Radical Democracy After Social Media: Technics, Ontology and the Political

Jamie Ranger
St. Hugh's College



Michaelmas Term 2022

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of D.Phil in Politics in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Oxford.

88837 words

Acknowledgements

I thank Sharon Kits Kimathi, for her love and support throughout my entire academic journey. My world is brighter and my life is richer because we live it together.

I thank my parents, Mark and Carolyn Ranger, for their love and support throughout my entire life. I will be forever grateful for your belief in my academic ambitions and your toleration of my grating whimsy.

I thank my supervisor, Dr Stuart White, for supporting a thesis outside of his usual areas of interest, and for reining in my more impressionistic flights of fancy with a commitment to clarity of thought and expression.

I thank my brother, and occasional co-author, Will Ranger, and wish him luck embarking on his own scholarly journey. Here's hoping they pay better in History departments!

In terms of contributors and supporters of this project, there are simply too many people to thank by name: from friends and colleagues providing feedback at conferences and workshops to those willing to read drafts of entire chapters. I thank those who finished ahead of me amongst my cohort for providing an example to follow, and I dedicate my work to those pursuing exciting new research in my field to whom I hope to have cleared a path. I thank my colleagues at OxPol and the UCL Policy Lab for their patience and toleration of my split priorities. This submission is dedicated to you all.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to the unlikely scholar who finds themselves skimming these acknowledgements before reading on - I am grateful you would even try.

Table of Contents

Abstract…5

Introduction …7

1 - Mapping the Political…24

i. What is Political?…26

ii. What is Democracy?…31

iii. Post-Foundational Political Ontology…35

iv. The Charge of Social Weightlessness…41

2 - Technics and the Political…48

i. Politics and Technicity…49

ii. Stiegler on Technics…60

iii. Technics and Public Memory…68

iv. Technical Development and General Proletarianisation…73

v. Disruption in the Information Age…81

3 - The Technospheric Condition…93

i. Bubbles…99

ii. Globes…102

iii. Foams…108

iv. Social Acceleration: A Theory of Modernity…119

4 - Ideology as Political Technology…128

i. What is Ideology?…129

ii. Althusser on Ideology…132

iii. The Interpellation of the Subject…139

iv. Ideology and the Technospheric…145

5 - Neoliberalism and the Internet…150

v. Neoliberalism as Political Technology…151

vi. The Behaviours of Neoliberal Subjectivity…157

vii. Ideologies of the Internet…163

viii. Information Anxiety and the Problem of Post-Truth…172

6 - On Social Media…179

i. Conceptualising Social Media…180

ii. Platform Capitalism and Subjectivity…188

iii. Dromology and Social Acceleration…200

7- Hypersubjectivity and the Return of the Political…208

i. Interpellation as Infinite Distraction…209

ii. Social Media as Hyperreality…215

iii. The "Free" Subject of Social Media…221

8- Radical Democracy with Technospheric Characteristics…233

i. Political Turbulence…236

ii. Associational Technics…245

iii. Aversive Spheres…255

iv. Democracy as a Promise to the Future…261

Conclusion…266

Bibliography…276

Abstract

The thesis is concerned with two central questions on the subject of democracy: (1) to what extent does social media expand or restrict possibilities for radical democracy? (2) To what extent does the relationship between politics and technology account for the difficulties of democratic reform, renewal and expansion?

I argue that we currently live in the technospheric condition, a series of social, cultural and technological factors that intersect with one another and produce certain subjectivities, the contemporary iteration of which is increasingly steered by social media. The technospheric condition distorts what is properly political (that is to say, democratically contestable) and makes it appear technical (an objective process grounded in efficiency to be deferred to experts). The hegemonic ideology of neoliberalism has benefited most from this trajectory, and done little to counter its effects. However, due to contemporary reconfigurations of our technological landscape through the ubiquity of social media and its platform model, new subjectivities are emerging that complement *the return of the political*. These subjectivities are open to the relitigation of all political questions, which provides counter-hegemonic actors an opportunity to contest the neoliberal-capitalist status quo (as well as far-right forces previously vanquished to regroup and attempt to normalise their positions). I conclude that through a political comprehension and reconfiguration of the platforms that exacerbate and cultivate the tendencies of *hypersubjectivity*, radical democratic actors and institutions may best critique and overhaul neoliberalism (and by extension, reinvigorate the forgotten promise of democracy as a political ideal).

The primary philosophical contention of the thesis is that radical democratic theory's "ontological turn" is incomplete, insofar as it cannot adequately explain contemporary subjectivity without a critical examination of the inherent relatedness of the political and

technics, which I here argue to be integral to any reformulation of radical democracy in the information age. The primary political contention of the thesis is that social media, amongst a combination of other factors, plays a role in reproducing the (neoliberal capitalist) status quo by contributing to the interpellation of the *hypersubject*, a subject formation inculcated into digital activity through constant stimulus distributed on curated profiles and feeds, and political passivity through a disorientating bombardment of information. However, as shall be later explained, the same economic model that incentivises designers to create tools that command the user's attention to maximise profit, inadvertently provides the tools for countering the very neoliberal-capitalist principles that these technological corporations exploit. By constructing a new theory of ideology as a technics of interpellation, I aim to demonstrate the relationship between political and technical logics in the processes of subject production, and conclude that hypersubjectivity, as both a cultural condition, and a nascent form of technical mastery, provides an opportunity for the reinvigoration and reorientation of radical democratic theory as a political technique of "sphere-building".

Introduction

'In our society one can invent and perfect discoveries that still have to conquer their market and justify their existence; in other words discoveries that have not been called for' - **Bertolt Brecht**

'Every age has its own style of being dissatisfied with the world. And every dissatisfaction that becomes self-conscious contains within itself the seeds of a culture' - **Peter Sloterdijk**

The world has lost its friction and fallen into screens. Conversations with strangers, neighbours, and increasingly even friends and family members, are becoming detached from the social expectation of shared assumptions. We are networked to more people, places and ideas than ever before, and yet the wires that stretch out and entangle themselves in the world also bind and entrap us in the solitude of bubbles, the social resembling pulsating foam rather than the reliable solidity of the public sphere. We are epistemically unmoored from a chaotic, paradoxical and hypocritical world of crises, scandal, complexity and insecurity: yet despite the appearance of a growing general agreement that society must change, we cannot agree on why, when and how. We have a general idea of how we got here: the impotent political response to the 2008 financial crisis that saw an unprecedented spike in class inequality in the West[1]; state austerity measures hit the poorest and most vulnerable the hardest[2]; the primary response to looming ecological catastrophism on a planetary scale has been vague green individualism rather than acknowledgement of structural forces[3]; the

[1] Mortiz Kuhn, Moritz Schularick & Ulrike Steins (2018) "Research: How the Financial Crisis Drastically Increased Wealth Inequality in the U.S", Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2018/09/research-how-the-financial-crisis-drastically-increased-wealth-inequality-in-the-u-s

[2] Oxfam (2013) A Cautionary Tale: The true cost of austerity and inequality in Europe. https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/bp174-cautionary-tale-austerity-inequality-europe-120913-en_1_1.pdf

[3] Oliver Millman (2019) "Greta Thunberg condemns world leaders in emotional speech at UN", The Guardian, UK. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/sep/23/greta-thunberg-speech-un-2019-address. Accessed: 18 March 2021.

remobilisation of citizen activism, from Occupy and #MeToo to Black Lives Matter and Antifa, were hastily demonised or recuperated by a complicit press[4]; the return of political reengagement with socialist ideas was met with immediate false-equivalence with the simultaneously emergent far-right nationalism[5]; the younger generations, engaged with political discourse through grassroots movements and social media[6], were swiftly portrayed as entitled and ignorant. Millennials have taken to the ironic term '*doomscrolling*' to refer to the endless stream of seemingly relentless, disconnected instances of bad news on social media feeds.[7] For many, living in western postmodernity may be characterised as the cultural condition of perceiving the world as a series of impositions rather than opportunities.

In response to these tendencies, much radical political theory read as sources of residual comfort for a counter-cultural intelligentsia than a practical resource for unmasking instances of social domination.[8] It was during a period of liberal capitalist triumphalism that the apparent inevitability of our current systems had radical politics on the back foot, having

---

[4] Joy Leopold & Myrtle P. Bell (2017) 'News media and the racialization of protest: An analysis of Black Lives Matter articles', *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion,* 36:8, pp.720-735; Seth G. Jones (2020) Who Are Antifa and Are They A Threat? Centre for Strategic & International Studies. https://www.csis.org/analysis/who-are-antifa-and-are-they-threat Accessed: 18 March 2021.

[5] Tom McTague (2019) "Jeremy Corbyn is like Donald Trump, not Boris Johnson", The Atlantic, US. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/11/jeremy-corbyn-like-donald-trump-not-boris-johnson/601957/ Accessed: 18 March 2021.

[6] Ruth Milkman (2017) 'A New Political Generation: Millennials and the Post-2008 Wave of Protest', *American Sociological Review*, 82:1, pp.1-31.

[7] Although doomscrolling itself may be an unhelpful cultural practice. See Angela Watercutter (2020) Doomscrolling Is Slowly Eroding Your Mental Health - https://www.wired.com/story/stop-doomscrolling/ Accessed: 18 March 2021.

[8] I would also venture that radical democratic theorists by contrast, many of whom would self-identify as Marxists, post-Marxists or communists of numerous stripes, were dashed against the rocks by a tide of anti-socialist sentiment across the West, as technocrats and 'Third Way' politics firmly replaced social welfarism and worker-aligned policies across centre-left political parties.

to argue against the contention of 'the end of history' itself.[9] The move towards abstraction, often referred to as "the ontological turn"[10], may be interpreted as a manoeuvre around the obstacle of the social, a method to circumnavigate the flattening of political contestation in the public realm and the accompanying theoretical focus on social movements and identity politics. The thought was that isolating those distinctly political elements of "being" may bring about new theories that could serve to reinvigorate democratic thought, to bring underlying structural tensions, or universally applicable principles, to the surface. Political polarisation and intense contestation has returned, but erratically, characterised by a distrust of pre-existent political institutions[11], undermined by misinformation[12], debased by racism, sexism and xenophobia[13], and now radical democratic theory must map a hyper-connected world of motion, media and malaise. How must radical democratic theory respond to our contemporary situation? What is the relationship between the technical configuration of social life and the prospects for transformative political change? Is radical democracy even possible in the age of social media?

---

[9] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992). Although notorious for its suggestion that liberal democracy will be considered the final form of government and that although events may still occur, the historical journey of political institution-building would come to an imminent close, there is an oft-neglected aspect to Fukuyama's work regarding his technological pessimism. Fukuyama, the father of liberal academic triumphalism, even at the peak of his mainstream popularity, considered his thesis incomplete. A decade later he would expand on his concerns, specifically the biotechnological intervention in the evolutionary process, arguing that 'post-humanism' could have disastrous affects for liberal democracy, and human society in general. See Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future* (New York: Picador, 2003).

[10] Not to be confused with the ontological turn in anthropology, which has also spilled over into interdisciplinary approaches to cultural practices. See Paolo Heywood (2017) The Ontological Turn, Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology. https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/ontological-turn Accessed: 18 March 2021.

[11] Often attributed to the 'hollowing out' of democratic institutions into 'franchise states', in which a minimalist state extends its influence by outsourcing and incorporating others in public governance, creating unclear divisions of responsibility, and as such concerns surrounding transparency, accountability and legitimacy. See R.A.W. Rhodes, *Network Governance and the Differentiated Polity: Selected Essays, Volume I.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[12] Nolan Hidden, *The Anatomy of Fake News: A Critical News Literacy Education* (California: University of California Press, 2020).

[13] Brian F. Schaffner, Matthew Macwilliams & Tatishe Nteta "Understanding White Polarization in the 2016 Vote for President: The Sobering Role of Racism and Sexism", *Political Quarterly,* (2018), 133:1: 9-34.

Radical democratic theory is a methodological approach in political theory that rejects the conceit that liberal democracy, as it is understood as a regime in western modernity, is the endpoint of democracy's journey from concept to political practice, and instead focuses on the ways in which its values and aims can be extended further, often by conceptualising democracy as something that is either yet to arrive, continuously becoming, and in any case, a political state of affairs that must be robustly re-enacted, performed and defended.

As shall be explored in the first chapter, radical democratic theory, to some extent since the 1990s, underwent an "the ontological turn", leading to a growing body of work that builds upon the distinction between politics and the political, and/or the political and the social. As neoliberal managerialism became the dominant mode for major political parties in the Global North[14], heterodox political thought reoriented itself away from class struggle and state capture towards social struggles and horizontal movements[15], increasingly represented (to appease a liberal academy, an indifferent political climate, a hostile anti-socialist media; or in earnest) as the dominant mode of effective political action. If politics was being increasingly understood as the mechanisms of statecraft[16], then the political denoted a more expansive terrain, an underlying condition of the social that can be "activated" by certain procedures, that emerges under certain novel conditions to be opportunistically seized upon, or referring to the larger site in which politics itself resides. An account of the political for the radical democratic theorist would better describe the radically contingent ground that underlies our social conditions, and as such, reveal the ways

---

[14] Colin Crouch, *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

[15] Most extensively elaborated in Antonio Negri & Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London: Penguin, 2004); *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

[16] More specifically, hegemonic neoliberalism has transformed the business of state from government to governance, where the latter shifts emphasis from statute law towards more flexible forms of regulation and implementation derived from 'networked polities' that devolve authority to task-specific institutions. See Antonio Palumbo & Richard Bellamy, *From Government to Governance, 1st Edition*. (London: Routledge, 2010).

in which the dominant *status quo* may be changed by forms of political action, including those underestimated by, or extrinsic to, electoral politics.

Nevertheless, the ontological turn in radical democratic theory is not without its detractors. Lois McNay has argued that such an enterprise is in danger of reproducing social weightlessness[17], defined as a lack of consideration for 'the internalisation of objective structures of oppression'.[18] McNay's critique stresses how theories of radical democracy fall short of arguments when explaining why individuals in certain conditions are 'unable to act as agents of their own interests' and become at times 'complicit with their own oppression'.[19] McNay's central claim is that 'some types of democratic theory have become so enmeshed in an abstract and closed reasoning about the political that their relevance to the phenomenal social world and to the logic of embodied action is cast into doubt along with, ultimately, their purportedly progressive political implications'.[20] Ultimately, if normative political theory is committed to unmasking and undermining instances of social domination, and if we take the view that radical democratic theory, in its commitment to the extension of democratic values, is confluent with such aims, then there is a case to be made that the ontological turn may be a turn in the wrong direction. How does social domination reproduce itself through contemporary subjectivity, and how may radical democratic theory respond? The thesis does not aim to directly criticise any particular strain of radical democratic theory; rather it seeks to argue that political ontology can overcome the charge of social weightlessness when the political is bolstered by an account of technics, and apply this approach to argue that radical democratic theory must engage with social media to

---

[17] A term drawn from Pierre Bourdieu, *The Weight of the World* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999).

[18] Lois McNay, *The Misguided Search for the Political: Social Weightlessness in Radical Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), p.37.

[19] McNay, ibid.

[20] McNay, pp.4-5.

overcome the limitations imposed upon emancipatory politics by neoliberal-capitalist technique.

Although we understand our contemporary situation as unprecedented and distinctive, the story of modernity for many philosophers and cultural commentators has been the story of people throughout history struggling to find their footing in a world in motion, a sense of collective pessimistic foreboding, with technological development seen as the post-political solution to both global and local social problems.[21] Each new invention tends to go through stages of social derision, scepticism, hysteria, acceptance and finally, normalisation. With each invention, there are innovations that reimagine, reorient or repurpose existing technologies for different or improved purposes, contributing to an overarching narrative of a world of progress, even if much of that progress underwhelms expectations and arrives in the form of commodities.

Since the dawn of the era termed Web 2.0, it is unclear whether it is logistically possible to untether digital communications technologies from the contemporary consumption of political information.[22] The thesis will contend there exists *a co-constitutive relationship between the political and technics*, and thus in contemporary life, a relationship between social media and democracy, and between politics and the Internet, that can be abstracted to the level of ontology. In other words, theoretical accounts of the political in radical democracy (rightly) criticised for social weightlessness neglect to account for the interrelated

---

[21] 'To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction. It is to be overpowered by the immense bureaucratic organisations that have the power to control and often to destroy all communities, values, lives; and yet to be undeterred in our determination to face these forces, to fight to change their world and make it our own. It is to be both revolutionary and conservative: alive to new possibilities for experience and adventure, frightened by the nihilistic depths to which so many modern adventures lead, longing to create and to hold onto something real even as everything melts'. Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (Verso: London, 1982) pp.13-14.

[22] "Since 2004, Web 2.0 has been the term used to describe the social web, where social networking sites hold a prominent place in users' online activities. The shift to this more interactive web from Web 1.0 generally occurred as a result of technological changes that made the internet – and the ability to develop content – more accessible. These changes include broadband internet, better browsers, AJAX and the mass development of widgets." - Technopedia (2017) What is Web 2.0? - https://www.techopedia.com/definition/27960/web-10. Accessed: 2 November 2020.

development of technics as an ontological category of its own with distinct characteristics. In doing so, I aim to demonstrate the ways in which politics can be understood as a form of technique, a means of depoliticising social issues by reframing solutions as technical problems, and argue that it is this structural move from the political to the technical that has characterised contemporary ideological formations, obscuring both instances and locations of social domination.

As shall be argued in the second chapter, if we are to understand the political as a category of relational being, as that underlying dynamic or emergent process that determines the direction of power, integral to the communication of collective decision-making or goal orientation, then it must have a supplementary account of technics. Technics, here defined as a broader category than what is commonly referred to as technology, encompasses the development and application of technique, of skill, onto the world for the purposes of creation. Technics is the way humans exercise their capacity to imprint themselves upon the world, to inscribe difference, to bequeath a series of new expectations for subsequent generations for how life is to be lived. I shall argue that *technics contributes to the metastable condition of radical contingency attributed to the social in political ontology*. In other words, the stabilisation of memory and culture in technics holds steady the otherwise radically contingent social: it is the missing material component of post-foundational accounts of hegemony.

Although the study of technics as a philosophical enterprise has its origins in pessimistic accounts of modernity, originally mobilised by conservative theorists lamenting the erosion of traditional communities by systems of industrial production[23], I shall argue that an understanding of technics is paramount to understanding the complexities of our contemporary situation, as well as rediscovering the creative and experimental aspects of

[23] The most heinous example is the speculative racism of Oswald Spengler's *Man and Technics: A Contribution to a Philosophy of Life*, recently re-released and popularised by far-right publishers as a foundational text of "European Radical Traditionalism".

democratic practices. Our cultural and social practices, forged in ancestral fires, are the ways in which we come to understand ourselves and our communities, and contain within themselves secreted tendencies that critical examination, itself possible only through engagement with bequeathed methodologies, obliges us to unveil. The philosopher Bernard Stiegler has argued the case for technics as a neglected category necessary for understanding dynamics of social development and crises, an approach which I shall repurpose to inform an account of subject production in our contemporary world of overlapping virtual and physical spatial realities.

It is argued that one of the key tasks of the digital sociology literature is to acknowledge and address 'the entangled nature of the material and the digital, people and machines'.[24] More specifically, it is argued that we live in a 'platform society', where all areas of public and private life are permeated by platforms.[25] The form of power that is ubiquitous in "platform-control societies" is termed by Byung-Chul Han as *smart power,* defined by the way in which it operates almost invisibly and calls into question the very notion of free choices for the subject. Han explains that 'power that relies on violence does not represent power at the highest order. The mere fact that another will manages to form and turn against the power holder attests to the latter's weakness'.[26] Smart power operates in such a way that it almost cannot be perceived in everyday life: 'wherever power does not come into view at all, it exists without question. The greater the power is, the more quietly it works. It just happens; it has no need to draw attention to itself'.[27] Through our growing collective dependence on the Internet, its accompanying arrangements of social media platforms and algorithmic interventions into the accessibility of information, our lives are

---

[24] Neil Selwyn, *What is Digital Sociology?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019) p.25.

[25] José van Dijck, Martijn de Waal, and Thomas Poell, *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[26] Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* (London: Verso, 2017), p.13.

[27] Han, *Psychopolitics*, ibid.

concretely intertwined with the digital manifestation of new power relations, themselves imbricated with pre-existent instances of social domination.

Stiegler argues in a similar vein that we are approaching the dawn of the reticulated society, a society in which we are modulated, coordinated and nudged by algorithmically assembled conveyer belts of information and communication through digital technologies to conform to certain neoliberal behaviours, serving to benefit those on the other side of surveillance-platform capitalism. Stiegler's concerns reach a similar level of hyperbole:

> Disruption moves quicker than any will, whether individual or collective, from consumers to 'leaders', whether political or economic. Just as it overtakes individuals via digital doubles or profiles on the basis of which it satisfies 'desires' they have most likely never expressed- but which are in reality herd-like substitutes depriving individuals of their own existence by preceding their will, at the same time emptying them of meaning, while feeding the business models of the data economy- so too disruption outstrips and overtakes social organisations, but the latter recognise this only after the fact: always too late.[28]

If we are to take these proclamations seriously, the timescale for political intervention is stark; either we are witnessing the imminent foreclosure of a political possibility, or the moment for a transformative emancipatory politics has already been and gone. If we are in an historical moment in which smart power has yet to come, in which the pieces of neoliberal state, private-public surveillance systems, dominant corporate platforms and consumer production are still shuffling into place, then a critical interrogation of such a state of affairs is urgently required. Furthermore, if we are in a situation in which smart power can operate in such a way that we cannot know how it intervenes to reproduce social domination, then it could be plausibly argued that an analysis of politics at the ontic level, at the level of observing the social world, is not enough on its own. Political theory requires an

[28] Bernard Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption: Technology and Madness in Computational Capitalism*. (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), p.8.

ontological understanding of subject-production in order to isolate the ways in which certain political possibilities may be occluded from immediate view, and afford us the language and the epistemic access to ways in which political power, obscured by a technical veneer, reshapes the social.

The third chapter of the thesis develops an account of the social field in the context of the purported co-constitutive role of technics and the political. Related to the co-constitution of the social by technics and the political, radical democratic theory has a "space" problem: Peter Sloterdijk's *Spheres* trilogy is an extended post-Heideggerian assessment of global human civilisation, that can be briefly summarised around the notion that Heidegger wrote '*Being and Time*' but should have written '*Being and Space*'. Hans-Jurgen Heinrichs, whilst in dialogue with Sloterdijk, argued that the 'best way to understand the sphere would be to interpret it as a new spatio-ontological definition, one oriented toward psychological and topological characteristics, as a determination of place and of space of coexisting beings'[29]. Contrary to traditional accounts in the western philosophical tradition, Sloterdijk argues that, 'ontology begins at the number two'.[30]

As Sloterdijk's work focuses on the ways in which human beings relate to one another and their environments, his ontological vision lends itself to constructions of the political. Intuitively, it is impossible to conceive of the social without referring to the materiality of the world, the temporality of the historical conditions in which we live, and more than anything else, the fact that a situation cannot be political in the absence of at least two opposing sides. Furthermore, space is integral to Bernard Stiegler's post-humanist account of the relationship between humans and how he defines technics. In his trilogy, *'Technics and Time'*, he analyses accounts of human anthropology and technological innovation to argue

---

[29] Peter Sloterdijk with Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs, *Neither Sun Nor Death*, trans. Steve Corcoran (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press/Semiotext(e), 2011), pp.145-146.

[30] Sloterdijk, *Neither Sun Nor Death*, p.148.

that what separates humans from non-humans is our capacity for *epiphylogenetic memory*: humanity is capable of *exteriorising* its progress in tools, artefacts, written languages and other objects, such that we become historical, capable of communicating a shared heritage: technics is thus the process of transmission and cumulation, from which the possibility of collective self-improvement emerges. This approach, when taking into account the anthropological accounts of human space, the digital sociological accounts of virtual space, as well as a materialist account of ideological production, will provide a techno-social framework that overcomes the charge of social weightlessness for the purpose of reinvigorating radical democratic theory.

The fourth chapter of the thesis returns to the notion of the social weightlessness of the political. Drawing on the work of Louis Althusser, I posit that ideology takes the contemporaneous form of a technics of interpellation, an impersonal structure that incorporates both local cultural practices and an individual's self-image into the production of roles that conform to the reproduction of the conditions of production, with varying degrees of self-awareness on the part of the interpellated subject, analogous to the way in which individuals reorient themselves to incorporate new technologies into their lives. I contend that by understanding ideology as a technics of interpellation, we may track the gradual structural transformation of ideology towards becoming an encoded unconscious, whereby our social and political behaviours are modulated, regulated and conditioned by the structure of our internet-connected smart devices, disciplined by the ubiquity of algorithms that rationalise and quantify our social performances, and "nudged" toward certain goal-directed behaviours with a conscious perception of both the steering mechanisms, and the goal itself.[31] This process of mass interpellation, which Stiegler refers to as disruption

[31] Referring to the 'libertarian paternalism' of nudge theory, and the explosion in mainstream popularity of behavioural economics in the immediate aftermath of the financial crisis. See Richard Thaler & Cass Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New York: Penguin, 2008).

> amounts to nothing other than the ultra-liberal, so-called 'libertarian' programme, which claims to absorb the social and the political into the technological and economic by crushing them: when technology is computational, it makes it possible to algorithmically dissolve the social, to reduce it to the calculable in an economy that has itself become purely, simply and absolutely computational.[32]

Disruption in the language of Stiegler, or smart power in the language of Chan, refers to a dystopian plausible endpoint of (neoliberal) ideology and its associated political techniques: the application of computational thinking to surveillance-platform capitalism in order to suppress political processes, to deny instances of social domination rather than confront them, an apparatus capable of reproducing a politics of TINA ("there is no alternative"). If the emergent control society wields a smart power incapable of detection, steering us through the world by guiding us towards certain values, ideals and priorities (not to mention products, media and institutions) whilst occluding others, if our desires are being inauthentically steered, then to paraphrase the US video artist Jenny Holzer, we may need to "protect ourselves from what we want". Under these scenarios, the radical democratic project of bearing witness to instances of social suffering and internalised oppression becomes all but impossible without an underlying ontological affirmation.

In the fifth chapter of the thesis, I argue that neoliberalism reproduces cultural conditions that "disenchant politics by way of economics" and embraces the language of technology to depoliticise its role of using the state to artificially create and support markets. Furthermore, the chapter explores the historical origins and ideological motivations underpinning the expansion of information communications technologies - specifically the Internet - and the academic and political reception of its potential networking of the world, suggesting that the problems of post-truth and information anxiety, rather than being caused by social media, have existed since the commercialisation of the Internet, and that social

[32] Bernard Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption: Technology and Madness in Computational Capitalism*, p.41.

media may be understood as an attempt to build platforms to solve a problem they would unintentionally exacerbate.

The sixth chapter of thesis explores social media. Social media is a paradox for political theory. On the one hand, there is growing concern that social media is changing human behaviour; that the world is becoming more uncertain[33]; that our minds are becoming more fragmented and polluted with nonsense[34]; that individuals are being unknowingly inculcated with certain neoliberal principles[35], in that the design of social networks establishes a competition for attention that favours the neoliberal culture of performance[36]. On the other hand, there is growing empirical support for the claim that social media allows for the mobilisation of collective action in support of public goods[37], often providing robust opposition to neoliberal free market policies through public demonstrations[38], an incongruence that has not gone unnoticed.[39] Social media has become so ubiquitous for digital natives that it has come to dominate the way in which we consume and interpret media online. It is often stated in the communications literature that 'it is the boringness and routineness that makes the internet important because this means that it is being pervasively incorporated into people's lives'.[40]

---

[33] 'Every fact has its antifact…my certainty about anything has been decreased…I assume more and more that what I know is wrong'. Kevin Kelly, 'The Waking Dream', in John Brockman (ed.), *Is The Internet Changing The Way We Think? (*New York: Harper Perennial, 2011), p.19.

[34] Mark Pagel, 'Brain Candy and Bad Mathematics,' in John Brockman, 2011, pp.70-73.

[35] Christian Fuchs, *Critical Theory of Communication: New Readings of Lukacs, Adorno, Marcuse, Honneth and Habermas in the Age of the Internet.* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2016).

[36] Julio Cesar Lemes de Castro, (2016) 'Social Networks as Dispositives of Neoliberal Governmentality,' *Journal of Media Critiques,* 2(7): pp. 85-102.

[37] Helen Margetts, Peter John, Scott Hale & Taha Yasseri, *Political Turbulence: How Social Media Shape Collective Action.* (Princeton, MA: Princeton University Press, 2016).

[38] Jeffrey M. Ayres (2004) 'Framing Collective Action Against Neoliberalism: The Case Of The 'Anti-Globalization' Movement,' *Journal of World-Systems Research*, 10 (1): pp.11-34.

[39] John Michael Roberts, *New media and public activism: neoliberalism, the state, and radical protest in the public sphere* (Oxford: Policy Press, 2014).

[40] Barry Wellman & Caroline Haythornthwaite, *The Internet in Everyday Life.* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p.7.

Social media consists of '(a) the information infrastructure and tools used to produce and distribute content that has individual value but reflects shared values; (b) the content that takes the digital form of personal messages, news, and ideas that become cultural products; (c) the people, organisations, and industries that produce and consume both the tools and the content'.[41] The reason I wish to focus on social media is due to the nature of communication that it structurally permits: when a broadcaster reads the news, I can accept it, reject it, or turn off the television; with social media, I can talk back. All social media users can become broadcasters, either of their own personal experiences, or in the act of sharing and distributing news sources to those to which they are connected. This brings a level of mediated subjective commentary to each news item, which are presented to the user as a constant current affairs feed of dialogue and testimony. Nevertheless, there is a growing homogenisation and congealment of power as social media influencers maintain far greater outreach and influence over the total circulation of ideas.

The seventh chapter offers an interpretation of these conflicting aspects of contemporary subjectivity, and by doing so, I shall argue that social media plays a role in reproducing the (neoliberal capitalist) status quo by contributing to the interpellation of the *hypersubject*, a subject formation inculcated into digital activity through constant stimulus distributed on curated profiles and feeds, and political passivity through a disorientating bombardment of information. However, as shall be later explained, the same economic model that incentivises designers to create tools that command the user's attention to maximise profit, inadvertently provides the tools for countering the very neoliberal-capitalist principles that these technological corporations exploit.[42] The thesis contends that the platform capitalist incentive structure fails to lend itself to the interpellation of the

---

[41] Samuel Woolley & Philip Howard, (2016) 'Political Communication, Computational Propaganda and Autonomous Agents', *International Journal of Communication,* Volume 10, p.4882.

[42] Yohann Koshy, (2017) Vice: Why Social Media Can Never Fill the Void in Our Depressing Lives. https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/5377w5/why-social-media-can-never-fill-the-void-in-our-depressing-lives. Accessed April 13, 2018.

neoliberal subject, and instead produces a *hypersubject*, capable of mastering social media to suit their own political ends. So long as the current economic incentives remain in place for the quasi-monopolists in Silicon Valley, social media will continue to be a potential site of counter-hegemonic resistance, a logistic and communicative resource for those actors engaged in collective action. My contention is that the ubiquity of these systems produces a subjectivity capable of accommodating and normalising this information overload such that it is inculcated with the critical tools capable of subverting these technologies against the ideological scaffolding that provides their structural support.

Whilst social media inculcates these behaviours conducive to neoliberalism, it also provides tools for unprecedented levels of global communication at little cost, as well as an ongoing psychological familiarity with the bombardment of information. This has led to social media providing the catalyst for political action: we can envision a world where human beings can instantly communicate without geographical restriction, and information flows freely between one another, so why not demand that the simulation becomes real? So long as social media companies remain sufficiently monopolistic such that the user base is of a global scale, but also as competitive as to render censorious administrative behaviour harmful to the bottom line, there remains an opportunity to steer the political turbulence engendered by the hypersubject and challenge the neoliberal *status quo*.

The final chapter of the thesis shall argue that the "political turbulence" demonstrated by empirical studies of social media validates the underlying ontological assumption of radical contingency that post-foundational political theory espouses, and I argue that a radical democratic theory attuned to the relationship between politics and technics may be able to negotiate the "return of the political" in service of a progressive and inclusive political project. Specifically, I draw from existing democratic theory literature to complement the theoretical analysis of technics and society developed in the thesis:

specifically, Hirst's associationalism with Stiegler to advocate for an *associational technics* and on Norval's aversive democracy with Sloterdijk to advocate for *aversive spheres* with the intention of moving radical democratic theory towards a comprehensive analysis of politics as a technique of "sphere-building" that must consolidate the technical configuration of social life with its public collective memory.

As Sloterdijk notes, whether political theorists like it or not

> detached individuals know no longer how and where they live, with whom they have to entertain relations, in which formats they are to communicate, what they can convert and what not. They know no longer who they are and who others are - and they cannot know it.[43]

It is easy for political theorists to forget that for many people, politics is something that is at best, uninteresting, and at worst, alienating and daunting. Sloterdijk reminds us that many people, and that includes those falling into reactionary politics, are primarily searching for a sense of belonging, a sense of authentic proximate intimacy that they are unable to find in an individualistic era. Technology is neither inherently oppressive or liberating. Nevertheless, we must return to Langdon Winner's famous essay 'Do Artefacts Have Politics?', specifically his conclusion arguing that

> in our times people are often willing to make drastic changes in the way they live to accord with technological innovation at the same time they would resist similar kinds of changes justified on political grounds.[44]

There is something of deep political importance to be teased out of the fact that it the notion of meeting people from the internet offline has been completely normalised, that the idea of being "friends" with people on social media platforms who you did not previously

---

[43] Sloterdijk, 2011, p.187.

[44] Langdon Winner (1980) 'Do Artefacts Have Politics?', *Daedalus*, 109: 1, p.136.

know and have no intention of physically meeting, profoundly changes the way in which the social is to be understood. The internet reveals to us that we have unprecedented capacity for global discourse just at the moment our politics is in the process of nationalist retrenchment, our sentiments often split along generational lines.

I shall conclude by arguing that the task of radical democratic theory, in response to the emergent threat of the age of disruption to the possibilities of emancipatory politics, and the threat of smart power to undermine our capacities for unmasking instances of social domination, ought to pivot towards a spatial, temporal and material account of political ontology; one that acknowledgements and overcomes the charge of social weightlessness, allows for the understanding of the relation between political turbulence and digital processes, the development of a strategic intervention, and a renewed commitment to radical democratic theory reconceived as a *technics of sphere-building*.

1. Mapping the Political

'The controversy over the concept of the political is of a more serious nature than yet another family quarrel among paradigms; it is about the relevance or irrelevance of political philosophy to our times'[45]

'The problems of pure philosophical ontology have seemed so deep or confused that philosophers who concentrate primarily on the concept of being as such have acquired an occasionally deserved reputation for obscurity and even incoherence'[46]

In this chapter, I shall provide an overview of the ontological turn in radical democratic theory, its distinction between politics and the political, explain why such a distinction is made and consider the most pertinent objection to such an undertaking, the problem of social weightlessness. I shall argue that the political can be understood as the underlying social milieu exposed during ontological ruptures in the otherwise hegemonic (and depoliticised) conditions of the social, which forces those individuals within the space of its emergence to align themselves with a political orientation. If politics can be understood as the organisation of power relations, the political emerges when the hegemonic order of those relations is disrupted, where the fixed alignment of interests is interrupted and individuals are compelled by these newfound circumstances to reaffirm or renounce their subject-position within the new political context.

The chapter is split up into the following sections: 'What is Political?', 'What is Democracy?', 'Post-Foundational Political Ontology', and 'The Charge of Social

---

[45] Agnes Heller, 'The Concept of the Political Revisited' in David Held (ed.), *Political Theory Today*, pp. 330-346, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991)

[46] Dale Jacquette, *Ontology.* (Chesham: Acumen, 2002) p.xi.

Weightlessness'. The beginning of the chapter provides the context of radical democratic theory and post-foundationalism, and by the end of the chapter, the reader will be familiar with the theoretical assumptions and problems I wish to address by incorporating an account of technics.

Philosopher writing partners Deleuze & Guattari famously declared that the work of contemporary philosophy is 'forming, inventing and fabricating concepts'.[47] Concepts are created to address problems in the world. They are created for the purpose of organising information that would otherwise remain "chaotic", so the creation of concepts allows philosophers to make a tangible impact on the world.[48] Philosophy is not simply about introspection and reflection; the art of conceptual production and manipulation has a normative as much as a constructive component. The hope is that philosophy can make the world more intelligible and the basis for doing so is underwritten by a commitment to truth, operating with the assumption that it is better to know the truth of the matter than not. This idea of what philosophy is and how philosophers ought to orient their work dovetails nicely with more expansive notions of democracy, and the affirmation of an accompanying democratic ethos: just as philosophy wishes to produce the conceptual building blocks for understanding the world, a democratic political theory encourages critical thinking, the unobstructed circulation of ideas, as well as an attentive and sceptical view of power, and the intentions and actions of those who wield it. Democratic cultures cultivate and communicate the intelligibility of their own political and institutional order. The task of political philosophy, therefore, may be understood as the normative task of producing concepts that allow for greater understanding within the democratic sphere, and thus better clarify and make intelligible the opacity of contemporary politics. Political ontology, the

---

[47] Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p.2.

[48] This not to say that only philosophers create concepts, rather that the creation of concepts is a philosophical activity.

exercise of distinguishing between "politics" and "the political", can be understood as a philosophical project with the intention of showing us something true about the political world that would otherwise be occluded, or unable to be articulated, in the absence of such a distinction. We may understand political ontology as a philosophical approach to politics with democratic convictions.

What is Political?

The conventional understanding of politics is the process in which individual interests are reconciled with collective action and the provision of public goods, and thus political action, in which the predominant focus is on state institutions, as those organisations considered legitimate holders of the responsibility of making decisions. Metapolitical debates concern the capacity for actors to reconfigure the public realm altogether, in terms of the entities and processes that compose it, and the concepts and practices utilised by actors themselves.[49] Political ontology, insofar as it is concerned with the structures that determine what is considered politics, is a metapolitical enterprise.

Political ontology is the study of being as it relates to political subjectivity, the basis of our political institutions and actions, referring to claims or assumptions that a particular approach to society and politics makes about the nature of social and political reality, i.e. what it looks like, what units constitute it, how these units interact, and under what conditions and processes does this reality change.[50] Ontology relates to *being*, to what *is*, to what *exists*, to the constituent units of reality, in what form, how and on what basis; political ontology, by extension, relates to *political being*, to what *is* politically, to what *exists politically*; it is the underlying constituent aspects of reality that are operationally assumed by a theory

[49] Jan Zienkowski (2019) 'Politics and the political in critical discourse studies: state of the art and a call for an intensified focus on the metapolitical dimension of discursive practice', *Critical Discourse Studies,* 16:2, pp.131-148.

[50] Norman Blaikie, *Approaches to Social Enquiry*. (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), p.6.

moving forward, although as the philosopher Timothy Morton often quips in interviews, ontologists are not "the object police". Ontology is invoked so as to better understand social events, actions and processes, and thus the theoretician's challenge is to approach a given subject of inquiry with ontological commitments that best map and isolate the causal forces at play. In the case of radical democratic theory, political ontology is invoked to think about democracy beyond the confines of pre-existent institutional and electoral processes to consider democracy more expansively as a disposition or cultural practice (alongside alternative processes for reinforcing such practices).

To some extent in the radical democratic literature, there has been an "ontological turn".[51] Theorists of radical democracy are constructing theories that seek to explain what it means for something to be political, to examine the constituent parts which make up a political object or subject, and attempt to articulate categories of being that apply to political theory. The basis behind such an enterprise to ascertain the social conditions for new political collectives to emerge, both how they form and how they articulate themselves, and aid in the construction of theories of political instantiation, whilst being able to best understand power relations and their accompanying pathologies of social domination.

When political theorists debate the nature of 'the political', it strikes the ear as strange. Conventionally, we understand politics in a general sense to mean the practice of

---

[51] Don Herzog, *Without Foundations, Justifications in Political Theory.* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1985); J.G. Gunnell, *Between Philosophy and Politics: The Alienation of Political Theory*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986); Dick Howard, *Defining the Political*, London: Macmillan, 1989); 'Reading the Political. Exploring the Margins of Politics', Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time.* (London: Verso, 1990); *Kari Palonen and Tuija Parvikko (eds.) (1993) Finnish Political Science Association*, pp.6-16; Carole Pateman, *The Disorder of Women. Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory.* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989); Judith Butler & J. W. Scott, *Feminists Theorize the Political.* (New York/London: Routledge, 1992); Hugh J. Silverman, *Questioning Foundations. Truth/Subjectivity/Culture.* (New York/London: Routledge, 1993); Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics.* Ithaca/London: Cornell University, 1993); Horace L. Fairlamb, *Critical Conditions. Postmodernity and the Question of Foundations*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Dana R. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger. The Fate of the Political.* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Hannah Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob. Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social.* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Jacob Torfing, *New Theories of Discourse. Laclau, Mouffe and Zizek*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999); Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation. The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory*. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000); David Ingram (2002) The Political, Oxford: Blackwell.

power relations, or the relationships between people and governing institutions, or the discursive distribution of power and resources, and although there are often disagreements about the precise definition, there is sufficient overlap that academics understand one another when they talk about politics as a subject of inquiry. However, when talking about 'the political', as it is so abstractly articulated in certain areas of the literature, there seems to be far more debate, with supposedly more at stake. 'The political' appears to denote some sort of primordial state of things, or an ingredient in a social situation that transmogrifies it into a 'political' one. In quotidian language, we understand what it means to 'do politics' or to 'get political', but to ask the question 'what is the political' is to ask an ontological question: what is the character of a political situation or action that marks it as distinctive from any other kind of situation or action?

When presented with the challenge of defining the political, there is a line of response that rejects the notion outright. Why should there be a distinction made between the politics and the political? What kind of value is found by trying to pinpoint the moment where a social situation becomes a political situation when we can observe institutions, the decision-making processes of elite actors, and the ideological commitments of social movements, to produce a rigorous understanding of politics as it is conventionally experienced? This response we may call the *appeal to clarity*: politics is difficult enough to define as it is, why muddy the waters with *ontological* contestation when we have enough trouble with *ideological* contestation? Unfortunately, what appears as a common-sense reaction to an abstract question is arguably just as problematic as the challenge posed: how can we deem the question of what makes something political to be irrelevant or unimportant without implicitly trying to distinguish a cut-off point for what counts as politics? If we don't try to work out the difference between the political and politics, the question does not disappear, but rather collapses back into the language of defining politics. The last thing political theory needs is for the word politics to become even more overdetermined and

contested, which is precisely what the appeal to clarity wishes to avoid, although this is not to say that to ask the ontological question is to rule out the possibility of pluralistic definitions of politics.

There is another dissenting approach to defining the political, which we shall call *the appeal to subjectivity*, which is broadly along the lines of "everything is political" (to someone), and this is a difficult position to contest. Granted, some things may appear directly more political than others, such as the express demands of a protest movement or a general election, but there is no doubt that there are political elements in anything from office squabbles to urban geography, from factory farming to product design. Nevertheless, there is a danger of political theory holding the view that "everything is political" with the smugness of a philosophy undergraduate arguing that "all art is subjective" in an introductory class on aesthetics. If we take the thought further, we may follow up with the question: "if everything *is* political, then what is it about the character of everything that makes this so?" If there is a secreted tendency within something that turns it political like the flip of a switch, or a spectrum by which the political nature of a thing can be turned up and down like a volume control, then we need to know both what it is that is being turned on or up, and what it is that is prompting the change of status. The view that "everything is political" avoids the problem of political theory neglecting areas of importance for study but only by further complicating matters, but as I shall argue the case for post-foundational ontology, it does so by leading us in a productive direction.

In any case, defining the political is an ontological activity insofar as it attempts to address the issue of what "being" political is all about, to then use this understanding to better articulate and conceptually map the social world we have inherited, and to do so without interpreting politics exclusively through the lens of our inherited institutions (including the state). Furthermore, to understand the political also provides political theory

with metapolitical leverage over the regional political debates of their location. As Michael Freeden notes, 'the underlying rationale of politics is the quest for finality and decisiveness in the affairs of groups, ends that are permanently frustrated by the slippery and inconclusive circumstances in which the quest occurs'.[52]

In other words, when people talk about politics, when people participate in political debate or action, there is a tendency to consider it part of a larger, ongoing attempt to realise a social world that unanimously supports their position, a social world that will always be out of reach as long as those with oppositional politics are convincing others, or acting otherwise, elsewhere. One of the oldest tricks in the book when it comes to political strategy is to position your opponent's views as beyond the pale, to convince the undecided that the issues they are raising are not worthy of scrutiny, that the issues one's opponent raises have already been decided upon. Due to the essential contestability of political concepts and ideas, and the radical contingency wrought by free and open political debate, political actors attempt to 'decontest' certain ways of thinking in order to secure hegemonic victories. As Freeden notes, 'decontestation is the attempt to control equivocal and contingent meaning by holding it constant'.[53] In this sense, denying the importance of the question of the political may be considered a 'metapolitical' strategy, intentionally or otherwise, on the part of political actors, including those within the academy: those that sit comfortably within the 'decontested' *status quo* may dismiss political ontology as a methodological practice, but do so from a position of bad faith.

Jacques Ranciere has argued that political strategy, in this sense, is anti-political, where 'to diminish politics is in one sense to reduce it to its function as a pacifying procedure between individuals and collectivity by relieving it of the weights and symbols of social

---

[52] Michael Freeden, *The Political Theory of Political Thinking: The Anatomy of a Practice.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.22.

