Review Essay: Social Media, Politics and Protest

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Books reviewed:

Lina Dencik and Oliver Leistert (eds), *Critical Perspectives on Social Media and Protest: Between Control and Emancipation.* London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.

Daniel Trottier and Christian Fuchs (eds), *Social Media, Politics and the State: Protests, Revolutions, Riots, Crime and Policing in the Age of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.* New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2015.

Julie Uldam and Anne Vestergaard (eds), *Civic Engagement and Social Media: Political Participation Beyond Protest.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Introduction: where politics happens

In a recent memoir by Carrie Brownstein (2015), the Sleater-Kinney guitarist writes about the suffocating conformism that came to characterise the Riot Grrrl movement from which the band emerged. Her frustration stems from the painful irony that this was a subculture whose origins were anything but stifling, both visceral and committed to carving out new ways of thinking about and beyond gender. Riot Grrrl ossified as it grew, with self-appointed gatekeepers always on the lookout for transgressions of mostly unspoken rules, and Brownstein found herself increasingly alienated in a world that had once felt like home.

To read across from this observation to contemporary protest movements is not glibly to suggest that despite voiced commitments to openness and inclusivity online activist cultures have tended towards the exclusive and intolerant. Instead, the takeout is a by-

product of both the drive of those involved and the fervour of the academics who study them. It can be explained in terms of Bourdieu's field theory (1993). As with any newly burgeoning area of activity, or with the ascendancy of a new generation of practitioners, it is not just that new conventions are established and sacred cows overturned. Also at stake are the rules of the game, in this case what counts as the meaningful practice and study of protest and other kinds of political activism. The result is that a subset of a culture of practice comes to stand for the whole – a synecdoche, like 'the Kremlin' standing in as the subject of a sentence in a news bulletin about Russian government policy, or the eye coming to represent everything involved in the act of looking. More than shorthand or symbolism, the part *becomes* the whole – a natural progression for field insiders, a cause for concern with outsiders mindful of what might be lost in the process.

This can be put more precisely by way of Nick Couldry's (2003) myth of the mediated centre of society, more recently (2015) transposed to social media as the myth of 'us'. By this Couldry refers to two specific risks as media institutions become embedded among the rhythms and routines of everyday life. The first risk is assuming that whatever goes on in these media, in this case anything academics observe on social media platforms, is direct evidence of wider political realities. Several of the authors in these volumes anticipate this caution, drawing on Andrejevic (2002; 2012), and Fuchs (2013; 2014) to aver that the last thing posts on social media are is representative of reality: indeed they are nothing more than the overdetermined products of the commercial, or neoliberal, logics that drive the design, promotion and management of these platforms. Happily, the chapters under review here run the gamut from one pole to the other, and seen in the round a defensible middle ground just about emerges – one where as much as we cannot assume that what is observed in social media is an authentic expression of political reality (Dencik, in Dencik & Leistert), *nor* can we responsibly reduce it to incited labour demanded by corporate tech behemoths. Epistemology matters, and the academic field of protest studies is anything but consistent in its application.

The second risk Couldry identifies lies in accepting that media are where meaningful things happen these days – more specifically for us, that social media are where politics happens now. More than crowding out other political spaces worthy of attention and investigation, we run the risk of losing sight of ways of thinking about politics that developed through academic engagement with them. At first glance there is nothing to worry about here, with the canonical texts of protest studies well represented across the

three volumes: Gramsci, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Hardt and Negri, Laclau and Mouffe are all in rude health, if health consists in citations. There is, though, evidence of what Couldry writing with José van Dijck (2015) describe as forgetting what we used to mean by the social before social media came along. Plenty of the work presented is nutritious, sturdy and insightful, but there is also a pervading sense of things that can be safely assumed, things it goes without saying about what happens when people use social media – and perhaps when social media use them. The result is an inevitable subsequence of specialisation: tunnel vision, though to the editors' credit several tunnels are on offer. What is often missing is an awareness of what else is going on around politically motivated social media practice.

