and you are to have it: it is pretty, and will hold a lot’ [...] ‘Thank you so very much’, I said at last, effusively, as I put the pipe in my pocket, not without a qualm of doubt as to whether I shouldn’t find myself before a magistrate presently. ‘Oh, you are so very welcome’, said the little lass, with an affectation of grown-up manners at their best which was very quaint. ‘It is such a pleasure to serve dear old gentlemen like you; specially when one can see at once that you have come from far over sea’ (Morris 1890/1993, 73-74).

The political system that Morris depicts in *News from Nowhere* is a communicative participatory democracy (in Chapter IV): Citizens meet in neighbourhood assemblies, where they discuss matters of concern for the community. Suggestions for certain changes, such as building a new bridge or town hall, are made. If such proposals are supported by others, then pro- and counter-arguments are collected and published. In a later meeting, a “vote by show of hands” (119) is taken. If the minority is of significant size, then discussions and further votes continue until consensus is reached or the minority is happy to accept the decision.

Morris stresses that true democracy requires discussion and face-to-face assemblies. In the 21st century, Internet communication can support participatory democracy: The collection of arguments and counter-arguments can be started face-to-face, but can then be continued online. It can make use of user-generated content, wikis that allow the creation of collaboratively edited texts, videos that express the opinions of groups and individuals, links to and summaries of academic studies, online discussion, etc. Face-to-face communication can more easily create social cohesion than online communication, which is why in a participatory democracy digital communication should support, but not replace personal meetings and assemblies. Computer networks also enable electronic voting, which on the one hand allows increased participation, but on the other hand is susceptible to plebiscitary demagoguery, where the questions that are being asked and voted on are manipulative and defined by a minority.

In *News from Nowhere*, there are no telegraphs, telephones, or other two-way forms of mediated communication over distance. A call is made by blowing a bugle-horn that attracts the attention of a particular person nearby (Morris 1890/1993, 51). People ride in horse-drawn carriages at a slow pace (59-61; 62; 64; 164). William, Dick

and Clara move from London to the countryside in a boat that sails on the Thames. The boats are rowboats powered by human sculling (202). In the society discussed by Morris, railways were abolished (206; 215-216) and transport is based on human and animal power. There are no direct, two-way long-distance forms of communication. The organisation of transport and communication is toil. There are mysterious “force vehicles” that have “taken the place of our old steam-power carrying” (186), but it is not clear how they work, how important they are, and what exact role they play.

In capitalism, lots of long-distance transportation and communication has to do with the transport and marketing of commodities and the organisation of exploitation over distances. Transnational corporations can only exist based on global means of communication and transportation. Certainly, there would be less need for global transport in a communist society because commodities will have disappeared. But a communism that abolishes long-distance communication and transport deprives humans of the possibility to travel, learn about foreign cultures, and make friends all over the world. In such a society, culture is likely to be local and mundane. There would still be a need for transporting goods from one location to others where the conditions for the production of these use-values do not exist, in order to enable wealth for all. And there would still be the human need and desire to undertake travels to learn about the world, enjoy themselves, and meet others. There would no longer be travels for the organisation and management of exploitation. Fossil-fuel driven, individually owned cars would be unlikely to exist, but there would be effective networks of public transport. Fewer long-distance flights and journeys than today would be needed. Rockets, aeroplanes, buses, railways, trams, ships, cars, lorries, mopeds, cable cars, etc. will be solar-driven or powered by other forms of green energy. Those who enjoy driving buses or practicing the work of a captain of a ship or aeroplane would be able to do so. But there will also be the possibility to use highly developed, secure self-driving vehicles that utilise Artificial Intelligence.

In *News from Nowhere*, there is no formal school system; children learn practically and through curiosity (Chapter V). They are highly educated and speak several languages. There is a certain hostility against books, reading, and writing, and children are not much encouraged to read (68; 166; 175). There is a danger that in a society without books or with a lack of engagement with books individuals would lack imagination and society would become static, too pragmatic, and lack critical reflection capacities. Schools and formal education should continue to exist in a communist society, but there should be no performance principle and no grading system, and humans should be enabled to learn in a participatory manner.

#### 2.4. Conclusion

We can learn from *News from Nowhere* that communism is likely to transform human culture, manners and behaviour so that humans are less aggressive and engage with each other in a much more friendly, open-minded, caring, and solidary manner than today. Beauty will not just be a feature of the natural and physical world, but also a characteristic of the human character and interpersonal relations.

The political system of a communist society requires the participation of humans in making decisions that concern their lives. Participatory democracy is the political system of a communist society. In such a society, there is enough motivation, interest and time available for humans to engage in political debates and decision-making. Computer networks will support democratic information and communication; not replacing, but rather enhancing face-to-face assemblies and debates.

In a communist society transport and communication should not entail toil and localism as in *News from Nowhere*, but, based on green computing and green transport technologies, should enable humans to communicate and travel globally so that they learn from each other, enjoy discovering the world and meeting other people in distant cultures, and create a global community of friends. In a communist society, schools would continue to exist but be organised as participatory organisations. Learning, reading, writing, art, critical thinking, critical arguing, critical reading, critical writing and critical debating would be encouraged and practiced in cultural communities of life-long learners and cultural creators. Digital technologies would be used for supporting these critical and cultural skills.

### 3. Peter Kropotkin's *The Conquest of Bread*

#### 3.1. Communism in General

Peter Kropotkin was a leading anarcho-communist thinker and activist. In his book *The Conquest of Bread*, Kropotkin (1892/1995) outlines the utopia of an anarcho-communist society and explains how the economic, political and cultural foundations of such a society can be organised.

Kropotkin's communism is based on the collective ownership of the means of production enabling wealth for all and luxury for all. The economy is built on the principle of mutual aid. Companies are worker-controlled and houses owned by those who live in them: "The common possession of the instruments of labour must necessarily bring with it the enjoyment in common of the fruits of common labour" (1892/1995, 32). Communist anarchism is based on the principle "*to every man according to his needs*" (33). There is no wage-labour, no money, and no exchange, but distribution of goods according to needs in the form of gifts. Humans themselves know best what they need. Communism uses the principle "[t]ake what you need" (34). Kropotkin is influenced by Marx (1875, 87), who formulated the principle "[f]rom each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs" as one of the cornerstones of a communist society. Kropotkin argues that in communism the state and governments should be replaced by free agreements between communes; that there is no need for authority in order to make organisation work.

Murray Bookchin further developed Kropotkin's approach into libertarian municipalism. The municipality is an important organisational unit. There are also confederations of municipalities, i.e. communes of communes:

the 'apex' of all authority would lie with the municipal assemblies, guided by majority rule both in the assembly and among the assemblies of a confederal region; the 'base' would lie with the broadest confederal councils whose work is simply administrative and adjudicatory, and whose deputies, drawn from smaller confederal bodies, would be easily recallable and subject to careful popular oversight (Bookchin 1992, xix-xx).

Confederalism takes on the form of a "commune of communes" (1992, xxi), to which municipalities send delegates that debate matters concerning citizens at levels of organisation above the municipality. Participatory democracy requires "personal interaction" and "face-to-face education" fostering "the development of a face-to-face democracy" (xxiv). We can add to Bookchin's view that in the age of the Internet, certain preparatory contributions and information can also be provided online so that online

information, online communication, and user-generated online content support face-to-face deliberation and decision-making.

### 3.2. Technology and Production in Communism

For Kropotkin, communism is a highly productive, post-scarcity society that makes use of and further develops the means of production:

It now remains for society, first, to extend this greater productivity, which is limited to certain industries, and to apply it to the general good. But it is evident that to utilize this high productivity of labour, so as to guarantee well-being to all, Society must itself take possession of all means of production. [...] It is a case of producing the greatest amount of goods necessary to the well-being of all, with the least possible waste of human energy (1892/1995, 88, 89).

In the 21st century, communism can make use of digital technologies in order to increase productivity and create wealth and luxury for all beyond scarcity and necessity. Kropotkin reminds us that communism requires technological foundations and that communism today requires digital foundations.

Further developing Kropotkin's communist anarchism, Murray Bookchin (1986) argues for the use of computing technologies as liberatory technologies that form one of the foundations of a post-scarcity society. A post-scarcity society realises what Kropotkin terms wealth for all and luxury for all:

Post-scarcity society, in short, is the fulfillment of the social and cultural potentialities latent in a technology of abundance. [...] a new technology has developed that could largely replace the realm of necessity by the realm of freedom. [...] It is arguable whether computer 'intelligence' is, or ever will be, creative or innovative (although every few years bring sweeping changes in computer technology), but there is no doubt that the digital computer is capable of taking over all the onerous and distinctly uncreative mental tasks of man in industry, science, engineering, information retrieval and transportation. Modern man, in effect, has produced an electronic 'mind' for coordinating, building and evaluating most of his routine industrial operations (Bookchin 1986, 13, 115, 123).

Comparable to Bookchin, Herbert Marcuse also developed a concept of liberatory technology. For Marcuse, a true society "presupposes freedom from toil" (1964, 133) and therefore requires highly productive technologies designed and applied in humane and sustainable ways. He defines the "good life" as "a life which is as much as possible free from toil, dependence, and ugliness" (1964, 130). A communist society needs "the planned utilization of resources for the satisfaction of vital needs with a minimum of toil, the transformation of leisure into free time, the pacification of the struggle of existence" (257).

In communism, modern technologies are not abolished, but radically reconstructed:

If the completion of the technological project involves a break with the prevailing technological rationality, the break in turn depends on the continued existence of the technical base itself. For it is this base which has rendered possible the satisfaction of needs and the reduction of toil – it remains the very base of all forms of human freedom" (Marcuse 1964, 236).

Capitalist technology has to be sublated and a technology of liberation to be created:



For freedom indeed depends largely on technical progress, on the advancement of science. But this fact easily obscures the essential precondition: in order to become vehicles of freedom, science and technology would have to change their present direction and goals; they would have to be reconstructed in accord with a new sensibility – the demands of the life instincts. Then one could speak of a technology of liberation, product of a scientific imagination free to project and design the forms of a human universe without exploitation and toil” (Marcuse 1969, 19).

In 19th-century socialism, communists such as Marx and Engels argued that the abolition of the state, exchange, and wage-labour was not immediately possible and that therefore an intermediate stage between capitalism and communism was needed, where the state continues to exist and co-ordinates production. Anarchists such as Bakunin and Kropotkin argued, in contrast, that the state needed to be immediately abolished together with capital and that the immediate creation of a society without domination was possible and necessary. Whereas Marxists favoured a combination of revolutionary and parliamentary politics in order to seize state power, anarchists argued against party politics. The conflict between the communists around Marx and the anarchists around Bakunin led to the split of the First International in 1872.

Marx’s criticism of anarchism was certainly correct in the 19th century: even in the most developed countries, productive forces were not developed to a degree that would have allowed the immediate transition to a fully communist society. In the 19th century, anarchists had a naïve, idealist, abstract-utopian image of post-capitalism. In the age of digital capitalism, the levels of productivity are so high that the first stage of communism is no longer needed and a widely advanced communism that enables post-scarcity and wealth for all could be immediately introduced. In the age of digital technology, the traditional conflict between Marxist communists and communist anarchists about the question of whether an interim stage is needed between capitalism and full communism has become superfluous.

Kropotkin argues that the principle of “*Bread for All*” and assuring the provision of “Shelter, food, and clothes to all” (1892/1995, 55, emphasis in original) is the most immediate need in the course of and after a revolutionary transition to a new society. But he also points out that beyond the satisfaction of these very basic needs a communist society needs to be able to guarantee not only the physical survival of its inhabitants, but also the need of luxury for all: “After bread has been secured, leisure is the supreme aim” (95). Kropotkin follows Marx’s insight that communism and the communist application of technology enable the “wealth for all” and that free time “will grow for all”. In a communist society, the “measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labour time, but rather disposable time” (Marx 1857/1858, 708). In 21st-century society, wealth for all also includes the access of all to the world’s knowledge as knowledge and digital commons and the *gratis* access of all to creative and digital skills and the cultural resources needed for universal artistic and creative production so that everyone can become artistically and an intellectually accomplished.

Kropotkin argues that as a result of technological developments in communism, humans will engage in diverse free activities “to satisfy [...] artistic or scientific needs” and have ample time available for their hobbies (1892/1995, 97). The social revolution opens up universities, laboratories, research institutes and science to all and thereby promotes “the spirit of invention” and the “impulse to thought, this boldness, this knowledge, this conviction of working for all” (1892/1995, 102), which in turn helps to advance society’s productive forces and the development of knowledge, science, and

technology. A revolution “implies the awakening of human intelligence, the increasing of the inventive spirit tenfold, a hundredfold, it is the dawn of a new science” (177). Based on William Morris, Kropotkin argues that in a communist society that maximises free time, work becomes art (105) and everyone can become an artist.

Kropotkin stresses that a communist society must use and develop the means of production and employ certain forms of collective reproductive labour (e.g. the provision of services such as public kitchens providing free food or the collective washing services of clothes and dishes) in order to rid itself of hard, dangerous and unpleasant labour:

Cleaning, rubbing the skin off your hands when washing and wringing linen; sweeping floors and brushing carpets, thereby raising clouds of dust which afterwards occasion much trouble to dislodge from the places where they have settled down, all this work is still done because woman remains a slave, but it tends to disappear as it can be infinitely better done by machinery. Machines of all kinds will be introduced into households, and the distribution of motor-power in private houses will enable people to work them without muscular effort. [...] But emancipation from domestic toil will not be brought about by small machines only. Households are emerging from their present state of isolation; they begin to associate with other households to do in common what they did separately” (Kropotkin 1892/1995, 112).

Future communism requires digital machines such as toilet-cleaning robots, robotic waste collection and recycling, robot vacuum cleaners, robot lawn mowers, robot builders, agricultural robots, etc. in order to automate as widely as possible dangerous, exhausting, monotonous, mundane, boring, and unpleasant necessary labour. This excludes certain work such as human care because robotic psycho-therapists and carers are inhumane and would make people more ill and unhappier instead of supporting them. Robots can be used in meaningful ways in medicine, for example in robot-assisted surgery, where the robot supports but does not replace the human surgeon. In care, labour such as moving hospital beds, changing sheets, cleaning instruments, washing the laundry, etc. can certainly be automated and robotised without fostering inhumanity.

In the book *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism*. Peter Frase (2016, 47) argues that in a communist society, robots should conduct “the more emotionally complex aspects of care” and writes that “a robot nurse could be more comforting than an overworked and exasperated human one” (2016, 47). In a communist society, those who need care will not automatically be put into special institutions, but will to a larger degree than today live with their family and friends. On the one hand, more time would be available for friends and family to undertake care work. And on the other hand, there will still be professional carers who practice care out of communist solidarity. In a communist society, where humans are solidary, more humans will be interested in engaging for a certain number of hours per year in professional care work. Robotic emotional care does not work and is inhumane because machines do not have and cannot properly simulate feelings, ethics, and emotions. Robotic psychotherapists, doctors, nurses, midwives, etc. are not an expression of communist care, but of inhumane, alienated care.

Kropotkin argues for the creation of agro-industrial communes, which can be achieved by creating urban fields and agricultural parks so that land, food and industry are organised close by one another:

If fields are to be properly cultivated, if they are to yield the abundant harvests that man has the right to expect, it is essential that workshops, foundries, and factories develop within the reach of the fields. A variety of occupations, and a variety of skill arising therefrom, both working together for a common aim – these are the true forces of progress (Kropotkin 1892/1995, 175).

Today, we need communist agro-industrial-digital communes, where tangible and intangible production are organised in the same locales and the division between mental and manual work can more easily be overcome than in an international division of labour. In a digital communist society, digital technologies will advance the digital support of agriculture, manufacturing and services so that the division of labour can be abolished, necessary labour can be minimised, and free work beyond necessity and compulsion can be maximised.

Given that the computer is a universal machine, in a communist society it can be used as a tool that supports the sublation of the division of labour; the divisions between agriculture, industry and services, producers and consumers, mental and manual labour, town and countryside, developed and developing countries, productive and reproductive labour, paid and unpaid labour, the international division of labour, the gender division of labour, and so on. For example, the digitisation of agriculture, manufacturing and services makes it easier to organise these forms of production in all localities so that the distinction between the rural countryside, the post-industrial global metropolis, and de-industrialised cities becomes superfluous.

In a communist society, a diversity of realms of production could flourish independent of location and the division of labour could, along with class society, be abolished. But not everything can be produced everywhere. You cannot grow bananas in Scandinavian gardens. There will always remain a certain need for international mutual aid and international gifting co-ordinated via networked computer systems that record the global demand for goods as well as the production capacities in self-managed companies, communes, communes of communes, regions, etc.

### 3.3. Communication and Culture in Communism

Communist society will possess the material foundation and productivity that allows the sublation of the division of labour between mental and manual labour:

It is precisely to put an end to this separation between manual and brain work that we want to abolish wagedom, that we want the Social Revolution. Then work will no longer appear a curse of fate: it will become what it should be – the free exercise of all the faculties of man (Kropotkin 1892/1995, 133).

Kropotkin follows Marx's concept of the well-rounded individual that emerges based on communism's abolition of the division of labour. Marx speaks of a

communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic" (Marx and Engels 1845/1846, 47).

In digital communism, it is possible that the well-rounded individual creates digital videos in the morning, cooks a meal whose recipe they have obtained from a friend over

the Internet in a collective kitchen at noon, spends time with family and friends in the afternoon, prepares themselves via the Internet for the next day's local assembly where an important collective decision will be taken in the early evening, then together with others cooks a meal, and in the evening continues the work on a novel that will be distributed online and as a free paperback using a Creative Commons licence.

Kroptokin argues for creating a different kind of school system that works without authority, the performance principle, and grading:

the child reputed lazy at school is often the one which simply does not understand, because he is being badly taught. [...] Do not you see that by your methods of teaching, framed by a Ministry for eight million scholars, who represent eight million different capacities, you only impose a system good for mediocrities, conceived by an average of mediocrities? Your school becomes a University of laziness, as your prison is a University of crime. Make the school free, abolish your University grades, appeal to the volunteers of teaching; begin that way, instead of making laws against laziness which only serve to increase it (1892/1995, 141, 142-143).

### 3.4. Conclusion

In the digital age, Kroptokin's vision of a communist society remains highly relevant. Although in the 19th century computing could not be envisioned, Kropotkin was, like Marx, an anticipatory thinker, who saw communism as a highly productive society, where technologies are designed in humanistic ways and support the creation of wealth and luxury for all.

In the 21st century, communism can make use of digital technologies in order to increase productivity and create wealth and luxury for all beyond scarcity and necessity. Kropotkin reminds us that communism requires technological foundations.

## 4. Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*

### 4.1. Communism in General

Ursula K. Le Guin's (1974/2002) *The Dispossessed* is a science fiction novel that deals with life in future societies located on two different planets: the communist planet Anarres and the capitalist society A-lo on the planet Urras. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was "a whole explosive renewal of Utopian thinking and imagination, and for a rebirth of the older narrative form. Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* [...] was the richest literary reinvention of the genre" (Jameson 1991, 160).

On Urras, societies are shaped by private property, classes, capital accumulation, money, and commodity exchange on markets. The reader learns that on this planet and in its various national societies, one finds commodity fetishism, a gender division of labour, competition, tabloid journalism, exams in universities and schools, and wars. It is a generally rich, but unequal, exploitative and war-waging planet. Visiting Urras from Anarress, the book's main protagonist Shevek comments: "And you the possessors are possessed. You are all in jail. Each alone, solitary, with a heap of what he owns" (1974/2002, 190).

On Anarres, we find collective worker ownership of companies and their means of production (syndicates), federations of organisations, participatory democracy, gender equality, and an administration (Production and Distribution Coordination, PDC) that does not rule over citizens but merely coordinates production. PDC consists of volunteers who are selected by lot and serve for a period of five years (1974/2002, 14).

There are no contagious diseases on Anarres. Anarres is built on mutual aid and solidarity, its principles are “to give, not to sell” (15) and “[h]aving’s wrong, sharing’s right” (44). We learn that people typically work five to seven hours a day and four to five and a half days a week (156), which means between twenty and thirty-eight hours and a half per week.

The settlers who built society on Anarres deliberately left Urras because they wanted to escape from capitalism. On Anarres, they built an alternative society, the Odonian society. But Anarres is a planet with low vegetation, rough climate and no animals: “Anarres is all dust and dry hills” (189). It is much more difficult to sustain an economy there than on Urras. The advantage of these conditions is that it is unlikely that imperialists from Urras try to conquer Anarres because there is no wealth to be exploited. They will stick to organising exploitation on their own planet. But the disadvantage is that building a communist society under such difficult environmental conditions is hard; almost impossible. The result is that Anarres is a rather poor socialist society with low productivity that experiences phases of collective hardship, poverty, famine, and drought. Scarcity is also a potential source of the emergence of class divisions: Anarres faces the danger of turning into a class society.

Anarres is not free of antagonisms and asymmetric power. The book discusses the case of the scientist Sabul who uses his reputation and influence to make others work for him and take the credit for their labour, a process that can be termed academic exploitation.

#### 4.2. Technology and Production in Communism

Heavy physical, unpleasant, or dangerous labour exists on Anarres and is organised as labour performed on rotational duty. Labour such as toilet cleaning and waste collection is collectivised. Shevek explains: “Well, we all do them. But nobody has to do them for very long, unless he likes the work. One day in each decad [= ten days] the community management committee or the block committee or whoever needs him can ask him to join in such work. [...] People take the dangerous, hard jobs because they take pride in doing them, they can – egoise, we call it – show off” (1974/2002, 124-125).

In *The Dispossessed*, adverse economic and environmental conditions result in a four-year long period of famine. Individuals take on jobs wherever they are needed, which rips apart families and friendships and makes people unhappy. There is no forced labour. Individuals could refuse accepting jobs in regions away from their friends and family. But their sense of duty and a culture where the collective interest is seen as much more important than the individual interest makes them reject this option, as they do not want to be seen as individualists: “To survive, to make a go of life, an Anarresti knew he had to be ready to go where he was needed and do the work that needed doing” (204).

The book shows that a socialism of scarcity is built on the principle of equality, but does not automatically make individuals and society happy and renders it difficult to realise a dialectic of collective and individual interests. Whereas capitalism fetishizes individualism without nourishing the collective and common good, the socialism of scarcity fetishizes collectivism without individuality and does not give enough space to individual interests and needs. High productivity is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for a socialism that enables wealth and happiness for all. *The Dispossessed* presents, as the subtitle of some editions of the book indicates, an “ambiguous utopia”. Carl Freedman (2000, 122) argues that *The Dispossessed* is “a self-critique of anarchism” because it shows that “material privation not only sets quantitative limits to the

achievements of socialism; it may qualitatively deform socialist values at their very core”.

In contrast to the situation on Anarres, labour on Urras is highly productive and creates an overall richer society. Visiting Urras, the book’s main protagonist Shevek is impressed by “the greatness of the enterprise” of building space ships on Urras, whereas the ships of Anarres’ space fleet are two hundred years old. To “build just a ship to carry grain across the sea [...] it takes a year’s planning, a big effort of our economy” (1974/2002, 73). Le Guin’s book risks the danger of cementing the myth that a communist society is *necessarily* less productive and poorer than a capitalist society.

Frederic Jameson (2005, 159) argues that Le Guin’s novels are

the prototype of a Utopian commitment to the countryside and the village, to agriculture and small face-to-face groups, as opposed to the urban celebrations of a Delany: the commitment of a pastoral Morris, as opposed to the industrial Bellamy. Indeed, the opposition probably becomes meaningful only after industrialization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries”.

On the one hand, there is validity in the criticism that Le Guin omitted description of high-tech communism. Reynolds (2005, 87-88) argues that “Le Guin’s suggestion is that, so long as [...] suffering is freely shared like everything else, then even the most extreme hardship may be chosen and made part of one’s freedom”. On the other hand, in response to the criticism that her novels avoid high-tech Le Guin writes that technologies such as making a fire without matches are very complex and that “all science fiction is, in one way or another, technological.” She says that in her novels, the “hard stuff’s inside, hidden” (2004). There are computers on Anarres and in an anarcho-primitivist society without science and technology, a tech-communist such as Shevek simply would not exist.

Le Guin does not provide the answers to how high-tech communism is possible, but she inspires us to ask the right questions, such as: What would have happened if the settlers had stayed on Urras and had successfully organised a revolution? What would a communist society look like on Urras? Such questions are the “hard stuff” that is hidden inside her novels. In this context, Hamner (2005, 228) argues that *The Dispossessed* is “an incomplete utopia, but we see the beginnings of revolution in Thu and A-lo and the hope of renewed progress in the revolution on Anarres”.

When Shevek visits Urras, his hosts try to keep him from meeting the poor because they are afraid he could lead or inspire such a revolution. The dominant class on Urras is interested in Shevek’s theory of simultaneity and tries to hide him from the propertyless class. The real concrete utopian-communist potential that the book outlines occurs when Shevek joins revolutionaries in Benbili, an undeveloped part of Urras, where the propertyless rebel against their exploitation. This part of the story focuses on class struggle as the potential for the creation of a highly developed communist society. The settlers have fled not just from capitalism, but also from class struggle. They were abstract utopians trying to create an autonomous communist society under improper material conditions.

On Anarres, there are computers that co-ordinate “the administration of things” (Le Guin 1974/2002, 82). The Division of Labour Office (DivLab) hosts a huge database that contains information about every job that needs to be done, the priorities of all workers, and their assignments (1974/2002, 222). Le Guin hints at the importance of co-ordinating the demand and supply of labour in a communist society via networked computing.

### 4.3. Communication and Culture in Communism

There are no national languages on Anarres. People speak Pravic, which like Esperanto is a constructed language. On Anarres, there is not so much need for long-distance communication via radio, telephone, and postal mail because there is no sales communication (Le Guin 1974/2002, 208). There is little sense of privacy on Anarres, which is why personal letters are not sealed (1974/2002, 209). Life is very local, and personal telephone calls are rare and have to be arranged in advance (209). The PDC controls which letters are sent to Urras or rejected, because the latter's inhabitants are seen as enemies (133): there is censorship of such communication.

Shevek is a real communist. He creates his theory of time because it can underpin the creation of an instantaneous, interstellar communication system, an Internet of the Universe that is called the "ansible", which is short for "the answerable". The ansible is "a device which will permit communication without any time interval between two points in space. [...] So we will be able to use it to talk between worlds, without the long waiting for the message to go and the reply to return. [...] Like a kind of telephone" (283). Like Tim Berners-Lee, who made the World Wide Web a commons, Shevek does not want to earn money from his theory and the resulting communication system, but wants to give his ideas to the world as a gift. Shevek explains his motivation: "I'd like to share it out. [...] It ought to be given out, handed around. It won't run out!" (311). *The Dispossessed* is the story of how Shevek invents the ansible, which exists as interstellar Internet in the ten books that make up Le Guin's "Hainish Cycle".

Le Guin (1966) had already introduced the ansible in her first novel *Rocannon's World*, where it is spoken of as "the big machine [...] which can speak instantly to other worlds, with no loss of years". In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin (1969/2017) describes the "ansible communicator" as working on the "constant of simultaneity", requiring no radio waves and producing "a message at any two points simultaneously". "A NAFAL ship takes 67 years to go between Gethen and Hain, but if I write a message on that keyboard it will be received on Hain at the same moment as I write it" (1969/2017). *The Dispossessed* reveals the origin of the ansible in Shevek's development of a General Temporal Theory.

Raymond Williams (1978/2005) argues that in science fiction, utopian transformations are all too often not "social and moral but natural". Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* deprives "utopia of its classical end of struggle" (1978/2005, 212) by an "open utopia" (211) where "the good land is in the grip of the Urrasti dominance" (211). Shevek is the social character typifying the struggle for the open communist utopia.

Comparable to Jürgen Habermas, Shevek believes in the good potentials of communication. He says that "[s]peech is sharing – a co-operative art" (Le Guin 1974/2002, 28) and sees communication as a means "to unbuild walls" (1974/2002, 65). For Shevek, communication is an important foundation of universal peace, peace in the Universe. Shevek describes the potentials of the ansible as "making a league of worlds possible. A federation" (284). He imagines the creation of an interstellar public sphere that fosters peace and understanding.

But the example of the Internet commons shows that in a world that has not rid itself of class divisions, dominant classes can turn the commons into commons of capital and commons of authoritarianism. Created as a commons, the World Wide Web is today dominated by the likes of Alphabet/Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Alibaba. In

2019, these four companies together made profits of over US\$70 billion from the commodification of the Internet<sup>1</sup>. And there is also the political colonisation of the Internet by authoritarians. Using Twitter, Donald Trump communicates in order to build physical and political walls (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Tweet by Donald Trump, source: <http://www.twitter.com>, accessed July 15, 2019

Communication is neither good or evil by nature; it is a tool mediating good and evil social relations. Habermas (1991) points out that there are economic and political forms of the colonisation and feudalisation of the public sphere. Commodification and authoritarianism have colonised the Internet.

We can learn from Le Guin's works that universal and global communication systems need to rid themselves of commodification and authoritarianism and be designed and used in a participatory-democratic manner in order to foster the public sphere, peace, and global understanding. A communist society needs a communist system of communication that is based on the principles of common access, common use, and the creation of possibilities for common encounters of humans that strengthen solidarity and friendship.

#### 4.4. Conclusion

Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* does not convince as a utopian story of what a communist society could look like. Anarres is a failed experiment where power inequalities cannot be overcome and humans suffer and are unhappy under the conditions of a socialism of scarcity. The book's strength is the portrayal of Shevek as a communist social character who is both opposed to capitalism on Urras and the unhappy life on Anarres. He is a tech-communist who makes his invention, an interstellar Internet of the Universe, available as a common good and sees the communist potentials of technologies for the creation of a truly humanist and communist world. Socialist transformation requires many Sheveks.

<sup>1</sup> Data source: Forbes 2000 List of the World's Largest 2,000 Companies for the year 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/global2000/list/>, accessed on 18 July 2019.



## 5. P.M.'s *bolo'bolo*

### 5.1. Communism in General

P.M. (1983/2011) outlines in his utopian work *bolo'bolo* the foundations of a society that is free from domination, capitalism, and the state.

“bolo'bolo” is a society of autonomous communities. A bolo is a “large communistic” household (1983/2011, 20) consisting of 300 to 1,000 individuals. Bolos are spaces of communication, production, and reproduction. A bolo is a “direct, personal context for living, producing, dying” (72-73). P.M. thinks that a community of 500 individuals constitutes the ideal size of a bolo (22-23). As far as possible, a bolo tries to organise food production locally so that it is “largely self-sufficient so far as the daily supply of basic food is concerned” (75). The introduction of urban farming is common in a bolo. The basic necessities of life are provided for free to the members of a bolo.

P.M. argues that necessary work guaranteeing survival (such as agricultural work) must be compulsory and divided among all members. Typically, it would constitute 10 percent of the available active time (88; 119). P.M. suggests that 10 percent of the working time in a bolo could be passed over to the township so that production for trans-local needs could be organised (119). The township could pass over 10 percent of the total working time it contains to the region, which again could pass over 10 percent to the planetary community (119). “Organising more complex forms of production – “water, energy, raw materials, transportation, high tech, medicine, etc.” (97) – requires “exchange and co-operation” across bolos “on higher social levels: towns, valleys, cities, regions, continents – for raw materials, even world-wide” (97).

P.M. suggests that ten to twenty bolos together form townships (120) organising common institutions (such as hospitals), and that counties consist of ten to twenty townships (124-125). Autonomous regions are made up of twenty to thirty counties (126). Based on P.M.'s assumption that an ideal bolo has 500 members, a county bears a maximum of 200,000 inhabitants and a region a maximum population of 6 million. According to P.M., the Earth could consist of “about 700 regions in all” (130), which means a maximum of 4.2 billion inhabitants. In 2020, the world population was 7.8 billion; in 1983, the year *bolo'bolo* was first published, it amounted to 4.7 billion<sup>2</sup>.

Forcibly reducing the world population is not compatible with a free society. It is in this context a bit disturbing that P.M. suggests that every individual should be equipped with a suicide/death pill (79; 111-112), that medieval duels should be revived (79; 147-149), and that “longevity won't be a general value” (110). But in his work *Kartoffeln und Computer (Potatoes and Computers)*, it becomes evident that P.M. (2012, 20; 43; 2009, 17; 19) in no way supports repressive population policies and revises his vision so that there are enough organisational units that are the homes of 9 billion individuals. In *Kartoffeln und Computer*, P.M. identifies more organisational units than in *bolo'bolo*: neighbourhoods, boroughs/towns, cities, territories, (sub-)continents, the planet (2009, 19).

The idea of population reduction has been part of the reactionary and racist politics of Social Darwinism. An anarchist version of such politics needs to be avoided. A long, healthy and happy life for everyone is desirable and only becomes possible in a communist society that does not deny but supports medical progress for all. At the global level, the average life expectancy of those born in 2020 is 73.2 years and, of those that will be born in 2100, 81.7 years<sup>3</sup>. Such progress should be celebrated, not denied in a

<sup>2</sup> Data source: UN Population Statistics, <https://population.un.org>

<sup>3</sup> Data source: UN Population Statistics, <https://population.un.org>

necrophilic manner akin to fascination with death. If possible and enabled by scientific progress, then all individuals in the world should enjoy a good, long life.

P.M. suggests that large cities should be “thinned out” (1983/2011, 125) so that they are not larger than 500,000 individuals. It is unlikely that many families who have lived for a long time in communities within large cities would volunteer to move away. In the 1970s, the compulsory depopulation of cities based on the idealisation of rural life in villages and the ideology of the creation of an agrarian socialism resulted in genocide under Pol-Pot’s Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. This should teach us a historical lesson about attempts to ruralise society.

In *bolo’bolo*, decisions on all of the organisational levels of a communist society are made based on a system of “delegation from below” (122), where two delegates are chosen by lots to represent a unit in an assembly for a limited period of time, where a small number of external delegates and delegates from neighbouring units are also represented. There are bolo assemblies, township assemblies, county assemblies, regional assemblies, and one planetary assembly.

The assembly meetings are transparent and broadcast on television (123). P.M. seems to see such assemblies as a kind of government that takes decisions. This is certainly one possibility. Another possibility is that there is deliberation within local communities before decisions are made and local constituencies vote on certain options that are suggested in a grassroots manner. In the age of the Internet, individual online debate can support face-to-face meetings and electronic forms of citizen participation in debates are possible.

## 5.2. Technology and Production in Communism

The “real motivation” for individuals to “live together” in a bolo “is a common cultural background” (1983/2011, 84). More complicated forms of production such as construction, water and electricity supply, sewage, the production of machines, tools, clothes, furniture, electronics, etc. depend “on the cultural identity of a given *bolo*” (96). One problem of the organisational form of the bolo is that it is predominantly a cultural unit of togetherness, where humans come together relatively arbitrarily and spontaneously and not around a shared interest in a particular type of skill or production.

A bolo is predominantly a unit of culture and not of economic production. As a consequence, in such a society there could easily be a large number of bolos that do not have the necessary number of individuals with the skills needed for producing the goods and services necessary for survival. The fact that P.M. suggests that there is no education system in *bolo’bolo* may easily make skills shortages and educational deficits a severe problem that hampers the survival capacity of bolos and the bolo’bolo-society. If in contrast the basic organisational unit is not a local neighbourhood, but the self-managed company (the co-operative) in a decentralised planned economy, then the anarchy of production can more easily be avoided. P.M.’s vision of bolo’bolo lacks decentralised planning of the economy and could easily end up being a society of general poverty and shortage.

bolo’bolo’s anarchy of production should, according to P.M., be overcome by gifts, township-depots of surpluses, exchange, barter agreements, and markets. There are markets as “agreements on importation/exportation of energy” (100). In *bolo’bolo*, gifting is spontaneous (132), there are common pools of reserves that are given to those communities that require them (133), barter agreements between bolos and at other organisational levels (134-137), and also money-based markets (137-139). In the bolo’bolo-society, there is exchange-value such as “100 bottles local wine” = “20 pounds feta cheese” (136).

P.M. argues that the need for “economic – i.e., value-calculating – exchange” (137) would be drastically reduced. The problem is that every exchange needs to be based on some standard of exchange and that labour-time is a likely candidate for such a standard. Because of different local production conditions, some organisational units are inevitably more productive than others. In an exchange-economy, the more productive units can attain advantages in barter agreements and as a result accumulate surpluses of certain goods that others cannot obtain. Exchange is always unequal exchange that results in class divisions between richer and poorer individuals, groups, classes, and regions. Marx stresses that when there are different societal and natural conditions of production, “the same quantity of labour satisfies a different mass of requirements in different countries, and consequently under otherwise analogous circumstances, the quantity of necessary labour-time is different” (1867, 650). In an exchange-oriented system, units, communities, countries and regions that have a lower productivity face disadvantages and get less in exchange for their products than others. Uneven geographical and social development is a consequence of exchange. A communist society needs to abolish exchange and organise the economy as a high-tech, post-scarcity gift economy.

Theodor W. Adorno stresses the dominative and destructive character of all exchange. He argues that barter and exchange mean “an exchange of things that are equal and yet unequal” (1973/2004, 147). In “the institution of exchange there is created and reproduced that antagonism which could at any time bring organized society to ultimate catastrophe and destroy it” (Adorno 1969/1970, 149). Emancipation requires the ability to “transcend barter” (1973/2004, 147). In “post-capitalist societies”, “there can be no question that exchange will have ceased to take place” (2000, 31).

P.M. writes that computer networks could be used in *bolo'bolo* for storing offers for barter agreements that “could be consulted by others who’re looking for a certain product” (1983/2011, 135). In high-tech, post-scarcity, digital communism, exchange becomes superfluous and production and distribution can, with the help of global computer networks, be organised as a needs-based economy. Households and local communities can enter their local demand for certain products and services for particular periods of time (such as one month) into a global economic database that is accessible to everyone and therefore also to the producers of these goods who can orient their production activities towards actual needs.

Self-managed companies specialising in certain forms of production know what their average productivity is and can thereby calculate how many products they are able and willing to produce per month. They also enter their average output per unit of time into a global database. If such computer-based needs assessment and computer-based production planning is organised globally, then an Internet-based process of decentralised economic planning is realised. An algorithm calculates what share of the products created in a particular self-managed company is allocated to what local community. In order to avoid high levels of transportation, the principle is used that goods that satisfy the needs of individuals in certain local communities are produced in the geographically closest companies that have a corresponding production capacity. Inevitably, there will be shortages of certain important products in particular regions, such that physical transportation of goods will not cease to exist, but become part of a global solidary gift economy without exchange. A computerised, networked post-scarcity socialist society does not need any form of exchange. The computerised decentralised planning process identifies global shortages, which allows the planning of mitigation strategies.

Although P.M. says that in a future society there should be no limits on “pleasure and adventure” (55) he argues for the organisation of bolos, towns and regions as a “relatively lame, harmless, low-productivity affair” (119), which implies low productivity and the existence of toil. It is therefore no surprise that *bolo’bolo* does not discuss automation and robots. A communist society is a society where there is wealth for all, which requires high technology, high productivity and the abolition or at least massive reduction of toil. The communist shaping and use of computing and robots can automate alienated labour. Full automation is neither possible nor desirable because there are many creative activities that humans want to conduct, complex activities where robotic decisions are dangerous or impossible, and social activities where robotic activities are inhumane (e.g. the education of children or the emotional and social care of the sick and elderly).