[53] Freeden, 2013, ibid.

division'[54]. By decontesting certain concepts or issues and narrowing the frames of debate surrounding decision-making, whether by the barrel of a gun or by achieving discursive hegemony in a democratic space, is a way of reducing political possibilities away from those that serve one's own ideological ends: 'the reciprocal appeasement of the social and the political is the business of old, an old business which politics has always had as its paradoxical essence. Politics is the art of suppressing the political'.[55] If we return to the relationship between the political and social worlds, we may follow Freeden in saying that 'politics, it has been repeatedly and persuasively been pointed out, does not occupy a separate sphere of social activity. But it is a separate *form* of social activity'.[56] Thus, with a consideration of 'the political' as something that emerges in relation to the social, we return to the task of uncovering what it is to *be* political.

What is Democracy?

Democracy may be considered 'both a real regime and a political ideal'[57], a political regime that exists in the world 'where the will of the people ex ante becomes the law of the country (legal order) ex post'[58] and as an aspirational state of affairs that institutionalises the political equality inherent to humanity. Schumpeter defined democracy as 'that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote'.[59] Nevertheless, the clarity of the struggle as a democratic process is often undermined by both internal and external

---

[54] Jacques Ranciere, *On The Shores of Politics* (London: Verso, 1995), p.11.

[55] Ranciere, 1995, ibid.

[56] Freeden, 2013, p.28.

[57] Jan-Erik Lane & Svante Ersson, *Democracy: A Comparative Approach*. (London: Routledge, 2003), p.2.

[58] Lane & Ersson, ibid.

[59] Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy.* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976), p.269.

factors as 'participation tends to be low and politicians/political parties play a dominating role in deciding politics'.[60] Lakoff suggests that 'in sharp contrast to the autocratic alternatives, democracy aims to empower all citizens in equal measure'[61], but it may well be the case that contemporary democracies are currently failing on their own terms. As Gerry Stoker puts it, 'citizens fail to fully appreciate that politics in the end involves the collective imposition of decisions, demands a complex communication process and generally produces messy compromise'[62], but it is often the will to frustrate popular political demands by elite actors, often employing the language of civility, compromise or moderation in bad faith, that contributes to the malaise surrounding electoral politics. There is a tendency in the literature to try to explain away the problems of our current democracies as problems caused by individual citizens, often without explaining why an allegedly viable political culture fails to produce viable political citizens, by their own admission. For example, if the primary problem with a democracy is that its population often elects the wrong leaders, perhaps we should consider why a democracy's population makes the choices it does, how its criteria of assessment diverges from the democracy functioning "properly", and the supposed disconnect between culture and practice (including the possibility that the imposed democratic culture is inherently flawed).

The method of endogenous democracy theorises that democracies function as macro forces determined outside of the political system, with democracy is modelled as a function of socio-economic "modernisation", defined by a host of variables strongly related to each other, including GDP, industrial employment, urbanisation, amongst other factors.[63] Within the political science literature, Munck has condemned what he refers to as 'the surreptitious

---

[60] Lane & Ersson, ibid, p.249.

[61] Sanford Lakoff, *Democracy: History, Theory, Practice.* (Boulder, Westview Press, 1999), p.155.

[62] Gerry Stoker, *Why Politics Matters. Making Democracy Work.* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.10.

[63] Lane & Ersson, ibid, pp.257-258.

introduction of ideological bias', that is to say, 'countries that favour capitalism and are pro-business will be seen as respecting the rule of law, even if they do not recognise the rights of labour and other groups; and, on the other hand, the effort of countries that do recognise the rights of labour and other groups will not be acknowledged'.[64] If we return to the notion of endogenous democracy, we may have a similarly biased account in practice, skewed favourably for the richest nations (whose wealth is often historically grounded in the ill-gotten gains of bloody conquest) whilst wielding the comparable poverty of postcolonial states as means to admonish their democratic inferiority when they are out of step with the hegemonic consensus of the international community.

Consider Munck's concern of the manner in which political science appeals to empirical evidence that suggests that the stability of a democratic state 'is more endogenous than exogenous. Although economic and cultural factors impact on democracy, institutions play a crucial role; and institutions can be promoted from within the political system through constitutional policymaking'.[65] According to certain political scientists, the strength of a democracy is found within its people, within the strength of democracy as a political ideal within its civil society. Nevertheless, returning to Munck's critique, a rich country is less likely to undergo regime change than a poor one, and so the Global North have securer democratic arrangements than the Global South. In many cases, the stability of a democracy is not assessed in terms of its "democratic-ness", nor its transparency, nor its accountability to a broad, educated public, but rather linked to its historical economic asymmetries with the rest of the world. A democracy is free to be successful and stable when it can operate with the knowledge that it will be left to deliberate on its own affairs, and the only way to guarantee such a political context is to align oneself with the liberal-capitalist framework

---

[64] Gerardo L. Munck, *Measuring Democracy: A Bridge Between Scholarship & Politics*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2009), p.10.

[65] Lane & Ersson, ibid, p.266.

advocated by the United States and her allies. Munck concludes his analysis by advocating a conception of democracy as

> a set of rules regarding the political process, extending from the formation of government through public decision making all the way to the implementation of binding decisions, which reflects the principle that voter preferences are weighed equally. This robust procedural conception justifies the inclusion in a definition of democracy of standard political rights associated with the election of representatives, such as universal and equal voting rights, the right to run for office, the right to free and fair elections, and the right to regular elections.[66]

Whilst this procedural account may satisfy political science, allowing for comparative political analysis between actually existing states, whilst setting a commendable, practical bar for our actually existing institutions, defining democracy in such a way for a radical-theoretical enterprise is to prematurely limit our scope of inquiry and impoverish our broader political imagination.[67] To remain faithful to the ideal of democracy, we must be prepared to entertain the notion that it has yet to come, that none of our contemporary institutions are worthy of the name.

Understanding the relationship between democracy as a regime-type and democracy as an regulative ideal reinforced by a legitimising culture is thus a primary focus of radical democratic theory: specifically, 'how do democratic practices become embedded in a society; and what is the relationship between these processes and the assumption of democratic subjectivity?'.[68] If we take the view that democratic culture secures against the inherent

---

[66] Munck, ibid, p.128.

[67] The fear of a prematurely limited scope for democratic theory may explain the rift between theorists of democracy that offer radical alternatives within the paradigms of our existing institutions (such as citizen's assemblies, participatory budgeting, de-growth economics, etc.), which suggests the existence of a parallel "institutional turn" committed to incremental politics not always in dialogue with those theorising more comprehensive systemic change.

[68] Aletta J. Norval, *Aversive Democracy: Inheritance and Originality in The Democratic Tradition.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.1.

fragility of democratic institutions, then the task of radical democratic theory is to better understand how these cultures emerge, for the sake of empowering activists and agitators in non-democracies, and countering the hegemonic complacency found within the democracies of the Global North.

Post-Foundational Political Ontology

European political thought has sought to differentiate between 'politics' and 'the political': one interpretation considers politics as partisan strategies and the institutions in which they operate, whereas the political refers to the broader milieu presupposed by strategic actors and institutional frameworks. Politics is critically interrogated as an activity, as a mode of action, whereas the political refers to 'the *form-giving* dimension of society'.[69] As Ranciere argues, 'the foundation of politics is not in fact more a matter of convention rather than nature: it is the lack of foundation, the sheer contingency of any social order. Politics exists simply because no social order is based on nature, no divine law regulates human society'.[70] If politics is an account of how the social order is reproduced, the political reveals the condition of instability that haunts every politics, the inherent instability of the system itself.

Radical democratic theory's "ontological turn" is often referred to as post-foundational political thought. Post-foundationalism is best understood as an ontological weakening of the status of foundation without doing away with foundations altogether. Rather than assuming the absence of any possible foundations, the view holds that any ultimate grounding of action (such as natural law) does not exist, and thus the contestation that results from social contingency can never be resolved. This lines up with Michael

[69] Claude Lefort in Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p.90.

[70] Jacques Ranciere, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p.16.

Freeden's argument surrounding political thinking: there is a finality drive, an arrogant impulse in politics to reach a decision and let it be the final say on the matter, but there lacks an absolute means of securing a political consensus to be held in stone forever. In fact, we could say that an acknowledgement of the constant shifting of political actors, symbols and systems, a concession to respectful disagreement, rather than a dogmatic commitment to changing everyone's mind, is the first step away from any authoritarian temptation that shadows political conviction.

Post-foundationalist politics, therefore, acknowledges the problem of grounding the social, and that any discursive formation is both externally and internally contestable, but nihilistic meaninglessness does not follow, because it is accepted by post-foundationalists that one grounding must replace another, and indeed the freedom afforded by the continuous contestation of the powerful hegemonic formations that emerge in political life is to be understood as a democratically-affirming ethos.[71] This ethos is especially important when applied as a critical interrogation of those with pretensions to metaphysical absolutes. Marchart agrees with both Freeden and Ranciere by arguing that 'this primary task of politics can indeed be precisely described in modern terms as the political reduction of the social (that is to say the redistribution of wealth) and the social reduction of the political (that is to say the distribution of various powers and the imaginary investments attached to them)'.[72] Citing Paul Ricoeur's notion that politics 'only exists in great moments, in "crises", in the climactic and turning points of history'[73], Marchart argues that the purpose of stressing a distinction between the political and politics is to 'carve out the specificity of the

[71] Oliver Marchart, 2007, p.14.

[72] Marchart, 2007, ibid.

[73] Paul Ricoeur, *Reflections on the Just*, trans. David Pellauer. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p.35.

political realm and defend its autonomy versus other domains of the social'.[74] Marchart summarises the various positions as serving to demonstrate that

> the political serves as *ground* as much as it serves as *cause* and *condition* of all social being. Yet, this is a *ground* that can never be reached and still has the status of a foundation, a *cause* that does not determine anything and still produces effects of its absence, and a transcendental *condition* whose emergence is historically conditioned and still assumes supra-historical validity.[75]

Marchart retrieves this notion of the groundless grounding from Martin Heidegger, who conceived of the ground as an abyss ('*Der Abgrund ist Ab-grund*') in one of his many esoteric passages, arguing that since the ground is necessarily abyssal, 'it is precisely by remaining empty- by incessantly deferring its own fulfilment- that it remains always open, endless generating new possibilities of grounding'.[76] The centrality of Heidegger to post-foundational political thought relates to his philosophical engagement with questions of ontology and difference, that between *le politique* and *la politique*[77], in other words, the ontic arrangements of political institutions and order, and the ontological category of the political as a philosophical enterprise considering abstract questions (of justice, difference, legitimacy, etc.). The necessity of the distinction arises because the claim is that the ontological level enables and necessitates the contingent arrangements that makes politics both possible and

---

[74] Marchart, ibid, p.37.

[75] Marchart, ibid, p.176.

[76] Vassilios Paipais, *Political Ontology and International Political Thought: Voiding a Pluralist World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p.359.

[77] 'Le politique refers to the essence (a word apparently employed with little deconstructive reticence) of the political - what, before Heidegger, one might have referred to as the philosophical interrogation of politics- whereas la politique refers to the facticity or empirical event of politics'. Simon Critchley, 'Re-tracing the Political: Politics and Community in the Work of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy' in David Campbell and Michael Dillon (ed.), *The Political Subject of Violence* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993) p.74.

indeed inevitable; society is contingent, so politics is contingent; therefore, ontology is political.[78]

Marchart argues that 'politics has to accept the fact that it is an open-ended process with neither a clear beginning nor a determined end or destination'.[79] He contends that political activity 'does not take place in a vacuum, but is always enfolded in sedimented layers of traditions which, conversely, are ungrounded, flexible and changeable for their part'.[80] Marchart's justification for post-foundational theory is that the distinction between politics and the political resolves a deadlock between conventional political and social theory where the former focused (perhaps excessively) on procedural questions of governance whereas the latter was more interested in a more expansive account of politics as it permeates everyday life, emerging during instances of social cohesion or division.[81]

Politics remains a discursive regime with accompanying forms of social action within its own institutional boundaries, and the political is free to issue the role of something more esoteric and constituent: 'the *principle* of autonomy of politics, or the *moment* of institution of society'.[82] Marchart's contention is that the questioning of 'grounds', an inherent scepticism of a definitive means of permanently resolving political conflicts, may lead to a better understanding of the empirical context that allows certain grounds to become the hegemonic frameworks that legitimise social convention and political order.[83] Post-foundational theory's recognition of the absence of an ultimate grounding of a system

---

[78] "Politics' as 'sub-system', as a separate sphere of society, represents *within* society as its own forgotten foundation, its genesis in a violent, abyssal act- it represents, within the social space, what must *fall out* if this space is to constitute itself…politics as sub-system represents the Political (subject) for all other social sub-systems.' Slavoj Zizek, *For They Not Know What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor.* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), p.194.

[79] Marchart, ibid, p.3.

[80] ibid, p.3-4.

[81] ibid, p.5.

[82] ibid, p.7-8.

[83] ibid, p.15.

(citing an earlier example, natural law theory's ultimate justification found in God) leads to an inherent plurality of grounds, and thus 'making *impossible* the *final* achievement of a totality'.[84]

Unfortunately, theorists cannot access the ontological level directly, because any claim regarding the relatedness of relations must cohere with our understanding of such relations at the ontic level. In other words, if we were to adopt the agonistic theorist's position and argue that the political is antagonism[85], we would expect to see the inherent antagonistic relation between political ideologies, actors and institutions made manifest in social life. It is in this sense that the work of the political ontologist must always defer to empirical observation, 'in order to "wave" at something which will always escape our grasp because of the irremediable gap between the ontological and the ontic, beingness and beings, the ground and what is grounded'.[86] Nevertheless, the way Marchart describes such an enterprise, it calls to mind Plato's cave, wherein gesturing at the shadows brought its inhabitants no closer to the light.[87] Marchart foresees such an objection, and explains that this sort of 'transcendentalism' can only ever be a '*quasi*-transcendentalism', that any theory that attempts to map the political in a universal fashion will always 'emerge out of particular *empirico-historical* conjunctures'[88], and thus a self-imposed methodological humility is necessary.

Post-foundational theory often draws upon the notion that conceptual innovation is linked to 'social crisis', where crises emerge when the social appears increasingly untethered

---

[84] ibid, p.17.

[85] Chantal Mouffe has developed her theory of agonistic democracy extensively in: *The Return of the Political.* (London/New York: Verso, 1993); *The Democratic Paradox.* (London/New York: Verso, 2000); *On the Political.* Abingdon – New York: Routledge, 2005); *Agonistics: Thinking The World Politically.* (London/New York: Verso, 2013); *For a Left Populism.* (London/New York: Verso, 2018).

[86] Marchart, 2007, p.24.

[87] Marchart, 2007, p.25.

[88] Marchart, ibid, p.27.

from theories that explain it. As Marchart puts it, 'a growing non-correspondence between an old conceptual paradigm and its changing institutional or social context'.[89] Already we bear witness to the importance of social theory in the "fleshing out" of post-foundational political theory, as an explanation of social crises is required prior to the political intervention, in which counter-hegemonic political actors attempt to "assume the role" of society's absent ground by way of offering an alternative vision of how the social ought to be organised.[90] But at this point, we may interrogate post-foundational theory on its own terms: what is to be gained from this enterprise beyond an acknowledgement of contingency which does not itself open up the political imagination, rather give us permission to do so? Knowing things could be otherwise may afford us the possibility of theorising change, but what kind of politics may mobilise and secure it?

I understand the political as an ephemeral state of being in society that cannot be institutionalised, referring to the process of collective social change that is only possible in its own time, and only in moments of crisis, opportunity or heightened intensity such that the possibility of radical changes to an otherwise hegemonic order emerges. In this moment of disruption, where uncertainty and contestation are brought to bear on a pre-existent institution, the political allows us to avoid the trap of searching for ways to persist with what previously existed, and instead forge alternative ways of living, in a social context in which the politics of the status quo will necessarily frame these transformative possibilities as impossible, unaffordable, unrealistic, utopian to a fault, and in some cases, violent and criminal. From this perspective, post-foundational political ontology is a mode of thinking revolution democratically.

---

[89] ibid, p.56.

[90] ibid, p.57.

The Charge of Social Weightlessness

However, Lois McNay has argued that post-foundational political thought's methodology may run counter to its normative commitments. Radical democratic theory distinguishes itself a sub-discipline within political theory due to its commitment to furthering a critique of power relations.[91] Thus, it is one of the primary methodological objectives of any theory of radical democracy to build within itself an understanding of the asymmetrical power relations endemic to contemporary society, including the way in which those power relations may impact the theorist's own interpretation of politics, and how power may guide and shape their sense of where lines are drawn between the feasible and the aspirational in terms of inferring practical policy.[92] For McNay, the irony is that it is the 'intrinsic connection to the critique of power that renders radical democratic theory vulnerable to the criticism of social weightlessness'[93], as opposed to other forms of political theory that acknowledge, but nonetheless refuse to engage with, problems of social ontology.[94]

If theorists of radical democracy have previously inquired into the first principles that can illuminate the inherent, and potentially emancipatory, features of political action, contemporary post-foundationalism radically diverges from other approaches insofar as it conceives of all social relations as potential sites of political contestation and transformation. However, McNay is sceptical of the way in which the political realm is framed: '[it] does not take its essential shape from underlying social dynamics and interests which it relatively passively reflects and transmits into the democratic arena. Rather, the

---

[91] McNay, 2013, p.6.

[92] McNay, ibid, p.7.

[93] McNay, ibid, p.8.

[94] A discussion of the most prominent elaboration of this methodological discussion can be found in Irena Rosenthal (2016) "Ontology and political theory: a critical encounter between Rawls and Foucault", *European Journal of Political Theory*, 18:2, 238-258.

political is accorded its own distinct logic that not only renders it autonomous but also gives it *primacy* over the social'.[95]

Nevertheless, the search for the socially weightless 'political' is misguided if it undermines, and produce tensions with, the norms of freedom and equality that still continue to inform and motivate radical political theory. McNay concludes that 'unvindicated privileging of political over social life, a valorisation of impersonal dynamics over experiential ones and the construal of radical agency as an empty process of flux and contestation rather than as embodied practices in the world' together cause the very problems of powerlessness, inequality, and domination to emerge only as 'secondary, merely empirical issues or, worse, drop out of the picture altogether'.[96] McNay's concern is that if political theory abstracts to this level of ontology, political theorists may accidentally inscribe our ideal models of radical democracy with the structural inequalities and domination that persist in our current socio-historical contexts. We may unintentionally elevate and universalise concepts that are themselves conducive to problems that exist now, working to construct models of radical democracy that would flourish in a direction that would only then reproduce the structural inequalities we sought to avoid, rather than ameliorating these circumstances for the excluded at the social margins.

McNay welcomes initial ontological reflection, deeming it 'an unavoidable aspect of political thinking in so far as the latter is always grounded, explicitly or implicitly, in certain presuppositions about fundamental features of social reality and human agency'.[97] The problem is the next move, an account of how the radical contingency of grounds, and the distinctions drawn between politics and the political, play out in regional social contexts, and how asymmetrical power relations control the extent to which the status quo may be

---

[95] McNay, 2013, pp.3-4; my emphasis.

[96] McNay, ibid, p.208.

[97] McNay, ibid, p.12.

perceived as malleable by competing social actors.[98] McNay's view is that the fundamental connection between ontology and the critique of power has yet to be theoretically interrogated, and thus post-foundational theory offers 'accounts of the political so rarefied that they close off the very issues of inequality and domination that are purportedly their central concern'.[99] More specifically, radical democratic theorists are

> unable to address a series of issues about empowerment and participation that are crucial to their theory, such as how to mobilise individuals in the first place or why 'the political' should be the principal focus of citizen loyalty rather than any of the many other constitutive attachments and bonds of social life.[100]

Radical democratic theory 'tends to presume political agency as an unproblematic given', the result of which is a 'tenuous connection with the lives of those on whose behalf it claims to speak'.[101] Any non-elitist democratic theory must presume the capacity for equal and universal political agency, yet ironically if that equality is presumed as an immediate possibility 'many of the barriers to political participation that face marginalised and powerless groups are not considered'.[102] According to McNay, ontological accounts in political theory too often fail to address 'the social conditions necessary for effective agency and instead simply assume the existence of ready-made political subjects'.[103] Abstract notions of political community and action often presuppose individual participants vaguely construed as equal to one another, where their political participation, their seat at the table, is presupposed and assured.[104] McNay's concern is that these political theories often neglect

---

[98] ibid.

[99] ibid, p.14.

[100] ibid, p.15.

[101] ibid, p.17.

[102] ibid.

[103] ibid.

[104] ibid, p.18.

the question of whether those individuals with long-term experiences of inequality and suffering may be reticent to participate in a political context.[105] The question of mobilisation and political re-engagement remains: how do the disempowered, absent the privileged detachment of experiencing their lives as one of multifaceted opportunities, be provided with the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation necessary to build a sense of their own individual and collective political agency?[106]

I believe this to be a pertinent challenge to the political as a site of academic inquiry. One possible response to McNay might be to say that this may be a problem for the current ontologies proposed, but not a problem *qua* ontology; rather, a problem with the approaches proposed thus far. It could well be the case that each political ontology has incoherencies, inconsistencies and unfounded presuppositions, but that the case for constructing political ontologies remains viable. Another possible route is to read McNay's critique as a problem of ideology; that theorists, intentionally or otherwise, backwards-engineer their own political beliefs into their ontologies, rather than the latter influencing the former.

McNay draws upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu to retrieve the concept of social suffering, an idea which 'highlights the depoliticising effects of dominations: that when objective inequalities are taken into the body and naturalised as subjective dispositions, the capacity for political agency can be subtly eroded'.[107] McNay's view is that social weightlessness can be overcome by focusing attention to a 'logic of embodiment and power'.[108] I argue that in our contemporary age, any logic of embodiment and power must engage with the political dimension of technology, and any political ontology responding to the charge of social weightlessness must incorporate an account of technics. I would also

---

[105] ibid.

[106] ibid, p.112.

[107] McNay, ibid, p.28.

[108] ibid, p.19.

stress that any account of internalised oppression requires an account of ideological production, specifically in cases where the claim is that disenfranchised individuals reject political projects conducive to their interests, and/or are interpellated into identifying with and endorsing political projects that run counter to their material self-interest. In this vein, I echo Lorna Finlayson's criticism of radical democratic theory's propensity to think 'the political' as a way to theorise transformative politics without having to directly address the material.[109]

Returning to Oliver Marchart, he concludes that the contemporary concern for post-foundational political theory is that 'politics proper must not be confused with today's 'technologized' politics, with the bureaucratic management of the affairs of the state- which is only part of a larger process of technologization'.[110] Despite the charge of social weightlessness, I maintain that the enduring appeal of the politics/political distinction remains in its implicit, and in some cases explicit, acknowledgement of and commitment to, the separation of the political as a domain concerned with the implementation of philosophically robust conceptions of justice opposed to 'apolitical' politics (as it has become in the century of technology) as a system of reproducing economic life through aesthetic and rhetorical tinkering around the edges of a generally fixed technical regime.

The ontological turn has provided radical democratic theory with the conceptual framework to challenge the hegemonic political order.[111] Some theorists may characterise the

---

109 'There is no point banging on about equality and freedom and autonomy, the thought goes, without being willing to criticise the fundamental elements of capitalist society that inevitably destroy those same goods - just as there is no point in simply recommending good health whilst proposing the continuation of arrangements that are incompatible with it'. Lorna Finlayson, *The Political is Political: Conformity and the Illusion of Dissent in Contemporary Political Philosophy* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), p.24.

110 Marchart, 2007, p.114.

111 Furthermore, through critical discourse analysis and the Essex school, radical democratic theory boasts a post-foundational account of hegemony itself. See Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time.* London/New York, 1990); *Emancipations.* (London/New York: Verso, 1996); *On Populist Reason.* (London/New York: Verso, 2005); Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Zizek and Judith Butler, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality. Contemporary Dialogue on the Left.* (London/New York: Verso, 2000).

political as a fleeting historical moment[112], as a dramatic confrontation[113]; others consider it the constant social background noise, the gentle yet mildly unsettling thrum, its volume increasing in moments of confrontation.[114] However, any political theory committed to the radical transformation of society requires an account of why these alternative possibilities, however desirable and compatible with broadly-shared democratic values, may be unlikely to emerge from our contemporary circumstances. As the charge of social weightlessness contends, in the absence of a material analysis of social conditions and an acknowledgement of the ways in which intended democratic agents are structurally deprived of their political agency by factors, including but not limited to, specific instances of internalised oppression, radical democratic theory lacks the purported engagement with power relations necessary to inform practical political struggles.

The critique of social weightlessness argues that this account of social insufficiently accounts for the material conditions of a given society and the fluctuating effects of internalised (and externalised) social oppression on political subjectivity. My contention moving forward is that the problem of social weightlessness can be resolved with an account of technics and social formation, as the material conditions of any given social settlement are mediated and interpreted through technics, which also contribute to the shaping of social relations.

To conclude, I understand the political as the underlying radical contingency of the social, revealed in moments of rupture, discontinuity or crisis (as that which necessarily precludes the ultimate foreclosure of contingency). Its disclosure induces fleeting, time-

---

[112] Sheldon Wolin, *Fugitive Democracy and Other Essays.* (ed). Nicholas Xenos (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

[113] For Ranciere, 'politics doesn't always happen - it actually happens very little or rarely', *Disagreement,* p.17.

[114] Critchley, in response to Badiou, argues: 'I see politics as everywhere, as being a really quite banal, or rather mundane, call to forms of mobilisation that begin from the place where you are, where you are working (or where you are not working), the place where you are active and where you are thinking'. Oliver Marchart & Simon Critchley (ed.) *Laclau: A Critical Reader.* (London/New York, Routledge, 2004), p.296.

sensitive contexts of radical social possibility that by their very existence impose new subjectivities on a given group, forcing them to either affirm, reject or wilfully ignore the possibilities for social transformation. In other words, the radical contingency of the social means that any given aspect of the social anything *could* be political, but only is such when collective action is organised for or against it, that re-presents this aspect as changeable, and makes a case for doing so; that is to say, the social is made political by virtue of its *configuration* in relation to situated social subjects and their pre-existent social organisation.

However, these moments of instability are double-edged, in that the return of political enmity does not inevitably lead to democratic reform, and can just as easily collapse into more authoritarian responses to political crisis. To put it in (overly) simple terms, the emergence of the political could lead to democratic revolution, but by virtue of that same radical contingency, so too could lead to non-democratic revolutionary elements or counter-revolutionary movements that leave democrats of all stripes worse off than before. Thus, radical democratic theory is not a reformist approach, but neither does it advocate immediate counter-hegemonic political action out of principle (unlike anti-statist ideologies such as revolutionary vanguardism or anarchism).

Post-foundational political ontology may be considered socially weightless insofar as it is unable to account for the ways in which forms of social oppression are internalised by subjects through the material practices of everyday life. In the next chapter, I shall argue that "the technical", understood as an ontological category, provides the necessary corrective to the problem of social weightlessness in political ontology, as technics structure the phenomenology of everyday life, determine the possibility of overlapping subjectivities, provide the source of collective memory necessary for political communities, and contribute to the shaping of social relations.

2. Technics and the Political

'The spirit of technicity…it is the belief in an activistic metaphysics - the belief in unlimited power and the domination of man over nature, even over human nature; the belief in the unlimited "receding of national boundaries", in the unlimited possibilities of change and prosperity' - **Carl Schmitt** [115]

In this chapter, I shall argue that there has been an ongoing "*technologisation*" of politics and society. I shall draw from Schmitt to suggest that this process has been a concern historically, and argue that technics - defined as the exteriorisation of memory - ought to be understood as a configurative dynamic that, along with the political, co-constitutes the social, and as such, must be understood as conceptually distinct from politics, but nonetheless inextricably tied to its functioning in practice. Given the influence of technics (through media) on our perceptions of collective memory, I argue that renewed focus on the technical configuration of social life is necessary for radical democratic theory.

The chapter is comprised of the following sections: 'Politics and Technicity', 'Stiegler on Technics', 'Technics and Public Memory', 'Technical Development and General Proletarianisation' and 'Disruption in the Information Age'. The chapter begins with Carl Schmitt, who originally pioneered the politics/political distinction in theory and his early concerns about the *technologization* of politics - I move forward with this notion as a contemporary political issue. Drawing on Stiegler's account of technics, I argue that technics and the political are co-constitutive of the social, that technics determines the state of public memory, and that disruptions in our access to information caused by the technical system creates problems that must be resolved politically.

[115] Schmitt, 2007, p.94.

Politics and Technicity

Why does the political appear somehow everywhere and nowhere? Why does the political feel so ephemeral, fleeting and impermanent, something rarely approached directly, forever deferred by the primacy of immediate circumstances, undermined by social indifference, circulating in everyday life as a series of platitudes, a domain in which people often try to avoid applying critical scrutiny, and think best to avoid? Yet, at the same time, politics appear to be *everywhere*, an inescapable force of antagonism and division, polarising and burdensome in bringing the severity of judgement or moral outrage to the banal or trivial? We argue amongst each other as to the appropriateness of applying political analysis to certain contexts, the relentlessness of bringing politics into all aspects of social life, and yet there is also a depressing absence of substantive political debate, as if all serious critical interrogations of the political landscape are simplified, flattened or disingenuously undercut by mass media, indeed by varying forms of epistemic inaccessibility. The history of political ontology may provide an insight into such a paradoxical cultural condition.

Carl Schmitt, a legal scholar who wrote *The Concept of the Political* in 1932 and pioneered the politics/political distinction, argued that the political is a category distinct from the religious, moral and social, defined by the friend-enemy distinction. Schmitt's ire was primarily reserved for the liberal-individualist interpretation of society as one of private individuals engaging in market relations, where the state is considered a neutral institution. Liberalism, in its attempt to downplay politics and instead articulate a series of deliberative compromises, wishes to deny the antagonism inherent to political disagreement. As Tracy B. Strong notes in his introduction to the expanded edition, Schmitt's essay also argues for a deeper claim: 'the political defines what it is to be a human being in the modern world and that those who would diminish the political diminish humanity'.[116]

---

116 Tracy B. Strong in Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political.* (ed.) Tracy B. Strong (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p.xv.

Although the distinction between politics and the political had been implied in prior texts, Schmitt was first to articulate the importance of the conceptual distinction.[117] When two groups of people with different values meet, the political emerges, as the friend-enemy distinction is actualised. For Schmitt, political attitudes and actions can be reduced to this distinction. The friend-enemy distinction is not a private matter, but enunciated and articulated in public; enemies recognise in each other that intensity of enmity, a willingness to fight for oppositional causes, and in extreme cases, even risk their own life to defend what they believe to be right. Schmitt's argument begins with the premise that the concept of the state presupposes the category of the political, insofar as the state is the site of legitimate political action.[118] Thus when a state intervenes in social life, their actions inherently politicise the pre-existing religious, moral, cultural, economic aspect.[119] Schmitt explains this politicisation through the way in which actions and motives are reducible to the distinction between friends and enemies, characterised as denoting the highest level of intensity 'of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation', and it exists theoretically and practically without drawing upon any other form of distinction.[120] Participants thus recognise, interpret, and apply judgement to concrete situations where conflict arises, whether with each other, or in relation to the decision of the state, and thus the determination is made as to whether 'the adversary intends to judge to negate his opponent's way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought in order to preserve one's own form of existence'.[121] Notice how Schmitt conflates the alignment of interests and the individuals advocating for such interests: is 'the enemy' a means of categorising individual peoples and

---

[117] The historical precursors to Schmitt's use of the politics/political distinction are discussed in Irinia Viriasova, 'The Political Totalisation of Carl Schmitt: Deciding on the "Absolutely Unpolitical"'. *Telos,* 175 (2016) 85-104

[118] Schmitt, 2007, p.19.

[119] Schmitt, 2007, p.22.

[120] Schmitt, ibid, pp.26-27.

[121] ibid, p.27.

participants in political conflict, or is it a means of objectifying the structural in the particular for the sake of channelling one's emotions into embodied scapegoats (and where has 'the friend' gone in this formulation)? The language of existential preservation harbours a cultural aspect to the political, as if these critical encounters only emerge when quasi-essentialist communities are placed in intractable conflict.

For Schmitt, the political is the most 'intense and extreme antagonism'.[122] War has an obvious political dimension, but the declaration of war itself presupposes that the state has already determined its allies and adversaries.[123] Politicisation is thus a process of dynamic categorisation that emerges in moments of judgement and decision; it is the mode of behaviour that evaluates a situation and draws its demarcations accordingly.[124] For Schmitt, the political does not have its own autonomous substance; it is the description of the intensity of association or dissociation within pre-existent social groupings.[125]

Schmitt's "dissociative" account of the political pertains to the cleavage of a social whole at the enactment of a decision made amongst competing options to achieve an outcome, in that 'the political entity is by its very nature the decisive entity, regardless of the sources from which it derives its last psychic motives. It exists or does not exist. If it exists, it is the supreme, that is, in the decisive case, the authoritative entity'.[126] This account of

[122] ibid, p.28.

[123] ibid, p.34.

[124] ibid, p.37.

[125] ibid, p.38.

[126] ibid, pp.43-44.

politics is therefore tied to statist conceptions of authority and legitimation, where the political is that which is considered "the one who gets to decide".[127]

Schmitt's critique of the liberal state lies in its primacy over the economic over the political in relation to the social: the state is perceived either as a 'mere servant' of a society considered to be economically determined, 'as one association among other[s]', or merely the institutionalisation of the agglomerated product of other smaller associations.[128] Whilst this account may read as a political theorist denouncing the liberal refusal to grant politics the level of attention and legitimacy it deserves, the more charitable interpretation is that the liberal's denial of the political is itself dangerous; to deny the state its political power is to either obscure the power it holds, or to produce a society in which the ultimate arbiter of decision-making power is unclear to its public.[129]

Political life vanishes in a social world wherein the people lack the capacity or the will to make distinctions between their friends and enemies; for Schmitt this capacity for differentiation is the 'essence' of 'political existence'.[130] He distinguishes between the case of an unpolitical world, and the naive perception of one: 'if a part of the population declares that it no longer recognises enemies, then, depending on the circumstance, it joins their side and aids them. Such a declaration does not abolish the reality of the friend-and-enemy

---

[127] Schmitt's statist formulation may be juxtaposed with the 'decision' imposed upon political subjects during the natalist (in the Arendtian sense) fervour of an Event, a disruption in the state of a situation where new possibilities emerge and 'militant subjects' (always external to the state) must affirm their fidelity to the transformative potential of their new circumstances via collective action. See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event.* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2001); *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return of Philosophy* (London: Continuum Press, 2003); *Logics of Worlds, Being and Event II.* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2006); *Theory of the Subject.* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2009); Alain Badiou et. al, *What is a People?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Peter Hallward, *Badiou. A Subject to Truth*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

[128] ibid, p.44.

[129] Here we may distinguish between the political liberalism of figures such as John Rawls and contemporary liberal republican tradition from the kind of 'career politician' precursor to neoliberal managerialism that Schmitt invokes. For Rawls and those who follow in his footsteps, the political takes priority over the economic and social, although political liberalism underplays the antagonistic elements of politics in favour of a consensus-building approach.

[130] ibid, p.49.

distinction'.[131] In other words, from its outset as a modern political conception, the politics/ political distinction has always been wary of the attempt by hegemonic political actors to suppress the inherent divisiveness of political engagement, as well as the practical complicity that certain political attitudes may have with actors to which they consider themselves opposed, at least theoretically if not in their actions.

Schmitt's critique of liberalism is that unlike other modern political ideologies, it has been the most successful at neutralising and depoliticising aspects of social life, such as education or the economy, that were previously seen as obviously and openly political, and the trend of depoliticising sites of contestation is a technique that non-liberal actors have also taken up[132]. Schmitt's contention is that if the political is negated, 'which is inherent in every consistent individualism'[133] the social consequence is a general distrust of the state and government (big problem for a fascist) and a general distrust of political organisation as an effective means of transforming society (bigger problem for everybody else). The liberal position splits what was previously political into the moral sphere, which contains within it ethics, education and intellect, and a market sphere, which contains economics, trade and property.[134] As for our contemporary situation, it is precisely the absence of a state willing to politicise certain aspects of the social that is confounding in moments of social crisis: the neoliberal technique of governance is to frame the state as a disempowered hindrance, reluctantly legitimate and wedded to the reproduction of the *status quo* even to the point of institutional inertia.

Carl Schmitt's first essay on the problem of depoliticisation in liberal society was written in 1929, years before his most famous works. '*The Age of Neutralizations and*

---

[131] ibid, p.51.

[132] ibid, p.69.

[133] ibid, p.70.

[134] ibid.

Depoliticisations', published as a companion piece in the aforementioned expanded edition, and also addresses Schmitt's aversion to liberal democracy and demonstrates the concerns that led the politics/political distinction to be formulated. Schmitt begins by lamenting the fact that 'all questions, including the economic, *recede before the task of technical progress*'.[135]

He argues that modern statecraft is primarily concerned with the reproduction of economic relations, and as such, is less concerned with understanding its own historical and cultural development, declaring itself 'neutral with respect to political questions and decisions' which is to 'thereby renounce its claim to rule'.[136] Schmitt contends that the primacy of the economic sphere, coupled with an institutional commitment to "neutrality" lends itself to technocratic governance, that political actors gesture in the direction of technology as the apolitical get-out clause, 'the absolute and ultimate neutral ground', operating under the assumption that 'there is nothing more neutral' because technology purports to serve everyone.[137] The basis for asserting the neutrality of technology is that these processes are egalitarian insofar as 'radio is utilised for news of all kinds or as the postal service delivers packages regardless of their contents, since its technology can provide no criterion for evaluating them'.[138] In other words, technology was (originally) favoured by liberal actors due to its neutral appearance, on the assumption that technology itself is neutral, that technology is strategically incapable of inegalitarian calculation and discrimination (how times change).[139]

---

[135] ibid, p.86; my emphasis.

[136] ibid, p.88.

[137] ibid, p.90.

[138] ibid.

[139] An extensive overview of the empirical evidence that demonstrates the myriad examples of race and sex-based discrimination that has emerged in the application of contemporary digital technologies, such as facial recognition, surveillance software and even bluetooth-operated hand-dryers can be found in Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code.* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

Schmitt observes that 'no single decision can be derived from the immanence of technology, least of all for neutrality'.[140] Referring to technology as 'both an instrument and a weapon',[141] Schmitt contends that technical progress does not need to propose a metaphysical, moral or economic vision for society, yet technology is tangentially linked to a moral discourse on the naive assumption that technological innovations will only be used to further good intentions to the benefit of society, that there will be an egalitarian distribution of these various technologies amongst the population. Schmitt claims technology is 'culturally blind' and as such, 'no conclusions which usually can be drawn from the central domains of spiritual life can be derived from pure technology…nor a specific political system'.[142] Schmitt speculated that the coming century may be provisionally understood as the century of technology, in the sense that actors from across the political spectrum would appropriate technology as the primary means of guiding society through the reproduction of economic life, and in order to obscure their own ideological tendencies.[143]

Returning to the contemporary literature, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe argue to the contrary that we live in an age in which 'everything is political', such that 'under its domination…the political becomes unapparent - an unapparence proportionate to its powerfulness'.[144] *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.* Just as Schmitt was concerned by the repression of the political, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe are concerned by what we earlier designated as the appeal to subjectivity, that all things can be political at certain times to any person, the consequence of which is a totalising approach to the political, which is equally disempowering for democratic contestation. This 'new totalitarianism' that Lacoue-Labarthe

---

[140] ibid, p.91.

[141] ibid.

[142] ibid, p.92.

[143] ibid, p.95. It is worth acknowledging the dark irony that the early Schmitt is disdainful of those reluctant to share their political convictions when the later Schmitt would transparently hold risible political convictions before, during and after the Second World War, of world-historical proportions.

[144] Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy in Marchart, 2007, p.66.

and Nancy lament 'designates the merging of the political with diverse authoritative discourses, among which the authors count socio-economic, technological, cultural, or psychological discourses'[145], an inversion of the earlier worry that politics as a domain of social life would be disregarded, with a similar conclusion drawn: 'the political converts itself- *given the absence or the spectacularization of public space*- into 'technological' forms of management or organisation, a process which leads to the effective silencing of genuinely political questions'.[146]

The similarity between the approaches, aside from the "the political is nowhere/ everywhere" inversion, is found in the critique of the depoliticising affect of technology as imbricated in governmental technique to produce a veneer of neutrality, as well as a renewed focus on physical space, the slow transition from an inherently egalitarian understanding of public space as an aspect of the commons (or in Schmitt's case, a politicised space), towards public space interpreted by the state as property assets to be regulated, commercialised, outsourced, and in many cases, outright privatised (economised, and therefore depoliticised, space).[147] As space is transformed by technology, so too is it shaped by politics, albeit in subtle, often intangible, ways, and as political ontology serves to demonstrate, the *status quo* is often shaped by actors that wish to suppress contestation through the false conflation of technology as moral progress and governance as the systematic application of technology to social problems in search of "post"-political solutions.

---

[145] ibid.

[146] ibid, my emphasis.

[147] That is not to say that spatial analysis has been neglected by theorists, the most prominent being Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, David Harvey, Stuart Elden and 'Right to the City' activists influenced by the situationist movement. Staging "the people" in public space is also an integral aspect of Ranciere's theory of politics as a suspension of the police order, and this miniature "spatial" turn has seen renewed interest in his approach. See Jacques Ranciere, *On the Shores of Politics*. London: Verso, 1995); *Disagreement*, 1999; *Hatred of Democracy*. (London/New York: Verso, 2006); *The Emancipated Spectator*. (London: Verso, 2009); *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. (London/New York, 2010): Verso; *Staging the People: The Proletarian and His Double*. (London: Verso, 2011). A reinvigoration of public space in opposition to neoliberal individualism is found in Bonnie Honig*, Public Things: Democracy in Despair*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

'The undivided reign of the political'[148] leads to its dilution across social life, the inability to distinguish between politics as a regressive means of causing division and politics as the means by which collective action oriented towards justice manifests itself in practice. It is important to note that this does not mean that the politicisation of certain aspects of social life is an undesirable enterprise; if anything, attempts to scrutinise the politics of work, gender, race, etc., are all supplementary projects designed at reaffirming the existence of the political, as they expose false divisions amongst peoples and social pathologies to be rectified.[149]

Elsewhere in the work of Claude Lefort, who separates between the political proper and "apolitical politics" (an account that more closely resembles Schmitt's account of depoliticisation), the 'retreat of the political' can be understood as what amounts to a 'forgetfulness or oblivion of the difference between politics- as a subsystem or mode of action- and the political'.[150] Marchart reads Lefort as saying that 'politics and the political serve as mutual conditions of (im)possibility due to their play of presencing/absencing'.[151] A political actor wishes to mobilise support for an alternative possibility to the social order, whilst their adversary attempts to deny, deride and withhold such a possibility, whilst in turn proposing a political project of their own. The post-foundational contentions that Marchart finds in Lefort is that (1) what makes (post)modernity unique is that the conditions have arrived for us to collectively understand this underlying struggle between politics and the political, (2) in moments where the political becomes apparent it stops being an aspect of another social domain (the politics of ecology, film, economics, etc) and reveals itself 'as an

---

[148] Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe & Jean-Luc Nancy, *Retreating the Political.* (London: Routledge, 1997), p.126.

[149] For example, the gender and racial critiques of society, and the necessity of intersectional responses. See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment.* (London: Routledge, 1991).

[150] Marchart, 2007, p.90.

[151] Marchart, ibid.

autonomous activity: in the event of what we called 'the moment of the political".[152] Thus, the emergence of the political is an event that supersedes the boundaries of the state; this notion corresponds to the radical contingency earlier elaborated. The state itself is an institutional arrangement shaped by prior historical formations, and as such, although it holds constituent power and is often considered the exclusively legitimate mode by which sovereign power is exercised, the state is never a given, always operating in particular ways in regional contexts, janus-faced in its operations, necessarily reproducing its own interests, and thus almost always anti-political insofar as it suppresses adversaries that question the extent of its coercive capacities, if not at the level of political representatives, then at the level of bureaucracy, militancy and espionage.

Returning once more to Schmitt's critique of the liberal state, the fear was that the state would turn into society; society's actions would be determined by ethical and intellectual attitudes whilst an economic-technical system, untethered from the collective belief in transformative structural change, would operate continuously alongside unopposed by the arbiter of both domains found in the neutral liberal state (which ostensibly prioritises the concerns of the latter in the language of the former). Schmitt condemns the industrial production of a mass of consumer-citizens, indifferent to a collective political project, and instead 'at the intellectual pole, government and power turns into propaganda and mass manipulation, and at the economic pole, control'.[153] Although markets provide freedom of choice courtesy of industrial-scale mass production, technology serves both the comforts of consumption, and the production of dangerous weapons and instruments, and as such 'a technological rationalisation can be the opposite of an economic rationalisation'.[154]

---

[152] Marchart, ibid, pp.91-92.

[153] Schmitt, 2007, p.72.

[154] Schmitt, ibid, p.76.

Thus the economic way of organising social life is declared a naturally occurring system of reciprocity, productivity and harmony, whilst the political way is declared by contrary to be a form of 'conquering power outside the domain of economics, namely, thievery, conquest, and crimes'.[155] Political beliefs are impartial and prejudiced; political movements are self-serving and dogmatic; political actions are compromised and political actors to be treated with suspicion, bordering on contempt. It is easy to see these cultural tendencies, especially in western liberal democracies and amongst those most ideologically wedded to free market economics.[156] If (it is falsely believed that) politics solely concerns the state, and the state is a coercive enterprise enamoured by crooks and partisans, then any calls to reimagine, reinvigorate or reactivate the receded or diluted political element of social life is ostensibly a threat to all pre-existent social domains, however insecure, regressive or asymmetric the power relations within those domains are.[157] My later contention is that contemporary politics - specifically hegemonic neoliberalism - has exploited this previously theorised disconnect between the public reception of technology and political partiality. Sweeping political reforms of the public's relationship to capitalism are justified as "modernisation" through technological implementation. Neoliberal policies are communicated through a discourse of calculation and efficiency and thus framed as incontestable.