Implicated selves of social networks

A corollary to the argument that social media politics is not simply the new politics in its entirety or purest or most developed form is that for individuals engaged in online and offline activism the stakes are not as high as is sometimes claimed. This is by no means to downplay the efficacy of or personal investment in various causes, simply that it is as speculative to presume that someone will realise her political subjectivity most fully in mediated networks as it is to begin from the supposition that her subjectivity is under existential threat from the economic and institutional logics of social media platforms. However much someone is engaged in politics or immersed in media cultures, and however much each demands to be apprehended as a fully-formed, always-already world, that someone's whole being-in-the-world is not really at stake. This derives from Paddy Scannell's (1996) phenomenological take on television: when we switch the thing on we are confronted not just with content but whole worlds of frames, reference points, temporalities and value systems that insist on being grasped as they are and in toto. Further, this world of television demands that we engage with it as a particular kind of self – one that understands not only the natural meaningfulness of media genres but scheduling sequences and cycles, the hierarchies of a news broadcast, and how to recognise an authoritative source.

This gets political when news cultures are thrown into the mix. Now, the world into which someone is thrown every time they turn on the 10 o'clock news is one whose parameters are not only mechanical and value-laden but discursive, shaped by ways of knowing about events that are caught up in the deep structures and structural reproduction of society, and economic logics to boot. Echoes of this line of thinking are

there across these collections, most transparently in the political economy perspective that forms the backbone of the Trottier and Fuchs volume and is well-represented elsewhere, but also, interestingly, in the many papers cleaving to the transformative power of protest (see especially Lovink & Rossiter, in Dencik & Leistert). It is refreshing to see such consistent ambivalence about the instrumental efficacy of social media networks (for instance Porto & Brant, in Dencik & Leistert), but the world of resistance and dissent is depicted as every bit as enveloping as Scannell's television world – prefigurative and generative, yet morally replete, unimpeachable and irresistible (see for instance de Bakker, in Uldam & Verstergaard; Cammaerts, in Uldam & Verstergaard; Hintz, in Dencik & Leistert; Della Porta & Mattoni, in Trottier & Fuchs). Dogma and ideological obedience are anachronistic in online protest cultures and are more or less absent in these volumes, but their value systems, whether explicit or implicit, are nonetheless insistent and always-already everywhere.

For Scannell, though, while the selves called forth in media encounters are multiply implicated in technological affordances, moral systems and relations of power, they are also partial. This means that while navigating media might require a naturalised orientation to a world operating by commercial principles, this is not the same as either a neoliberal assault on otherwise authentic selves (Leistert, in Dencik & Leistert), or as the summoning into existence of compulsory neoliberal selves (Redden, in Dencik & Leistert). It is certainly possible that immersion in particular media cultures could start to supplant other modes of being, but it is not a zero-sum contest between alternate subjectivities, some self-evidently better than others. Rather, in a manner closer to Goffman (1972) than Deleuze (1995), the repertoires people learn and ultimately embody as they feel their way through media worlds are just that: they may feed into your sense of who you are, but they neither displace some originary self nor carve out space for radically new ones. To be wilfully prosaic about it, it varies from platform to platform and cause to cause. Our job is methodically to disaggregate and weigh up the implications of social media for the ways in which people think and act politically, whether as individuals or collectively.

Judith Butler points one way forward in this regard. The kind of incitement detailed in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) is a strictly coercive kind of selfhood, one that is fiendishly difficult to shake off, and one to which there isn't an obviously preferable alternative in any case. But in later works such as *Excitable Speech* (1997) she cautiously opens up a few crevices by asking precisely what kinds of subjectification are at work when

someone comes to adopt certain ways of dressing or walking, as well as how we are interpellated – called forth as specifically implicated selves – by institutions. Van Dijck likewise works outwards from case studies to broader theses, with *The Culture of Connectivity* (2013) divided into chapters focussing on different social media platforms without dragging normative baggage from one to the next. Like Scannell she very much has in mind the unsolicited, usually unacknowledged interpellation of new kinds of self – this is how she theorises the observation that we adapt ourselves to the logics and affordances of new media forms as much as we adapt them to suit our interests, needs and desires. Resisting a more heavy-handed approach, however, she suggests that we would do well to be a bit more historical about particular social media platforms and what their adoption embeds as normal over time.