But there are also activities that are objectively alienated, such as waste collection or the cleaning of toilets, sewage systems and sewage plants. Socialising the labour of cleaners of public toilets and sewage divers so that everyone has to do such dirty work for some hours per week does not make it less alienated. A communist society cannot exist without the cleaning of public toilets, the collection and recycling of garbage, and the maintenance of sewage drains and sewage plants. The solution is, however, not that we learn to love dirt and shit and stop the work of cleaning, as P.M. suggests (“Dirt and the right to be dirty can even be a form of luxury”, 103), but that such labour is automated and in a communist society conducted by toilet- and sewage-drain-cleaning robots and waste-collecting and waste-recycling robots. A communist society without toilet- and sewage drain-cleaning robots is unimaginable. Technical progress has been made in the development of toilet-cleaning robots. Giddel is the world’s first portable toilet-cleaning robot. Such robots should be widely used for cleaning public toilets in a communist society and should also be available for households, where individuals, families, or collectives of individuals live who want to use cleaning robots.

### 5.3. Communication and Culture in Communism

In *bolo’bolo*, there are no specialised institutions, including educational institutions such as schools and universities (1983/2011, 112). There is also no compulsory literacy (113). Knowledge is “acquired on the job” (113). There are cultural centres, and increased amounts of free time are used for cultural activities (114). The university “will become universal”, there will be “more possibilities for information and research”; “science will be in the reach of everyone” (114).

It is difficult to see how skills and knowledge could diversify and become universal without schools and universities. Reading, writing, mathematics, abstract and critical thinking are not simply acquired as part of training on the job, but require in-depth engagement with knowledge in social learning communities. There is a danger that *bolo’bolo* is a highly pragmatic society that is oriented on instrumental skills and does not nurture mass intellectuality, critical and creative thinking, and the complex skills and technologies emanating from such thought. As a consequence, *bolo’bolo* could mean a return to the agricultural age, featuring toil, poverty, scarcity, hard labour, and low living standards. A communist society must be a technologically highly productive information society or it will not exist.

That schools and universities continue to exist in a communist society does not mean that these institutions will take the same form as today. They will have a more democratic and participatory character and be oriented on the principle that we can all

best learn from others and in communities of learners without learning pressure and a grading system.

“Communication in itself will have a different character under the conditions of *bolo’bolo*” (114). According to P.M., in *bolo’bolo* there is a much higher level of interpersonal communication for spreading news, so that there is no mass press: “Paper information will be limited to bulletins of all kinds, to proceedings of neighbourhood or city assemblies [...] and to reviews” (115). P.M. seems to assume that most global and trans-local communication organised by the media system stems from the antagonisms of capitalism and the state. There is a danger that the elimination of regional, international and global media and communication systems would support localised forms of bigotry and nationalism. A truly communist society consists of individuals who are curious about individuals, communities and life in other parts of the world. Newspapers, television, radio and Internet communication would lose their capitalist character as means of advertising, sale, ideology, and become global means of information, communication, news, entertainment, debate, participation, and collaboration. Truly participatory media can only exist in a communist society, in which the common ownership of the means of production exists and these means are used for common production (citizen journalism), common debate, and the common participation of everyday individuals. Communism does not have to abolish, but to radically transform the contemporary means of communication.

*bolo’bolo* was written at a time when computer networks such as the ARPANET and Minitel existed, but had not yet reached the status and reach that e-mail, the Internet, and the World Wide Web have today as international and global means of communication. P.M.’s suggestions for how to use the means of communication focus on local applications with low-usage capacities:

Local cable-TV networks, radio stations, video libraries, etc., can be installed by local organisms (see *tega*, *vudo*) and remain under the control of the collective users” (116).

Already at this moment there’s a computer terminal for every *bolo* on the planet – no more production is necessary. The telephone network could also be completed in such a way that every *bolo* could have at least one station. This means that it could be connected with regional or planetary processors or data-banks. Of course, every *bolo* would have to decide on the basis of its cultural background whether it needs such means of communication or not” (117).

In the early 1980s P.M. probably did not have the utopian vision of imagining the existence of the global communication system of the Internet and how it could be repurposed in a communist society as means for global cultural production and global economic and administrative co-ordination, but there is also a certain degree of fetishism of localism and local communities in his approach. Communist societies have to be ‘glocal’, i.e. based on a dialectic of the global and the local that combines global localities and local globality as unity within diversity, in order to avoid both localist bigotry (diversity without unity) and globalist cultural domination (unity without diversity).

P.M.’s claim that “*bolo’bolo* will not be an electronic civilization – computers are typical for centralized, depersonalized systems” (116) blames the computer as such for the ills of bureaucracy and class society. Communism will be, among many things, a form of digital, post-industrial socialism or it will not exist.

In his later work *Kartoffeln und Computer (Potatoes and Computers)*, P.M. stresses that commons are resources that are necessary for all humans and are maintained by

a community. As a consequence, commons should not be private property or a commodity, but be accessible to all and collectively controlled. Land (food, resources, energy, etc.) and knowledge (“the capacity to use and improve all means of production”) are two key types of the commons (P.M. 2009, 17). The commons are “all about potatoes and computers” (2009, 17). In his later works, P.M. gives much more attention than in earlier works to the role of computing in communism. He argues that ‘co-operatories’ are spaces where knowledge is shared and becomes a common. The Internet “can function as a global on-line *cooperatory*”, but computer-supported co-operation would have to be a combination of “internet and face-to-face gatherings” (2009, 19). The Internet could also play a key role in the organisation of the economy:

A postcapitalist household system is in principle demand-oriented. Instead of dumping commodities onto a market, goods that are needed are ordered by the consumers (who in turn are organised democratically on various levels). The producers (the same people wearing different hats) try to match these orders with the available resources (including their capacity or willingness to produce them) and give feedback to the ordering persons/institutions, who in turn modify their orders. This system of *iterative planning* seems clumsy, but computer programmes that can support it already exist. According to Paul Cockshott and Allin Cottrell’s *Towards a New Socialism*, there is no amount of complexity that such planning algorithms couldn’t handle” (2009, 22).

Cockshott and Cottrell (1993, 118) propose the creation of “a socialist market in consumer goods” that uses computerised planning so that prices are regulated according to labour-values. In their suggested system, labour-values of goods are calculated by recording labour-times as well as the inputs and outputs for the production in each company and for each commodity.

In our hypothetical socialist economy, each unit of production would use such a package to build a model of their production process. The spreadsheet model would have fed into it how much labour had been used over the last week, how much of each other input, and what the gross output had been. Given up-to-date figures for the labour values of the various inputs, the spreadsheet would rapidly compute the labour values of the outputs. [...] The whole system would be acting as a huge distributed supercomputer continuously evaluating labour values by the method of *successive approximation* (Cockshott and Cottrell 1993, 59).

Based on an algorithm, the commodity prices and target outputs of companies are set accordingly.

In Cockshott and Cottrell’s version of socialism, commodities, prices, markets, exchange-value, and wage-labour (although not remunerated in money, but in labour credits, which is another general medium of exchange) continue to exist. The two authors underestimate how high levels of productivity and networked communication enable the elimination of exchange-value and the creation of a gift economy. Nick Dyer-Witford (2013, 14) argues that automation as well as the copying of digital content and hardware (3D printing) and peer-to-peer production, enabling decommodification and the creation of digital commons, point in the direction of a communist system, where

scarcity is replaced with plenty, ending the need for either prices or planning. For Marxists, 'plenty' yields the transition from the 'lower' phase of communism, which still must grapple with problems of scarcity, to the higher phase of 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs'" (2013, 14).

Evgeny Morozov (2019, 54) suggests the use of the feedback infrastructure enabled by digital technologies and big data for "non-market forms of social coordination", such as bringing together "problem-finders" and "problem-solvers" in collaborative digital problem-solving (2019, 56), the design of non-markets (57), or decentralised planning of the economy (62-65): "On the consumption side, the predictive capacity of Big Data can anticipate our preferences better than we can; [...] Likewise on the production side, 3D printers enable cheap and flexible manufacturing, without the need for massive fixed-capital investment" (62, 63).

Morozov refers to Daniel Saros' (2014) approach for suggesting the creation of a digital socialist market economy:

At the centre of his system stands a General Catalogue, something of a mix between Amazon and Google, where producers, who are organized in guild-like 'worker councils' – worker-run startups if you will – list their products and services in a way that would be familiar to users of Apple's App Store or Google's Play Store. Consumers, equipped with a unique digital id card, turn to the catalogue to register their needs during the so-called 'needs registration period' at the beginning of each production cycle; they rank the products they want, specifying their quantities for the next cycle. Consumers can still purchase products they didn't request after the need-registration period ends, but they receive higher bonuses if their purchases do not deviate from their initial predictions" (Morozov 2019, 64).

In the economic system both Saros and Morozov suggest, companies do not make profit, but commodities, exchange-value, money, and markets still exist; this also implies the existence of wage-labour. Production is more needs-oriented because consumers indicate their needs in a decentralised manner over a networked database system.

But given that exchange is always unequal exchange, there will be unequal distribution of money and goods and unequal purchasing power in such a system. In addition, some co-operatives will sell more and be more productive than others, which may result in bankruptcy, overproduction, crises, precarious working conditions, wage cuts, lay-offs of certain groups of workers, unemployment, etc. Exchange-value, commodities, wages, and markets are unnecessary mediators of the economy which create inequalities. 21st-century socialism requires a decentralised system of planning that uses a networked information system that is organised over the Internet.

In such a decentralised communist information system, humans register their needs and wants, co-operatives' production capacities are recorded, and both sets of data are co-ordinated so that co-operatives produce use-values that correspond to actual needs and wants. Data-based recommendation systems that use a publicly transparent open access algorithm for assessing the defined needs of consumers and suggesting what other goods the consumer might be interested in can be organised via the networked planning system. For such a system, no money, no commodities, no exchange, no markets, and no wage-labour are needed. Socialism must aim at eliminating these forms of economic mediation right from the start and in their place implement a socialist gift economy. As far as possible, a socialist economy should also make

use of the automatic and robot-supported production, distribution, repair, disposal, and recycling of goods.

In *Kartoffeln und Computer*, P.M. puts more stress on gifts and commons and less on markets and exchange than in *bolo'bolo*. He argues that markets are “terribly wasteful” (2009, 22) but nonetheless suggests that creative enterprises “may operate with market systems, with money, bartering, gifts or just when there is occasional demand” (19), which contradicts his argument in the same book that knowledge should be treated as a common good available to everyone. Once a market and exchange are introduced, there are mechanisms that exclude humans from wealth.

#### 5.4. The Communist Allocation Algorithm

The allocation of the amounts of products that consumers need from the producers is the key economic issue in a communist economy. Networked computing can be used for supporting the organisation of economic allocation. For the allocation process itself, the consumers and producers need to deal with the following questions:

- Q1: How many goods of the types  $g_1, g_2, \dots, g_i$  does consumer  $c_j$  want and need in a certain period of time?
- Q2: What producing unit (co-operative)  $p_i$  produces how many units of a certain good during a particular period of time (e.g. one month)?
- Q3: How many hours during a certain period of time does individual  $i_i$  make available in order to produce a certain good  $g_j$  according to their abilities and in what co-operative  $p_k$  do they work?
- Q4: What is co-operative  $p_i$ 's productivity, i.e. how many goods of a certain type  $g_j$  does it produce during a particular period of time?
- Q5: In co-operative  $p_i$ , what amount of goods-type  $g_j$  are produced by robots and what amount by humans during a certain period of time?
- Q6: Allocation function: What amounts of goods  $g_1, g_2, \dots, g_i$  do co-ops  $p_1, p_2, \dots, p_j$  produce and what amounts of these goods are delivered to consumers/communities  $C_1, C_2, \dots, C_k$ ?
- Q7: Given certain needs and productivity levels, can a sufficient amount of the goods  $g_1, g_2, \dots, g_i$  be produced during a certain period of time? If there are goods where the need is going to be larger than the expected production capacity, what mitigating measures can be taken?
- Q8: What amount of reserves of the goods  $g_1, g_2, \dots, g_i$  should be produced by what co-operatives in order to mitigate against economic crises?

A key aspect of the communist gift economy is the allocation of co-operatives' production capacity to the quantities of goods needed and requested by consumers and communities so that production is organised in such a way that transport distances are kept at a minimum. Physical proximity is important in order to reduce transport time, transport labour, and possible negative effects of transport on the environment.

Using software and networked computing, an allocation algorithm is used for defining what producer produces what amount of a certain good for whom. This algorithm is run in order to create an allocation matrix at the start of a production period (e.g. at the start of each month). Networked computing as infrastructure that runs the allocation algorithm is used for communicating to producers what amounts they produce and for whom. Here is the syntax of such an algorithm:



Goods types:  $G[1,2, \dots M]$ , there are  $M$  types of goods that are needed,  $G[1]$  is the ID of goods type number 1

Consumers:  $C[1,2, \dots N]$ , there are  $N$  consumers, consumers can be individuals, households or organisations or communities,  $C[1]$  is the ID of consumer number 1

Producers:  $P[1,2, \dots O]$ , there are  $O$  producers; producers are individuals, co-operatives or other organisations,  $P[1]$  is the ID of producer number 1

*Variable matrixes that are defined per period of time (e.g. one month) by producers and consumers respectively:*

Consumers: Needs matrix  $NEED[x, y]$ : the amount that consumer  $C[x]$  requires of good  $G[y]$  during the production period (e.g. during one month)

Producers: Production capacity matrix  $PCAPC[x, y]$ : the amount of good  $G[y]$  that producer  $P[x]$  can produce during the production period

*Available functions:*

$x = \text{CLOSEST}(y, z, \text{NEED}[y,z])$

This function provides the ID of the producer  $P[x]$  that is in closest physical proximity to consumer  $C[y]$  and is capable of producing the amount the consumer needs of good  $G[z]$ . If the producer's capacity is already fully allocated, then the next closest producer's capacity is checked. The function returns the ID of the producer that is located closest to the consumer and can produce the latter's demand of a certain good. If no producer is available, then the function returns the value 0. The function  $\text{CLOSEST}$  uses the production capacity matrix  $PCAPC [i,z]$ ,  $i=1 \dots O$ , the needs matrix  $NEED[y,z]$ , and a database and a function that together provide the distances between consumers and producers in order to determine the right producer and store its ID in variable  $x$ .

*Allocation matrix:*

For a particular production period, the allocation algorithm defines a three-dimensional allocation matrix  $A[x, y, z]$  that specifies the amount of good  $G[z]$  that producer  $P[x]$  produces for consumption by consumer  $C[y]$

```

FUNCTION ALLOCATE(N, M, O)
BEGIN
  FOR c = 1 TO N DO
  BEGIN
    FOR g = 1 TO M DO
    BEGIN
      k := CLOSEST(c, g, NEED[c,g]);

      IF k=0 THEN
        FOR i=1 TO O DO A[i, c, g]:="N";
      ELSE
        A [k, c, g] := NEED[c,g].
    END.
  END.
END.
END.

```

The ALLOCATE-algorithm defines the allocation matrix  $A[x, y, z]$ . If there is no production capacity available for fulfilling the need of a certain consumer, then the specific cells in the three-dimensional matrix contain the symbol “N” (no capacity). For example, if consumer C(123) requires two goods G(999) for which there is no production capacity, then the algorithm fills all matrix cells  $A[i, 123, 999]$ ,  $i=1, 2, \dots, O$  (all producers) are filled with the symbol “N”. After the allocation algorithm has been run, one knows if and what production shortages exist.

If there are significant shortages then there is a need to mitigate. One mitigation strategy is that each producer always tries to produce a reserve of e.g. 10 percent of each good that are used when shortages occur. A second option is that one tries to use additional robots to create more products. A third option is that calls are sent out over the producer/consumer-Internet app communicating that a certain amount of working hours is needed in order to satisfy society’s need and that volunteers are sought who work for a certain amount of hours in a particular co-operative. If there are not enough volunteers or not enough robots available, then a maximum amount of goods that consumers can receive of the scarce good can be introduced for a limited period of time.

#### 5.4. Conclusion

*bolo’bolo* is a book that inspires the reader to think about how a communist society could look and what organisational features are needed to overcome class, capitalism, the state, nations, borders, exploitation, and domination. P.M.’s vision is a commune of local communes that is based on grassroots democracy, self-managed production, and autonomous life organised without capital, class, and the state. He envisions a participatory society that has a grassroots character.

There are limits of P.M.’s vision in respect to the use of communication technologies, computers, and robots, where the book is not visionary and not utopian enough and is in danger of idealising local, rural life that is based on hard physical labour and has low levels of productivity.

P.M.’s *bolo’bolo* and *Kartoffeln und Computer* are important contributions to discussions about post-capitalism and show that alternatives to capitalism are feasible. How such alternatives should best be organised is debatable and is a practical and collective question of the realisation of concrete utopias.

## 6. Other Novels About Post-Scarcity Communism

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s (1911/2018) novel *Moving the Mountain* plays in a future post-scarcity society, where eugenics is practiced in order to kill the mentally ill, the disabled and criminals. Published in 1911, the novel cannot envision a society where computing plays an important role.

In Philip José Farmer’s (1967/1992) *Riders of the Purple Wage*, there is a post-scarcity society where everyone receives a basic income and people live in segregated communities, there is government surveillance and a sterilisation programme, and citizens engage in anti-social behaviour, including sex between children and parents, forced emigration, and riots and violence in the arts scene.

Samuel Delany’s (1976/1996) *Trouble on Triton* is a direct response to Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*. Delany focuses on Bron Helstrom, a troubled and unhappy character living in the utopian society Triton, which is at war with Earth. Triton is a socialist society where computers play a role. But the novel is too preoccupied with subjectivity to deal with questions such as how production and distribution work, how garbage is collected, or what role computers play in the economy.

In Kim Stanley Robinson's (1992; 1993; 1996) *Mars Trilogy*, a post-scarcity society is established on Mars. The plot focuses on the settlement of Mars, where longevity becomes possible, and conflicts over emigration from an Earth ridden by wars, environmental disasters and transnational corporations' dictatorship. The book predominantly focuses on conflicts and wars that shape the build-up of a communist society on Mars and is not so much focused on communism itself.

In James P. Hogan's (1992) *Voyage from Yesteryear*, a space expedition escapes from global war and authoritarianism on Earth and establishes a communist post-scarcity society on Chiron, a planet in the Alpha Centauri star system. The economy is automated and human labour has been replaced by robot activities. The plot focuses on how the rulers of Earth try to conquer Chiron and implement fascist rule on the planet.

In *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* (2003) Cory Doctorow presents stories that are set in the Bitchun society, which features immortality, post-scarcity, and the respect of fundamental rights. There is a digitally-organised reputation system called Whuffie that measures how popular an individual is and provides privileges to the most liked individuals. The plot revolves around a turf war between two rival adhocracies about the control of Disney World. Doctorow's (2017) *Walkaway* describes a dystopian post-scarcity society where the rich elite rules over citizens in a dictatorial manner, citizens are under constant surveillance, and military force is used against rebels who walk away from this repressive society.

Iain M. Banks' (2011) *Culture* series consists of nine novels and a volume of short stories. The Culture is an anarcho-communist society where the economy is automated, there is no state, and Artificial Intelligence systems ("the Minds") conduct all administration. The plot focuses on wars and conflicts with less-developed societies on other planets, such as the Idiran War between the Culture and the militaristic Idirans, and how the Culture uses espionage, agents, and special operations for defending its society and expanding its influence. The novels are more focused on interstellar conflicts than on how a highly automated communist economy and a communist society work.

Ken MacLeod's stories, novels, and book series, such as the *Fall Revolution Series* (2008; 2009), the *Engines of Light Trilogy* (2000; 2001; 2002), and *The Corporation Wars* (2018), are often science fiction space operas that involve life on other planets and focus on wars and conflicts between communists and their enemies.

Most of the mentioned novels are either dystopian, or contain no computing, or do not focus much on how the economy works. They are preoccupied with wars, espionage, and conflicts that are all too characteristic of contemporary capitalist society. A genre of post-scarcity communist novels, where technologies are used in a humane way and society is democratic and participatory and the plot revolves around the organisation of the economy and society, has yet to be created.

## 7. Conclusions

There are important lessons we can learn for the organisation of a future communist society from the readings of communist utopias presented in this paper.

### 7.1. William Morris's *News from Nowhere*:

#### Beauty as a principle of society:

What we can learn from Morris's utopian communist society is the importance of the principle of abundant beauty and the advancement of possibilities for creative work

and work as art and play. Morris underestimates the potentials for modern technologies and could not envision a post-industrial socialism where computing technologies and knowledge work play an important role and enable the end of toil, unpleasant and dangerous labour and the maximisation of free, self-determined time used for leisure, creativity, social engagement, political debate, art, and human togetherness.

### **Machines for the conduct of dangerous, unpleasant, stupefying, monotonous, and physical labour:**

A highly productive post-industrial socialism where robots and computing are used for providing possibilities to automate dangerous, unpleasant, stupefying, monotonous, and physical labour is less likely to turn back into a class society and more likely to provide happiness for all. Morris overestimated the interest and capacity of humans to find pleasure in mundane, hard physical labour. In a highly productive digital-communist society, humans can volunteer to conduct hard labour if they indeed find it pleasurable, but a decisive feature of such a society is that there are machines available that can to a significant degree conduct such work or make it less alienating.

### **The beauty of interpersonal relations and communication:**

We can learn from *News from Nowhere* that communism is likely to transform human culture, manners and behaviour so that humans are less aggressive and engage with each other in much more friendly, open-minded, caring, and solidary manners than today. Beauty will not just be a feature of the natural and physical world, but also be a characteristic of the human character and interpersonal relations.

### **Participatory democracy as communist politics:**

The political system of a communist society requires the participation of humans in making decisions that concern their lives. Participatory democracy is the political system of a communist society. In such a society, there is enough motivation, interest and time available for humans to engage in political debates and decision-making. Computer networks will support democratic information and communication; not replacing, but rather enhancing face-to-face assemblies and debates.

### **Communist transport and communication:**

In a communist society, transport and communication should not mean toil and localism, unlike in *News from Nowhere*, but, based on green computing and green transport, technologies should enable humans to communicate and travel globally so that they learn from each other, enjoy discovering the world and meeting other people in distant cultures, and create a global community of friends. In a communist society, schools would continue to exist, but be organised as participatory organisations. Learning, reading, writing, art, critical thinking, critical arguing, critical reading, critical writing and critical debating would be encouraged and practiced in cultural communities of life-long learners and cultural creators. Digital technologies would be used for supporting these critical and cultural skills. Certainly, there would be less need for global transport in a communist society than in capitalism because commodities and exploitation will have disappeared. Fossil-fuel driven, individually-owned cars are unlikely to exist, but there would be effective networks of public transport. Fewer long-distance flights and travels than today would be needed. Rockets, aeroplanes, buses, railways, trams, ships, cars, lorries, mopeds, cable cars, etc. would be solar-driven or powered

by other forms of green energy. Those who enjoy driving buses or piloting ships or aeroplanes would be able to do so. But there will also be the possibility to use highly developed, secure self-driving vehicles that make use of Artificial Intelligence.

## 7.2. Peter Kropotkin's *The Conquest for Bread*:

### Wealth and luxury for all in the digital age:

Kropotkin's communism is based on the collective ownership of the means of production that enables wealth for all and luxury for all. In 21st-century society, wealth for all also includes the access of all to the world's knowledge as knowledge and digital commons and the *gratis* access of all to creative and digital skills and the cultural resources needed for universal artistic and creative production so that everyone can become an artistically and an intellectually accomplished.

### Post-scarcity digital communism:

For Kropotkin, communism is a highly productive, post-scarcity society that makes use of and further develops the means of production. In the 21st century, communism can make use of digital technologies in order to increase productivity and create wealth and luxury for all beyond scarcity and necessity. Kropotkin recalls that communism requires technological foundations and that communism today requires digital foundations. Future communism in the 21st and 22nd centuries requires digital machines in order to automate as widely as possible dangerous, exhausting, monotonous, mundane, boring, and unpleasant necessary labour.

### Communist agro-industrial-digital communes:

Kropotkin argues for the creation of agro-industrial communes. In a digital communist society, we need communist agro-industrial-digital communes, where digital technologies advance the digital support of agriculture, manufacturing and services so that the division of labour can be abolished, necessary labour can be minimised, and free work beyond necessity and compulsion can be maximised. Given that the computer is a universal machine, it can in a communist society be used as a tool that supports the sublation of the division of labour so that everyone can become an intellectual, an artist, and both a manual and a mental worker. Digital communism will create well-rounded individuals using digital technologies.

## 7.3. Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*:

### The need for post-scarcity communism:

*The Dispossessed's* ambivalent utopia shows that whereas capitalism fetishizes individualism without nourishing the collective and common good, the socialism of scarcity fetishizes collectivism without individuality and does not give enough space to individual interests and needs. High productivity is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for a socialism with wealth and happiness for all.

### The communist social character:

The book's main protagonist Shevek is a communist who wants to support the creation of common goods that foster universal friendship, mutual aid, and universal solidarity.

Shevek creates his theory of time because it can underpin the creation of an instantaneous, interstellar communication system, an Internet of the Universe that is called the ansible, which is short for “the answerable”. Like Tim Berners-Lee, who made the World Wide Web a commons, Shevek does not want to earn money from his theory and the resulting communication system, but wants to give his ideas to the world as a gift. For Shevek, communication is an important foundation of peace in the Universe.

### **The Internet of the Universe as interstellar public sphere:**

For Shevek, communication is an important foundation of universal peace. He imagines the creation of an interstellar public sphere that fosters peace and understanding. We can learn from Le Guin’s works that universal and global communication systems need to rid themselves of commodification and authoritarianism and be designed and used in a participatory-democratic manner in order to foster the public sphere, peace and global understanding. A communist society needs a communist system of communication that is based on the principle of common access, common use, and the creation of possibilities for common encounters of humans that strengthen solidary and friendship.

### **7.4. P.M.’s *bolo’bolo* and *Kartoffeln und Computer***

#### **The communist gift economy:**

We can learn from P.M.’s works that contemporary societies are productive enough and provide powerful means of networked communication so that decentralised economic planning of production and distribution allows the abolishment of all exchange and the replacement of the commodity economy by the gift economy. Exchange is always unequal exchange that results in class divisions between richer and poorer individuals, groups, classes, and regions. A communist society needs to abolish exchange and organise the economy as a high-tech, post-scarcity gift economy.

#### **Decentralised, computerised planning in the communist economy:**

In high-tech, post-scarcity, digital communism, exchange becomes superfluous and production and distribution can, with the help of global computer networks, be organised as a needs-based economy. Households and local communities can enter their local demand for certain products and services for particular periods of time (such as one month) into a global economic database that is accessible for everyone and therefore also for producers of these goods. Self-managed companies specialising in certain forms of production know what their average productivity is and can thereby calculate how many products they are able and willing to produce per month. They enter their average output per unit of time into a global database. If such computer-based needs assessment and computer-based production planning is organised globally, then an Internet-based process of decentralised economic planning is realised. An algorithm calculates what share of products of a self-managed company is allocated to what local community. In order to avoid high levels of transportation, the principle is used that needs should, as a preference, be satisfied by goods produced in the geographically closest companies. Inevitably, there will be shortages of certain important products in particular regions, so that physical transportation of goods will not cease to exist, but become part of a global solidary gift economy without exchange.

### **The automation of unpleasant and dangerous labour in communism:**

Public toilets are highly prone to becoming dirty and dysfunctional. The public toilet is a symbol for the question of how the economy is organised in a communist society. If such a society manages to organise the most unpleasant labour such as the cleaning of public toilets and sewage drains and the collection of garbage, then the communist economy will work. If public toilets overflow and are dysfunctional, then it is also likely that collective housing projects, self-managed companies and society as a whole will be dysfunctional. The question of how public toilets are organised and maintained is a key metaphorical question for communist societies. A communist society cannot exist without the cleaning of public toilets, the collection and recycling of garbage, and the maintenance of sewage drains and sewage plants. The solution is, however, not that we learn to love dirt and shit and stop the work of cleaning, but that such labour is automated and, in a communist society, conducted by toilet-, and sewage drain-cleaning robots and waste-collecting and -recycling robots. A communist society without toilet- and sewage drain-cleaning robots is unimaginable.

### **7.5. Guidelines for Writing and Struggles for Utopias of Digital and Communicative Socialism**

From the readings of the discussed communist utopias, we can formulate some guidelines for how storytelling and fiction can best outline concrete utopias of digital and communicative socialism:

#### **Communist digital machines:**

Communism is a highly productive digital society where toil, dangerous, unpleasant and necessary labour have been abolished by alternative scientific and technological progress. Digital machines are used for creating an economy that fulfils human wants and needs. The effects of these machines on society are socially and environmentally sustainable and the development of machines, science and technology is a participatory process where all those who are affected by science and technology's use together take collective decisions.

#### **Wealth and luxury for all in digital communism:**

Digital communism is a society that features wealth and luxury for all in a socially and environmentally sustainable manner. The means of production are common goods owned collectively by those who work with them. Human wealth is a common, which means that the riches that satisfy human needs and wants are available to everyone as gifts without payment. Common goods include the knowledge commons and the digital commons. The means of communication, including digital technologies, are common goods managed in a democratic manner.

#### **Work as art that creates beauty:**

In communism, human toil has disappeared, but human work continues to exist beyond necessity as free activity that humans use for artistic, creative, social, self-fulfilling, self-determined and intellectual work, political debate, human togetherness, etc. Work becomes art and humans strive to create a beautiful world that benefits all. Lots of work is conducted in co-operatives as social production.

**The communist social character:**

In concrete-utopian digital communist stories, the reader meets individuals who are representatives of the communist social character. There is beauty in their interpersonal relations and communication. They are friendly, open-minded, caring, and solidary humans who treat others in a humane manner and strive to foster common wealth and common benefits for all.

In stories where we hear about revolutionary situations that aim at overcoming class society or have established a communist society, the communist social character who strives for a society that benefits all plays a particularly important role.

**Well-rounded individuality:**

In digital communism, the division of labour and society's divisions have been abolished. There are agro-industrial-digital communes, where digital technologies advance the digital support of agriculture, manufacturing and services. In such a society, it is common that humans do not have a single realm of activity, but undertake multiple creative and social work activities. Humans are well-rounded individuals. Digital technologies support their creativity and well-rounded activities. In communist society, humans are general intellectuals and artists with manifold cultural interests.

**The communist economy and decentralised, computerised planning:**

The economy of digital communism is a gift economy without exchange, markets, commodities, money, and wage-labour. It is based on the principle 'from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs'. Globally networked computing systems are used for organising a needs-based gift economy, where needs and wants are recorded in a decentralised manner, which means that humans and households regularly enter their basic and special needs into a database. The production process is transparent and needs-oriented. The produced amounts of goods are digitally recorded so that the level of productivity of each unit is known. Consumers' wants and needs and production capacities are co-ordinated via decentralised, computerised planning. Production is to a significant degree organised at the local level, but there is also trans-local, regional, trans-regional and global gifting organised via computing and environmentally sustainable transport technologies.

**Participatory democracy:**

Participatory democracy is communism's political system. Humans have the time, skills, motivation and interest to engage in political assemblies where decisions that concern them are discussed and taken. There are assemblies at various organisational levels of society ranging from the company and local community level to the global level. There are communes, communes of communes, communes of communes of communes, etc. that host assemblies as decision-making bodies. Large assemblies consist of delegates appointed for a limited period of time by their grassroots communities. Networked computer technologies support but do not replace face-to-face meetings.

**The digital and global public sphere:**

In digital communism, there is a global public sphere, where humans debate matters of concern vividly and reach understandings. There are no asymmetric power struc-



tures that colonise the public sphere. The public sphere involves face-to-face encounters as well as the support of political information, communication, collaboration, and co-operation by the global Internet that is free from harassment and bullying and where humans communicate as friends. Digital communism knows no national borders and is not a form of local bigotry and isolationism. It is a glocal society that is based on a dialectic of the local and the global as well as universal and global cultural unity in diversity. Humans encounter each other as friends and fellow human beings. Sustainable communication and transport technologies enable humans to explore the world and make contacts and friends all over the world. The public sphere is to a significant degree a cultural public sphere, where humans encounter each other in order to make new friends and enjoy life together.

### **Everyday life in digital communism:**

Stories about digital communism provide lots of insights into details of everyday life, including education, family life, friendships, love, birth, food supply, eating, consumption, culture, arts, housing, energy supply, utilities, communication, the means of communication, transportation, entertainment, sports, privacy, health, illness, social care, death, gender relations, sexuality, etc. The stories also outline what positive roles digital technologies play in everyday life and where they do not play a role because their use is considered harmful.

### **Transformation, revolution, the capitalist past:**

Stories about digital communism also compare the organisation of and everyday life in digital communism to past stages of history, where capitalism or other class societies existed. They also reveal how the revolutionary transition to communism took place. There are comparisons between means of production/communication, including the digital means of communication and digital machines, in class society and in digital communism. The design, use, and impacts of technologies in capitalism and communism are compared.

### **Contradictions:**

If communist novels, stories and fiction focus predominantly on problems, conflicts, wars, or violence in respect to communism, communist technology, or the relationship of communism and class society, then there is the danger that the impression is created that communism can never work and should not be created in the first instance. A pure focus on such issues should therefore be avoided.

But digital communism is not a society that is free from contradictions and problems. There are problems and contradictions of digital communism that we learn about in concrete-utopian communist stories. But class relations, exploitation, and domination do not exist, which makes it easier to solve problems and deal with contradictions. Digital communism is a problem-solving society, where humans are in general creative, intellectual, critical beings who together engage in trying to solve the problems society is facing. In some stories, digital communism comes under the threat by hostile groups or societies, who threaten to invade and destroy communism and to impose a class rule. Such stories show how digital communism deals with existential threats in a resilient manner. Occasionally, there are stories in which such threats turn digital communism from utopia into dystopia and later back into utopia.

### Dialectical technology:

Raymond Williams (1978/2005) argues that it is problematic when technological transformations in fiction are presented based on the logic of “technological determinism”, where there is “little or no social agency” and technology has “certain ‘inevitable’ social consequences” (1978/2005, 198). In such stories, technological transformation is the opposite of humans’ wilful transformation; there is no dialectic of society and technology. Utopia and dystopia are “narrowed from agency to instrumentality” (199). Science fiction is scientific, then, because science and technology take on an instrumental character.

In the concrete utopian-communist story it is important that science and technology are presented as dialectical. In both capitalism and communism, there is a dialectic of science/technology and society. The consequences and impacts of science and technology on society are not inevitable, but depend on human interests and on how humans shape science, technology, and society. Utopian and dystopian technological impacts are not natural consequences of science, technology, or society. Science and technology often have multiple, contradictory potentials, realities, impacts, and consequences. In a communist society, science and technology are far from perfect, but also contradictory. It is, however, more likely that they have positive consequences and impacts than in class society. If something goes wrong, then it is easier in such a social formation for humans to intervene, undertake mitigating interventions and undo negative impacts.

Dialectical technology depends on dialectics of technology and society, continuity and discontinuity, agency and structure. In concrete-utopian communist stories, there are struggles for a good society that involve struggles for and about good technology. Utopian-communist literature needs struggling, humanist, solidary communist social characters such as Le Guin’s Shevek or the revolutionaries in Morris’s chapters on “How the Change Came” (Chapter XVII) and “The Beginning of the New Life” (Chapter XVIII). Such communist social characters should also be present in respect to the dialectics of technology.

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# A Global Revolutionary Class Will Ride the Tiger of Alienation

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates how the global class of organic intellectuals will emerge. It thus updates Marx view on class struggle dynamics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by taking the quantum leap of productive forces during the last 200 years serious. The most striking new element is the tremendous increase of the force of information power brought about by ICT. The emergence of Fascism and Stalinism in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was just a frightening first symptom of the coming *age of alienation*. Today, basing class membership – including the emergence of class consciousness – only on the (physical) local position in industrial production units is insufficient, even misleading. Global production is by its inbuilt complexity blurring the visibility of a specific worker's exploitation status. There is necessary alienation, but then class struggle managed disinformation and manipulation is added. For the progressive classes this implies that they are split along the lines of their respective education status – how far the fog can be dissolved. This is where the concept of the global class of organic intellectuals, of an avantgarde, enters. The paper shows that already in the emergence of this new socialist agent the structures, in particular the information structures, of the next mode of production have to be present. It turns out that features, which are evil for capitalist thought are often the most important ingredients for the constitution of the forerunners of a socialist global society: persistent contradictions and diversity, exploding oscillations, deep and time-consuming dialogues, irrational solidarity, aesthetic stubbornness. The new intellectuals can remain rooted in local circumstances, can be organic, because they share many of these features with the exploited classes within which they act as catalyst, as avantgarde. In the end global socialism, organised by a revolving class of organic intellectuals, has to master alienation. This is the challenge.

**Keywords:** revolutionary class, alienation, global class of organic intellectuals, political avantgarde, socialism, capitalist algorithm, socialist algorithm

## 1. Introduction

Contemporary social forces are building up steam. It is not just the global climate, which rapidly starts to oscillate with higher and more surprising amplitudes. More and more authoritarian state leaders subscribe to a kind of disintegrating capitalism, which falls back to the coercive mechanisms which were thought to be overcome after World War 2. In this situation a new wave of modernized Fascism knocks at the door and its resonance in the population shows that the progressive movements still have so far not really understood what Fascism is<sup>1</sup>. Their analysis mostly just scratches the surface when it investigates singular historical features of 20<sup>th</sup> century Fascism. Neither

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<sup>1</sup> The two classical approaches to explain 20<sup>th</sup> century are (1) the so-called “Western” interpretation, which equates Fascism and Stalinism as “Totalitarian”, and (2) the “Eastern” interpretation, which considers it to be just the rule of most radical imperialistic capitalists. For a critique of both compare Hanappi (2019b).

the personality of Hitler, nor that of Mussolini, nor that of Stalin should be taken as a historical force. Single politicians as well as the local and transient historical peculiarities in which they are embedded in, are of secondary importance if the long-run dynamics of capitalism are to be investigated.

Progressive theory in the tradition of Marx's analysis – what in this special issue is called socialism – has to be envisaged as *a theory about the dynamic struggle between classes*. The agents of change, those pushing forward social progress as well as those trying to turn back the wheels of history, are large groups with a shared common consciousness, which runs through different stages of emergence. Moreover, even the set of classes to be considered does not stay constant. The last 75 years have seen a tremendous turmoil of emerging and vanishing class consciousness, pseudo-consciousness, misconceived class relationships, mixtures of class, race, and nationalism, and the like.

In short: this confusion indeed was the fertile ground that the dominant economic theory of the ruling class, i.e. neoclassical economic theory, had proposed with its methodological individualism. If human individuals are the uniquely possible starting point for any social theory, if classes are assumed not to exist, then some surrogate Newtonian mechanics framework (neo-classical theory) can be used to show formally that we live in the best of all possible worlds; no change needed. Just make sure that political institutions never disturb market forces. In such a theory, progressive classes do not exist, neither does their enemy, the capitalist class. For the former, the teaching of such a theory is a tranquillizer, a distraction directing attention away from the understanding of social dynamics and substituting it by acquiring mathematical skills appropriate for 19<sup>th</sup> century physicists. For the ruling classes such a theory is useless as well – apart of its manipulative task with respect to their enemies.