Post-foundational political ontology works at the separation of politics as it is, and politics as it can be, but in order to have an idea of what can be done, we must have a clear account of the social (the place where doing is done)! If ontology is invoked by political theory to better understand social events, actions and processes, any account of society in

---

[155] Schmitt, ibid, pp.76-77.

[156] For example, American "right-libertarians" and "minarchists" such as Ayn Rand and Murray Rothbard.

[157] It also provides a provisional explanation of the tendency for both liberal and conservative commentators to misrepresent socialist and communist politics as the fetishisation or the pathological over-extension of a hypothetical state, whilst simultaneously endorsing the actual state's pervasiveness so long as it extends itself to bring further domains of social life into the economic sphere.

the information age must isolate the relationship between technological processes and social production. I shall argue that technics ought to be understood as a configurative dynamic that, along with the political, co-constitutes the social. Technics is fundamental to human comprehension of temporality and spatiality, bringing about the possibility of collective memory through the recording, communication and transmission of past human activity (words and deeds), and mediating our historical interpretation of the past, social expectations in the present and political trajectories for the future. Furthermore, technics reveals the structures of social domination within digital communications technology that require political intervention, and I argue addresses the charge of social weightlessness levelled at political ontology by supplementing an account of both the restrains upon, and possibilities of, collective agency.

Stiegler on Technics

Technics is the anglophone reconstruction of the ancient Greek *techne,* defined by Aristotle as one of the virtues of thought (also referred to as the intellectual virtues) as a disposition that brings contingent things into existence by way of craft. Philosophers often use technics interchangeably with technique, or to distinguish technics in the broadest possible sense from technology as referring to something more historically specific, tied to industrialisation, modernity, and/or capitalism. Lewis Mumford was first to retrieve technics from the ancients, using it to refer to the total technical equipment of a society.[158] Jacques Ellul, a prominent critic of technology writing later, referred instead to Technique, defined as 'the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity'.[159] For Ellul, technique is a guided

[158] Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934/2010)

[159] Jacques Ellul, *The technological society*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), p.xxv.

operation, replacing spontaneous forms with technical forms in order to maximise efficiency, adapt to new conditions and better operationalise certain aspects of a given form. He argues that in the 18th century, there was an *explosion of technique*. Ellul argues that globalisation caused technique to have universal transmissibility across the entire world: where once regional contexts provided distinctive approaches to problems or situationally specific tools, there is now an overarching hegemonic technique across the world. Ellul argues that the tendency towards universal, uniform techniques of human production globally imposed and normalised across cultures has emerged across all aspects of social life, albeit with varying degrees of success. "Technique" itself has replaced "Nature" as the hegemonic social 'milieu'.[160]

Bernard Stiegler, as a former doctoral student of Jacques Derrida, considered himself a deconstructionist rather than exclusively a philosopher of technology, and with that theoretical background comes the novelty of his approach. Stiegler considers 'technics' a repressed foundational aspect of the human condition, rather than a concrete practice of circulating standardised instructions on ways of making and doing. He explained further in his autobiography that his work concerns

> the endurance of a condition which I call techno-logical: at the same time technics and logic, from the beginning forged on the cross which language and the tool form, that is, which allow the human its exteriorization. In my work I try to show that, since its origin, philosophy has endured this technological condition, but as repression and denial and that is the entire difficulty of my undertaking—*to show that philosophy begins with the repression of its proper question.*[161]

---

[160] 'For Ellul, Technique is the 'new milieu' of contemporary society, replacing the old milieu, nature; all social phenomena today are situated within it rather than the other way around; all the beliefs and myths of contemporary society have been altered to the core by Technique; individual techniques are ambivalent, intended to have good consequences but contributing at the same time to the ensemble of Technique; so that, for instance, psychological or administrative techniques are part of the larger Technique, and no particular utilisation of them can compensate for the bad effects of the whole'. Paul T. Durbin in Eric Higgs, Andrew Light and David Strong, *Technology and the Good Life?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p.39.

[161] Bernard Stiegler, *Acting Out* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008) p.59, my emphasis.

Technics can be understood as the tactics of living, human activity oriented towards implicating oneself in the world and the exteriorisation of memory into objects. If political theory may be interpreted as initially blindsided by technology when its accelerating influence emerges in modernity, this may be partially explained by Stiegler's suggestion that philosophy (and theology) repressed its conceptualisation. I shall outline outline Stiegler's theory of technics as an ontological category necessary for understanding the distinctiveness of human existence, specifically his notion of tertiary retentions and the extension of bodies and memories through technics; secondly, I shall assess Stiegler's account of the development of techno-social systems; and thirdly, I shall outline the political consequences of technical disruptions in the information age, specifically the problems of general proletarianisation and social acceleration, which I shall argue must be confronted by a radical democratic theory informed by a political ontology attuned to the technical.

Stiegler argues that technics forms the 'horizon of human existence'[162], an idea allegedly suppressed by the (implicit) abandoning of Aristotle's distinction between *episteme* and *techne* by the philosophical canon, in that the history of technical and empirical knowledge were and are conventionally considered inseparable, complementary and broadly synonymous. By doing so, we miss the fact that technics govern the temporality intrinsic to human existence; different technical systems arranged differently produce social subjectivities with varying temporalities.[163]

Technics is the process by which individual living beings exteriorise their modes of being into the world through crafting, the extension of the body into other objects: we see

---

[162] A choice of phrasing attributed to Stiegler's longtime collaborator and translator Daniel Ross, which calls to mind Hans-Georg Gadamer's term "the fusion of horizons" which characterises hermeneutics.

[163] By way of example, research into indigenous Aboriginal communities found that 'the Aboriginal concept of time differs from the Judeo-Christian perception of time in that Aboriginal people do not perceive time as an exclusively 'linear' category (i.e. past-present-future) and often place events in a 'circular' pattern of time according to which an individual is in the centre of 'time-circles' and events are placed in time according to their relative importance for the individual and his or her respective community (i.e. the more important events are perceived as being 'closer in time'). See Janca, Aleksandar, and Clothilde Bullen. "The Aboriginal Concept of Time and Its Mental Health Implications." '*Australasian Psychiatry',* 11, no. 1_suppl (October 2003): S40–44.

this process in toolmaking and the way in which tools function as supplements to our own human capacities. Heidegger's famous example is the way in which familiarity with a hammer allows its user to forgo conscious thought regarding the hammer's purpose and instead focus on the nail to be struck.[164] When we first use a hammer, we focus on the hammer itself, the feel of our grip on the handle and the movement of our wrist towards an object that requires hammering. Over time, however, the hammer becomes more ingratiated into the technique of our movements, the operation of using a hammer stops being the primary conscious focus, and instead we focus our attention on the nail in front of us, the hammer disappearing out of thought, and then reappearing into frame as an extension of our body when the movement towards the nail is made. Marshall McLuhan refers to the wheel and pedals in a car as his example of technical supplementation. Another example would be an accomplished musician and their instrument, where their technique is so well-honed and finely-tuned that when they play, their movement is felt less with the instrument and mentally resembles something closer to a direct connection to the music played.

Stiegler uses the terms 'organology' (the logic of organisation) and 'organogenesis' (the beginning of organological processes) to describe the development of technical (and consequently, cultural) innovation.[165] Stiegler considers technics as a stage of organogenesis that mirrors the evolution of life, where technics is not contrary to life, or the

---

[164] 'The less we just stare at the hammer-thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is—as equipment. The hammering itself uncovers the specific 'manipulability' of the hammer. The kind of Being which equipment possesses—in which it manifests itself in its own right—we call 'readiness-to-hand'. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time.* trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1927/1962) p.98.

[165] Stiegler considered Marx's work a precursor to a 'theory of general organology', as can be seen in passages in 'Fragments on Machines' such as the following: 'Nature builds no machines, no locomotives, no railways, electric telegraphs, self-acting mules, etc. These are products of human industry; *natural material transformed into organs of the human will over nature*, or of human participation in nature […]. *They are organs of the human brain, created by the human hand; the power of knowledge, objectified.* The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a direct force of production, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it. To what degree *the powers of social production have been produced, not only in the form of knowledge, but also as immediate organs of social practice, of the real life process*'. Karl Marx in Franco Berardi, *The Soul At Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2009), p.34, my emphasis.

opposite of living, rather 'a continuation of life by means other than life'.[166] In this sense, there is no hard and fast distinction between nature and technology as with Ellul; rather, technology is always the extension of the natural by means other than its own reproduction in nature. Technics allows for the implication of human life into the world to transcend life - not in the sense that all objects last forever, rather that a man can make a tool, die, and that tool stays in the world, to be used by another who may yet to have been born at the time the tool was made.

For Stiegler, 'being is historial [not historical], and the history of being is nothing but its inscription in technicity'.[167] Historial is to be understood in the sense of being recorded, as opposed to historical, understood to mean that which is related to the past. Nevertheless, history and technics are inextricably linked: 'no records, no history, so history is actually synonymous with the information age, since prehistory is that age in human development that precedes the availability of recording systems'.[168] For Stiegler, being is characterised by four traits: 'temporality, historiality, self-understanding and facticity'.[169] Being is temporal insofar as there is always a past to which we anticipate how our lives are different from our ancestors and in which way they will be similar. Being has an essential relationship with a heritage that exists prior to the establishment of our present, but this heritage is itself contestable: 'this historical, nonlived past can be inherited inauthentically: historiality is also a facticity'.[170] It is conceivable to imagine a world where the inherited past is a false one, a mythological tradition that exists solely as a bricolage of retrieved archaeological artefacts,

---

[166] Bernard Stiegler, *Nanjing Lectures (2016-2019).* (London: Open Humanities Press: 2020), p.9.

[167] Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, Vol. 1: The Fault of Epithemeus.* trans. George Collins and Richard Beardsworth. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p.4.

[168] Luciano Floridi, *Information,* p.3.

[169] Stiegler, *Technics and Time,* p.5.

[170] Stiegler, ibid.

imperfect historical inferences and narratives that develop from the needs of the present rather than the facts of the past.[171]

The process of developing symbols, alphabets and forms of communication based on the inscription of ideogrammatic writing is referred to as 'grammatisation', a concept borrowed from philosopher of science Sylvain Auroux, which Stiegler uses to describe 'how all human movement and behaviour can be analysed, discretised and reproduced'.[172] Grammatisation can be understood as the production of language defined in the broadest sense as it is in semiotics, where language refers not only to oral and written communications, but also the reproduction of images, sounds and gestures through analogue technology such as photography and phonography.[173] Here we are introduced to the fascinating fact of technics predating humans, insofar as our biological ancestors also implicated themselves in the world with pictorial representations and primordial tool use - humans were born into a world already shaped by technics.

The aspect of grammatisation most directly relevant to politics is its relation to memory. Consider that instead of reading a text, you are listening to a speech. Each listener "gets an idea" of what information the speaker is trying to convey based on how clear the choice of words are in getting close to what the speaker means to say, and how listeners maintain their attention in terms of being willing to take the speech as it is intended to be understood. A speech is a flow of *primary retentions*, from which an individual decides (consciously or unconsciously) what parts are important enough to be worth remembering and thus the flow of primary retentions becomes a bespoke series of selections made by

---

[171] A fictitious example can be found in Will Self's novel *The Book of Dave* in which the central character, mentally unstable taxi driver Dave Rudman, inscribes a misogynistic rant on a sheet of metal and buries it, only for his unhinged ramblings to be retrieved centuries later by archaeologists to form the basis of a dogmatic and hateful religion that spreads across southern England following catastrophic flooding. Will Self, *The Book of Dave*. (London: Vintage Press, 2008).

[172] Stiegler, *Nanjing Lectures*, p.26.

[173] Stiegler, ibid.

consciousness. Imagine that after five minutes, you meet a friend who missed the speech and she asks you to summarise. At this point, you directly retrieve the selections made during the primary retention of conscious thought and articulate a summary of what you heard in your own words, what Stiegler terms a *secondary retention*; we may understand primary retention as curated thought and secondary retention as reconstructed thought.

When prehistoric man cuts flint, for the purpose of cutting meat, or fashions a crude weapon to disable prey, they do not intend to improve their own memory, but the act of manipulating an object in the world to suit their ends preserves their gestures, thus constituting a new memory support system. If another person were to come across this tool, they would not have to fashion it for themselves; if the inventor dies, the invention remains. Thus, technics concerns the expansion of possibilities for human becoming, as well as the stretching of human relation to time through inherent historicisation of being through objects. Biological man relies on two forms of memory: the genetic memory of DNA, and the individual memory of the brain and nervous system. These memory sets are completely autonomous; my children might inherit the shape of my nose, but they will not inherit my experiences. Experiences change individuals, but without the intervention of technics, life experience cannot be transmitted from one to another. In what we may term prehistory, technics begins the process of very limited transmission of memory, what Stiegler terms *tertiary retentions*, through items such as tools, receptacles and artefacts; it is from this technical milieu that primordial cultures emerged.[174]

This third kind of memory is separate from the internal, individually acquired memory of our brain (epigenetic) and the biological evolutionary memory that is inherited from our ancestors (phylogenetic); Stiegler refers to tertiary retentions as epiphylogenetic

[174] 'By artificially retaining something through the material and spatial copying of a mesic and temporal element, tertiary retention modifies the relationship between the psychic retentions of perception that Husserl referred to as primary retentions, and the psychic retentions of memory that he called secondary retentions'. Stiegler, *Nanjing Lectures*, p.18.

memory or epiphylogenesis. Humans are therefore shaped by this process of epiphylogenesis, by a past that we ourselves, as individuals, have not lived; this past is brought to us through culture which is the amalgamation of the 'technical objects that embody the knowledge of our ancestors, tools that we adopt to transform our environment'.[175] Furthermore, the contingent forms grammatised through technics shape our sense of selves. As Peter Sloterdijk notes, many of the earliest human civilisations perceived the human as a sublime vessel for an invisible, spiritual content, seeing themselves in the shaping of their inventions: 'metaphysics begins as metaceramics, for the substance to be filled into this singular vessel will be no merely physical content'.[176] It is not only the case that ancestral memories are inscribed in the world through tertiary retention, but humans shape their present cultures in an hermeneutical interplay with history, as it is inscribed in memory support systems. The anthropological speculation made here is that politics, in the institutional sense, is made possible by writing systems, by ways of fixing speech in the world, so that systems that formalise everyday custom and conduct may be reproduced across generations without distortions made by errors in primary and secondary retentions. Culture is reproduced in the forms of social practices, but also alongside and with reference to traditions inscribed through grammatisation. Technics, therefore, play a constitutive and reconstructive role in the production of cultural and social norms and their relation to political order - and make possible public memory.

---

[175] Christina Howells and Gerald Moore, *Stiegler and Technics.* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p.3.

[176] Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres, Vol. 1: Bubbles.* (Semiotexte, MIT Press, 1998), p.34.

Technics and Public Memory

Radical democracy purports to instantiate a process by which citizens within a political community must deliberate (using reason) to ascertain and anticipate the common good, albeit with varying interpretations of democratic participation. Hannah Arendt defines a political community as a 'kind of organised remembrance'[177], in which its political sphere is considered 'more specifically 'the work of man' than is the work of his hands or the labour of his body'.[178] Arendt's political public is sustained by its remembered words and deeds, which are considered integral to understanding the community's sense of shared identity.[179] I wish to forge the link between technics and politics through memory, as the transmission of memory is integral to the constitution and continuity of society required for politics. As Irene McMullin notes in her work on Arendt, speech and action are considered necessary for establishing political relationships, as a record of ancestral speech and action establishes political continuity.[180] For Arendt, it is humanity's individuality that means we cannot be understood exclusively in terms of our species-being as are plants and animals,[181] and recalling Stiegler, this process of individuation is always-already technical.[182] In the absence of a shared history - 'and the normative stance embodied in the community's decisions about what counts as memorable'[183]- the impermanence of the social undermines the

---

[177] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p.198.

[178] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p.208.

[179] French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who coined the term *collective memory*, argued these forms of memory exist extrinsically of individuals, periodically reconstructed by social groups, resulting in individuals having an influenced perspective on the past, rather than a totally independent recollection of events. Remembrance is contingent upon the internal and external group dynamics, and subsequent interactions shape the collective meaning of historical events. See Maurice Halbwachs, *La Mémoire Collective* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), pp.52-67.

[180] Irene McMullin, 'The Amnesia of the Modern: Arendt on the Role of Memory in the Constitution of the Political', *Philosophical Topics*, (2011) 39:2, p.92.

[181] McMullin, ibid, p.93.

[182] The language of individuation is taken from Gilbert Simondon. See *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information.* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, trans. Taylor Adkins, 2020).

[183] McMullin, ibid.

establishment of a politics. Through the commemoration of past deeds, a coherent society can be "founded", even if it is always on shifting grounds and provisional, as post-foundational political ontology underscores.

Shared meanings, which can be understood as collective secondary retentions, presuppose support systems that allow them to be transmitted through time. The important aspect of this process for Stiegler is that the practice of written language, of humans reading and writing, and interpreting the world as a consequence of what they have read, is a process of technical individuation; hence, 'psychic and collective individuation is always also a technical individuation'[184], an idea developed in parallel by the extended mind hypothesis in philosophy of psychology.[185]

Stiegler argues that thinking is conditioned by technical individuation, that thinking subjects are integrated into our technical apparatuses to fit into the operations of the pre-existing social and technical system, *but we are not determined by it*, as the technical artefact itself opens up a field of indefinite possibilities due to its status as a '*pharmakon*[186]: a poison

---

[184] Stiegler, ibid, p.24.

[185] Clark and Chalmers invite the reader to consider Otto and Inga. Otto lives with Alzheimer's disease, so he writes information he might forget in a notebook for constant reference. The argument is that both Otto and Inga draw upon their memories to fulfil tasks, the only difference being that Inga's memory is internally stored and processed by the brain, and Otto's memory exists externally in the notebook to be reprocessed by the brain later. In Stiegler's language, Inga draws upon secondary retentions to make secondary selections (recalled memories to construct internal instructions) whereas Otto draws upon tertiary retentions (written in the notebook) to inform secondary selections (direct interpretation of the information). Clark and Chalmers suggests that Otto's mind (conventionally understood by physicalists to be conceptually identical to the brain) has been extended to include the notebook as a memory support system. The notebook is considered an extension of the mind insofar as it is constantly and immediately accessible to Otto, and as he constantly refers to it, it is automatically endorsed by Otto as a reliable memory carrier. See Andy Clark & David J Chalmers (1998). 'The extended mind', *Analysis*, 58(1): 7–19.

[186] The pharmakon is a concept retrieved from Plato's *Phaedrus* by Jacques Derrida in: Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*. trans. Barbara Johnson. (London: Athlone Press, 1982). "If there was trouble in the ancient polis, the one determined to be responsible — or a symbolic stand-in that the community kept in reserve for such occasions — would sometimes be sacrificed to purify the ill effect. In such a moment, the malevolent "wizard" (pharmakeus) whose "influence" (pharmakon) could be identified as the "poison" (pharmakos) afflicting the polis, must be made a "sacrifice" (pharmakos) to be transmuted into a "remedy" (pharmakon). In this way, the pharma words connote a sort of alchemy in which the cure for a poison is not a different substance, but the same substance transmuted. This transmutation can only be achieved under special conditions. Otherwise, the pharmakon remains inherently ambivalent — that is, potent both ways, positively and negatively." Patrick McCarthy-Nielsen (2016) "Education as Pharmakon: Plato and Derrida's Dialectic on Learning." *Philosophy of Education Archive*. p.153.

that can be a remedy, or vice versa'.[187] For example, literacy opens us up to the world of novels, newspapers, letters, signposts and stories, but also the world of gossip, propaganda, slander, misinformation and advertising campaigns.[188] Here we may marshal Stiegler's explication to argue that technics is not something to be ultimately disregarded: a radical politics cannot emerge from technological disavowal, just as eschewing the written word is a fruitless reaction to the problems that emerge from literate society. After all, it is the process of tertiary retentions inscribed, recorded and remembered through successions of generations that constitute the shared meanings of societies, from which individuals in these social milieus are taught collective protentions (social expectations and norms that typify their place in historical time).

Society is thus constituted by shared meanings in the present, and a collective expectation of its future direction premised upon those shared meanings, and so opting out of the way in which these shared meanings come to exist (and persist) through time merely incapacitates those individuals committed to radically transforming the social milieu. All knowledge, all collective retentions and protentions are bequeathed by a common past written mostly by anonymous authors, 'projecting a common future that is always indeterminate, inaccessible and improbable, but which insists and remains open through works'.[189] Our technical inheritance influences our capacity to determine and anticipate our desires, including our political subjectivity.

The importance of technics as the transmission of memory, and with it the construction and continuity of political communities, calls for a renewed political focus on media. Couldry defines media as 'technologies that able regularly and reliably to transmit or

---

[187] Stiegler, *Nanjing Lectures*, p.24.

[188] 'Without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form. More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness'. Walter Ong in Stiegler, ibid, p.177.

[189] Stiegler, ibid, p.171.

preserve meanings across space and time'.[190] Our society (and we as individuals) are constantly mediated and mediatized. Whilst mediation describes the ways in which transmitting ourselves into another space and time from our corporeal selves, for example, a photograph or a video clip, mediatization describes the ways in which we are changing our behaviour because of the media surrounding us. Mark Deuze has argued that in contemporary life, we do not live *with*, so much as live *in* media. Media augment life, and as such, for Deuze, it is an illusion (or a delusion) that we can control our media. Media cannot be switched off; it is pervasive and ubiquitous (even more so in the expansive sense of influencing technics).[191] We cannot make sense of a world outside media, because media is a key component in the construction of social reality itself. Media almost acts as its own discursive ecology, its culture industry seducing us with fantasies, stories and narratives that blur the clear demarcations between socially constructed reality and socially convenient fiction. As Couldry and Hepp remind us, 'the screen is not simply a 'medium…it is a building site on which a whole economic and epistemological world is erected'.[192] Furthermore, politics itself, through the circulation of political party advertising, televised speeches and debates, panel shows and partisan artistic endeavours, has become part of the broader media ecology, what Stiegler terms 'the absorption of politics into the market through the integration of the mnemotechnical system into the global techno-industrial system'.[193]

In addition to these concerns, there is the politics of forgetting, not in the sense of destroying historical evidence (although that has been a deeply political move for centuries), but in terms of a community mythology as necessarily streamlined. McMullin argues that

---

[190] Nick Couldry, *Media, Voice, Space and Power* (London, Routledge, 2020), p.4.

[191] Mark Deuze, 'Media Life', *Media Culture & Society*, (2009), 33(1): 137-148.

[192] Nick Couldry & Andreas Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality.* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), p.95.

[193] Stiegler, *Nanjing Lectures*, p.138.

'modernity is characterised by the desire and the ability to record all events: a revolution in memory due in large measure to technological outsourcing'.[194] Humans, without the aid of memory support systems, cannot remember everything that has ever happened; the collective selection of words and deeds of historical importance is itself political, and as modern hypomnesic technologies allow for the recording and archiving of every speech, act, word and deed, which McMullin argues leads to the 'wholesale acceptance of all words and deeds as equally worthy of commemoration'[195], a flattening affect that falsely renders the collective retentions required for a prefigurative politics so interchangeable as to be arbitrary. At the individual level, media theorist Neil Postman theorised that a world without forgetting would lead to the disappearance of childhood, but instead scholars have found individuals born into the world of social media, digital images and cloud computer storage find it all but impossible to escape the person they once were, elongating their adolescence into adulthood.[196]

To conclude, technics and their media not only preserve history, but shape our sense of temporality itself, our sense of what is to *be* through time. Technics is inherently political insofar as it produces the conditions for both individual and collective self-understanding, mediating the "we"-ness required for collective agency and the intergenerational continuity of "we"-ness required for the emergence of political communities (societies with a shared sense of directionality). A healthy and accountable media landscape ought not be considered a democratic bonus, so much as a necessary pre-condition for any radical social transformation in the information age. However, the organisation of contemporary technologies is such that the unprecedented optimisation of information archival and

---

[194] McMullin, 2011, p.94.

[195] McMullin, 2011, p.106.

[196] The thesis is found in Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood.* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1982) and empirically developed upon in Kate Eichhorn, *The End of Forgetting: Growing Up With Social Media.* (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

retrieval destabilises the social cohesion reliant on collective memory. This presents unique challenges and opportunities for radical democratic theory, especially as a project that intends to destabilise the hegemonic social order to instantiate a more expansive democratic culture. I shall interrogate Stiegler's proclamations regarding the technical crisis of our contemporary configuration, critically assess his concerns and suggest that the problems of general proletarianisation and technical disruption reveals that socio-technical issues initiate ruptures and discontinuities that radical democratic theory may be able to opportunistically seize upon.

Technical Development and General Proletarianisation

Stiegler's general organology is a philosophical project in which technological development is considered vis-a-vis the dynamics inherent to technics, rather than explaining invention and innovation *exclusively* through individual actions (moments of genius) or external systems (capitalism); the dynamics of technics are then explored for their effects on social systems, specifically the way in which societies adjust to shifts in technological capacities, and in turn, how these changes transform social subjectivity. I argue that the technical condition of metastability contributes to social discontinuities: that is to say, if something radically new is to happen politically, it must emerge as a new way of making or doing.

As Stiegler and his influences explain, until the Industrial Revolution, "Man" lives in a technical milieu that is predominantly stable, transformed occasionally by inventions, in periods referred to by the historian Bertrand Gille as 'technological ruptures'[197], small ripple effects on the world as opposed to the more seismic shifts in cultural consciousness

[197] Bertrand Gille, *The History of Techniques.* (New York: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1986).

described by Thomas Kuhn's 'paradigm shifts'.[198] Initially, they are far apart from another; speaking broadly, they occur every thousand years until the Classical period, in which they begin to occur every few hundred years, with each technological rupture occurring closer than the last, a presentation of the history of technical knowledge as accelerating contractions of technical development.

Furthermore, competition between capitalist entities and the expansion of markets leads to the expansion of corporate enterprises and with it an accompanying commitment to technological development in line with the profit motive of the competing firms. Technics thus forces communities outside of their cultural spheres and into direct contact with other cultural milieus. Globalisation is always the globalisation of technics, as markets allow for the transmission of technical objects across cultures (and indeed certain technical infrastructures such as railways, telecommunications and consumer products coercively imposed in one-sided arrangements between colonisers and colonised, often in ways that frustrated and undermined local interests). In 18th century Europe, the fields of palaeontology, archaeology, anthropology and their accompanying discoveries and discourses began uncovering the relationship between hominization and tool-making, which prompted (broadly speculative and predominantly racist) theories of technical evolution and development.

Stiegler reads Marx's analysis of industrial capitalist exploitation as describing the proletarianisation of manual workers as a loss of their knowledge, which passes into machines (the means of the production).[199] From the Industrial Revolution onwards, workers were far less likely to interact directly with raw material (the move from agrarian to

---

[198] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

[199] 'Labour appears… merely as a conscious organ, scattered among the living individual workers at numerous points of the mechanical system… whose unity exists not in the living workers, but rather in the living (active) machinery, which confronts his individual, insignificant doings as a mighty organism'. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy.* trans. M. Nicolaus. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973 [1861], p.693.

industrial labour); technology transformed work towards the utilitisation of tools of increasing specialisation and the maintenance, monitoring and supervision of machines. Although Stiegler broadly agrees with Marx's economic critique and political programme, he maintains that Marx failed to develop the pharmacological aspects of his account of the technical system, which poses political questions as much as the relationship between classes.[200] Stiegler argues that all technical systems pose social problems that become political problems at the point of collective social disruption, which must be resolved with 'therapeutics' that are 'always a system of de-proletarianisation'.[201] For Stiegler, this oversight leads to the prioritisation of a political project committed to the abolition of class without an accompanying account of de-proletarianisation, understood to be 'a reacquisition of knowledge in the service of the individuation of citizens'.[202]

For Stiegler, proletarianisation is not *only* the absence of ownership of the means of production, but the accompanying effect of knowledge deprivation that comes from the machine-human relation: when we are deprived of knowledge (*savoir-faire*, know-how), we are deprived of the capacity to overcome the conditions of our circumstances insofar as the political demand for ownership of the means of production is undermined if we are deprived of the ability to understand how we would use it differently (rather than inheriting and inadvertently reproducing the existing system). Stiegler wishes the Marxist ambition for

---

[200] Langdon Winner was far more critical of Marxism's belief in technology as something to be harnessed for the betterment of mankind: 'the Marxist faith in the beneficence of unlimited technological development is betrayed…to the horror of its partisans, it is forced slavishly to obey [technocapitalist] imperatives left by a system supposedly killed and buried'. It is worth noting that all political ideologies of the 20th century were committed to technological progress as a means of asserting their superiority over one another, but Winner reinforces a precursor to the Stieglerian notion that ideology is imbricated in the machines left behind by a former system. See Langdon Winner, *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought.* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), pp.276-277.

[201] Stiegler, ibid, p.62.

[202] Stiegler, ibid.

a communism without specialisation led to more comprehensive accounts of technicity.[203] Although Stiegler wishes to underscore the notion that technological innovation leads to the growth of an underclass of "declassified" and disenfranchised citizens unable to provide value to the dominant forms of production, we may reject the implicit notion that all individuals the other side of the newly-erected knowledge barrier are equally impoverished. It is important to retain a critical analysis of material conditions, to acknowledge that machinery is owned and steered to pursue the accumulation of capital.[204]

In the information age, technical novelty and planned obsolescence is often prioritised over innovation, as technology increasingly takes the commodity form of devices (and requires devices to provide screens of access to informational commodities).[205] Proletarianisation impoverishes our overall knowledge of social systems, depriving the individual worker, consumer and citizen, of the knowledge of how they fit into a broader structure that appears to operate dispassionately and imperviously even in the absence of their contribution. The more complex and comprehensive our modern digital communications technology become, the more distinct the levels of specialisms required to be on "the right side" of the knowledge barrier.

Arendt points the blame at modern science for inserting 'human unpredictability into nature while decoupling it both from the individual responsibility of the actor and the

---

[203] 'In 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, herdsman or critic'. Karl Marx, The German Ideology, vol.3, (1845/46), Vol. 1, Part 1. https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/index.htm. Accessed: 20 March 2021.

[204] 'Machinery comes into the world not as the servant of 'humanity', but as the instrument of those to whom the accumulation of capital gives the ownership of the machines. The capacity of humans to control the labour process through machinery is seized upon by management from the beginning of capitalism as the prime means whereby production may be controlled not by the direct producer but by the owners and representative of capital'. Harry Braverman, "Technology and Capitalist Control" in Donald MacKenzie and Judy Wajcman (ed.), *The Social Shaping of Technology (2nd Edition).* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2011), pp.158-159.

[205] Livia Gershon, "The Birth of Planned Obsolescence" JStor Daily (2017) https://daily.jstor.org/the-birth-of-planned-obsolescence/ Accessed: 1st March 2021.

evaluative stance of the witnessing community'[206], but a Stiegerlian reading would suggest the Arendtian critique take aim instead at contemporary technological organisation (*techne* rather than *episteme*). Arendt argues that as modern citizens, 'we become slaves to our own know-how'[207], incapable of comprehensive understanding of the increasing complexity of our social systems, and as such 'political issues about what we ought to value and how we ought to act' have been made 'inaccessible to the political sphere'[208] insofar as we defer to specialists (or more accurately, political elites defer to technocrats). As proletarianisation detaches individuals from the broader technical aspects of the social system, it is inevitable that what media theorist Mark Poster referred to as 'information subjects', those specialists capable of understanding the niche technical frameworks that increasingly shape the contours of their particular industries and of society more generally, become valuable to both the public and private sectors. As Poster notes, 'information is presented as the key to contemporary living and society is divided between the information rich and the information poor. The 'informed' individual is a new social ideal'.[209] Nevertheless, expertise is necessarily specialised due to the complexity of our systems, and as such, "thought-leaders" in their niche technical sectors and professional networks are not necessarily fluent in the broader social and technical system to which we are all generally proletarianised subjects.

The technical system paradoxically leads to the destruction of knowledge that occurs when it is exteriorised, despite exteriorisation 'being the fundamental condition of the constitution of all knowledge'.[210] Dillet categorises Stiegler's analysis of proletarianisation into three separate aspects: the proletarianisation of the producer, the proletarianisation of

---

[206] Arendt in McMullin, ibid, pp.99-100.

[207] McMullin, ibid, p.100.

[208] McMullin, ibid, p.101.

[209] Mark Poster, *The Information Subject.* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.8.

[210] Stiegler, *Nanjing Lectures*, p.25.

the consumer, and generalised proletarianisation.[211] In the post-war period, alongside the rise of the United States of America as a dominant power, comes Taylorism-Fordism, an industrial stage of capitalism that runs on oil, the car industry and consumption, wherein organised labour compromised its revolutionary fervour in exchange for the expansion of the welfare state. The third stage of proletarianisation occurs with the financialisation of the global economy in the mid-1970s, the rise of the knowledge economy, computerisation, digital networks and datafication.

General proletarianisation can be understood as the intensification and expansion of both proletarianisation at work and in leisure: employment is becoming more about performing bureaucratic or technical tasks divorced from value-producing interactions with raw materials, whilst leisure time is dominated by conspicuous consumption, the consumption of 'content' on numerous screens, and discourse surrounding the consumption of such aforementioned content, a systematic erosion of our sense of *savoir-vivre*, our sense of "how to live". As a new form of tertiary retention, digital communications systems constitute a new age of the *pharmakon*.[212]

Stiegler's contention that we have entered a hyper-industrial age may be read as the continuation of the critique of the culture industry typical of the Frankfurt School.[213] Stiegler argues that 'ours is an epoch of great symbolic misery' which 'places the sensory life of the individual under the permanent control of the mass media'.[214] Due to the seizure of

---

[211] Benoit Dillet, "Proletarianization, Deproletarianization, and the Rise of the Amateur", *boundary 2: an international journal of literature and culture*, (2017), 44: 1, pp. 79-105

[212] Stiegler, ibid, p.28.

[213] The initial critique of the culture industry by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer is that the mass production of art and media in capitalism limits the creativity of culture through its subordination to the profit motive. Art ceases to be an autonomous mode of human action. Popular culture offers a distraction from work, but only insofar as we become further enmeshed in living through the consumption of commodities. The critical theories developed by the Frankfurt School, and the social context of its researchers is developed in historical accounts. See in Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute for Social Research 1923–1950*. (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1996); Stuart Jeffries, *Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School.* (London: Verso, 2016).

[214] Stiegler, ibid, p.20.

tertiary retentions by corporate industrial technology, contemporary societies of 'hyper-control'[215] rely upon audiovisual and digital technologies to regulate and modulate the rhythms of consciousness and life. The relationship between sociality and technicity has never before been so integrated and entangled: 'to be alive in today's world is to be technologically textured'[216] and these devices are 'not merely tools: they can be seen as living objects with which people have relationships'[217]- i.e. the difference between your phone and your pen is that the former is a dynamic object that becomes more personalised to you the more you use it, in terms of the apps you download, the software settings you prefer, the algorithms operating to provide information streams that suit your preferences. The direction of consumer technology has been a shift to accommodate the increasingly peer-to-peer forms of communication and distribution with which younger people particularly resonate.[218]

He argues that the notion of an aesthetic engagement, capable of founding a new communal sensibility and a genuine aesthetic community, has largely collapsed today. The age of Dadaism, of situationism, of radical politics emerging from the artistic fringes, manifesto in hand, have largely evaporated or regressed into ironic pastiche, due to the fact that the overwhelming majority of (western, but increasingly global) populations are subjected to the aesthetic conditioning of marketing, which is able to 'bypass and short-circuit the savour-vivre of consumers, their knowledge of how to live'.[219] Artistic works are less concerned with their emancipatory potential (if such political goals are even considered

---

[215] Expanding on the concept found in Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *Anti-oedipus: capitalism and schizophrenia* (London: Penguin Classics, 2009).

[216] Stacey O'Neal Irwin, *Digital Media: Human-Technology Connection.* (New York/London: Lexington Books, 2016) p.3.

[217] Patrick W. Jordan, *Designing Pleasurable Products: An Introduction to the New Human Factors.* (Philadelphia, PA: Taylor & Francis, 2002) p.7.

[218] David Buckingham, *Youth, Identity and Digital Media.* (Boston: MIT Press, 2008).

[219] Stiegler, ibid.

possible) so much as their capacity to be sold in a crowded entertainment marketplace of competing "content".[220]

Furthermore, the culture industry, and its accompanying reliance on currying favour with advertising partners, becomes the hegemonic process by which retentions and protentions (things we remember and the social expectation we associate with those things) are produced.[221] Despite the well-meaning and valuable interventions into popular culture by public intellectuals, historians, documentarians and academics, we do not live in a world of curated historical formation, so much as the mediated fictionalised bricolage of film, television, music and media, a veritable ideological smorgasbord in service to the *status quo*. The extent to which our understanding of social reality, especially concepts, objects and innovative processes outside of our immediate lived experience are shaped by media cannot be underestimated.

Furthermore, even our political systems are dragged into the uniformity of digital communications media. Paolo Gerbaudo's work tracks the change from digital campaigns as a fringe approach of radical youth movements to becoming the quotidian state of play for mainstream political parties, adapting to incorporate social media strategies into their broader political "marketing"[222]; electoral politics as attention-grabbing marketplace offering competing commodities. Cultural life is becoming a series of micro-targeted advertisements for a relentless stream of products, which increasingly take the form of computerised information as commodities.[223] In response to Stiegler, we may suggest that the general proletarianisation is just that: *general*, and as shall be elaborated in forthcoming chapters,

---

[220] For an extensive condemnation of the cynical intergenerational reproduction of intellectual property in media to induce nostalgia in consumers, see Grafton Tanner, *The Circle and the Snake: Nostalgia and Utopia in the Age of Big Tech* (London: Zero Books, 2020); *The Hours Have Lost Their Clock: The Politics of Nostalgia* (London: Repeater, 2021).

[221] Stiegler, ibid, p.171.

[222] Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Digital Party: Political Organisation and Online Democracy* (London: Pluto, 2018).

[223] Stiegler, ibid, p.16.

whilst problematically pervasive and certainly a hindrance to political agency, general proletarianisation is not currently a totalising structure. Just as there are tendencies inhibiting our "know-how", there are counter-tendencies that may be developed to present and encourage emancipatory ways of living.

Disruption in the Information Age

Stiegler contends that the contemporary conjunction of technics and time manifests itself in the "problematic of speed", where ruptures become so contracted with invention after invention that the technical system itself is characterised by metastability, a system of "permanent innovation", whereby technologies transform themselves perpetually. The speed of technological development has continued to accelerate 'dramatically widening the distance between technical systems and social organisation as if, negotiation between them appearing to be impossible, their final divorce seem inevitable'.[224] Through social acceleration, the 'social systems are constantly misadjusted and challenged - thrown into question. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this acceleration intensifies still further, resulting, today, in so-called 'disruption".[225] The underlying technological phenomena which Stiegler considers distinctiveness to the new pharmakon of digital communications technology is the strategic exploitation of information speeds 'with the aim of creating legal and theoretical vacuums…a structure lack of knowledge'.[226] For Stiegler, there is the 'knowledge of how to do (*savoir faire*), knowledge of how to live (*savoir vivre*) and knowledge of how to think (*savoir penser*)'[227], and it is the last that is the predominant focus of Stiegler's critique of the information age, characterised as disruption.

---

[224] Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 2: Disorientation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p.3.

[225] Bernard Stiegler, *Nanjing Lectures*, p.98.

[226] Stiegler, ibid, p.30.

[227] Stiegler, ibid, p.187.

In the information age, it is said that data has become "the new oil", a phrase allegedly coined by Clive Humby, British mathematician and architect of the Tesco Clubcard, a supermarket reward program. I take Humby's point to be multi-faceted: conveying the importance of data as an extractable resource, a resource so potent and influential that it may shape the global economy, international relations and the way in which we relate to technologies henceforth, but also reinforcing the notion that data is not inherently useful in an unrefined state, and much like fossil fuel, it must undergo quasi-industrial processes to accrue its value.[228]

According to Stiegler, the problem of disruption is that 'it seems impossible to reconstitute any knowledge, and that forms of behaviour are now produced, not by social systems, cultures and knowledge, but by marketing that exploits 'big data' and digital tertiary retentions insofar as these are calculable, computable and as such constitute the worldwide data economy'.[229] Digitalisation allows all previous 'technological automatisms' to be unified, as the internet can be used to source all forms of media, consumption in terms of online shopping, communication in both professional and leisure contexts, and as such, most interactions of the information age are mediated through screens. Furthermore, these contexts are not distinctively separated. Philosopher of information Luciano Floridi suggests that

> we are modifying our everyday experience on the ultimate nature of reality, that is, our metaphysics, from a materialist one, in which physical objects and processes play a key role,

[228] Consider James Bridle's response to the phrase "data is the new oil", abridged for the sake of brevity: "Data/oil is insufficient as an analogy because it might give us false hope of a peaceful transfer to an information-free economy. Oil is, despite everything, defined by its exhaustibility…The same is not true of information… While peak knowledge may be closer than we think, the exploitation of raw information can continue infinitely, along with the damage it does to us and our ability to reckon with the world. In this way, information more closely resembles atomic power than oil — an effectively unlimited resource that still contains immense destructive power and that's even more explicitly connected to histories of violence." James Bridle (2018) "Opinion: Data isn't the new oil — it's the new nuclear power". Ideas @ TED. https://ideas.ted.com/opinion-data-isnt-the-new-oil-its-the-new-nuclear-power/

[229] Stiegler, ibid, p.31.

> to an informational one. This shift means that objects and processes are de-physicalised in the sense that they tend to be seen as support-independent (consider a music file). They are typified, in the sense that an instance of an object (my copy of a music file) is as good as its type (your music file of which my copy is an instance). And they are assumed to be by default perfectly clonable, in the sense that my copy and your original become interchangeable.[230]

However, the general proletarianisation affect that occurs as a result of digital unification is 'total automatisation'[231] as public authorities, social and educational systems, intergenerational relations and prior means of social formation are all disregarded, disintegrated or subordinated to the digital to remain relevant, and deprived of their ability to fully understand how they are incorporated into the broader technical configuration of social life. Information communication technologies are radically transforming the social world, by structuring environments to such an extent that the contemporary STS (Science and Technology Studies) literature does not consider it controversial to claim that these technologies are 're-ontologising our world'[232], but with an ontological account of technics we are better placed to understand this phenomena and reorient ourselves politically in response. If all our institutions are being coordinated, configured and contorted by the necessities of computerisation, it follows that philosophical thought that hinges upon comprehension of feasibility conditions requires engagement with contemporary technics.

Returning to the notion of social stability and memory, it is the speed of information that tears at the social fabric as much as the sheer quantity of data, as the information economy is predicated on various analytical, statistical and probabilistic models that coalesce

---

[230] Luciano Floridi, *Information: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.12.

[231] Stiegler, ibid, p.34.

[232] Floridi, *Information*, p.11.

to form 'reticulated artificial intelligence' capable of information feedback loops capable of operating at speeds between two and four million times quicker than the human nervous system.[233] Our dominant system operates beyond the limits of human thought, and although Stiegler's criticism of technological acceleration remains implicit, I argue there exists an underlying observation that if technical apparatuses are communicating with each other at accelerating speeds, should anything "go wrong", far more significant and far-reaching damage accrues before human intervention is possible. Furthermore, there are also certain systems where any abrupt halt causes serious aftershocks: an emergency stop often leads to whiplash.

By reading the automated technical systems of information exchange and computational recursion as the most recent stage of grammatisation that began with the ideogrammatic writing and recording of speech, it could be argued that societies and cultures (all of which are constructed by the continuity of memory) may be unwittingly entering a stage of existence in which computational flows determine how societies remember themselves.[234] As philosophers of information have already intimated, 'the increasing informationalisation of artefacts and of whole (social) environments and life activities suggests that soon it will be difficult to understand what life was like in pre-informational times'.[235]

Stiegler argues that the generalised proletarianisation of citizens at both work and leisure leads to a form of mediated conditioning 'of the conditions of the citizen's ek-sistence'[236], an overarching liberal paternalism taken to its extremest conclusions, whereby systems of power surveil, nudge and steer populations through a series of consumptive

---

[233] Stiegler, ibid, p.83.

[234] Stiegler, ibid, p.228.

[235] Floridi, ibid, p.16.

[236] Stiegler, ibid, p.18.

options whilst earning wages through what appear to be an arbitrary series of tasks pinned to key performance indicators (or in the case of self-evidently valuable work, the interruption of these processes with bureaucracy that reinforces a distance between the worker and the overarching technical structure).[237]

Stiegler's proclamations can be traced back to Deleuze & Guattari's suggestion of a future "netocracy": where the dominated class (no longer the working proletariat) of consumerists ("consumtariat"), are condemned to consume information prepared and manipulated by a "netocratic" elite, a shift in power towards information systems that generates fluid networks of power relations, as information is constantly shifting, articulating and adapting to changing circumstances. These individuals become 'dividuals', constantly shifting and adapting between roles, in a social world simply too complex to be dominated by traditional hierarchies.[238] Stiegler's position can be differentiated from Deleuze's notion of 'societies of control' on the basis that for Stiegler, it is unclear whom is in control within these hierarchies. Societies of hyper-control are paradoxically out of control, hence Stiegler's reservations concerning the recent popularity of the concept 'anthropocene' in contemporary social theory: human societies may be the primary cause of climate breakdown, but that does not necessarily mean human societies have retained sufficient agency in its current technical configuration to coordinate themselves adequately to prevent climate breakdown.[239] Given the extent to which neoliberal governance has led to the centralisation of financialisation and its accompanying sites of power and influence, we may

---

[237] For an idea of how absurd and facile these bureaucratic systems for their own sake can become, see David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory.* (Simon & Schuster: London, 2018).