Discourses of socially mediated protest

So the point of this review is not to devise another definitive conceptualisation of social media activism and mediated politics more broadly, but to question some currently dominant ways of knowing and thinking about it all. The breadth of topics is remarkable, ranging well beyond the totems of Occupy, Los Indignados and the Arab uprisings. The intellectual curiosity across disciplines and theoretical traditions is likewise impressive, and a keen sense of the need to be sensitive to political and temporal context pervades (see especially Dencik & Leistert, in Dencik & Leistert; Porto & Brant, in the same volume. Kaun, in Uldam & Vestergaard, points out that 'Occupy' has distinctly negative connotations in countries that have experienced the other kind of occupation). Nonetheless, by further de-universalising ways of knowing about social media politics manifest across much of the literature, we can start to ask else what else might be going on here. Something that is clear from this sample is that we have moved on from mapping out perspectives on social media between two opposing camps of optimists and pessimists: references to early influential publications by Clay Shirky and Evgeny Morozov are, on this evidence, finally on the wane. There remains a fairly clear bifurcation, but one with a fulcrum in the form of the still divisive figure of Manuel Castells.

This is progress of sorts and there is little straw-manning of Castells, with a broad understanding that his mass communication of the self (2009; 2012) is neither a celebration of individualism that he invites you to sign up to or hiss at, nor the valorisation of solipsism and parochialism as which it is sometimes written off. The

conceptual work that mass self-communication was devised to do is not so much to argue in defence of or against the social mediatisation of politics and activism, but instead to attempt to supersede the individual/collective binary altogether. As such Castells is just the latest in a long and rich theoretical tradition that stretches back through Bourdieu ultimately to Hegel. In practice, it means that his creative audience is not some kind of magic, collective generativeness. It looks almost mundane in some sections of *Communication Power* (2009): a community of users that is able to respond, adapt and build on new, potentially heterogenous voices in a way which does not subsume or annihilate those individuals as a necessity of collective political subjectivity and expression. It appears that what raises hackles in some quarters (see for instance Cammaerts, Uldam & Vestergaard) is not that Castells is an apologist for the consumerist narcissism some diagnose in social media cultures. Rather, and this may be the opposite side of the same coin to his critics, it is that he is comfortable situating the individual as logically prior to the collective when it comes to politicality. An individual that precedes and survives the formation of political consciousness and movements is incompatible, for them, with how progressive politics works.

In order to test this proposition, academics have deployed both theorisations and empirical explorations of social media political activism to determine whether there is something qualitatively different about communities in which individuals remain intact, only partially implicated in the causes around which they are active. Elsewhere (Juris, 2012) this has been dubbed the politics of aggregation, but here the most commonly cited exemplar is *that* paper, and subsequent book, by W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2012; 2013) which distinguishes *collective* political action of the kind seen in earlier activism up to and including the listserv culture that thrived in the antiglobalisation movements around the turn of the century, from the *connective* action seen in social media activism. This work is frequently used to back up claims about the fissiparous nature of social media activist networks, but Bennett emphasises in a foreword to the Uldam & Vestergaard volume that their aim was to challenge the very conception of media as mass communication. Looked at one way this is no different than reconceptualising media as, say, practice, but there is something distinctly fruitful about thinking of media primarily as organisational processes, the means for allocating resources, assigning roles, adapting tactics and strategy in response to events (see also Treré, in Dencik & Leistert). The subtext here is that we should be less preoccupied with asking whether social media are capable of generating new political imaginaries and long-term commitment: that is not their job.