When Fascism did strike after World War 1 the capitalist class could not use its theory to understand what is going on. It had to rely on somebody without education in economics, but with the ability of marrying political skill with convincing rhetoric and a good sense of feasibility: John Maynard Keynes. His doctrine, known as Keynesian macroeconomics, could hide the class concept behind a veil of accounting relationships and an assumed average behaviour of individuals, so-called socio-psychological constants. An approach good enough to re-introduce the state as an institution that is needed to save capitalism from its own aggravating sequence of heavier and heavier crisis. Some former leaders of the labour movement could be pacified by transferring the class struggle to the couloirs and meeting rooms of state institutions. Integrated capitalism was born, and after the little understood intermezzo of Fascism could flourish to its global zenith. Class, as a central concept of political economy, was eliminated from the theoretical discourse.

But as a motor of real economic processes classes were as vital as always, just theories had gone astray. Of course, class structures were changing since Marx's death in 1883 – not a big surprise. Changes in the capitalist mode of production, discrete steps of its development leading to different stages of capitalism, are to be understood in front of what is common to all stages, of what is the essence of capitalism. Capitalism is a particular mode of production embedded in the larger category of commodity producing societies. Commodity exchange – a consequence of the division of labour – implies the emergence of money, which in turn is accompanied by the step-wise evolution of money forms and their corresponding forms of political organisation. Hence, the capitalist mode of production is characterised by a particular money form, which best can be understood as an *algorithm*.

In recent discourses the concept of an “algorithm” has taken on a somewhat mystic character, so let me clarify its use in this text. With the shift of formalisation techniques from classical mathematics towards computer programs several important new twists of understanding of processes were implied. A programme running on a computer is an algorithm, i.e. it performs a sequence of instructions, which change the set of variables present in the programme. Though the number of instructions is finite, the possibility of recursive calls of itself within a program – realised in the machine by constructing copies of the calling program – leads to a new understanding of infinity, called the “halting problem” in computer science<sup>2</sup>. From a more profane view, in a finite world programmes need a stop condition since the space for storing copies is finite. The stop condition thus links the external conditions of the programme’s environment (its limits) to the general set of instructions. To do this it must be included in the programme. A second important twist stems from an extension of the concept of a variable. A variable is a sign referring to another sign, where at the so-called roots of such a sign structure usually signs referring to measurable properties of non-signs occur. With modern learning techniques sign systems can be derived directly from the interaction between the learning program and these (dynamically changing) roots – though, of course, several axiomatic restrictions of the learning algorithm (often disguised linearity) have to be considered. Unlike the stop condition, which points at the preliminary character of all recursive thinking in real life, the wide opening of self-constructing programmes<sup>3</sup> due to machine learning has blurred the common perception that programs still are necessarily deterministic. They are written and implemented by human individuals to run in a finite world.

An order given by a firm owner to one of its employees is an algorithm too. It is a sequence of actions, which the employee has to perform. In a specific firm each abstract command will refer to a less abstract action, which the worker has to accomplish – often in more direct physical contact, important for the production process. The boss is the programming authority. The worker is the machine. Note that recursive calls now assume a different flavour: Employees higher up in the firm hierarchy become copies of the boss (or the next higher level) at the interface to the next lower level. The stop condition now simply is the worker who has no other workers subordinated to him/her, i.e. the level where there are workers that do not give orders.

But the real crux that enabled the capitalist mode of production was the evolution of money forms taking place in capitalism: A capitalist owner does not just own a specific firm, he or she rather handles capital, i.e. as a class capitalist owners gain the flexibility to jump from one firm to another firm, from one country to another country, from one tax regime to another tax regime, etc. This new flexibility substitutes the inflexible family bonds, which held the feudal class together, and makes the capitalist class a more abstract class. The only common element in all parts of capital in the world that has to contrast this overwhelming flexibility is what I call the “*capitalist algorithm*”. It is an algorithm again, which can be spelled out very clearly, see below (section 2). Just like recursions the capitalist algorithm can spread, can enhance feudal societies, and can counteract like a disease in societies at the verge to socialism. Like

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<sup>2</sup> On a very general level the halting problem is one of the *logically* undecidable problems as Alan Turing showed (see Turing 1937). There is no possible algorithm that can free a programmer from the need to shut down an otherwise *infinitely* running programme in all cases. A somewhat disappointing result, though an infinitely running capitalist algorithm is illusionary due to the physical finiteness of the world anyway.

<sup>3</sup> Conceptually self-constructing programmes have already been studied by John von Neumann (1966). For an implementation, see Pesavento (1995).

cancer, it can disguise as a promised growth process for individual humans, while it actually only addresses capital, and even its individual human agents are forced into its spell – they are just character masks.

This is just the first inhuman aspect of the capitalist algorithm: it enslaves *all* human individuals of all classes. The second inhuman aspect emerges due to the fact that at the lowest level of the recursive command chain in a social system there is not just a copy of an algorithm for which no additional space in the working memory can be found – as it was the case in a computer. The very reason for the running of the overall programme in this case is unmistakably specified, it is *exploitation*: there is no room for a human programmer to play around with a toy problem.

At the roots of society an anti-thesis is forming, as Hegel would have called it. It is something that non-living software due to its missing consciousness never will be able to achieve. From all parts of the enslaved humanity, but substantially from these exploited roots, resistance against the capitalist algorithm can constitute itself. It certainly will need to present a different algorithm in its fight against the capitalist algorithm. This algorithm will be characterised by strong and sophisticated feedback loops from the roots of a global society – what today might be called future democracy, socialism, or dictatorship of the proletariat. The design of such a *socialist algorithm* will bring current attempts in machine learning studied in academic circles to flourish. And it will imply a new money form overcoming capital. An educated guess is that the foundations of this money form are labour time and lust.

The concept of an algorithm thus has emerged as an important concept, and is here to stay with us. In capitalism the capitalist algorithm is the most general abstract programme that governs capital, currently the highest money form of frozen, appropriated social value. The next mode of production will need a governing programme, an algorithm, too. But instead of an illusionary unstoppable accumulation imperative this algorithm will aim at what now is at best a side constraint: (1) compatibility with environmental limits and (2) abolition of exploitation of “humans by humans”, feedback loops and diversity instead of hierarchical authoritarian power structures.

## 2. The Capitalist Algorithm

In societies dominated by agriculture, contradictions between cities, i.e. places of exchange, points of concentrated political power, and the open land were aggravating. Exploitation, i.e. the appropriation of surplus by a ruling class, was managed either by direct coercive force – in the beginning the domain of the feudal class – or later by enforcing rent payments in the form of money, i.e. a system of carriers of social value, e.g. coins. The necessary acceptance of this carrier system had, of course, to be secured by the feudal state. With further sophistication of the monetary exploitation system the ruling class experienced a split: On the one hand the politically governing old feudal class and on the other hand the non-feudal merchants which were able to keep the difference between bought and sold commodities as private money stock. In the sequel the latter were the part of the ruling class that provided credit for the nobility, with which then an army of mercenaries could be hired for internal and external exertion of direct power. These soldiers (including administrative military personnel of the state) constituted a further split within the ruling class.

The fruits of the global division of labour which started with the discovery and exploitation of new continents (e.g. in 1492) made merchants cooperating with the crown



rich. *Merchant capitalism* was the first monetary program following the capitalist algorithm. This algorithm looks as follows<sup>4</sup>:

For each member of the set of currently possible visions do (“vision loop”)

- Produce a vision of specific (entrepreneurial) activity
- Check expected wage cost
- Check expected interest on credit-money (vulgo “capital cost”)
- Check expected effective demand
- Compute expected growth rate of capital
- Estimate the probability to achieve that growth rate

End of vision loop

Choose the vision yielding the highest utility of a mean-variance utility function

Check if the selected vision’s utility exceeds the expected utility of a supplier of credit-money

If the lender’s utility is higher, then perform the chosen project,  
else become a supplier of credit-money.

For merchant capital its entrepreneurial component was still somehow hidden below the dominance of the political might of the necessary feudal sovereign. Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and British conquerors were “explorers”, though their visions already concerned the accumulation of capital stock<sup>5</sup>.

The close connection between profit made by merchant companies and the territories conquered and exploited by the feudal state enabled the ruling classes to keep their contradictory goals most of the time latent. A more pressing problem were the fetters of limited productive force, which the growth process inscribed in the capitalist algorithm soon met. E.g. the capacity to manufacture the amount of cotton transported to England by the merchants from the cotton fields of America was soon reaching its limit. At this point in time the magic word of “innovation” became the new mantra, became a systematic force in capitalism. Innovation designates activities which transform a combination of existing, but seemingly unconnected elements into a new social practice. In capitalism this new social practice typically concerned the activities of a production unit, of a capitalist firm. This narrower concept of innovation nevertheless included at least three elements: technical innovation, organizational innovation, and product innovation.

It is evident that the ability to perform innovation was not a very common property in the group constituting the politically ruling feudal class. The nobility were the degenerated heirs of lucky and brave knights that made their fortunes in the times of direct coercive power struggles<sup>6</sup>. Thus it soon became clear that the ruling classes approached a further split: The non-feudal bourgeoisie was dividing into entrepreneurial

<sup>4</sup> A detailed description can be found in Hanappi (2013). The algorithm is formulated with the help of an image of capitalist behaviour, which stems from observing firms of fully developed capitalism, though the nucleus of it is already visible in merchant capitalism.

<sup>5</sup> The fascination with gold that is so characteristic for that period is telling.

<sup>6</sup> The correspondence between special properties of the members of a ruling class and their historical mission was highlighted by Antonio Gramsci (Gramsci 1930/1999).

capitalists performing innovation and money owners<sup>7</sup> administering the transfer of the (monetary) fruits of exploitation to the different components of the capitalist system. Since innovation first started to take hold in the factories, in the industries on the island of England, the stage of capitalism that followed merchant capitalism has been named *industrial capitalism*. In the words of Marx, this industrial capitalism signals the “historical mission” of capitalism, its *raison d’être* in the evolution of mankind. Entrepreneurial activity increases labour productivity by *process innovation* and explores the space of human utility dimensions by *product innovation*. Both are prerequisites for welfare increase of the whole species: work less and derive utility from an expanding universe of consumption and service dimensions. Schumpeter later stylised the fraction of entrepreneurs as the heroes of capitalism, ignoring Marx’s conclusion that the disequilibrium process initiated by industrial capitalism will necessarily lead to a revolutionary shake-up: The so-called “productive forces”, i.e. the potential welfare increase, is going to run ever faster than the slow changes in class structures, which hinder that such a latent general welfare increase materialises.

The first clash in 1848 was a failure for the bourgeois fraction of the ruling class, the next one in 1918 proved to be its final triumph. Marx’s hope that a revolution within the ruling classes could open up the possibility for a takeover of power by the exploited classes turned out to be unjustified. The capitalist algorithm survived both World Wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Since the end of World War 1 capitalism developed into a new stage, which I call *integrated capitalism*<sup>8</sup>. During this stage several new elements of capitalism were emerging:

(1) In the interwar period, capitalist nation states, the administrative political fraction of the ruling class, allowed for some participation of the exploited classes in the policy process – thus the label *integrated capitalism*.

(2) Integration at the level of nation states was paralleled, sometimes even supported, by a boost of nationalism, which in the end helped the emergence of Fascism and Stalinism. Fortunately, Fascism experienced a heavy blow in WW2, and in 1990 also Stalinism saw a drawback. More recently, nationalism raises its evil head again.

(3) Both elements mentioned above owe a lot to the rise of new information technology. The manipulation of internal model-building activities of human individuals, i.e. the provision of interpretation schemes, has reached unforeseen levels. To exert power by information policy has become the most effective weapon not just for private firms (with omnipresent advertisements) but also for “political entrepreneurs” distorting more traditional class relations. In other words, we are living in an *age of alienation*. Compared to the previous two centuries, this concept now experiences a boost: Today reigns hyper-alienation.

The common ground of all stages, i.e. the capitalist algorithm, is itself based on the existence of exploitation, the permeating process which it handles in stage-dependent ways.

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<sup>7</sup> This group includes what today is called ‘banking’ as well as central banks and national (ministries of finance) and international (ECB, IMF, etc.) financial authorities. In the last 170 years this conglomerate has developed a highly sophisticated internal structure, first investigated from a socialist perspective by Rudolf Hilferding [Hilferding, 1910].

<sup>8</sup> Compare Hanappi (2019a).

### 3. Stages of Exploitation and Class Dynamics

Exploitation in its most general sense is the process of the taking away of lifetime of one group of living systems from another. To exploit the growth processes of plants and animals by eating them is how mankind exploits nature<sup>9</sup>. Note that in this case exploitation takes place between species, and that the notion of *sustainability* is implicitly characterised by the need of the growth process of inputs to the exploiting species has to be at least as high as the demand for them – though the build-up of stocks of inputs can act as a buffer<sup>10</sup>. The notion of the *scarcity of inputs* thus falls into two categories: inputs from renewable sources (other species) and inputs from finite amounts of material. Only the former qualify as elements of the exploitation process.

As Marx observed, the exploitation of “man by man” is an extension of the exploitation of nature by the human species, which immediately implies that there exist classes *within* mankind: an exploiting class and an exploited class. The power to exploit characterises the ruling class as the exploited class is characterised by its stagnation at just sustainable levels of reproduction. The transfer of lifetime can be complete, as is the case in the slavery mode of production, or it can be engineered by institutionalized transfer of labour time (corvée), commodity transfer (rent), or money transfer (taxes). The latter three have been different phases of exploitation mechanisms in feudal medieval Europe, designed to keep the exploited class of farmers at the lowest level of sustainability. These steps of exploitation in Feudalism already herald the ascent of *money forms as general systems of signs of social value*.

In capitalism money forms take over, the capitalist algorithm presented above links the behaviour of the exploiting class to the working of a specific money form, i.e. capital. In all stages of capitalism exploitation therefore can be traced back to the transfer of labour time from the exploited class to the exploiting class, measured in terms of the general sign system of social value, in money terms. A precise ex post formulation of a labour theory of value, which reports this transfer on a global level, is in principle possible, though extremely cumbersome. It has to account not only for the intricacies of myriads of institutional details that emerged in class struggles all over the world, it also has to consider that the oscillations of power struggles between classes, between firms, between sectors of the economy, and between nation states certainly have led to prices that cannot be considered to be “equilibrium prices” in any useful sense.

Nevertheless, ignoring the difficulties of an algorithmic representation of what happened in the world last year, it is theoretically sound to draw a clear border line between the (globally) exploited class and the ruling class of exploiters based on a labour theory of value<sup>11</sup>. In so far Karl Marx’s hypothesis on the purification of the class antagonism between capital and labour is still valid. But this overarching structure of capitalism as a particular mode of production of commodity producing societies does not directly translate into a purification of two antagonistic classes. Only during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – the time of Marx socialisation – the impressively fast emancipation of an anti-feudal young bourgeoisie parallel to a socialist avantgarde consisting of anarchists

<sup>9</sup> For a formal model – a simple Lotka-Volterra system – of this process compare Hanappi (2006).

<sup>10</sup> Even in advanced texts of Marxist mathematical economists, e.g. Roemer (1981, p. 19), this so-called feasibility condition usually is derived as a flow equilibrium, without mentioning the importance of stock variables. Note that capital is a stock variable!

<sup>11</sup> From the perspective of the labour theory of value there is no middle class, this is the major argument in the paper Hanappi & Hanappi-Egger (2012).

and communists gave the impression that a future bipolar constellation of the exploitation structure only waited for a final intervention of communist intellectuals. The avantgarde of communist intellectuals acts as an agent of enlightenment and transforms the working class from a class in itself into a class for itself – so went the argument at that time.

This plan to catalyse a communist revolution until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century failed. But with respect to the transformation of the working class into a class in itself remarkable successes surfaced as the growth of membership in unions towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century shows. The decisive setback only came with WW1, when the victory of national consciousness over class consciousness – in particular in Germany and France – became manifest (compare Hobsbawm 1990).

How deep nationalist propaganda had entered the minds of the population turned out in the interwar period. With more advanced information technologies even more radical variants of nationalism, racism and fascism, could take hold in the populations of the losers of WW1, Germany and Italy. The fascist movement became the first “class” without economic rooting, a party held together simply by direct paramilitary coercive force and propaganda. A set of simplistic narratives boasted towards a confused audience (with the help of the newly available broadcasting devices) combined with a dubious call for party discipline was the prelude. With the Great Depression of 1929 the fascist movement finally received the necessary economic backing of German warfare industries. The economic upswing of the 1930s still was taking place without a noteworthy fascist theory<sup>12</sup>, it was just the demand induced by fascist war preparation that drove the economy. Of course, the national socialism of fascists was no socialism at all. The choice of the name “Nationalsozialismus” already reveals a typical trick of fascist movements: Sell your slogans as mixtures of incompatible buzz words. A confused slogan will be appreciated by a confused audience. In the end it is just the glitter and glamour of the packaging of the void, which stirs the enthusiasm of the fascist mob. “The medium is the message” was McLuhan’s judgement much later.

In Russia the coalition between many farmers and the weak urban proletariat that Lenin had formed to overthrow Czarism had to build a non-feudal state from scratch. Forced industrialisation thus should produce more proletarians while an apparatus of state administrators being communist party members were acting as substitutes for the working class. In 1924, when Stalin after Lenin’s death took over, a particular nationalist policy element – “socialism in one country” – was added to this setting. The ruling class in the Soviet Union, de facto the elite of the national communist party, was different from the fascist rulers in that they indeed had a more or less realistic master plan to develop socialism. What they soon started to miss, after Lenin’s death even started to suppress, was innovation and creativity, which they substituted by military controlled discipline and correlated hierarchical power structures. The population did develop into a class structure following this hierarchy. On top was the elite of administrators of state power more or less identical with the party leaders. On the levels below there was the management personal with executive power according to their position in the hierarchy. All of them more or less conscious of executing a faint copy of the capitalist algorithm to win what had been called “system competition with the West” by the doctrine of “socialism in one country”. Below these classes with graded ruling

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<sup>12</sup> One of the predecessors of Keynes’ ideas, Michail Kalecki, at the time probably had a better understanding of the fascist movement than its proponents, see Kalecki (1943).

power there was the amorphous mass of workers, which became increasingly tired of policed discipline lacking increases in welfare<sup>13</sup>.

Then World War 2 stopped the proliferating *social cancer* called Fascism and in the West brought integrated capitalism to its most sophisticated form. In many OECD countries a two-party system served as a simulation of the interplay between a working class oriented economic policy and the goals of the capitalist class. Compromises between these two large parties, including alternate state leadership – became the rule. In the East the Soviet Union had advanced towards Europe and its satellite states became copies of the Russian original. As the latter could build on their pre-war knowledge stock their technologically more advanced commodities became the exports to the USSR which they exchanged for cheap energy. Nationalism in the new states remained as latent as religious attitudes. Only when the systems collapsed around 1990, their social structures rapidly broke up. Quick adopters in the population, often with the help of Western intruders, formed a young capital class that was able to apply the capitalist algorithm in the new environment. In Russia, this class now is called the group of new oligopolists and constitutes a second pillar of the ruling class. There again is a similar, even more pronounced development in China.

But in the early 1970s, integrated capitalism in the West had passed its zenith. The part of the ruling class controlling international finance had concentrated in the USA. To cement its economic dominance the regime of fixed exchange rates was given up, leading to a burst of US exports, a price hike of oil prices and turmoil in two-party systems worldwide. Around 1980, Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and Helmut Kohl took office and a long-run downturn of social democratic parties in Europe (and the Democrats in the USA) started. The global capitalist class started again to shape the world economy according to its goals. It followed the capitalist algorithm.

Globalisation now meant that global value chains were booming. Financial centres in the rich world's big cities together with multinational firms looked for countries with low wages and sufficient knowledge for production, other countries with high effective demand, and still other countries to be used as tax havens. The ruling classes were split again into multinational and transnational giant firms on one hand and local national capitalists on the other. State administrations started to align along continental frameworks; the banking sector was already a highly concentrated global network. The capitalist class thus today is characterised by a mosaic of partly opposing entities, though all parts subscribe to their perception of the capitalist algorithm. They mistakenly perceive this algorithm and its growth imperative as an unchangeable "natural" property of mankind.

On the side of exploited classes, the work of the traditional industrial proletariat of OECD countries to a considerable extent has been shifted to 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries, compare Cope (2015). This element of the globalisation process implied a severe split of the working class. It not only meant that overall representatives of workers do not exist, at best there are some local national leaders. It also implied that the commodities had to be sold to consumers in rich countries, buying with money they received from credits, increasing the debt levels of banks and governments. While wages and commodity prices were – and to some extent still are – the central variables for exploitation within a national economy, the new global setting has replaced them by exchange

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<sup>13</sup> The development of China had many similarities to the original Stalinist production system.

rates and debt levels<sup>14</sup>. The fragility of this global financial system popped up in 2001 as the so-called IT-crisis, and as a real disaster in 2008.

Despite the fact that the global working-class today is atomised as far as its class consciousness is concerned, it nevertheless is more tightly interwoven in the global production process itself than in any time in human history. The leap from a class in itself to a class for itself therefore has widened enormously.

#### 4. The Emergence of the Class of Organic Intellectuals

The local environments, the perceived worlds within which workers expend their labour time, remain alien to the quantitative amount of money they receive in return for their activity. If they compare their deal with what happens in distant environments they often simply cannot understand. If then the global financial coordination system gets a blow – the crisis of 2008 probably was just a prelude to the next, really heavy shock – it seems to be an unexplainable natural catastrophe, fate, bad luck.

Remembering that the last comparable financial crisis, the Great Depression of 1928, in the end was only overcome by the war expenses of Fascist regimes heading for WW2 should make us aware that the rise of extreme right-wing parties all over the world eventually is a messenger of a new kind of Fascism, a thunderstorm of a 3<sup>rd</sup> World War, which with less luck than with the previous one, mankind will not survive. Fascism builds on nationalism paired with a technologically amplified hatred (i.e. a blind feeling) on the bugaboo of an enemy. To fight it, the opposing attitudes and actions have to be launched: global humanism and scientific analysis of social contradictions.

To support a fascist regime is usually not the first choice of a capitalist class. But unfortunately, due to the destructive power of contemporary weapons, even seemingly small conflicts at the periphery involving a handful of “madmen in authority who hear voices in the air” (Keynes 1936, 241) are sufficient to cause a global disaster<sup>15</sup>. With fascism in state power the growth imperative of the capitalist algorithm assumes its ugliest face: military conquest and an internal police state. Compared to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, today’s “surveillance capitalism”<sup>16</sup> now possesses means to monitor the individual behaviour of citizens in real time. The problem of a centralised police state is not the availability of this enormous amount of data, the problem is how to select the relevant parts and pieces. To be able to do so, some kind of interpretation of observed messages is mandatory. This starts with the occurrence of certain words and contacts to seemingly suspicious persons. As in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it will end with a complete streamlining of communicated independent thought and the burning of (electronic) books. There is a global community which is the carrier of exactly this: the global community of scientists. It will be its vital interest to fight Fascism.

As a matter of fact, contemporary science to a large and increasing extent takes place electronically. Ideas are exchanged, laboratory experiments are performed, reported, simulated with the help of electronic devices. There now exists already a *global*

<sup>14</sup> Note that national government debt is just firm and household debt disguised by the promise of a capitalist nation state to be able to set the record straight by appropriate fiscal policy any time the creditors want it. Left wing actors in governments therefore are always a threat for these creditors, which explains debt problems of left-leaning governments.

<sup>15</sup> In 1936. Keynes was not aware that his prophetic words applied even better to the fascist leaders that are not even “distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back”. Fascism is free from any serious theoretical content below the surface of propaganda.

<sup>16</sup> The term was recently popularised by Shoshana Zuboff (2019).

*community of scientists* held together by the various objects of investigation studied and a shared devotion to reveal scientific truth. But note that the same *information infrastructure* that enables the jump in scientific collaboration has led to a jump in fragility and random outcomes of traditional democratic mechanisms. This is the result of the success of the first three stages of capitalism (merchant, industrial, and integrated capitalism), which have pushed the global division of labour to a level that in the era of global alienation now isolates individuals in perception bubbles with little chances to understand larger parts of their actual economic and political interdependence.

The most important big topics for them look like completely unpredictable white noise, like fate. They are the blank white sheet in front of which the stupid narratives of soap operas and outdated religious ghost stories entertain them. Sure enough, the global structure of production, in particular global value chains, has also left its trace in the structure of the global working class. Despite its common high level of alienation, the part of the proletariat working in third world countries deliver an overload of labour time with minimal room for their own education or political emancipation.

The part of the exploited living in OECD countries acts either as better educated worker or in the administration (including marketing and selling) of the global production process. This latter part is also needed to complete the circuit of exploitation, i.e. to buy the cheaply produced products at prices allowing high enough (always monetary) global profits. This is only possible due to the global system of credits and national government debts. Today's profit of the large and successful firms is made possible by allowing less wealthy, even poor citizens in the rich world to pay later<sup>17</sup>. In many OECD countries that have more developed tradition of the labour movement, this borrowed increase in consumption also acted as a tranquiliser with respect to more radical socialist aspirations: If capitalism manages to make you better off, why should you fight it? And if this experience prevails for decades, then the notion of exploitation vanishes in the minds of the population. Alienation then not only concerns alienated products and alienated, complicated production relationships, it in particular becomes a strangeness with respect to the own status of the now completely alienated individual human being. In such a situation mass psychology becomes very volatile<sup>18</sup>. Political moves of larger groups of such societies become as difficult to predict as the moves of an aggressive tiger.

On the other side of the globe, humans of the Global South live in poverty, in locally encapsulated regions where hard labour in low-paid manufacturing enclaves is organised. In such an environment, there is only little time and communicative space to develop islands of intellectual counterinsurgency. Aggression in such a depressing context sometimes turns to cultural implosion, to a return to outdated religious traditions. Again, this type of revolts is erratic, difficult to predict, and in its high aggressive potential also reminding on the just mentioned tiger.

The problem for a global class of organic intellectuals is that there is no way to ride these tigers with enlightenment arguments – as Marx had hoped to have found the most oppressed class, the proletariat, which only needed its class consciousness (provided by communist intellectuals) to become a class for itself. To some extent, the alienation process is irreversible, the enormously grown human society needs it, needs the division of labour (including the one between manual and intellectual labour) to reproduce itself. What is not needed is the omnipresence of the capitalist algorithm.

<sup>17</sup> The alternative to produce more commodities for the super-rich is limited by the tremendous shrinking of the members of this group.

<sup>18</sup> With reference to Sigmund Freud's insights, Adorno (1951) discusses how fascism is able to use this volatility.

Quite to the contrary, this virus of a fading away capitalist mode of production again and again jumps on the train of authoritarian, fascist movements supporting their war preparations (and wars) for profitable short-run investment. World War 3 is knocking at the doors of human history; there is no good reason why this history might not end with the capitalist mode of production – though certainly not in the paradise that the prophets of capitalism (as *nature's final goal*) had promised.

The global class of organic intellectuals, as a conscious part of the exploited people in the world, therefore needs an add-on to the self-imposed “enlightenment” – to its own knowledge acquisition – that enables it to interact with the poor South as well as with the hyper-alienated rich North. Today scientists and intellectuals are dispersed all over the world and serve very different class interests rooted in the wide variety of human cultures. Large parts of this group already strive for progress of humanity in a very general sense, to know induces to be left-leaning. But these are not a proper class yet. That they develop into the global class of organic intellectuals is still a desideratum. So far the original class background of the future members of this new class is less important, due to a worker's little time left to become an intellectual it is even more probable that a considerable part originally does not come from working class families. But as they become “organic” they transform themselves into a vital part of this newly emerging class, which then forms a tight coalition with the most exploited parts of the global working class<sup>19</sup>.

To be “organic” means to be closely connected to the poor South and the hyper-alienated rich North, while nevertheless to have some stand-alone capabilities. Connections as information flows come – actually are in principle already available – via the global information infrastructure. Connections in a more physical sense, i.e. connections as commodity and service flows, are still waiting to be designed – on a global level, of course. In other words, it is democracy itself that waits to be transformed from an antediluvian rule of majority voting to a pragmatic design of global reproduction of the species<sup>20</sup>. This would be the riding of the tiger.

## 5. Afterthoughts

For the just mentioned design political economy needs a substantial remake of what mainstream economic theory provides today. Most types of equilibrium assumptions make only sense if some extremely fast processes are included in models of extremely slow processes. For processes taking place in approximately the same range of speed, e.g. in political economy dynamics, there is no place for (general) equilibrium theories. They have to be replaced by formalisms that grasp dynamic instability, increasing disequilibria, structural instability and emergence and exit of relevant variables. For theoretical physics and biology some formalisations of this kind – often using algorithmic formalisms - already exist, the social sciences are lagging behind. Synthesis of the different sciences with respect to the formalisms used thus is getting even more important.

But not only formal techniques need an upgrade. Looking at the objects of investigation also reveals a necessary turn of attention. The spell of being concerned only

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<sup>19</sup> The global production structure today is organised mainly along global value chains (see Suwandi 2019). Therefore, the different strata of exploitation strength are geographically mirrored. This is an important source of information for the newly emerging class.

<sup>20</sup> To square the potential of the internet with the need to develop democracy also is in the focus of the work of Eugenia Siapera (2017).



with the economy within the borders of a nation state obscures most scholarly communication. This is evident in microeconomic theory that explicitly assumes away influences of a capitalist political entity called the state. In macroeconomic theory this state is added again, while the misspecifications of a representative household and a representative firm are dropped to make room for underspecified behavioural aggregates that shall substitute classes. But what remains almost completely out of sight is the level of the (really finite) world economy<sup>21</sup>. In times of global value chains and global finance, the largest scope, the *world economy*, has to be political economy's *first focus*. But since political economy needs at least two focuses to bring in additional dimensions (compare our eyes), there also has to be a complementary *second focus*. We need to give attention to the *diversity of perceived dynamics* of political economy in different locations in the world.

Producing an abstract global model (first focus), which aspires to grasp the essentials adequately, is not a matter of freewheeling theoretical invention. Its abstract assumptions have to be derived (in Marx' words produced as "Gedankenkonkretum", a "totality of thoughts" that is "concrete in thought", Marx 1857/58, 101) by finding shared elements in a great diversity of local observations. To perceive these local dynamics (second focus) – including the mental models of the local classes involved – is an indispensable precondition for useful abstractions of the first focus. Since the two eyes of the scientist are interdependent, how local dynamics are observed also is framed by the global view. A conscious and close interaction of the two perspectives, global and local, bridging generalisation and Schumpeterian diversity<sup>22</sup>, shall be a permanent aspiration.

Diversity is here to stay, though in ever-changing forms. This provides a possible answer to the question: What is so *socialist* about the global class of organic intellectuals, anyway? To start with, the currently observed result of several hundreds of years of capitalism is significant enough. The capitalist algorithm has produced an enormous split – a diversity – of wealth and income in the world<sup>23</sup>. At the same time, it has also led into a bewildering diversity of perceptions of what is going on. This is the experience of an age of alienation. The globally possible information overload in the communication sphere now mainly consists of advertisements and manipulative messages, which indeed mute any communication. In this way the capitalist mode of production has undermined the possibility of a democratic global political economy, it currently could tilt over to a reprise of autocratic authoritarian regimes fighting each other in a Third World War (compare Hanappi 2019a). Capitalism enters its self-destructing last stage.

The hope is that it can be decoupled from the fate of the human species. If the global class of organic intellectuals<sup>24</sup> can contribute to this decoupling, this is exactly

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<sup>21</sup> Open economy models of macroeconomics are an insufficient attempt to cope with this absence. They usually start with a two-country case and then eventually jump to the infinitely-many countries case – for technical convenience, of course. Needless to say that such models are rather inadequate for a treatment of the world economy, since they are based on a "representative" macroeconomic country model.

<sup>22</sup> Re-occurring diversity is as important as its counterforce of sudden singling out of temporary Schumpeterian heroes. This idea already has been the mantra of Darwin's evolutionary view in biology. This type of diversity is what here is called "Schumpeterian diversity". For a model of an "optimal" level of diversity (see Hanappi and Hanappi-Egger 2004).

<sup>23</sup> Note that these distributions are epiphenomena caused by exploitation.

<sup>24</sup> Being "organic" in this context means to be on the side of the human species, on the side of "living labour" instead of "dead labour", i.e. capital (the capitalist algorithm), as Marx once remarked: "Indem der Kapitalist Geld in Waren verwandelt, die als Stoffbildner eines

what can be called “socialist”. Of course, if the catastrophe can be prevented, then the diversity of the global population remains intact, organic intellectuals will be just one element of it. They will work on an elimination of the most painful type of diversity today, the one in living conditions around the globe, and at the same time they will try to spur the diversity of utilities which the locally dispersed communities are able to experience. In both respects, several *thresholds* will have to be respected:

(1) Mankind is also a system of biological entities. Thus, it needs a minimum of reproducible resources to survive, which limits its own reproductive activities. To care for sustainability in a world where also self-reproducing inputs (plants and animals) have rather finite growth rates, means to be restrained by a complicated network of checks and balances.

(2) As a species, mankind builds up neg-entropy. But it nevertheless is embedded in the long-run increase of entropy, i.e. it was born and will die. Birth and death reduce human individual experience to a much shorter period than the one of the species. As a consequence, the knowledge capacity of any human individual is much smaller than the knowledge capacity of the species. It is the diversity of finite knowledge capacity appearing in different communities (storing a medium-time experience), human individuals (storing a short-time experience), and human society’s knowledge (storing the long-time experience), which in its interwoven status restricts what each of these entities can communicate, what it can transmit to other entities. These limits of knowledge acquisition<sup>25</sup>, of learning and teaching, are not only dispersed along the dimension of time of experience, they are also dispersed with respect to geographic location.

(3) A third limit, which usually is ignored, concerns a property that in physics is known as inertia. For a social entity this property means that its inscribed procedures will be repeated unchanged if no stimulus is forcing a change. Such a stimulus can come from suddenly changing environmental conditions, or from internally built expectations, both reasons often being interconnected<sup>26</sup>.

For the global class of organic intellectuals, it is most important to *learn* from the just mentioned limitations<sup>27</sup>. From *limitation (1)* it becomes clear that the adjective “organic” also has to cover the fact that animals, plants, and non-living scarce resources have to be explicitly included in any design of a new mode of production. This was not the case when the outgoing capitalist algorithm emerged, which still reaches for the unbound growth of the capital stock. From *limitation (2)* a more modest, a more realistic

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neuen Produkts oder als Faktoren des Arbeitsprozesses dienen, indem er ihrer toten Gegenständlichkeit lebendige Arbeitskraft einverleibt, verwandelt er Wert, vergangne, vergegenständlichte, tote Arbeit in Kapital, sich selbst verwertenden Wert, ein beseeltes Ungeheuer, das zu ‚arbeiten‘ beginnt, als hätt' es Lieb' im Leibe” (Marx 1867b, 209). English translation: “By turning his money into commodities which serve as the building materials for a new product, and as factors in the labour process, by incorporating living labour into their lifeless objectivity, the capitalist simultaneously transforms value, i.e. past labour in its objectified and lifeless form, into capital, value which can perform its own valorization process, an animated monster which begins to ‘work’, ‘as if its body were by love possessed” (Marx 1867a, 302).

<sup>25</sup> The ability to *forget* the *correct* less important parts of knowledge *in time* never has to be forgot as a constitutive part of the learning process.

<sup>26</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the upheaval of the working class was stimulated by the *expectation* that the lives of workers will be condemned to misery forever if they would not start a communist revolution. On the other hand, reactions on an approaching climate catastrophe are fuelled by direct perceptions of sudden environmental changes as well as by expectations formulated by climate science.

<sup>27</sup> Compare the use of game theory for studying limits, as proposed by Herb Gintis (2014).

vision of enlightenment has to be derived. The idea that knowledge only flows top-down, from an intellectual elite to an unconscious mass of less educated individuals, this idea has to be rejected. In the end this idea has been at the core of the religions that dominated early stages of human evolution: an omniscient entity (God) is governing what human knowledge can achieve. Instead, the mentioned structural limitations show that knowledge flows in all directions: between communities (often dubbed “cultures”), within the members of communities and classes, between global knowledge and all other entities (often using the internet). The distinction between different channels, as already mentioned in the previous chapter, therefore becomes very important.

The preliminary character of all knowledge, of course, does not nullify the fact that there is a grading from less adequate to most adequate knowledge. The push towards upgrading on all levels and for all entities for the next mode of production via communication is the final step ending religions, substituting them by rules of commensurate behaviour. Nevertheless, also in this field some diversity will persist, Schumpeterian diversity. The lessons taken from *limitation (3)* are straightforward extensions from the previous points. Why should a social entity – a human individual, a community, a class, society as a whole – change its course of behaviour? The first, the most evident reason is that the dominant behaviour has changed its environment in a way that makes survival with the same behaviour impossible. Like an asteroid that is led by its physically determined trajectory into a planet: without consciousness a crash is inevitable. Inertia in a society does exist too.

The only remedy to prevent a crash in living systems is by *building expectations*, which in turn are built on *memories*. Memories can be grouped in two categories, good ones and bad ones<sup>28</sup>. When expectations for the future trespass a certain sensitivity border as compared to the current situation, then a social entity will surmount inertia. If something very bad pops up or if something particularly nice can be expected, then regular behaviour will be overridden by a new type of action. The lesson for the global class of organic intellectuals follows straight from this observation: The situation of the global working class exploited in third world countries (mainly in manufacturing) keeps it in a state of despair that continuously breeds radical hate and energy to change their fate. For them, fuelled by bad expectations based on bad memories, organic intellectuals have to provide designs of a future global mode of production that give them hope. This is complicated and includes strategies on how to get from here to there, but it is possible.

For the population in the richer part of the world, where the age of alienation has arrived at a fragile state of confusion, the immediate danger is a return of nationalism leading to fascism and as a consequence to global war. It has to be noted that nationalism also works with expectations, with the propagation of a seemingly extremely glorious future. It promises the re-birth and domination of a grand nation (“to make the nation great again”). The fight of organic intellectuals against fascism in the area of ideology therefore has to demolish this illusion scientifically and has to provide a vision of love and peace for all women and men as alternative. The latter is not a scientific project. It is an emotional message rooted in the acceptance of the preliminary character of scientific knowledge, in the acceptance of the sensual, of the aesthetic remains of human perception. It might be difficult to learn for intellectuals that influence on others, empathy with others, is also based on channels that are not using knowledge, but

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<sup>28</sup> Why and how these two types of memories are emerging goes far beyond the scope of this paper. It only has to be noted that the two categories always have to be linked to the consciousness of the respective social entity.

somehow accept its limited character. These channels are using beauty and lust – and as history teaches any social movement neglecting them is doomed to fail<sup>29</sup>. To ride the tiger of alienation in an age of alienation the class of organic intellectuals will have to develop its aesthetic attraction too!

These paragraphs are not a *closing* conclusion. They are an *open invitation* to develop further ideas on how to proceed. With each movement of the tiger below us our reactions must be rational and intuitive at the same time, such are the living conditions of the class of *organic* intellectuals.

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<sup>29</sup> As the cultural rebellion of the 60-ties shows, the reverse is not necessarily true – though it is still an open question if this rebellion failed in a long-run perspective.

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## About the Author

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Hardy Hanappi was born in Vienna (1951) and studied economics and Informatics. He became university professor and researcher at the University of Technology of Vienna and concentrated on macroeconomics, political economy, simulation methods, and game theory. He was deputy director of socioeconomics at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, and director of the Institute for Monetary Economics (Ludwig Boltzmann-Institute). From 2004 till 2016 he was Scientific Development Officer of the European Association for Evolutionary Political Economy. From 2011 to 2015 he was professorial research associate at SOAS (University of London). He currently is ad personam chair for Political Economy at the European Commission and director of the Vienna Institute for Political Economy Research (VIPER). For more details on his curriculum vitae see [http://www.econ.tuwien.ac.at/hanappi/cv\\_Hanappi.pdf](http://www.econ.tuwien.ac.at/hanappi/cv_Hanappi.pdf)

He has been project leader of numerous research projects and author of more than 200 publications (see <http://www.econ.tuwien.ac.at/hanappi/publications.html>). After his retirement from the TU Vienna in October 2017 he still is providing the annual lecture series in "Political Economy of Europe" and "Information Economics".