[238] Slavoj Zizek, *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences.* (Routledge: London, 2004) p.192-193.

239 For the broader debates surrounding the concept and its uses, see Jason W. Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism.* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016)

speculate that the notion of a state apparatus committed to maximising behaviours that reproduce consumer culture is likelier than a crude authoritarianism.[240]

Although a philosopher addicted to neologisms of a nihilistic bent such as "negentropy", "symbolic misery", "addict capitalism" among others, Stiegler remained an optimistic thinker through the 00's, hopeful regarding the prospects of a society of contribution, characterised by networks of amateurs coordinating through peer-to-peer networks online to provide new economic forms and exchanges, but as neoliberal capitalism reaffirmed its grip on the creativity and informational abundance of the internet, strangling the free associations of cyberspace through corporate funnels in the shape of social media platforms, the late Stiegler cut a more foreboding figure: 'we are witnessing the dawn of the age of the loss of *savoirs theoriques*, of theoretical knowledge'.[241]

Theoretical knowledge allows individuals to understand a situation before they experience it directly; it is the knowledge of knowing *why* something is true. Political theory, the practice of constructing theoretical knowledge pertaining to politics (and the political) is in danger as much as any other form of theoretical knowledge. Stiegler envisions a future in which individuals subordinate themselves to the externally imposed logic of automatisms and derive practical knowledge exclusively from innovations led directly by machine intelligence, algorithmic processes and a "smart" external environment, and indirectly by those individuals whose knowledge pertains to the practical aspects of optimising these aforementioned organologies. We may become accustomed to knowing something is true

240 Although as J.G. Ballard speculated in his fiction, fascism may emerge from consumerism out of a sense of consumerist boredom. Indeed, as Zizek notes in his discussion of Deleuze's concept of micro-fascisms, which heavily influences Stiegler, 'Deleuze's theory of fascism is that it 'does not take hold of subjects at the level of ideology, interests, and so forth but takes hold directly at the level of bodily investments, libidinal gestures, and so on. Fascism enacts a certain assemblage of bodies, so one should fight it (also) at this level, with impersonal counterstrategies". See J.G. Ballard, *Kingdom Come.* (London: Fourth Estate, 2006); Slavoj Zizek, *Organs Without Bodies,* p.187.

241 Stiegler, *Nanjing Lectures*, p.17.

because the technical system asserts it as information, rather than because we understand the information as part of our broader situational understanding.

Rather than expanding the democratic possibilities of instant information access, the immediacy of information retrieval and exchange has led to the erection of artificial barriers (paywalled websites, databases, journals, etc.), a rejection of the open-source ethic in favour of hegemonic corporate actors and the circumvention of the spaces in which information becomes knowledge through the connection of ideas resonating in introspective thought.[242] Furthermore, the loss of theoretical knowledge has profound implications for democratic politics: from where does the legitimacy of political decision making arise if the people are inhibited from understanding why they would want one policy over another? Theoretical knowledge allows an individual to enter a new situation and understand why certain decisions are superior to others: practical experience may provide the knowledge that putting your hand in the fire is a bad idea; theoretical knowledge explains why it would be stupid to test the proposition in the first instance. If individuals are systematically deprived of the kind of knowledge that allows them enter new situations with the security of understanding, it deprives them of both the capacity to imagine alternative scenarios, and the capacity to favour one action over another (recall the earlier concerns regarding the flatness of absolute political memory). When an individual is speeding through the world of hyper-industrial social acceleration, in which freedom is understood as the frictionless movement through space, then it follows that to be steered in any direction is preferential to the friction of stasis; freedom is movement, even if externally steered.

Our experience of the world is one of informational access, of extending ourselves through screens and machines, of flipping between browser tabs, of compiling, manipulating, creating, recording, destroying and interacting with information. Those who

[242] Stiegler, ibid, p.86.

do not directly engage with the information economy are increasingly steered by it; by systems of open banking just by virtue of having an account, by systems of surveillance just by walking in public, and by systems of state and corporate bureaucracy that increasingly overlap, inform and augment one another, colluding to reduce human life to calculation.[243]

Stiegler argues that the technical condition of society from which a new political project must acknowledge and overcome is constituted by 'the digital pharmakon – which, through the speed at which it functions, makes it possible for calculation to destroy the improbable, that is desire, affection, attachment, identification, singularity, individuation and the feeling of existing physically and thus collectively'.[244] He argues that alternative political projects remain possible but they require a new constitution of the public sphere: 'a new public thing is required to open up a new age of deliberation'.[245]

Even though Stiegler's account leaves space for collective agency, I still believe his techno-pessimism is most charitably read as speculating on a future to come, rather than an analysis of our current technological situation. As shall be elaborated in forthcoming chapters, social acceleration caused by technical metastability can be decelerated through various practices, and there are counter-tendencies that can circumnavigate these shifting epistemic conditions: the knowledge that Stiegler warns we are losing may eventually be considered frivolous in future technical configurations, as pointless as intricate knowledge of ham radios, Betamax players or other comparable obsolete technologies.

---

[243] Although in response to Stiegler's contention regarding the uniqueness of our contemporary techno-political settlement, it is worth noting that anarchists have been decrying the state and corporatist reduction of governance to calculation for centuries. 'To be GOVERNED is to be watched, inspected, spied upon, directed, law-driven, numbered, regulated, enrolled, indoctrinated, preached at, controlled, checked, estimated, valued, censured, commanded, by creatures who have neither the right nor the wisdom nor the virtue to do so. To be GOVERNED is to be at every operation, at every transaction noted, registered, counted, taxed, stamped, measured, numbered, assessed, licensed, authorised, admonished, prevented, forbidden, reformed, corrected, punished…That is government; that is its justice; that is its morality'. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, "What Is Government?" *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*. trans. John Beverly Robinson. (London: Freedom Press, 1923, [1851]) pp. 293–294.

[244] Bernard Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption: Technology and Madness in Computational Capitalism*. (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), p.42.

[245] Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption*, ibid.

Far more problematic is the technical configuration of social life in relation to reproducing an expansive democratic sphere. If we take from Arendt an understanding of the public sphere as an arena of equally valuable citizens engaged in the creation and recreation of the conditions necessary for the reproduction of its own space[246], and if we were to understand public space as being continuously shaped, steered or reproduced by technical forces outside of the citizen's control or understanding, as remains plausibly the case in our societies of hyper-industrialisation, then general proletarianisation is a condition that obstructs radical democratic possibilities.

A critical political engagement with technics underscores the importance of co-presence for political deliberation, and the sharing of social spaces as integral to the communitarian spirit of democratic projects. In order to be present, for a space to command one's attention, people require spaces that accommodate and resonate with them, that afford them the capacity to give themselves the time to engage in the work of politics (and the accompanying theoretical knowledge to understand why they want to politically convene in the first instance). However, if the projection of a common future remains open through the possibility of works, then accessibility to each other's works is an integral political issue of the information age. If in the age of information, these works are increasingly computationally presented and algorithmically organised to serve corporate ends, then either the foundations of society will be constantly destabilised by technical disruption, or social stability is reliant on a technical configuration that operates outside of democratic accountability.

Why is it important to understand technics as an ontological category? Firstly, it demonstrates the extent to which the technical alongside the political is co-constitutive of the social, and thus any political project must account for the technical operations underlying

[246] McMullin, 2011, p.107.

the social reality it wishes to transform. Furthermore, displacing technics from contemporary understandings of technology holds political relevance for imagining configurations of social life beyond the limitations imposed by neoliberal capitalism: for example, a world without work is not a world without desire or purpose, because work properly understood as technics is an aspect of human existence itself. We make because we are human, we do not make because we must. The latter is merely the poverty of our circumstances, circumstances that technics may have already demonstrated we are capable of overcoming. If the task of radical democracy today is to reinvigorate and reimagine possibilities for collective human action, we ought to reconceptualise radical democracy as a mobilisation against (and in anticipation of) the social disjointedness increasingly endemic to contemporary techno-capitalist societies through social acceleration and general proletarianisation.

Just as the political and technical are ontologically co-constitutive of the social, so too are politics and technique inextricably linked. To appropriate the language of Jacques Ranciere, who defines politics as a form of distributing the sensible, we may consider *technique as the configuration of the sensible*, the means by which resources are gathered, manipulated and transformed to serve human ends. Political conflict often emerges from the ruptures caused by technique, for any tool can be made a weapon. Technology precludes possibilities by shaping the way humans perceive temporality, spatiality, but I argue just as importantly, trajectory; our shared collective expectations and the direction of travel that "we" (the political community) are taking.

As shall be elaborated further, technological structures, organised by neoliberal capitalism, are directed towards profit-driven, competitive market behaviours that otherwise occlude alternative political economic arrangements by virtue of their separation of information, whether that be intellectual property rights, databases and accompanying

predictive analytics, or literally patented machinery in warehouses and factories. Politics seeks to manage social crises, but it does so within the scope of what technics deems appropriate, desirable and feasible (in terms of efficiency, capability or time-sensitivity). Technics influences our sense of proximity to one another (in terms of digital communications technology, transportation infrastructure, etc.), it influences our sense of social acceleration (the acceleration of the pace of life, social transformation, our sense of priorities, etc.), and thus, technics is co-constitutive of the political. Technics causes the radical contingency of the social in those moments of discontinuity and rupture; it determines, as much as ideology, what we believe to be possible. Without wading too deeply into the waters of psychoanalytic debates, it is worth noting that Espinoza considers Stiegler's approach as revealing that 'technics is the unconscious of psychoanalysis'[247], in its capacity to shape what we take for granted, what we expect, and what kind of fantasies (personal and political) we envision. If radical democratic theory wishes to invoke the political in the belief that it guides us towards the radical transformation of society, then it must so alongside technics, so as to provide an expansive account of techno-political possibilities, rather than a neutered politics delimited by technical formation. If political ontology intends to peek "behind the curtain" of the politics of the everyday, and reveal the productive capacity of social ruptures, it must do so with a renewed focus on the ways in which technics shape the social field.

In summary, we may say that radical democratic theory is committed to an expansive definition of democracy to avoid complacent analysis of contemporary states designed as democracies. Its methodological commitment to contingency and its openness to different political models, however, is undercut by social weightlessness, that it operates in a world of concepts insufficiently tethered to the power relations that permeate everyday life. My contention is that an account of technics contributes to overcoming that problem - technics

[247] Tania Espinoza, "The Technical Object of Psychoanalysis" in Christina Howells & Gerald Moore, *Stiegler and Technics*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), p.151.

is co-constitutive of the social and the political, as it inscribes memory through time in objects, and influences human perception of collective trajectory and feasibility. I shall argue that power has become harder to analyse due to "technologization", the obscurantist technique of attributing political partiality in decision-making as a neutral institutional discourse of efficiency and optimisation. Retrieving technics as an ontological category, therefore, avoids the trap of analysing the social through our hegemonic technological discourse, which may itself contribute to reproducing social pathologies by prematurely narrowing our scope of political feasibility. In the next chapter, the focus turns to the way in which our technical configuration and political contestation coincide to shape social relations and produce social space, in service of an ongoing analysis of power relations.

I shall interrogate Peter Sloterdijk's ontology of being-together that attempts to uncover the historicity of mankind's development of communities through a long-form philosophical investigation of human conceptions of space and time. I shall argue that contemporary societies are analogous to foam, small bubbles of social relations and activity that overlap but often remain beside and separate from one another, thus underscoring the importance of mediated communication networks. Furthermore, we shall move forward with the notion of acceleration caused by technical systems disrupting social temporality, and consider its effect on social subjectivity through Hartmut Rosa's theories of social acceleration, arguing that the accelerating technological transformations indirectly contribute to a condition of *frenetic standstill* in citizens and *institutional inertia* in political bodies. I shall conclude with an account of information anxiety, a cultural disposition that informs the epistemic pluralism, conspiratorial political thinking and online micro-communities that populate social media, and argue that all these features of techno-social subjectivity can be understood holistically as our contemporary *technospheric condition*.

3. The Technospheric Condition

"You know that we have lost the sense of space. We say 'space is annihilated', but we have annihilated not space, but the sense thereof"[248]

-E.M. Forster, "The Machine Stops"

"The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space"[249]

-Michel Foucault

The charge of social weightlessness against post-foundational political ontology is not completely overcome solely through the introduction of technics. If we grant that the political and technics are co-constitutive of the social, the next move is to better understand the structure of the social to uncover ways in which the radical contingency induced by technics in the social is crystallised in everyday practices. Radical democratic theory must understand the impact of technicity as a social force.

I shall present an overview of Peter Sloterdijk's theory of spheres, which I argue complements the ontological account of technics from Stiegler and provides the context for contemporary social configurations. I contend we may use Sloterdijk's theoretical toolbox to recalibrate radical democratic theory's focus from politics as a mode of social relations that brings disparate individuals together to politics as a practice of removing obstacles to human sociality that undermine and fragment social units. Furthermore, I shall draw upon Hartmut Rosa's theory of social acceleration, and my own account of information anxiety - both

248 E.M. Forster, *The Machine Stops and Other Stories*. (London: Andre Deutsch, 1997), p.100.

249 Michel Foucault (1986) "Of Other Spaces", *Diacritics*, 16:1, p.22.

compatible with our earlier mapping of the techno-spatial configuration of social life - to provide an explanation for social fragmentation and argue that the reproduction of the political status quo is coterminous with everyday life in the technospheric condition.

The chapter is divided into the sections 'Bubbles,' 'Globes', 'Foams' and 'Social Acceleration: A Theory of Modernity'. The chapter provides an account of Sloterdijk's historical trajectory of social system becoming more individualised due to their incorporation of communication networks to bolster elite power, and I suggest that contemporary political theory ought to avoid sketching abstract theories of political contracting or laying down hypothetical social conditions, and should instead focus on the ways that social obligations and duties may emerge organically from systems of organisational interaction and intergenerational continuity. By the end of the chapter, Rosa's theory of social acceleration provides the reader with an additional layer to the problems that emerge in what I term the technospheric condition, specifically reproducing an environment that interferes with institutional change.

Peter Sloterdijk's Spheres trilogy draws from architecture, design theory, theology, anthropology, geology, human geography, histories of western and eastern philosophy, sociology, economics and cybernetics, arriving at a theory of social formation that attempts to encompass the history of human coexistence in order to "explicate" life in contemporary postmodernity.[250] For Sloterdijk, modernity is characterised by the 'technical production of its immunities'[251], the removal of the psychological and cultural structures that pertained to theological and cosmological narratives regarding the importance of human life. Immunology, in its original context, pertains to those biological functions that protect the

---

250 Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres, Vol. 1: Bubbles.* (Semiotexte, MIT Press, 1998); *Spheres, Vol. 2: Globes.* (Semiotexte, MIT Press, 1999); *Spheres, Vol. 3: Foams.* (Semiotexte, MIT Press, 2016).

251 Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, p.25.

continuity and integrity of an organism[252], for example, the autoimmune response to viral infection. Immunological research presupposes a fixed, bordered individual, a "patient" that can be understood as under threat from an external source, and philosophers draw upon this language to explore the implications of such assumptions for individual and collective identities.[253] Philosophers consider the diachronic and synchronic identities of individuals, where the former pertains to an organism's capacity to remain "the same" despite changes through its lifespan, and the latter pertains to those characteristics that make an individual "distinctive".[254] The language of immunology allows for a discussion that bypasses consciousness - "I feel like I am the same person" - and focus on the material and spatial boundaries of an organism, in terms of assimilation or rejection, inclusion and exclusion.[255]

The traditional account of "the immune self" is often framed as a (predominantly western) project of detaching humans from their natural environment[256], of seeing individuals as disconnected monads that interact with, rather than belong to, a broader ecological system, and Sloterdijk's project inverts the immunological position. If the traditional sociological account of immunology positions humans as 'entities, separate from the rest of the world—as containers with insides and outsides'[257], Sloterdijk argues that

---

252 Thomas Pradeu (2016), "Organisms or Biological Individuals? Combining Physiological and Evolutionary Individuality", *Biology & Philosophy*, 31(6): 797–817

253 Jacques Derrida, "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides", *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*. Giovanna Borradori (ed.) (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003, pp. 85–136); Donna Haraway, (1989) "The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Determinations of Self in Immune System Discourse", *Differences*, 1: 3–43; Lisa Weasel (2001) "Dismantling the Self/Other Dichotomy in Science: Towards a Feminist Model of the Immune System", *Hypatia,* 16(1): 27–44.

254 See Locke for diachronic and Sober for synchronic: Dan Kaufman, "Locke's Theory of Identity", *A Companion to Locke*, Matthew Stuart (ed.) (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016, pp. 236–259); Elliott Sober, *Philosophy of Biology*, 2nd Edition. (Boulder: Westview, 2000).

255 Pradeu formulated such criteria and proposed that the immune system plays the central role in determining what is and is not included in the organism. See Thomas Pradeu, *The Limits of the Self. Immunology and Biological Identity*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

256 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By.* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p.58).

257 Ludwig Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact.* Frederick Bradley and Thaddeus J. Trenn (trans). (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, [1935] 1979).

being is always contained with another. He follows those influenced by poststructuralist literature to the extent that they understand "the individual" as a permeable and problematic space to locate a fixed identity[258], and instead invokes immunisation as a means of understanding the social pathologies of contemporary western societies.[259]

More specifically, Sloterdijk reorients the Heideggerean understanding of being, so that "*in-die-Welt-Geworfen-Sein*" (being-thrown-in-the-world) is transformed into "*in-den-WeltraumGeworfen-Sein*," i.e., 'being-thrown-in-the-cosmos'. Where once religion and the homogeneity of rituals and customs eased humans into mortal, temporal existence, these traditional narratives of community and intergenerational continuity have been replaced in industrial civilisation by 'the welfare state, the world market and the media sphere', where 'networks and insurance policies are meant to replace the celestial domes' and the 'body of humanity seeks to create an immune constitution in an electronic medial skin'.[260]

The technical production of immunities, understood as the process by which society protects itself from the contingencies that undermine its integrity and continuity, is what Sloterdijk terms *living in spheres*, the creation of those dimensions in which human beings are contained. Sloterdijk defines spheres as 'immune-systematically effective space creations for ecstatic beings that are operated upon by the outside'.[261] Sloterdijk argues that 'solidarity' is the forgotten secret of the historical world, that 'the power to belong together, which is experienced in exemplary fashion by select couples…can be extended to communes, teams,

---

258 The immunity metaphor was marshalled by feminist writers to create social parallels with the AIDS crisis. See Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1990); Emily Martin, *Flexible Bodies. The Role of Immunity in American Culture from the Days of Polio to the Age of AIDS*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

259 The most influential examples of political immunology in the literature are Roberto Esposito and Giorgio Agamben. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas. The Protection and Negation of Life*. (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

260 Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, p.25.

261 Sloterdijk, ibid, p.28.

project groups, and perhaps even entire peoples'.[262] Sloterdijk's claim that contemporary society has forgotten its inherent togetherness is an interesting challenge to theories that presuppose individuals existing and living distinctly and separately in abstract that must form normative commitments through express or tacit approval for social formations to be actualised in practice, despite anthropological evidence that has shown that technics, community and empathy predate *homo sapiens*.[263] Sloterdijk maintains that the nature of the force that binds people together 'in shared vibrations'[264] has been insufficiently examined.[265] It is a popular truism that people can achieve more together than they can on their own, yet this very longing for belonging may be considered under-interrogated, at least in terms of its cultural and political implications.

Returning to the language of 'being-in-the-world', Sloterdijk argues that in most cases, we are actually referring to 'being-in-spheres'; if humans are "being-there" in Heidegger's sense, then they are "there" in spaces that exist because of prior human habitation, and as such have been given prior 'form, content, extension and relative duration' that are themselves dependent on their 'constant renewal'.[266] Spheres are finely tuned, precarious and delicate spaces for human existence that Sloterdijk likens to heating and air

---

262 ibid, p.44.

263 There is an apocryphal observation attributed to the anthropologist Margaret Mead that the first sign of civilisation was found at an excavation site in which archaeologists recovered a broken femur bone that showed signs of being fixed. In other words, contrary to speculative accounts of the state of nature, there was evidence of individuals looking after the wounded and protecting them long enough to recover from a leg break 15,000 years ago. As other anthropologists point out, the attributed quote misses evidence from even further back that our ancestors lived empathetic and cooperative lives with one another. On the anthropological record of humans living in equality, see Kim Sterelny (2021) "How equality slipped away". Aeon: https://aeon.co/essays/for-97-of-human-history-equality-was-the-norm-what-happened. Accessed: 21 June 2021.

264 Sloterdijk, ibid, p.45.

265 I would attribute this oversight to the way in which political philosophy often privileges teaching historical thinkers of the canon for their influence on the discipline over the relevance of their ideas, i.e. the all but universal teaching of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau's "states of nature", implicitly endorsing the framing as a continuous and valid debate through time, whilst neglecting advances in other disciplines that cast doubt on the overarching framing altogether, most recently in David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity.* (London: Allen Lane, 2021).

266 Sloterdijk, ibid, p.46.

conditioning systems insofar as they exist to produce a reliable source of comfort that can be completely taken for granted without comparison (for example, the occasional shock at the temperature change when you step outside having spent a day indoors). These human comforting systems are self-created, but not from the starting point of a radical social contingency in the post-foundational sense; they are always given, handed-down conditions, hence the tangible sense of intergenerational social continuity articulated and concretised in technique and technologies respectively.

Sloterdijk's critique of Heidegger is a rejection of the uniformity of the world in his articulation of "being-there", simplified to the point of being unhelpful in the context of cultural, sociological and political analysis. The world has always been a complicated and heterogeneous mixture of overlapping cultural codes, beliefs, ideas, fashions, foods, clothes, practices, theologies, languages, discourses and techniques. I understand Sloterdijk's spherology as a project of cultural philosophy committed to understanding the universal aspects of such complexity through their morphology, where spheres are shared places of perception and experience, and thus the basis for how we understand our identity, community and their accompanying intimacies in a way that feels distinctively tied to cultural authenticity. If adherence to traditional cultural values, where those values come into conflict with emancipatory political proposals, provides a stumbling block for radical democratic theory to overcome, it follows that an understanding of how cultural practices are shaped and sedimented into social identities is necessary for theorising ways of overcoming the granular particulars of social life to inform a broader democratic consensus.[267]

[267] This kind of thinking is perhaps more commonplace in international relations theory, where 'modern accounts of the political are still framed spatially: here and there, inside and outside, First World and Third World. It is within that framing that modern conceptions of temporality, of progressive history and development, have found their political purchase. Without that framing, it is difficult to make sense of politics at all'. R.B.J. Walker (1993) "Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory", Cambridge Studies in International Relations (24), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.314.

Bubbles

Sloterdijk's first volume focuses on microspheres; the mental development of the unborn and its sensory relationship with the womb, the infant and mother relationship, and those early childhood experiences which imprint themselves on our minds and shape our orientation in the world. As a child, our entire world may consist entirely of our family; then the friendship circles formed at school and after-school clubs extend our reach further, and into adolescence our world expands further still, now increasingly online, and as we grow into maturity through acculturation, we become more invested and acclimatised to our broader social orientation (which is distinct from conformity or uncritical approval). Obligations and those normative ties that bind us to one another exist prior to the process of subjectivization: we move from the absolute comfort and dependency of the womb to the cradle, and for Sloterdijk and the psychoanalytic childhood development literature he draws from, we first encounter ourselves as subjects as children in those moments when we feel compelled to act, to do, to say, to be somewhere; to become responsible for ourselves. We are 'encompassed and devoured by the circumspections and arrangements of others'.[268] As children, we become living observers, witnesses first of the other lives around us, and then become inner witnesses, as we adopt the perspective of an outside view of ourselves.[269] An individual is not the monad often described in theory, for 'no one comes into this world unaccompanied or unattached'.[270]

Sloterdijk describes each social form as its own 'world house, a bell jar of purpose, under which human beings first of all gather, understand themselves, defend themselves, grow and dissolve boundaries'.[271] When viewed in this way, spheres are composed of

---

[268] ibid, pp.88-89.

[269] ibid, p.203.

[270] ibid, p.413.

[271] ibid.

peoples that live together in communities of shared ritual, custom, discourses, achievements, memories and efforts, surviving through reference to their gods, their myths and shared narratives, their forms of artistic expression, and as such, may be considered successful constructs insofar as they manage the stresses of everyday life.[272] Sloterdijk suggests that sphere psychology precedes sphere politics, in that the way in which we understand togetherness and community supports the particularities of any political morphology.[273] Returning to the charge of social weightlessness, it is my intention to demonstrate that alongside Stiegler's account of technics, Sloterdijk's spherology provides the necessary density to otherwise socially weightless accounts of political ontology.

In this technical sense, Sloterdijk contends that spheres persist beyond the mortal separation between persons, that things lost remain in memories - either literally in the case of recalled experiences, or in terms of their material retention in technologies. It is finding solace in these retentions, as well as our human capacity to endure these traumas and recalibrate, that allows for the persistence of spheres: their favourite song plays; something happens and you catch yourself imagining their reaction alongside your own; you find yourself meeting someone or something that reminds you of them.

For Sloterdijk, we are always immersed in spheres, even if our cultures have learned to overlook, deny or exclude them.[274] Spherology can be understood as a genealogical undertaking focused on the transcultural phenomenon of spatial metaphors used to psychologically orientate subjectivity in relation to its immediate world. These spheric constructions produce shared common sense and psychological dispositions that grow within us habitually, manifesting as second natures - we are sponges to the languages we hear, the systems of ritual and meaning we are ingratiated into, those things which are given

---

[272] Sloterdijk, ibid, pp.59-60.

[273] Sloterdijk, ibid, pp.60-61.

[274] Sloterdijk, ibid, pp.78-79.

importance and those things taken for granted.[275] Humans live in a restless field of containers that produce collective psychological effects; imagine people moving through different concentric circles throughout their day, a shifting, dynamic topology guided by the movements through free association, but with a structural dimension that holds certain circles in place even in the absence of those individuals that conventionally compose them, through the reproduction of expectations (recalling Stiegler's concept of protentions) as they are materialised in the world in cultural objects and geographical places. These containers both incorporate and exclude: individuals become subjects only to the extent they are partners in a divided and assigned subjectivity, for 'every subject is the restless remainder of a couple whose missing half never ceases to make demands on the one left behind'.[276]

Summarising from Sloterdijk's first volume, I wish to highlight the psychological development of an individual from birth to maturity and its inevitable imbrication with the pre-existent cultural backdrop of their environment. From these observations, I contend that any attempt at emancipatory politics relies on willing subjects understanding their relation to power and recognising each other as part of a broader democratic social unit, a process complicated by the specificity of culture and upbringing. Furthermore, the environment itself framed as a shared psychological construction is designed to shelter subjects from the existential angst of temporality and mortality - and thus disruptive reallocations of historical importance or narratives that disturb settled narratives of intergenerational continuity may be falsely interpreted as hostile challenges to collective identity rather than liberating. Finally, the means by which intergenerational continuity is achieved and symbolically incorporated is through the production of technical configurations as earlier explicated in Stiegler's work - and thus political narratives are spatially incorporated.

---

[275] Sloterdijk, ibid, p.84.

[276] ibid, p.85.

Globes

In his second volume, Sloterdijk considers macrospheres, expanding his interest beyond psychological individuation and intimate relationships between couples and considers the forms of intimacy that exist amongst groups. Considering our contemporary world of information overload and the relentless archiving of all life as data, it is fascinating to remember that prior to the incorporation of technics for the intentional purpose of memory retention, entire clans, tribes and peoples have disappeared from the historical records, either completely with only lip service found in neighbouring people's texts, or patched together through archaeological excavations of limited recoveries.[277] Sloterdijk understands prehistory to modernity as a series of struggles for spheric expansion[278], where expansions are only possible if previously external elements can be absorbed and reinterpreted as 'factors of its sensible force and superelevated curvature'.[279] Once within the broader sphere, external elements previously "othered" as a cause for alarm or stress can be assimilated and normalised over time, the most common being the assumption of strangers as enemies and their gradual transition into associates, neighbours and friends.[280]

Sloterdijk speculates that early community superstition emerged as a response to death: humans are aware of their own mortality as much as the mortality of others, and thus to live as a human is to know that death will touch our lives. Culture itself emerges to turn empty space into places of ritual, of organised commemoration, sites of meaning to counteract the stresses endemic to human existence. Remembering the dead 'necessarily initiates sphere-creating processes, as the psychological sphere rent open by the

277 Sloterdijk, *Globes*, p.149.

278 *Globes*, p.151.

279 ibid, p.152.

280 ibid, p.158.

disappearance of the important other, the intimate bubble of coexistence, can only be restored through a form of space-creating immune reaction'.[281]

Echoing Arendt's reference to the commemoration of words and deeds as necessary for political communities to form, Sloterdijk considers the spheric space as that which expands beyond deeds of those present and commemorates those absent, providing the minimum scope for culture, as it opens up the possibility of intergenerational memorialisation.[282] Sloterdijk mirrors Arendt in contending that only a system of coexistence between the living and the dead can ontologically develop into a "world" as it allows for the drawing of borders around its framing of life[283], and "place" a people in the world where an anthropological place can be understood as 'the territorial commitment of a sphere'.[284] Drawing upon but subtly adjusting Schmitt's conception of the friend/enemy distinction, Sloterdijk suggests that there is a 'sociologically subversive thesis' that spheric narratives must construct an "other" to have been vanquished or excluded to produce a 'strong affective glue' and thus through this collective exclusion of an 'evil that the self-inclusion of the non-evil in a pathos-charged 'we' space becomes possible'.[285] The difference here is that the evil is not necessarily a rival people: the evil can be a theological construction, a purely conceptual pathogen, but nonetheless an aspect that cannot live peacefully within the established borders of the group, as the community's sense of a shared intimate memory is reaffirmed by this historical exclusion, however 'mythically moved and ritually muted' it might become over generations.[286]

---

[281] ibid, p.160.

[282] ibid, pp.161-162.

[283] ibid, p.164.

[284] ibid.

[285] ibid, p.179.

[286] ibid, p.180.

For Sloterdijk, these early motifs of collective human living are the basis of the Aristotelean notion of human beings as "zoon politikon", political animals, insofar as it presupposes those binding forces between us that individualistic ideological perspectives are incapable of grasping through their own methodological imperceptibility.[287] He maintains that an acknowledgement of solidarity in this prefigurative stage does not require an essentialist notion of 'national spirit' nor does it provide normative justification of nationalist or communitarian politics.[288] However, it allows us to understand primary cultural units as 'self-triggering morphogenetic processes' that occur over time as a community's self-harbouring of a group in its 'morphological shell'.[289] A "people" in any meaningful sense is a morphological fiction that provides the illusion of comfort and security amongst the familiar, because at this stage of human social development, there is no consistent cultural and political synthesis between hundreds of thousands of people across a shared land so much as ties that bind those immediate families and houses together, and a broader perception of a kinship that induces obligations elsewhere, even though we have never been or may never venture over "there".[290] The world in this context is understood as that which is contained by a form or a known boundary.[291]

There is a 'psychopolitical bridge' that exists between the structure of micro- and macrospheres, where the strong bonds between families, friends and romantic partners is conflated with the thinner obligations of openness and cordiality which are 'still praised and demanded in the republican community' as "public spirit", a notion of affirmative citizenship that formally expresses the deep, unspoken solidarity amongst fellow citizens of a given polis that allow for a shared grounding of social life that is both 'intimate and

[287] ibid, p.188.

[288] ibid, p.189.

[289] ibid, p.190.

[290] ibid.

[291] ibid, p.191.

public'.[292] Although Sloterdijk's politics prevents such a critical intervention, I believe it is worth contemplating whether the public performance of citizenship is well-meaning or utilised to obfuscate asymmetric power dynamics within a given society.

As human societies have expanded, encompassing, negotiating and meeting one another at the edges of their boundaries, the greater the need for means to communicate a sense of shared identity, and one such mechanism for those in power was the notion of representation. Spherologically, 'representation is always a matter of making the power centre present at a distant point- as if the spheric centre had the ability to communicate with every point on its circumference through representatives or emissaries as if actually present'.[293] This elitist interpretation of political representation considers these positions as instantiated from the centre of power to convey a surveillant and accessible presence that communicated across an expanding jurisdiction. Rather than the democratic reading of political representation as bottom-up presentations of demands from the periphery to the centre, Sloterdijk's reading is one of a central power willing to make concessions due to the necessity of governing over greater territories.

Sloterdijk considers the history of the envoy; a dignitary, a notary, a communicator, an observer of a communication's reception; 'by confiding in a special way in a chosen messenger, the simultaneously distant and discrete centre makes him its representative' and insofar as authorised, the envoy induces the obligation between instruction and those instructed, has the power to hold those who receive the message responsible for their reaction to its content, as if the 'divine centre were immediately present', in that rejecting the envoy is comparable to rejecting the monarch.[294] Fiefdoms, kingdoms and in their most expansive form, empires, can only maintain their imperial authority over a dynamic,

---

[292] ibid, p.306.

[293] ibid, pp.637-638.

[294] ibid, pp.643-645.

expanding territory through its capacity to communicate, to send messages and instructions to the periphery from the centre, whether that be envoys with sealed letters, or the circulation of myths and symbols that reproduce its power, however remotely located. For an empire, 'being means being connected'.[295]

An empire thus constitutes and reconstitutes itself not only with the threat of physical force against those who contest its legitimacy both internally and externally at those points of spatial contiguity, but continuity with the centre must be an attractive proposition for the periphery, and thus imperial power is mediated through 'a distribution system for signs of glory'.[296] The imperial model of communication is the ideological reproduction of its power through the sending of its messages 'in all directions from an overflowing, self-communicating centre'.[297] Sloterdijk sees the imperial mode of political communication prevailing across competing cultures and empires through history, arguing that it was only until the age of mass media, and after the post-socialist globalisation debate, that continental Europe removed its 'dream glasses' and appreciated that those universal values it had held sacrosanct since the Enlightenment and felt compelled to export across the world, and where necessary, viciously implement, 'only had regional validity'.[298] Sloterdijk's interpretation of the multipolar, postmodern world of mass communication is a world of 'couriers who hurry couriers who hurry about the world, shouting to each other- since there are no kings- messages that have become meaningless'.[299]

The image of messengers running around barking old orders to deaf ears inverts the importance of the communication of ideas found in John Stuart Mill's description of dead

---

[295] ibid, p.670.

[296] ibid, p.671.

[297] ibid, p.747.

[298] ibid, p.750.

[299] ibid, p.752.

dogmas.[300] The conventional narrative is that the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere in modernity allowed European political life to thrive as the public sphere was constituted and configured in the cafes, salons, clubs and associations of the time, providing the prefigurative conditions for the "informed citizen" integral to the liberal political settlements of representative democracy.[301] Here the view is that the state is legitimised insofar as it listens to those ideas communicated in the public sphere.[302] Sloterdijk's analytical eye, for better and worse, never leaves the seat of power: his focus remains on the source of ideological circulation within societies and the media infrastructure that determines the direction and intensity of information flows. The cynical interpretation would be that the proliferation of symbols, messages, texts, voices and worldview across the media field *benefits* the status quo: if there are so many ways we could change things, why risk any change at all? We may apply Sloterdijk's perspective to the marketplace of ideas, the constant circulation of multiple perspectives, to understand it as less evidence of a productive democratic public, and more a demonstration of the way in which power benefits in certain contexts from the relentless debating of all things, of keeping "all moves in play", distracting from decisions already made behind closed doors.

---

300 'However unwillingly a person who has a strong opinion may admit the possibility that his opinion may be false, he ought to be moved by the consideration that, however true it may be, if it is not fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a dead dogma, not a living truth'. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty, Utilitarianism and Other Essays.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1859] 2015, p.64).

301 Most significantly outlined in the work of Sloterdijk's public rival, Jurgen Habermas. See *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. trans. Thomas Burger. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, [1962] 1989).

302 Seyla Benhabib, "Models of Public Space" in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 73–98.

Foams

Sloterdijk's final volume takes us from the dyadic microspheres of womb-child, child-mother, brother-sister, friend-friend, lover-lover, etc., the human expansion program of society expands outwards, from village to city, through to imperial projects of globe-spanning empires and 'onwards to the finite universe until it loses itself in the unthinkable boundless space'.[303] Speaking directly to contemporary theorists of social and political immunology, Sloterdijk argues that life in terms of 'immunisation can no longer be thought with the tools of ontological simplification…if "life" has a boundless manifold space-forming effect, this is only because every monad has its own individual environment, but more significantly because they are all intertwined with other lives and consist of countless units'.[304]

Foams are described as 'agglomerations of bubbles' insofar as the 'term stands for systems or aggregates of spheric neighbourhoods in which each individual "cell" constitutes a self-augmenting context…an intimate space of meaning whose tension is maintained by dyadic and pluripolar resonances, or a "household" that vibrates with its own individual animation'[305] experienced by and within itself. The foam metaphor is designed to undermine the suggestion that societies can be understood as organic totalities of homogenous continuity, as per the original fantasies constructed by traditional communities through shared traditions. Instead, societies are only comprehensible as 'restless and asymmetrical associations of pluralities of space and processes whose cells can neither be truly united nor truly separate'.[306] The internal coherence or unity of a given social field is always an ideological construction: the "we"-ness at the macrospheric level, unlike the "we"-ness

303 *Foams*, p.16.

304 ibid, p.23.

305 ibid, p.52.

306 ibid, p.54.

found at the microspheric level between dyadic couples, is a fantasy that operates to suppress the 'fluid, hybrid, permeable and promiscuous constitution'[307] of societies, in other words, a means of cloaking the radical contingency to which post-foundational ontology refers.

Society, understood as the spherological product of human coexistence, is not a monospheric container for a population with an essential character, nor a 'non-spatial communication process' that only exists at a lower ontological level of differentiating subsystems, such as the topology of network theory. Society is understood as an aggregate of microspheres (those resonant couplings and spaces of meaning produced by couples, families, households, businesses, free associations, institutions, etc.) that exist and relate to one another in contiguity and propinquity, as 'individual bubbles in a mountain of foam', both bordering one another and layered above and below one another, without the full transparency and accessibility of absolute disclosure.[308]

The important aspect of understanding the social field through this structure is that it reveals the world-forming aspect of each individual symbolic unit alongside one another, that are then 'drawn into an interactive network based on the principle of co-isolation'.[309] Due to the dynamic, interlinking and overlapping movements of these bubbles and those individuals that comprise and reconstitute these spaces, societies are often topologically misarticulated as private citizens in private dwellings that leave these domains to enter into a wide, expansive and open public sphere, but in practice, individuals only consistently interact within spaces that 'arise in shared waves of imitation and have analogous media facilities'.[310] We don't live in a private world and then enter the "real world" shared in public, so much as

---

307 ibid, p.55.

308 ibid, p.56.

309 ibid, p.56.

310 ibid, pp.56-57.

move around in our habitual spaces, living in a dynamic private world with others, with constant reference to a broader public imaginary that can never be fully actualised in space.

Sloterdijk contends that 'in media terms, foam cell "society" is a murky medium with a certain conductivity for information'[311] insofar as every point in the foam is aware of those bubbles it borders and due to the translucent nature of foam, has a blurred but general vision of where they are in relation to others more broadly, but a bird's eye view remains unavailable to "being-in-spheres". Furthermore, the bubbles that serve as the aggregative spatial multiplicities in the foam metaphor are not solely reproduced defensively, defined only through its exclusionary boundaries: they require an inherent creativity, flexibility and malleability described as a 'primary extensibility'.[312] The work of humans in the creative endeavours of building their own lives and the social spaces that emerge from this overlapping flurry of activity produce 'the perceptible space-stacking effect' called foam: the purpose of the metaphor is to explain the production of social systems without relying on border-policing or social essentialism.[313] Foam theory attempts to explain the existence of the social bond that answers 'the question of how society is possible as a collective of shareholders'.[314] Societies are composed of enclosed, co-isolated and co-fragile spaces of social activity only exist through acknowledged boundaries understood as 'shared separation installations (walls, doors, corridors, roads, fences, border installations, hatches, media)'.[315] The foam metaphor captures the extent to which independent social practices engage in meaning-making discourses that necessarily overlap but often remain functionally

311 ibid, p.58.

312 ibid, p.232.

313 ibid, p.233.

314 ibid, p.234.

315 ibid, p.236.

independent to the point of being unintelligible to those unfamiliar with the discursive practices of a given field of activity.[316]

Sloterdijk's foam metaphor is designed to refute the contractualist paradigm[317], arguably the predominant mode of thinking about political organisation in academic political philosophy (at least in the western world).[318] The contractualist position presupposes a social field once comprised of self-interested individuals that organised themselves in a rational process of compromises so as to secure the formalisation and protection of their pre-existing interests in exchange for a series of duties and obligations to the newly constituted institution. Although contemporary theorists of political obligation often compose theories that touch on the inherent solidarity involved in human activity[319], there is a statist bias to proceedings in that the literature is more interested in explaining why the current liberal-democratic settlement is viable, permissible and enforceable, and less interested in the actual historical instantiation of the state and the processes of collective organisation it may be actively impinging upon. If individuals are concerned self-interested, 'social synthesis' can be explained in dispassionate terms of contractual coordination with no need to allege any 'mysterious solidarities, deep pre-contractual connections or pre-rational depths of community'.[320] As Sloterdijk quips, 'can I claim to have signed a contract of kinship with my

---

316 ibid, p.237.

317 Translated as 'contractualist', interchangeable with the more common 'contractarian'.

318 Aspects of the anti-contractualist foam perspective are found in Africana philosophy's description of traditional African conceptions of personhood as an extended self, a project of moral liability to others that exists from the period of maturation to death, indicated in the aphorism, "I am, because we are". See John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. (Doubleday: New York, 1970); Ifeanyi A. Menkiti, '*Person and Community in African Traditional Thought*', In. R.A. Wright (ed.), *African Philosophy: An Introduction*. (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), pp.171-81.

319 Margaret Gilbert's research has recently transitioned from explicit theories of political obligation (of citizens to the state) towards systematising forms of human activity that produce social units more generally under the banner of 'joint commitment' between parties as a precondition of collective action, a brilliant example of parallel thinking that arguably coheres with Sloterdijk's foam theory, and an interesting route for further research into the overlapping concerns of analytic and continental political philosophy. See Margaret Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation: Membership, Commitment, and the Bonds of Society*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); *Joint Commitment: How We Make The Social World*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

320 Sloterdijk, *Foams*, p.255.

parents and siblings?'.[321] He speculates that due to the densely mythological, theological and folk-religious nature of western cultural solidarities, it is easier for the po-faced empiricist to outright ignore the history of social ties and instead make retroactive generalisations about our social constitutions that best encapsulate the priorities of industrialised western society (namely, the reproduction of market society).

The moment we abandon the contractualist approach and accept that humans have social ties that predate the constitution of political institutions, one must ask in 'what larger shared structure those coexisting with one another are "contained", and what nexus actually binds them together'[322] and thus the possibility of cohesive forces of pervasive shaping power existing prior to the intervention of the original violence of the constituting state.[323] Although as a conservative it was never Sloterdijk's aim, spherology implies a comprehensive solidarity that may render the state to be a non-necessary means of enforcing collective action altogether.[324]

In the contractualist model, human beings "lack" for something (predominantly security) only accessible once they are transformed into "citizens" through the apocryphal manoeuvre from "state of nature" to "civil society", an action which 'none will ever be able to say where, when and in what medium it occurred, and how it could be grounded…no archivist has yet succeeded in finding the cabinet in which the social contract is stored'.[325] For Sloterdijk, it is 'the exquisite nowhere' in which any social contract is supposedly enacted that deflects away from the material fact of the 'situate constitution of coexistence and its

---

321 Sloterdijk, ibid, p.256.

322 Sloterdijk, ibid, p.257.

323 ibid, p.257.

324 The potentially fruitful relationship between Sloterdijk's spherology and anarchism has been explored in Iwona Janicka, "Are these Bubbles Anarchist? Peter Sloterdijk's Spherology and the Question of Anarchism", *Anarchist Studies*, 24:1 (2016), pp.62-84.

325 Sloterdijk, *Foams*, p.268.

self-willed spatial dynamics'.[326] Thus, for Sloterdijk, the Kantian definition of space as the possibility of being together must be inverted, 'for being together is the enablement of space'.[327]

When political sociologists invoke the language of immunity, it is often understood as a social fact related to social cohesion, where family and tribal communities, and then later peoples, parties and corporations wish to impose on their members forms of behaviour that meet a 'standard of immunity they had attained together'.[328] Sloterdijk expands on Marshall McLuhan's notion that modernity and its mass media's "literate man" replaced the "dwelling man": people no longer needed to see their houses as ritual extensions of their bodies, and as reading comprehension increased in mass society, media (ideas, image, stories, cultural products) increasingly situate people in communities with one another, and what books, newspapers, magazines, television shows and radio channels people listened to became more of an indicator of commonality and rapport between conversing strangers.[329]

Sloterdijk's interpretation of the technical configuration of social life is one of media saturation through foam: 'existence now means swimming in signs that come from far away'[330] and as our societies become more fractured by complexity, 'the agencies of social synthesis devote themselves to the task of producing the overarching forms that can group the insulated into interactive units'.[331] To put it with less poetic flourish, the technical aspect of social life becomes most visible at those points where they mediate social interactions and through their capacity to circulate communications across vast distances, reduce the

---

326 ibid, p.268.