Whether social media activism is capable of producing or sustaining collective political subjectivity remains an open question, as it should be. For all the possible new ways of being political being opened up and embraced, it does us a service to be warned that these novel configurations might lack something of what we used to understand by collectivity, commitment and solidarity (Castelló & Barberá, in Uldam & Vestergaard; Husted, in the same volume; Lovink & Rossiter, in Dencik & Leistert). Jess Baines' chapter in the Uldam and Vestergaard volume, on community print shops in 1970s London, stands out not just for its historicity but for its clarity and colour – it also foreshadows Brownstein's experience in detailing the exclusive, disciplinary side of DIY politics. The essential point, though, is that as with previous incarnations of the individual/collective dialectic, that offered up by Castells and by Bennett and Segerberg ultimately boils down to normative propositions. Whether all practice including activist politics is ultimately determined by and oriented towards structural reproduction, or whether it carries within it the possibility of transformation, cannot be derived from first principles after all. This is a good thing: academic discourse around protest should be about principles and ethics. It suggests, though, that it is proper to put motivation under the spotlight and to do so in a way that does not reduce all political participation to self-interest. And this means that as well as self-evident allegiance to the goals and guiding values of a particular movement, it becomes possible to look, uncynically, at motivations for activism that might include kinship and status. A protest culture isn't rendered inauthentic by its developing gatekeeping mechanisms, shibboleths and disciplinary regimes.

In other words, this is simply being reflexive about our ways of knowing and talking about politics and protest. It is not a matter of demarcating academic and activist perspectives, and there is room in these volumes for how-to guides and encomia (de Bakker, in Uldam & Vestergaard; Uldam, in the same volume; Thorburn, in Trottier & Fuchs) alongside more critical accounts. We are well beyond the convention that only disinterested outsiders can produce valid insights into political movements, and that activists can only speak to the particular and not the universal. At the same time, however, and the parallel is intended in good faith, anthropologists researching fan communities face the dilemma of selecting populations with which they share a passion and feeling of belonging, or deliberately targeting a niche interest to which they are indifferent or actively hostile. The question arises because there is very little here on right-wing protest movements and their use of or emergence through social media.

Granted, there are those who argue that most such groups do not qualify as genuine grassroots protest movements insofar as they are at base elite exercises in astroturfing (Hay, 2011). But apart from one chapter on the neo-fascists in Greece (Kompatsiaris & Mylonas, in Trottier & Fuchs), which does not set out to investigate them as a protest movement as such but rather as social media-facilitated racist discourse – there is nothing on the Tea Party in the US, the Front National in France, the Sweden Democrats, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands or Ukip.

Epistemologies of protest, epistemologies of power

Being reflexive about ways of knowing means taking seriously epistemology, which means in the first instance resisting reading the visible evidence of social media politics as standing for politics tout court. While important things happen on social media, it is not an elevated form of social knowledge. Resisting is difficult – because of the sheer amount of data available, because of the ease with which like-minded others can come together, mutually affirming that this is the centre of things, and because there is ample space for imagining. The last point is a crucial element in the evolution of new ways of being political, but it necessarily includes the possibility of projection. Now, projection is a dirty word, suggesting nothing more than seeing what you want to see in the face of whatever the reality is. But in practice the way that projection happens and is allowed to happen is complex, and certainly not reducible to an individual lack of rigour or acumen. Husted, in Uldam and Vestergaard, is strong on this point, detailing precisely how chains of equivalence emerge linking concrete goals to increasingly vague and interchangeable aspirations. It is a salient example of what can be learned from the weaknesses of protest movements as well as their strengths. Maintaining a healthy scepticism towards ways of knowing presented as universal likewise means suspending a thoroughgoing critical rendering of social media politics of the kind proposed by Fuchs and especially Andrejevic. Their models are compelling, with Fuchs arguing convincingly for the continued relevance of critical theory and Andrejevic for an insidious reading of Foucauldian governmentality. Redden in Dencik and Leistert derives much from the latter, and what results is theoretically cogent and well-argued. But it is also thoroughly discursive, a theorisation of protest whose premises necessitate their conclusions.