Besides global political economy his most recent research interest concerns the development of quantum political economy. He is married to professor Edeltraud Hanappi-Egger, has three children and lives in Vienna.

# YouTube as Praxis? On BreadTube and the Digital Propagation of Socialist Thought

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**Abstract:** In this paper we discuss the rise of BreadTube and what it means for the spread and normalization of socialist ideas online. We aim to focus on four major YouTube content creators – Contrapoints, Philosophy Tube, Shaun, and Hbomberguy – to outline how they construct their videos to entertain, inform, as well as debunk both alt-right and (economically) liberal talking points, helping to prevent potential radicalization of a mostly young audience who stand at a crossroads in their ideological development. Aside from examining the content of produces by the creators, we also hope to investigate the unique configuration of their platform use, emphasizing such elements as distributions, financing, and audience interaction.

**Keywords:** digital, BreadTube, Reddit, digital socialism, affective media, Patreon, YouTube

## 1. Introduction: Enter BreadTube

In January 2019, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez dropped by an event hosted by Harry Brewis ('Hbomberguy'), who raised money for a transgender charity by live-streaming the videogame Donkey Kong 64 for around 50 hours. In a show of international solidarity, Cortez's act was the first big intersection of BreadTube with "real-world" political figures, the first major instance of it being propelled outside the confines of its digital origins.

BreadTube (or 'YouTube but good' as referred to by its adherents) is a loose association of independent online videographers and their surrounding communities that makes up a leftist response to alt-right use of digital media. The moniker *Loose Association* implies a lack of central organisation, of a structure that determines their relationships. Instead, a shared ideology binds them together. Including such content creators as Contrapoints, Hbomberguy, and Philosophy Tube, BreadTube stretches beyond YouTube, with a presence on various social media platforms (e.g. Reddit, Something Awful), as well as its own websites (e.g. BreadTube.tv). These digital outposts serve as video aggregators, discussion spaces, and even platforms for social mobilization.

Borrowing its name from Kropotkin's anarchist classic *The Conquest of Bread*, BreadTubers and their viewers do not shy away from associations with leftist thought. BreadTube.tv claims that the goal is "to challenge the far-right content creators who have taken advantage of the profit-driven algorithms used by services like YouTube for the purpose of spreading hate" ("About · BreadTube" n.d.). They express a "wish to educate people on how their world operates, the alternative possible visions for our future, and how we organize ourselves to get there."

Our position is that BreadTube is a form of digital praxis promoting new types of digital engagement with leftist and socialist thought. While the impact of BreadTube within the political arena is yet to be seen, the increasing popularity of its content shows a growing public awareness of the lacunas of capitalism, as is evident from reports by more traditional media outlets (e.g. Jacobson 2019; *The Economist* 2019).

We start this article with a reflection on the role of communication technologies in contemporary class struggles. We argue that assemblages like BreadTube present a way of applying affective media that goes beyond creation of antagonists, or pure violent *jouissance* associated with libertarian uses of affective media (Jutel 2017). Second, we examine how these formations aid the spread of socialist ideas. We propose that BreadTube can fulfil the educational and agitprop purposes of media, assisting in a Brechtian reconfiguration of the people (Žižek 2018): the transformation of the inert mass of the working class into a politically engaged united force.

We then discuss the applicability of socialist literature to the BreadTube phenomenon. We draw on studies of earlier leftist online communities as well as contemporary leftist theoretical scholarship, positioning BreadTube at the intersection of these two themes. In section three we engage with BreadTube itself: both the content and the virtual community (Song 2009) surrounding it. Is it possible to conceptualize BreadTube as socialist? Or is it part of the nexus of communicative capitalism, offering the feeling of change without bringing about real transformation? If – as we argue – it is the former, what makes it informative and mobilising? What does this phenomenon mean for discussions of (digital) praxis? In the final section, we reflect on the future of BreadTube, by bringing up Marcuse’s work on the Tea Party (Marcuse 2010), while considering some of BreadTube’s present limitations.

## 2. Helping Others Remember to Dream

BreadTube does not have a central hierarchy. It is made up of loose linkages that congregate on different social media websites, with videos serving as focal nodes that anchor discussions of ideology and praxis. Our preliminary conceptualisation of BreadTube is to see it as a catalyst, an agent preparing and hastening up conditions for change, rather than the site in which said change occurs. Discussing the prospect of radical change today, Žižek (2018, 481) argues that revolutions come to those with patience. To quote:

Revolutionaries have to wait patiently for the (usually very brief) period of time when the system openly malfunctions or collapses, seize the window of opportunity, grab the power [...] so that, once the moment of confusion is over, the majority gets sober and is disappointed by the new regime, it is too late to get rid of it, and the revolutionaries have become firmly entrenched.

BreadTube serves to create the conditions necessary for socialism to become an acceptable reality. It helps disentangle the meaning of socialism from the capitalist smear campaign, re-articulates it in a positive light, resulting in a push towards a vision of a shared, achievable reality. It represents some of the “hard theoretical work” needed to break free from the ideological mask fixed upon the working class that makes its members turn again one another (blaming the immigrant, the feminist, etc.) (Žižek 2018).

BreadTube gently pushes its viewers to perceive the injustices thrust upon them by the capitalist system. BreadTube’s common tactic revolves around taking a right-wing talking point or “alternative fact” and subverting it. Critical analysis of such talking points

as climate change denial or the Great Replacement of Europe (i.e. the Muslim/refugee/migrant ‘invasion’) introduces the viewer to a gentler politics. It should be noted that unlike the cyberlibertarian formations investigated by Jutel (2017), where antagonization of political opponents takes centre stage, BreadTube content tends to focus on understanding, analysis, and suggestion of alternatives to the talking points presented. The discussion – be it about the men’s rights movements (Contrapoints 2019b), Flat Earthers (Hbomberguy 2018), or Unite The Right’s actions in Charlottesville (Shaun 2018) – stays clear of the trolling and vulgar jouissance that is characteristic of the alt-right (Jutel 2017). While also aiming to entertain, this more pensive, critical approach, while most certainly not inciting a swift socialist uprising, may lay the necessary groundwork.

It is hard to classify BreadTube videos as socialist per se, and a broader view of leftist thought is more appropriate. In his discussion of the continuing relevance of Marxism, Wright (2018) raises four “central propositions” that remain relevant today and constitute the basis of our discussion:

- Capitalism obstructs the realisation of conditions of human flourishing.
- Another world is possible.
- Capitalism’s dynamics are inherently contradictory.
- Emancipatory transformation requires popular mobilisation and struggle.

BreadTube – through both videos and discussions – directly engages with and contributes to this broad conceptualisation of the Marxist and socialist traditions. The first and third propositions show the need for BreadTube, as it helps pull back the veil of capitalism by defamiliarizing and deconstructing the status quo. As for the second and fourth proposition, BreadTube can advance a popular cultural style of the socialist movement without explicitly naming it as such. Wright (2018) reminds us that emancipatory transformation requires building institutions to embody relevant ideals, that transcending capitalism is not a manner of rupture, but of consciously building up a foundation of socialism inside of capitalism. Distorting the normalcy of our capitalist world order is one of the core tasks that BreadTube undertakes.

BreadTube, despite its anarchist-inspired name, is a comprehensive host of leftist worldviews and analyses. Some state that they are spreading leftist thoughts (e.g. BadMouse self-describes as creating “leftist propaganda” (BadMouse n.d.)). Others seek to obtain a wider audience, rarely directly mentioning socialism. As if in a conscious effort to avoid the negative association socialism has amongst those she wishes to engage, Contrapoints (Natalie Wynn) describes her videos as follows: “My political aim is to counterbalance the hatred toward progressive movements that is so common online. Stylistically, I try to appeal to a wide audience and avoid merely preaching to the choir.” Orientating the uncertain viewer towards a type of leftist, socialist thought without confronting them with affective signifiers that these terms accumulated in popular press is one of the great strengths of this community.

Invoking the Zapatista movement’s famous notion of “One No, many Yeses” (Wolfson 2014) BreadTube appears to embrace heterogeneity as long as all the noses are pointed in the direction of opposing the capitalist status quo. This, however, leads to a problem of the will of the people, the theorisation of which has been a contentious issue. In this instance, we borrow Dean’s (2012, 114) formulation of the will of the people as “as a divisive political subject that produces itself through its practices [whose] will precedes not only its knowledge of what is willed, but the people itself.” As Žižek (2018, 479) argues, today there is no “global cognitive mapping”, no collective will. BreadTube has the potential to structure the previously this will by shining light



upon the frustrations viewers might have with the capitalist system, inciting a yearning for the communist horizon.

Continuing this train of thought, Dyer-Witheford (2015, 10) notes that knowledge is the “main site for contesting capitalism”. For socialism to be successful, critique of ideology must become part of mainstream discourse (Fuchs and Monticelli 2018). It needs spokespersons and leaders, someone to decode academic debates and terminology, to sieve out the core message, to convey it to their audience in a clear and engaging manner. BreadTube fills an ideological void for people who may lack the means and methods to educate themselves. It is bite-sized and features well-produced video spectacles.

Fuchs (2018) notes that a Marxist theory of communication should analyse the structure of ideology through various channels. One must overcome “capitalism, class society, exploitation, and domination” (Fuchs 2018, 531). BreadTube can have an emancipative function of exposing the viewer to the previously unseen flaws of capitalism. This leads to a question of how BreadTube differs from earlier forms of leftist digital media.

Wolfson’s (2014) study of Indymedia can help us identify why earlier attempts at (digital) socialism failed. He argues that Indymedia organisers did not set clear goals, only asking themselves “What do we want to achieve?”. Without a strong aspiration it was difficult to organise and invoke societal change. This, in combination with a lack of clear leadership or organisational forms, led to the diminishing effectiveness of this media project. While BreadTube exhibits similar issues, the crucial differentiating factor is that this community is centred around individual content creators. While said creators have not yet exhibited interest in changing their platform from one of words into one of actions, they are engaged in a style of informational warfare with the modern right.

Dean (2012), discussing Occupy Wall Street, states that for communism to flourish we must not simply be together, but rather “stick together”, turning our collective desire into actual change. A desire that must be channelled into action by leaders (Žižek 2018) who can formulate strategies and educate. This desire can be misguided – as we in the past few years have seen this desire being harnessed by extremists to cast the blame upon the refugee, the immigrant, the other. Crucially, we must remember that “strategies don’t just happen” (Wright 2018, 499).

On social media, activism-related discussions are a frequent sight, urging people to go beyond the videos: “Watching YouTube videos never led me to praxis – reading theory did” (BobartTheCreator2 2019). BreadTube can thus be seen as a gateway to socialist thinking. It utilises the information infrastructure of capitalism to present the masses with visions and dreams of a better, fairer world: something that left has failed to accomplish up to this point (Dean 2012). Dean argues that we have unlearned how to dream of a better future, and it is up to communists to show why socialism is “the best alternative” to capitalism” (83). Some BreadTubers directly state that their reason for making videos is to counteract the growing influence of the alt-right on the internet (Contrapoints 2019a; Hawking 2019).

Having looked at a range of discussions and interpretations of Marxist thinking, it appears that BreadTube can perform a variety of essential functions, including promoting socialist ideals, educating the population, and sparking the dream of socialist transcendence. Moreover, it can serve to connect the work of theoreticians with practical mobilisation, preparing the discontented population by promoting the central propositions outlined by Wright (2018).

All this sounds good, but one wonders whether BreadTube has the capacity to formulate a collective will capable of affecting change. Its decentralised nature, the style

of content produced, the channels of its distribution and the format of its discussions can be seen as strengths or as weaknesses. We must more thoroughly investigate these constitutive elements.

### 3. Analysing BreadTube

YouTube is the root, the platform where videos get posted and disseminated by content creators. These videos are discussed in the comment section of the platform, but most of the discussion takes place on social media platforms such as Reddit or Internet forums like Something Awful. Reddit is a website that hosts a multitude of subreddits, each a community that regulates its content through voluntary moderation, with the admins proper only interfering in extreme cases (e.g. child pornography).

A viewer might become curious and follow the links provided in the video description or the comments. This would lead them towards the major BreadTube discussion spaces where, in an ideal case, they could be guided towards a gentler politics. Simply put, this is a two-layered “hijacking.” The first layer involves use of search algorithms by BreadTubers to disseminate their videos. The second layer – a kind of affective hijacking – revolves around using a variety of theatrical and didactical styles to convey leftist thought. The system is well summarised by Roose:

The core of BreadTube’s strategy is a kind of algorithmic hijacking. By talking about many of the same topics that far-right creators do – and, in some cases, by responding directly to their videos – left-wing YouTubers are able to get their videos recommended to the same audience (Roose 2019)

#### 3.1. BreadTube’s Logistics and Funding

The platform dependent nature of BreadTube requires us to consider its position at the intersection of communicative capitalism and affective media. Does it have emancipative potential or is it a form of affective media labour, with capital “contradicting the productivity of biopolitical labour and obstructing the creation of value” (Hardt and Negri, 2009, 144)? Through affective media we are made to think of ourselves as parts of a bigger narrative, apparently fighting capitalism online, while in fact contributing to its continued existence.

Most major BreadTubers use YouTube to spread their ideas. Some of them acknowledge Google’s role in the propagation of hate but are in the end reliant on it. As a small sign of resistance, some BreadTubers use Patreon (a crowdfunding platform) to make a living, with some opting out of monetising their videos (i.e. turning off advertising). Patreon serves to democratise socialist knowledge. BreadTubers’ videos are free to watch and discuss online. Those able and willing to fund the production are invited to make direct contributions.

Democratisation of knowledge is explicitly mentioned by Philosophy Tube, who after austerity in the UK education system “decided to give away [his] MA in Philosophy free to people who don’t have the opportunities for learning [he has] had” (Philosophy Tube n.d.). He wants to “get people in a position where they can take cutting edge academia and apply it to the real world” (n.d.). The image of leaving the ivory tower to is a common theme within the BreadTube community.

To sum up, the work of BreadTubers is a reconfiguration of socialist promoted via capitalist information structures with the goal undermining them. These videos serve as discussion nexuses, forming communities of practice. Ideally, the more well-versed can guide those who, after having seen a video, are looking for more answers. An example of this is shown below:

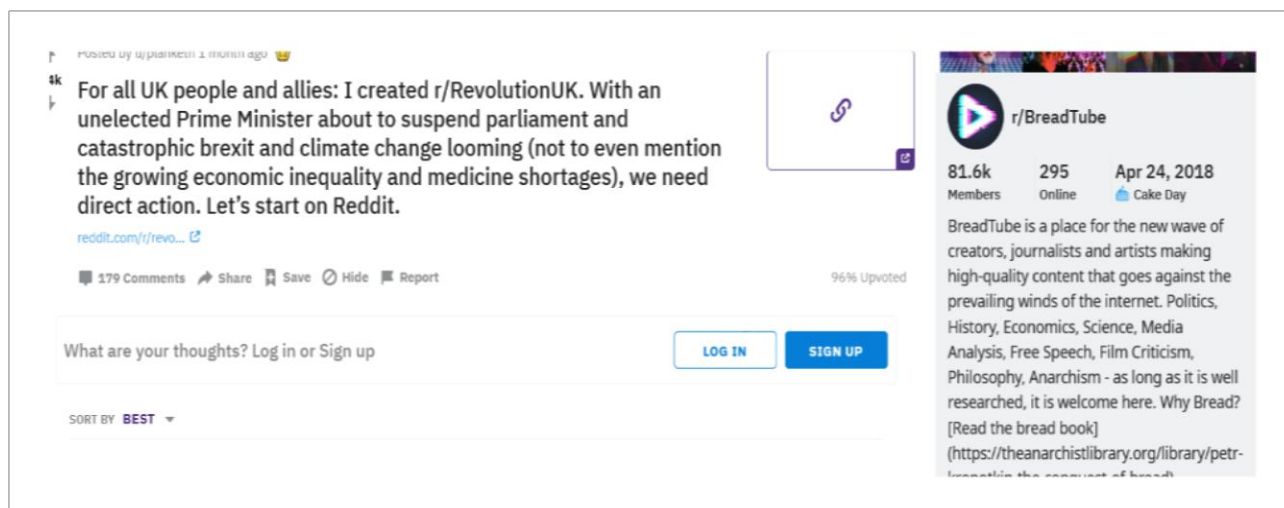


Figure 1: Revolution UK subreddit announcement

These videos appear to have a ripple effect. The Revolution UK community features many links to protests, mixed with questions from people frustrated with the status quo. For example, one commenter says they are “[t]ired of the left being purely reactionary but feel powerless to actually help in any capacity” (Azulmono55 2019).

Earlier we presented BreadTube as a catalyst or gateway towards socialist thought. As shown, the various pathways that lead from BreadTube videos can put a viewer on the road towards discussions, consideration, and acceptance of leftist thought.

### 3.2. The Content

One of the difficulties in defining BreadTube is its inclusiveness. There is no arbiter, nor any clear notion of what a ‘BreadTube video’ is. Rather, it is through consensus that work gets incorporated into the canon. This happens through discussions on forums, voting on Reddit or simple agreement between users. In this article we focus on the four largest YouTube channels whose videos are frequently discussed in the BreadTube communities. These are Shaun, Hbomberguy, Contrapoints, and Philosophy Tube. Their content can be generalised into two categories: the response video and the explanatory video.

In the first type, a (right-wing) talking point is explained, analysed, and debunked. For example, Hbomberguy in the ‘*A Measured Response*’ series tackles climate change denial propagated by popular right wing YouTube channels. Similarly, Shaun in ‘*A Response To...*’ directly engages with other YouTube channels, discussing topics such as why ‘*European History Is Not White History*’, ‘*Feminism, Why You Need It*’, or ‘*What Is White Supremacy*’. Shaun also has a video series on how ‘*PragerU Lies to You*’. PragerU is a right-wing propaganda outlet, “one of the most effective conversion tools for young conservatives” (Nguyen, 2018). These response videos use popular (right-wing) talking points to anchor discussions surrounding issues such as feminism, right-wing outrage, socialist alternatives, the manufacturing of ‘cultural Marxism’, and so on.

The second category – the explanatory video – has a more general aim: rather than focusing on a particular point, these videos introduce and analyse a larger theme. The work of Contrapoints and Philosophy Tube exemplify this approach. The former covers topics such as ‘*Incels*’, ‘*The West*’, ‘*What’s Wrong With Capitalism*’, ‘*The Apocalypse*’,

and *'Beauty'*, and the latter delves into the subjects of *'Reform or Revolution'*, *'Witchcraft, Gender, & Marxism'*, and *'Elon Musk'*.

We have selected three recent videos about the climate disaster to serve as examples (Table 1). As Shaun does not have a video on this topic, we did not include him.

Channel:	Contrapoints	Hbomberguy	Philosophy Tube
Video title	<a href="#">The Apocalypse</a>	<a href="#">Climate Denial: A measured Response</a>	<a href="#">Climate Grief</a>
Date	December 2 <sup>nd</sup> 2018	May 31 <sup>st</sup> 2019	August 22 <sup>nd</sup> 2019
Length	24:43	41:19	29:30
Views (on 3 October 2019)	867,463	1,295,413	438,922

Table 1: Basic YouTube video information

While this is but a small sample of the BreadTube universe, we believe these videos are good demonstrations of how leftist (socialist, progressive) thought is embedded in video content, how it is relayed to the viewer.

### 3.2.1. Philosophy Tube: Climate Grief

In *Climate Grief*, Philosophy Tube discusses the climate disaster in its totality. In his productions, he speaks directly to the viewer in the guise of different personas. In this case, the central character is a kind of futuristic priest delivering a eulogy at the “funeral for planet earth.” Another recurring character is the “travelling salesman,” a caricature of a (neo)liberal who proclaims himself to be moral, preaching ‘responsibility’ and ‘rational debate’ while seeking faults in others. Central to the video is the argument that climate change is not one problem, but a composite of many problems. Borrowing a term from philosopher Timothy Murton, he refers to the climate disaster a hyper object.

Philosophy Tube makes frequent use of a variety of literature to support his arguments. Another example is the use of Terry Eagleton’s *Why Marx Was Right* (Eagleton 2011) to argue that the acknowledgement of the world as tragic fuels fascism, “persuasive to so many liberals because it acknowledges that many things just suck.”

Philosophy Tube criticises both right wing climate change denial and left-wing techno fetishists that believe in technological solutions (citing Bastani’s book *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* (2019)), arguing that there is more than one way to deny climate change. He asserts that the tragedy of the current situation is our sense of powerless, the belief that those at fault might never reap what they sow. He does offer hope, however, arguing that smaller and within-reach acts of unionisation, empathic politics, listening to indigenous people and their philosophies are all part of understanding and dealing with the climate disaster. He concludes by stating that:

[R]ather than not thinking about it, or hoping for a perfect technological solution seriously considering the world might end with climate change might be a chance to ask: what were the good bits? Apocalypse doesn’t actually mean the end of the world, it’s a Greek word that means the revealing of knowledge.

Philosophy Tube poses questions and dilemmas while supplying answers and workable solutions: listen to indigenous philosophies, recognise that you have more allies than you think, that we are not alone in our individual struggles but are part of a

greater whole (a covert case of class analysis if there ever was one). Climate change is a host of issues rather than one isolated struggle. We need to think about how we want the world to look after the apocalypse.

### 3.2.2. Contrapoints: The Apocalypse

Contrapoints' *The Apocalypse* – like many of her other works – employs a discursive-dialectical technique. The video features a scientist that tries to convince a decadent denier (lying in a bath) of two things: that climate change is real, and that the world needs to be saved. The video involves the scientist explaining things to the denier (or the audience) after which they shortly discuss the content, with the denier occasionally interrupting the video. The explanatory parts are factual, discussing the consequences of climate change, as well as the lobbying efforts to deny, delegitimise and suppress climate change policies. The strength and impact of Contrapoints' content lies in the discussion elements.

The conservative climate change denier begins on the premise that the scientist seeks only to “shove the liberal agenda down [their] throat”. But the latter retorts through engagement with the denier's own rhetoric, asking if she wants more refugees (“no!”), then arguing that climate change policies need to be implemented to avoid that (“no!”), or otherwise more refuges will come (“no!”). Contrapoints does her best to preempt arguments from those on the opposite end of the political spectrum, and this allows her productions to go beyond antagonism by showing an understanding of the other side.

Contrapoints provides guidance, emphasising practical individual and group involvement: we need to push for rapid political change, go on strikes, vote, demand action. She states that capitalism cannot provide a solution to climate change due to its propensity for short term thinking, which is incompatible with the long-term orientation of climate change. The video ends humorously with the acknowledgment that the conservative needs an antagonist, which echoes earlier findings on cyber-libertarians and affective media (Jutel 2017): “how am I supposed to care about rising sea levels? There are Muslims and Mexicans – there could be Muslim Mexicans for all I know”. Ending on a joke, the scientist conjures up an opposition figure for the denier. The Dark Mother – the Sea – who threatens to consume the planet.

### 3.2.3. Hbomberguy: Climate Denial

In contrast to the other two channels, Hbomberguy plays himself talking straight to the camera, occasionally cutting to relevant footage or comedic sketches. He admits he is not an expert – he was originally a videogame YouTuber – and relies less on academic writing, speaking more from his own experiences. Unlike the previous examples, he directly attacks some talking points explicitly highlighting their wrongness rather than leaving the moment of realisation with the viewer. The video employs a personable approach with Hbomberguy wondering how climate change deniers are able to persist despite the obvious flaw in their arguments, debunked with a few seconds googling. The video first discusses why the “science” of climate change denial is based on lies. It then outlines how denialism works by pointing out stakeholders (e.g. oil companies) with vested interests.

Discussing popular right-wing figures such as Stephen Crowder and Patrick Moore, Hbomberguy explains to the viewer how they manipulate those on the fence (the conservative audience), how they make the audience feel good about themselves by asserting their viewpoint as the right one. Hbomberguy notes: “The product [Stephen Crowder] is selling is ideology.” The main point of the video is not about climate change

but the mechanisms of this ideology, how its rhetoric is sold to the people, how a veil of ignorance and denial gets woven and placed over their minds. Hbomberguy reveals the inherent contradictions of right-wing discourse that claims to stand for reason and facts, to be pro-science. Joking that “climate change isn’t your fault, it’s the Koch’s brothers’ fault,” he argues that the most effective strategy is to agitate for political change. The video ends in a hopeful manner, stating that if even someone like him can realise that these people are just being paid to make him feel good, then perhaps all of us can pierce the veil.

### 3.2.4. Synthesis

The videos discussed lay bare the inherent contradictions of the right-wing stereotype: logical, science-adhering sceptics who prefer reason to feelings. What sets these channels apart from the more radical BreadTube adherents is their neutral appearance, which allows them to attract a wider viewership and to attain relevance beyond a leftist or socialist echo chamber.

Often there are no winners in these videos. Rather, they assert that deciding on the truth of the matter is left to the viewers. Philosophy Tube, Contrapoints, and Hbomberguy tell their audiences to look at the sources themselves, to witness the debate at hand, to establish their own viewpoint. This stands in contrast to the contentious politics of the likes of Ben Shapiro or Jordan Peterson, who popularised themselves on the wave of the ongoing populist right-wing resurgence. They rely on the creation of antagonists as acknowledged in Contrapoints’ video, positioning their ideological opponents as sources of all that is wrong with the world.

On BreadTube, antagonization does not take centre stage. There is a level of honest engagement with opposing arguments. Unlike cyberlibertarian forms of affective media that prioritise *jouissance* (Jutel 2014) over other themes, there are no real gotcha moments, no one-liners. The intent is not to create enemies (a constructed other) but to examine, deconstruct and critique the points brought up. This might be due to the independence of these creators and the democratisation of their videos through voluntary donations. Unlike many of their counterparts, BreadTube content creators by and large do not have a product or point of view to sell. They are therefore freer to discuss any topic in any way they wish<sup>1</sup>.

Channels such as Philosophy Tube or Hbomberguy take a more liberal approach with their format, structuring their work like mini-documentaries or television series. But what is consistent across these content creators’ videos is production value. Their videos have been professionalised as the popularity (and income) of the channels increases. We view this as a positive evolution. Videos like these serve to introduce a new generation to ideas and viewpoints which they otherwise may not have encountered.

### 3.3. The Community

The largest discussion site for BreadTube is Reddit, a social media platform that is infamous for being extremely *laissez faire* in its content moderation. Reddit hosts a number of fascist, extreme right, nationalist forums that spread hate and discontent on the Internet. Analysing the website, Massanari (2017) argues that its design implicitly promotes a techno-culture that encourages toxic behaviour.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the earlier mentioned right-wing users Ben Shapiro and Stephen Crowder both push a range of products in their videos ranging from “brain power enhancing pills” to general merchandising.

There is friction between acknowledgement of these platforms (e.g. YouTube, Reddit) as tools of (capitalist) oppression, and relying on them for the means and methods to spread and discuss leftist ideas. This leads to some interesting parallels with the real world. The subreddit for the popular leftist/anarchist podcast *ChapoTrapHouse* recently got “quarantined” due to repeated calls for violence. This means that it does not receive any advertising and is delisted from the main site. This development was received as good news by many, considered to be a form of “digital squatting” (Iarrikin99 2019).

A socialist worldview ties together networks such as *ChapoTrapHouse* and *BreadTube*. Due to their sparseness, there are difficulties in making decisions across networks, or even within one. Organisational power is something that we should not expect from *BreadTube*. Rather, *BreadTube* is more a gateway to further activism, a tool for the untangling of our ideological shackles. It is a catalyst that speeds up the development of favourable conditions under which things can progress and change. Figure 2 is a network graph that shows in which other communities users from the *BreadTube* subreddit are active. We used data from August until September 2018.

We can see a leftist Reddit network with sub-communities such as Anarchism, Communism, and Anti-Capitalism. There are links to communities dedicated to educating the people (Socialism101, debatesocialism, LateStageCapitalism) but also subreddits focused on organising action.

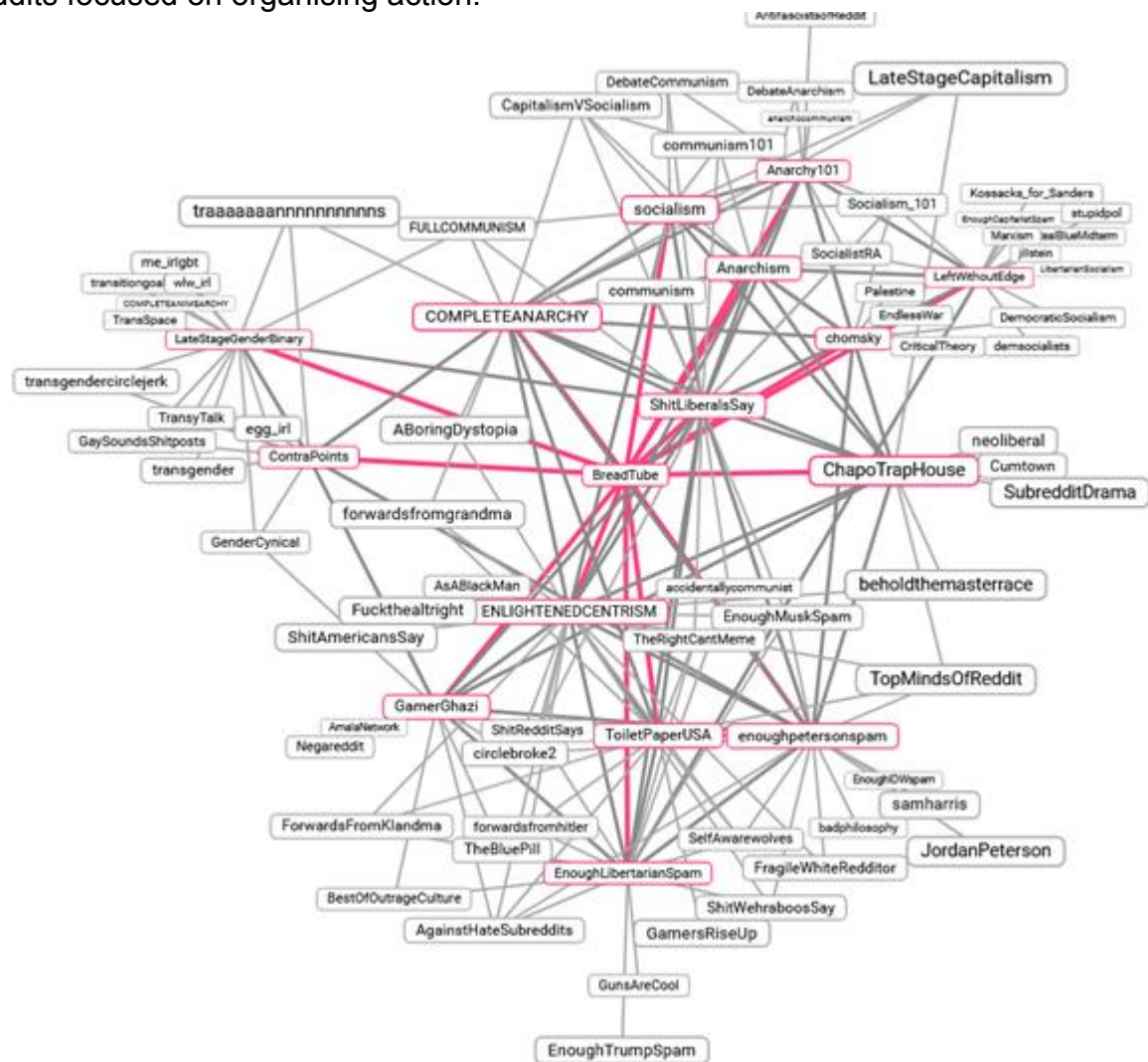


Figure 2: Networks of commenters who post in BreadTube and other Subreddit Communities

Below is an example from a post on LateStageCapitalism discussing climate change activism.



Figure 3: Climate change activism on the LateStageCapitalism subreddit

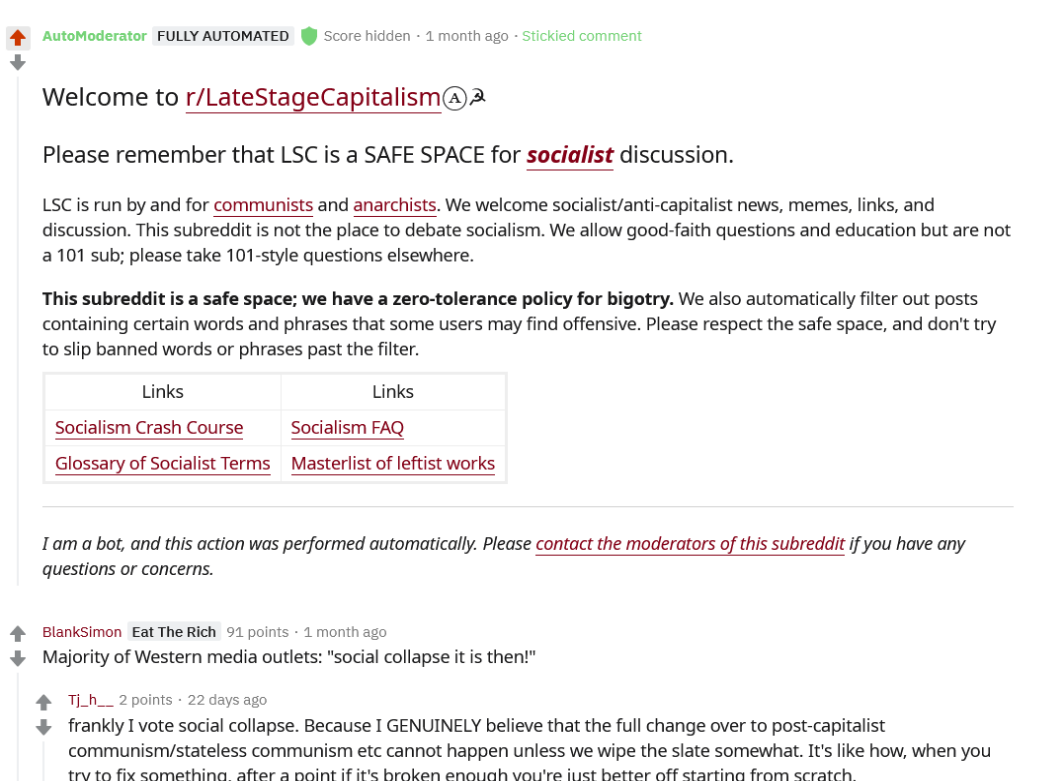


Figure 4: Introduction text on every comment thread on the LateStageCapitalism subreddit



Several of these communities have a strong didactic element where people ask questions and get answers from those more versed in leftist thought. A common sight on many leftist subreddits are recommended book lists, some even hosting recurring book clubs. There is a grassroots element with users educating themselves, often drawing directly from the classical works of socialism.

BreadTube is a general catch-all leftist subreddit meaning that its content is not that radical. It has an pedagogical function, guiding users to ways to educate themselves through readings, videos, and other types of media.

Figure 4 shows that BreadTube is not an isolated instance but a central node of the left-leaning Reddit sphere. It belongs to a constellation of leftist communities, constituting a starting point of a journey towards leftist thought, towards deconstruction of the (ideological) bias against socialism that has accumulated due to decades of propaganda, with Trump and Johnson being the most recent and vocal examples (Cammaerts et al. 2016) of socialism's vilification. On 24 September 2019, Donald Trump vowed in his United Nations speech to "never let America become a socialist or communist country" (Schwartz 2019). On 2 October 2019, UK Prime Minister Johnson called for "raising the productivity of the whole of the UK, not with socialism [...] but by creating the economic platform for dynamic free-market capitalism" (Mason 2019). An important question remains: How can socialism best be understood today?

#### 4. Discussion: Everyday Critical Theory

Grassroots localised socialist revival is growing on certain Internet spaces. While many caveats exist, there is hope for social change and public mobilisation. BreadTube signifies a return to a classic, democratised socialist mass education programme. However, there is a risk of BreadTube becoming subsumed under neoliberalism and individualism if socialism is seen and practiced as fashion rather than a political and social need.

There is also the threat of techno-fetishism, that BreadTube might fuel the assumption that open source software and knowledge constitutes socialist praxis or is socialism. Jutel (2017) points out the dangers of such techno-fetishism, that it can lead us to believe we are acting politically by clicking, making us feel good and righteous while playing into the hands of a capitalist society. The collective potential of this community is yet to be revealed, as it has mainly operated within the boundaries of the platform(s). A further question is whether there is any potential for transcending the common forms of political participation and change, as the democratic exercise of voting is a questionable method of pushing for real change. However, faith in the democratic process remains, exemplified by calls for people to vote Trump out of the office (Contrapoints 2018).

Use of social media for political education and mobilisation occurs not only in leftist movements, but also among the alt-right who rely on affective media and video production to radicalise youths. This behaviour has had a substantial yet sombre impact on the real world, exemplified by the Christchurch shooting and the Charlottesville massacre. These and other examples show the negative potential that is inherent to social platforms and media content-based mobilisation.

Another concern is whether and how BreadTube can engage those on the opposite side of political debates. Recent media coverage (see Fleishman 2019) has highlighted that BreadTube can de-radicalise the radical right (Fleishman 2019). Commenting on her videos covering alt-right talking points, Contrapoints said: "Deradicalizing is part of my work, maybe even the most important thing I've done" (Contrapoints 2019a).

BreadTube does not exist in isolation. It is part of a larger movement against right wing and populist thought that have dominated the media landscape over the past few years. In 2010 Peter Marcuse wrote an article analysing the Tea Party movement. Why did it suddenly explode in popularity and what can we do to counteract it? Written before the rise of the alt-right, Marcuse conceptualises the Tea Party as “repression from below, not from above” (2010, 356). He argues that there is a need for critical theory in everyday life – a critical theory from below – to steer individuals’ frustrations with the system towards proper causes and solutions. His categorisation of resistance as individual or collective, comprehensive or partial, serves to emphasise the need for BreadTube, as it allows for bottom up critical engagement to be embedded in everyday life. The “extreme displacement,” as Marcuse calls it, felt by many due to the havocs of capitalism can be channelled towards a progressive form of resistance rather than being co-opted by the alt-right.

It remains to be seen in what ways the BreadTube content creators are able (or willing) to transform themselves into more overt political actors. It is unclear if this is something we should ask of them, as their role might be to act as guides, starting points for education and mobilisation.

However, what remains certain is that like Lenin standing on the train and speaking to workers more than a hundred years ago, BreadTube is a socialist movement. Technological progress has given us tools that allow for the advancement of socialism. BreadTube subverts techno-capitalism and hijacks YouTube’s algorithms in order to spread leftist thought. Rather than being stuck on rails, Lenin’s train now takes the form of smartphones and online videos, allowing emancipatory politics to integrate seamlessly into everyday life.