327 ibid, p.284.

328 ibid, p.500.

329 ibid, pp.503-504.

330 ibid, p.557.

331 ibid, p.564.

importance of proximity and provide the infrastructure for those wishing to reproduce a cohesive public "sphere" to obscure the postmodern condition of foam. Technology becomes the mediator between otherwise co-isolated social units: we use media to ascertain what the others think, rather than asking them ourselves.[332]

If we understand our co-isolation in foam as adjacent, loosely touching "lifeworld" cells, the metaphor implies there is no absolute privacy[333], a space absolutely our own of which we are sole arbiter: all spaces are connected and thus shared in some respect, even if it as weak as the ties that bind neighbours at a fence between properties, or two local hobby clubs that must negotiate a community timetable to ensure there are no overlapping bookings of the town hall. The rhythm of foam is 'the disassembly of social conglomerates into individuated complex units and their recombination in cooperative ensembles'[334] to which modern collectives confront the task of producing spatial conditions in which individuals, smaller groups and larger assemblies of people may freely associate and dissociate, whilst having appropriate spaces to accommodate their varying needs for clearly demarcated boundaries for security, intimacy and privacy as well as porous borders in other contexts for interactivity, transparency and accountability. It is the material particularities of "spatialising" the practicalities of radical democracy that complicates socially weightless theory, as both the technical and spatial configurations of social life heavily influences the capacity for both individuals and groups to coalesce, communicate and collectivise.

Sloterdijk's project is attuned to the relationship between technics and society, and he often found himself in literal dialogue with the late Stiegler and his proponents. Specifically, the merit of Sloterdijk's theory for this project is the centrality of the continuing importance

---

[332] For perhaps the most famous scholarship on the increasing "co-isolation" of individuals in liberal democracies, see Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

[333] ibid, p.565.

[334] ibid, p.567.

of dominant media in reproducing the discursive fiction of societies, configuring social space, and its relationship to the reproduction of political and cultural systems. Sloterdijk describes contemporary society as increasingly extending and thus becoming ever more reliant on technological networks.[335]

If Stiegler and Sloterdijk share a number of theoretical contentions, there is a significant ontological departure between them. Whilst for Stiegler, human beings are inherently technical and their "technicity" is a reaction to the "lack" or deficiency of meaning that humans find existing as conscious life, Sloterdijk inverts yet another ontological truism of the philosophical literature, and instead argues the opposite: human beings are not "*homo paupers"* as he claims many psychoanalytic, phenomenological and existentialist theories like to propose; we are creatures of "pampering" that use our superior intelligence and craftsmanship in the form of technics to propose luxuriating spaces of living that allow us to thrive beyond mere survival.[336] Our technical capacities make the (ultimately unhelpful) nature-culture binary possible in the first place, in that we are so good at improving our situation that we are capable of deluding ourselves into denying continuity between our circumstances and those of other living things.

For Sloterdijk, human beings are atmospheric designers, and as design theory notes, 'as we feel more "at home" in dwelling places, they become places created in our own bodily images'[337]. We are carving out spaces in the world through technics for the purpose of providing themselves with utility, luxury, accessibility to the resources and potential pleasures of the world without having to expend excessive effort: the aim is a "sheltered" life of "pampering", and thus with this individual and collective social project, come the epistemic

---

336 ibid, p.657.

337 Ed Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p.120.

limitations and challenges of different groups of disparate people taking different aspects of their spatial arrangements, technical configurations, cultural practices and everyday conveniences for granted, often whilst attempting to communicate a politics that adequately captures a shared commonality between all those individuals within the territory of a state.

Furthermore, through an account of the extension of technological networks, Sloterdijk's theory reveals a possible resolution of the apparent contradiction between the fragility of individual social spaces and the "stickiness" of broader social norms. Society is becoming fragmented, but the overarching media network may contribute to an explanation of the limitations placed upon social change. Sloterdijk does not have a structural account of ideological reproduction, but his mapping of the social provides the framework for such an approach to which we shall later return. Where Sloterdijk fails to extend his analysis, I contend that in our contemporary politics of systemic oppression and spiking inequality, the dream of modern life described by pampering, the 'shortening of the way to the result, bypassing intermediate steps involving work or alienation'[338] obscures the processes of production and consumption, the asymmetrical power dynamics of capital accumulation, ideologically supported by the notion that the appropriate and intelligent application of technology provides the conditions for luxury, occluding from view the extent to which domination and exploitation are endemic to social reproduction.

Relevant for our purposes, then, is the notion that general or universalist *strategies* for radical democratic expansion or emergence cannot be ascertained at the level of political ontology in the absence of a critical encounter with the mediated arrangements of our societies, and thus, the technical configuration of such prospective spaces for political reflection and action. The radical social contingency, and the possibility of its reemergence, is not uniquely an opportunity as often described in post-foundational political thought, but

[338] ibid, p.727.

also an historical crisis that one could argue leads to stasis, or in extreme cases, the reorientation of politics towards authoritarian and exclusionary practices. Rather than reciting the habitual "there is no alternative" lines endemic to capitalist realism, the postmodern conservative may respond to post-foundational politics thus; "if things could always be otherwise, is it not safer for things to be left as they are?"[339]

My appropriation of Sloterdijk is not to reproduce the conservative view that the status quo is the optimal state of affairs, rather to underscore that the post-foundational reliance on the condition of radical contingency as a justification for the potential of progressive politics is itself too narrow an understanding of the social space: when there are ruptures and discontinuities in the (neoliberal-capitalist) status quo, when systemic challenges emerge and new political modes become tangible, the "masses" of the Global North are just as likely to reaffirm and redeploy the borders that structured modernity, blow the dust off colonial maps, clean the moss from the castle walls and pull up the drawbridge; metaphorically, in the case of the rise of reactionary political discourse in the form of culture wars (*kulturkampf*)[340] or literally in the case of xenophobic border policies of "Fortress Europe".[341]

Lemmens and Hui's comparative study of Stiegler and Sloterdijk concludes with important questions regarding the marshalling of technology in their work. They argue

---

339 In this vein, we may recall the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's inversion of Nietzsche's quote "when God is dead, everything is permitted", instead saying that "when God is dead, nothing is permitted" in the context of diagnosing neuroticism, the obsessive impulse to overcome the threat of a world that cannot be mastered.

340 Frank Furedi, *Populism and the European Culture Wars: The Conflict of Values between Hungary and the EU*. (London: Routledge, 2018).

341 Nicola Zolin, "From Compassion to Fortress Europe: The migrant crisis in pictures", Politico. (2020) https://www.politico.eu/article/from-compassion-to-fortress-europe-the-migration-crisis-in-pictures/. Accessed 28 June 2021.

> both thinkers analyse our contemporary technological situation like physicians diagnosing their patients. This figure of the philosopher is incarnated in Sloterdijk's theory of general immunology and Stiegler's general organology. The task for the philosopher-physician figure is to find the symptom in order to then prescribe the patient a remedy. This task implies two further sub-questions. Firstly, what determines a healthy society? Secondly, how can decisions and actions in this regard be carried out in a democratic way?[342]

Neither Sloterdijk nor Stiegler offer a comprehensive democratic political programme that accommodates their (bombastic and often vague) social prescriptions. However, I argue an overarching account of our contemporary technospheric condition combined with radical democratic theory resolves the apolitical aspects in the technospheric account of society, and the social weightlessness of the post-foundational ontology's account of the political. Social weightlessness is a problem ameliorated by a spherological understanding because it allows us to situate the development of technics within the density of culture, to understand the relationship between social practices and the problematic of speed, and affords the opportunity to consider the hazards of encouraging the "opening up" of politics to challenge without a thorough interrogation of one's place in the foam structure: in other words, the difference between the reception of radical democratic theory amongst its literature versus these ideas articulated for a more expansive, and potentially less sympathetic, mediated mass audience. My progressive application of Sloterdijk's spherology serves to acknowledge that the problem of politics is not getting people together; it is about establishing techniques and strategies to eliminate those occlusions that interfere with the human process of coexistence, once more affirming my claim that the political and technical are co-constitutive of the social.

---

[342] Pieters Lemmens & Yuk Hui (2017) 'Reframing the Technosphere: Peter Sloterdijk and Bernard Stiegler's Anthropotechnological Diagnoses of the Anthropocene', *Krisis*, (2), 26-41, p.38.

In the next section, I shall present an overview of Hartmut Rosa's theory of social acceleration, linking his concerns to Stiegler's earlier contention of "the problematic of speed" and suggest that that social acceleration can be directly linked to the perceived combination of a rapidly changing social field and political inertia on the part of western states, and critically assess the political implications of social acceleration.

Social Acceleration: A Theory of Modernity

As sociologist Judy Wajcman has noted, 'there is a widespread perception that life these days is faster than it used to be'.[343] 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'[344], 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 is given by critical theorist Hartmut Rosa. 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'.[345] 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.[346]

---

343 Judy Wajcman, *Pressed For Time: The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) p.1

344 Wajcman, *Pressed For Time*, p.6.

345 Hartmut Rosa (2003) "Social Acceleration: Ethical and Political Consequences of a Desychronised High-Speed Society", *Constellations.* 10(1), p.4.

346 There exists an abridged version of my discussion of Rosa's theory of social acceleration published in the context of discussing the validity of theories of "digital deceleration on social media". See Jamie Ranger (2020). "Slow Down! Digital Deceleration Towards A Socialist Social Media", *Triple C: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, 18, 254–267.

For Rosa, 'acceleration is an irreducible and constitutive trait of modernisation'.[347] 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.[348] 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

---

347 Rosa, ibid, p.27.

348 Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) p.97.

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 globalisation 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.[349] 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'.[350] 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'.[351] 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

---

349 Hartmut Rosa, "Social Acceleration: Ethical and Political Consequences of a Desynchronized High-Speed Society", In Hartmut Rosa and William E. Scheuerman (eds.) *High-Speed Society: Social Acceleration, Power and Modernity*. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), p.83.

350 Hartmut Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration: Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality*. (New York: NSU Press, 2010), p.16.

351 Rosa, *High-Speed Society*, p.83.

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.

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.[352] 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'.[353] 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 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.[354]

---

[352] A practical example of the accelerating pace of life can be found in studies that have shown that people who live in urban centres across the developed world walk faster and have lower patience thresholds. These trends were noted for being dependent on the rhythm of the space rather than cultural preferences (in other words, a slow walker from a village in a "slower moving country" who moves to a city in a "faster country" would become a faster walker to unconsciously coordinate with the rhythm of others over time). The implication here is that the speed of social practices is determined by the configuration of space. See Robert Levine, *A Geography of Time*. (Basic Books: New York, 1997), p.16; Philip Zimbardo & John Boyd, *The Time Paradox*. (Rider: London, 2010), p.324.

[353] Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration*, p.21.

[354] I would later discover my intuitive observation is supported by empirical studies. See John Freeman, *The Tyranny of E-mail*. (Scriber: New York, 2009), p.183.

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, occurring 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')'[355], i.e. "TINA", capitalist realism, and all the other nihilistic and totalising articulations of our contemporary political moment.

Rosa's analysis demonstrates 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 (the recent fad of tech firm CEOs going away to yoga retreats that forbid phone and internet usage). Deceleration, however, appears to occur either as a pressure release valve in the broader structure or in small pockets of society, rather than a broader collective project to reverse modern trends.

---

[355] Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration*, pp.38-39.

What does a radical democratic politics look like under these supposed conditions of modernity? And what role does "modernity" seem to be playing in Rosa's work when I 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".[356] 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'.[357] Thus, we must acknowledge that whilst the technical may have its own external affects on social life, it does so contingently, and interdependently with the economic system in which it is imbricated. The pressure to increase profits induces harriedness as much as any technical factor, arguably attempting to solve the problem it creates itself with decelerating practices such as the 'happiness industry'.[358]

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

---

[356] Rosa, ibid, p.54.

[357] Rosa, ibid.

[358] Will Davies, *The Happiness Industry: How Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-Being.* (London: Verso, 2015)

quo'.[359] 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.

As earlier articulated in Stiegler's thought as "the problematic of speed", social acceleration is a product of the technical configuration of social life in western modernity with increasingly influential effects on society. Frenetic standstill and institutional inertia are the individual and collective responses caused by social acceleration, the mass psychological effect of the implementation of technology. Stiegler's aforementioned concerns regarding general proletarianisation and the relationship between technics and memory provides an account of ongoing structures that influence the reception of technological implementation that Rosa otherwise lacks, and Sloterdijk's foam demonstrates the social topography shaped as a consequence: co-isolated, co-fragile micro-communities stuck together by a shared technical and semiotic architecture; disoriented, fragmented and with much of this imposed condition presented as apolitical.

Here we have the theoretical and conceptual toolkit that begins to explain the lack of constant transformations, renewals and recombinations that we might reasonably consider both plausible and likely given the radical contingency underlying contemporary social life. The race towards an emancipatory radical democratic future appears leaden-footed, bogged down in the particularities of our cultural inheritance and the everyday ways in which our working conditions are shaped by a technical configuration outside of our parameters of control (as well as our individual and collective knowledge). The promise of politics as the activity that can ameliorate instances of social and economic inequality is undercut by the stodgy resilience of oppression in supposedly frenetic and frictionless times.

---

[359] Bart Zantvoort (2017) "Political inertia and social acceleration", *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 43(7), p.720.

At this point in proceedings, we have an account of the political and the technical and its relation to the social. We have a topological account of the social alongside an affective account of how technology shapes our relation to the social. The missing factor here is an account of how asymmetrical power dynamics and oppressive social structures persist. We mapped the political to understand how post-foundational political theory reveals the radical potential that underscores the constitution of the social, but its methods are blighted by social weightlessness. We mapped the technical in an attempt to overcome such a problem by suggesting that both technics and the political constitute the social, that the social is more than the political instituted, but also constituted by the technical configuration inherited from prior generations. Furthermore, we mapped the social, using Sloterdijk's foam theory to demonstrate that individual actors are shaped by relationships with others, in varying scales of intimacy, proximity and intensity.

Furthermore, Rosa's theory of social acceleration expounds upon the collective and individual affective condition that the technical configuration of social life reproduces, namely a sense of frenetic standstill and institutional inertia. Although I disagree with the particulars of Sloterdijk's own account of social acceleration[360], his foam theory can accommodate these externalities as described by Stiegler and Rosa. Here we face another *prima facie* contradiction: if there exist social forces that impose a sense of instability and insecurity to proceedings, if we are left feeling out of our depth, detached from our work and one another, not to mention politically inert, in a world outside of our design, knowledge and control, why is the coordinated pushback against such negative social experience so disparate and ineffective? Here we shall make the move from social ontology to ideology.

---

[360] Sloterdijk's essay is a polemical description of social acceleration that broadly aligns with my own interpretation informed by Stiegler and Rosa, but lacks a structural analysis in favour of blaming the modern "spirit of self-intensification", an individual condition vaguely related to globalisation and rooted in the political climate of the late-1980s. See Peter Sloterdijk, *Infinite Mobilisation*. (Cambridge: Polity, 2020 [1989])

4. Ideology as Political Technology

'What is to be explained is not the fact that the man who is hungry steals or the fact that the man who is exploited strikes, but why the majority of those who are hungry don't steal and why the majority of those who are exploited don't strike'.[361]

The following chapter is comprised of the following sections: 'What is Ideology?', 'Althusser on Ideology', 'The Interpellation of the Subject' and 'Ideology and the Technospheric'. The chapter demonstrates how ideology as a concept has been previously used, distinguishing the ideological from the political in the theoretical sense. After a critical overview of Althusser's account of ideology, where ideology is understood as a social force that interpellates individuals as political subjects, I explain my intentions to use ideology as a means of separating issues of negative social experience for citizens caused by the technospheric condition from issues caused by domination and political obfuscation. I intend to avoid a misapprehension of my analysis thus far: I contend there exists both the *technologization* of politics as described earlier, interpreted as the manifestation of contemporary ideology as technique (ideology as political technique), but there also exists the influence of the technospheric condition (technology as a social force that compels ideology to respond to its configuration). In other words, I wish to avoid the systematic reduction of technics to ideology and vice versa; neither an ideological reductionist nor a techno-deterministic be.

[361] William Reich, *On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology*. Michael Rosen (ed.) (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

What is Ideology?

What makes something ideological rather than merely political? If the political is the underlying contestable condition of the radically contingent social, and politics is the collective activity of public contestation, what does it mean to say that something is *ideological*? In this chapter, I shall argue that ideology is best understood as a political technology, specifically a technics of interpellation. Ideology manifests itself in contemporary society through the production and circulation of symbolic and discursive practices that produce (interpellate) a subjectivity that conforms to the reproduction of the status quo (neoliberal capitalism) experienced as a voluntary commitment to norms and behaviours conducive to freedom. However, ideology also constitutes the space in which interpellation occurs, and increasingly, contemporary power operates through nondiscursive networks that bypass consciousness through computational systems and processes.

Post-foundational ontology reveals the radical contingency of the social. Stiegler's intervention demonstrates that a subject's sense of time and place is shaped by technics. Sloterdijk's social foam metaphor reveals that subjects are indissolubly imbricated with one another through the sharing of these technically induced cultural spaces. The purpose of ideology is to naturalise, flatten and depoliticise the material contradictions in the existing social order, and in doing so hide forms of social oppression necessary for its reproduction. Ideology-critique is a means of disclosing the masked operation of power, revealing otherwise hidden material contradictions that may be rectified politically. Therefore, radical democrats must consider the role ideology plays in the reproducing the status quo.

Ideology is a concept with a richly contested heritage, with various definitions, some of which are contradictory, juxtaposed, or interchangeable.[362] The concept of ideology 'arose at the historical point where systems of ideas first became aware of their own partiality; and this came about when those ideas were forced to encounter alien or alternative forms of discourse'.[363] The term itself, *ideologie*, was coined in France in 1796, and began as an empiricist enterprise to create an analytic social science of the study of ideas. However, as those who espoused this methodology refused to use it to rationalise the rule of Napoleon Bonaparte, ideology quickly became a term of abuse.

Rationalisation is defined in the psychoanalytic literature as a 'procedure whereby the subject attempts to present an explanation that is either logically consistent or ethically acceptable for attitudes, ideas, beliefs, etc., whose true motives are not perceived'.[364] Ideologies are social rationalisations in that they provide explanations of social phenomena, but by withholding the material interests that their explanations serve, they provide an epistemic barrier to the genuine political knowledge required for authentic democratic action.

Ideology is most often associated with the work of Karl Marx, in which religion, morality and metaphysics are referred to as ideologies, mere phantoms formed in the brain, ultimately derived from the material conditions of social relations. Ideology, in the general sense, became the subject of study for those who perceived social relations as distorted by

---

362 'Including, but not limited to: '(a) The process of production of meanings, signs and values in social life; (b) A body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class; (c) Ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power; (d) False ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power; (e) Systematically distorted communication; (f) That which offers a position to a subject; (g) Forms of thought motivated by social interests; (h) Identity thinking; (i) Socially necessary illusion; (j) The conjuncture of discourse and power; (k) The medium in which conscious social actors make sense of their world; (l) Action-oriented sets of beliefs; (m) The confusion of linguistic and phenomenal reality; (n) Semiotic closure; (o) The indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure; (p) The process whereby social life is converted to a natural reality'. Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*. (London: Verso Books, 1991), p.2.

363 Eagleton, ibid, p.106.

364 Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bernard Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*. (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1980), p.375.

systematically disrupted communication. By understanding and overcoming ideology, Marxist theorists claim to understand political truths hitherto undisclosed by the dominant class power of bourgeois institutions.[365]

Marx argued that in any historical moment, the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class. Whilst many consider the industrialist and the intellectual as existing in separate social spheres, the class which holds the means of material production, those that hold the society's economic power, invariably control what Marx terms the means of mental production: by contrast, those precluded from the social spheres of philosophy and high culture are subjected to ideas about politics that serve the interests of the elite.[366]

We are born into a world in which the social field is determined by the ruling class's ideas of how social reality is, and how it ought to be. Marx argues that if you own the means by which societies produce and allocate their resources, you are also going to hold a significant interest in reinforcing the system that places you in charge, and indeed, wield the power to circulate ideas that reproduce the system accordingly. Ideologies explain how power structures, and in the case of capitalist societies, structures of exploitation, are maintained. Marx also decries the universality that ideologies purport to contain. Ideology presents itself as having always existed and existing in the future, untethered from historical and social contingencies, and presented as the way things are. To use a contemporary example, consider television advertisements for life insurance aimed at young people: not only does the system itself reduce the existential crisis of mortality to a financial inconvenience suffered by others, but it completely takes for granted that the current financial system, as well as the specific insurance company being advertised, will exist in fifty or sixty years' time. Ideology plans for a future that resembles the present.

---

[365] David Macey, *Dictionary of Critical Theory*. (London: Penguin Reference, 2000), pp.198-199.

[366] Macey, ibid, p.302.

Marx prescribes the following three aspects to any approach which aims to unveil the paucity of ruling class ideas; an empirical separation of ruling ideas from the rulers themselves, to clarify the role of ideas or illusions rather than conspiratorial actions of individual rulers; systemise these ruling classes, by ascribing them a certain form of agency in order to determine the motivations behind the system of ideas; remove the mystical appearance of these ideas, the false impression that the ruling ideas are universal, natural or divine, and affirm their historicity by locating the originators of ideology, the "manufacturers of history".

The traditional Marxist account of ideology is often understood as those views, ideas and beliefs somehow tainted by the social origin or the social interests of those who hold them. Louis Althusser's interpretation of Marx, or perhaps, his theoretical reinvigoration of Marx, is that ideologies are views, ideas and beliefs *embedded within social practices* that are tainted by the social origins or the social interests of those who *circulate* them. It is Althusser's theory of ideology that shall form the starting point for my methodological contention that contemporary ideology operates as a political technology.

Althusser on Ideology

Louis Althusser's conception of ideology 'alludes in the main to our affective, unconscious relations with the world, to the way in which we are pre-reflectively bound up in social reality'.[367] Ideology is a fiction that emerges from the institutional apparatuses that produce discourses from which the subject is 'ejected'.[368] As such, 'ideological statements may be true to society as at present constituted, but false in so far as they thereby serve to

[367] Eagleton, ibid, p.18.

[368] Louis Althusser, 'Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses', *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings* (1966-67), (edited by Francois Matheron, pp.33-84. New York: Verso, 2003), p.56.

block off the possibility of a transformed state of affairs'.[369] Specifically, Althusser has two theses of ideology for which he is renowned. Ideology is 'a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence'[370], and 'ideology has a material existence'.[371] Both claims need to be unpacked and explained in greater detail to better understand Althusser's model.

When Althusser refers to the 'imaginary relationship', it is a reference to the psychoanalytic models proposed by Jacques Lacan. The 'Imaginary Order' is linked to Lacan's 'mirror stage' of human development, both of which require explanation. Lacan, following Freud, separates the unconscious from the preconscious, the latter referring to our psychological dispositions in infancy. Between the ages of six and eighteen months, Lacan posited that an infant will begin to recognise their image in the mirror, and this recognition is accompanied by pleasure; 'the mirror image anticipates the mastery of the body that the infant has not yet objectively achieved…thus the infant's imaginary mastery of his body anticipates his biological mastery'.[372] The infant is aware that they exist independent of the gaze of their mother, and can imagine their development, when they will grow and become capable of the physical traits that are still developing. It is the advent of the mental process by which individuals are capable of fantasies about themselves. Benvenuto & Kennedy explain the 'Imaginary' in their introduction to Lacanian psychoanalysis in the following terms:

> The Imaginary Order includes the field of phantasies and images. It evolves out of the mirror stage, but extends into the adult subject's relationship with others. The prototype of the typical imaginary relationship is the infant before the mirror, fascinated with his

---

[369] Eagleton, ibid, p.27.

[370] Louis Althusser, *On Ideology*. (London: New Left Books/Verso, 2008), p.36.

[371] Althusser, ibid, p.38.

[372] Sergio Benvenuto & Roger Kennedy, *The Works of Jacques Lacan: An Introduction*. (London: Free Association Books, 1986), pp.54-55.

> image…the Imaginary Order also seems to include pre-verbal structures, for example, the various 'primitive' phantasies uncovered by the psychoanalytic treatment of children, psychotic and perverse patients.[373]

When Althusser calls ideology a representation of the imaginary, it serves the purpose of socially affirming a fantasy of how the world is, and ought to be, which further occludes the real conditions of existence from the individual to whom ideology is transmitted. Ideology, therefore, exists in social reality to circulate and preserve a certain skewed way for subjects to interpret the social field. Ideologies are the ways in which we understand our world, the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of our lives, the narratives in which we place ourselves as the protagonist and allow us to comprehend the social behaviours of others, and compare ourselves to the rest of society, and acquire our normative worldview. Ideologies are experienced as common sense, as patently obvious, the natural order of things, as uncontested collections of intuitions, marked by their social, cultural and historical contexts.

Everybody "lives in" ideology, including the ruling class. For Althusser, the factory owner is living in ideology just as much as the factory workers; all sections of society must believe in its mythologies, and it is not difficult to believe a myth that projects one's own superior social status as the praiseworthy consequence of merit. Nevertheless, even though the oppressed class are made to normatively justify their class position through ideology, the dominated can also produce their own ideologies, their own stories about the world, narratives that question the status quo, and express themselves, provided there exists social space to do so.

---

[373] Ibid: 81.

Thesis two relates to the materialist underpinning of Althusser's thought, where ideology is found in the practices of everyday life, which leads to their ultimate expression as ideas and actions informed by citizens with false consciousness. Rehmann interprets Althusser as saying that 'individuals are moved by a system that goes from a particular apparatus to material rituals, to everyday practices of the subject and produces ideological effects there'.[374] Consider Althusser's favourite example: the School (always ominously capitalised). Individual students are placed within the authority and remit of their school, in which they are taught not just the content of their lessons (which may be propagandistic enough), but moreover, they are taught in such a way that disciplines them into acting in a way that benefits future employers. Students move from classroom to classroom at the sound of a bell, they are taught the value of breaking the day into sizeable chunks for timekeeping purposes, taught to switch from one topic and action to another with frequency within a single day, taught how to adequately mix productive labour with socialising and leisure time, and taught the importance and discipline required to dress formally (for those schools that maintain a uniform or dress code). In many ways, students learn the rewards of obedience and hard work alongside the perils of inappropriate behaviour and insufficient application; albeit, with varying results and degrees of success.[375]

Althusser splits the socio-political terrain into two distinct institutional apparatuses; repressive state apparatuses (RSAs) and ideological state apparatuses (ISAs). The former pertains to 'the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the

---

[374] Jan Rehmann, *Theories of Ideology: The Powers of Alienation and Subjection*. (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2014), p.151.

[375] Althusser's work is often compared with Gramsci's account of hegemony and hegemonic apparatuses. Althusser insists on the distinction, arguing that ISAs are defined on the basis of their cause whereas hegemonic apparatuses are defined on the basis of their result. For Althusser, the State resembles a machine that transforms social force into political and legal systems, where ideology is "the motor cause", the energy within the system. Althusser also rejects Gramsci's conception of civil society, as the former rejects the public/private distinction, rendering his approach more complementary with my theoretical framework. For Gramsci's approach, see Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Writings*. trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971). For Althusser's criticisms of Gramsci, see Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter. Later Writings 1978-86.,* trans. G.M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2006), pp.139-144.

Prisons, etc.'.[376] This first type of apparatus operates at the level of raw coercion, of force, and power; think the Weberian model of the state as the legitimate monopoly of violence within a geographical location. ISAs, however, serve to render those who exercise this monopoly of violence as legitimate in the first instance. ISAs indicate structures that give us reasons to believe in the (moral) coherence of the current order. They give us an understanding that we ought to contribute to the reproduction of the existing settlement, albeit with slight tweaks from time to time: they produce the social conditions in which a citizen's worldview shifts from "this is how the (social) world is" to "this is how the (social) world is, *and how it ought to be"*. These apparatuses include 'the religious ISA (the system of the different churches), the educational ISA (the system of the different public and private 'schools'), the family ISA, the legal ISA, the political ISA (the political system, including the different parties), the trade-union ISA, the communications ISA (press, radio and television, etc.), the cultural ISA (literature, the arts, sports, etc.)'.[377]

The State (for some Marxists generally, and Althusser in particular) can be understood instrumentally, as a "machine" of repression, enabling the ruling (capitalist) class to dominate the working class. RSAs are branches of the State, in the sense that they are wielders of 'legitimate' coercive power, and exercise punitive measures on those who fail to comply with legality. ISAs support the RSAs but nonetheless operate autonomously from them. To use a regionally specific example, the Daily Telegraph newspaper in the UK, and its endorsement of various British traditional institutions, such as the Conservative Party and constitutional monarchy.

Ted Benton notes that Althusser's terminology unnecessarily complicates his argument. When it comes to the notions of RSAs and ISAs, he asks, 'what grounds are there

---

[376] Althusser, *On Ideology*, pp.16-17

[377] Ibid: 17.

for classifying them *together*, and as part of the state?'[378] One plausible defence is that Althusser is a product of his time, and is attempting to articulate his theory when the State was the primary object of analysis, and trying to demonstrate how these power structures permeate the social world with as much efficacy. However, Althusser could've just as easily labelled the repressive state apparatuses as "state apparatuses" and ideological state apparatuses as "social apparatuses", so why this insistence that they are inextricably interlinked? Benton argues that Althusser's slippery terminology may be a consequence of the fact that he is committed to the view that the distinction between "public" and "private" is a fiction of bourgeois law, and that by clearly distinguishing where the reach of the state ends implies that the common sense distinction formalised within capitalist societies genuinely captures the limits of state power on the private life of a citizen. Althusser's overall theory remains salvageable if we take the "state" in "ideological state apparatuses" to be the broader functionalist account of the state often found in Marxist thought, where the state broadly encompasses everything that contributes to the reproduction of the existing social order.[379]

For Althusser, there exists a plurality of ISAs, each with their own distinctive form and discursive content, united by the fact that they are all dominated by the ideological convictions of the hegemonic ideology, the ideology that benefits the ruling class insofar as it normatively endorses and augments the exploitative status quo to which they benefit. Over the course of this project, I shall attempt to situate social media as a communications ISA. Althusser paints the picture of a communications apparatus that is 'cramming every citizen with daily doses of nationalism, chauvinism, liberalism, moralism, etc., by means of the press, radio and television'.[380] Communications ISAs are traditionally understood as the

---

[378] Ted Benton, *The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism.* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1984), p.102.

[379] Ken Smith and William Marshall (2018) "What is Marxism? What is the State?", *marxism.org*, http://www.marxism.org.uk/pack/state.html. Accessed April 13, 2018.

[380] Althusser, *On Ideology*, p.28.

media by which citizens are subjected to propaganda that serves to delimit the political imagination and inculcate an understanding of social reality as ordered, rational and worthy of intergenerational reproduction.

It is important to note that ISAs are dominated, but not totalised, by the dominant ideology; ISAs are sites of class struggle, where the proletariat (or the dominated, oppressed or marginalised in more contemporary terminology) struggles for control or the capacity to express itself through these ISAs; for example, radical political parties, revolutionary socialist newspapers and pamphlets, and for more modern examples, radical political podcasts, video blogs and social media posts. An interesting aspect of this interpretation of the social world is that it appears that the form that an ISA takes, and its relationship to broader society, may be a determining factor in the extent to which different classes may express themselves and contest the social conditions of production. This opens an intriguing enterprise in assessing the extent to which social media may have a specific form of apparatus that lends itself to more protracted class struggles, and the cultivation of emancipatory political projects.

Althusser also contends that there is usually one ISA that functions as the pedagogical fulcrum, to which the others react and interact; for example, in medieval Europe, it would be the church. Althusser argued that in modern French society (of the late 1960's), the church-family dynamic of pedagogical dominance had been replaced with the school-family dynamic, in that it is what we learn from our parents and from our schools that most shapes our characters. As shall be investigated, the uniqueness of social media's capacity to allow users to exchange information in horizontal dialogues with each other, rather than the vertical imposition of information from above, may expose the explanatory limitations of Althusser's model, constructed with 'a specifically statist, 'French' variety of Fordism' in mind.[381] I intend to incorporate my prior theoretical contentions into

[381] Stuart Hall in Jan Rehmann, *Theories of Ideology*, p.155.

Althusser's account of ideology to update his account of interpellation in order to account for contemporary technologies. In the next section, I shall provide Althusser's account of how the subject is constituted by ideology.

The Interpellation of the Subject

Althusser's contention is that 'ideology interpellates individuals as subjects'.[382] A 'subject' is a concept linked to the belief in the critical theory literature that the 'individual' is a product rather than a source of meaning; 'the concept of the subject is thus frequently invoked to undermine the notion that an innate sense of 'self' can provide a stable personal identity or be the focus of experience'[383], and for Althusser, 'the subject does not exist prior to its interpellation, but is summoned into being by it'.[384] For Althusser, the existence of over-determination means that the social totality has no essence or single focus, and therefore no overarching subject. Individuals, in this sense, are no more than the 'supports' for a 'dialectic'.[385] Althusser uses overdetermination to 'describe the manner in which contradictions within the practices within a social formation affect that formation in its entirety'.[386]

Interpellation is understood as 'the mechanism that produces subjects in such a way that they recognise their own existence in terms of the dominant ideology of the society in which they live…[it] demonstrates that subjects are always and already the products of ideology, and thus subverts the idealist thesis that subjectivity is primary or self-founding'.[387]

---

[382] Althusser, *On Ideology*, p.44.

[383] Macey, ibid, p.368.

[384] ibid, p.369.

[385] ibid.

[386] ibid, p.287.

[387] ibid, p.203.

Interpellation is a process by which an individual is 'hailed' by the ISA, not unlike the hailing of a policeman calling somebody over on a street corner, leading an individual to turn around and accept that they identify with the call, that they are to whom the policeman wishes to speak. For Althusser, our ideas about the social world are rarely (if ever) our own. This is not to say that people who think about politics a lot, for example, political theorists, are incapable of creative and original thought, but rather that our working assumptions and what we deem to be common sense presuppositions, may ultimately cohere to, and support, the status quo, to an extent we may not be immediately aware. Indeed, as new technologies are invented, and influence everyday life, it is inevitable that political theorists will consider the ramifications of their ubiquity. The Althusserian point is that new technology may change the way that society works, but their application may be draped around a status quo that seeks to preserve itself through the transmission of ideas that support its continuation.

Althusser's theory of the subject is not without its critics, and one of the most pertinent criticisms of his formulation is discussed by Michel Pecheux, in which he argues that this account resembles the 'Munchhausen effect', a mental disorder in which a person repeatedly and deliberately acts as if he or she has a physical or mental illness when he or she is not actually sick.[388] The concern that Pecheux has is that if one is to frame ideology as this pervasive psychological framework to which an individual must unconsciously acquiesce, from where does the content of the ideology emerge other than from the consciousness of the individuals themselves?

---

[388] 'If it is true that ideology 'recruits' subjects from amongst individuals (in the way soldiers are recruited from amongst civilians) and that it recruits them all, we need to know how 'volunteers' are designated in this recruitment, i.e. what concerns us, how all individuals accept as evident the meaning of what they hear and say, read and write (of what they intend to say and of what it is intended to be said to them) as 'speaking subjects': really to understand this is the only way to avoid repeating, in the form of a theoretical analysis, the 'Munchhausen effect', by positing the subject as origin of the subject, i.e. in what concerns us, by positing the subject of discourse as the origin of the subject of discourse'. Michel Pecheux, "The Mechanism of Ideological (Mis)recognition" in *Mapping Ideology*, pp.144-151. (London/New York: Verso, 1994) p.150.

Althusser can respond thus: the subject is 'always-already'. The term 'always-already', commonplace in French literary discourse of the time, is a reference to Paul Ricoeur's narrative theory that 'human action can be narrated…because it is always already symbolically mediated'.[389] Althusser claims that we are "always-already" a subject, in the sense that our psychological development, per Lacan, is such that we are primed for identification with someone or something outside of ourselves, on which we may project a fantasy. In other words, when we grow up within a certain society, and become aware of its traditions, customs and language, we are also learning the way in which an interpellative call will be articulated. When we learn the language of statements, we are also learning the language of false statements. It is not that ideology exists as a self-imposed illness, because the content of ideologies could plausibly be normatively salient: an ideology that encourages compassion, cooperation and tolerance may well be beneficial. Althusser's point is that the reason that political theorists ought to concern themselves with ideology *in this particular historical moment* is that the dominant ideology is obscuring exploitative class relations. To bring in the theoretical language we have encountered thus far, we may say that individuals are "always-already-in-spheres", already accustomed and familiar with overlapping social and cultural practices, through which obfuscated power dynamics may be miscommunicated as natural, rational and apolitical circumstances.

As Michael Freeden notes, 'the ambiguity of the word 'subject'…catches the essence of ideology beautifully. It refers to the free initiative of the individual, but also to the domination of the individual to a higher authority'.[390] Luke Ferretter notes that interpellation is a process that 'freely' positions an individual in a fixed subject position in two ways: in a philosophical sense, a subject is constituted as a 'free' and responsible centre of thought and action, and in a political sense, a subject is constituted as 'freely' submissive to the

---

[389] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol 1.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p.57.

[390] Michael Freeden, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.30.

hegemonic ideology of the ruling class.[391] Furthermore, as we all exist in ideology for Althusser, this account of ideology is in direct opposition to the mainstream liberal view of political opinions as considered independently in the private sphere, and then brought into the marketplace of ideas in the public sphere.[392] Althusser contends that the (subject) formation of our political opinions and our understanding of ourselves as conscious, free agents appears to us to occur outside of ideology, but in fact, is itself constituted by ideology, so that the ideological subject conceives of itself as outside ideology. The most ideological position you can hold is that you have no social or political biases, that it's all just common sense.

Despite claims that Althusser presents a bleak picture of politics in which subjects have little or no agency, Wolff reads Althusser in the context of his Marxist contemporaries to come to an altogether different interpretation: 'Althusser was, in effect, urging Marxists to correct their past over-attention to and emphasis on the state by means of an equivalently serious and sustained attention to the workings of ISAs. His goal was a Marxist program for cultural studies and struggles that would intervene in all ISAs'.[393] It would seem a difficult enterprise to encourage a cultural critique of all institutions that produce social knowledge whilst simultaneously presenting a deterministic worldview in which political subjects were incapable of rejecting the interpellative call.

Eagleton argues that a fruitful conception of ideology in general 'aims to disclose something of the relation between an utterance and its material conditions of possibility, when those conditions of possibility are viewed in the light of certain power-struggles central to the reproduction (or also, for some theories, contestation) of a whole form of

---

[391] Luke Ferretter, *Louis Althusser.* (London: Routledge, 2006).

[392] Jill Gordon (1997) 'John Stuart Mill and "The Marketplace of Ideas"', *Social Theory and Practice,* 23 (2): 235-249.

[393] Richard D. Wolff (2004) "Ideological State Apparatuses, Consumerism and U.S. Capitalism", *Rethinking Marxism*, 17(2), p.226.

social life'.[394] With this notion in mind, I here provide a justificatory argument in support of Althusser's account of ideology below:

> P1: A belief is ideological if a person believes 'x' to be true because it has been presented by an institutional discourse, implicitly or explicitly, as a common-sense belief to hold.
>
> P2: Institutional discourse operates with certain assumptions, either passed down through history, or produced by the need to ground their practices in presuppositions about social reality.
>
> P3: These operating assumptions may not correspond or cohere to an accurate portrayal of social reality.
>
> P4: This inaccurate portrayal of social reality may lead to the continuation, or even escalation, of social inequalities obscured by this process.
>
> P5: We can investigate institutions and assess the credibility of their operating assumptions.
>
> C: Ideology-critique, defined in terms of P5, is a valuable means of locating the formation of ideological beliefs.

On this account, ideology is not about "ideas" in the sense of thoughts in the heads of people: 'it is a structure which imposes itself upon us without necessarily having to pass through consciousness at all'.[395] Ideology is a means of articulating the totality of a social whole in a way that a human being may comprehend: in this sense, ideology allows the subject to perceive beyond the immediacy of its social foam. It is more methodologically plausible to interrogate an institution and assess the credibility of the claims that its

---

[394] Eagleton, ibid, p.223.

[395] Eagleton, ibid, p.148.

discourse produces than it is attempting to demonstrate to an individual that their belief 'x' is wrongly held, even in scenarios when the individual is adamant that they are not under any illusions.

The strength of Althusser's materialist account of ideology is threefold: firstly, we may observe ideology as a social phenomenon by observing institutions and the means in which they articulate their interests; secondly, we may observe ideology as a social phenomena by observing individual behaviours that comply with the worldview proffered by these institutions; thirdly, we do not need to make a claim to epistemic access to other minds to make a claim about the ideological motivations of such behaviour. Nonetheless, there are those within the social media literature who are more sceptical regarding the appropriateness of Althusser's account, due to perceived methodological disadvantages for certain research projects[396].

In this section, I have considered the way that ideology has been interpreted in the literature, and endorsed Althusser's materialist ideology-critique, because it offers methodological plausibility and an account of subject formation, which is pertinent to the

---

[396] Daniel Trottier & Christian Fuchs, *Social Media, Politics and the State: Protests, Revolutions, Riots, Crime and Policing in the Age of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.* (London: Routledge, 2015). Trottier and Fuchs felt Althusser's approach too inflexible for their research: they claim he 'implies that ideology is not a form of repression and violence and that repression does not also work outside of physical violence via ideological manipulation'; 'overstretches the notion of the state to such an extent that culture as the sphere of the production and reproduction of the human mind and body and communication become mere attributes of the state, which does not allow for any relative autonomy of these realms from the concept of the state'; and 'does not leave any space for a culture that is both critical of capitalist and state power…Althusser's totalising concept of the state squashes potentials of critique and struggle that are situated in the realm of communication and information' (p.18).

From what has already been discussed, it ought to be clear to the reader that whilst Althusser is undoubtedly an opaque theorist, these criticisms belie an uncharitable reading. Whilst sympathetic to the view that political scientists in the field wish to clearly distinguish between the state and other sources of power for the purposes of projects surrounding issues of revolutionary protest, crime and policing (p. 171-247), it is not the case to suggest that Althusser's model precludes critique of capitalist and state power, for the model itself would become *ipso facto* impossible to theorise.

Whilst there is no doubt that Althusser's account of the conditions of cultural autonomy required within an ISA to produce dissenting subjects is underdeveloped, he nonetheless posited a relative autonomy, and provided a framework for understanding how the subject is politically constituted by the cumulative effect of social inculcation, in such a way that predominantly reinforces aspects of an inegalitarian status quo, even in cases where such a settlement disenfranchises and disadvantages the very subjects who act with complicity within it.

specific aims of the thesis. Despite Althusser's detractors in the literature, I believe that by engaging with such an approach, we may bear witness to social media's role in reproducing the status quo by making explicit the explanatory link between the productive forces, the state, society, and the social roles taken on by the subject in the reproduction of those productive forces[397].

In the next section, I shall integrate Althusser's theory of ideology with our post-foundational "technospheric" account of politics and society, arguing that ideology ought to be understood as a political technology, specifically a technics of interpellation, designed to recursively disrupt the dynamic process of individuation in order to produce (and maintain) subjects that conform to the reproduction of the status quo.

Ideology and the Technospheric

"The greatest and most egregious of misunderstandings (from which, of course, many imposters make their living) can be explained by the erroneous transfer of a concept at home in one domain (e.g., only in the metaphysical, the moral, or the economic) to other domains of intellectual life'

- Carl Schmitt[398]

Maurizio Lazzarato argues that theorists in the Marxist/(post)-Marxist traditions have insufficiently adapted their approaches to capture the ways in which contemporary neoliberal capitalism has transformed itself to absorb and recuperate the global financial crisis of 2008.

---

[397] It should be noted that I am in excellent company when it comes to the contemporary pastime of repurposing Althusser for our contemporary political conjuncture. See Panagiotis Sotiris, *A Philosophy for Communism: Rethinking Althusser*. (Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2020); Natalia Romé, *For Theory: Althusser and the Politics of Time*. (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

[398] Schmitt, 2007, p.85.

Lazzarato argues that post-Althusserian accounts (naming Ranciere and Badiou specifically, but this critique would also be aimed at Althusser's himself) focus exclusively on "social subjection" whilst ignoring the non-discursive elements of capitalism's reproduction of subjectivity. The claim is that they incorrectly frame politics as a rarefied and separate mode of human activity away from economics and material practices (not dissimilar to McNay's social weightlessness critique levied at radical democratic theory). On the other hand, Lazzarato also criticises those influenced by the Italian autonomist tradition - Paolo Virno, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, amongst others - for focusing exclusively on "machinic enslavement", the way in which capitalism incorporates workers into a broader mechanistic assemblage to extract profit from the resultant social surplus. The claim is that they focus excessively on economic arrangements without an adequate understanding of how capitalism contributes to the production of social roles.

Lazzarato considers both "social subjection" and "machinic enslavement" as heterogenous but interdependent processes. There are views, ideas and beliefs embedded within social practices tainted by the material interests of those who circulate them, and there are institutional arrangements that shape, regulate and constitute social spaces that become the proving ground for these ideologically compromised practices. I here contend that Althusser's account of ideological state apparatuses may be updated to accommodate both the process of social subjection (interpellation of the subject) and machinic enslavement (understood through the "technospheric" condition already elucidated by Stiegler, Sloterdijk and Rosa). It is my contention that contemporary ideological production ought to be understood as a form of political technology, specifically a *technics of interpellation*. Ideology is a political technique that reproduces the material conditions of production and consumption, responding to the (technologically mediated) constitution and configuration of social spaces where interpellation is enacted.