As with any discourse, the means exist for pulling apart what makes it tick – how observed communication and behaviour is accorded the status of empirical evidence of theoretical models of media and power. The methodologies followed in these volumes

are appropriately various and not in the least doctrinaire (for an excellent example of methodology appropriately applied to its object of analysis, see Castelló & Barberá, in Uldam & Vestergaard), but in some cases methods seem to serve little purpose but to affirm rather than build theses, let alone test them. In particular, what is presented as knowledge of the social and interpreted as evidence that supports a Deleuzian perspective (Thorburn, in Trottier & Fuchs; Trottier in the same volume) is not self-evidently meaningful on those terms. Working within a broadly Habermasian framework, Uldam and Vestergaard's introduction fares better in this regard, perhaps because Habermas is more prescriptive in setting out criteria for what constitutes deliberation and deliberative spaces. This is not to suggest in any way that Deleuze operates in too abstract a realm for his models to be provable or disprovable, and other authors elsewhere (Best, 2010) have sought to put Deleuzian research on firmer epistemological ground. The solution is not a more positivist philosophy of science or the adoption of social scientific methodologies: Juris (2012) is ample evidence of what current anthropological thinking has to offer protest movement studies, for one. Haunss (in Dencik & Leistert) though is right to suggest that we would benefit from more longitudinal research in this field. For present purposes, what emerges is a valid, but contingent, set of knowledges instinctively meaningful and instinctively read in particular ways, a discourse in which it is a natural move to infer a minoritarian politics of becoming that consists in constitution rather than representation from a laudable campaign against a hike in student tuition fees (Thorburn, in Trottier & Fuchs).

However that sounds, it is not meant to be simply critical: it shows that academic discourse too is about group membership. For whom are these instinctive inferential leaps to make, and why? This is important because group membership in academic discourse is rarely about shared methodologies – it is about politics. That is entirely appropriate, but we shouldn't assume that epistemology naturally follows political conviction. And importantly, this elision becomes its own kind of gatekeeping mechanism. Another way of looking at the presentation of evidence in these volumes confirms this view. A lot of the papers give ample space over to the voices of individual protestors, often more or less unadulterated. This is a valid move in analytic and ethical terms, consistent with the ethnographic ethos of letting people speak for themselves, at least to the extent that this is possible within the production logics of the academic field. First, though, this is not the same as grounded theory, which sets out from the same principle of listening without prejudice to participants but tries to derive and not only confirm theoretical models on the basis of their words. And second, in many cases it is

assumed that what participants say is self-evident, as though there were only one way of hearing these words. Consider this, for instance, from a member of Ecologistas en Acción (from Barassi, in Dencik and Leistert):

> Everybody says that there is no censorship on the internet, or at least only in part. But that is not true. Online censorship is applied through the excess of banal content that distracts people from serious or collective issues.

This is presented as an expression of information overload making it difficult for political messages to reach intended audiences, which it is. But it much else besides: that 'Everybody' a clear relational positioning against conventional thought, a self-authorisation; 'banal content' likewise valorising that which is defined against it; 'censorship' and 'distracts people' hinting that there are dark forces at work. These words do not just express or describe, they enact a way of being political whose meaningfulness is not immediately transparent.

There are particular words, too, which suggest a natural epistemology which except for field insiders is anything but: transgressive and radical, most conspicuously (see Fuchs, in Trottier & Fuchs; Uldam, in Uldam & Vestergaard). Again there is nothing strange or questionable about using these terms, but they are scattered about as though it is obvious what constitutes a radical or transgressive act (Uldam, for instance, suggests that criticising BP is transgressive). It is not clear here whether being transgressive or radical is like being pregnant – you either are or you aren't – or if there is a sliding scale, and how this is calibrated. It isn't pedantry to question the use of specific words: there is nothing disingenuous about them, but they appear to function among webs of ideas that are self-evident only within this part of the field.