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## Brazilian *Blogosfera Progressista*: Digital Vanguard in Dark Times

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**Abstract:** This article explores the Brazilian *Blogosfera Progressista* (Progressive Blogosphere, hereafter BP), a leftist political communication initiative aiming to conciliate an institutionalized model of organization with a networked model of action. Despite the disparity of resources existing between them, BP proved able to counter effectively the mainstream media's political framings, thanks to wise networking strategies, which explored the communicative opportunities offered by social media. The *Centro de Estudos de Mídia Alternativa Barão de Itararé* – Barão de Itararé Alternative Media Studies Center – is an essential piece in this schema, as it works as a coordinating agency for BP members and trains new participants. Our article intends to discuss this and other characteristics of BP as a group, and the challenges it faces at the present, after the rise of Jair Bolsonaro to Brazil's presidency.

**Keywords:** Blogosfera Progressista, counter-hegemonic media, activism, Brazil, Vanguard, networked organization

### 1. Introduction

In June 2013, massive demonstrations – known as the *Jornadas de Junho* (June Journeys) – took place in several cities in Brazil. The immediate factor triggering protests in the city of São Paulo was the rise of the bus fares, from 3,00 to 3,20 *reais*. Other demonstrations followed and, soon, they “were not only about the 20 centavos”; they also demanded better social services (as health and education), complained against the realization of the FIFA World Cup in 2014, and the Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games, in 2016, and denounced government corruption, among numerous other topics. They were hailed as a vibrant example of a new model of politics, one allowing the crowds to demonstrate (and even impose) their will to the political elites. Scholars soon identified parallels between these demonstrations and others occurring around the world, as the Occupy movement in the United States and Europe, the Indignados movement in Spain, the Arab Spring, among many others (Castells 2012). These movements were presented as a radically new type of political mobilization, capable of uniting different political agendas, a model that Bennett and Segerberg (2013) named “connective action”, which was made possible by the emergence of social media.

In retrospect, it seems clear that the *Jornadas de Junho* backfired. When the demonstrations began, the Brazilian presidency was already in the hands of PT (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, or Workers' Party) for ten years. During this period, consistent social

policies led millions of people to ascent from poverty to a middle-class status, numerous public universities were created, and affirmative policies allowed for the first time a massive number of non-white people to have access to them. Additionally, the economy looked solid, and Brazil enjoyed a considerable prestige in the international arena. President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva ended his two-terms period (2003-2006 and 2007-2010) with a record high popularity, and just before *Jornadas de Junho*, his successor Dilma Rousseff was very popular too (Ballestrin 2019; Singer 2019). Ironically, most leaders of the first demonstration were members of PT, aiming to push the party more to the left. However, as they disdained the very idea of a political vanguard, they were incapable to coordinate actions in order to obtain practical results from the protests. Even worse, right-wing militants infiltrated the manifestations and, little by little, proved able to hijack their agenda, by changing the focus to corruption, and then to PT's corruption.

Additional manifestations occurred in 2014 – this time against the FIFA World Cup – and contributed to weaken PT and president Rousseff, who, despite this, managed to be re-elected. Protests asking Rousseff to be impeached began just after she was sworn in, in January 2015 – this time carried out by right wing groups and supported by the mainstream media, with basis on the allegation that PT was a “criminal organization”. Under a strong attack both from the Judiciary – the *Lava Jato Operation*, led by Judge Sergio Moro, turned from a general anti-corruption crusade into an anti-PT movement – and the mainstream press, Rousseff was impeached in 2016, in a parliamentary coup. In 2018, Lula was arrested after a Kafkaesque judicial process, and prevented in disputing the presidential elections. Jair Bolsonaro, a far-right politician, won the elections and invited Moro to be his Minister of Justice (Feres Junior and Gagliardi 2019). In a short term, neoliberal policies reverted the previous social conquests, political repression peaked, the universities went under attack. Interestingly, the bus fare in São Paulo is now 4,30 reais.

The disdain regarding the importance of the political vanguards proved to be a core fragility for the *Jornadas de Junho* movement. Yet, despite the massive attention it received, this is not the only existing model that explores the potentialities of digital media for political mobilization. This article explores one of these alternatives: The Brazilian *Blogosfera Progressista* (Progressive Blogosphere, hereafter BP) a leftist political communication initiative aiming to conciliate an institutionalised model of organisation with a networked model of action. Despite the disparity of resources existing between them, BP proved able to counter effectively the mainstream media's political framings, thanks to wise networking strategies, which explored the communicative opportunities offered by social media. The *Centro de Estudos de Mídia Alternativa Barão de Itararé* – Barão de Itararé Alternative Media Studies Center – is an essential piece in this schema, as it works as a coordinating agency for BP members and trains new participants. Contrary to that suggested by Bennett, Segerberg and Castells, we contend that there is still room for collective models of activism and old principles characteristic from socialist activism – as the vanguard model of organization – remain valid nowadays, in a growingly digital environment.

The article is organized as follows. It starts with the origins of BP in light of two historical antecedents: 1) the influential role that communist professionals exerted in the process of modernization of the Brazilian journalism, in the 1950-70s; 2) the tradition of independent journalism, which developed in Brazil during the military dictatorship era, in the 1960-70s. The third section discusses the organisational characteristics of BP. It proposes a typology of its members, describes its networking structure and the vanguard role that Barão de Itararé Center performs on it. The fourth section

focuses on BP modus operandi and its impact as a counter-hegemonic media. The fifth and sixth sections discuss, respectively, the challenges faced by BP after the 2016 coup, and the surprising opportunities that the chaotic Bolsonaro government present to the rebuilding of the Brazilian left. The final section looks for general lessons from the BP. It is argued that the logic of collective action remains as necessary as ever for social movements, and that models of organization originated from socialism – as the organizing role of political vanguards – are still necessary in order to allow them to establish and pursue coherent strategies and courses of action.

## 2. Historical Context

The origins of BP in Brazil can be traced to 2006, when political activists and journalists joined efforts in search of a counter-hegemonic alternative to the conservative mainstream media, one of the most concentrated in the world (Moreira 2016). After the return of democracy, in 1985, Brazilian mainstream media claimed to exert a quasi-official branch of the government, whose attributions included to act as a moderating power with respect to the three official branches of government, intervening in political issues “for the sake of democracy” (Albuquerque 2005; Guimarães and Amaral 1988). Concretely, this implied in systematically taking sides against the political left in general and PT in particular (Azevedo 2017; Feres Junior and Gagliardi 2019), as well as, championing neoliberal policies as corresponding to the “national interest”.

After Lula was sworn in as Brazil’s president, in 2003, the mainstream media lost much of their ability to influence the government’s political agenda, but still remained very powerful. In the following years, they used this power as a means to destabilize Lula and PT, by associating them to negative values as populism, corruption, and authoritarianism (Albuquerque 2019), but this was not enough to avoid Lula’s reelection in 2006, and from making Dilma Rousseff his successor in 2010 – she was also reelected in 2014. As this happened, they engaged in a campaign aiming to defeat PT by any means (Damgaard 2018; Feres Junior and Sassara 2018). This finally worked, as President Rousseff was deposed in 2016, and Lula was put in jail in 2018 – in both cases after very controversial political and judicial processes.

It was against this backdrop that BP emerged as a counter-hegemonic medium. Still, other factors must be taken in account to understand BP’s development in Brazil. A first aspect that influenced the progressive blogosphere in Brazil refers to particular characteristics of the development of Brazilian journalism and how it impacted on the journalists’ professional culture. Two elements may be emphasized here: 1) the considerable influence that communists exerted in the Brazilian journalistic culture, in the decades following the end of World War II; 2) the rise of an independent journalism movement in the 1960-70s.

In the 1950-70s, there were many communists in Brazilian newspapers – even in conservative ones – some of them in editorial positions. The owners of these newspapers were aware of the presence of communists, but they did not matter – *O Globo*’s owner, Roberto Marinho used to refer to them as “my communists” (Albuquerque and Roxo da Silva 2009). This happened for different reasons. First, most Brazilian communists had a middle-class background, rather than a working-class one, and communism had a considerable appeal for a large part of Brazilian intelligentsia. This made them particularly attractive in a time when journalism experienced a modernisation process and needed a skilled workforce. Additionally, the Leninist views about the importance of the newspapers as an instrument for political organization contributed to make journalism more attractive for Brazilian communists (Serra

2007). Yet, the presence of communists in the newsrooms has come with a price: They were expected to not engage in subversive activities and be acquiescent to the newspapers' editorial lines. In fact, the newspapers' owners considered them as being a particularly disciplined group of journalists. In exchange, they enjoyed some autonomy in everyday routines in the newsroom, which allowed them to hire fellow communists. Paradoxically, the Communist Party's structure worked as a factor reinforcing the discipline in the newsrooms. This non-orthodox pact made sense because Brazilian communists had a reformist, rather than revolutionary approach to politics, and were disposed to make alliances with sectors of the bourgeoisie (Albuquerque and Roxo da Silva 2009).

This arrangement endured until the end of the 1970s. At that time, in a context of growing competition, newspapers looked for a more professional management system, in which the communists were not necessary anymore (Albuquerque and Roxo da Silva 2009). Added to this, the Communist Party was not as influential as before, as the Workers' Party (PT) emerged as a political force disputing its hegemony in the Brazilian left. Different from the communists, *petista* journalists viewed the newspapers' owners as adversaries, as they imposed an "economic censorship" that prevented them to make "real journalism" (Smith 1997). The journalists' unions became particularly active in voicing an anti-capitalistic view of journalism, by demanding social control of the news (Roxo 2013).

A parallel development refers to the rise of a model of independent journalism in Brazil in the 1960s and 1970s (Kucinski 1991). At that time, Brazil experienced a brutal military dictatorship, which systematically repressed the freedom of expression and brutalised journalists (Kushnir 2004; Smith 1997). However, this did not prevent the mainstream media outlets to unambiguously support and being generously rewarded for this (Guimarães and Amaral 1988; Kushnir 2004). In such circumstances, many journalists came to believe that the only possible manner to exert their profession was outside the mainstream media, as independent journalists. Numerous independent outlets were created, but most of them were short-lived, as they fell victim to political repression and economic difficulties (Kucinski 1991). However, the independent journalism ideal remained influential in Brazilian journalism's culture, and together with the anti-capitalism agenda, it served as an inspiring source to the BP.

A second factor that influenced the progressive blogosphere in Brazil has to do with political changes associated with the rise of the political left to the presidency, not only in Brazil but also in other South American countries, such as Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Despite being very different in their political styles – some more populists, others more institutionalised; some closer to socialism and others to social democracy (Cameron 2009; Castañeda 2006; Lupien 2013) – those countries proved able to forge a regional alliance and a common Latin American identity. The Latin American elites reacted to it, by presenting leftist governments as putting democracy in jeopardy, sometimes picturing them as a part of a broader "Bolivariana" or "Chavista" conspiracy. Accordingly, they claimed for themselves the performance of the role of the political opposition that political parties were not able to exert (Farah 2010). As the political engagement of Brazilian media became more and more explicit, professional journalists felt compelled to take side against them and, in order to do this, they joined political activists to form BP.

The third and last prerequisite of BP is technological in nature: The new wave of independent journalism and political activism would not be possible in the absence of a media infrastructure allowing low-cost communication between activists, journalists



and their public. The rise of blogs, in the early-2000s, and social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram provided them with the means to present an alternative to the mainstream media – although, as Bailey and Marques (2012) observe, in many cases, originally independent journalistic blogs were absorbed by the mainstream media. Furthermore, the networking character of these media allowed activists and journalists to forge strategies permitting them to reach a much larger public that would be possible if they acted in an isolated manner.

### 3. Structure

BP is a complex organisation with porous borders. It includes agents with different (although essentially compatible) agendas, institutional profiles, and models of action. This section explores BP as a particular type of media ecosystem (Magalhães and Albuquerque 2017; Rovai 2018), describes the characteristics of the actors taking part in it, the types of relationship they have established with each other, and the role performed by *Barão de Itararé* as a vanguard agent, which provided BP with a considerable degree of organicity.

#### 3.1. Typology of BP Members

The members of BP differ in their nature, status and social capital type (De Magalhães Carvalho 2018). As its origin coincides with the rise of the personal blogs (Aldé, Escobar and Chagas 2007; Quadros, Rosa and Vieira 2005), BP was initially a confederation of individuals but, since then, it has evolved and included other, more institutional types of agents. Individuals form the most important aspect of the BP ecosystem. Notable cases include Rodrigo Vianna's *O Escrevinhador* and Conceição Oliveira's *Maria Frô*. In some cases, individual blogs evolved to become small journalistic outlets, as Paulo Henrique Amorim's *Conversa Afiada*, which is run by four journalists. There are also more consolidated journalistic groups, such as *Brasil 247*, *Opera Mundi*, *Revista Forum*, all originally online, and the online version of the magazine *Carta Capital*, and other media related to political parties, such as the web portal *Vermelho* that is associated with the Communist Party of Brazil (*Partido Comunista do Brasil*, hereafter PCdoB), and PT na Câmara that is associated with PT (De Magalhães Carvalho 2018; Magalhães and Albuquerque 2017).

A BP membership is associated with different types of sources of authority. The three most relevant types are journalists, activists and politicians. Journalists have the more prestigious position in the BP ecosystem. Many of them had distinguished careers in the mainstream media before joining BP, and some were able to conciliate both activities (Guazina 2013). *Conversa Afiada*'s Paulo Henrique Amorim worked for a long time as the anchor of Globo Network's newscast *Jornal Nacional* and *Jornal da Globo* and remained as the anchor of the Record Network until 2019, when he was fired. He eventually passed away a few weeks thereafter. *Viomundo*'s Luis Carlos Azenha worked as a television reporter on the SBT, *Manchete* and Globo networks. Luis Nassif, from *GGN Jornal*, was a member of the Editorial Council of the newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo*. Paulo Nogueira, the editor of *Diário do Centro do Mundo* held editorial and foreign correspondent positions in *Veja*, *Exame* and *Época*. *Socialista Morena*'s Cynara Menezes formerly worked for *Folha de S. Paulo* and the *Veja* magazine. The founding members of BP began their blogs as personal projects, parallel to their professional careers, according to the spirit of "personal blogs" of the mid-2000s, and posteriorly professionalised them (Guazina 2013). They sustain an ambiguous relationship with the mainstream media as, on the one hand, they contend they don't do real journalism, as they are compromised with economic and polit-

ical interests but, on the other hand, their past work in these very media paradoxically provides them with journalistic authority (Zelizer 1992) which lends credibility to BP as a whole.

Different from journalists, whose foremost interest in BP lies on exerting journalism far from the imposed constraints by the mainstream media, activists perceive it as a means for promoting a political cause. Activists are much more diversified in their authorizing sources and styles than journalists. Conceição Oliveira, the head of the blog *Maria Frô* describes herself as a historian and educator who fights for racial and gender equality. Created as a strictly personal blog, *Maria Frô* subsequently acquired a more political tone. It later was hosted in the web portal Forum. Oliveira also cooperates with other BP media. Another prominent member of BP is Eduardo Guimarães, a lawyer who had no previous political experience before founding his *Blog da Cidadania*.

The boundaries between the identities of journalists and activists are considerably porous, however, as BP descends from the independent journalism movement. The case of Altamiro Borges – responsible for Blog do Miro, and one of the most important articulators of Barão de Itararé – is a case in point in this respect. He graduated in journalism studies in 1979, the same year he became affiliated to PCdoB. Since then he has engaged in the *midialivrisimo* (free media) movement and has been allied with other social movements such as the MST (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, Movement of Landless Rural Workers). The blending between the journalist and activist identities is particularly notable in some of the more institutionalised actors of B such as *Revista Forum*, *Carta Maior* and *Brasil de Fato*, as their origins are related to the World Social Forum, an anti-neoliberal globalisation event whose first edition occurred in the city of Porto Alegre in 2001 (De Magalhães Carvalho 2018).

The third category, politicians, refers to individuals who had a political career before joining BP, political parties and other political organisations. Two parties – PCdoB and PT – have been particularly active in BP. PCdoB was a junior partner during the PT-led governments, but in BP their asymmetrical relationship was somewhat inverted. PCdoB benefited from its large experience in communication in accordance with Leninist principles. When it split from PCB (Partido Comunista Brasileiro/Brazilian Communist Party) in 1962, PCdoB inherited the newspaper *Causa Operária* (Worker's Cause), which was deemed illegal during the military dictatorship (1964-1985). In 2002, PCdoB was a pioneer in using digital media as a resource for party communication, as it created the web portal *Vermelho* (Red). *Causa Operária* and *Vermelho* adopted totally different communicative logics: While *Causa Operária* targeted hardcore activists, in a time when they faced intense political repression, and used a very politicised language, *Vermelho* looked to reach a broader public through a more informative approach, which is expressed by the slogan “the well-informed left” (Mourão 2009).

### 3.2. BP's Networking Structure

More than a group of individuals, BP is also defined by the concrete relations the individuals involved in it establish with each other. Working as a pack, BP is a force to be respected. It works through a verticalised network structure, which is built through reciprocal quoting, sharing of posts, linking to other members' pages and “official” policies of partnership, which are indicated in the blogs' blogrolls. This allows the messages originally posted by particular members to reach a much larger audience

than it would be possible otherwise. A network schema of the relations between BP members' Facebook pages can be found in Figure 1.

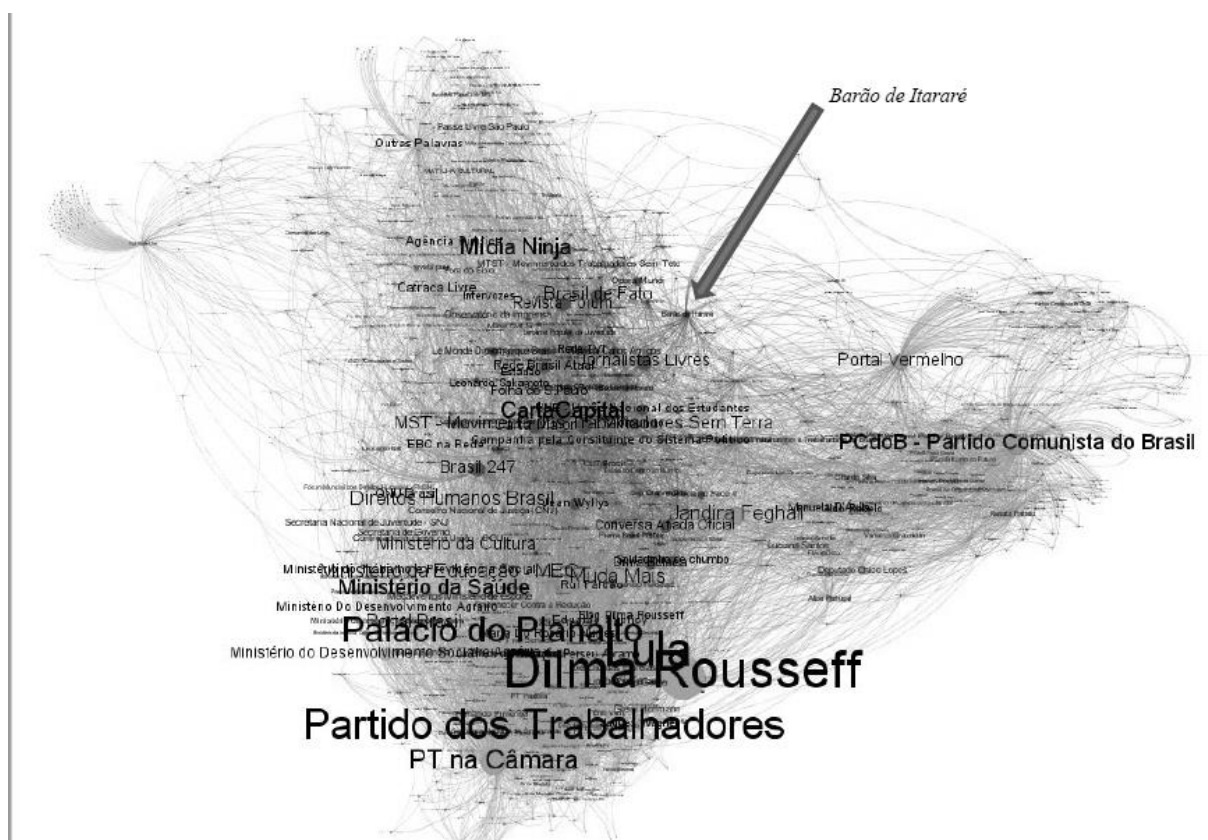


Figure 1: BP Network in Facebook

This logic results in a hierarchical model of organisation. The central position in the system is occupied by prestigious journalists and activists, in most cases belonging to BP's first generation (Magalhães and Albuquerque 2017). Their prestige allows their posts to be shared with a wider range of people than others. The second level refers to other actors identifying themselves as members of BP. Many of them joined BP later and do not use blogs but have social media accounts on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and other platforms that they use to echo BP's content.

The third level refers to agents that do not belong formally to the BP universe, but establish some tactical alliances with it, motivated by common interests or sensibilities. A particularly relevant case refers to other leftist activist media organisations that differ from BP in their political and organisational approaches. Two particularly relevant cases refer to *Mídia Ninja* and *Intercept Brasil*. *Mídia Ninja* – Ninja is an acronym for *Narrativas Independentes, Jornalismo e Ação* (Independent Narratives Journalism and Action) – is a collaborative journalism project providing live coverage of protests through the use of cell phones, which gained momentum during the *Jornadas de Junho* in 2013 when activists in their coverage provided live testimonies of police brutality (Cammaerts and Jiménez-Martínez 2014; Penteadó and Souza 2016). Initially, BP actors were mostly suspicious both of *Mídia Ninja*'s unmediated journalistic methods and its political agenda, as they were sceptical or even critical of the *Jornadas de Junho*'s political intentions and impact. However, BP and *Mídia Ninja* established closer ties after 2016, when they allied in defence of President

Rousseff's government, which faced a process of impeachment. In the same line, *The Intercept Brasil*, the Brazilian branch of *The Intercept* – which played a central role in the Wikileaks case – gained a lot of prestige among BP members in consequence of the *Vaza Jato* initiative, which presented disturbing evidences about the political motivations behind *Lava Jato* and pointed to the operation as an effort for toppling President Rousseff and putting former President Lula in jail.

### 3.3. The Role of Barão de Itararé as BP's Political Vanguard

Online networking practices have a great importance in forging BP as a coherent political media group, but offline models of organisation are also essential. *Barão de Itararé* has a crucial role in institutionalising BP. The origins of *Barão de Itararé* can be traced to the *Confecom* (*Conferência Nacional de Comunicação* or National Conference of Communication), in 2009 (Rovai 2018). At that time, the Brazilian government called representatives of diverse civil-society organisations to discuss the model of media communication existing in Brazil, and proposing modifications to it (Inter-vozes 2010). A similar approach was adopted later with respect to the *Marco Civil da Internet* in 2014. Many proposals resulted from the meeting, as for instance: the acknowledgement of communication as a social right; the creation of a National Communications Council, which would be responsible for establishing and monitoring public policies on the sector; public funding policies for the media and measures intending to avoid property concentration. These proposals alarmed the mainstream media organisations, which accused *Confecom* of trying to establish a potentially authoritarian model of control of communications. Contrary to what was happening with the *Marco Civil*, the measures proposed by *Confecom* were not approved by the Brazilian National Congress. Nevertheless, *Confecom* was the seed of BP, thanks to the *Barão de Itararé's* efforts.

The *Barão of Itararé* Center was created in May 2010 with the purpose of “creating something capable of reuniting social movement activists with journalists and bloggers who took part in *Confecom*” (Borges 2016). In August, it promoted the First National BlogProg Meeting in São Paulo. Other meetings followed in 2011 (Brasília), 2012 (Salvador), 2014 (São Paulo), 2016 (Belo Horizonte). Additionally, *Barão de Itararé* promoted other events, such as an international meeting in 2011. In 2013, it sponsored the first edition of the National Course of Communications for Media Activists, targeting activists from community, unions and alternative media.

According to its president Altamiro Borges, *Barão de Itararé* has four core objectives: 1) to take part in the fight for the democratisation of the Brazilian media; 2) the support of alternative media in Brazil; 3) the study of the transformations happening in the media landscape at the present; 4) the education of new communication activists. In order to do this, *Barão de Itararé* conciliates a rigid hierarchical structure, which include a President, a General Secretary, different Directors, a Fiscal Council and an Advisory Council with a considerable diversity in its membership, including intellectuals from different leftist groups. As Penteado and Souza put it, it “presents a transitional model between the traditional one and those exclusively based online, as it sustains a verticalized structure and actors associated to it preserve their autonomy to act and produce content” (2016, 47-48). These characteristics constitute *Barão de Itararé's* role of a political vanguard role in BP. Although activists associated with PCdoB have a particularly prominent role in *Barão de Itararé*, their influence on the BP agenda is quite limited. PCdoB is not a significant player in national politics, and therefore its political ambitions are modest. This allows other agents to feel comfort-

able with *Barão de Itararé's* role. Paulo Henrique Amorim, whose core source of authority is associated with journalism, provides an example:

I am sympathetic to the Instituto de Mídia Alternativa Barão de Itararé, which tries to gather giant egos around punctual missions. But his president Miro Borges often succeeds. The movement's results are stronger than the sum of progressive bloggers. They have a role that I think is formidable: to disseminate the poison that, in the end, contaminates the dominant system (Amorim 2017).

#### 4. Modus Operandi and Impact

Putting it simple, BP provides the basis for a critical counter-public – that is a counter-hegemonic public sphere (Fuchs 2010; Negt and Kluge 1993) – aiming to challenge the views disseminated by the mainstream media. As BP is not only a vehicle, but a media ecosystem (Magalhães and Albuquerque 2017; Rovai 2018), the activities of its members include not only producing and divulging media content, but also sharing material produced by fellow members, or other critical content. In most cases, the material vehiculated by BP consist of pieces critical to the mainstream media news coverage, as well as interviews and analytical pieces, and more rarely, in-depth reporting.

A concrete example, referring to the *Bolinhagate* incident, illustrates the dynamics of BP collaboration in opposing mainstream news media framings. In the morning of October 20, 2010, just a few days before the presidential elections – in which PT's Dilma Rousseff appeared as a clear favourite – José Serra, the main candidate opposing PT's government was hit by an object on his head, during a campaign walking tour in Rio de Janeiro. The walking tour was then cancelled, and Serra was taken to a hospital. The scene was registered by a *Folha de S. Paulo* reporter with a cell phone camera, and at night, it was exhibited by *Jornal Nacional*, Rede Globo's main newscast, in a two and half minutes news piece that described the object as being solid, and therefore the situation as an attempt against Serra, made by PT activists. In the following day, *Jornal Nacional* dedicated seven minutes to the incident, presenting a non-official report made by the forensic expert Ricardo Molina. Other mainstream news media, such as the newspapers *Folha de S. Paulo*, *O Estado de São Paulo* and *Veja* magazine, echoed the idea that Serra had been hit by a solid object.

Then, Daniel Florêncio, a film maker, posted on Twitter a video entitled “Bolinhagate – the *Jornal Nacional* edition”, which denounced the mainstream media's coverage as a fabrication. According to him, Serra was hit by a paper ball (*bolinha de papel* in Portuguese), and not a solid object (in fact, posterior images did not show any bruises on Serra's head, and this is significant, as he is bald). The video was re-tweeted by Cynara Menezes and other influent bloggers and then went viral. *Viomundo* published a letter, written by the Federal Forensic Experts Association, raising doubts about the mainstream version of the incident. Other important BP vehicles shared the letter. Rodrigo Vianna published on his blog *O Escrevinhador* that some journalists from the Globo Network became so ashamed of the *Jornal Nacional's* seven-minutes news segment that they booed when it aired.

Humour was another resource employed to spread the message. Serra was portrayed as the Matrix's character Neo, dodging a paper ball. A picture showed a paper ball with the X-Files title “I want to believe” behind it. Activists even created a flash game, which invited players to throw paper balls at Serra, as he tried to hide behind

the *Jornal Nacional's* bench. BP's version reverberated in the international media and hashtags related to the case became trend topics on Twitter.

The Bolinhagate case presents a vivid example of how a collective effort made by BP members allowed them to successfully counter mainstream media framings. BP members made intensive use of social networking sites to propagate their narratives. Comparative analysis shows that Brasil 247, one of the most prominent progressive bloggers, managed to gather more visibility than some traditional media organisations.

Time-series of the total shares of publications on Facebook reveals that the Brasil 247 fan page reached 16 million shares on 2016, the year of Dilma Rousseff's ousting by the Brazilian Parliament. In comparison, *O Globo*, one of the largest newspapers in the country, shows an opposite trend of decay after 2014. Results shed light on BP's struggle for online visibility, as Progressive bloggers were able to amass more shares than resourceful media organizations.

## 5. The Challenges ahead of BP

Having been created during the PT-governments era, BP has been facing unprecedented challenges in recent years. During the second term of Dilma Rousseff's presidency, PT politicians and its allies became subject to a continuous harassment by the judiciary, public prosecutors, the press, and far-right activists. Things became worse when vice-president Michel Temer took Rousseff's place after her impeachment. In order to avoid PT's return to power, former president Lula – who was the favourite in all electoral polls to win the presidential race – was arrested. The Brazilian Supreme Court prohibited that Lula gave interviews to the press under the allegation that this could “disturb” the electoral process. Additionally, during the entire campaign the mainstream media presented Fernando Haddad, who replaced Lula as PT's candidate, as being a political extremist who is just as dangerous to democracy as Jair Bolsonaro (Feres Junior and Gagliardi 2019).

The Brazilian mainstream media has traditionally refused to recognise BP members as legitimate media agents, as they claim for themselves the monopoly of the right of doing genuine journalism. To be sure, their monopolist demands are so extensive that, in October 2016, the *Associação Nacional de Jornais* (National Newspapers Association or ANJ) required that the Brazilian Supreme Court limits the activities of the Brazilian branches of foreign online journalism outlets – as, for instance, *BBC Brasil* and *El País Brasil* – under the allegation that they violate a Constitutional limit that establishes a 30-percent limit of foreign participation in Brazilian media organizations (Folha de S. Paulo 2016). Mainstream media play an even rougher role in the fight against their BP competitors, which they call “dirty blogs” and to whom they deny a journalistic status, despite the fact that in many cases bloggers previously had a solid career in the mainstream media.

The consequences of this can be very serious, as illustrated by the case of Blog da Cidadania's Eduardo Guimarães. In March 2017, he was detained by the Federal Police under the orders of Judge Moro, who accused his blog of being a “vehicle of political propaganda” and releasing confidential information that put at risk the *Lava Jato's* investigations. According to Moro, as Guimarães was not a journalist, he had no right to the legal protection offered to journalists. More recently, in 2019, Glenn Greenwald, the Pulitzer Prize winner ahead of the *Intercept Brasil* was portrayed by part of the mainstream media as being a hacker, rather than a journalist, in an attempt to demoralize the *Vaza Jato* series, presenting it in a criminal framing.

A second challenge is the emergence of a highly popular alt-right media ecosystem. In the events leading to the parliamentary coup against Dilma Rousseff, strong machines of far-right propaganda disputed the narratives and discourse both from the traditional journalism vehicles and from progressive bloggers. The far-right ecosystem is a loosely connected network of diverse actors, ranging from journalists fired from the national press, authoritarian politicians, neo-Pentecostal preachers, digital savvy youngsters, and a myriad of parody/fake accounts (Santos Junior 2019). The far-right groups' model of operation differs from BP particularly considering the anti-systemic hostility against parties, as well as the political, journalistic and intellectual establishment (Sponholz and Christofoletti 2019). The communication practices resemble astroturfing and informational warfare techniques such as the public harassment of opposition leaders, physical threats; all sorts of innuendo and smear campaigns (Santos Junior 2019).

Finally, a more recent development refers to the moral panic that has been generated, in a worldwide scale, around fake news (Carlson 2018), which gained ground in 2016, after the referendum that decided for the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union (Brexit) and the election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States. In both cases, "Russian meddling" was blamed as one of the key factors explaining these electoral results (Boyd-Barrett 2019). The fake news problem gained a lot of attention in March 2018, when it was revealed that Cambridge Analytica, a political strategy company that worked for Trump, irregularly obtained data from more than 50 million Facebook users, and Facebook did nothing to prevent this surveillance.

This scandal contributed to aggravate already existing accusations against social media platforms as being co-responsible for the fake news wave. Reacting to these critiques, social media platforms engaged in a series of practices that, arguably, aimed to contain fake news diffusion. In Brazil, Facebook Journalism Project and Google News Initiative provided financial backing for Projeto Comprova (Comprova Project), an initiative joining three fact-checking agencies (*Lupa*, *Truco* and *Aos Fatos*) and news media outlets – some of them belonging to the mainstream media, as *Veja*, *Folha de S. Paulo* and *O Estado de São Paulo* (Strano 2018). Added to this, Facebook endowed *Lupa* and *Aos Fatos* with the responsibility of checking the distribution of fake news in its platform (Facebook 2018). Perpetrators would be eventually punished with a temporary or even permanent ban. Although fake news has been often associated with the far-right alt-media, the new censorship dynamics established by Facebook and the fact-checking agencies allowed them also to target BP members. For instance, on June 12, 2018, *Revista Forum* published the information that Pope Francis sent a chaplet and a letter to Lula, in order to express his solidarity to him. Although there were controversies with respect to details of the incident, *Lupa* promptly classified this news as fake news and as a consequence *Revista Forum* was subject to retaliatory measures, which included a temporary Facebook ban.

## 6. Bolsonaro's Government and the Unexpected Opportunities for BP

At a first sight, the rise of Jair Bolsonaro – an unabashed defender of the previous Brazilian military regime, who once said he intended to shoot leftist activists – to the Brazilian presidency seems to put BP in great peril. Surprisingly, this appears to not be the case. Bolsonaro's far-right activists do not identify BP as their prime adversary. Instead, they have focused their attention on the mainstream media, which they accuse to be "leftist" and "petista". Although some leftists have been targeted by Bolsonaro activists' harassment – *The Intercept Brasil*, in particular – this happened in a

much less systematic manner than it would be expected. Indeed, it is possible to argue that Bolsonaro's disastrous and divisive style of government provides BP with promising political opportunities.

In order to understand that, it is necessary to highlight the very special circumstances allowing the 2016 coup against President Rousseff to happen. This was only possible because different fractions of the Brazilian political right joined forces with the mainstream media, leading sectors of the judiciary and the Prosecutor's Office, the Federal Police and military leaders to topple PT by any means (Albuquerque 2019; Tatagiba 2018). By blaming PT as the source of all corruption existing in Brazil, they succeeded in presenting the Brazilian left in a criminal framing and contended that the solution for the Brazil's political problems was to be achieved by judicial means. Judge Sergio Moro emerged, in their discourse, as the leader of a moral crusade, and the main antagonist of Lula, who was pictured as the mastermind of the enormous corruption schema that, allegedly, was led by PT (Damgaard 2018; Feres Junior and Gagliardi 2019). The far-right activists associated with Bolsonaro had a subsidiary role in this arrangement, as they were responsible for assembling people for the anti-PT manifestations and physically intimidating the leftists (Santos Junior 2019; Tatagiba 2018), who the press, conveniently, ignored.

Contrary to Rousseff, vice-president Temer, who took her place, had several accusations of corruption pending against him. In his government, several social policies established by the PT-led governments were reverted, the economy stalled, and the confidence in the institutions of representative government collapsed (Goldstein 2019). In 2018, Lula emerged as the clear favorite to win the elections, but he was put in jail on the orders of Judge Sergio Moro. Contrary to the mainstream elites' expectancies, however, this did not benefit the institutional right. Rather, the crisis of legitimacy of the representative institutions, which resulted from the Lava Jato Operation, opened the way for the antisystem candidate Jair Bolsonaro. He disputed the second round of the election with Fernando Haddad, a candidate with a political moderate profile, who was the former mayor of the city of São Paulo and succeeded Lula as the PT candidate. Although the mainstream media were not sympathetic to Bolsonaro, they actually preferred him to Haddad, who was presented as being as dangerous to democracy as Bolsonaro – but worse than him, because he supposedly was a radical leftist (O Estado de São Paulo 2018).

The rise of Bolsonaro to the presidency proved to be disastrous for the unity of the Brazilian right. Even though the mainstream media and rightist forces support Bolsonaro's neoliberal reforms, his outrageous style of government, poor economic indexes and pathetic performance in international forums (as in his inaugural discourse in the UN General Assembly), blatant nepotism (illustrated by his attempt to nominate his son Eduardo Bolsonaro as Brazilian Ambassador to the United States), and, last but not least, reports about his family connections with criminal organisations (UO 2019) have raised a severe criticism among the mainstream press – although nothing comparable to the treatment they gave to Lula or PT. In his turn, in many occasions Bolsonaro complained about the mainstream media coverage of his government – for instance, he threatened to stop giving interviews unless they “tell the truth” about his discourse at the UN – and even suggested he could take measures to economically constrain some media. Bolsonaro also has maintained conflictual relations with the Brazilian Congress, Supreme Court, and even his own political party. The popularity of the president plummeted. He has been rated as the worst first term president so far, and even some of his far-right supporters now abrogate him.



The institutional crisis is not limited to Bolsonaro's government, however. When, Sergio Moro accepted his invitation to be the Minister of Justice, the credibility of the Lava Jato Operation suffered a major blow, as his impartiality became highly questionable. Although part of the mainstream media initially presented him as the "rational", "institutional" face of the government, his prestige was damaged by Bolsonaro's numerous scandals and public acts to demote him. Even worse, the Vaza Jato series – a major investigative report led by the renowned journalist Glenn Greenwald on leaked Telegram chats among task force members – indicated that the process that led to Lula's imprisonment was a judicial farce, as the Judge and the prosecutors articulated their actions not only with each other, but also with the mainstream media, in an effort to de-moralise Lula and PT. Indeed, *Folha de S. Paulo's* newspaper present self-criticism regarding its coverage of Lava Jato (Lima 2019). At the present, the Brazilian judiciary is deeply divided at all levels. In sum, Brazil currently experiences an extraordinarily serious institutional crisis in all branches of government.

As serious as the Brazilian current situation may be, from the perspective of the Left and BP in particular, it represents a political opportunity. Once formidable, the forces that overthrew Dilma Rousseff from the presidency and put Lula in jail are now divided and have spent a lot of energy fighting each other. At the same time, mounting public evidences indicate that Lula's image as the mastermind of corruption in Brazil was a fabrication with political purposes. This, together with the dignity shown by Lula in jail – he refused to make any deal with the Justice Department – and the huge contrast between the achievements of his government and the disasters that followed the 2016 coup provide a fertile ground for the re-organisation of the left in Brazil. At a time when the adversaries are divided, the ability of BP to work as a political communication vanguard makes it a very relevant instrument to unify the discourse of the left around a common rhetoric and cause.

## 7. BP in Perspective: The Role of Vanguard in Networked Media Activism

In the 2010s, a new orthodoxy emerged regarding mediated social activism, having in the works of Castells (2012) and Bennett and Segerberg (2013) their main exponents. Based on protests occurring in different parts of the world – Tunisia, Iceland, Spain, United States, Iran, among many other examples – they suggested that the Internet offered brand new opportunities for political mobilisation, as it allowed people to connect to each other beyond the limits of physical space. According to Castells, the digital media allow individuals to recognise common problems and, then, by joining forces and occupying public spaces, to challenge the established powers. As these movements originate in the emotions of individuals, shared through networked cognitive empathy, they "are the less hierarchical in their organization and the more participatory in the movement" (Castells 2012, 15).

In a similar vein, Bennett and Segerberg identify these movements as organised on the basis of a digitally networked *connective action* model, which differs from the traditional *collective action* model, as it is neither structured in reference to an organising centre nor does it have a hierarchical structure. Rather, such movements are based on the phenomenon of personalised politic that features "citizens seeking more flexible association with causes, ideas, and political organizations" (Bennett and Segerberg 2013, 5). In both cases, the idea that vanguards are an indispensable part of political movements seem to be an anathema.