The reproduction of the conditions of production is a technical enterprise, where ideology circulates misrepresentations of the material conditions of society in order to structure the limits of political contention. There is a relative autonomy for political actors in terms of what they can say and how they can say it, and to some extent there is a genuine debate to be had regarding the extent to which certain compromises and concessions are entertained, but the fundamental underlying asymmetries of power (in a global capitalist system, that of capital over labour) remain depoliticised by obfuscating the social effects of their operation.

So what is the value of thinking ideology as political technology? Firstly, there is the practical value of avoiding the various complications of psychoanalysis; although Althusser drew upon Lacan's work, the framing of ideology as political technology affords theorists freedom from reliance on specific psychoanalytic premises regarding the nature of human desire or the structure of the unconscious. Ideology can be understood as a collective psychological phenomenon, but studied through its concretisations and function as techniques within institutions and media.

Secondly, recalling the history of the term, I argue this approach returns a degree of intention and self-awareness to the project of the "ideologists": political actors are often falsely portrayed by reductive ideology-critique as the blind leading the blind. On this account, political actors retain a level of self-awareness: they deploy irony and sincerity in different rhetorical contexts, they often know which discourse is most persuasive to what audience, and actors are aware of the internal hierarchy amongst individuals within their political group, of the power and influence wielded by those within their own spheres. In political discussions, not everybody is an ideologist: many happily parrot the arguments they have read or heard elsewhere, but this is not to frame them as less important or effective in

the broader ideological structure, nor to consider them inherently less aware of their political orientation. Recalling Sloterdijk, ideologists are (postmodern) envoys for the imperium.

Thirdly, ideology as political technology provides a means of accommodating post-foundational theory (the ontological turn in radical democratic theory) with a theoretical framework that incorporates the technical and spatial dynamics that influence the materiality of social life, thus avoiding the charge of social weightlessness. With this approach, I contend that political theorists may locate asymmetries of power, hierarchical arrangements within both institutional spaces and pre-existent social "bubbles", and those internalised techniques of living that manifest themselves as behaviours, attitudes and practices.[399]

Fourthly, understanding ideology as a political technology allows us to track the ways in which neoliberalism, which I shall argue ought to be understood as the contemporary (western, but increasingly global) hegemonic ideology, integrates itself into modes of thought that appear as apolitical to interpellated subjects. When people refer to technical processes, the word "technical" engenders a sense of neutrality, and if not, some form of internal closure. "Can I help you with that problem?"/ "No, don't worry, it's a technical issue, we'll bring somebody in who knows what to do". The point here is not that we shouldn't wait for a computer expert to fix the virus or the plumber to inspect the blocked sink. Rather, if we are moving forward with the notion that the political and technical are inextricably linked, it must be clear that the suggested solution is not elitism or technocracy. Quite the opposite: radical democratic projects require the collective marshalling of those moments of rupture and discontinuity engendered by the political's emergence in the social, and therefore any collective political actor necessarily requires access to an understanding of those institutional or technological functions necessary for cohesive organisation alongside

[399] In this vein, the technospheric approach to ideology-critique seeks no quarrel with Foucauldian discourse analysis.

any emancipatory political demands. If ideology-critique has the gall to tell us we are being duped, we are entitled to know how, why and what we can do about it.

If we move forward with the notion that we live in the technospheric condition, where individuals feel as though they are increasingly disempowered, isolated and disenfranchised by systems of accelerating volition and complexity, it suggests a disconnection between systems of public memory that produce explicable and resonant collective narratives related to political trajectory and the hegemonic ideological narrative that purports to deliver the assurances of intelligible social roles and shared values. In the next section, I shall argue that neoliberalism is the contemporary hegemonic ideology, committed to the expansion of markets into as many spheres of social life as possible, the reduction of political problems to technical questions of quantification and efficiency, and with the shrinking of meaningful democratic participation in public policy and governance.

5. Neoliberalism and the Internet

"We need to understand that technology is not simply a relation between humans and their natural environment, but more fundamentally a way of organising global human society"

–Alf Hornborg[400]

In this chapter, I present an overview of the critical theory literature regarding neoliberalism, and argue that it ideologically produces consumer-citizens, individuals for whom their hopes, dreams, anxieties and problems are highly individualised, and the way in which to achieve or overcome these emotional states is through consumption, or by reorienting oneself so as to better serve the demands of the free market. The chapter is comprised of the following sections: 'Neoliberalism as Political Technology', 'The Behaviours of Neoliberal Subjectivity', 'Ideologies of the Internet' and 'Information Anxiety and the Problem of Post-Truth'. The chapter begins by exploring the idea that neoliberalism as an ideology benefits from obscuring its hegemonic processes as a technical system, but that its reluctance to utilise the state's power outside of the creation and maintenance of markets means it cannot adequately resolve the problems created by the technospheric condition. Furthermore, I draw on Kalpolkas' account of post-truth and its relationship to information anxiety, itself a consequence of information overload that I argue was a problem forewarned by communication scholars *prior* to the existence of social media.

[400] Alf Hornborg, "Technology as Fetish: Marx, Latour, and the Cultural Foundations of Capitalism", *Theory, Culture & Society,* (2014) 31:4, p.123.

Neoliberalism as Political Technology

In the critical theory literature regarding the contemporary subject, there is broad consensus that western liberal capitalist democracies operate with the hegemonic political discourse of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism has a variety of dimensions, and is often used as a catch-all term to denote a variety of political dispositions, but can be broadly defined by David Harvey as 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade'.[401]

The neoliberal project involves the restoration of the classical liberal idea of economic freedom with a rhetorical withdrawal of the state from 'the market', whilst practically pushing 'through active policy interventions, to remould institutions, state agencies and individuals, in ways that [are] compatible with a market ethos'.[402] One of the great ideological moves within the neoliberal discourse is the paradoxical partnering of a hatred of state intervention and using the state's institutions to intervene in the economic system in a such a way as to induce the logic of competition that its proponents claim occurs naturally. The state must continuously intervene to produce the conditions for a competitive market logic in all sectors where possible, even though the operating logic of neoliberalism is that this individualistic spirit exists exclusively in situations where the state turns its back.

Neoliberalism can also be defined as 'the elevation of market-based principles and techniques of evaluation to the level of state-endorsed norms'.[403] Social authority that attempts to exist within a neoliberal context is put under pressure to justify itself through the

---

[401] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.2.

[402] Will Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition. (*London: Sage Publications, 2014), p.8.

[403] Will Davies (2013) "When is a market not a market? 'Exemption', 'externality' and 'exception' in the case of European state aid rules," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30 (2), p.37.

logic of market competition: trade unions, guilds, cultural critics, families, artists, democratic procedures, law, traditions and professions to use Davies' examples, are all areas that operate by appealing to tacitly acknowledged or qualitative notions for assessing their value, be they aesthetic or normative. The neoliberal impulse, however, is to calculate and evaluate these social institutions in terms of market mechanisms: what value does a university professor have? This question is answered in market terms by the neoliberal ombudsman: their value is their contribution to the degree, which in the neoliberal age is paid for by the individual student and treated as a commodity. The task of a degree is to acquire a graduate job, and thus, the starting salary of a student after they leave university can be traced all the way back, via a praised or admonished higher-education institution, to the professor, as a means of calculating the quantifiable value of the knowledge the student received. The incommensurability of values such as self-mastery, the common good, justice or civic virtue are merely extracurricular to the neoliberal project, as its intention is to translate these notions into 'the quantitative language of efficiency, price and preference'.[404]

The neoliberal state itself is tasked with various responsibilities, therefore, to ensure that these conditions are satisfied, and neoliberal states collaborate through supranational institutions to ensure that these practices are observed across national borders. The neoliberal state is tasked with being the guarantor of the quality and integrity of money, although its own ideological preference for as little state intervention as possible allows for monetary policy decisions such as fractional-reserve banking to become ubiquitous. The state is also responsible for setting up the military, police and legal structures, for the proper functioning of markets, although as with the economic policy package enforced by Augusto Pinochet's authoritarian regime, dubbed "the miracle of Chile" by Chicago School economists, democratic institutions are optional, so long as there is a market where freedom can be supposedly exercised. More so than the protection of existing markets, state policy is

[404] Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, p.23.

also geared towards intervening such that markets can emerge where they otherwise did not exist through privatisation. Harvey gives the examples of land, water, education, health care, social security and environmental pollution as sites of state intervention.

One of the consequences of the neoliberal project is the willingness to outsource economic wellbeing to the individuals within a society, rather than considering the population as the primary and ongoing concern of the state. Indeed, for all the interventions of the state to produce the market conditions that neoliberalism claims will allow society to best thrive, the resultant powers granted to corporate power and the arch-creditors of capitalism in international high finance, has meant that any reversal of these power dynamics is only possible at the international level, were these supranational institutions not also ideologically tethered to a global neoliberal imaginary. Maurizio Lazzarato notes that this phenomenon is often misinterpreted as the diminishing importance of the state, or the withering away of national borders, but it is rather the case that the state's function within the broader capitalist system has changed.[405]

The state at the domestic level has the role of ensuring that neoliberal logic is applied in all sectors where possible, and shift risk from the private to the public sector, so that the citizens of a sovereign nation are formally indebted to financial creditors; this eliminates the considerable risk involved in the conventional creditor-debtor relationship. Usually the creditor must be careful whom he agrees to lend to, but now the state will ensure that creditors are repaid, either through borrowing, which allows creditors to buy up more bonds, or through the defunding and stealth privatisation of public services[406], which creditors may

---

[405] Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition.* (Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e)/MIT Press, 2011).

[406] Daniel Boffey, 2014. Academy School Chain Outsource Jobs Privatization By Stealth. Accessed March 20, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/sep/20/academy-school-chain-outsource-jobs-privatisation-by-stealth.

well be able to replace with their own private business operations.[407] This process, ironically, runs counter to one of the key operating principles of states creating these markets in the first place, which is that it is supposed to make it so that the state cannot "pick winners".[408]

At the international level, states are at the mercy of the credit agency ratings, and as Mauricio Lazzarato argues, never fail to dance with their tune: 'European States now have no choice but to apply the economic and social policies dictated by the markets (that is, by the economic-political-financial power bloc) based on the new European stability pact'.[409] Consequently, elections in neoliberal democratic countries are often centred on domestic squabbles, the debate framed in terms of personalities or culture wars, given that the economic programs that the neoliberal actors (who often accommodate seats in both the governing party and the opposition) intend to implement, are already determined by the financial constraints imposed by supranational financial organisations, such as the IMF, the World Bank or in the case of EU member states, the European Union itself.

Will Davies describes the central project of neoliberalism as the ongoing 'attempt to replace political judgement with economic evaluation, including, but not exclusively, the value determined by markets'.[410] Once these markets are robustly protected, preserved or created by neoliberal states, the belief is that political decision-making is reducible to technocratic managerialism; outcomes will be quantitatively predictable. The political theorist is replaced by the economist; the politician is replaced by the bureaucrat. Another characteristic of neoliberalism is its essential hostility to the ambiguity within political discourse, to the fact that citizens will hold fundamentally incompatible worldviews, and

---

[407] Tony Helm & Denis Campbell. 2013. Doctors Bemoan NHS Privatisation By Stealth. Accessed March 20, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/mar/02/doctors-bemoan-nhs-privatisation-by-stealth.

[408] Donald Cohen, 2016. The American Prospect: Public Infrastructure as Stealth Privatization. Accessed March 20, 2018. http://prospect.org/article/public-infrastructure-stealth-privatization.

[409] Lazzarato, 2011: 99

[410] Davies, 2014: 5-6.

maintains that the quantification and predictability of policy outcomes through the universal application of the market price system will reduce these antagonisms.[411] In this sense, 'neoliberalism is the pursuit of the disenchantment of politics through economics'.[412] This reproduces the capitalist status quo because one of the key means of assessing a democratic candidate is to imagine them as a business leader, which automatically reduces the field of "electable" candidates to those individuals whom one could most envision as a bank manager. The "business experience" of politicians is scrutinised, the assumption being that politicians ought not to represent the ordinary worker, but quite the opposite: the ideal neoliberal politician is the figure of the charismatic boss.

By defining neoliberalism in such a way that implicates everyone from Margaret Thatcher to Deng Xiaoping, these scholars capture the idea that neoliberalism is not a robust political ideology; few people adopt the moniker as their own. Rather, it operates as a theory of '*what one ought to do'* when it comes to political economy. It is both ideological and hegemonic to the extent that political actors from across the spectrum have internalised the neoliberal perspective as the *centrist* or *pragmatic* position. To be realistic, or to be reasonable, is to think like a neoliberal; neoliberalism is the contemporary language of the capitalist status quo. It skirts easy definition precisely because of its ideological nature; it hides in plain sight as the sensible option, and is a logic communicated across a variety of ISAs, from economic think-tanks, newspaper opinion columns, to business schools, and everyday "common sense", using symbolically important concepts such as freedom, democracy, equality and property to normatively enforce the pre-existent inequalities of power and privilege found in western liberal societies. The process leaves western capitalist democracies reproducing conditions of economic inequality that induce the everyday citizen to work harder and faster for the benefit of the state's wellbeing, whilst simultaneously stripping the

411 Ibid: 6.

412 Ibid: 6

nation-state of its power to reciprocate by outsourcing the services that protect the citizen's wellbeing to the private sector. Amusingly, this process is framed as apolitical, rational and moderate by the neoliberal political class, because the alternative would be a radical restructure of the international economy away from finance-led capitalism, which is framed as potentially cataclysmic, morally unconscionable and politically impossible. We all live in ideology. There is no conspiratorial cabal of mean-spirited zealots; Emmanuel Macron may well genuinely believe that his prior experience as a senior civil servant and investment banker is the perfect education for the role of President; he may well believe that the neoliberal policies that he is enacting will help the poorest in French society; such is the potency of the dominant ideology.

Davies concludes by arguing that neoliberalism rests on a belief in an idiosyncratic political anthropology, which assumes that individuals are wired to impose themselves on others, develop plans to achieve future goals, and rationally act in accordance with that will to impose that plan on others. Davies believes that any alternative must involve 'offering an alternative political anthropology, in which political actors are capable of injecting vitality and surprise into society, without necessarily dominating one another'.[413] Lazzarato, whose work concentrates more on the indebtedness that neoliberal policies produce for ordinary citizens, asks himself the question, 'under what conditions can we revive a class struggle that capitalism has completely shifted to the very 'abstract' and 'deterritorialized' ground of debt?'.[414] He argues that the political space in which this broader fight occurs cannot be the nation-state, for most nation-states are weak in isolation, and indeed all are subject to the broader neoliberal project enacted on the world-economy, to varying degrees. Lazzarato is at a loss when it comes to positing an alternative site of internationalist resistance and concludes by merely hoping that "black sheep" countries, citing SYRIZA's emergence in

[413] Ibid: 199.

[414] Lazzarato, 2011: 161.

Greece, will provide a visible presence against the expanding subjectivity of the "indebted man". I shall later argue that social media, due to the fragmented nature of the hypersubject it produces, may provide such an outlet for anti-neoliberal resistance, due to its international scope, and its capacity to "simulate" a social world without constant state and capitalist interference.

The Behaviours of Neoliberal Subjectivity

Turken et al. argue that neoliberal subjectivity converges around four dominant, intersecting discourses: rationality, autonomy and responsibility, entrepreneurship, and positivity and self-confidence.[415] Jason Read argues that neoliberalism produces a *'homo economicus',* a term coined by Michel Foucault, a form of individualistic behaviour where all aspects of one's social life are conceptualised through the paradigm of market rationality, and where the previous idea that economic exchange is natural is replaced with the more robust idea that competition brings out the best in people, and ought to be artificially inserted into all areas of social life where possible.[416] Foucault describes *homo economicus* as 'an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself'[417], an idea which has found its way into the language of business and marketing articles regarding social media, where those wishing to get ahead using these technologies are expected to master the art of 'self-branding'.[418] Indeed, *homo economicus* is expected to internalise any economic risk that free-market policies have on their livelihoods, and are rendered personally responsible for any upturns and

---

[415] Salman Turken, Hilde Eileen Nafstad, Rolv Mikkel Blakar & Katrina Roen. 2016. 'Making Sense of Neoliberal Subjectivity: A Discourse Analysis of Media Language on Self-development,' *Globalizations*, 13 (1): 32-46.

[416] Jason Read, 2009. 'A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity,' *Foucault Studies*, 6 (1): p.25.

[417] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France 1978-79*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.12.

[418] Alessandro Gandini, 2015. 'Digital work: self-branding and social capital in the freelance knowledge economy,' *Marketing Theory*, 16 (1): 123-141

downturns in the broader economic sphere.[419] If your company goes bust, you should have seen it coming; if your private pension fund collapses, you should have diversified your portfolio.

Sam Binkley considers the popularity of positive psychology in neoliberal subjectivity, which reinforces the notion that happiness is acquired in isolation, quantifiably measurable, and reducible to 'a task, a regimen, a daily undertaking in which the individual produces positive emotional states just as a fitness guru might shape a desired muscle group'.[420] Loic Wacquant describes neoliberal subjectivity in the context of criminality as inducing the ubiquitous moral trope of individual responsibility, where prisoners are reformed insofar as they acknowledge their wrongdoings as isolated failures of character, rather than through acknowledgement of their role in broader systemic social problems.[421] Indeed, Jorge Aleman argues that the novelty of neoliberalism is its fluid nature, its capacity to produce pre-existent rhetorics that configure themselves to conform with the corporate, managerial, capitalist paradigm required for the reproduction of neoliberal conditions of production.[422] Neoliberalism takes the subcultures conventionally reserved for anti-corporate sentiment, and inverts them to make entrepreneurship "exciting" and "rebellious": in the context of social media, the annual technology event hosted in Silicon Valley is called *TechCrunch: Disrupt*, where "disruption" of the capitalist status quo is reduced to presenting business plans for forthcoming software products to prospective angel investors.

The literature provides a growing consensus as to which behavioural markers are considered indicative of neoliberal reproduction at the level of subjectivity and the way the

---

[419] Paul Du Gay, *Consumption and identity at work*. (London: Sage, 1996).

[420] Sam Binkley, 2011. 'Happiness, positive psychology and the program of neoliberal governmentality,' *Subjectivity*, 4(4), p.394.

[421] Loic Wacquant, 2010. 'Crafting the Neoliberal State: Workfare, Prisonfare, and Social Insecurity,' *Sociological Forum*, 25(2), pp.197-220.

[422] Jorge Aleman, *Neoliberal Horizons in Subjectivity*. (Buenos Aires: Grammas Ediciones, 2016).

dominant ideology interacts with cultural and social norms, although it cannot be understood solely through an analysis of prevalent discourses. Many individuals' experiences will overlap between these discourses as they move through education, employment, friendships and associations, and others may only come across a few variants on the same hegemonic disposition, but the implicit attitudes of neoliberalism are nonetheless reinforced. The continuous reproduction of ideology concretised in technics reproduces a cohesive and consistent social "whole", the social expectation of shared assumptions (to which I shall argue social media has contributed to disrupting).

Mitchell Dean understands neoliberalism as broadly referring to a form of governmentality.[423] Dean draws upon Foucault's pithy definition of government as the conduct of conduct, and suggests that government, insofar as it leads, directs, guides and employs techniques and forms of knowledge with the express purpose of shaping and regulating the behaviours of a population, becomes an inherently moral enterprise as much as a political one.[424] Dean notes that modern ideas of government presupposes the existence of subjects that are free in the sense that they are considered both by government actors and by themselves to be agents capable of acting and thinking in ways that cannot be immediately foreseen by authorities.[425] Dean argues that classical theories of the state often rest upon the presumption of a relatively unified set of institutions that share political power, whereas an analytics of government leans into the historical contingency and complexity of these arrangements, focusing rather on 'the mobile relations of strategy and tactics, to struggles and battles, and to the disposition of forces employed in the exercise of political rule and in the resistance provoked'.[426] Dean considers neoliberalism naive, arguing

---

[423] Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society, 2nd edition.* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2010).

[424] Dean, *Governmentality,* p.19.

[425] Dean, ibid, p.22.

[426] Dean, ibid, p.35.

that it operates without providing solutions (however ideological) to social questions, assuming they will be dissolved by the contrivances of the market society it reinforces.[427]

Aihwa Ong has argued that despite the association of neoliberalism with the global North and American politics in particular, the globalised norms of capitalism mean that governments in the global South have adopted neoliberal policies, including the discrete legal creation of "economically free zones" for businesses, producing a cultural convergence in which citizenship increasingly overlaps with consumerism.[428] Ong argues this assemblage of political technologies ought to be understood as reconfiguring the relationship between governing and the governed, especially traditional understandings of sovereignty and territory. She argues that neoliberalism often positions itself as averse to state power, committed to reducing governance in favour of allowing market society freedom to operate with limited interference. Neoliberal governing activities are framed as apolitical and non-ideological technical solutions, designed to "optimise" a given society or sector.[429] Ong's analysis focuses on the way in which neoliberal "exceptions" are made in the global South, spaces within territories earmarked for neoliberal "reform". These populations are subjected to free market "experiments" in which what Ong refers to as 'technologies of subjection' endorse political strategies that introduce 'spatial practices that engage market forces', regulations including the 'fortressization of urban space, the control of travel, and the recruitment of certain kind of actors to growth hubs'.[430] In doing so, these neoliberal exceptions run roughshod over conventional understandings of citizenship, where elements such as rights, entitlements, territoriality and national culture are 'disarticulated and

---

[427] Dean, ibid, pp.259-260.

[428] Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty.* (Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press, 2006), p.1.

[429] Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*, p.3.

[430] Ong, ibid, p.6.

rearticulated' by market forces.[431] Consequently, Ong argues that 'diaspora discourses and Internet-based interventions' have produced a 'disembedded form of racialised citizenship that poses the question of who is accountable to whom in a transnationalised world'.[432]

Information technologies have only strengthened neoliberalism's capacity to extend itself across the world - the space-annihilating technologies of the Internet, digitalised information and rapidly advancing computational systems provide the means by which a unified ethnicity may seemingly reproduce itself without borders.[433] However, Ong suggests that the transformative power of neoliberalism in the global South versus the political communication between diaspora and home-based citizens is utterly disproportionate, and 'electronic-based humanitarian intervention'[434] encouraged by Internet-based diaspora groups cannot overcome the problems of anonymity amongst digital participants and the extent to which digital technologies are predominantly in the hands of elite citizens. Just as labour otherwise undertaken in the global North is outsourced to the neoliberal "zones of exception" in the global South, the corresponding diaspora, many of whom have business interests in their countries of origin, are endowed with the ideological power that comes from dominating digital political communication. They use the 'arms of long-distance nationalism' to 'revive or shape cultural memories and incite the vicarious rage and suffering, thus calling into being a cyberpublic of communal belonging'[435], which is to say, a cultural sphere that obscures the asymmetries of power that Ong considers a 'graduated citizenship', where governments 'adjust political space to the dictates of global capital', indirectly allowing corporate entities to shape the political conditions of those citizens living within

---

[431] ibid.

[432] ibid, p.53.

[433] ibid, p.66.

[434] ibid, p.71.

[435] ibid.

neoliberal zones of exception.[436] The dynamism, opportunism and influence of capitalist networks mobilises faster and supersedes any transnational sentiment for cosmopolitan institutions capable of regulating corporate power as nation-states introduce neoliberal frameworks that instead discipline local labour markets to suit transnational capital.[437]

To understand ideology as a political technology is to take the social subjection elements of neoliberalism - its production of a citizen-consumer - as well as account for its its machinic enslavement elements - the production of an institutional arrangement and technical configuration that manifests itself in culture as a depoliticised system of techniques for efficiency and optimisation derived from networks of impartial expertise. These networks need not be individuals: increasingly expertise is a presumed feature of computational and algorithmic systems and processes such as the underlying code that informs the internal policies of social media. As shall be explored, social media in many respects represents a neoliberal capture of a previously chaotic and spontaneous Internet, disciplining its users to conform with the incentive structure of platform capitalism through its software architecture. However, as shall be argued in the forthcoming chapter, social media is also a space where users may simulate the experience of hitherto obstructed forms of international connectivity and solidarity, and utilise its tools to engage in counter-hegemonic political action. To this extent, I shall argue that problems that have emerged from our technical configuration were left strategically unaddressed by neoliberal institutions, leaving them unprepared to confront the reemergence of political contestation in the age of social media.

---

[436] ibid, p.78.

[437] ibid, p.138.

Ideologies of the Internet

Any analysis of the political influence of social media will always be directly or indirectly aligned with an account of the emergence of the Internet. I argue we may track its development as a global communications infrastructure to understand its reception by political elites and researchers, and interpret the way in which social media platforms transformed the user experience, and with it, the Internet's perceived ideological trajectory.

Andrew Keen argues that there are three phases in the history of the development of the Internet[438]: firstly, there is the contested early origins, where historians argue over whether the Internet begins with the early pioneers of computational networks, ARPAnet and similar overlapping military and publicly funded projects, or whether the Internet begins when Tim Berners-Lee contributes "the World Wide Web", often considered synonymous with it. In this early period, the Internet is at its most conceptual stage, and ideas about it are limited by both the technologies involved, but also the ways in which it is being framed. Until we reach the advent of the World Wide Web, the Internet is either a military tool for communicating between nuclear fallout bunkers, a means for theoretical physicists to share large chunks of numerical data, and/or everything in between. Framed by pioneering technologists and an 'idealistic spirit', Keen calls this first period "The Network".

If the first phase defined by its commitment to uncovering the technological requirements for a network in the public sphere, the second phase in the history of the Internet's development is defined by its privatisation. Keen call this second period "The Money", the period from the early 1990s until "now" (read as 2015), where the Internet was radically deregulated and Silicon Valley became one of the most unequal places on the planet, a speculative market dominated by venture capitalists. Keen suggested in 2013 in the first edition of the book that state regulation would usher in the third period of internet

[438] Andrew Keen, *The Internet is not the Answer* (London: Atlantic Books, 2015).

history, "The Political Age", an age in which states would cooperate with the broader institutions but concedes in 2015 in an updated afterword that he was wrong to pin his hopes on second-term Obama and the European Union. Fast-forward to 2020, and we are well into the Political Age of the internet, named so for different reasons, where cyber-pessimists argue that corporate internet giants cannot be trusted with our data, that they are aiding and abetting anti-democratic disinformation campaigns, whilst cyber-utopians claim that if states further deregulate and embrace the disruptive spirit of the hyper-capitalist tech industry, we may transcend political dispute altogether.

The internet brought with it much promise. It was the beginning of a new era, of global liberal democracy brought forth by interconnected world markets, an "information superhighway" providing the tools with which to bring about democracy for the 21st century. Unfortunately, the myth of cyber-democracy was predicated on the assumption of a world of relatively affluent, democratically-minded computer-using citizens; in short, it was a myth built on a myth. As James Curran explained:

> leading experts, politicians, public officials, business leaders and journalists predicted that the internet would transform the world. The internet would revolutionise, we were told, the organisation of business, and lead to a surge of prosperity. It would inaugurate a new era of cultural democracy in which the sovereign users- later dubbed "prosumers"- would call the shots, and old media leviathans would decay and die. It would rejuvenate democracy- in some versions by enabling direct e-government through popular referenda. All over the world, the weak and marginal would be empowered, leading to the fall of autocrats and the reordering of power relations…the internet would be an unstoppable force: like the invention of print and gunpowder, it would change society permanently and irrevocably.[439]

[439] James Curran in Robert McChesney, *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy*. (New York: The New Press, 2013), p.5.

McChesney charts the bold claims that were symptomatic of the literature[440]: Clay Shirky argued that the internet would shape the world's cultural backbone[441]; Michael Nielsen implied that the collaborative potential of the internet may lead to Nobel Prizes being awarded to groups of amateurs[442]; Yochai Benkler argued that the internet demonstrates the better angels of human nature[443]; Simon Mainwaring described the internet age as the most amazing and exciting era in human history[444]; Jeff Jarvis argued that a 'wired society' has unprecedented levels of what he terms 'publicness'[445]; Pamela Lund wrote that the internet would give users unprecedented levels of creative power[446]; Rory O'Connor went as far as to rally a cry against big media, big business and big government, their power soon-to-be unseated by the growing swell of online friends and followers.[447] Nonetheless, there is an important distinction to be drawn between accounts that heralded the *potential* of the internet, and those who believed in the inevitability of the internet reaching such potential. Many of the aforementioned assessments are partially true as incomplete accounts of the energies unleashed by the Internet, but the technophilic excitement, further encouraged by the direction of capital investment (leading to bubble after bubble), also spoke to the project of offering a project, affording the opportunity for elite economic and political actors to

---

440 McChesney, ibid, pp. 5-8.

441 Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age.* (New York: Penguin, 2010).

442 Michael Nielsen, *Reinventing Discovery: The New Era of Networked Science.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

443 Yochai Benkler, *The Penguin and the Leviathan: How Cooperation Triumphs over Self-Interest.* (New York: Crown Business, 2011).

444 Simon Mainwaring, *We First: How Brands and Consumers Use Social Media to Build a Better World.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

445 Jeff Jarvis, *Public Parts: How Sharing in the Digital Age Improves the Way We Work and Live.* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).

446 Pamela Lund, *Massively Networked: How the Convergence of Social Media and Technology Is Changing Your Life.* (San Francisco: PLI Media, 2011).

447 Rory O'Connor, *Friends, Followers and the Future: How Social Media Are Changing Politics, Threatening Big Brands and Killing Traditional Media.* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2012).

gesture towards some collective goal of seemingly universal import ("connectedness") in a time of post-soviet capitalist triumphalism.

Although McLean acknowledged that 'futurology is a business for fools and knaves'[448], he wrote at the beginning of the first computer boom about the growing concerns raised amongst political science circles by the rapid integration of information technology in public life, ranging from 'the romantic to the prosaic: that information technology stifles creativity; that polls devalue politics; that IT benefits the political right; that it benefits the rich; and that it threatens civil liberties'.[449] Ultimately, computers and internet connectivity became increasingly useful in science research and corporate finance, but the transition to consumer product meant that the vast majority of IT's earliest adopters were the well-off. The worry was that computational power may bolster economic productivity and provide exciting new forms of communication, entertainment and creative production, but do so whilst reinforcing social inequalities.[450]

In 2002, Don Heath, president of the Internet Society, said that 'if the United States government had tried to come up with a scheme to spread its brand of capitalism and its emphasis on political liberalism around the world, it couldn't have invented a better model than the internet'.[451] The thought was that the Internet makes government organisation and

---

[448] Ian McLean, *Democracy and New Technology.* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), p.94.

[449] McLean, p.97.

[450] Consider Catherine Gouge's research analysing IBM, Microsoft and Apple product advertisements and press releases: 'the notion of technology's ability to function as an empowering civic prosthesis propagated by so many advertisements and proponents of computer-oriented technologies masks the economic conditions and motivations that characterise the exploration of this new frontier. It masks, in short, the proposition that those who do have access to computer technology should endeavour to exploit those without "full" access to the digital frontier ventures. Left unexamined, such an imperial ideological agenda is capable of recreating what it imagines. It not only is capable of reinvesting in a frontierist hierarchy of values which privileges economic and technological superiority as a measure of individual worth, but it is capable of suggesting that such privileges necessary for cohering identity are really choices we make as citizens of a "free" Digital Nation'. See Catherine Gouge, 'Citizenship in the Cyberspatial Frontier' in David L. Erben, *Adrift in the Technological Matrix.* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2003), p.85.

[451] Don Heath, quoted in Leslie David Simon, Javier Corrales and Donald R. Wolfensberger, *Democracy and the internet: allies or adversaries?* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Canter Press 2002), pp.5-6.

power ambiguous, in that the boundaries within and between governments, and government and the private sector, become blurred by their technological and communicative entanglements.[452] The everyday citizen's appetite for political information may not increase, but the obstacles for grassroots mobilisation and organisation would rapidly drop, theoretically empowering interest groups further from establishment political culture.[453] However, "authoritarian" states are also attracted to the Internet by way of its ability to surveil dissident actors and compensate for their lack of domestic legitimacy through international marketing and ideological campaigns (as earlier discussed with Ong, often with help of a mobile *emigre* class of expatriates).[454]

In the early years of the Internet, in which the online architecture consisted broadly of webpages, message boards and discussion forums, anonymity provided an opportunity for personal expression unencumbered by our real life circumstances: one could easily pretend to be someone else, experiment with new ideas, styles of speaking, ways of interacting, encounter new subgroups and subcultures, all with a relatively clear separation between oneself and the online persona. This is not to say that all Internet users were deluding themselves, or producing fictionalised accounts of their lives, for as Katelyn McKenna argued, 'expressing one's true self on the internet can lead to greater self-acceptance and to heightened feelings of belonging and connectedness with others. Actively participating in identity-relevant groups and sharing one's 'inner self' within dyadic relationships online, can result in the development of close and intimate relationships'.[455] The fascinating attraction of the Internet was the mixture of truth and fiction, that you could be reading a forum thread about someone's life story that was the outpouring of real

---

[452] Corrales in Simon et. al, ibid, p.10.

[453] Corrales, ibid, p.34.

[454] Corrales, ibid, p.54.

[455] Katelyn McKenna in Adam Joinson, Katelyn McKenna, Tom Postmes & Ulf-Dietrich Reips, *The Oxford Handbook of Internet Psychology* (ed). (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp.218-219.

troubles in the hope of achieving clarity or closure, or a teenager's creative writing project, and that dissonance made cyberspace a fluid, discordant and entertaining space. As Whitty & Joinson suggest, 'what makes this space unique is how we communicate within it…often our communication is 'hyperhonest' and paradoxically it is often 'hyperdishonest".[456] They conclude their study suggesting that anonymity was the early subject of research fascination, but that more attention must be focused on geographic distance, asychronicity and the norms of Internet spaces, which contribute to the possibility of building fictional identities. Therefore, 'if the technology itself is both an enabler of honesty and deceit, one needs to look beyond explanations rooted in technological determinism in order to fully understand people's behaviour online'.[457]

The Internet was all but immediately bound up in dreams of political reconfigurations, with McLean positing that 'a mass democracy could choose an electoral system once its politicians and commentators had come to understand the principles of voting theory'.[458] The dreams for Internet democracy exceeded the logic of representative democracy from the start: whilst politicians wrestled with tentative approaches to using the Internet for constituency feedback, consultations, virtual citizen assemblies and as a research tool, many political scientists of a cyber-optimistic bent were suggesting that the Internet could demonstrate that mass politics, in the full participatory model, may become a practical reality, alongside exciting new forms of prefigurative political engagement. McLean concluded *Democracy and New Technology* with the call for a return to experiments with direct democracy within western liberal democracies, as 'new technology sweeps away the traditional barriers of time and space'.[459] That is true, but what McLean could not predict

---

[456] Monica J. Whitty & Adam N. Joinson, *Truth, Lies and Trust on the Internet.* (London: Routledge, 2009), p.7.

[457] Whitty & Joinson, ibid, p.143.

[458] McLean, p.155.

[459] McLean, pp.171-172.

that these new technologies, through their accelerating connecting speeds and the emergence of hegemonic digital platforms, would replace these traditional barriers with an apparent limitlessness and relentlessness. Theories of the information society and 'infotopia'[460] once following an optimistic narrative path would soon swerve into more pessimistic accounts of 'infodemics'[461] and 'infogluts'[462]. Concepts were being coined to indicate that access to information, once considered transformative, was becoming burdensome and unruly in its hyperactive and unceasing state. The cyber-utopian accounts were rightly excited about the technical potential of the Internet for changing society and the economy without adequately interrogating the way these changes would be twisted by structural forces to fit the preexistent social modes of relation and exchange. Any Internet-boosted democratic future requires political will and institutional amenability, whereas the Internet was instead met with commodifying forces to align its expansion with the interests of neoliberal capitalism.

Sarikakis and Thussu offer a robust denunciation of cyber-utopian accounts. They explain that 'in the initial years of its expansion, the internet was hailed as a democratising and even subversive communication tool, with the potential to create a global public sphere'.[463] However, the internet itself was transformed by a combination of telecommunications company advertisements, excessive state rhetoric and cultural osmosis into a 'meta-ideology' in and of itself, presenting a capitalistic, ahistorical worldview of technological progressivism through the expansion of free enterprise: 'the internet normalises a set of ideas, a belief in the inevitable progress of humankind through the

---

460 Cass R. Sunstein, *Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce Knowledge.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

461 Department of Global Communications, "UN tackles 'infodemic' of misinformation and cybercrime in COVID-19 crisis", United Nations - (March 2020) - https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19 Last accessed: 27 October 2021.

462 Mark Andrejevic, *Infoglut: How Too Much Information is Changing the Way we Think and Know.* (London: Routledge, 2013).

463 Katherine Sarikakis & Daya K. Thussu, *Ideologies of the Internet.* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2006), p.7.

unlimited powers of a global market connected through digital communications'.[464] More specifically, the 90s tech utopianism of Silicon Valley adopted a right-libertarian language that focused on markets and networks operating in tandem to weaken and replace hierarchical structures, but as technology critic Evgeny Morozov notes, 'in reality, networks amplify hierarchies and make them less visible.'[465] In this sense, the most unfortunate aspect of cyber-optimism is the way it laundered the triumph of financial capitalism, the disproportionate and growing inequality between capital and labour and the neoliberal retrenchment of the post-war social welfare states of the global North, through a technological vision of global progress. The transition from a hierarchy to a network is often the obfuscation of authority - just because the boss is no longer present does not mean they do not exist. To reference a catchphrase from an old comedy sketch, when "the computer says no", it is unclear whom is making these decisions, on what basis and on whose authority. Our everyday experience of technology is often the placement of a barrier between orders and the ordered, the absolute reduction of the political to the technical.

Paolo Bory's critical history of the reception of the Internet is instructive: the Internet of today was not an inevitable progression in the technical idea but one of many possible implementations; secondly, the way in which we think about the Internet's origins impacts our collective capacity to understand its present and conceive of the openness of its future; finally, there exists an underlying, problematic idea that 'networks, by themselves, are the main agents of social, economic, political and cultural change'.[466] Our technospheric approach to politics is not a concession to these techno-deterministic ways of thinking: the network society is fundamentally an anti-political, technocratic means of approaching the world as a system with inefficiencies to optimise rather than a lifeworld populated with

---

[464] Ibid: 7-10.

[465] Evgeny Morozov in Geert Lovink, *Sad By Design: On Platform Nihilism.* (London: Pluto Books, 2019), p.1.

[466] Paolo Bory, *The Internet Myth: From the Internet Imaginary to Network Ideologies.* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2020), p.1.

people holding conflicting, contrasting and compromising ideas worthy of deliberation. It is the dangerous belief in a world becoming more egalitarian by virtue of its own technical unfolding, in spite of the fact that the existent hierarchies of state and corporate power stabilised through their technological configuration. The "inherently progressive" nature of networks is precisely the kind of social mythology our technospheric approach to politics identifies and critiques by integrating a socio-technical account of the social with a materialist account of ideology.

Bory's intervention is informed by the transformation in the social mythology of the Internet, 'the conceptual shift from a technical object (the network as infrastructure) to an ideological reference (the network as the elective model for the organisation of societies)'.[467] He argues that all social histories of the Internet, whether they focus on its military origins or its precursors in computational logistics, 'all tell of a powerful new technological form able to change the perception of space and the very meaning of mediated communication'.[468] In the 1990s, the "cyberspace" framing of the Internet 'was largely perceived as the unstoppable cause of three imminent radical changes: the end of history, the end of physical distance, and the end of traditional political systems'.[469] Cyberspace was ostensibly the spatial imaginary for an emergent globalised system of computer-mediated communication, attributed 'post-political', 'post-ideological', 'post-historical' qualities symptomatic of the neoliberal perspective hegemonic of late-90s Western capitalism.

Bory draws on early Internet history to make a case for the future: citing Paul Baran's essay on three types of network (centralised, decentralised and distributed) and how it was popularised and folded into an idealising rhetoric. The distributed model that shows the most equitable horizontal linkages between nodes is often presumed to be a) analogous to

---

[467] Bory, ibid, p.3.

[468] Bory, ibid, p.14.

[469] Bory, ibid, p.17.

the democratisation of organisational power, b) the original intentional model of distribution for the Internet and/or c) the way the Internet used to be before the emergence of Silicon Valley. Bory reminds us that the distributed model, the kind of Internet many of us would describe as its most intuitive and purest form, was never built.[470] A radical democratic Internet is not a relic to be recovered, nor a system that intuitively emerges from the removal of commercialisation, but a form to be concretised and intentionally strived towards as one of many possible Internet futures. It is through this historicised perspective we may consider social media through its precursors, through the beliefs and ambitions that informed its emergence, and the extension of these ideas into its contemporary design.

Information Anxiety and the Problem of Post-Truth

Within the theoretical construction of the social presented so far, there exists the notion that the world is an increasingly complex, accelerating system of social signs, references and discourses, that the individual is swept up in a world of almost excessive meaning, where events and their causes are distributed across the flat surface of a frictionless postmodern landscape. In this abundant sensorium, alongside the harried condition of frenetic standstill and general proletarianisation, the role of the concerned and responsible individual is to become an "informed citizen", committed to going beyond the surface of any political or social circumstance and instead follow the breadcrumbs towards something resembling a digestible and coherent truth of the matter. If the Internet was responsible for exacerbating such an information overload, social media's rise can be partly explained as an attempt at a market solution.

I here argue that "information anxiety" is an extension of the broader neoliberal impetus to construct self-interested rational agents that act in alignment with their

[470] Bory, ibid, p.26.

preferences, and thus requires an intelligible account of society and its operations in order to rationally assess how best to do so. The pressure to know, as much as the desire to know, in both our personal and professional lives, influences our habits interacting with technology, and the decisions that these platforms take in order to monitor and influence these aforementioned habits. Information anxiety as a phenomenon that encourages citizens to learn more about the social world may appear initially encouraging: all democratically minded citizens can appreciate the notion of an informed polity, the importance of the acquiring and sharing of knowledge, and the ethical commitment to self-improvement. However, I argue that due to the structure of our dominant media and its attention-prioritising algorithms alongside the co-isolated, co-fragile social foam, paradoxically, the anxiety towards information contributes to the emergence of post-truth.

Kalpokas argues that post-truth as concept refers to the re-legitimation of arguments based on their emotional appeal and symbolic value over the validity of impersonal truth.[471] Post-truth's widespread appeal is attributed to our desire for pleasure, that in a world where a plethora of variant iterations regarding any issue are (broadly speaking) equally accessible, our emotional connection with information is prioritised. I may editorialise here to suggest that the easy answer, the immediate pleasure, was surely always an underlying inclination, but the implicit contention here is that our desires have been transformed by our contemporary technical configuration.

Kalpokas argues that post-truth communities are distinctively precisely because of their activity: their power lies in their capacity to incite action in their audience, even if the action itself does not always correlate with efficacy and may in fact play an escapist role.[472] Post-truth claims are considered a form of signalling, in that they display certain allegiances

---

[471] Ignas Kalpokas, *A Political Theory of Post-Truth.* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p.2.

[472] Kalpokas, ibid, p.3.

to target audiences, and the gesturing act is more important than the content itself.[473] Consider the aftermath of the 2020 US presidential election: after the Republican accusations of widespread voter fraud were deemed baseless by all concerned authorities, the irrational and futile position that Joe Biden was not the legitimate winner and that Donald Trump was a president-in-exile became the loyalty test for the nativist Trump-aligned section of the party. Right-wing ideologues from television evangelicals to local populist candidates could not curry favour with their base without first paying lip service to this untruth, because without affirming the irrational lie, it would communicate either that you were not fully invested in Trump's first term or that you also implicitly reject the collective political position that the Democratic Party is an irredeemably corrupt adversary, one of the foundational positions of the movement.

Further to this point, Kalpokas argues that post-truth also involves affective investment by audiences in political actors exceeding any claim made by those actors[474]: once again we may use the example of Trump's one-off soundbites such as "drain the swamp" being used to maintain, even in the fourth year of an ineffectual and transparently unscrupulous term, an unwavering commitment to substantial anti-corruption reform. Kalpokas likens post-truth to escapist fiction taken beyond conventional artistic limitations, where parallel realities are constructed and lived in.[475] Post-truth political narratives are often aspirational, not in the sense that the reality they describe is always hopeful, but in the sense that the post-truth community are 'about the aggrandisement of the collective 'we".[476]

What of dystopian narratives, that paint the world even worse than it already is? For explanation, we return to the information subject. The comfort of being a purveyor of the

---

[473] ibid, p.12.

[474] ibid.

[475] ibid, p.13.

[476] ibid, p.18.

secret knowledge is preferable to the insecurity of living in a world of complex uncertainty, where the individual is not somebody with all the answers to hand, and in many cases, their importance to their post-truth community vastly outweighs their perceived importance in the wider world. In this sense, post-truth is better understood as a collective 'collusion' rather than top-down manipulation.[477] However, since post-truth narratives are radically contingent as they do not rely on the foundation of fixed anchoring points, they can only be maintained so long as they are capable of producing effects of social affirmation and collective belief.[478] Nevertheless, due to the low cost of creating new communities on social media (it takes seconds to create a new group), there is ample space for the production of mutually validating micro-communities that can interact, overlap and reproduce the illusion of a wider societal trend towards the post-truth condition the original group advocates.