Two final big themes are worth teasing out a little. The first is violence. When it is described in these works, violence takes the form either of police brutality (Thorburn, in Trottier & Fuchs), or the exaggeration by media of violence in demonstrations (Cable, in Trottier & Fuchs). These are all important, but contingent on a specific reading of violence that is antithetical to the implied norms of progressive politics. The inference is that protest movements occupy the moral high ground, and it is their nefarious opponents – the state, the police, mainstream media – that resort to a- or immoral tactics to thwart them. First, this othering of violence has a clear function in terms of in-

group solidarity, with collective identity made stronger in the face of adversity that is not only formidable but unjust. And second, there is a lot more going on in contemporary theorisations of violence, especially in sociology and philosophy, than is given an airing here. Key questions include not just whether violence is justifiable under certain conditions, but what violence actually is: a form of political communication, a kind of agency, and not just the opposite of voice, deliberation and subjectification.

The second theme is technology, which in more than a few papers is written about in a way that is somewhat at odds with much of the current literature – with technology ascribed something approaching volition, and more contingently still, as something external to human agency that threatens to disrupt or destroy it. There is no need to reach for actor-network theory when discussing technical infrastructures, but unqualified claims such as "Human intentionality is superseded by the uncanny intentionality of the network" (Trottier, in Trottier & Fuchs) and to write of individuals "torn to pieces" by algorithms" (Lazzarato, quoted in Leistert, Dencik & Leistert) points to a conception of social media networks that is dehumanising. Again, fair enough (see especially Barassi's persuasive application of Virilio in Dencik & Leistert, as well as Kaun's call for politics to be slowed down in the same volume), but it is presented in several chapters as a universal, taken-for-granted perspective which, outside this discursive space, it is anything but.

Conclusion: thinking beyond ways of thinking

It is inevitable when we make inferences and generalisations that we risk reading too much into things, or not enough, or just read in ways that are deceptively narrow. Returning to Couldry's point, this is anything but a dismissal of the wealth of perspectives on social media and protest delivered here: it is rather to flag up the risks associated with accepting that this evidence and these ways of interpreting it *are* who we are now. And while Couldry is referring to our collective values as communities and societies, there is a corollary that concerns the way we all live with and through media in our everyday lives. Phenomena such as the rapid adoption of new media devices and platforms, and our concomitant adaption to their architectures and rhythms, are important. We are enacting distinct, inevitably constrained and possibly complicit modes of subjectivity if we pay attention to or participate in protest with an always-already orientation to visibility or shareability, or to group membership dependent on patterned, time-sensitive gestures rather than affiliation secured through more

traditional routes (Lovink & Rossiter, in Dencik & Leistert). It is history forgotten as history and thus deserving of methodical excavation. It might also matter if our reorientations are towards networks designed primarily with corporate profit in mind. But adapting to these affordances is not the same as subjection to the logics of capitalism. There may well be a link to flesh out, but it cannot be assumed that evidence of one is evidence of the other.

Similarly, positing an equivalence between surveillance and the loss of free will ("Corporate platform users effectively have lost all control over their freedom of expression after their acceptance of corporate terms of services", Leistert, in Dencik & Leistert) risks conflating the distinct epistemologies of each. If the two are related it is a complicated relationship, and though it is easy to say that it's complicated, we can follow that through with a more detailed look at the different kinds of interpellation of partially implicated selves in all manner of concrete situations: stop and search, the codification of gendered victimhood in law, the designation of a political cause as a potentially threat to national security, and so on. There are chains of events to track, the things that happen when you are called forth by institutional discourse as risky, deviant or dangerous (see for instance Kaun, in Dencik & Leistert; Redden, in the same volume; Trottier on police surveillance in Trottier & Fuchs). But there is no seamless logical chain that ends with an existential threat to one's political subjectivity. Indeed, there is every possibility collective identity is strengthened by being officially othered.