Yet, as impressive as these movements seemed to be at a first glance, their capacity to produce concrete results in the mid-term proved to be questionable at best, as they were not able to secure sustainable changes and, worse, in many countries

governments actually turned to the right or even, as in Brazil, to the far-right. As Gerbaudo (2013a; 2013b) observed, in reference to Egypt, the organisational fragility of the prodemocracy movement, closely associated to the informal character of mobilisation and the model of leaderless resistance, not only prevented them to reach their goals but, indeed, resulted in a military coup that launched the country again into a full dictatorial state. This suggests that, contrary to the hopes of Castells and Bennett/Seberberg, vanguards may still be necessary to convert revolutionary situations into revolutionary outcomes (Tilly 1978).

Contrary to the dominant view, this article argues, with basis on the example of BP, that there is still room for the collective action in networked movements, and old models of organisation, associated to the socialist movements – as the role of the political vanguards – remain relevant in the digital era. As tempting as the ideals of “personalisation” and “participation” may be, they don’t provide a solid basis for coherent collective movements (Fenton and Barassi 2011; Fuchs 2010). However, the concrete manners to instrumentalise political vanguards are not obvious, as the present social and technological circumstances differ sharply from those existing when the notion of political vanguard was coined (Pimlott 2015). For this reason, it can be instructive to analyse concrete initiatives based on the political vanguard principle as, for instance, BP. More than simply an alternative, BP is a critical media initiative (Fuchs 2010), which combines a networked model of action (through hyperlinks and content sharing) with centralised principles of organisation (Barão de Itararé Center is a central piece in this arrangement). BP also preserves some personalised traits – not a surprise given its origins lie in personal blogs – which help to provide it with a considerable capillarity, but, at the same time, it is a considerably institutionalised environment, in which traditional institutions as political parties, social movements and journalism exert a core organising role. Until today, this model of organisation allows BP to work as an effective critical media environment. However, BP’s dependence on social media may be a factor of risk to its survival, as they, allied to the mainstream media and fact-checking agencies, have employed the rhetoric of combating fake news as a tool for curbing political dissidence.

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# Towards a Marxist Theory of Mediation: Contributions from Ibero-America to the Study of Digital Communication

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**Abstract:** This paper presents and articulates for the first time the concept of mediation as theorised by three key scholars of the Ibero-American space, namely Manuel Martín-Serrano, Luis Martín-Santos, and Jesús Martín-Barbero. This article shows that their understandings of mediation are valuable for the study of digital communication, particularly for identifying criteria that facilitate the sublation of communicative capitalism into communicative socialism. The three scholars have placed the concept of mediation at the centre of their intellectual production with the aim of breaking with mechanical Marxism, but provide differing conceptualisations and have scarcely engaged in a dialogue of knowledges. This article will articulate the complementarity of Martín-Serrano's Marxist socio-historical analysis of communication, Martín-Barbero's Latin American cultural studies, and Martín-Santos's phenomenological theorisation of mediation as the key concept of Marxist epistemology.

**Keywords:** mediation, communication, social change, Marxism, Ibero-American scholarship, digital socialism

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## 1. Introduction

The end of Franco's dictatorship and the transition to representative democracy witnessed an explosion of cultural activity and working-class struggle in Spain. In the intellectual sphere, the late 1970s and 1980s were a fecund time for Spanish critical scholarship. Some factors contributing to this intellectual production were the experiences of social struggle, the need to develop new ideas for the new socio-political system, the new contact with international scholarship, and the ideological opening of society. Of course, Spain and Latin America have strong historical, cultural and linguistic ties, but the reception of numerous Spanish exiles had contributed to further intellectual exchange and interculturality. This paper intends to contribute to this exchange by putting in dialogue the work of three scholars from the Ibero-American space who have played a key part in the international flows of knowledge.

The three authors discussed in this article have shaped scholarship in the Ibero-American space, although to differing degrees. Martín-Barbero's concept of mediation has become the dominant paradigm in Latin America and is also influential in Spain. Martín-Serrano's theory of mediation counts with a small school of thought with scholars from Spain, Mexico, Cuba and other Latin American countries. Martín-Santos's work is not so influential, but is highly appreciated by Marxist thinkers in Spain. The three authors began their work in the late 1970s and 1980s, and Martín-Serrano and Martín-Barbero have continued to investigate mediations until today.

Their understanding of mediation and application to digital communication can provide valuable tools to analyse and extend digital socialism.

The paper begins with a brief profile of the authors and then discusses their work. The article synthesises the understanding of mediation of each of the authors and explains the key role this activity can play in the reproduction of (digital) capitalism as well as in the development of (digital) socialism. The three perspectives are compared and the possibilities of complementarity are identified. Because the authors address mediation from different angles, an articulation of the three approaches can reinforce one another and provide a comprehensive conceptualisation of mediation and digital socialism. Moreover, the article contextualises how the three understandings of mediation relate to Marx and Engels's works.

The work of Martín-Serrano will serve as a starting point of the articulation of perspectives because it provides a broad model for the analysis of the relations – including contradictions – between the communication and social systems, and an understanding of mediation focused on media products. Martín-Barbero's work cannot be considered to follow a Marxist approach (even though it draws on Walter Benjamin), but brings to the forefront the necessary transformative agency put into practice in processes of cultural re-signification and appropriation of representations and technologies in the social system which multiply and diversify meaning. Finally, Martín-Santos provides a method to create mediations between theory and praxis by transforming knowledge into emancipatory communication and social action. In this view, mediation has a bifurcating/transformational capacity when it results from *diáiresis* and *eidos*, especially when the exchange-value of commodities is sublated by the use-value.

The possibilities of complementarity can be readily observed, since Martín-Serrano focuses on media mediations, while Martín-Barbero stresses the cultural mediations of receivers who also become producers, and Martín-Santos provides a theory of mediation for revolutionary praxis. The articulation of the three perspectives will allow approaching digital communication by focusing on key contradictions between the capitalist system and digital praxis based on the development of transformational narratives and the cultural and material appropriation of communicative and non-communicative means of production.

## 2. Profile of the Authors

The first author who will be discussed, Manuel Martín-Serrano (Spain, 1940-), has dedicated his academic career to the development of an encompassing theory of communication able to explain the role of communication both in the evolution of nature and in the conformation and transformation of societies. To this end, Martín-Serrano has drawn on evolutionary theory, sociology, semiotics, anthropology, systems theory, epistemology, and media and communication studies.

The first sources of academic influence in Martín-Serrano's work were Marx, the Frankfurt School, Abraham Moles (cybernetics) and May 1968. Drawing on these influences, Martín-Serrano has focused on the need to develop a communication theory based on the concept of mediation which can help to identify the criteria that explain the reproduction and change of societies and of communication systems. He has always underscored the importance of theorising communication and founded the first Communication Theory department in Spain at Complutense University of Madrid.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Jesús Martín-Barbero's (Spain, 1937-) conceptualisation of mediation has become the dominant paradigm in cultural and commu-

nication studies in Latin America. He was born in Spain in 1937, just one year after the Spanish Civil War started, and has lived in Colombia since 1963, where he founded the School of Social Communication of the Universidad del Valle (1975). His work is inspired by Walter Benjamin, Raymond Williams, semiotics, Bourdieu's sociology of culture, Michel de Certeau's productive consumption, Cultural Studies, Latin American scholarship, and Spanish anarchism.

Martín-Barbero is known for advocating for a change in scholarly attention from the media to mediations. This involves the de-mystification of the power of the media in the context of processes of multiple mediations. Martín-Barbero emphasises the power of the cultural mediations of popular subjects to re-signify discourses and create meaning.

The third author to be discussed, Luis Martín-Santos (Spain, 1921-1988), was a high-school teacher of philosophy and later on a professor of sociology of knowledge at Complutense University of Madrid. He should not be mistaken for his namesake novelist and psychiatrist who wrote *Tiempo de Silencio* in 1962. Martín-Santos was a Marxist militant who stirred discussions on democracy and authors like Marcuse with his high-school students during Franco's dictatorship. He was also candidate for the Spanish Communist Party in the first elections in Burgos.

Martín-Santos abhorred the functionalist theory of communication for its apocryphal consensus fetishism. He was also a cultural dynamiser and organised conferences with Henri Lefebvre, Karl Popper, and other international intellectuals. His research and teaching stays in Germany, France, and the USA put him in touch with international thought. His work on mediation aims to reach a combination of Marxism and phenomenology which could explain the complex processes involved in social revolution.

### 3. Manuel Martín-Serrano: Mediations and Contradictions

In one article in which Martín-Barbero (2007) discusses Martín-Serrano's work, the Colombian author explains the historical importance of Martín-Serrano's paradigm of mediation. In the early 1980s, researchers from Leicester (Graham Murdock and Peter Golding) were denying the pertinence of a communication theory on the grounds that communication is explained by the social formation. According to Martín-Barbero, this denial actually leads to the adoption of a simplistic and deterministic understanding of the relations between communication and society in which communication is reduced to being instrumental to the social system (social control paradigm). On the other hand, Martín-Barbero notes that Martín-Serrano advocated for a communication theory which acknowledges that communication is socially produced and contributes to social reproduction, but that it also has varying degrees of autonomy and, thus, that there is possibility of change (the paradigm of dialectics).

Martín-Serrano first published on mediation in his French PhD thesis (1974). Due to difficulties with censorship, the book *La Mediación Social* (1977) was published in Spanish three years later. The book defines mediation as a system of rules and operations applied to any set of elements belonging to heterogeneous parts of reality to introduce an order or a design. From this point of view (see also Martín-Serrano 2004), the representations contained in media products provide a worldview, among many other possible worldviews, which influences cognitive systems and social action. In turn, the social formation influences the media system, usually to foster the reproduction of the same formation. However, media products also include models of order which negate the social order and can contribute to social change.



Martín-Serrano (2019ab) argues that the ongoing technological revolution includes both humanising and dehumanising mediations. The humanisms propose mediations which attempt to realise the utopia of a universal access to information (the Enlightenment) and the utopia of collectively shared knowledge (communism). On the other hand, Martín-Serrano argues that dehumanising communication fosters the technocratic counter-utopia of monopoly capitalism based on positivism, social Darwinism, neoliberalism, and post-humanism.

### 3.1. Historical Perspectives on the Relations between Communication and Society

Martín-Serrano (2004) identifies three key approaches of how the relations between communication and society have been conceptualised:

- Idealism, the philosophical approach of the Enlightenment, holds that cultural/communicative changes produce change in the social totality. Transforming what is said about something, changes that something. By modifying the worldview of actors through the spreading of the Lights, society will become freer, peaceful, and equal.
- Mechanical materialism, which is the foundation of vulgar Marxism, holds the opposite view. As it is not consciousness that determines reality, but reality that determines consciousness, it is through the change of actions, and not conceptions, that reality is transformed.
- Dialectical Marxism holds that there are mutual, dynamic influences between representation and action, communication and society, structure and superstructure. Social change requires transformations in both the sphere of ideas and the material sphere.

### 3.2. Dialectical Relations between Communication and Social Systems

Martín-Serrano (2004) adopts a dialectical perspective. He argues that Marx's first works (*The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, *The Holy Family*, *The German Ideology* and *The Poverty of Philosophy*) already question the validity of the programme of the Enlightenment (voluntarist idealism): in conditions of inequality, it is not possible to change society by acting *only* upon consciousness. The message was misunderstood by Blanqui and his followers who relegated communication and advocated for revolutionary action to transform society and, thus, consciousness (voluntarist materialism). According to Martín-Serrano, in the polemics with Blanquist communists since 1848, Marx insisted that historically false consciousness is rooted in affective needs which cannot be extirpated simply by eliminating the ideological apparatuses or by revolutionary action. Instead, consciousness and social organisation are interdependent and mutually affect each other. According to Martín-Serrano, Marx proposed a socio-historical (material and cultural; systemic) change based on solidarity and the shared use of knowledge, which allows the interrelation of theory and practice.

Martín-Serrano (2004; 2007) combines dialectics with systems analysis to conceive the communication system and the social system as two *differentiated* systems which are *open* to one another, meaning that there are mutual influences. Each system has a *partial autonomy* because it has its own components, organisation and functions allowing internal changes. But each system also affects and is affected by the other system.

From this point of view, communication is *socially produced*. According to the law of historical necessity, communication systems are organised in each historical peri-

od to contribute to the reproduction of the social system, i.e., they tend to *adjust* to the requirements of the social system for its continuity and expansion, which include reforms in the system.

However, the interrelations that take place historically may also generate *disadjustments*. This occurs when transformations in the systems make dominant media representations not respond to the determinations of the social system to bring about its reproduction (technological innovation, economic demands, political control, etc.).

Disadjustments sometimes refer to a *contradiction*, when communicative mediation exerts intense and prolonged pressure in an opposite and incompatible direction regarding the constrictions arising from society. Contradictions can be resolved in two distinct ways:

1. Most contradictions are solved with *functional changes* in one of the two systems, or both. Readjustments *in* the systems occur, but there is no change *of* system. It can take place when the communication system incorporates innovations that allow meeting the intellectual and/or economic needs of the social system. It may also happen that oppositional mediations contribute to society incorporating some changes, as with the civilising effect of 1968 in capitalism.

2. Less frequently, a *dialectical transformation* takes place, when a given system is overcome or *sublated* by a different system, i.e., when changing *from* one system to *another* system. Martín-Serrano identifies the following dialectical transformations of communication systems in relation to socio-historical changes: a) assembly b) by emissaries, c) by distribution networks of message, d) by mass production and distribution techniques of communication products e) by virtual networks. It should be noted that when a dialectical change takes place, the new system incorporates elements from the previous system, even though it is qualitatively a different system (see Fuchs 2015 for further discussion).

For Martín-Serrano, consensus/conflict (Conflict Studies) is not a dialectical opposition in regards to capitalism, but reproduction/revolution (Marxism) is.

### 3.3. Contradictions of the Digital Era

According to Martín-Serrano (2019ab), referential, multidirectional digital media have been replacing the mass media as the dominant model of the media. This dialectical transformation can lead either to a contradiction with regards to the social system or to the adjustment of the communication system to the functional change from industrial capitalism to global monopoly capitalism. So far, functional changes in the communication system led by corporations and states have favoured a reproductive digitalisation of face-to-face activities.

However, Martín-Serrano sees possibilities in the use of digital technologies for the transformation of the world. The utopia of universal access to information can be realised through the referential appropriation of the world which fosters the Enlightenment of all people. And the utopia of knowledge sharing can be realised through multidirectional virtualisation which socialises and diversifies communication. Use-value can prevail over exchange-value.

### 3.4. The Dialectics of Referential Appropriation

Since many more people are involved in communicative production than in the mass media model, the data of reference (the topics and perspectives) is expanded. Many more people can provide many more representations of many more objects of reference. Martín-Serrano identifies a series of elements of the communication system

that stand in contradiction with the requirements of capitalism to reproduce on par with the mediations that contribute to its reproduction:

- Universal access to information / Obscurantism.
- More participants can mean more plurality / Redundancy and stereotype are dominant.
- There is no need for a narrator / Algorithmic gatekeeping.
- There is the blurring of the technical division between producers and consumers of information / A technocratic class of cognitive managers.
- Reflecting events / Inventing events.

For Martín-Serrano, the utopia of universal access to diverse information intends to elevate the culture of societies in order to assure their democratic, free and peaceful functioning. It aims to contribute to human autonomy, the ability to think for oneself based on sufficient information, together with the development of the power of altruistic values, of solidarity and can be fostered with public policies and democratic control of the Internet. The global dissemination of information and knowledge can also help people to imagine how a social utopia can look like so that this image serves as a compass.

Martín-Serrano conceives mediation as a kind of Enlightenment, understood as the spreading of information, knowledge and education (the “Lights”) that might eventually lead to a further utopia based on the collective production and sharing of knowledge. The latter can also be pursued through virtualisation.

### 3.5. The Dialectics of Virtualisation

Virtualisation has introduced multi-directionality, facilitating the complete communication process to take place among a multiplicity of actors. In the context of virtualisation, Martín-Serrano identifies the following dialectics:

- Multi-directionality can promote socialist relations of solidarity / It is a necessary resource for the expansion of capitalism in its purpose of materially appropriating the world.
- Multi-directionality can entail diversity / The transmission of information among many actors tends to lead to banalisation (prejudices and stereotypes) and cultural industries introduce homogeneity.
- More participants and frequency / Most of those interactions only take place in the virtual space.
- Communicative interactions are no longer constrained by spatial and temporal separations / Nationalism, chauvinism.
- Intellectual co-production / privatisation of intellectual production.

According to Martín-Serrano, the communist utopia holds that the collective ownership of communicative means of production can foster the production and exchange of knowledge based on use-value. Collectively controlled communication can also introduce diversity and mediated communication can be used to engage in physical action. He contends that there is the possibility now of globalising humanising mediations through collective creativity and shared knowledge and memory.

This utopia seeks to share knowledge of what unites, so that eventually it is possible to share the world.

Martín-Serrano notes the successes of humanising mediations:

- The Internet was born with the purpose of making free knowledge available to everyone.
- The expansion of information open to all is unstoppable.
- The production and use of free software is increasing.
- There are growing numbers of non-profit online platforms.
- Social networks are already a real alternative for the organisation of civil society and its political mobilisations.

Martín-Serrano notes that both referential and virtual communication require greater user autonomy. As a consequence, the effectiveness of dominant mediation to maintain social control may decrease. As receivers they will exercise criticism. As producers, they will diversify social representations, calling into question consensus.

As developed below, digital mediations can play a key role in the reproduction of the capitalist system, but also in change to a communist system. The social uses of digital communication will decide if humanising mediations become dominant.

### 3.6. Humanising Mediations

Martín-Serrano argues that humanism proposes to develop our natural capacities through the use of technologies aimed at globalising Enlightenment and collective solidarity (the foundation of communism). Humanising communication brings awareness of the dignity of human beings and promotes solidarity with all human beings and groups. Communication also humanises when it serves creativity, when it is innovative and imaginative.

He considers that humanist communication (and a humanist society) is possible due to the genetic inclinations of human nature towards solidarity. Human communication evolved as another way of securing life based on altruistic values. Altruism opposes the humanising power of human nature to the impotence produced by dehumanising powers.

This leads to the conclusion that humanising mediations foster intellectual, creative and moral skills that are limited by the state of societies. Technologies are used to eliminate these limitations by transforming societies; humanising mediations refer to socio-genetic changes.

### 3.7. Dehumanising Mediations

Martín-Serrano states that dehumanising communication links individual and collective security to ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and the imposition of force. Communication dehumanises when it limits imagination, and reproduces conformism and resignation in the face of obscurantism, which is a vision of human relations that renounces altruistic feelings and values.

Martín-Serrano argues that a key role of today's mediating institutions is to ensure that conflicts that could confront subjects with institutions and structures are transferred to interpersonal relationships. To cope with the continuing crises of socio-economic origin, each individual is expected to "change" himself/herself as many times as necessary and as much as necessary. These mediations encourage people to adapt to living in a state of permanent crisis, without questioning the global system. These mediations are applying the technocratic counter-utopia.

According to Martín-Serrano, posthumanism promotes, willingly or not, the technocratic counter-utopia by proposing to equip humans with artificial abilities. Posthu-

manism claims that technological and genetic interventions will eventually replace the current “homo faber” with a post-human being adapted to social control; these mediations refer to anthropogenic changes.

Martín-Serrano identifies communicative mediations that stand in contradiction to the social system and other mediations that are oriented on contributing to the reproduction of capitalism. The next section shows the complementarity of this approach with that of Jesús Martín-Barbero, whose work focuses on humanising practices of cultural mediation that introduce re-signification and diversity.

#### 4. Jesús Martín-Barbero: Cultural Mediations

While Martín-Serrano focuses on what the communication system does to the people in the social system, Martín-Barbero and the Latin American school of communication give priority to what people in the social-cultural system do with the communication system.

Martín-Barbero’s (1987; 1993) concept of mediation is widely understood as the cultural appropriation and re-signification of communication. This is done through agency (interpretation and production of meaning) by the receivers, who also become co-creators in the communication process. New meanings emerge from collective knowledge and interrelate with new practices. The key actors in this process are popular subjects and culture, which facilitate diversity, resistance and social change. According to Martín-Barbero the mediations of popular culture are the most important influence in defining the social meanings of communication processes and, thus, are the main counterhegemonic force. With digital convergence the possibilities have expanded for introducing diversity, interculturality, translation and sustainability.

##### 4.1. From Media to Mediations

Martín-Barbero’s academic efforts have focused on moving from media-centrism to the mediations that shape the communication process. In the author’s own words, the analysis of mediations focuses on

processes, practices and means of communication, and in that order of importance, that is, starting from the social processes in which communication is embodied, followed by the practices in which different cultures insert communication, and thirdly the media that, from the Egyptian palimpsest and the Greek choir were transformed into book – newspaper – cinema – radio – TV – Netflix (Martín-Barbero 2015, 14 [translated from Spanish to English]).

Changing the focus from the object to the process allowed research to be opened to the everyday practices of popular agents who play and an active role in the production of meaning. Martín-Barbero (2014) opposes what Raymond Williams criticised as the nefarious combination of technological determinism and cultural pessimism in critical scholarship.

For Martín-Barbero the most important mediations take place in cultural processes, and particularly popular culture, albeit this is not the only locus. He views popular culture as the main provider of mediations between society and mass culture:

Instead of starting the investigation with the analysis of the logics of production and reception, to then look for their relations of overlapping or confrontation, we propose to start from the mediations, that is, from the places from which the constraints that delimit and shape the social materiality and cultural ex-

pressiveness of television (Martín-Barbero 1987, 23 [translated from Spanish to English]).

Even though Martín-Barbero focuses mainly on cultural mediations, he has also identified other forms of mediation which give sense to communication. As noted by Gámez-Torres (2007), in the first edition of *From the Media to Mediations*, Martín-Barbero (1987) identifies key cultural mediations such as the habitus, families' daily life, social temporality, and cultural competencies. In the prologue to the 1998 edition, the author proposes new mediations to explain the new complexities in the constitutive relations between communication, culture, and politics. Martín-Barbero (1998, xvi) relates cultural matrices (CM) and industrial formats (IF) on the one hand and on the other hand the productive logics (PL) and the reception or consumption competencies (RC). The relations between CM and PL are mediated by different institutional regimes, while the relations between CM and RC are mediated by various forms of sociality. Technicities mediate between PL and IF, and rituals mediate between IF and RC.

Martín-Barbero defines technicity as the narrative aspect of the media that works as an organiser of perceptions and institutionality as the influence of economic, political and cultural interests on the media. Sociality is comprised by the everyday relations that involve non-mediatised socio-cultural mediations while ritualty encompasses the different interpretations, readings, and uses of media.

#### 4.2. The Mediation of Popular Culture: Counterhegemonic Agency

Martín-Barbero (1987; 1993) argues that there are great difficulties in applying Marxist theory, and especially Adorno's work, to Latin American reality. Martín-Barbero criticises Horkheimer's and especially Adorno's work for cultural pessimism and elitism and argues that sensitivity towards mass and popular culture and cultural diversity are key to understanding Latin American reality. A variety of historical conflicts and hybridisations among people and between mass and popular culture have created a heterogeneous cultural landscape.

Martín-Barbero also criticises Marxism for negating the value of the category of "the people". The Enlightenment placed the people at the centre of politics and Romanticism of culture. Marxism negated both through the sublation of "the popular" into the proletariat. On the other hand, anarchism combined politics and culture to affirm the validity of the popular and showed the rich possibilities of viewing the people as a historical agent of resistance and change. For anarchism, the people was an apt concept in relation to its opposition to all forms of oppression, while Marxism reduced the struggle to the relations of production. In the context of Latin America, Martín-Barbero argues, mestizo and hybrid cultures provide the key counterhegemonic mediations. In this view, identities play a key role in cultural mediation.

Against orthodox Marxism and the core of the Frankfurt School, Martín-Barbero finds inspiration in Frankfurt School associate Walter Benjamin. Martín-Barbero writes that Benjamin pioneered the understanding of popular culture not as its denial, but as experience and production. In his view, Benjamin allows us to think historically about the relationship between transformations in production conditions and changes in the space of culture, understood as the sensorium of modes of perception; the social experience.

According to Martín-Barbero, Benjamin showed that the media do not provide totalitarian alienation, but hegemony subjected to contradictions. Benjamin didn't accept that meaning had been absorbed by exchange-value. Meaning is transformed

and leads to social realities that include both obscurantism and creativity. Benjamin, Martín-Barbero argues, opened the path to the study of the experiences of oppressed people who configure modes of resistance, grant meaning to the struggles, and are fundamental counterhegemonic actors.

### **4.3. Digital Convergence and Cultural Diversity**

By looking at digitalisation from the mediations of popular culture, Martín-Barbero (2008; 2014) understands digital convergence as diversity, intercultural communication, translation, and sustainability.

#### **4.3.1. Diversity**

Martín-Barbero argues that the digital revolution has enhanced the possibilities of diversifying popular mediation. Communication ceases to be a process between producers and consumers. Digital convergence allows dissolving this social and symbolic barrier because it de-centres and de-territorialises the possibilities of cultural production. This leads to heterogeneity of symbolic production. As communicative production democratises on the Internet, the meanings of the mediations lived by receivers also become more diverse, which affects social action and media practices.

Martín-Barbero holds that digital convergence also favours the possibility of sustained intercultural translation. He argues that the revitalisation of identities provides a key entry point to understanding online diversity. Identities can introduce counterhegemony because of the demand for recognition, the search for meaning, and the way of belonging to and sharing the world. All identity is generated through narratives that tell stories to others. And interculturality and translation are key to facilitating diversity.

#### **4.3.2. Intercultural Communication**

Martín-Barbero (2008, 12) writes that “the Internet is the site of the total communication meeting point, a place where cultures can communicate endlessly. Internet has been a dream for mankind since quite a long”. In this view, digitalisation has provided unprecedented spaces for intercultural communication on a global level. This can be observed in the ongoing process of reconfiguration of indigenous, local, and national cultures due to the intensification of communication and interaction with other national and world cultures. For example, digitalisation provides spaces which connect immigration territories with the country of origin.

According to Martín-Barbero, interculturality has nothing to do with what the media do with cultures. To exist as cultures is to exchange. Cultural diversity cannot be created from above. It can only be practiced by the diverse cultures.

Martín-Barbero notes that intercultural experiences entail a sense of danger and insecurity. They tend to be more conflictive than dialogic. However, communication can play a constitutive role when the actors acknowledge that the vitality of culture depends on its ability to communicate with others. Living cultures confront each other. They translate and are translated by other cultures.

#### **4.3.3. Translation**

Martín-Barbero underscores that the paradigm of translation shows the possibility of a constitutive mediation between plurality of cultures and unity of humanity. This paradigm acknowledges that there are translatable as well as indecipherable aspects of

cultures, and that the role of each culture is to know the other cultures and re-know itself as such in the possibilities and limits of the exchange.

To affirm diversity, notes Martín-Barbero, is to affirm translatability, i.e., that there is something in common. For example, human rights, while knowing that they are perceived and ranked differently by different cultures. Even though there are some aspects which cannot be deciphered, every culture is translatable to others because it is possible to share aspects of life.

Translation brings people together because it is based on non-exteriority, non-foreignness, non-otherness. So, translation allows populations to appropriate – from the standpoint of their own culture – new knowledges and languages. The result is increased cultural hybridisation.

#### 4.3.4. Cultural Sustainability

Martín-Barbero (2008; 2014) claims that cultural sustainability is a concept in construction taken from ecological thought. When applied to culture, it is being used to study the relations between cultural difference and social inequality, and, therefore, between culture and development. This perspective holds two key ideas. First, the long temporality of cultures is in contradiction with the increasingly short temporality of objects produced and sold in the capitalist market. Second, cultural creativity in community and independent media as well as in cultural industries can play a key role in social development. The articulation of cultural value with an alternative form of development can make cultural diversity last in time.

The first idea has to be addressed, according to Martín-Barbero, outside of the Habermasian framework of dialogical consensus, in which communicative reason is deprived of the political contradictions introduced by technological and market mediations. What social change requires is to decipher the hegemony of the market and identify and facilitate the counter-hegemonies that can make cultural diversity sustainable.

The second idea requires three conditions. 1. Autonomy of the communities and social movements. 2. Political participation of citizens which is reflected in cultural policies. 3. The ability to open one's own culture to exchange and interaction with the other cultures of the country and the world.

According to the author, digital convergence can contribute to cultural sustainability because it breaks with the artificial separations characteristic of Western epistemology. Against the excluding power of the written word, oralities and visualities acquire cultural visibility and "intertwine their memories to the imaginary of virtuality to give new meaning and new form to cultural traditions" (Martín-Barbero 2014, 26). Dualism can no longer be held in this new communication environment. The appropriation of the hypertext means putting together texts, sounds, images, and videos in an interactive way that expands the possibilities of combining different temporalities, reading and writing, the book and the audio-visual, knowing and doing, arts and sciences, culture and technique, reason and imagination, aesthetic passion and political action.

The Internet can also facilitate cultural sustainability by providing new spaces that are configured by social movements, cultural communities, and community media. Subaltern sectors are increasingly appropriating new technologies to build counter-hegemony all throughout the world. The political context for interculturality can be renewed by networks which connect cultural workers and artists with territorial institutions and social organisations. A new public sphere can emerge with new modalities of cultural, artistic, scientific and political communities which benefit from digitalisa-



tion. These communities are engaged in the decisive political struggle for cultural visibility.

Martín-Barbero advocates for implementing public policies for cultural convergence that set the grounds for a new cognitive economy focused on human rights. The regulatory frameworks should have both a local and a global scope at the same time. In his opinion, the priority is to explore the strategic potential of digital convergence for the socio-cultural integration of the Ibero-American space that is in construction. The survival of diversity depends, according to the author, on a new global cultural institutionality capable of interpellating global organisations. This new institutionality will only arise from a new type of relationship of culture with the nation-state. This transformation does not involve replacing the state, but citizens reinstating or re-institutionalising the state so that it focuses on interacting with the local communities and the new world actors.

Martín-Barbero notes the contradictory nature of the digital revolution: it is a source of inequalities, but also a source of citizen empowerment. The connective and interactive model of net communication facilitates cultural mediations which introduce diversity and help people get associated, participate in society and engage in creative expression.

If Martín-Serrano writes about the features of humanising and dehumanising mediations, Martín-Barbero argues that the possibilities of humanisation depend on the mediations arising from popular culture. And, as developed in the next section, Martín-Santos provides a specific guide, a method for the development of humanising or communist mediations both in the communication and the social systems.

## 5. Luis Martín-Santos: Mediations between Theory and Praxis

Luis Martín-Santos's work adds to the other two perspectives a method to produce mediations to articulate revolutionary theory and praxis. Martín-Santos was a specialist in Husserlian phenomenology and aimed to combine it with Marxism, particularly through the concept of mediation. According to Martín-Santos, Marxism provides a framework based on historical materialism and dialectics that can be strengthened by phenomenologically detailing the way in which the world becomes present in subjectivity. Thus, phenomenology allowed him to think revolution at the level of meaning.

Martín-Santos's (1976; 1977; 1988) work can be interpreted in today's context to define communicative communism as mediations based on diáresis (rupture) and totalisation (eidos). These mediations are conducted by the digital proletariat for the abolition of the private property of the means of communicative and non-communicative production (classless society). This model of communication would be characterised by confrontation of ideas and dialogue, as well as by the primacy of use-value and diversity.

According to Martín-Santos, the ideas of mediation, diáresis, and totalisation can be found throughout Marx and Engels's works. However, he notes that mediation is more prominent in *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels 1846/2010), diáresis in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (Marx 1844/1975a), and totalisation in *Capital* (Marx 1867/1990).

### 5.1. Mediation

Martín-Santos (1976) claims that Marx and Engels used the idea of mediation much more than they named it. He notes that often they did not differentiate it from the crude concept of cause, but that the idea of mediation can be observed in their use of terms such as connection, root, or result. According to Martín-Santos, a Marxist un-

derstanding of mediation points to a complex, multi-faceted process that produces social change. He was particularly interested in the mediations that can articulate theory and praxis to bring about social sublation, i.e., for the emergence of a communist society.

This understanding of mediation is opposed to both idealistic subjectivism and Lenin's objectivist theory of reflection, since both theories are based on the mechanical and deterministic coincidence of the subject with the real world. Only the processes of mediation can facilitate an articulation of revolutionary theory and praxis. The author argues that Marx and Engels viewed consciousness and social relations as interdependent.

Martín-Santos (1977) refers to the criticism of Hegel in *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels 1846/2010): the superstructure is not autonomous; consciousness cannot be understood as the result of the autonomous force of the spirit, but as a social fact. If for Hegel the Idea creates life, for Marx consciousness and theory have their roots in praxis while serving to correct it.

Martín-Santos notes that historical materialism underscores the importance of material mediations in consciousness. Moreover, unlike vulgar materialism, he holds that Marx's dialectical conception of history views ideas as a mediating power. He further clarifies that, in spite of some expressive excesses, the works of Marx and Engels (for example, *The Holy Family*, Marx and Engels 1845/1975) identify interrelations between thought and reality and conclude that theory can only be realised as a realisation of necessities.

From a dialectical point of view, mediations between ideas and praxis are found in revolutionary processes: praxis is incorporated into theory and ideas become material power when they are appropriated by the working class (Marx 1844/1975b).

Martín-Santos (1976, 30) posits three laws to understand the mediations between theory and praxis:

1. The law of non-interruption indicates that all elements are interrelated parts of a social formation. No element exists by itself in isolation but as part of a chain of mediations that limit and enable each other.

2. The law of alternative mediation opposes a priori and mechanical approaches that reduce social reality to crude relations of cause and effect in which some elements are mere reflection of others. Even though historical materialism demonstrates the determining effect of matter *in the last instance*, according to this law, in any given social process there is no a priori hierarchy between economy and culture, no exclusive foundational principle. Instead of strict determinism, there is polyvalence. There is intellectual democratisation.

3. The law of revolution as the generalisation and intensification of mediations suggests that the programme of historical materialism aims to find and promote the mediations that allow unifying theory and praxis.

Martín-Santos (1977) aims to provide analytical tools to understand and foster mediations for revolutionary subjectivisation and material transformation. He understands mediation as the result of a double dialectical movement that operates at both cognitive and metaphysical levels as a creator of continuity in the discontinuity of being and thought. The phase of negativity which renounces to the immediate is understood as a *diairesis*, a rupture with revolutionary potential. And the movement of sublation is understood as a totalisation which involves recuperation and sublimation.

Martín-Santos clarifies that *diairesis* and totalisation are different to an antithesis and synthesis. Antithesis and synthesis are based on a logical determination while

diaresis and totalisation are based on an anthropological determination in which the subject gets involved in social transformation and is transformed.

## 5.2. Diaresis

Martín-Santos understands diaresis as a rupture that produces discontinuity in a fact and a concept (or theory) based on its contradictions or internal incompatibilities. If bourgeois thought presents both social processes and concepts as a unity with continuity, Marxism discovers the internal fissures and acts to produce a profound tear. Thus, in diaresis, Marxism aims to identify and unveil hidden alienations. By demonstrating the contradiction in a concept or fact, the diaresis sheds light on a rupture that cannot be reabsorbed in the original intended unity. When the fictitious unity is revealed, the process of bifurcation is irreversible and consciousness becomes revolutionary. A concept no longer means the same as before. Dialectics has made it critical. Therefore, diaresis is a method of awareness regarding the material world and a guide for praxis.

Martín-Santos provides several examples which can serve as a guide for theory and praxis:

- Social totality is divided by class struggle (*Communist Manifesto*). Likewise, the Hegelian concept of “man” as a theoretical unit cannot be sustained when Marxist diaresis is applied, which shows the alterity of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The human being is also divided into being and history, discontinuity and continuity, and the proletariat is made up of both physical and spiritual needs.
- Misery is not only misery, Marx argued in his letter to Schweitzer about Proudhon. The concept hides a contradiction, for misery is lack but also strength, repression and subversion.
- The notion of order from the point of view of a formal analysis has a positive meaning. However, diaresis discovers the repressive dimension of order as well as an empowering dimension that tries to create the conditions for channelling the revolutionary protest.
- Use-value and exchange-value of commodities: Martín-Santos contends that this is possibly the most important example of diaresis provided by Marx. In capitalism, the quantitative predominates over the qualitative. The fetishism of commodities is imposed, which hides the social relations of production between people (exploitation) for the benefit of economic relations between objects. The worker experiences alienation in exchange. There is a humanisation of the product and an objectification and dehumanisation of the producer.
- Other diaresis can be observed in society, which is broken in theory and praxis, and structure and superstructure.

## 5.3. Totalisation

After diaresis, the next movement in the mediation process is totalisation or convergence. The author argues that the objective is to reach a real unity of the opposites (reconciliation) in a classless society by abolishing the private ownership of the means of production. Totalisation acts upon heterogeneous elements. It involves the convergence of theory and praxis, i.e., the realisation of Marxist philosophy and the abolition of the proletariat and class contradictions (Marx 1844/1975b). Revolution as a totalisation keeps the continuity of working class struggle in a discontinuity regarding the social formation. As Marx (1867/1990) explains in *Capital*, collective ownership fosters use-value and brings an end to commodity fetishism.

Martín-Santos provides a method to develop totalisations by giving meaning to and articulating the diairesis elements. This method is based on variations that allow for constructing *eidos* or polemical ensembles. Specifically, *eidos* are mediations between theory and praxis that allow their reunion.

This method looks at a topic from different points of view and explores all possible paths. A variety of aspects of the topic that initially appear to be independent merge in a figure (*eidos*). This *eidos*, with its internal interrelations and tensions, provides the concrete meaning of the topic. While concepts are static and peaceful, *eidos* are dynamic, complex, dialectical and with great cognitive strength, which makes them effective mediators to understand and transform reality. *Eidos* provide the mediation needed for scientific thought.

Martín-Santos notes that Marx (1844/1975b) used this method continually but especially to describe the proletariat in the introduction to *Critique of Hegel's' Philosophy of Right*. The proletariat was defined here as universality of suffering, sufferer of total injustice, artificially impoverished, product of social dissolution, negativity, possessor of a title of human being, and universal emancipator.

Martín-Santos applies the method of *eidos* to explain the sense of revolution from different, albeit complementary points of view:

- Social: unequal development of the revolutionary forces; processes to achieve harmony and share a programme for a life in common.
- Economic: functionalisation of wealth; revolutionary energy can improve the economy by fostering use-value and distributing property.
- Cultural: counterculture aims to refute existing ways of life and implement problematic cultural principles which have not been used yet.
- Political: dispersion (not transfer) of power.
- Anthropological: new behaviours; recovery of vitality.
- Historical: a change in the goals and course (not a mere acceleration).
- Ideological/philosophical: the loss of magic of dominant ideas (de-naturalisation).

Developing communism would require mediations in all dimensions of reality as a tensor unity (*eidos*). However, Martín-Santos notes that this *eidos* is still too abstract and proposes a concrete phenomenology of the dialectics of confrontation and dialogue.

#### 5.4. Communication

Martín-Santos understands the role of communication as follows:

The technique of confrontation allows the socialisation of knowledge through adjustment, guesswork, regression and other movements of ideas. Discrepancy with others allows the discovery of one's own thought. Together with dialogue, confrontation allows the emergence of the epistemic subject, which keeps thought alive, socialist, and shareable.