Furthermore, the flatness of social media platforms means that large (and sometimes verified) accounts give the illusion of credibility: if someone spreading misinformation has more followers than establishment media journalists, it lends implicit plausibility to their baseless claims.[479] Post-truth communities exploit the fragmentation of the media environment: they are not looking to attract the average voter, or the everyday person on the street so much as dragging people with similar but sceptical viewpoints over the threshold into the collective irrationality encouraged. Kalpokas suggests that 'strategic extremism' is employed, performing the function of gatekeeping the group from the prying eyes of the median voter by using language that may offend mainstream sensibilities.[480]

Following the neoliberal logic of the citizen-consumer, individuals approach "truths" as if shoppers in an information marketplace, aiming to maximise the utility and satisfaction

---

[477] ibid.

[478] ibid, p.22.

[479] ibid, p.26.

[480] ibid, p.27.

received from their foray on the platform, choosing networks of internally cohesive information as if picking fruit and vegetables from a market stall.[481] Post-truth becomes a means of achieving a shared experience of pleasure and community with fellow travellers[482], thriving in scenarios that bring 'the world closer to the self and not vice versa'.[483] If my beliefs, principles or dispositions do not conform to the social world, my digital bubble affords us the possibility to reinvent social reality in our own image, to suit our needs and achieve the satisfaction required to sustain the epistemic community.

The key to the flourishing of post-truth from an economic standpoint is personalisation: 'just as personalised services from today's digital giants allow for a more bespoke, unchallenging, and effortless use, just as users are tempted to allow their virtual assistants to learn as much about them as possible to deliver tailor-made answers, so personalisation of truth allows for living in a world of- seemingly- one's own making'.[484] There is a never a boring hoax, and we always remain the protagonist. As the Twitter joke goes, "grandma is online uncovering the secrets to the vaccine the global scientific community all missed".

Post-truth becomes a means for the information subject to reckon with a world devoid of meta-narratives[485], capable of easily accessing networks of information that do not constitute knowledge, but provide security and comfort in their aforementioned affective and community-building features. Post-truth reveals the extent to which our global networks of the information society have fragmented information, producing a truth market that offers 'tailor-made niche offerings', a form of meta populism in that 'an essentially empty

---

[481] ibid, p.36.

[482] ibid, p.80.

[483] ibid, p.99.

[484] ibid, p.124.

[485] ibid, p.127.

object of affective investment serves as a screen onto which everyone can project their desires and pleasures'.[486]

The difficulty with overcoming the severity of post-truth bubbles (especially in a pandemic) is their affective dimension. As Kalpolkas argues, it is the affective aspect of finding fellow travellers that makes the bubble durable and sticky, rather than the information itself. Although social media platforms could do more to dissuade users from falling down rabbit holes, ultimately the issue is not one of creating a centrist balancing act (my Facebook feed is regularly disrupted by random racist groups and anti-vaccination rhetoric purely because my friendship circle does not include any - the ridiculous consequence of "both-sides-ism" here being that Facebook is actively peddling misinformation in my direction due to my own ability to curate a profile absent of such digital detritus). The solution is digital literacy, critical reading skills and more interconnected offline social networks (such as the mutual aid groups that emerged during the pandemic) that allow for durable social bonds that do not require the loyalty test of holding similar (extreme and implausible) beliefs.[487] There is always a tendency to presume that a technical problem requires a technical solution, but the injunction to knowledge, and the marketisation of information as plural knowledges, are social structures that predate social media (as demonstrated by Stiegler's historical overview of industrial technologies), and will be not resolved solely by the regulation of social media misinformation.

Furthermore, the enactment of state and corporate censorship to remove misinformation from platforms may backfire, serving only to confirm the suspicions of the paranoiac. In the context of the technospheric condition, citizens increasingly rely on communications networks to inform them not only of what is happening in the world, but

---

[486] ibid, p.128.

[487] Anne Power and Ellie Benton (2021) "Where Next For Britain's 4,300 Mutual Aid Groups?" LSE Blogs. (May 6) https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/covid19/2021/05/06/where-next-for-britains-4300-mutual-aid-groups/ Last accessed: 15/12/2021

how they and others should feel about what is happening. To counter these problems of misinformation, an emancipatory politics must embrace the acceleration of information across communication systems but harness it in opposition to the broader problem of the shrinking of physical space where public demands are articulated, which may involve the extension of cooperative and democratic models of media ownership in the broader market economy to counteract extreme attention-seeking (and attention-rewarding) platform behaviours.

To some extent, post-truth practices are the consequence of neoliberal subjectivity, in that Internet users adopt a consumer-citizen approach to information, scouring a vast network for a personalised agglomeration of facts that support their worldview, and thus reproduce a highly individualised process of epistemic orientation. We may attribute the commercialisation of information, not to mention the normalisation of anonymity, to the spread of outlandish statement, weird conspiracies and eccentric messaging, insofar as it can always find its audience.

On the other hand, post-truth practices and communities are often predicated on anti-political sentiment, on suspicion of malfeasance and collusion between government agencies and firms, slipping between speculation of corruption alongside plausible evidence of corruption to reach invalid inferences. Post-truth may be a social consequence of the anti-political sentiment driven as much by the technospheric condition as by hegemonic neoliberalism - that people feel disempowered in their everyday lives, and so find the vast network of the Internet as a place to join and contribute to communities with shared commitments to orienting themselves in an accelerating and uncertain world. In this next chapter, I situate social media within such a techno-social context.

6. On Social Media

In this chapter, I shall conceptualise social media as a form of computer-mediated communication in cyberspace that operates on a platform capitalist model. I shall argue that the incentive structure of platform capitalism produces an attention economy, and through the convergence of its technical configuration and the broader neoliberal ideological social settlement, it is argued that social media produces user subjectivities that align with behaviours conducive to the reproduction of the political status quo.

The chapter is comprised of the following sections: 'Conceptualising Social Media', 'Platform Capitalism and Subjectivity', and 'Dromology and Social Acceleration'. I shall argue that social media is best understood as a form of computer-mediated communication in cyberspace and suggest that the underlying logic of platform capitalism influences user behaviour. The end of the chapter introduces Virilio's critique of technology as an agent of acceleration, and compares his concerns with Rosa's earlier theory of social acceleration. I will conclude that social media, whilst having distinctive qualities as an iteration of communications technology that influences the user experience, it is a contributor rather than a cause of the underlying problems of social acceleration, which may be attributed more generally to the technospheric condition.

Conceptualising Social Media

'As the laws and mechanisms of technological rationality spread over the whole society, they develop a set of truth values of their own, which hold good for the functioning of the apparatus- and for that alone.'[488]

Here I shall undertake a critical survey of the digital sociology literature to ascertain the sociological and political possibilities that were posited regarding the internet and social media as a transformative form of communication. I shall engage with conceptual precursors, such as cyberspace and computer-mediated communication, to situate social media within the context of its academic reception and assess the extent to which there already existed pre-conceived speculative ideas about how its technologies may be appropriated for political projects prior to its practical formation and ubiquity. I shall demonstrate how the design of social media systems places their users into neoliberal "roles" of performance, diligent in the curation of their profiles, incentivised to regularly engage with the digital stimulus presented as a form of play, whilst contributing to the bottom line of tech giants that sell on the data amassed by the user's consistent engagement.

Wellman and Haythronwhaite have argued it is the quotidian and humdrum aspect of habitual Internet use that obscures its pervasive incorporation into people's lives.[489] The generation raised by the television trapped the generation below them similarly in a world of screens, but these screens began to offer far more in the way of interpersonal connectivity, networks of immediacy and intimacy, and slowly these applications would become woven into conventional social activity: Facebook friends and Twitter feeds became routine and boring, but also formative, addictive and politically charged.

---

[488] Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) p.146.

[489] Barry Wellman and Caroline Haythronwaite, *The Internet in Everyday Life* (ed). Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p.7.

Social media did not develop into its current form until the advent of 'Web 2.0', a term denoting the period from around 2004 when there was an explosion of new globally popular websites such as YouTube, MySpace and Facebook that would have been practically implausible prior to widespread broadband connections. Nevertheless, conceptual precursors to social media devised by speculative theorists of the emergent digital future were already present in the literature, and as such, when social media finally emerged in its mainstream, functional, user-friendly form, it arrived with the baggage of expectation.

The predominant precursor to social media was the aforementioned "cyberspace", a term commonly used in the internet studies literature to denote the theoretical online space in which individuals may coalesce to produce new forms of personal and group identification and information exchange:

> Cyberspace is public and private space. It is because of these qualities that it appeals to those who want to reinvent their private and public lives. Cyberspace provides new terrain for playing out of the age-old friction between personal and collective identity; the individual and community.[490]

Jones argued in the early literature that cyberspace was being promoted as a 'new public space' made by internet aficionados that are 'conjoining traditional mythic narratives of progress with strong modern impulses toward self-fulfilment and personal development'.[491] Cyberspace was the theoretical laboratory in which experiments with electronic democracy were to be coordinated. However, early (and ultimately futile) experiments came with an accompanying literature that 'centred on the 'empowering' or 'controlling' nature of cyberspace for the public'.[492] There were concerns, even in the early stages, that cyberspace

---

[490] Zizi Papacharissi (2002) 'The virtual sphere: the internet as a public sphere,' *new media & society*, 4 (1), p.20.

[491] S.G Jones (1997) 'The Internet and its Social Landscape.' In *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, edited by S.G. Jones, 7-35. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p.22.

[492] Howard Tumber & Michael Bromley (1998) 'Virtual soundbites: political communication in cyberspace,' *Media, Culture & Society,* 20 (1): p.159.

may become a platform by which citizens were persuaded and manipulated by the state, rather than empowered to challenge the established order, and that internet access itself was highly skewed in favour of the better educated and/or higher income groups.[493] Even as the world becomes ever more globally connected and internet-savvy, it is also important to note that even contemporary studies of social media must account for the social and economic disadvantages that inequality of internet access between classes, communities and countries entail.

One of the predictions of the early digital media literature was that the mainstream media may have to assume the role of watchdogs providing secondary analysis and assessing the claims made by the messengers of primary information. The logic was that in the age of the internet, eyewitnesses to world events, or individuals within institutions with announcements, could enter that information onto the network for all to see, rather than having to use journalistic channels. Furthermore, the dissemination of government policy online could theoretically bypass most traditional ways in which government information was mediated, replacing 'the tripartite system of government-media-public with direct interactive communication between the government and the governed'.[494] Journalists predicted that mainstream media corporations and their control of radio, newspapers and television, would be ended by the revolution in information delivery that the internet would provide.

Nevertheless, whilst mainstream culture grew excited, and the financial markets induced the "dot com bubble", many academics remained dubious, arguing that 'people will mould the internet to fit traditional politics. The internet itself will not be a historical light switch that turns on some fundamentally new age of political participation and grassroots

---

[493] Pippa Norris (1999) "'Who Surfs Cafe Europa?', Paper for the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association." Atlanta, GA.

[494] Tumber & Bromley, 1998: 165.

democracy'. [495] Cyberspace, rather than being an effective ballast against democratic erosion, would eventually form into an innovative scaffolding on which traditional power structures would be rebuilt.

Computer mediated communication (CMC), another conceptual predecessor to social media, attracted considerable attention from social scientists due to the potential impacts of these online networks on social organisation.[496] Jones refers to computer mediated communication as 'in essence, socially produced space'.[497] As Diani notes:

> CMC represents an unusual form of communication, as it does not really fit conventional distinctions between public and private, and direct and mediated communication. It may be expected to affect collective action in both instrumental and symbolic terms, by improving the effectiveness of communication and creating collective identity and solidarity. At the same time, heterogeneity of social movements prevents us from formulating generic arguments about their relationship to CMC.[498]

The hope was that CMC would give rise to virtual communities, made up of strangers engaging in discussions about their interests and hobbies, as well as small-scale experiments in political discourse. Early research showed that the internet, even in its fledgling stage, provided numerous avenues for political expression and several ways for users to attempt to influence politics and become politically active.[499] One of the more interesting accounts of

---

[495] Kevin A. Hill & John E. Hughes. *Cyberpolitics: Citizen Activism in the Age of the Internet*. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), p.186.

[496] Manuel Castells, *The Information Age, Vol I: The Rise of the Network Society*. (Oxford/Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996); Barry Wellman & Janet Salaff (1996) 'Computer networks as social networks: collaborative work, telework, and virtual community,' *Annual Review of Sociology*, 22 (1): 213-238; Karen Cerulo & Janet M. Ruane (1997) 'Reframing sociological concepts for a brave new (virtual?) world,' *Sociological Inquiry*, 67(1): 48-58

[497] S.G. Jones (1994) 'Understanding community in the information age', In *CyberSociety: Computer-mediated communication and community*, 10-35. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p.17.

[498] Mario Diani (2000) 'Social Movement Networks Virtual and Real,' *Information, Communication & Society*, 3 (3): p.386.

[499] Charles Bowen, *Modem Nation: The Handbook of Grassroots American Activism Online*. (New York: Random House, 1996).

research into internet sociology all but revealed the future lure of social media by noting that virtual communities were often not made up of strangers, but rather acquaintances and friends who lived in different parts of the world. They opened up spaces for strangers to engage with each other, but CMC also provided an opportunity for individuals to reinforce their prior offline relationships.[500] Indeed, the most enduring of the early online communities were those in which members were willing to disclose information about their personal identities, and where a core group of individuals within that community were willing to engage each other offline.[501] Although, as Hubert Dreyfus notes, one of the core attractions of CMC was the fact that 'the Net frees people to develop new and exciting selves'[502], and if the anonymity that the Internet originally privileges were to become increasingly difficult, 'anyone using the Net who was led to risk his or her real identity in the real world would have to act against the grain of what attracted him or her to the Net in the first place'[503], and in this sense, social media becomes a space where spaces of anonymous fantasy and authentic self-representation uncomfortably converge.

For social science research, social media is often given a tighter definition, such as 'the Internet-based platforms that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content, usually either mobile or web-based technologies'.[504] Although, as Dominic Pettman notes, when approached with philosophical scrutiny, social media is not considered 'a thing, or a place, or a new medium. It is a constellation, a concept. It is a virtual, evolving assemblage of elements, including- and especially- older forms of media, now diagrammed in novel

---

[500] Mary Virnoche & Gary Marx (1997) '"Only Connect" - E.M. Forster in an age of electronic communication: computer-mediated association and community networks', *Sociological Inquiry*, 67 (1): 85-100.

[501] Tommy Tranvik, (2000) '"Surfing Together and the Rise of Social Capital?', paper for the 'Investigating Social Capital' Conference, 18-21 May." Solstrand, Norway.

[502] Hubert Dreyfus (2004) 'Nihilism on the Information Highway: Anonymity versus Commitment in the Present Age.' In *Community in the Digital Age: Philosophy and Practice*, edited by A Feenberg and D Barney, 69-81. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, p.75.

[503] Ibid: 78.

[504] Margetts et. al, 2016: 5.

articulations'[505]. Thus, conceiving of social media as an 'internet space' allows for the retention of the materiality of the platform found in social sciences literature, whilst remaining suitably flexible to the way in which it intersects with pre-existing forms of mediated social life in accounts of subjectivity. Social media, therefore, is both a technological apparatus with a designed function, and a phenomenological experience that engenders certain socio-psychological effects. Social media is a cyberspace where computer-mediated communication takes place.

Recalling Althusser, ideology operates through 'symbolic devices that order social space'[506], so to assess the extent to which social media reproduces the dominant ideology is to assess the ways in which social media is ordered. Social media attempts to map social reality such that a user may come to understand the social world, and their own place within it, and whether social media inculcates certain beliefs, behaviours or dispositions which serve the status quo either explicitly through discourse, or implicitly by operating within its parameters, is a test of its success at reproducing the status quo. As Wendy Chun argues, 'software, or perhaps more precisely operating systems, offer us an imaginary relationship to our hardware: they do not represent transistors but rather desktops and recycling bins. Software produces users. Without operating system (OS) there would be no access to hardware; without OS no actions, no practices, and thus no user. Each OS, through its advertisements, interpellates a "user": calls it and offers it a name or image with which to identify'.[507] The next section will argue that social media companies that adhere to the platform capitalist model contribute to the production of neoliberal performance, by presenting a certain version of reality to the user, and that capitalist relations of production

---

[505] Dominic Pettman, *Infinite Distraction.* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), p.xi.

[506] Freeden, 2003: 42.

[507] Wendy Chun in Lovink, ibid, p.29.

are reproduced *implicitly* through users operating within their platforms, rather than explicitly through censorious policies or hegemonic political discourse.

A materialist approach to ideology is predicated on the notion that the material conditions of production have a correlative relationship with the forms in which ideological ideas are circulated through social practices. Ideology production is a necessary function of all societies, and not specific to certain modes of production; as the modes of production change, we shall bear witness to a change in the way the dominant ideology is circulated, and thus how subjects are interpellated. Nick Srnicek argues that such a change is taking place in contemporary neoliberal economies.[508] Srnicek claims that the digital economic model has become one of the primary hegemonic models of large-scale capitalist enterprise, where the response to the decline of the manufacturing industries has been a shift towards the profitability of data-mining, which he terms the platform model. Srnicek invites the reader to consider data as a raw material that is extracted by the processes put in place by this model, wherein the activities of the users on the platform is the natural source of that material.

Srnicek defines platforms as 'digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact. They therefore position themselves as intermediaries that bring together different users: customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers'.[509] By this definition, social media are the subset of communications companies that fall within the larger category of platform capitalist enterprises. Furthermore, platforms 'can operate anywhere, where digital interaction takes place' and 'produce and are reliant upon 'network effects': the more numerous the users who use a platform, the more valuable that platform becomes for everyone else'.[510] Hence, the performance of social media is augmented by its own success:

---

[508] Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

[509] Ibid: 43.

[510] Ibid: 44-45.

the more people use Facebook, the more data Facebook can use; the more data Facebook can use, the better Facebook is at creating an experience enticing for the user. The assumption here is that as time passes and the platform becomes smarter, the better the apparatus is for interpellating the subject. As we shall later see, the sheer amount of data presented to the user complicates matters.

Srnicek categorises social media as an advertising platform insofar as it operates to 'extract information on users, undertake a labour of analysis, and then use the products of that process to sell ad space'.[511] By considering Srnicek's analysis of the economic mode of production, we are provided with a coherent explanation of why social media functions as it does: capitalist competition is causing the internet to fragment, as many different services, products and applications are being made available to online consumers every day; online platforms serve as the most scalable websites, because they attempt to impose a clear and cohesive streamlining of the disorder of cyberspace: 'the aim for Facebook is to make it so that users never have to leave their enclosed ecosystem: new stories, videos, audio, messaging, e-mail, and even buying consumer goods have all been progressively folded back into the platform itself'.[512] Given that my claim is that social media platforms that operate with the platform capitalist model produce neoliberal affects, it follows that it is possible that other social media companies, perhaps cooperatives or subscription services, that operate with intentional political considerations or for more bespoke, niche purposes, may not reproduce neoliberal subjectivity to the same degree. Moving forward, I shall investigate how the economic factors that characterise platform models translate to the user experience.

---

[511] Ibid: 49.

[512] Ibid: 110.

Platform Capitalism and Subjectivity

Dreams of cyberspace bled into social media. Social media was supposed to be the space on the internet that functioned as the cyber-utopians had theorised that cyberspace would, and as such, all the exciting potential that these theories had proffered regarding the social interactions the internet made possible were now implicitly projected onto platforms that were ostensibly the corporate centralisation of digital interactivity.[513]

Christian Fuchs approaches modern theories of communication, specifically the internet and social media, from the perspective of critical theory. Fuchs is concerned with the ways in which society and technology interact, and the consequences these interactions have for how humans perceive themselves, and the social world they inhabit. Fuchs argues that social media operates to obscure the pre-existent class conditions of subordination and domination necessarily entailed by the capitalist mode of production.[514]

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 for its users 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

---

[513] Robert McChesney, (1996) 'The global struggle for communication,' *Monthly Review*, 48 (3): 1-20: 'The primary function of the non-profit sector in U.S. communication has been to pioneer the new technologies when they were not yet considered profitable…once the technologies proved profitable, however they were turned over to private interests with negligible compensations', p.8.

[514] Fuchs, 2016: 121.

more ubiquitous offline as our expectations change about how often the rest of society uses the internet.[515] 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 themselves 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'.[516] Fuchs develops this idea further by explaining that the fact that one's data is sold onto advertisers as a commodity, is precluded from the user's experience of the social media platform. The obtained use-value for the user is evident from the immediate use of the platform, as Twitter, Facebook, Google, YouTube, etc. do not charge an upfront fee for their services, but behind the user experience are the processes by which one's personal data is commodified: this capitalist exchange is not fully comprehensible to the user because no money is exchanged for the user-value that social media provides[517]. To posit the idea

[515] Ibid: 122.

[516] Ibid: 122.

[517] Ibid: 122.

differently, outside of the language of Marxist economics, social media presents itself as a free-to-use tool for sharing things with your friends. But it is also 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. 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.[518]

Srnicek differs from Fuchs insofar as he distances his view of platform capitalism from the claim that social media users undertake a form of labour: 'beyond the intuitive hesitation to think that messaging friends is labour, any idea of socially necessary labour time- the implicit standard against which [Marxist analyses of] production processes are set- is lacking'.[519] Although curating one's social media account may feel labourious, it is not labour in the strictest sense, in that 'there are no competitive pressures for getting users to do more, even if there are pressures to get them to do more online'.[520] Because social media users are not in direct competition with one another in terms of the quality and frequency of content delivery to the platform system, it is better to analogise the curation of a Facebook profile, a Twitter feed or a YouTube channel as akin to voluntary service. It feels necessary to the user in order to stabilise one's online persona or brand, but also directly benefits the platform by providing it with data. I'd argue that the notion of constantly stabilising one's persona to remain algorithmically favourable to social media is compatible with earlier notions of

[518] Ibid: 127, my emphasis.

[519] Srnicek, 2017: 55.

[520] Ibid: 55-56.

harriedness and frenetic standstill that emerge from the affective condition of social acceleration.

However, Fuchs' implication that the person becomes a commodity themselves may be a poetic stretch: our time and our efforts on the platform are surely commodified, but there is still an important distinction between the person and the profile. Another criticism may be that by drawing on Fuchs alone, my line of argument so far is too reductive: individualism and neoliberalism are compatible, but not synonymous - to produce a neoliberal individualism is arrange a space that accommodates the desire to expand marketisation, to continuously mine all digital relations for potential content for commodification.

One of the purposes of neoliberal-capitalist media is to reduce humans to the status of market actors; in this context, consumers of advertisements; the lifeblood of the communications apparatus' reproduction as its primary source of income. Like all prior forms of ideological state apparatuses in the realm of communications technology, social media presents its online platforms as 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'.[521] 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, and

[521] Fuchs, 2016: 133.

operate profit-driven models, despite their sloganeering implying a higher calling untethered from the demands of the market.

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'.[522] 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'.[523] 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'.[524] In Fuchs' view, social media turns consumers into *prosumers*, individuals encouraged 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.

[522] Ibid: 138.

[523] Ibid: 146.

[524] Ibid: 146.

Facebook is one of the world's largest advertising agencies'[525], concurring with Srnicek.[526] In this respect, social media is not too distinct from the economic model used by newspapers selling advertising space, which comes under Althusser's concept of the communications ISA as originally envisioned. The platform does indeed provide the capacity for users to communicate, but it also operates like an online dating agency, pairing corporate partners with prospective consumers, under the auspice of connecting human beings with each other.

David M. Berry holds similar concerns, and a similar background in applying critical theory to the social problems that digital media bring. Berry takes Fuchs' argument one step further, and pushes theorists in a more technical direction, arguing that technologies enable or disable certain forms of social and political interactions, due to their network system being built with a certain user performance in mind. Consequently, to understand the effect of social media on subjectivity, we must understand the sort of behaviours that have been designed into the system itself.[527]

Berry accepts the view that Fuchs presents, that social media affords its users with contexts that enable certain new forms of social and political interactions, but also argues that these social contexts that the platform creates are linked to 'associational structures' in order to achieve a certain 'performance'; not only is there the neoliberal performance that social media draws on from our social conditions, but there is a specific kind of performance that the platform wants of its users. Social media interpellates its users to inculcate certain behaviours and actions in the subject that are most conducive to its own success, whether the subject is conscious of these processes or not**.** Social media companies are not just concerned with creating the *best* product; they are also constantly researching

---

[525] Christian Fuchs, *Social media: a critical introduction.* (London: Sage, 2014), p.170.

[526] Srnicek, 2017: 49.

[527] David M. Berry, *Critical Theory and the Digital.* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p.10.

ways to create the most *addictive* products, psychologically compelling habit-forming behaviours.[528]

Berry is also concerned that the digital world is producing a destabilising amount of knowledge for its own interests, which is incongruous with our understanding of our own actions as temporary, fleeting moments subject to collective memory, and the extent to which every minute detail of such actions is being permanently traced, recorded, remembered, repackaged and commercialised. As Berry puts it, 'by collecting such previously ephemeral information as conversations, movement through cities and consumptive habits, these organisations collect our everyday memories and lifestreams and harvest them later for policing, control and exploitation. Indeed, our memory (both cultural and personal) and what might be called 'pre-thought' is also becoming a site for commercialisation'.[529]

Berry argues that this is a disconnect between a consumer culture that encourages individuals to follow their desires and feed them through consumer products which are designed to be disposable, and yet those moments of consumer action are being permanently tracked, recorded and acted upon by the algorithms at work behind the scenes of the social media experience. Consequently, this socially available permanence of actions, situated within a stored digital cultural memory, influences the consumer behaviour associated with buying new and improved models of frivolous yet trendy products. As market researchers have noted, millennials (young people between the ages of 18-35) prefer

---

[528] See Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: How the internet is changing the way we think, read and remember.* (London: Atlantic Books, 2011); Nir Eyal, *Hooked: How To Build Habit-Forming Products.* (London: Portfolio Penguin, 2014); Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Struggle to Get Inside Our Heads.* (London: Atlantic Books, 2017); Adam Alter, *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked.* (London: Penguin, 2018).

[529] Berry, 2014: 22.

to buy experiences over products: memories for the digital album, rather than fashionable products to be discarded and forgotten.[530]

Berry argues that 'the dominant apparatus serves as a means of communication creating and legitimating accepted discursive strategies…shaped not only by rationalities of computation, but also by the affordances of the medium of software itself'.[531] Specifically, Berry believes social media to inculcate behaviours conducive to neoliberalism, which he defines as 'a particular form of post-welfare politics, in which the state essentially outsources the responsibility for ensuring the 'well-being' of the population'[532], where the subject is considered a rational individual capable of fulfilling their own needs and 'looking after themselves' provided they have access to an adequately liberalised marketplace. Berry contends that neoliberal governmentality is inculcated in the everyday use of social media technology, consistent with the doctrine that state power ought to submit to the whims of the market, a framework in which 'citizens are promised new levels of freedom, consumerism, customisation, interactivity and control over their lives and possessions'.[533] Berry's concerns are that social media repackages capitalist interactivity as a form of exercising individual agency; competent and savvy utilisation of social media for one's own convenience becomes a form of freedom and is understood by the subject as such. In extreme cases, we have seen the rise of the social media star, teenage celebrities whose

---

[530] Mark Walker (2017). "EventBrite- Study: Millennials Want Experiences Over Anything". Accessed February 20, 2018. https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/blog/millennials-want-experiences-ds00/.

[531] Berry, 2014: 39.

[532] Ibid: 65.

[533] Ibid: 66.

dedication to their content allows them to amass millions of followers, often becoming millionaires due to an obsessive dedication to their own self-branding.[534]

To avoid a less impressionistic analysis, given that we are drawing on different interpretations of neoliberalism from different critical social media theorists, I here suggest that platform structures inculcating certain neoliberal behaviours can be demonstrated with four different kinds of users. Firstly, the most obvious kind of user plausibly described as neoliberal would be those that transparently utilise their profile to support their business and sell products. The "professional or business account" is the exclusive purview of business social media such as LinkedIn, but also operate on the less specialist social media apps such as Facebook and Twitter. As large corporations, celebrities and legacy media entered social media alongside the introduction of advertisements to user feeds and features such as Facebook Marketplace normalised the integration of messaging and online exchange, smaller businesses, sole traders and hobbyists began to integrate their personal and business lives through their social media activity.[535]

The second kind of user is somebody cultivating a following with the intention of becoming an influencer, somebody who does not necessarily own their own brand or product line themselves, but wants to cultivate a following significant enough that they can acquire sponsorship and brand deals as an influencer. "The influencer" is primarily using social media on a superficial level, cultivating a simulated presentation of themselves for the sake of attracting attention, but also their followers know that to support their favourite

---

[534] Taylor Lorenz, (2018) "The Atlantic: Raising A Social-Media Star". January 17. Accessed 17 November 2021. https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/01/raising-a-social-media-star/550418/. It is also important to note that when it comes to western social media stars, the vast majority are cisgender, heterosexual, rich, white, young adults, their rigorous upload schedule made possible by parents able to afford HD cameras, lights, professional sound equipment, etc., many of whom monetise their own privilege by showing their followers the 'awesome' lifestyle they enjoy, which is then accelerated by the consequential money and fame. Social media thus supplements and reproduces inequalities between platform users, as a hierarchy develops between followers, and those figures deemed worthy of following. The injunction to use social media is incentivised by the prospect of overnight celebrity status, to be handpicked as a "chosen one" by the masses.

[535] Nikki Gilliland, (2020) "30 Brands With Excellent Social Media Strategies". June 25. Accessed 14 June 2022. https://econsultancy.com/30-brands-with-excellent-social-media-strategies/

influencers is to like and share their posts, use their affiliate links to support the products that support them and participate in the parasocial relationship as a consumer. To be an influencer is to be a niche celebrity, a public relations, marketing and promotional team all-in-one, to become a "professional" social media user, and to become a "professional" user often means learning to follow the algorithm's lead, to produce content that best suits the fads that the platform is currently giving disproportionate attention, and flexibly adjusting one's brand to avoid accusations of inauthenticity.[536]

The third kind of user is an increasingly common "opportunist". This user may organically grow a following simply through habitual use of a given platform rather than for monetary gain, or alternatively they might receive attention in a brief moment - e.g. a viral tweet- and they use this sudden spike in attention to beg for money, ask for the use of affiliate links, plug another venture elsewhere on the Internet, etc.. A tweet that says something funny will often be followed up with a message along the lines of, "did you enjoy my tweet? Buy this product through one of my affiliate links, help me make rent this month!" Sometimes more shameless users will respond with their own affiliate links in the hopes of gaining unlikely or unearned attention, as if a popular moment or comment cannot be scrolled past without users actively choosing to pollute their own collective experience with even more advertisements and consumer propositions. It is increasingly normalised to see individuals place their CashApp details in their social media profiles: not directly begging for money, but increasingly normalising the idea of sending money in the direction of users that brighten your day, "buying somebody a cup of coffee" if you agreed with their thoughts or engaged with their ideas.[537]

---

[536] Loes van Driel & Delia Dumitrica (2020) 'Selling brands while staying "Authentic": The professionalization of Instagram influencers', *Convergence*, (27)1, 66-84.

[537] Abram Brown (2020) "People are begging for cash on Twitter - and Jack Dorsey says he'll donate to them" March 18. Accessed 14 June 2022. https://www.forbes.com/sites/abrambrown/2020/03/18/people-are-begging-for-cash-on-twitter-and-jack-dorsey-says-hell-donate-to-them/

From one perspective, it is a collective attempt to normalise a level of community and empathy, a collective understanding that everyone who uses the profile and contributes to it is indeed "working" to make the platform enjoyable for all, and that we should recognise each other's hidden precariousness and be willing to step in and help one another when we feel we've earned it. On the other hand, this form of social media interaction is an extension of the market mentality, the economisation of a social lifeworld of communication with digital currency transactions - even enjoying a witty commentary on current affairs or the latest celebrity controversy comes with the associated guilt of enjoying it for free, something that the platform itself is happy to let you do, but users themselves are slowly changing cultural practices simply because the platform is hoovering up the profits of attention.

The fourth person is somebody who accidentally commands attention, often for notorious reasons: for example, a woman who drove her car through protestors was subsequently interviewed by the right-wing press and suddenly found herself rapidly gaining a sympathetic anti-protestor following. The interesting aspect here is that through habitual social media use, she had internalised the opportunity to monetise this brief period of intense attention: despite being famous for fifteen minutes for ostensibly committing a crime caught on camera, she knew it would be foolish not to capitalise and started releasing merchandise associated with her actions.[538] Through the neoliberal principles inculcated on social media, both the "notorious opportunist" and her followers knew that the best way to express their support was through the purchasing of hastily made mugs and t-shirts, to show support with their wallets. This form of notorious opportunism demonstrates three interesting social aspects: firstly, the aforementioned social media inculcation of neoliberal performance principles; secondly, the complete moral indifference of the attention

[538] The Big Issue (2021) 'The mum who drove her Range Rover into Insulate Britain protesters is selling merch now', https://www.bigissue.com/news/the-mum-who-drove-her-range-rover-into-insulate-britain-is-selling-merch-now/ Last accessed: 24 December 2021.

economy; and thirdly, the blurring of legacy and new media, the bleeding of interactions informed by algorithmic platform relations into confusing events, personalities, debates and ideas that enter all mediated public networks. This is arguably symptomatic of the failures of legacy media, namely their own desperation to keep up with what is new and popular, even if this involves simply reproducing the norms that support the notorious opportunists of social media.

In this context, we see that the marketing strategy for the platform model of contemporary neoliberal capitalist relies on two supporting mythologies: that computer-mediated communication in cyberspace can produce and "house" social spheres in a manner equivalent to the physical spaces in which human beings interact with in the material world, and that neoliberal market logic - understood apolitically - is the natural way of organising such communities. That is to say, that cyberspace presents the social bonds that bind us together in the material world - e.g. the school where friends all met for the first time, with the market logic of choice and preference - e.g. friends are whomever you feel as though should be able to access your Facebook profile and those whose profile you'd like to access. Social obligations produced by intimate proximity are culturally reconfigured by the platform model as voluntary associations in the libertarian vein - communities that exist through persistent express consent that can be dissolved with the click of a cursor.

In the next section, we shall consider Paul Virilio's concept of dromology, an approach that focuses on the way that historical conceptions of speed impact our collective capacity to perceive space, and argue alongside Rosa's theory of social acceleration, that there is a danger that the platform model and its associated behaviours may facilitate and normalise the privatisation of physical spaces (synchronous with Ong's earlier concerns regarding the neoliberal capture of "zones of exception") through the provision of digital alternatives.

Dromology and Social Acceleration

Paul Virilio describes his work as *dromology*, a philosophy that concentrates on 'the importance of speed in history'.[539] His contention is that in contemporary life, 'we are confronted with the problematic of the residual abundance of the world's expanse in the face of ultra-powerful communication and telecommunication tools'.[540] Sarikakis & Thussu have since argued that 'technology, the new means of production in the virtual age of speed and freedom, is associated with the borderlessness of capitalist globalised markets' and the means by which unequal power relations are maintained and reproduced.[541] In this sense, Virilio's proclamations about the future of society, and how we shall live within an accelerating world, appear prescient.

Virilio argues that acceleration ought to be considered a political concept, claiming technological development and the notion of speed have been bound together as a social good, that to go faster is to be better, and that this notion spills out into the non-technological world and causes social effects. Virilio ties together the increasing ability for humans to travel long distances through technological advancements in transportation to the increasing speed of information communication. He likens this to the 'loss of the traveller's tale'[542], by which he means that with information being so easily accessible in the age of Google, the possibility for unique and novel interpretations is reduced; we don't need to hold large chunks of information in our heads, that may cross-pollinate and germinate new ideas, in a world where facts are permanently stored on the internet, available at our convenience. His concern mirrors Berry's critical theory of social media, wherein he argues that 'memory, history, cognition and self-presentation are all increasingly being mediated through

---

[539] Paul Virilio, *Virilio Live: Selected Interviews*. John Armitage (ed.)(London: Sage Publications, 2001), p.16.

[540] Paul Virilio, *Open Sky*. (London: Verso, 1997), p.24

[541] Sarikakis & Thussu, 2006: 2.

[542] Virilio, 1997: 25.

computational devices and it is inevitable that to manage the additional real-time stream data flows, new forms of cognitive support software-enabled systems will be called for'.[543] Much like the city gym operates to simulate the experience of muscular activity ubiquitous with antiquated forms of human life, the concern is that the future will include technology designed to allow humans to adjust to a world where memory is stored on different technology.

Virilio is concerned that this discharging of the obligation to memorise information about the world is further problematised by the growing amount of what he calls *dromospheric pollution*, 'pollution that attacks the liveliness of the subject and the mobility of the object by atrophying the journey to the point where it becomes needless'.[544] Why go to a music concert when it's been uploaded on YouTube? Why go over to a friend's house when you can chat on Facebook Messenger? Why go to football training when you can play FIFA games on the Xbox? In an accelerating world, the immediacy and accessibility of virtual experiences replaces the needs for experiences grounded in concrete situations, which both deterritorialises the subject, and allows for the stealth reclamation of public space by neoliberal politics. Consider the logic further: in a world of virtual reality headsets, will concert halls be necessary *at all*? Will cinemas? Push it further: will *schools*?

Virilio argues that as the future of social networking appears to exist online, communications technologies appear to be able to replace the old political party systems of western democracies, as individuals can access political information, raise concerns, and keep up to date with the daily activities of public figures online, and no longer need to physically attend meetings.[545] Virilio's worries appear increasingly supported by what American political scientists refer to as the rise of the 'apartisan', a citizen interested and active in politics, but

---

[543] Berry, 2014: 174-175.

[544] Virilio, 1997: 34.

[545] Virilio, 1997: 80-83.

without party alignment.[546] He invites us to consider the sociological effects of this virtualisation of social space on our own freedom of perception, claiming that 'noise pollution [is] being doubled more often than not by a discreet pollution of our vision of the world through the sundry tools of communication'.[547] As the world becomes more increasingly mediated, the poorer our ability to communicate clearly and concisely, and arrange the information sent our way into a coherent pattern of activity; the wider our letterbox, the more junk mail will fall on our doormat, and the harder it is to separate urgent notices sent by friends from worthless drivel sent by con artists. If we consider the Cambridge Analytica scandal, in which a data-driven marketing company used Facebook to spread tailor-made political propaganda to algorithmically-determined population sets, Virilio's concept appears integral to any complete political analysis of social media.[548]

Virilio is concerned that both the aforementioned 'dromological pollution'[549] clouds the judgement of the subject, and the retrenchment of public space by a combination of both neoliberal governmentality which is wont to privatise, and virtual spaces which make concrete spaces feel antiquated and redundant, leaves the citizen of nowhere without political recourse.[550] Let us return to Dave M. Berry's exploration of virtual space. Berry explains that software has two faces: the commodity and the mechanism. The commodity is accessible via the surface of the interface and provides a service or function, whereas the level of the mechanism is accessible via textual source code, containing the functions

---

[546] Jeffrey J. Mondak & Karen D. Halperin (2008) 'A Framework for the Study of Personality and Political Behavior,' *British Journal of Political Science*, 38 (2): 335-362.

[547] Virilio, 1997: 96.

[548] Carole Cadwalladr & Emma Graham-Harrison (2018) Facebook and Cambridge Analytica face mounting pressure over data scandal. Accessed March 22, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/18/cambridge-analytica-and-facebook-accused-of-misleading-mps-over-data-breach.

[549] Virilio, 1997: 34.

[550] Virilio, 2001: 24. 'Space is under threat. Not only matter is threatened, but space too is being destroyed. But it is being rebuilt at the same time. This is what I started to feel in the 1960's, and it was by then I got the foreboding of cyberspace! …the reason why space is critical is because it is becoming virtual space'.

'hidden' in the software, the layer of coding that is hidden from the user's interactional experience with the software.[551] Similarly, when zoologists encounter a new species of animal, generally its Linnaeusian classification can be determined by its appearance and behaviour, but to understand how the species "lives" in another sense, a biologist would have to familiarise herself with the internal systems of the organism.

Early sceptical voices in the internet studies literature argued that the fact that the internet's growing speed of access would lead to computer-mediated communication being primarily devoted to venting emotions and expressing hasty opinions[552] and Virilio argued that 'with the sudden but subtle 'inflation of the present', of a present globalised by teletechnologies, present time occupies centre stage not only of history (between past and future), but especially of the geography of the globe'.[553] Both prophetic declarations could have been made in direct response to the sociological effects of Twitter.[554]

Twitter presents its users with a constant real-time flow of tweets, where the user always uses the app in the present, but content always exists in the past; the second you send a tweet, the tweet exists '1 second ago', boxed into itself, archived and stored, to be perused by those active on Twitter at the time, and unless retweeted, favourited, and thus tangentially preserved across time, is almost immediately forgotten, despite its retention in the digital

---

[551] Berry, 2014: 69.

[552] Jeffrey B. Abramson, F. Christopher Arterton, and Gary R. Orren, *The Electronic Commonwealth: The Impact of New Media Technologies on Democratic Politics.* (New York: Basic Books, 1988)

[553] Virilio, 1997: 135.

[554] For those unfamiliar with Twitter, here are its key properties: '[1] a real time medium; [2] information flows through it, if you miss it then the information passes by (although through data resellers you can purchase a Twitter archive and replay it); [3] it is based around an interest graph (things people find interesting rather than friends or colleagues); [4] it is surprisingly flexible, if terse, and even with the 140 character restriction, the content of the tweet supports URLS, links to any other form of media (e.g. web/photos/videos), etc.; [5] the entire tweet (as a JSON data entity) can carry location data, user data and other contextual data that makes it extremely powerful; [6] it has little active memory as a system, until 2012 you could only retrieve the most recent 3,200 tweets per person…[7] Twitter has a client/server structure rather than a peer-to-peer architecture, so should Twitter go down, then so would the ability to share on the network'. Berry, 2014: 77-78.

memory of the servers[555]. By unpacking Twitter in such detail, Berry wishes to underline the extent to which users remain generally unaware of the extent to which software companies can disconnect how we experience social media from its underlying intentions and functions, thus giving a (false) impression to the user that they are ultimately in control of their use of the service.[556] Berry and Virilio's approaches are compatible, insofar as the user's bombardment with information in real-time is a direct consequence of dromological acceleration, the assumption that we need to be hit with things fast, regardless of its quality. Berry claims that this creates a need for 'hyper attention', where the user has to adjust to the effect required to manage and comprehend the speediness of the information being made accessible by social media systems, as well as the effective dimension, that 'the user is expected to desire the real-time stream, to be in it, to follow it, and to participate in it, and where the user opts out, the technical devices are being developed to maintain this too through curation, filtering and notification systems'.[557] Twitter includes a "while you were away" function, where certain tweets from individuals that a user follows with more close attention are drawn up from the chasm of server memory, and presented outside of the real-time feed, as nuggets of wisdom as significant as important news bulletins, and further inculcating the idea that to be away from one's Twitter feed is to necessarily miss out on something good.[558] This aspect of Twitter belies the central political apprehension that

---

[555] Berry, 2014: 80.

[556] Ibid: 137-138.

[557] Ibid: 172-173.

[558] Eric Barker, (2016) TIME Magazine: This Is The Best Way to Overcome Fear of Missing Out. June 7. Accessed April 16, 2018. http://time.com/4358140/overcome-fomo/ : '"the uneasy and sometimes all-consuming feeling that you're missing out – that your peers are doing, in the know about, or in possession of more or something better than you". Under this framing of FoMO, nearly three quarters of young adults reported they experienced the phenomenon.'

Virilio raises in his philosophy of dromology: technology has become so fast as to become disorientating for the subject.[559]

Virilio's concerns applied to an analysis of social media offers both a humbling yet potentially optimistic analysis. On the one hand, it may be a daunting prospect to appreciate that humanity is incapable of placing the internet genie back in its bottle without global technological regression (not to mention a complete structural transformation of the world economy); on the other hand, social media technologies are also beyond the ideological control of singular hegemonic institutions, for the speed at which information travels across the internet necessarily precludes the possibilities of a totalising control of information flow. This may provide possibilities for effective counter-hegemonic politics to emerge online. Although, it is worth making this assertion with the caveat that new research shows that 'fake news' travels on average six times faster than accurate reporting on Twitter, a concerning consequence of dromospheric pollution.[560]

Despite the digital possibilities, Virilio maintains that for all the virtual spaces that have emerged in contemporary life, it is important to return to a localised and concrete space where public political demands can be heard, and face-to-face discussions may take place. He is concerned that 'we're entering into a society without rights, a 'non-rights' society, because we're entering a society of the non-place, and because the political man was connected to the discrimination of a place. The loss of a place is, alas, generally the loss of rights'.[561] My rights are determined by my relationship with the UK government, as a resident citizen of the country. In a world where my global location becomes increasingly irrelevant, and my

---

[559] Virilio, 2001: 83. 'Politics is the art of the impossible…but what is special about these technologies is that that they are technologies of the impossible, of that which is impossible for humans. Humans may be considered to control them by implementing them, but once they are implemented they can no longer be controlled; the very speed of their operations elude human control'.

[560] Chris Stokel-Walker (2018) New Scientist: Fake news travels six times faster than the truth on Twitter. Accessed March 26, 2018. https://www.newscientist.com/article/2163226-fake-news-travels-six-times-faster-than-the-truth-on-twitter/.

[561] Virilio, 2001: 80-81.

reliance on a virtual representation of myself for gainful employment and communication increases, Virilio's warning is that concrete political movements for protecting both my online and offline rights may recede with public space.[562] Social media, in accordance with neoliberal performance, is incentivised to keep our experiences individualised and constantly digitally active; an emancipatory politics, therefore, will reject the implicit individualising culture, and embrace the tools of social media to build collectives formed from this activity, that will then make their political demands explicit on the street.