It is common in this literature for outrage to be expressed, often stirringly, at police and state strategies aimed at controlling, delegitimising and opposing protest. The revelation that the police as well as multinational corporations have media tactics specifically designed to target activists – predicting activist violence without justification, inflating or understating protestors on demonstrations – is met with something like disbelief (Treré, in Dencik & Leistert, writes of the "dirty digital tricks" of official politics; see also Cable, in Trottier & Fuchs; and Lekakis, in Uldam & Vestergaard, on corporate CSR strategies that appropriate national ideals and rituals). But why would these institutions not have strategic communications strategies and strategists? The indignation is doubtless sincere rather than sanctimonious, but it is also a specifically moral relative positioning, and it is an illocutionary act of commitment and belonging (see especially Milan, in Dencik & Leistert). Drawing such an inference does not reduce everything to a simulation of solidarity: like any principle solidarity never just is, it has to be learned and embedded and enacted in particular ways across time and space. The same goes for

a tendency to personify institutions and states as a venal 'they' or repressive other (see for instance Fuchs, in Trottier & Fuchs; cf Poell in the same volume. Uldam, in Uldam & Vestergaard, refers to 'BP' as a sentence subject throughout – BP responds, contacts, monitors etc.), acting as sentient and univocal enemies rather than the sites of struggle and contestation they invariably are. To ask whether this is naïve or disingenuous misses the point: it is a political act insofar as it locates the speaker and creates possibilities for collective identification and action. It is a way of thinking about power that should not displace others, but is instructive in what it can tell us about how academic researchers as well as activists orient themselves towards the world politically, morally and tribally.

The Trottier and Fuchs collection has 'State' in its title, and it is here that how it is conceptualised moves beyond the malevolent and intractable. Fuchs' opening chapter rolls out an outstanding disciplinary and historical contextualisation of different ways of thinking about the state, and as such offers a valuable counterweight to the tendency in some parts of the literature to think of social media politics as being post-institutional (cf Uldam & Vestergaard, in Uldam & Vestergaard). Following Jessop (2007), Trottier and Fuchs situate the state between 'majestic isolation' and embeddedness in the wider political system: states may tend towards self-sustenance but are not intrinsic entities; they are relations of forces. The Uldam and Vestergaard volume does a similar service for thinking about corporations, with several chapters presenting research into corporate social responsibility in a manner that does not reduce it to propaganda.

More generally, discourse around the media's roles and functions is a little out of step with broader trends in media studies that have tended towards greater emphasis on audience experiences and at the macro level to thinking of media organisations and industries more in terms of chaos than control (McNair, 2003). Here, media hegemony is very much still the norm, with systematicity and orchestration taken as given in many of the chapters (see for instance de Bakker, in Uldam & Vestergaard). Occasionally this strays into the hypodermic syringe model of media that has been rendered marginal by recent research, with talk of media outlets 'feeding' their audiences untruths (Kompatsiaris & Mylonas, in Trottier & Fuchs). Again, this can be looked at in functional terms rather than simply dismissed as dated, with an implied valorisation of independent minority media. Likewise the tendency towards sweeping, agentless phrases like "The very use of online media and social networking by G20Meltdown was incorporated into the press' narrative of fear" (Cable, in Trottier & Fuchs) speaks to a

coherent view but one that is nothing like as universally accepted as it is presumed to be – both the idea of an unseen agent or logic doing the incorporating, as well as the notion that there is a single, hegemonic narrative instilling fear and anxiety as a means of exerting control, have been consistently challenged for decades now.

Apart from anything else, this kind of account absents entirely the people who do media work, most of whom would resist the charge that whatever they do is implicated in the maintenance of a media system efficiently designed for indoctrination. The people who do protest work, on the other hand, are brought vividly to life in these collections across a plethora of geographies and campaigns. What is most striking of all in their testimonies is their reflexivity about media framing and surveillance, the banal realism that constitutes the day-to-day doing of idealism, and the centrality of human relationships – as inspiring, as annoying, as work – to it all (see especially Della Porto & Mattoni, in Trottier & Fuchs; Treré, in Dencik & Leistert; Elmer, also Porto & Brant, in the same volume). It is this sense of the social that we academics should be careful not to lose sight of as novel ways of theorising social media politics solidify into convention.

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