Dialogue means receiving and responding to ideas from others who have had direct experience. "I think" turns into "we think" and "my truth" becomes "our truth". It allows the proletariat to objectivise reality collectively. This real dialogue is continued and bifurcated by transcendental dialogue with the classics. Moreover, there is dialogue about the revolution but also revolution as dialogue (mediating model and mediated model). Dialogue should focus on the concrete, which is contradictory and attached to praxis. Concrete reality is the *logos* of language and revolution.

Martín-Santos contends that in *The German Ideology* Marx (1846/2010) explains that language plays a key mediating role in society because it is real, practical consciousness and always appears as a relation with other people and with other words. It is individual and social. The production of ideas is a language and production is the language of reality.

Even though new technologies are mainly used as means for diversion, they can also be used to raise class consciousness. Communication can give meaning to the revolution and guide action through a renewed eloquence. Instead of adopting a contemplative way of knowing, a Marxist use of digital media involves adopting a theoretical-practical global attitude to confront capitalism. The point is not to de-codify, but to produce communication.

Transformative communication and action should be grounded in internal democracy and camaraderie as mediations that facilitate the reproduction of the socialist project. A Marxist party plays a key role, just as the youth and collective intellectuals, but the working class is in charge of leading the process. Since the new proletariat is formed by the decomposition of other classes, the origin of today's proletariat is diverse and heterogeneous, and includes all the lucid people who are resisting capitalist power.

In synthesis, Martín-Santos describes a complex process of mediation between theory and praxis, superstructures and structures, to produce in an active and inventive way new ideas and material changes. Mediations involve a variety of actors and factors, which foster rupture and transformed reunion in the development of a communist society and communication system.

## 6. Conclusion

Mediations play a key role in the reproduction of monopoly capitalism, but they are also being used to move towards what could be called communicative communism.

Martín-Serrano notes the contradiction between a multidirectional digital system capable of turning most people into producers of communication and expanding the data of reference with the need of capitalism to concentrate and control communication for reproductive ends. In this context, de-humanising (technocratic) mediations try to obscure links of solidarity, while humanising mediations count with the technical possibility of the world-wide dissemination of information and sharing of knowledge.

Martín-Barbero complements this perspective by looking at the cultural mediations of popular subjects in the counter-hegemonic appropriation and re-signification of communication messages and technologies. Martín-Barbero argues that digital convergence provides for the first time in history technological means to achieve the utopia of diversity through interculturality, translation, and sustainability.

Finally, Martín-Santos adds a normative guide to action. He conceives mediation as the theory-praxis (both material and communicative) that produces diáresis (ruptures) and totalisations leading to the abolition of the private means of productions. Communication plays a key role in the development of socialist narratives and the exchange of theory and praxis, the confrontation of ideas, international dialogue, and the expansion of use-value.

The work of the three authors allows addressing the study of mediations as a complex totality with interconnected parts. Communicative communism can thus be characterised as being based on critical-transformative mediations that operate both in the communication system and the social system to produce ruptures and transform the cultural superstructure that contributes to the emancipation of consciousness *in interdependence* with the re-appropriation of the means of production by the

heterogeneous working class and other popular actors. They can operate on a global level to disseminate information, facilitate the counterhegemonic enjoyment of popular culture, and contribute to the collective production and sharing of creative work in multidirectional flows of communication. This international dialogue can only be achieved by introducing diversity, which has to be guided by interculturality, which, in turn, is facilitated by the paradigm of translation. These mediations should contribute to reducing and eventually eliminating technical and social division of labour. They aim to connect theory and praxis in order to create sustainable conditions of autonomy (freedom) and equality that allow the unfolding of altruistic values and the expansion of use-value.

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# Slow Down! Digital Deceleration Towards A Socialist Social Media

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**Abstract:** Hartmut Rosa argues that three systems of social acceleration (technical acceleration, the acceleration of social change and the acceleration of the pace of life) have emerged as fundamental to the human experience of late modernity. It is here argued that the digital imaginary, specifically curated by the “universal” social media platforms causes what Dominic Pettman has dubbed the “hypermodulation” of the subject, which contributes to the reproduction of the capitalist status quo. Consequently, I here argue that a socialist approach to the digital must commit to what Rosa would term an ideological (oppositional) deceleration to counteract such tendencies.

**Keywords:** digital socialism, social media, acceleration, hypermodulation, deceleration.

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## 1. Introduction

As Judy Wajcman (2015, 1) has noted, “there is a widespread perception that life these days is faster than it used to be”. Although there is not unilateral agreement on why, how or to what extent, one would be hard-pressed to find an argument to the contrary. She notes that “talk about life accelerating only makes sense against an implied backdrop of a slower past” (Wajcman 2015, 6), so any account of the acceleration of the pace of life must also provide an account of how we came to be so caught up in such perceived rapidity.

The most comprehensive account of social acceleration, and thus the focus of this paper, is given by Hartmut Rosa, a sociologist writing in the critical theory tradition. He argues that “we cannot adequately understand the nature and character of modernity and the logic of its structural and cultural development unless we add the temporal perspective to our analysis” (Rosa 2003, 4). In his 2013 work *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, Rosa denotes three systems of social acceleration (technical acceleration, the acceleration of social change, and the acceleration of the pace of life) which have emerged as fundamental to the human experience of late modernity.

Using Rosa’s theory of social acceleration, I shall argue that in the context of social media, social acceleration produces conditions which support a capitalist status quo. I shall conclude by constructing an account of ‘digital deceleration’ as a framework for thinking about socialist policies through the distinctive considerations of both social acceleration and digital politics.

## 2. The Features of Social Acceleration

For Rosa, “acceleration is an irreducible and constitutive trait of modernization” (Rosa 2003, 27). For modern societies, capitalist economics dictates that productivity and



growth must be continuously rising just in order to preserve what we already have, and it is this “frenetic standstill” as he refers to it, that leads to a state of individual and institutional inertia, insofar as these rapid changes undermine the belief that our lives and our actions are heading in some meaningful direction. Consider “frenetic standstill” as structurally analogous to the human body undergoing G-force, for example, in a Formula One car or during astronaut training: the acceleration imposed on the body makes movement incredibly difficult, such is the burden of the external gravitational weight, an invisible but dangerously potent relation of force causing both compressive and tensile stress. Rosa wants to explain that the lack of democratic transformation in our state of affairs is partially explained by such a phenomenon, that our institutions feel unable to initiate change because change is continuously enforced from outside, and as such, the uncertainty that is built into the stability of the economic systems of modernity create a sense of retrenchment; taking stock; a conservation of energies.

To return to Rosa’s three systems of social acceleration that characterise modernity, technical acceleration refers to the rapid developments in transportation and communication technologies: from horse-drawn carriages to automobiles with engines measured in horsepower, from handwritten letters to direct messaging on social media, from the wireless to the radio to the television to smart television streaming services (Rosa 2013, 97). Technological acceleration is the acceleration that is goal-directed, whether that be in communications, production, or transport. The project of making the Internet faster, of increasing the capacity of mobile batteries, of more powerful engines, of more immediate communications through telephony; all are contributors to the changing perception of time and space in social life. What was once an eight-month trip by sea is now a half-day trip by air: technological progress alongside globalization has compressed space in social life.

The second system of acceleration is the acceleration of social change, related to this first system of technological change, and can be explained anecdotally. When I was in primary school, I was one of the few children who had the privilege of accessing a home computer, where I would sit with my father and he’d watch over my shoulder as I wrote stories in a Word document or played a puzzle game. By being able to turn on the computer and the monitor, click “start”, load “Microsoft Word 1995” and type some words onto the screen, I was held up as a computer “whiz” by the teacher and would even be asked to help out with some of the younger children during their ICT lessons. Even if we remove the technological acceleration from this scenario, and the fact that computational power was such that it took half the lesson for the computer to even boot up (!), let us contrast this scenario with my experience working as a teaching assistant in a primary school in 2016: children as young as seven were capable of comfortably navigating protocols for saving their work on a cloud computing system. As for the older children who were at most eleven, never mind playing games. These kids were accessing a coding application that would help them *build their own!*

These examples give credence to the notion that the rate of technological change has a knock-on effect for social change: certain skill levels or practices are rendered obsolete by the changing relationship between technologies and their users. Looking back with hindsight, my computer skills were woefully overestimated, and if I had pursued a career in computer science rather than political theory because of my supposed mastery of word processing, I’d be sure to have had a rude awakening at some point. Nevertheless, as social change accelerates, the time in which our prior knowledge and experience can be considered to hold value or be applied to understand where we might be going is reduced (Rosa 2009, 83). By the time my ex-students grow up to be adults, it may be the case that their coding skills are deemed comparatively primitive,

as we lean more towards artificial intelligence to support computational processes. It is hard to guess where economic requirements, shifts in our cultural landscape, or technological developments, will require technical prowess. Prior to modernity, the way you boiled water, cooked food, performed daily tasks, would remain the same: you may learn a trade, a skill or a fact about the world in your childhood that would remain true and useful to be taught to your grandchildren. To be modern is to live through technological developments that fundamentally alter the ways in which people interact with their world, to shorten the lifespan of human relationships with particular technologies, and thus give life a sense of fast-paced movement, towards the direction of progress, or otherwise. Progress has its casualties; we are reticent to change, until we have little choice but to change to preserve what we have.

To quote Rosa directly, “social acceleration is defined by an increase in the decay-rates of the reliability of experiences and expectations and by a contraction of the time-spans definable as the ‘present’” (Rosa 2010, 16). Modernity has produced a social rapidity, where social beliefs and actions are considered sensible, mainstream, or acceptable, for shorter and shorter periods of time. Rosa refers to these rapid changes in “attitudes and values as well as fashions and lifestyles, social relations and obligations as well as groups, classes, or milieus, social languages as well as forms of practice and habits” (Rosa 2009, 83). Culture moves at a faster pace, where fashion trends, predominant music genres, all the way to political ideologies, are becoming harder and harder to catch up with: keeping “in the loop” is almost laborious, and this analysis is especially prescient in the age of social media, where internet memes and in-jokes can escalate within hours, disappear from relevance within a day and briefly resurface in an ironic, tired or even nostalgic reformulation by the end of a given week<sup>1</sup>.

For Rosa, the third system of social acceleration, the acceleration of the pace of life, can be understood as a form of subjectivity, an effect of feeling as if they are always running out of time, that there are never enough hours in the day; a subjectivity that views time as a commodity to be spent, and to be spent efficiently, a resource becoming scarce. Rosa defines it as “an increase in the number of episodes of action or experience per unit of time, i.e., it is a consequence of trying to do more things in less time” (Rosa 2010, 21). To explain this idea further, Rosa invites the reader to imagine a scenario where you spent two hours a week responding thoughtfully to a stack of a half-dozen letters. With the invention of e-mail, it would only take you an hour to do the same job. But that’s not what happens, of course: because you can now transmit your thoughts instantaneously across the world with the click of a mouse, you will sit for those two hours once used for letter-writing and instead try to get through forty or fifty e-mails under your belt, stopping after two hours as even more come flooding in. In other words, we try to compress actions into the time we have, but then this does not

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<sup>1</sup> We may also wish to incorporate Mark Fisher’s (2009) observation, specifically the notion that one of the problems of contemporary culture is the repackaging, collaging and reproduction of older styles for commodification, with little interest in breaking artistic and cultural boundaries and exploring the potential of art in a mainstream context. Fisher, a blogger and music critic as well as a cultural theorist, was particularly damning about the state of the British music scene, commenting in a lecture series that if you turned on any mainstream radio station and listen to the charts, you could be mistaken for thinking that the song could’ve been written anytime in the last 30/40 years. In other words, the acceleration of cultural change has led to stale imitation and stylistic reproduction, nostalgic homage as a more sure-fire commercial entity over the risk of authentic expression and experimentation.

give us more free time, rather the feeling of being constantly able to do more, coupled perhaps even with a tinge of guilt about the fact that we have not.

Bart Zantvoort's analysis of Rosa's overarching conceptual paradigm of social acceleration and inertia concludes with the thought that "the frenetic standstill diagnosed by Rosa [...] understood as global cultural-historical or institutional-structural phenomena, cannot be understood separately from the resistances – the vested interests, the ideological investments or the individual compulsions – which cause individuals to maintain the status quo" (2017, 720). I echo this sentiment: social acceleration can only be understood, and a political response only articulated, once we can understand the ways in which frenetic standstill is ideologically reproduced. Next, I shall explore Christian Fuchs' Marxist critique of social media; its endemic relationship to capitalism, its logic of profit, and the presentation of the user experience. Then, I shall focus (primarily) on the acceleration of the pace of life as I believe it coherently dovetails with Dominic Pettman's concept of "hypermodulation", from which I shall later argue that democratic socialism ought to concern itself with digital deceleration.

### 3. Social Media and Capitalism

It is argued that one of the key contemporary roles of the digital sociology literature is to acknowledge and address "the entangled nature of the material and the digital, people and machines" (Selwyn 2019, 25). More specifically, it is argued that we live in a "platform" society, where all areas of public and private life are permeated by platforms (van Dijck et al. 2018). Thus, for the theory of social acceleration to plausibly describe our contemporary situation, one would expect some tangible consequence to be found in the digital realm.

Christian Fuchs approaches modern theories of communication, specifically the Internet and social media, from the perspective of critical theory. He argues that social media operates to obscure the pre-existent class conditions of subordination and domination necessarily entailed by the capitalist mode of production (Fuchs 2016, 121). Fuchs discusses what he terms the dialectic of the subject and the object with regards to Internet communications. He argues that human beings, as subjects interacting with the object of social media, use its technologies for creating, sharing and communicating, for collaborative enterprises, and for the fostering of online communities. Through these communicative practices, the world of their social media becomes a "real" world, not only in the physical sense of being stored on computer servers, and accessible through devices, but also in the sense of becoming more concrete and objective on a psychological level.

This online world allows for communities to come to new understandings (and misunderstandings) of the pre-existent social world and produce discourses exclusive to these micro-communities, leading to meaningful interaction possibilities previously unarticulated. As Internet cultures grow, they bleed into the "real" world, as the shorthand and the discursive markers used online become more ubiquitous offline as our expectations change about how often the rest of society uses the internet (Fuchs 2016, 122). For example, the jarring experience one encounters when they overhear a teenager saying "lol" rather than laughing at a joke, blurring the lines between online and offline discourses.

Fuchs argues that the relationship of the individual and the social is "highly antagonistic". Social media can only exist in a context in which people are capable and willing to share, communicate, collaborate and identify with various communities, but that these actions, whilst encouraged on the online sphere by corporate social media, are precisely what the objective social reality has diminished with the individualist culture

that has emerged in western democracies. Individuals use corporate social media as a means of adhering to the “neoliberal performance principles” as Fuchs calls them, curating a picture of oneself for their social networks, and engaging with others on these platforms through the addition of carefully selected information available for others to view. Social media, in real terms, is a highly isolated and individualistic user experience dressed up as a community experience, and behind the curtain of the self-presenting “performance”, is what Fuchs refers to as the “private property character of social media” (Fuchs 2016, 122). Fuchs develops this idea further:

the fact that user data is sold as a commodity to advertisers- is hidden behind social media’s social appearance: you do not pay for accessing Twitter, Facebook, Google or YouTube. The obtained use-value seems to be the immediate social experience these platforms enable. The commodity character of personal data does not become immediately apparent because there is no exchange of money for use-values that the user experiences (Fuchs 2016, 122).

To posit the idea differently, outside of the language of Marxist economics, social media presents itself as a free-to-use tool for sharing things with your friends. Rather, it is a platform in which you turn yourself into a commodity by feeding advertisers information about your life, values and preferences through acts of curated self-presentation. There exists an ideological injunction to enjoy the social world, to participate not only as a free subject in the rules of the game, but also as an entertained subject, experiencing consumption as a form of ritualistic pleasure; we are all hedonists now. Fuchs argues:

Play labour is the new ideology of capitalism: objectively alienated labour is presented as creativity, freedom and autonomy that is fun for workers. The ideas that workers should have fun and love their objective alienation has become a new ideological strategy of capital and management theory. ‘Facebook labour’ is an expression of play labour ideology as element of the new spirit of capitalism (Fuchs 2016, 127).

As a consumer, the subject is conventionally presented as free and autonomous, exercising this right to choose by accessing the market economy to purchase commodities at will, within the constraints of one’s discretionary income. To reproduce capitalist relations of production, the system must present itself as the best possible system, and corporate media is complicit in maintaining this implicit message to keep the consumer-subject represented, and therefore, hegemonic. Social media presents its online platforms are purely for our use and entertainment, even down to their corporate pronouncements of benevolence; Facebook harnesses “the power to share and to make the world more open and connected”; YouTube wants to “connect, inform and inspire others across the globe”; Twitter wants you “to connect with people, express yourself and discover what’s happening” (Fuchs 2016, 133).

All major corporate social media present themselves as here to help, as benevolent as the visions of the peer-to-peer Internet of the 1990’s, or open-source software made freely available by socially conscious digital incubators: except unlike the utopian dreams of e-democrats, or the tools made available for others such as Wikipedia or Linux, these social media companies are worth billions on the stock exchange, despite their sloganeering implying a higher calling untethered from the demands of the market altogether.

Fuchs' primary claim is that there is a marked difference between how social media acts and how it wishes to appear to the end user. The purpose of social media is group formation and information exchange, to bring us together. Yet, capitalism subverts these newfound communication possibilities, and "fosters new forms of exploitation, commodification, individualism, and private property" (Fuchs 2016, 138). Whilst social media users upload pictures, message friends and express themselves online, they are funnelling data into a machine that primarily functions to transfer that data footprint into a product for a company to buy, to advertise to you in a way that turns your own sense of self back in on itself, into presenting you with a range of prospective commodity purchases.

Despite these misgivings about the relationship between social media and capitalist exploitation, Fuchs argues that there remains emancipatory potential within the technology: "[it] points towards, and forms together with other technologies, a material foundation of a democratic socialist society, in which the means of physical and informational production are collectively controlled" (Fuchs 2016, 146). The problem is that corporate social media undermines its own political possibilities by serving the capitalist status quo and serves to render new forms of "exploitation and ideology" (Fuchs 2016, 146). Social media turns consumers into *prosumers*, individuals compelled to labour for corporate profit under the guise of play; he argues that it is "mistaken to see Facebook as a communications company: it does not sell communication or access to communication, but user data and targeted advert space. Facebook is one of the world's largest advertising agencies" (Fuchs 2016, 170). Although social media platforms provide the capacity for users to communicate, they operate more like an online dating agency, pairing corporate partners with prospective consumers, under the auspice of connecting human beings with each other: except, as the users do not experience this manipulation of their own data, perhaps the analogy is closer to a blind date where you do not know you are being set up.

Fuchs' analysis of social media, specifically the dominant corporate platforms that shape the landscape, calls to mind the assemblage referred to as "The Twittering Machine" by Richard Seymour (2019), a reference to the Paul Klee painting of mechanical birds luring those enchanted by their song into a hidden ravine below. The following section will consider Dominic Pettman's account of social media subjectivity, emboldened with greater plausibility by Fuchs' prior account of social media's economic logic.

#### 4. Hypermodulation and the Digital Acceleration of the Pace of Life

Returning to the subject of social acceleration, Judy Wajcman (2015, 5-6) notes that "there are both different senses of feeling pressed for time and a range of mechanisms that trigger those feelings". It could be plausibly stated in a digital context that social media, specifically the universal platforms<sup>2</sup>, are predominantly responsible for such

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<sup>2</sup> The IPPR 2018 Commission for Economic Justice report refers specifically to Facebook, Alphabet, Amazon and Apple as the 'universal platforms' on the grounds "that they have accumulated the most data, developed the most advanced analytical capabilities and gained greatest ownership of the foundational infrastructure, from mapping to cloud computing, that underpins all digital technology" (Lawrence and Laybourn-Langton 2018, 1). In the context of social media, we may refer to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as the universal social media platforms, given their substantial market share, with the knowledge that Instagram is owned by Facebook and as such, their network effects are pooled, and with the caveat that China has its own internal social media market, which itself has created its own internally dominant platforms.

affects in contemporary subjectivity. In many ways, the largest platforms arguably resemble states in terms of their internal complexity and their systems of self-governance.

Following on from Christian Fuchs' analysis of the user experience, Dominic Pettman argues that social media represents itself to us as a tailored and unique experience in which the individuality of our identity is paramount, and its form is limitless in the sense that "no two people will navigate the same branching pathways" (Pettman 2016, xi-xii). His approach, which also draws from critical theory, negotiates the modern world of the consumer-citizen, claiming that "we hover between the older conceptions of what it is to be a person- a citizen, with rights, responsibilities, character, agency, identity, and so on- and new, emerging types of being- a consumer, with cravings, likes, profiles, and opinions, leaving a trail of cookie crumbs in our wake" (Pettman 2016, 6). Pettman appeals to the conceptual frameworks of thinkers like Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard to argue that subjectivity has lost its "scene" and has been replaced by the "ob-scene", by which is meant that traditional distinctions between "public vs. private, self vs. other, subject vs. other" have been eroded and in their place, a subject whose identity is contingent on its consumption, circulation and production of images for a broader technological apparatus. Specifically

the "ecstasy" afforded by social media is decidedly not an overwhelming thrill or sense of bliss, but rather the homeopathic parcelling of tiny and banal moments of recognition, reassurance, ego reinforcement, humblebragging, notoriety, curiosity, shame, and a galaxy of other modest- but collectively significant- affects (Pettman 2016, 10).

Linking this account of social media to Pettman's prior conversation surrounding subjectivity, he makes the compelling claim that social media is not primarily used for enjoyment, so much as to reinforce our identities, and ensure our visibility to our peers. Pettman explores the motivations behind the willingness of users to surrender personal information, photos, videos, conversation logs and other data over to a corporate platform for the validation that network visibility incurs. In this sense, digital natives are "becoming 'exo-subjects', sending selfies out into the void, in the search for validation of a self that is now distributed across the wires" (Pettman 2016, 10). When users are curating their social media presence, they are quite literally ensuring that they are present, that they have the validation of existence in cyberspace, an increasingly important space where the identity is stored permanently, in a way that requires management by the real-world subject; otherwise, one's identity can become shaped by external forces, such as individuals tagging you in unflattering pictures, uploading embarrassing videos, or being criticised on these public platforms without exercising one's right to reply: Fuchs' "play labour" account is almost too optimistic; curating a social media account with the level of detail required to flourish in cyberspace is joyless, uncompensated work, yet it is all but expected of all digital natives.

We can link this scenario to the consequences of social acceleration: because we can express ourselves online, and social media provides a platform to advertise our businesses, support our hobbies, pursue our personal interests, we are slowly inculcated by these heavily addictive technologies to do so with more frequency and intensity than we otherwise would. The fact that we can get instant updates immediately on our phones rather than having to hear about it all on the six o'clock news means that we are constantly checking our phones: "it is as though, one day, it's going to bring us the message we have been waiting for" (Seymour 2019, 69).

Pettman argues that the contemporary subject is being guided by “hypermodulation: the attempt to distract us from the fact that we are indeed being synchronized to an unprecedented degree” (Pettman 2016, 130). The contention is that social media’s apparatus distracts its users with small bursts of content that elicit various affective states, often at different times as other users, and at an ever-faster rate. Our emotional states are, therefore, compartmentalized, reduced to quick, sharp reactions to images, reports or actions on an algorithmically determined feed of news unique to the user. He argues that this flattens the user’s experience of social reality, which is perceived as a series of unrelated, chaotic micro-events, without a basis to form a coherent overarching social narrative. Social media leaves the subject fragmented and attempting to form a cohesive sense of identification by curating their feed to serve as an echo chamber, or by jumping to unsubstantiated conclusions.

Instead of the conventional understanding of critical theory that we are “always-already” to become a subject, as we operate with an understanding of the signs, symbols and language used for the interpellative process, the fragmentation caused by media representations causes the user to remain “always-nearly” a subject, uncertain of our place in the world: meaning is deferred by the infinite series of distractions. Rather than distraction being used to take our attention away from events that we would otherwise see, Pettman believes that the distraction is the decoy itself: social media is addictive because it distracts us with numerous interpretations, commentaries and reactions to the event that would be conventionally occluded: the political event is distorted through extensive coverage, rather than remaining unknown (Pettman 2016, 11).

The Internet provides users with access to more information, of varying degrees of authenticity and credibility, than ever before in human history, and social media is the most sophisticated attempt (so far) to compartmentalise that information in such a manner as to provide an ongoing report of social experiences, and in doing so, positions the user’s auto-curated profile as the location from where to orient this information. Pettman’s provocation is that social media protects the status quo by showing you what is happening, but as a series of seemingly unrelated experiential nodes, and at different times as your fellow users, so that you may vent your anger at injustice in isolation, rather than finding a means of protest or resistance in collective outrage. By showing all information and presenting it with the same level of urgency and immediacy, it induces a “flattening” affect for the user: “matters of potentially historic import, like a civil rights issue [...] are now flattened into the same homogeneous, empty digital space as a cute critter or an obnoxious celebrity” (Pettman 2016, 35). By receiving these various interpretations and media representations of numerous events alongside one another from different perspectives, the important political events, and indeed the larger social world, appear chaotic and unintelligible, which discourages active political participation.

However, Pettman’s analysis veers towards the conspiratorial in his claim that “*it is quite deliberate* that while one person is fuming about economic injustice or climate change denial, another is giggling at a cute cat video [...] that nebulous indignation which constitutes the very fuel of true social change can then be redirected safely around the network” (Pettman 2016, 29-30, my emphasis). That this controversial claim is made without evidence leaves it dubious but taken as literary license rather than a po-faced accusation, it can be plausibly argued that social media produces this circulation of emotional responses around the network as a coincidental consequence of the platform’s structure, in a way that may feel intentional.

Later, Pettman gives the example of Facebook admitting to “experimenting with users” feeds to ascertain the extent to which they can transfer via “emotional contagion”: leading unrelated individuals to experience the same emotional state because of the platform’s active intervention and manipulation” (Pettman 2016, 82-84). However, there remains a marked difference between arguing that social media platforms are engaging in a systematic strategy of intentional interpellation and arguing that social media platforms have demonstrated that they are nonetheless capable of doing so. Just because they can, does not mean they are. But given the continuous revelations and scandals breaking about the tech giants, so many that by the time you read this, the one that comes to your mind may be different to the one that I would otherwise propose, would it be particularly surprising if Pettman was right all along?

Returning to the psychological implications for the subject, he argues that the disorientation caused by social media produces “emotional dissonance”, because as the user is pulled in different directions that elicit completely incongruous emotional states, “the moral hierarchies of human culture crumble into a caricature of democracy, in which all elements are equal”, in which being “charmed by videos of interspecies friendship” and “(almost) simultaneously disgusted by the latest crime footage” (Pettman 2016, 37) leads to a blurring of events into individual moments that prompt virtual reactions; a like, a love-heart, a share, a retweet.

Social media produces a vision of a world too chaotic to be challenged, where the subject is enticed into fitting into the social machine without friction to “get on” in life, and to move from distraction to distraction. Whilst Pettman envisions a world where social media designers build distraction into the model for nefarious political ends, I here argue there is a more plausible explanation: hypermodulation is not a political conspiracy, but an unintentional consequence of the incentive structure of platform capitalism informed by the social acceleration of the pace of life. In other words, hypermodulation is caused by what may be termed the digital acceleration of the pace of life, and thus digital deceleration, the replacement of the universal platforms with alternatives sensitive to these affective conditions, may provide a corrective.

## 5. Thinking Deceleration

When Rosa talks about deceleration, he considers it as something that occurs in five different ways: firstly, the natural and anthropological speed-limits of biological life; secondly, the oases of deceleration that exist either because they eschew modernity in the case of the Amish population of the United States, avoided modernity in the case of excluded, isolated tribal populations, or deceleration/productive patience is required for their process, such as the production of whiskey; thirdly, deceleration can occur as a dysfunctional by-product of acceleration, as is the case for traffic jams; fourthly, functional (acceleratory) deceleration, for example, when time-pressed corporate managers take time to “decompress” on yoga retreats so that they may return to achieve success in their accelerated careers without burnout, or ideological (oppositional) deceleration, with examples such as the (historical) luddites or (contemporary) “deep-ecology” anarchist movements; fifth and finally, the structural and cultural inertia that occurs as a consequence of frenetic standstill, supported by the (once-popular) claim in sociology and theory that “there are no new visions and energies available to modern society (hence the most notable absence of “utopian energies”)” (Rosa 2010, 38-39).

Digital socialist deceleration, I argue, ought to be considered an ideological (oppositional) deceleration, by way of an acknowledgement of structural and cultural inertia,



which involves rejecting the supporting sociological claims<sup>3</sup>. Digital socialist deceleration rejects the view that we have rejected the end of history and sees this lack of utopian energies because of a collective poverty, or lack of acknowledgement of, radical political thought (with varying theories as to why). We have learned through Rosa's analysis that there are circumstances where deceleration can be a dysfunctional consequence, such as instances where everyone using a new technology causes that technology to malfunction or slow down (think servers crashing on the release date of a highly-anticipated computer game), and there are even instances where deceleration is intentionally inscribed into a system for the purpose of further acceleration (my cynical example would be firms giving workers the weekend so that they are refreshed to be productive on weekdays). What does a socialist project look like under these supposed conditions of modernity? And what role does "modernity" seem to be playing in Rosa's work when many would suggest that "capitalism" would be a more adequate descriptor?

What is modernity if it is not roughly the point at which capitalism began in the western world? What do we have to gain from ignoring the obvious fact that we feel the need to send off fifty e-mails in one sitting because there are external financial pressures beyond technological progress allowing for excess sociability? We are going faster because we must go faster, because we can go faster, because our bosses say that if we can, we should, and if we do not, we will be fired. Rosa argues that the merits of his theory of social acceleration includes its ability to explain "the transformation of the productive and consumptive regimes of modernity- from early modernity to "classical", Fordist modernity and so on to "late modernity" (Rosa 2010, 54). Rosa says that he does not claim that acceleration is the basis for society, rather a *dynamis*, its driving force and its logic or law or change" (Rosa 2010, 54). Although I would argue that the profit motive serves as the primary engine of change, these competing explanations do not necessarily come into conflict during this paper's analysis of social media. Nevertheless, it seems plausible that social media's relationship to its platform capitalist modus operandi is the driving force behind the hypermodulation of the subject, and thus deceleration of social media will either be instantiated through an anti-capitalist ideological opposition, or interestingly, a functional acceleratory project; in other words, the growing marketplace for products and services that encourage "digital detox". Capitalism attempts to solve the problem it creates itself: a cynical phenomenon exploited by the "happiness industry" (Davies 2015).

Rosa wonderfully articulates the contradiction at the heart of liberal democratic modernity, an individualist subjectivity that privileges autonomy of action and decision-making as paramount to what makes us human, and yet paradoxically diminishes our capacity for such prospective actions and decision-making, obscured by the systems of control that permeate and dominate our social structures. The socialist project argues that the capitalist mode of production obstructs the autonomy promised by liberal

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<sup>3</sup> Socialism is here defined as commitment to the following principles: equality, insofar as all should have broadly equal access to the necessary material and social means to live flourishing lives of autonomy and self-directed meaning; a commitment to democracy as the political basis for ensuring all have the capacity to make meaningful contributions to the decision-making processes that will shape the social conditions of their lives (and recourse to correct instances of individual or collective injustices); a positive account of freedom shaped by a belief in self-determination and self-actualisation (which is linked to the notion of equality as means of ensuring autonomy); and solidarity, as G.A. Cohen put it, that people should "care about, and, where necessary and possible, care for, one another, and, too, care that they care about one another" (Cohen 2009, 34–35).

democracy, and as such, a transition to an alternative material state of affairs in concert with a more radical democratic culture will better serve the political goal of human emancipation.

Rosa observes that “in late-modern politics, it is no longer (if it ever was) the force of the better argument which decides on future politics, but the power of resentments, gut-feelings, suggestive metaphors and images” (Rosa 2010, 56), and it could be argued that this political discourse that Rosa considers a cultural consequence of social acceleration, is increasingly and more commonly articulated and circulated on social media.

## 6. On Socialist Acceleration v Socialist Deceleration

As many readers will be familiar with theories on the contemporary left, it is here where the difference between Rosa’s account of acceleration and the accounts of left-accelerationism as a political stance become more explicit. When Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2013) refer to “accelerationist” politics, they are referring to the notion that capitalism, and its associated productive and distributive processes, should be accelerated instead of overcome, in order to reach socialist ends. In this sense, acceleration is posited as the harnessing of technological capacities that are limited by the capitalist paradigm, rather than being linked to more general understandings of social and cultural change. By characterising technological acceleration in its contemporary form as distinctively neoliberal, they are ostensibly politicising the very framework used in the sociology literature, and ironically, policies that I term “digital decelerationist” for the purposes of thinking within the framework could well be considered accelerationism in the context in which Srnicek and Williams use the term.

Both Rosa and left-accelerationists agree that capitalism alone is not responsible for our contemporary situation: “left-accelerationism begins with the premise that the deterritorializing force is not capitalism itself, but the transition from feudalism to capitalism was the expression of an emancipatory drive that capitalism’s reterritorialising dynamics has systematically (but never wholly) suppressed” (Wolfendale 2019). However, where they separate from each other is in political praxis: where Rosa and others see an unstoppable problem that inevitably unfolds from modern life, Srnicek, Williams and other left-accelerationists see an opportunity: but why? The key difference between the sociology literature and the left-accelerationist position is that the latter do not perceive the process of techno-social acceleration as a continuous path through modernity, but rather characterise our contemporary situation as approaching a crisis-point, a rupture, a disruption: for example, Aaron Bastani (2019) argues that we are approaching the third disruption of capitalism (where the first was the agricultural revolution and the second was the industrial revolution) and that our world must confront the following five crises and its consequence: “climate change, resource scarcity, ever-larger surplus populations, ageing and technological unemployment as a result of automation – are set to undermine capitalism’s ability to reproduce itself” (Bastani 2019, 48). In other words, whereas Rosa sees a world that may collapse because of its commitment to acceleration, left-accelerationism is more cynical (of capitalism) and less pessimistic (about prospects for the future):

Capitalism has begun to constrain the productive forces of technology, or at least, direct them towards needlessly narrow ends. Patent wars and idea monopolisation are contemporary phenomena that point to both capital’s need to move beyond competition, and capital’s increasingly retrograde approach to

technology. The properly accelerative gains of neoliberalism have not led to less work or less stress (Williams and Srnicek 2013).

Left-accelerationists want to push techno-social acceleration further because they perceive capitalism as a limiting, binding agent that is restricting our technological capacities. The existing infrastructure of the global economy ought not to be destroyed, rather harnessed for the purpose of meeting human needs and launching us towards a post-capitalist future. However, given the previously described account of hypermodulation as the subjectivity produced by our contemporary social media systems, I believe that a digital socialist approach must be decelerationist in nature to counteract such tendencies. As shall be demonstrated in the conclusion, the digital decelerationist policies that I conclude by advocating are plausibly compatible with broader left-accelerationist projects in other sectors, although locating compromise between these positions and these different interpretations of “acceleration” as a concept was not an explicit aim of the paper. Given the recent prominence of accelerationism as an in-vogue concept on both the contemporary left and right, and its specific prominence amongst political circles on the Internet, I believe there is value in distinguishing between Rosa’s account of social acceleration and the implications that emerge from his framework, and the way “accelerationism” is interpreted as a process by a distinct, if occasionally overlapping, literature.

## 7. Conclusion: Towards A Socialist Digital Deceleration

In the language that Rosa has given us, therefore, a socialist politics is a politics that wishes to “decelerate” society, insofar as it wishes to undermine the capitalist logic of continuous growth, and undercut the anxious subjectivity driven to action by frenetic standstill. There may be many instances within a broader socialist project where arguments for acceleration hold water (for example, technological progress in renewable energies; AI-driven bureaucracy to support a streamlined and robust welfare state, etc.), but for the limited purposes of this paper, I shall focus on the socialist response to the problem that social acceleration causes for social media, and how best to counteract such tendencies.

If we accept the view that our social media activity provides the illusion of meaningful critical engagement, whilst also reinforcing the hegemonic profitability and ubiquity of the universal platforms, and that hypermodulation induces the kind of passivity, uncertainty and disorientation that Pettman describes, then any attempt to undermine these effects would be a small but substantial contribution to a project of digital deceleration, and thus a rollback of the affective conditions that serve to reproduce the capitalist status quo of contemporary modernity.

On the individual level, Marcus Gilroy-Ware, in his 2017 book *Filling The Void: Emotion, Capitalism & Social Media*, concludes by offering suggestions to counteract what Pettman would term hypermodulation, as well as undermine the dominance of these digital institutions. Gilroy-Ware suggests limiting the time spent on the Internet, spent time researching and using independent/ethical/decentralised alternative digital products, limiting the amount of data that you consent to give away, corrupt the data by providing false information to undermine the predictive potential of universal platform algorithms, and resist the urge to care too much about being present and visible on social media (Gilroy-Ware 2017, 188-191). Unfortunately, it’s easier said than done, given that the very network effects that encourage one’s participation in social media would be lost the moment one turns to more obscure services. In terms of proposals for collective action, he suggests putting public pressure on social media companies

to change their ways, build your own open technologies and support others in building ethical social media businesses and “reclaim the idea of social media by producing media and culture that use these hallmarks to undermine the artificial, cruel stability of late capitalism and build something better” (Gilroy-Ware 2017, 191).

Digital deceleration, in practice, is a conscious rejection of the valorisation of a productivity-driven, individualist culture, because it is a rejection of the conditions that produce frenetic standstill. Digital deceleration, therefore, would operate as a practical principle of insuring that reforms to digital platforms, networks and data laws would be designed with an overarching commitment to undermine the disorientating experience of digital subjectivity, reducing the hypermodulation of social media users, and building a new relationship between digital consumers and their tools incongruous with the ideological reproduction of capitalist sentiment. Writing with very broad strokes, below are some examples that may correspond to a notion of digital socialist deceleration:

- digital spaces of egalitarian discussion for an indefinite period supported by interaction with an audience (co-operative software model for live streaming as opposed to corporate-owned social media reaction);
- socialist regulation that turns certain apps into non-profits to maximize value, allow for peer-to-peer connection and services to be rendered at lower cost without capitalist extraction (e.g. TFL (Transport for London) needs to produce an Uber app);
- an independent, regulated and verified non-profit Twitter-style social media application in which libel law applies and which is monitored by press regulators (i.e. a slow, factual Twitter that operates as a co-op in which users are paid for both viewing and contributing to the feed);
- an international supreme court composed of technological innovators, IP lawyers (or lawyers that previously worked on the defunct concept of IP, given the scale of our socialist ambitions) and ethicists that can make decisions to limit the scope, scale and application of emergent technologies, to counter the acceleration of exploitative models through rapid corporate investment.

A digital socialist project wishes to advance the cause of democratic socialism, undermine the capitalist relations between human beings when they engage with digital communications, and create conditions for the critical interrogation of ideology on an individual and collective level. A socialist project must acknowledge and respond to the constitutive role that the digital plays in the process of subject formation. A democratic socialist social media, therefore, would be “decelerationist” in this context, by which is meant it would advocate changes in the material life of social media in particular, and the internet in general, that would reduce hypermodulation, caused by the digital acceleration of the pace of life endemic to social media subjectivity. A working principle of digital deceleration is, therefore, merely the idea that any socialist political project oriented towards the digital ought to consider how its prospective interventions (whether they be alternative platforms, legislative agendas or otherwise) serve to influence the subjectivity of its users, and keep in mind the notion that current social media trends in platform design, network effects and content production is skewed towards enabling and augmenting the frenetic standstill of modern capitalist subjectivity. A socialist social media, therefore, must be a decelerated social media.

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# Communicating Communism: Social Spaces and the Creation of a “Progressive” Public Sphere in Kerala, India.

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**Abstract:** Communism arrived in the south Indian state of Kerala in the early twentieth century at a time when the matrilineal systems that governed caste-Hindu relations were crumbling quickly. For a large part of the twentieth century, the Communist Party – specifically the Communist Party of India (Marxist) – played a major role in navigating Kerala society through a developmental path based on equality, justice and solidarity. Following Lefebvre’s conceptualisation of (social) space, this paper explores how informal social spaces played an important role in communicating ideas of communism and socialism to the masses. Early communists used rural libraries and reading rooms, tea-shops, public grounds and wall-art to engage with and communicate communism to the masses. What can the efforts of the early communists in Kerala tell us about the potential for communicative socialism? How can we adapt these experiences in the twenty-first century? Using autobiographies, memoirs, and personal interviews, this paper addresses these questions.

**Keywords:** social spaces, communism, Kerala, modernity, autogestion, Henri Lefebvre

## 1. Introduction

Kerala – a state that lies on the south-western end of the Indian peninsula – has remained a distinct part of India owing to its unique physical, cultural, and political characteristics. The Arabian Sea on its west and the Western Ghats (mountains) on its east have led to the evolution of a kind of insularity which has given it immunity from the political convulsions of Indian history which shook northern India (A. Menon 2015, 14; Damodaran and Vishvanathan 1995, 1). Until about two centuries ago, Kerala was among the most traditional regions of the country, with deep caste cleavages and rigid laws of purity and pollution that divided the populations. But over the twentieth-century, Kerala went on from being tagged as a “mad-house” of caste, to one of the most politically charged, secular and developed states in the country<sup>1</sup>. Although religion continued to influence basic attributes of Malayali identity, direct forms of oppression were less prevalent in Kerala’s public sphere than any other states by the 1970s (Nossiter 1982, 33).

Kerala also remains one of the few parts of India where the left-parties play an active and important socio-political role. Electorally, an alliance of left parties called the Left Democratic Front was formed post-independence, of which the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (hereafter CPI(M)) continues to be the largest political party. More importantly, the left has played a pivotal role in shaping public discourse and consciousness in Kerala since the 1930s, building on the religious and political reform movements initiated in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-centuries. Yet, this control of the communists over the public sphere has come under severe strain over the

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<sup>1</sup> Kerala was called a “mad-house” of caste by Swami Vivekananda – Hindu monk, and nationalist. See Nossiter (1982, 25-26), Gopakumar (2009, 393-406)

last few decades as forces of capitalism and religion threaten the secular social fabric of the society. At this critical juncture in history, this paper looks back at the twentieth-century and tease out the importance of social spaces in communicating communism to the masses in Kerala. The next section lays out the theoretical framework used for this paper. Section 3 describes briefly the context in which communism arrived in Kerala, before exploring the important role played by informal everyday social spaces. Although many such spaces emerged in post-independence Kerala, this paper focuses on two specific ones that have etched their place in popular imagination but have received little academic attention: reading-rooms and tea-shops. The last section discusses the changing nature of social spaces in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and communist responses.

The data presented here is a collection of content analysis of autobiographies and semi-structured personal interviews conducted over two periods of field visits in 2017 and 2018. A total of fourteen interviews were conducted and respondents were chosen using snowball sampling. Although no specific measures were taken to choose specific genders, religions or caste for the non-expert interviews, the fact that only two of the respondents were female reflects the fact that the public sphere in Kerala continues to be dominated by males. Autobiographies of E.M.S Namboodirippad and K. Madhavan, and a biography of Krishna Pillai – all communist leaders from Kerala – have been used.

## 2. Social Spaces and the Public Sphere

Space – as an analytical tool – re-entered social theory in the last decades of twentieth-century after being treated as dead, fixed and immobile for generations (Foucault 1980, 70). Over the last three to four decades, many geographers, sociologists, and political scientists like David Harvey, Derek Gregory, Doreen Massey, Edward Soja, Laura Baraclough, Philip Howell, Christian Fuchs, Neil Brenner, and others have revisited the importance of space in shaping discourse, public opinions, and social relations. Henri Lefebvre's (1991) seminal work *The Production of Space* continues to be a point of departure directly or indirectly for a number of these studies. In his work, Lefebvre points out that "space" remains a concept never fully conceptualised in social sciences. It continues to be used in myriad ways without being critically engaged with, and we are confronted with a "multitude of spaces, each one piled upon, or perhaps contained within the next: geographical, economic, demographic, sociological, ecological, political, commercial, national, continental, and global. Not to mention nature's (physical) space, the space of (energy) flows, and so on" (Lefebvre 1991, 2; 8).

Yet, Lefebvre asks, why is it that there is no spatial criticism on par with the criticism of art, literature, or music? This question leads Lefebvre in his endeavour to theorise space, and to conceptualise a unitary theory that separates physical (nature), mental (including logical and formal abstractions) and the social space, to discern their mutual relationships and differences, and to open up space to critical enquiry. Such a critical enquiry was contingent on a Marxist analysis of society:

the social relations of production have a social existence only insofar as they exist spatially; they project themselves into a space, they inscribe themselves in a space while producing it. Otherwise, they remain 'pure' abstraction, that is, in representations and consequently in ideology, or, stated differently, in verbalism, verbiage, words (Lefebvre, translated and cited in Soja 1989, 127-128).

The idea is not to arrive at a universal theory but a unitary one – to force social sciences to think about space seriously – and think critically about the importance of spatiality in better understanding social relations (Lefebvre 1991, 89).

We can begin to do this by separating space into three interconnected realms – representations of space (conceived space), spatial practice (perceived space), and representational space (lived space). Even as dominant power structures in society (colonial powers, higher castes, the State, capital) attempt to control representations of space and spatial practices, an absolute control remains unachievable, because the representational space remains subversive; “representational space is alive: it speaks” (Lefebvre 1991, 42). In other words, the lived spaces where human experience is shaped through the everyday social interactions also shape these interactions themselves. Especially in the modern state mode of production, a system where the State (and capital) increasingly control all spaces, Lefebvre argues that left forces must give up their utopianism and embrace the emancipatory potential of social spaces that arise from the constant contradictions between representations of space and representational spaces.

This paper borrows from Lefebvre’s theory on the production of (social) spaces to focus on the everyday spaces as being important in communicating an ideology at a given time and space. Doing so would, on the one hand, bring space into analysis, while on the other it also allows for human experience as being considered central to understanding society, especially in extremely diverse and hierarchical societies like India (Guru and Sarukkai 2012; Guru and Sarukkai 2019; Mohan 2016).

Fuchs (2019) has made a similar argument recently, pointing out that Lefebvre’s humanist Marxism and the emphasis on human experience and social spaces can contribute to the foundations of a theory of communication. Here, I look at the case of the south Indian state of Kerala, where the political left has dominated the mainstream public sphere since the 1930s onwards<sup>2</sup>. For a revolution to be successful, it must create a new (social) space. When an ideology – any ideology – influences social relations in a society, it does so by producing new spaces or appropriating existing spaces. What then can be said of the spatiality of socialism? As Lefebvre asks, “has state socialism produced a space of its own?” (Lefebvre 1991, 54). What role did (social) spaces play in communicating socialism in twentieth-century Kerala? How have these spaces transformed in the twenty-first century, and how must the left-parties respond? These are the questions I address in this paper.

### 3. Communism and (Social) Spaces in Kerala

Communism arrived in Kerala<sup>3</sup> in the early-twentieth-century, at a time when traditional social structures were being rapidly overthrown and a more progressive, modern, secular public sphere emerged. Pre-modern Kerala was organised in a Hindu Brahminical system<sup>4</sup> and the Namboodiris (Kerala Brahmins) controlled the ideological sphere as

<sup>2</sup> The communist party adopted a social-democratic model in post-independent India and contested elections.

<sup>3</sup> Before Indian independence, Kerala comprised of the regions of Malabar (administered by the British), and the kingdoms of Cochin and Travancore. Malabar became a *de facto* part of the Indian Union in 1947, and Cochin and Travancore merged with India in 1949. Later, the three regions merged when Kerala was carved out as a result of the linguistic reorganisation of states in 1956

<sup>4</sup> The Hindu caste system divided society into four castes based on hierarchy – the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras – the Brahmins being considered the “purest” and the Shudras the “impure”. Each caste had a set of laws of purity and pollution that



the repository of knowledge and discourse. Politically, land was divided into semi-autonomous temple-centred villages. Means of production were controlled by the large temple corporations managed by Namboodiris or the socially next-lower Nair castes. All villagers across castes were thereby directly or indirectly dependent on the temple for employment. There was, in other words, a spatiality to how the society, resources and communities were arranged. The idea of “body as space” is vital here because we see that the purity of the Namboodiri body was the pivotal concept around which social – and consequently, material – relations were arranged. Social spaces were defined “outwards” from the Brahmin body, and analysing how spaces were distributed and controlled allows us – as Lefebvre attempts – to study space *as itself*. As Sanal Mohan (2016, 43) argues:

Representations of space in traditional caste society were the exclusive privilege of the upper castes. They in fact conceived and controlled it. Absolute control over space in the caste order that denied freedom to the slave castes was accomplished by exerting control over their spatial mobility. Stuck in the places where they lived, in most cases on the banks of rice fields or the borders of the landlords’ farms, the immutability of space was the experience of slaves.

Yet, even as Namboodiris had controlled the representations of space (conceived space) and spatial practices (perceived space) through the caste system supported by the laws of purity and pollution, the spread of missionary activities and access of education to the lower castes provided space for the traditional structures to be challenged. Meanwhile, social-reform movements that focussed on the idea of the body as space instilled in the lowered castes communities, an agency earlier denied to them. Parallel spaces that opened up courtesy of their conversion to Christianity further redefined their perceptions of space – and thereby the spatial practices which relied heavily on the adherence to them by the lower castes. Consequently, over the nineteenth and early-twentieth-century, struggles ensued that challenged the traditional social structures. And public (social) spaces remained very much pivotal to these struggles – spaces earlier reserved to higher castes were appropriated, while new social spaces of modernity opened up that allowed for new social relations and ideologies to be introduced.

By the 1930s, Kerala witnessed a social disintegration on a scale unequalled elsewhere in India and the matrilineal systems that governed caste-Hindu relations crumbled quickly (Jeffrey 1978, 77; Nossiter 1982, 17). Traditional social order was in the decline and new social spaces were being created that drew out new spatial practices that governed social relations. Yet, the unresolved tensions with respect to gender – and specifically the attempt and a spatial divide between the domestic and public – meant that a simply reformed version of the traditional society would not suffice. The unresolved gender and religious reforms were subsequently replaced with the struggles for economic equality and social justice. It is this ideological gap that Marxism came to fill in the 1930s in Kerala. It was assumed that solving the issue of class would automatically resolve the problem of caste and gender inequalities (Menon 1992, 2705; Devika 2012). The men and women who were unsettled with the changes turned towards this ideology which appealed to thousands of literate, alienated people (Jeffrey 1978, 78). When the left-leaning Congress Socialist Party (CSP) was formed in Bombay in 1934, and its Kerala wing (KCSP) was founded by P. Krishna Pillai, E.M.S.

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governed their interactions with other castes. The lowest castes were treated as untouchables – a segregation that also reflected in their expulsion from mainstream public sphere.

Namboodirippad and A.K. Gopalan in the same year. The communists in Malabar at the period attempted to create a community by renegotiating rural relations while organising mass agitations for the rights of the peasants (Menon 1994, 4). In the princely states, socialism developed within a framework of the struggles for responsible government that had shaped in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Although a political front of communists also took shape in the 1930s, Marxist ideology had been introduced into Kerala's public sphere earlier when journalist Swadesabhimani Ramakrishna Pillai wrote a biography of Marx's life in 1912 – arguably the first book on Marx published in any Indian language (Damodaran 1975, 98). Soon, periodicals such as *Bhashaposhini* and *Vidyavinodini* published articles on the new ideals of socialism<sup>5</sup>. But it is in the 1930s that we see clear indications of class replacing caste as a visible social characterisation in the public sphere. More importantly, the first signs of this transition became visible in the new social spaces. A coir worker's strike in 1933 raised the slogan: "Destroy the Nairs, destroy Nair rule, destroy capitalism" (Jeffrey 1976, 21). Three years later, when Bharatheeyan begins his speech at the first all-Malabar peasant meeting with the lines "there are only two castes, two religions and two classes – the haves and the have nots", he was also alluding to a shift occurring in Kerala's popular imagination – the addition of class as a category different from caste (Menon 1992, 2706).

E.M.S. Namboodirippad wrote in his autobiography, that despite having been introduced to socialism through books while younger, it was only when he started to interact with people from diverse backgrounds that a sense of public responsibility was instilled in him. The importance of the new social spaces of early twentieth-century Kerala is undeniable. The reading rooms, tea-shops and trade unions were, as Lefebvre argued, new spaces that signalled and influenced a transformation in social relations.

Early communists were quick to realise the importance of representational spaces (lived spaces) – both private and public – in communicating communism to the masses. The literate higher-caste members who were already attracted to Marxism saw such engagements with the peasant and labourers – most of whom belonged to the lower castes – as being important to win their trust. For this, they were asked consciously to break those spatial practices that had defined traditional caste hierarchies. Visiting the huts of the labourers and dining with them were revolutionary social changes that served a symbolic and a social purpose. K. Madhavan (1915-2016) who belonged to the first file of communists in Kerala, notes in his autobiography that to earn the trust of the lowered caste members in society, early communists were asked to visit the huts of the peasants, and "ask for water to drink before leaving", to earn their trust (Madhavan 2014, 16). Such acts had a profound impact in winning the social and political support of the lowered-caste communities (Kunjaman 1996).

Soon, the communists also appropriated and used public spaces such as the village-squares and public grounds to reach out to the common masses. In as early as in 1934 when the young critics were denied a space at the main literary conference in Tallicherry, socialist P. Krishna Pillai invited Kesav Dev to deliver a speech at a Youth Conference that he organised in an open market near a *kavala*<sup>6</sup>.

In his speech, Dev came down heavily on the mainstream literary sphere, arguing that it was time for the writers to move away from the palaces to write about the toiling masses, their poverty and their struggles. It was a speech that reflected the socialist

<sup>5</sup> During my archival work, I came across two articles in *Bhashaposhini* and one in *Vidyavinodini*, all published in the 1920s.

<sup>6</sup> (Kunhiraman 2013, 86-87); a *kavala* is a foursquare and acted as the node of activity in the villages or neighbourhoods (see Figure 1).

ideology that was to spread quickly in the following decade, and it was befitting that it was delivered in the *kavala* to an eager, diverse and enthusiastic crowd. By the end of the decade, *kavalas* had emerged as social spaces of importance. Rifts within the KCSP after the outbreak of World War II led to socialist leaders being expelled from the party and forced to go into hiding. When the Communist Party was formed in Kerala in January 1940<sup>7</sup>, their leaders were in hiding. However, they decided that the announcement had to be made publicly. The solution suggested by the leaders was to paint communist messages on the walls in public spaces and *kavalas* of north Malabar (Kunhiraman 2013, 63-64). The slogans “Long Live the Communist Party” and “May Feudalism and Imperialism Perish” that appeared on the walls and *kavalas* of Malabar, Travancore and Cochin in 1940-41 announced the emergence of the Communist Party, but also the secularisation and democratisation of public spaces in Kerala’s public sphere. By the mid-twentieth century, they also managed to create a strong network of new social spaces which constituted informal but vibrant associational spaces for the youngsters, predominantly male. In the second half of the twentieth century, Communist party-led trade unions, arts and cultural associations, literary and science forums all inundated the public sphere, taking communism to the common masses through theatre, music, pamphlets, lectures and stories.



Figure 1: A Kavala near Velinellur, Kerala, Picture by author, 03 July 2018

This research looks at the less formal social spaces that coexisted in twentieth-century Kerala, where informal associations formed through everyday interactions. These were not spaces maintained or controlled exclusively by the political party structures, but neither can they be brushed aside as inconsequential. Two such spaces stand out as

<sup>7</sup> In Malabar, and a year later, on 26 January 1941 in Travancore and Cochin.

important when one studies the case of Kerala – libraries/reading rooms and tea-shops.

### 3.1. Libraries and Reading Rooms

By the 1930s, Namboodiri students had started studying in public schools along with students from the lower castes. E.M.S. Namboodirippad, who went on to become the first Chief Minister of Kerala and one of India's foremost Communist leaders, writes in his autobiography about how his admission to a public school in 1925 changed his life:

This was an important turning point in my life...joining school felt like beginning a new life – an environment entirely different from the one I had been accustomed to. Friends and teachers were from different castes and religions. And one didn't study by oneself or with two or three other classmates, but in classrooms with twenty-five to thirty students" (Namboodirippad 1995, 77).

The school also gave him access to a reading room and library in an adjacent building where he read books, periodicals, magazines and engaged in discussions with peers. The establishment of libraries and reading rooms ushered in a new space in the modern public sphere that eventually shaped (mostly male) mini-publics where matters of social importance were discussed and debated<sup>8</sup>. It was often here – in the local reading rooms – that later political leaders began their association with the cultural, literary and political institutions; with the public sphere. Namboodirippad noted in an interview that the early communist leaders made a conscious effort to establish a reading room and a night-school in every village by the end of the 1930s (Namboodirippad 1992).

Although the establishment of public libraries started in Kerala in the nineteenth centuries, it was by the 1930s that they had permeated into all corners of the state with the efforts of locals (Nair 1998, 175). The library movement in Malabar was slower as compared to the rest of Kerala, because British authorities were wary of political activities surrounding libraries, and tried to minimise spaces of socialising (Ranjith 2004, 10; Lenin 2017, 9; Karat 1976, 38-39). Public libraries in Tallichery, Calicut, and Cannanore were established in 1901, 1924, and 1927 respectively. Small rural libraries began to appear in villages thereafter (Bavakutty 1982, 252). Soon, plays written by communists like K. Damodaran, Thoppil Bhasi, and others that discussed the social, political, and economic conditions of the people were often staged by the libraries, generating discussions and forming public opinions. The reading rooms that were established by themselves or as attached to a library were used by the KCSP to spread socialist ideas<sup>9</sup>.

The 1960s and 1970s were a golden period for the library movement, and the number of public libraries in Kerala continued to grow. Influenced by the left-leaning public sphere, they were centres where social consciousness was "created" and "recreated" at a rural level. As P. Achuthan (born 1945) who worked with the Local Library Authority for about four decades points out in an interview with the author:

<sup>8</sup> Libraries and Reading Rooms are often used synonymously in Kerala. In literature and from interviews, it was observed that the word *Vayanashala* (Reading Room) was used more generally to mean even Libraries (*Granthashala*). On the (in)difference between the two, E.M.S. Namboodirippad writes, remembering his experience of setting up a Library in his village in 1934: "Back then, we didn't call it a library; we called it a reading room. A reading room is also a library" (Namboodirippad 2017, 11).

<sup>9</sup> Raimon (2006) lists the main ones to be established in Malabar in the 1930s. For a complete list, see Lenin (2017)

Truth is, in almost all regions across Kerala, libraries had started functioning much before independence [...] In small villages as well, reading rooms were set up. The educated people succeeded in attracting and involving others too, through public discussions, talks and interpretations of ancient texts, poetry reading, etc [...] Often, libraries organised events where the local people participated in songs and theatre. The scriptwriters, directors, actors all came from among the village. These were all attempts to bring people into this [the public sphere].

Any study of the public sphere in Kerala inevitably has a section that discusses the importance of the reading rooms and libraries in forming public opinions and helping transcend political and religious differences<sup>10</sup>. In a sense, reading rooms epitomised the true nature of social spaces during the second half of the twentieth century in that apart from being important spaces of socialising themselves, reading rooms also facilitated other spaces where groups of people socialised in Kerala. Consequently, there emerged a number of youth clubs, theatre clubs, and associations that were attached to, and worked closely with the reading rooms. This allowed reading rooms to function as “cultural centres” of the community at large – a feature peculiar to Kerala (Bavakutty 1982, 254).

Although some of these extended spaces accommodated female participation, the reading rooms themselves remained, to borrow J. Devika’s (2013) term, “homoaesthetic circles”. In her interview, Hema (born 1973) remembers being strictly warned by her brother against going to the library as a teenager, because it “was not a space for girls to go”<sup>11</sup>. She defied such opposition and continued to visit the library, was the first female to apply for a membership there and was the only woman to periodically issue books at the library; reading rooms were still inaccessible to her.

The affiliated associations and clubs were relatively more diverse. A number of the respondents who were middle-aged or higher spoke of the Clubs and Associations that functioned closely with the reading rooms in their neighbourhood. Irrespective of political differences, their perception of reading rooms reflected a democratic and plural nature. This was because the spaces were conceived – since the time they were encouraged by reformers like Sree Narayana Guru, but later also under the Congress and Communist parties – as spaces where public deliberation was encouraged. Regular users also perceived these spaces as such, as Ajikumar (born 1978) recollects in an interview with the author:

It's been an active space. It is a centre of discussions and conversations. Sometimes, discussions get out of hand...like they do in our villages. We'd talk about an issue and sometimes it ends up in an argument [...] never in violence. Then it'd be resolved and they would talk about something else the next day – the same group.

This repetitive nature of public spaces is important to note. In the past, the physicality of social spaces was an important component. This meant that the groups who frequented the reading rooms and tea-shops were regulars. It encourages us to think of the influence of the increasingly “virtual” nature of public spaces. Ajikumar and his childhood friends from the reading room now have a WhatsApp group but he feels that this lacks the “personal attachment” that the physical spaces provided them.

<sup>10</sup> Gender still remained a marker of difference, as my female interviewees pointed out.

<sup>11</sup> Personal interview with Hema Joseph, 27 June 2018

On the other hand, they also encouraged an informal social-circle that extended to beyond the library. As Menon (1992) notes, one of the novelties of the reading rooms was the “communal drinking of tea, as one person read the newspaper and others listened. Tea and coffee lubricated discussions on the veracity of the news and of the political questions, and a new culture emerged out of the reading rooms” (Menon 1992). P. Achuthan (born 1945) comments in an interview:

When one speaks of a library in the rural areas, one must mention conversations from a tea-shop. Even after drinking their tea, people would stay around. There used to be a tea-shop next to the Desabandhu Vayanashala. People would come there for tea but the newspaper reading would continue even after the tea was done. This was when my uncle came up with an idea. There was our land nearby so he cleaned it and set up a little shed with palm leaves, put a bench and brought newspapers. So people who finished their tea could sit on the bench nearby and continue reading.

The importance of wayside teashops in Kerala in creating a politically conscious working class remains under-explored. Yet, in archival research, autobiographies of early communists and personal interviews, tea-shops always are described as social spaces where people (almost exclusively men) engaged in political discussions and debates. As we shall see in the next section, they played an important role as spaces where communism was introduced to the public.

### 3.2. Tea-Shops

Tea-shops emerged in Kerala’s public sphere as representational spaces where the traditional social relations were openly challenged. Anybody with money could, in theory, walk into a tea-shop and be served tea and snacks<sup>12</sup>. However, most tea-shops in Kerala had emerged by the 1930s as political spaces and had an extremely influential role in shaping the public consciousness and strengthening communist thought among the common people. K. Madhavan (1915-2016) remembers the tea-shop in his village as the “central office” of political activism and political discussions for the early socialists. It was also a space where people gathered for any updates on matters of importance: “If any problem arose in the village [...] people usually ran to Koman’s tea shop” (Madhavan 2014, 53). By the 1940s, the working classes and labourer in Kerala patronised the tea-shops with “stern resolve”, as tea, coffee and cocoa became increasingly popular and substitutes to local drinks like buttermilk (Pillai 1940). One observer notes of the tea-shops in Kerala in the mid-twentieth century that in his travels across south Asia, he had never seen anything like the little tea-shops of Kerala in the mornings

crowded with coolies scanning the newspapers or listening while others read them aloud. More than 40 newspapers in the Malayalam language are published

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<sup>12</sup> Even as anti-caste struggles by reformers like Ayyankali used tea-shops to challenge dominant caste norms, teashops continued to be spaces of contestations, as two recorded incidents that I came across suggest: one of a lowered caste Ezhava being fined for trying to buy tea from a Nair’s tea-stall in 1925 (Keralakaumudi, 1<sup>st</sup> January 1925); K.V Kannan’s (1988) recollection that as children, they were not allowed to “drink tea from the local tea-shop” (p.295).

in Kerala; they are read and discussed by people of all classes and castes (Woodcock 1967, 35).

As can be imagined, the presence of coolie labourers made such spaces important for communist leaders to tap into. By virtue of automatically being spaces that necessitated interaction between the different castes, tea-shops could not be controlled by upper-caste Brahmins.

The emergence of tea-shops as cosmopolitan social spaces that transcended not just caste and religion but also the limitations of spatiality reflects in a memory retold to the author by writer and critic M.N. Karassery (born 1951) from when an American academic Stephen F. Dale visited his village in the 1970s. The two heard a loud argument at a tea-shop near Karassery's home. Karassery recalls: "I brought Dale home one day... 'Are they quarrelling, what is going on there?' he said to me. 'No, no, it's a political discussion', I said. 'Political discussion?! What is there?'"<sup>13</sup>.

When the two of them walked to the tea-shop nearby Karassery's home, they realised that there were a group of people having a heated debate about the American President John F. Kennedy's daughter's name! The interesting thing is it wasn't between someone who knows the name and someone who doesn't but between two people who thought that they had the correct name. "Dale exclaimed – 'My gracious!'", says Karassery, adding, "Caroline or something is her name". Even Dale didn't know it. In other areas such as Mattancherry near Kochi, K.P Ashraf's (born 1954) recollects his engagement with the foreigners who frequented the tea-shops of the area in the 1960s and 1970s. Other autobiographies and memoirs from the period also allude to the creation of social spaces that centred on tea-shops where sociabilities were transcended<sup>14</sup>, ideas, exchanged, and opinions formed. Devika (2012) argues that the second half of the twentieth century saw a striking cultural contrast – between a literary cosmopolitanism and alarmingly conservative social attitudes. That Ashraf and Karassery's experiences coincide with this phase suggests that a study of locally rooted cosmopolitanisms in modern Kerala must take into consideration not just the literary sphere, but also that of social spaces<sup>15</sup>.

Babu Purushottaman (born 1957), who set up a tea-shop near the famous Paragon Restaurant in Kozhikode four decades ago, believes that the discussions and friendships he formed at his tea-shop in the 1980s drew him closer to active politics which he eventually joined: "Back then, we had crowds that would spend a lot of time as they had tea [...] not just here, really the Indian Coffee House was a left-leaning space that shaped many friendships", he says<sup>16</sup>. He believes that such vibrant political engagements were common across the tea-shops in the city and is what eventually drew him closer to active politics. Kureepuzha Sreekumar who belongs to the same generation as Ashraf, Babu Purushottaman and M.N. Karassery, points out that the vibrant tea-shops<sup>17</sup> belonged to a specific time period of Kerala's political history when communism and progressive ideals seemed attractive to the youngsters<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> M.N. Karassery, Personal interview.

<sup>14</sup>In his recent book, Jaaware (2019) has argued that society is not one homogenous entity, but must be seen as a number of "sociabilities" that are constantly traversed.

<sup>15</sup> Here, Menon (2010) and Devika's (2012) works on the creation of a cosmopolitanism in modern Kerala are alluded to. Both mention a cosmopolitanism of ideas in early modern Kerala that Devika argues gave away to a more elite cosmopolitanism of objects.

<sup>16</sup> Babu Purushottaman, personal interview, 19 July 2018

<sup>17</sup> Also barber shops and toddy shops.

<sup>18</sup> Personal interview, 3 July 2018

Over the last few decades, socio-economic factors have resulted in certain characteristic changes in the social nature of tea-shops. Babu, whose tea-shop is over three decades old, says that in the past, his customers were almost entirely writers, politicians and thinkers. Over the years, the crowd from a nearby Income tax office became regulars, although some old crowds still come once in a while. A lot of the discussions now, Babu says in his interview with the author, surround official matters – promotions, office politics, etc.

I ask them sometimes if they have nothing else to talk about. They flinch and say no. I become a listener. I focus on my work. I don't intervene. If there's a discussion on politics I intervene.

Ajikumar (born 1978) who would have belonged to the next generation of youngsters who grew up during these changes says that people across ages still use the tea-shop in his village of Poothotta near Eranakulam. However, he also alludes to a de-politicised nature of the space:

Recently the tea-shop has put up a board saying "you can't talk politics here". Because many times, this gets down to issues between people sometimes. So they put up a board saying "Please don't talk politics" (*laughs*). People drink tea and leave their ways [...] it doesn't get down to discussions except during election time.

He says that the regular customers are older people who drop by for tea after their morning walk when they read the newspaper for some time. For the younger crowds such as himself, he says the tea-shop is a space where they go and sit sometimes after playing, "because it's near the lake and it's nice."

### 3.3. State-Socialism and the Struggle for Control

The emergence of a nation-state, Partha Chatterjee (1993) argues, "cannot recognise within its jurisdiction any form of the community except the single, determinate, demographically enumerable form of the nation" (Chatterjee 1993, 238). Lefebvre argues that the state attempts to do this by seeking to master social spaces, which, "in addition to being a means of production, is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power" (Lefebvre 1991, 26). In other words, it is through an attempt at controlling social spaces – the "flattening of social and 'cultural' spheres – that nation-states attempt to promote itself as the stable centre (Lefebvre 1991, 23; see also Fuchs 2019). New social spaces were created in the early twentieth century in Kerala as spatiality of traditional social order was broken down. Post-independence, however, the consolidation of the state meant that there was a constant pressure on these spaces to be controlled or crushed. As Pandian (2002) notes, this contest between the state (and/or) capital and the community became an indispensable component of post-colonial India (Pandian 2002, 1738). This happens in all modern states – both state-capitalisms and state-socialisms.

In Kerala, the struggle between the state's attempt to control social spaces and resistance from the communities became increasingly clear by the 1970s. Already by then, a section of the authors, poets, and thinkers who played an active role in the early stages of left-politics were either side-lined by the party or moved away from the party voluntarily. In a stark critique of the communist parties' weakening ties with the literary and cultural movements at the time, Thoppil Bhasi wrote a strongly worded article in a Party Souvenir, blaming the Communist Party for distancing itself from the cultural



movement and reminding the important role played by writers like Thakazhi, Kesav Dev and others in shaping the progressive politics in the state (Bhasi 1966, 171-172).

The response of the political left parties towards the radical left movement in general and specifically to their cultural front – the *Janakeeya Samskarika Vedi* (1980-82) – further widened this divide. Emerged from the radical left movement as a cultural organisation that aimed to establish its own cultural sphere, the Vedi attracted many contemporary poets and artists who saw it as a space to fight for larger social issues that the organised political left had failed to raise (Sreejith 2005; Satchidanandan 2008, 148-149). It was evident from interviews also that a number of the left sympathisers saw this as a failure of the Communist Party to correct its course. Ashraf from Mattancherry, for instance, remembers that around the time he migrated to the Gulf in the 1980s, many youngsters were disillusioned by the left parties' stand on social issues. This period also saw the death of many youngsters, either from direct police brutality or suicides led by disillusionment (Satchidanandan 2008, 149)<sup>19</sup>;

The “secular” nature even of informal associations was affected by excessive political intervention by the late 1980s. One of my respondents, Hema (born 1973) recalls that by the 1980s, the Arts Club near her home had split into two groups based on political differences and eventually, both shut down. Other younger respondents such as Sreerag and Jitheesh (both 25 years old) said that people their age group were not involved with Clubs in their respective villages because they were being hijacked by political parties. Jitheesh said that there is one Club near his home, but he wasn't interested in joining it because its members – all aged under thirty, he said – are members of the DYFI and “they go to stick posters [for the party]”.

#### 4. Capitalism, Communalism, and Social Spaces: The 20<sup>th</sup> Century and Beyond

Even as communist forces struggled to resolve the contradictions of social spaces that had emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, economic and social changes as a result of both internal and external factors led to a radical redefinition of spatiality towards the end of the twentieth century. Capital emerged as a major player after the liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991, leading to a rapid increase in urbanisation and privatisation of land. Also important are the economic changes that the Gulf boom brought to the purchasing power of the people, and the rapid growth of the culture industries which had already emerged since the sixties. Meanwhile, the spread of satellite television and media changed how news was consumed in Kerala, radically affecting the role of rural libraries, teashops and reading rooms as social spaces (Ranjith 2004, 14).

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<sup>19</sup> Ashraf from Mattancherry mentioned this in his interview. He even named one Subrahmanya Das in the area who took his own life because of such disillusionment.



Figure 2: Once active spaces for everyday political discussions among the youth, reading rooms have ceased to attract youngsters today, as news is increasingly “consumed”, not “engaged with”. Seen here, Comrade Santo Gopalan Reading Room and Library, Fort Kochi. Picture by author, 16 January 2017.

In the twenty-first century, the decline in conventional social spaces, along with the increased control of spaces by capital and religious forces has led to new challenges to the left. Responding to these changes in the 1990s, the left saw decentralization of power as the most effective way to combat narrow religious and communal interests and global capital. Consequently, the meaning of civil society was revised to accommodate broad alliances at the grassroots level that cut across religious, caste and gender differences.

This led to a new struggle, since on the one hand, they created autonomous civil societies at the local levels, while on the other, capital and religious spaces also multiplied like never before. Even as autonomous secular social spaces emerge, the secular response to these challenges has been two-fold and unconvincing. On the one hand, there was an attempt to dissociate from the religious in the cultural sphere. The left’s attempts to uphold the secular ideal have been met, on the other hand, by instances where the Community Party resorts to over-accommodation of religious sentiments, rituals and practices. For instance, the celebration of “Krishna Jayanthi” (a religious festival celebrating the birth of Hindu god *Krishna*) in 2016 under the guise of Onam (secular harvest festival which, although with Hindu rituals and myths, is celebrated across the religions of the state) celebrations had drawn severe criticism to an extent where it “alienated true comrades from the party”<sup>20</sup>. The CPI(M)’s rallies on the

<sup>20</sup> Desperate Left Goes on Temple Run. *The Times of India*, 15 March 2016.

day have attempted to rival the right-wing Hindu nationalist organisations' "Shobha-yatra"s which continue to draw large crowds (see Figure 3)<sup>21</sup>. In another instance, one of the CPI(M) processions came under a row after it featured *Thidambu Nritham*, a temple ritual<sup>22</sup>. The unsaid rule of the communist party has urged its cadres to involve culturally" in temple festivals, while State Committee members have been asked to dissociate from going to temples<sup>23</sup>.



Figure 3: The Shobha Yatras started in the 1980s by right-wing cultural organisations continue to draw large crowds. Seen here, the Yatra at Thrissur city. Picture by author, 12 September 2017.

But these moves have come under criticism from the public across political ideologies. Criticising this attempted renaissance political analyst N.N.Pearson states: "How can a party that has diluted its own ideology for the sake of power lead a renaissance campaign? The politically enlightened people of Kerala can see through the games"<sup>24</sup>. Even in the 1990s, the equation of religion and politics came to become an important one to address.

In 1997 – a decade after the CPI(M) laid out a policy that their only God was the 'Red God' – the then Communist Chief Minister Nayanar's meeting with the Pope became a matter of much debate within Kerala. Opinion pieces were written criticising the gesture and to them, Nayanar quipped that the meeting was going to neither make the Pope a Communist nor make himself a non-Communist and that the matter needn't

<sup>21</sup> Shobha Yatras are processions organised by the Hindu organisations to celebrate the birth anniversary of the Hindu god Krishna. Children are dressed up as characters from mythological stories of Krishna and a procession is organised in the villages, towns or cities

<sup>22</sup> Mohamed Nazeer. 2016. Temple Ritual at CPI(M)'s Procession Triggers Row', *The Hindu*, 28 August 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with M.G. Radhakrishnan on 12 January 2017.

<sup>24</sup> T. K. Devasia. 2016. (31<sup>st</sup> August 2016), Kerala: LDF Hopes to Curb RSS Making Inroads into Hindu Vote Bank. *Firstpost*, 31 August 2016. also see Menon (1995, 23)

be blown out of proportion<sup>25</sup>. Such tensions continue to persist into the twenty-first century, as many cases from the recent past – including the agitation against a caste-wall in the temple at Vadayampady, the controversy following the Supreme Court verdict allowing women of all ages entry into the Sabarimala temple which earlier had age restrictions of women, etc. show. As has been mentioned, these add to the ever-rising concern of creating secular progressive spaces despite the internet and media providing alternatives to the common masses.

## 5. Conclusions

Social spaces played an important role in helping early communists to reach out to the masses and in shaping a progressive public consciousness. Unlike institutional spaces that are maintained and work under rigid party guidelines, informal spaces like reading rooms and teashops enjoyed an autonomy that allowed them to create a broader network of people cutting across party differences. A rigid party structure, the CPM's failure to accommodate for alternate social spaces that emerged in the 1980s and a rapid change in the economic and social systems have radically reformed the spatiality of Kerala in the twenty-first century. The increase of capital and religion in the public sphere raise new challenges to the secular and progressive forces. This leads us to the question: What can the communist parties do to meet the challenges raised?

In Lefebvre's argument about the transition from social-democracy to decentralised state forms in contemporary times, he urged the political left to explore the potential of *autogestion* in asserting a counter-hegemonic use of space, since it is the "one path and one practice that may be opposed to the omnipotence of the State" (Lefebvre 2009, 134; see also Butler 2010, 100). Lefebvre saw *autogestion* – most closely translated as grassroots democracy – as an essential basis for the democratisation of society, born spontaneously out of the void in social life that is created by the state (Lefebvre 2009, 14-15). To him, it was the radical democracy that emerges with the withering away of the state in modernity.<sup>26</sup> It is a redefinition of the state as an arena for "spatial *autogestion*, direct democracy, and democratic control, affirmation of the differences produced in and through that struggle" (Lefebvre 2009, 16). Although such movements may not have the continuous character and institutional promise of parties or trade unions, a decentralised state, Lefebvre argues that they have the power to reconstruct social space from "low to high", as opposed to "high to low"; social needs would be determined here by the action of interested parties, and not by "experts" (Lefebvre 2009, 193).

The ultimate aim of progressive movements must be to expand radical democracy to the deepest tiers of society. For this, they must aim not at narrow conceptions of controlling social spaces but must facilitate the creation of wide networks at the grassroots that may succeed in successfully challenging any attempts at control from above.

In other words, Lefebvre's work on decentralisation and *autogestion* can provide useful insights into understanding how communication strategies must change in contemporary societies. In Kerala, the autonomous, secular associational spaces at the grassroots continue to provide progressive, issue-based social spaces where people

<sup>25</sup> K. Govindankutty, K. 1997. Daivam Kallanaavumbol, *India Today (Malayalam)*, 27 August 1997, 24. M. Vijayachandran. 1997. Oru Paarshvaveekshanam, *India Today (Malayalam)*, 31 December 1997, pp.34-36.

<sup>26</sup> Lefebvre uses the "withering away of the state" in a different sense from Marx's concept of the same. To Lefebvre, it is a way of conceptualising a decentralisation of the state; a displacement of its nodes of control. See: Butler (2012), pp.100-101

can come together outside the “rigid structures” of party politics. The attempt must be to nourish such spaces without succumbing to the pressures to react to narrow religious pressures.

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