Virilio's work is perhaps the most specific precursor to the socio-technological problems that our technospheric approach to politics intends to investigate. We cannot move on from dromology without acknowledging our earlier discussion of Rosa's concept of social acceleration, and the compatibility between the two views. Comparatively, Virilio is more pessimistic and politically minded, painting the picture of overwhelmed societies dominated by the technological whims of capitalism, whereas Rosa maintains that the consequences of acceleration for the subject may be mitigated by certain social practices. For the former, acceleration is a swirling force that takes the ground from beneath us, turning concrete foundations into quicksand and slowly but surely dragging us down into the abyss; for the latter, the swirling force is a formidable inevitability of living in modernity, but as modern subjects, it is neither practical nor truly desirable to return to a world without formal technological progress, and thus with adequate social organisation, acceleration is a force with which we may ultimately reckon and accommodate.

Ultimately, the debate rests on the possibility of democratic intervention and regulation of our communications technology infrastructure: on the individual level we are increasingly compelled to slowly adopt new technologies and change our habits to shape the

[562] This notion of a "people without space" has become a chilling prospect exacerbated by climate change. See Stuti Mishra (2021) The Independent: Tuvalu investigating how to stay a country if it is submerged by rising sea levels. Accessed 1 December 2021. https://www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/news/tuvalu-sea-level-rise-state-cop26-b1955865.html

broader needs of market society, but whilst these nudges occur, there remains the possibility of politicising technology through collective action such that digital platforms are reorganised, restructured and regulated to benefit the workers, end users and society more generally. The political opportunity is found in the decoupling of interests between social media platforms and neoliberal capitalism more generally, so it is important that any regulation does not increase targeted censorship under the guise of civility.

In this chapter, we have seen how the platform capitalist model used by social media companies leads to the technology being designed with certain preferential user behaviours in mind, those behaviours which are compliant with neoliberal politics, where users are market actors that seek to self-brand, encouraged to store their social memories and connections, forgoing their personal privacy (in an inadvertently permanent way), obscured by the functional convenience of the platform. In the next chapter, I shall argue that the social, economic and technical factors that intersect on social media produce a hypersubject, a form of harried, knowledge-conscious, information-anxious subjectivity constantly moving between affective intensities determined by their relationship to social media events, groups and associations. Whilst hypersubjectivity lends itself to the reproduction of neoliberal performance principles, there also exists opportunities for undermining the ideological status quo through its capacity to form new collectivities across temporal and spatial distances and produce new forms of collective communication, identification and remembrance.

7. Hypersubjectivity and the Return of the Political

'People talk about a new society. Would it not be more accurate to fear a new state, founded on the political use of information, ruling over a population enclosed in the bubbles it has inflated, and in such a way that each mouth believes its bubbles come out of it?'[563]

'Where there was disconsolation, there will now be media performance'.[564]

In this chapter, I shall argue that social media interpellates a *hypersubject*, where the accessibility of information is experienced as a form of freedom through speed, per Virilio's theory of dromology, and determined by the logic of platform capitalism, which reproduces behaviours conducive to neoliberal governmentality, characterised by hypermodulation, as described by Pettman, as a flattening of the user's emotional states through an ongoing series of distracting content. However, by examining social media as a social metaphor, we may argue that social media inadvertently provides an insight into our broader collective social imaginary and opens up possibilities for imagining alternative modes of political communication and action.

The chapter is comprised of the following sections: 'Interpellation as Infinite Distraction', 'Social Media as Hyperreality' and 'The "Free" Subject of Social Media'. Firstly, I consider Pettmann's account of social media "hyper-modulating" the user, and apply Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality to our interactions with social media, to construct a social field of overlapping and interconnecting physical and digital spaces, in which mastery

563 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*. (London: Verso, 1947/2014), p.823.

564 Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, p.470.

of the latter is interpreted by the user as a form of freedom. I conclude the chapter by arguing that the "free" subject of social media, whilst inculcated by platforms into reproducing neoliberal performance principles, is also given the space for the relitigation of all historical, social, political and economic questions, and thus capable of radical transformations in perspectives, alignments and preferences - both an opportunity and problem for radical democracy.

Interpellation Through Infinite Distraction

Much like the interpellation of a subject, when it comes to the journey through cultural expectations and interactions with ideological content, no user's experience of social media is the same. 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.'[565]

Pettman argues that contemporary critical theory has yet to come to terms with how social media has influenced subjectivity. He 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'[566]. Pettman appeals to the conceptual frameworks of thinkers like Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard, the latter to whom we shall return, 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

[565] Pettman, 2017: xi-xii.

[566] Ibid: 3.

eroded and in their place, a subject whose identity is contingent on its consumption, circulation and production of images for a broader technological apparatus.[567]

Contra accounts of social media that associate the play labour of Fuchs with an idea that using social media is fun for the subject:

> the "ecstasy" afforded by social media is decidedly not an overwhelming thrill or sense of bliss, but rather the homeopathic parceling of tiny and banal moments of recognition, reassurance, ego reinforcement, humblebragging, notoriety, curiosity, shame, and a galaxy of other modest- but collectively significant- affects.[568]

Linking this account of social media to Pettman's prior conversation surrounding subjectivity, he makes the compelling claim that social media is not used for enjoyment, or even communication, but rather to reinforce our identities, and ensure our visibility to our peers. Social media interpellates the subject, and the recognition of the interpellative call is evidenced by 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'.[569] 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, in this 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. From this perspective, Fuchs' play labour account is almost too optimistic: curating a social media

---

[567] Ibid: 6.

[568] Ibid: 10.

[569] Ibid: 10.

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.

Pettman argues that the contemporary subject is being guided by 'hypermodulation: the attempt to distract us from the fact that we are indeed being synchronised to an unprecedented degree'.[570] 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, compartmentalised, 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. In this sense, social media maps an incomplete and fragmented social world to the extent that the subject can only form a cohesive sense of identification by curating their feed to serve as an echo chamber.

Schement & Curtis argue that 'when messages filtered through the media environment come unconnected, or as bits without organic integrity, the media environment exhibits fragmentation', which 'influences the climate of ideas within which we form values and construct reality'.[571] The contemporary hypersubject, therefore, is not the fully-formed subject of Althusser; instead of the conventional understanding 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

---

[570] Ibid: 130.

[571] Jorge Reina Schement & Terry Curtis, *Tendencies and Tensions of the Information Age: The Production and Distribution of Information in the United States.* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction 1997), p.120.

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.[572]

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.

Recall that Althusser's original account of an ideological state apparatus conventionally provides an individual with a collection of facts (and factoids) that link together to form a worldview that rationalises and naturalises the status quo. The implication of Pettman's provocation is that social media may be interpreted as a uniquely unconventional ISA, in that it 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. As seen in the example of police abuse of African-Americans, old communications ISAs simply chose not to communicate this information: the new form of communications ISA shows you, but in a way that makes the world appear chaotic, random and insusceptible to change.

Furthermore, by showing all information, and presenting it all with the same levels of urgency and immediacy, induces a 'flattening' affect for the user: 'matters of potentially historic import, like a civil rights issue…are now flattened into the same homogeneous,

---

[572] Pettman, 2017: 11.

empty digital space as a cute critter or an obnoxious celebrity'.[573] He argues that this is a more sophisticated form of propaganda, and cites the example that during certain civil rights protests, when violence flared up, rather than showing the spectacle of police brutality, television broadcasts would cut away to frivolity, such as rerunning the Miss America Beauty Pageant instead. Pettman's point is that in contemporary media, the censorious reactionary approach no longer exists in modern liberal democracies, but rather an active reactionary approach: the media will show us the spectacle of the violence, but withhold context, show those suffering at the hands of the police as deserving criminals; it is customary to see news clips where the journalist will report from beside the police, rather than beside the protestors themselves, framing the situation as an "attack on us" by the protestors rather than the police "clamping down on us" by way of coercively quelling dissent. By receiving these various interpretations and media representations of the same event from different perspectives, the event itself, and indeed the larger social world, appears 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'.[574] 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

---

[573] Ibid: 35.

[574] Ibid: 29-30, my emphasis.

experience the same emotional state because of the platform's active intervention and manipulation'.[575] 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.

Returning to the psychological implications for the subject, Pettman 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'[576] leads to a blurring of events into individual moments that prompt virtual reactions; a like, a love-heart, a share, a retweet. Pettman cites a passage by Eric Fromm to explain why this process of flattening subjects into passivity through social media is conducive to the capitalist status quo:

> Modern capitalism needs men who co-operate smoothly and in large numbers; who want to consume more and more; and whose tastes are standardised and can be easily influenced and anticipated. It needs men who feel free and independent, not subject to any authority or principle or conscience- yet willing to be commanded, to do what is expected of them, to fit into the social machine without friction; who can be guided without force, led without leaders, prompted without aim- except the one to make good, to be on the move, to function, to go ahead.[577]

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

---

[575] Ibid: 82-84.

[576] Ibid: 37.

[577] Eric Fromm, *The Art of Loving.* (New York: Harper, 1956), p.85.

from distraction to distraction.[578] 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 effect of the technospheric condition, exacerbated by the incentive structure of the platform model.

Social Media as Hyperreality

Post-truth politics would hardly surprise Jean Baudrillard. For the "godfather of postmodernism", the world is hyperreal. Hyperreality is defined as 'the generation by models of a real without origin or reality'[579] and is a consequence of living in technologically developed modern societies. Hyperreality is a form of social reality that is created through signs, where their meaning is understood through models, rather than a representation of the 'real', and is experienced as more real than reality itself. Baudrillard's contention was that hyperreality was a consequence of the 'ecstasy' of communication, a world where 'meaning is not lacking. There is *too much* of it. Information engorges the world'.[580] This notion captures the same phenomenon as Virilio's dromospheric pollution, whilst Pettman's hypermodulation provides an account of hyperreality from the perspective of the hypersubject.

To illustrate the idea of hyperreality, Baudrillard gives the example of Disneyland, California; a tourist attraction which is presented as fantastic simulation, i.e. this is a representation of what Disneyland is like, presented in the form of a theme park; you

---

[578] Future research could be done into the link between this state and what Mark Fisher termed 'depressive hedonia', the state of constant, unfulfilled, pleasure-seeking found amongst digital natives when they engage with habitual technologies. See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), pp.21-25.

[579] Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*. 2nd edition. Mark Poster (ed.) (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p.1.

[580] Chris Horrocks and Zoran Jevtic, *Baudrillard: A Graphic Guide.* (London: Icon Books, 2012), p.149.

recognise the Disneyland castle from the movie studio's logo; but of course, there is no real Disneyland; there is no 'real' castle; the theme park is a model of fiction. Baudrillard, known for his hyperbolic rhetoric, argues that 'America' and 'Los Angeles' similarly operate as simulations:

> Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle. The Disneyland imaginary is neither true nor false: it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real.[581]

Baudrillard is gesturing at a sociological phenomenon which may parallel social media: the intentional fiction that belies the absence of reality elsewhere. Leaving his bombastic claims about the broader unreality of America aside, let us consider the notion of hyperreality as it pertains to social media.

Social media is a digital space where users must intentionally design a version of themselves that they deem suitable for circulation amongst their peers: users understand that social media is a model, designed to represent the social circles in which we really exist offline. But what happens when as users we must choose the objects, images and text that is supposed to represent us? We become aware that the social media version of ourselves will always be a poor imitation of the real thing; and yet, we peruse the profiles of others, and make judgements about them based on what they upload. Furthermore, it leads to existential questions about the integrity of our identities altogether: if I am not the preferences, signs and text that I associated with myself when I created my social media profile, and my profile requires continuous curation, is it coherent to think of myself as having a stable identity at

[581] Ibid: 175.

all? The hyperreality of social media betrays the notion of the individual as the origin of meaning: as we explicitly like and dislike consumer products, sports teams and movies on our visible internet feeds, we reveal the process of subject formation; we come to understand that we understand ourselves through these identifications.

Consider the recent popularity of Instagram fitness "influencers", freelance models and personal trainers selectively uploading pictures of their bodies in perfect shape, perfectly lit, often in conjunction with advice ranging from gym technique to dieting tips, embedded with lucrative product placements. When an influenced user applies these tips in real life, desiring the projected lifestyle of the influencer, they are judging their real selves by the standards of a simulated version of someone else. Social media, therefore, is hyperreal to the extent that an influencer's social expectations are being affected by images that simulate an idea of how we ought to live: we wish to emulate a lifestyle that never originally existed.

Consider the Facebook "event", a future meeting scheduled on a collective calendar, where you can scroll through those who have marked their future attendance. The fact that you may look at who is going, and decide not to go, is for the Facebook simulation of the event to affect the composition of the real event: in some instances, events may be cancelled for failing to drum up sufficient Facebook interest. The event dies before it occurs, or perhaps, occurs entirely at the level of simulation. Baudrillard refers to hyperreal events, defined as those events that are 'no longer having any particular contents or aims, but indefinitely refracted by each other…[and part of] a referential order which can only dominate a determined world but which can do nothing about the indefinite recurrence of simulation'.[582]

Baudrillard's notion of the indefinitely refracted referential order captures the contemporary proliferation of internet memes; ideas, images or video files that are shared

[582] Ibid: 182.

from person to person online until they "go viral", becoming massively popular for a short period of time where seemingly everyone on social media has seen an iteration. These memes are often turned in on themselves or used as an "in-joke" discourse with which to convey current affairs or personal anecdotes. These second-order commentaries are often impenetrable to those without the pre-requisite context for appreciating the conveyed message, and yet these memes-about-memes circulate alongside the original meme, producing many cases where it is impossible on first sight to determine the meme's original iteration. Furthermore, with the ubiquity of social media exposing more people than ever before to the world of memes, these once-obscure signs have now become sufficiently mainstream that even social commentators feel comfortable sharing or referencing them. Memes have leapt off the computer screen and embedded themselves into conventional interpretations of society, which Baudrillard deems an inevitable process of hyperreality.

Baudrillard demonstrates this idea by inviting the reader to consider the prospect of organising a fake hold-up in a bank, arguing that even if you enter with harmless (but convincing) weaponry and take a reliable hostage (perhaps a friend who works as a teller), there is an inevitable collapse of the simulation into the real, 'one of whose functions is precisely to devour every attempt at simulation, to reduce everything to some reality'[583]; the police would be called, and you could get into *real* trouble. This maelstrom of fiction blending with reality explains the bizarre and curious world of catfishing, the phenomena where individuals meet offline after communicating online in a romantic capacity, only to find that one or both are nothing like the way they portray themselves online.

But let us consider an alternative example: a fake hold-up in a movie. If we organise a fake hold-up on a studio lot, with fake hostages, on a set designed to look exactly like a bank, then the simulation can retain its integrity, so long as everyone plays their role with suitable

[583] Ibid: 181.

conviction. Social media could be utilised in such a fashion, as a space where political alternatives can be explored, and roles can be interchanged because those involved are committed to the spectacle, to see if the simulation mirrors anything that may resemble a desirable alternative to the status quo. Unfortunately for us, social media in its current form resembles the former, a mixture of people playing intentionally simulated roles of themselves alongside users earnestly attempting to present their authentic selves within the limits of the technology. For Baudrillard, one of the core experiential effects of hyperreality on the subject is that

> each individual sees himself promoted to the controls of a hypothetical machine, isolated in a position of perfect sovereignty, at an infinite distance from his original universe; that is to say, in the same position as the astronaut in the bubble, existing in a state of weightlessness which compels the individual to remain in perpetual orbital flight and to maintain sufficient speed in zero gravity to avoid crashing into his planet of origin.[584]

Social media's hyperreal condition is thus demonstrated by the frictionless travel of the subject across virtual space, relentlessly encountering real-time information feeds, where the subject feels in complete control of their social media experience if they maintain their current speed of access and are diligent in their habitual usage, and curation of their profile. Baudrillard goes as far with his idea of the hyperreal to ask 'what is reality dissolved before our very eyes? Not into nothingness, but into the more real than real (the triumph of simulacra)?'.[585] If we reject the nihilistic impulse in Baudrillard's work, which lends itself to claims that there is no truth to be uncovered from memetic discourse, from the ways in which we communicate through our profiles, or in society altogether, we may instead garner insight from this perceived lack of a truth to uncover. None of the aforementioned political theorists (nor I) would share Baudrillard's commitment to the view that the whole of reality

---

[584] Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstacy of Communication*. (trans.) Bernard Schutze & Caroline Schutze. (New York: Semiotext(e), 1998), p.13.

[585] Ibid: 27.

is hyperreal, to the extent that ideology no longer operates, and it may belie a misunderstanding of its function.

Slavoj Zizek has noted that Baudrillard's postmodern vision of a world without the real is symptomatic of a broader error made in regards to ideology in contemporary political theory: bluntly put, Baudrillard may see the world as post-ideological precisely because that is the very effect of ideology itself.[586] A more generous reading of Baudrillard would be that he is alluding to the fact that neoliberal capitalism has become so prevalent in contemporary societies, that the difference between the real social conditions which we inhabit, and the superficially represented models of social reality found in the pop culture of movies, television and the internet, are blurring the boundaries such that the real is indistinguishable from its image. Nevertheless, his worldview remains incongruous with the unitary subject produced by ideology in Althusser's conventional theory, appearing closer to Pettman's fragmented subject. Baudrillard claims that in our hyperreal social world, culture is reduced to the consumption of signs and symbols[587]; purchasing clothes with the designer label, the latest trendy gadget, watching the latest prestige drama, or smaller acts of symbolic exchange, such as retweeting memes, or as noted when interrogating Berry's work, buying experiences to be shared on social media. Baudrillard saw consumer capitalism, and the accompanying neoliberal governmentality that reinforced it, as totalising, precisely because he abandoned ideology-critique, thinking that politics, in any meaningful sense, was over.[588] By contrast, our approach reveals what Baudrillard's 'anti-sociology'[589] cannot: hyperreality is

---

[586] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. (London: Verso, 1989) p.33. 'If our concept of ideology remains the classic one in which the illusion is located in knowledge, then today's society must appear post-ideological: the prevailing ideology is that of cynicism; people no longer believe in ideological truth; they do not take ideological propositions seriously. The fundamental level of ideology, however, is not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself. And at this level, we are of course far from being a post-ideological society'.

[587] Horrocks and Jevtic, 2011: p.50.

[588] Ibid: p.143.

[589] Ibid: p.134.

a contingent state of affairs, brought about by a contestable economic model, which in the case of social media may contain the tools for contesting that very model, by simulating the possible freedom of a world without it.

In the next section, I shall explore the technological contingencies that lead to the hypersubject experiencing their interpellation as a form of freedom and argue that until there is a complete monopolism of the market, and as such the logic of platform capitalism continues to apply to Silicon Valley, social media, by its ambivalence to the content circulating on its platforms, retains its potential as a site of emancipatory politics.

The "Free" Subject of Social Media

'Now we life fully in social media times, it has become pertinent to do precisely that: link techne with psyche'[590]

Following the conditions of ideological interpellation already outlined, I argue the hypersubject experiences interaction with the social media apparatus as a form of freedom. As Andrejevic has noted, the ideologies surrounding the internet have historically posited internet access as a form of informational freedom since its early commercialisation by telecommunications companies: 'cyberspace is offered to us as an autonomous world, one freed from any determinate relation to the material world and one that therefore develops according to its own immanent logic'.[591]

Andrejevic argues that cyberspace was presented as a world separate from physical reality, in which the collective human imagination is chronicled, and private fantasies can be explored in the absence of visible public scrutiny. Furthermore, Sarikakis & Thussu explain

---

[590] Geert Lovink, *Sad By Design,* p.23.

[591] Mark Andrejevic, (2006) 'Apprehensions of the Future: Internet Aesthetics and Ideology,' in *Ideologies of the Internet*, pp.19-35. (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press) p.22.

that this perceived autonomy of the online world from the natural one 'is the precondition of its subjugation to human control: because cyberspace is not 'really' nature, humans can do with it as they will. Both impulses- emancipation and comprehensive control; freedom and domination- are embedded in the promise of the digital aesthetic'.[592] Whilst the natural world requires intergenerational preservation and is made competitive by resource scarcity and the economic system with which these resources are distributed, cyberspace supposedly provides a world without such concerns. The internet becomes a seemingly infinite container of cultural artefacts, a place of pure escapism where users can surf across the content at their own whim, driven by their desirous impulses, and do and say what they want in this online world without restriction or consequence.

Andrejevic claims that the conceptual character of internet-specific neoliberalism centres around the normative importance of 'interactivity', an inherently progressive aspect of CMC, because it challenges the conventions of one-way, top-down mass media, and as such, autonomy on the internet mirrors the desire to break down participatory barriers and deconstruct hierarchies that exist in public life.[593] The experiential force of interactivity as an operative concept linked to feelings of control and power for the subject can be found in the work of Rosanne Stone, where she writes that 'interaction is the physical concretisation of a desire to escape the flatness and merge into the created system…it is the sense of unlimited power which the dis/embodied simulation produces'.[594] In the real world, we are limited by our physical, social and economic circumstances, but the internet appears to offer infinite possibilities.

---

[592] Sarikakis & Thussu, 2006: 23.

[593] Andrejevic, 2006: 21.

[594] Rosanne A. Stone. (2000) 'Will the real body please stand up? Boundary stories about virtual cultures,' In *The cybercultures reader*, edited by David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, pp.504-528. London: Routledge, p.521.

When we compose a tweet, upload an image to Instagram, or a video to YouTube, or edit our Facebook profile, the line between the creator of these systems and their users is blurred. In theory, those employed by Facebook are creating Facebook, at least in the mechanistic sense, but in terms of the commodity, the users are integral; a social media platform without active users is an empty husk of insignificant value. Indeed, that there is a blurring of the hierarchies between 'author and reader, creator and viewer' means that the 'interactive aesthetic' serves to make it difficult to trace these power dynamics. Rather than actively confronting the hierarchies that exist in capitalist societies, Andrejevic argues that the internet serves the function of obscuring these material relations of domination:

> The consumer is hailed as increasingly active and participatory, and the spaces of leisure, work, and domesticity start to merge, thanks to networked technology that allows users to work from home, to shop from work, and to transform the rhythms of their daily lives into value-generating demographic information.[595]

The internet is a communications tool advertised as an entertainment system, such that the passive subject of neoliberal capitalism can divest their libidinal urges and their frustrations and channel these impulses into video games, communications with strangers or friends, consumable entertainment products, etc. It is no surprise that rather than turning into a global public sphere, the internet became the world's largest stockist of pornographic material almost immediately. If the idea was that the internet would provide a cultural container in which the alienated subject could live out private desires without public consequence, then it has proven false: for the first generation of digital natives, for whom internet communications are ubiquitous and learned in concert with real-world human interactions, the internet provides a space for the augmentation of reality; social media operates concurrently with the material world.

---

[595] Andrejevic, 2006: 27.

Ultimately, what a direct translation of Baudrillard's prophetic vision of the hyperreal misses is the interpellation of the hypersubject, that the ubiquity of hyperreal systems would lead to a subjectivity capable of accommodating and normalising this blend of fiction and reality such that it would be *inculcated with the critical tools which may prove capable of subverting these technologies against the ideological scaffolding that provides their structural support.* If social media provides the conditions for the interpellation of a hypersubject, it provides us with two layers: hypermodulation presents the reality of our unfreedom but in a chaotic way which in certain circumstances engenders passivity (albeit with an accompanying affective intensity), but also the dromological acceleration of social media presents us with a simulation of a possible freedom, where we may globally connect with everyone else effortlessly without the perceived intrusion of surveillance states or capitalism slowing down the process of information flow. Whilst users new to social media experience hypersubjectivity as almost exclusively disorientating and overwhelming, digital natives and proficient early adopters may marshal these systems and harness social media for their own creative ends.

The conditions that produce the hypersubject may provide the virtual space for an emergent collective political imagination, capable of bending the hyperreality of social media in on itself to shape a simulation of a possible future freedom.[596] For digital natives, social media platforms are tools they have used their entire lives, and their ability to disseminate memes, collectively organise, and manage the endless flow of information through their profiles becomes second nature, whilst being simultaneously unintelligible to those unfamiliar or uncomfortable with these technologies. Consider the ersatz speculations of right-wing conspiracy theorists in response to the 'March for Our Lives' teenagers of Parkland, Florida. David Hogg and Emma Gonzalez, two high-profile activists and school shooting survivors,

[596] Rosanne A. Stone has previously explored this possibility in her own conceptual terms: '[I]n technosociality, the social world of virtual culture…The technosocial subject is able to successfully to navigate through this treacherous new world. S/he is constituted as part of the evolution of communications technology and of the human organism, in a time in which technology and organism are collapsing, imploding, into each other'. Stone, ibid: 523.

were theorised to be 'crisis actors' according to social media fantasists: what else could plausibly explain how articulate they were, and how expertly they prompted political action through satirical tweeting, producing viral content, and amassing online followings? The kids were *too good at digital politics*; they *had* to be on marionette strings, servants of clandestine liberal puppeteers.[597]

As with all technological advancements, there are those who believe that as social media shifts the way in which humans communicate, it changes something fundamental about human experience itself: according to Henk Oosterling's reading of Sloterdijk

> modern life has undergone a 'silent takeover': technology has converted- explicated- modern man's soul without his realising it…man has become a 'psycho-technological' and 'techno-psychological' being. Media are incorporated to the point of becoming indispensable means of subsistence. As a result, our moral categories are transformed… nowadays freedom is synonymous with frictionless immersion in a media environment. Enforcing your own rules- *auto-nomos*- is transformed into a will to access and exposure.[598]

These pronouncements may seem excessive, but they adhere to a common concern about the relationship between humans and their technology, especially when older generations consider the constant interaction of young children with devices they wield with bewildering mastery. In 2011, the United Nations declared that access to the internet is a human right, which suggests a growing understanding that internet access is becoming more integral to fulfilling one's capacities as an autonomous agent in the modern world.[599]

---

[597] Brian Resnick (2018) "Vox: Conspiracy theories flourished after the Parkland shooting. Here's why." Accessed March 26, 2018. https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2018/2/26/17045560/parkland-shooting-conspiracy-theories-psychology.

[598] Henk Oosterling, 2007. 'Interest and Excess of Modern Man's Radical Mediocrity: Rescaling Sloterdijk's Grandoise Aesthetic Strategy,' *Cultural Politics*, 3(3), p.372.

[599] Jenny Wilson (2011) UN Report Declares Internet Access A Human Right. Accessed 2017. http://techland.time.com/2011/06/07/united-nations-report-declares-internet-access-a-human-right/.

Matthew Flisfeder's "new structuralist" interpretation of social media takes Zizek's critique of the (Baudrillardian) postmodern further in its application to social media and society.[600] Where others see the creeping totalisation of communication by algorithmic intrusion, commercialisation and digital hierarchies of influence, Flisfeder reminds us that the initial early years of the internet were those most heavily associated with ideas of information overload - social media, for all their platform capitalist limitations, are popular precisely because they serve as a necessary functional corrective - they break the burdensome internet down into consumable chunks - and thus although I argue they remain systems of disorientation, hypermodulation, and (data) exploitation, their structures maintain the possibility of a shared coherent understanding of the social (which ought not to be confused with explicitly reinforcing a hegemonic discourse). As Flisfeder suggests, 'to realise a truly social media, we must use the concept to bring to the surface the lack in the realm of the social itself'.[601]

Flisfeder argues that social media functions as a metaphor and measuring stick that can be used to compare and assess the antisocial elements in society, and that social media, as part of our contemporary technical configuration, may well be reconfigured to bring out democratising and emancipatory social elements. Running alongside our technospheric account of ideology, Flisfeder follows a Zizekian methodology that concentrates on the way social media reproduces desire and enjoyment, which he argues must also be necessary components of ideology. We have so far created a quite stark picture of social media, and Flisfeder's approach renders plausible both the universal appeal of social media in practice and the alternative "pro-social" , counter-hegemonic social media that could exist in its place.

---

[600] Matthew Flisfeder, *Algorithmic Desire: Toward A New Structuralist Theory of Social Media.* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2021).

[601] Flisfeder, ibid, p.3.

Conceiving of social media as metaphor as well as computer-mediated communication, as a proxy for the social connectivity that we would prefer existed more readily in our everyday lives, exposes the hidden necessity that ideology presents as mere contingency; our flippant, speedy communications with strangers, showing off what we're got up to, what we want to do and see and what we think about current events, all presented as disposable fun, is in fact a global demonstration of our collective desire to connect. This connection, however, has been depoliticised: for all the excitement surrounding the "social media revolutions" of the Arab Spring, the real victors were the Silicon Valley billionaires whose technological products were now valorised as arbiters and custodians of international freedom, lending legitimacy to its normalisation and perpetuating the notion of a thriving digital democratic public sphere, that when "the people" are connected, they will be heard.[602]

Social media provides the structure to the otherwise chaotic information overload of the internet, through both its platform interface and the design of its algorithm, so if we accept the original premise that social acceleration and information overload are problems that cause information anxiety, then surely social media is a potential genuine solution to an earlier socio-technical problem? As Flisfeder suggests, 'is is the problem here the structure that social media gives to the internet, or is it perhaps instead a question of who is in control?'[603]

As we have already established, social media operates under platform capitalist principles for profit-making, incorporating algorithmic structures that reproduce neoliberal performance principles to ensure the sharing of data and the best possible product to sell to

---

[602] Flisfeder, ibid, p.52. For cautiously optimistic accounts of social media's implementation during the Arab Spring and other grassroots movements globally, see Joss Hands, *@ is For Activism: Dissent, Resistance and Rebellion in Digital Culture.* (London: Pluto Press, 2010); Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and tear gas: the power and fragility of networked protest.* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2017).

[603] Flisfeder, ibid, p.55.

advertisers. But what if datafication and algorithms were marshalled in service of other structures? Flisfeder argues that

> we should go further by asking how the tools for collecting big data might, under differently organised and more democratic legal and social structures, actually help to facilitate a more open society in a different way. What we should say, instead, is that *capitalism is ruining our lives, not social media; capitalism is making us antisocial.*[604]

Just as the political requires an account of the technical to understand the material and social relations of political subjects to their inherited spaces, the technical requires the political to demonstrate the extent to which technological configuration, design choices, infrastructures and markets are guided by profit-seeking behaviours, by the impulses of transnational capital (which in the case of tech firms, often includes neoliberal states and institutions as major clients). The complexity of social media, and its aptness as a metaphor for contemporary social systems, is that it has

> converged in ways that now make possible the overlapping functions required to discipline populations and to enforce contemporary mechanisms of control, so that we have, in a single device, machinations of enjoyment *and* labor, but also of democracy, surveillance, and control. We can see why, for this reason, social media operates as a useful metaphor for the current stage of capital.[605]

The social media metaphor underlines the incompleteness of the liberal critique of social media. Social media is often nebulously pilloried for damaging democracy, spreading fake news, causing polarisation and exploiting the credulity of the ignorant, but these pronouncements are often made in the column inches of legacy newspapers, the comfort of national television studios or by politician representing parties and institutions, of which

---

[604] Flisfeder, ibid, pp.56-57, his emphasis.

[605] Flisfeder, ibid, p.92.

many have a chequered history when it comes to representing truth to the public.[606] The fact that social media may be interpreted as a metaphor for society makes it a perfect punching bag: politicians from across the ideological spectrum will agree that "we need to rein in big tech", but we may also view it as an attempt to solve a political problem with a technocratic solution: we lament social media because it is a performative surrogate for lamenting "society" in general, or at the very least, the listless, fragmented and callous aspects of society we deem outside of our collective control.

When society in general appears chaotic and complex, indifferent and amoral, what better refuge than a virtual space where we may curate ourselves, seek approve from peers whilst hiding other aspects of our lives from view, deciding what version of ourselves we wish to present as publicly visible, and which parts of ourselves we want to remain undisclosed? "The world may be chaotic, but my house is in order".[607] "You may not quite understand how the world works, but I've got it sorted".[608] As Flisfeder and other theorists discussed earlier have suggested, we explain our continuing participation in these systems - even as it becomes clearer with every passing week how openly exploitative, surveillant and unscrupulous they are in danger of becoming - by way of our own desire for validation, our

---

[606] See Edward Bernays, *Propaganda.* (London: Routledge, 1928); Vance Packard, The Hidden Persuaders (New York: Pocket Books, 2007 [1957]); Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988); Michael Parenti, *Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media* (Boston, MA: Cengage Learning, 1992 [1986]).

[607] It is hard not to see a plausible link between the technospheric condition (information anxiety, material inequality, frenetic standstill and institutional inertia) as underlying factors that explain the disproportionate popularity of "cod philosopher" wellness intellectuals like Jordan Peterson and comparable YouTube channels that promise to improve one's social skills in service of improving interpersonal relationships (often with an underlying promise of material wealth as a direct consequence of "mastering" charisma).

[608] Social media is a hotbed of multi-level marketing, cryptocurrency, amateur financial and legal advice and NFT scams precisely because it is the perfect space to imply that the user has accidentally stumbled upon the exclusive micro-community where all the money is made. See Shama Hyder (2020) "How Social Media is Helping Cryptocurrency Flourish", Forbes (Nov 23) https://www.forbes.com/sites/shamahyder/2020/11/23/how-social-media-is-helping-cryptocurrency-flourish/?sh=782ca7e8717d; You Magazine (2020) "MLMs: The 'inspirational' social-media scams ruining women's lives", (Jan 12) https://www.you.co.uk/social-media-scams-multi-level-marketing-mlms/; Kate Hughes, "One in 10 investors 'taking tips from social media'", The Independent (16 Feb), https://www.independent.co.uk/money/investing-fraud-online-socialmedia-scams-help-check-b1802779.html; Francisco Rodrigues (2021) "Twitter and TikTok Embrace NFTS: Mainstream adoption incoming?", Coin Telegraph (October 9), https://cointelegraph.com/news/twitter-and-tiktok-embrace-nfts-mainstream-adoption-incoming

need to be assured that we understand enough about our little corner of the world such that we can secure our own material conditions and our own personal enjoyment, and that if we cannot satiate those appetites today, then social media will pop up with some suggested solutions tomorrow. In other words, social analysis that approaches our contemporary society through a postmodern, post-foundational lens, a perspective criticised earlier for social weightlessness, is itself a response to the cultural trends influenced by digital culture, the (false) impression that we are at "the end of history", a world of networks over hierarchical structures. Social media, to the extent to which it algorithmically curates the internet, reinforces neoliberal performance principles, and incidentally produces hypersubjectivity, can be said to 'have rhetorically as well as aesthetically (at the level of representation) and technologically (at the level of the platform and algorithm)' re-situated the sprawling internet maelstrom of utopian and dystopian proclamations back into the clear, demarcated boundaries of neoliberal capitalism.[609] The cultural age of postmodern irony is over; long live the post-postmodern age of sincerity and digital disclosure.

For Flisfeder, social media is the corporate capture of a digital project aiming towards increased democratisation, but in doing so, becomes a useful reference point, a powerful metaphor and an everyday demonstration of the possibilities of global community, of instant and spontaneous connectivity, and of our desire to share our lives with others. The recuperation of an egalitarian impetus to collaborate, communicate and connect provides us with a virtual space brimming with counter-hegemonic potential, by laying both the literal and metaphorical network infrastructure between individualised, anxious and increasingly disenfranchised citizens. Social media shows that despite the so-called non-existence of society, whether argued from the neoliberal right (Thatcherite "there is no alternative") or the socially weightless post-foundational left (society is merely a construction of the hegemonic discourse), we all wanted to "be-together" all along. These same platforms and

[609] Flisfeder, p.183.

algorithms that interpellate neoliberal subjects (however imperfectly) could be marshalled, either by open-source engineers, a politicised user base, or the creators themselves, to 'enable more freedom, mobility and democracy'.[610]

To summarise, Baudrillard's hyperreality serves to demonstrate why the early accounts of cyberspace were inaccurate to demarcate between the online and offline worlds. However, the chaotic, ecstatic flow of information that he envisioned would render the masses passive also provides a simulation of a world where individuals are free to coalesce, communicate, educate and express themselves with each other, with limited censorious political interference. Baudrillard anticipates a hyperreality, *but not the condition of hypersubjectivity*, by which those digital natives and proficient early adopters become capable of navigation through a social world where reality and fiction form an unwieldy partnership. Radical democrats must advocate for a political intervention into our media infrastructure, but social media itself cannot resolve the material inequalities it digitally replicates. Social media is a computer-mediated communications infrastructure, but Flisfeder demonstrates, it can also be understood as a proxy for a social world that could exist, provided the platform capitalist incentive structures are removed, its algorithmic priorities reconfigured, and analogue institutions and social arrangements adequately reinforce an emancipatory democratic culture offline.

In the next chapter, I shall consider the ways in which contemporary scholars of political communication have sought to understand the modern emergence of new social movements that spill out of internet communities and into offline political collectivities. I shall argue that the hypersubject is congruous with the emergence of 'political turbulence'[611]. I shall assess the extent to which social media provides the means for subjects to resist the interpellative call. I shall cite Simon Lindgren's 'disruptive spaces', places where individuals

---

[610] ibid, p.188.

[611] Margetts et. al, 2016.

attempt to articulate online pockets of resistance, Maria Bakardjeva's 'subactivism' as an example of online political action, and Paulo Gerbaudo's 'choreographies of assembly', an account of how social media users organise online to mobilise offline. I shall argue that hypersubjectivity allows for social media to influence offline politics, as the line between the digital and analogue public spheres has been irrevocably blurred.

Andrew Feenberg argues that 'technologies normally stabilise after an initial period during which many differing configurations compete. Once stabilised, their social and political implications finally become clear'.[612] In the case of social media, what becomes clear is that if one hopes for an emergent anti-neoliberal politics, the dominant social media platforms must remain in market competition, to avoid a sole monopolistic company introducing widespread political censorship at the whim of shareholders. Furthermore, certain legal and political structures must be in place in relation to the internet, such as the retention of net neutrality[613], and the protection of laws that prevent the kind of robust censorship found in illiberal countries such as China.[614] This section will follow the ways in which, under these circumstances, the hypersubject may be incorporated into accounts of online-to-offline collective identification and action, and provide directions to further research avenues.

---

612 Andrew Feenberg, *(Re)inventing the Internet: Critical Case Studies*. (Rotterdam: Sense Publications, 2012), p.3

613 Brian Barrett (2017) Why Net Neutrality is a Good Thing: A Wired Guide. Accessed March 27, 2018. https://www.wired.com/story/net-neutrality-fight-wired-guide/.

614 Beina Xu & Eleanor Albert (2017) "Council of Foreign Relations: Media Censorship in China." February 17. Accessed March 27, 2018. https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/media-censorship-china.

8. Radical Democracy with Technospheric Characteristics

Radical democracy is a response to the failure of soviet socialist projects, a response to liberal individualism and the limits of bourgeois democratic institutions, a revival of active citizenship over passive voter-as-consumer framing and runs counter to essentialist tendencies that fail to accommodate class and power dynamics that emerge from divergences in material conditions. However, there exists the persistent problem of social weightlessness, that radical democratic theorists in the post-foundational mould have a tendency to advocate for exciting, expansive participatory politics without explaining how and why the disenfranchised and immobilised are not already getting involved in such projects - that is to say, the radical contingency of the political that supposedly leaves hegemony constantly contestable appears to find itself frustrated by its resistance to even moderate, reformist - never mind radical - progressive change.

The chapter is comprised of the following sections: 'Political Turbulence', 'Associational Technics', 'Aversive Spheres' and 'Democracy as a Promise to the Future'. The chapter tentatively proscribes a new approach for radical democratic theory: the empirical fact of political turbulence caused by social media is utilised as a means of validating the assumptions of post-foundationalism, and by drawing on concepts from the existing democracy literature, I oppose aspects of the technospheric condition that contemporary neoliberal institutions fail to address. By acknowledging the technospheric condition through an understanding of technics and the political as co-constitutive of the social, I conclude that radical democratic theory can overcome the charge of social weightlessness by adapting to and with the technological trajectory of social life (including social media and beyond).

Radical democracy in the post-foundational mould rejects revolutionary politics, instead advocating participation within the institutions and operations of liberal democracy in order to improve upon its own ideals. I have argued that western liberal democracies - through their generational embrace of neoliberalism - have "depoliticised" themselves, reducing political problems that require public contestation and deliberation for democratic legitimation to apolitical issues that require the application of neoliberal-technical expertise. Reducing the political to the technical serves to entrench those neoliberal actors that are now themselves legitimised in our hegemonic media ecology by virtue of their policy proposals, rather than through democratic preferences (and even empirical outcomes compared to proposals extrinsic of their worldview). Insofar as it enshrined and valorised neoliberal policy proposals and reproduced hegemonic agenda-setting power, the depoliticisation of politics served its purpose. However, when neoliberal policies began to oversee spiking inequality, contribute to the climate crisis, leave surveilled populations feeling more insecure - a state of deteriorating affairs that culminated in a global financial crisis - the institutional inertia that once solidified and strengthened neoliberal best practices left the western political elite incapable of proscribing anything other than the same medicine.

I have argued that since modernity, we have lived in the technospheric condition. The technospheric condition is a historical, social and cultural condition that frames a society's relationship between culture and technology. I argue that our contemporary iteration of the technospheric is comprised of general proletarianisation, social acceleration and information anxiety. General proletarianisation creates discontented populations that find the social world increasingly inscrutable, accentuating the alienation felt in both work and in leisure time, rendering individuals passive and disempowered. Social acceleration produces institutional inertia - as organisations find themselves struggling with complexity and uncertainty - and frenetic standstill - as social subjects feel as though they have to keep working harder and faster to accommodate the increasing speed of the world just to retain what they currently

have. Information anxiety - itself linked to both - relates to both feelings of disempowerment and that the world is constantly leaving them behind - as the age of computation and information accessibility induces the imperative to know as much as possible to overcomes these issues (exacerbating surveillance and data analytic impulses in private and public institutions, and paradoxically contributing to the problems of post-truth and conspiratorial thinking in individuals).

Neoliberalism - understood as hegemonic in western liberal democracies but also increasingly the global logic of international capitalism - has neglected to address the material contradictions of its own practices. But I am also arguing that neoliberalism has *also* neglected to address the social consequences of the technospheric condition - whilst these issues aid in the reproduction of neoliberalism by distorting and immobilising counter-hegemonic resistance, they also lay the groundwork for neoliberalism to be replaced with an even more dangerous and reactionary political force. Apathy benefits incumbency, but only at the point before apathy turns into anger. In this sense, radical democracy can be framed as an attempt to salvage liberal democracy from its depoliticising tendencies before it undermines itself.

Social media, itself exploding in popularity in the immediate aftermath of the financial crisis, became both a conduit and catalyst for political communication, and given its influence initially in anti-authoritarian movements, was praised for its democratising potential. The platform model that social media operates priorities attention over ideological content - the effect of which has been the production of what I term *hypersubjectivity*, individuals that marshal social media for their own political ends. It is intuitive to argue that the peak of hypersubjectivity's use for democratic ends could be found in the early 2010s, with the global Occupy movement and the Arab Spring. However, hypersubjectivity results in the reopening of all previously closed matters, to the relitigation of all socio-political

questions, by exposing the radical contingency of the social (albeit in an individualistic, virtual format). Consequently, hegemonic legacy media are now struggling to produce cohesive narratives, failing to legitimise the neoliberal occupation of the "empty space" of democratic sovereignty. The result has been the rise of populisms of both the left and right, as well as strange, esoteric, paranoid political groups that prioritise their micro-communities' online perception over the broader offline shared reality. Hypersubjectivity ultimately produces fragile partisanship: incomplete, fragmented political subjectivities, occasionally untethered even from national ideological formations.

Through technics, societies are either opaque or transparent in their institutional operations, and our individual and collective memories are semiotically and discursively inscribed - technics as a social infrastructure precedes ideological production (which is itself necessitated by domination, class conflict - and under capitalist relations of production - forces related to technological extension). The platform model creates a virtual public sphere that transcends the nation-state and formal institutional norms of political discourse. I argue that the promise of the virtual (alongside recognition of the collective malaise of individualist cultures) offers a promising roadmap for radical democracy.

Political Turbulence

Margetts et al. have argued that social media can 'harness existing values and behaviour, and coordinate them more efficiently to achieve collective goals'.[615] It is important to note that their studies are not attempting to demonstrate that social media produces ideological change in an individual's politics, but rather empirically demonstrate the ways in which collective action is made possible by the technology. They define collective action as 'any activity undertaken by citizens with the aim of contributing to public goods:

[615] Margetts et. al, 2016: 31.

goods that are both non-excludable and non-rivalable- that is, they have benefit but cannot be sold to private buyers'.[616] Although this was not their intention, collective action is defined, broadly speaking, as a form of collective behaviour antithetical to neoliberal governmentality, insofar as it wishes to produce goods extrinsic to market rationality. To use Rousseauian terms, neoliberalism encourages citizens to frame political ideas through their particular will, whereas collective action is to act in accordance with a general will, a notion of what is perceived as good for the body politic as a whole.

Margetts et al. consider the way in which social media makes the signing of petitions easier, and how the ease of micro-donations to politicians or specific causes 'reduces the cost, in terms of time, effort, or money, of political participation'.[617] Bakardjieva argues that social media provides the opportunity for everyday 'subactivism', which she defines as 'small-scale, often individual decisions and actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference (or both) and remain submerged in everyday life'.[618] For example, just as in real life we may strike up a conversation with a passenger on a bus, and when a contestable topic of conversation emerges, we may try to persuade the other of our worldview, social media provides a similar outlet for political "point-scoring". There are scores of politically-motivated Twitter accounts and Facebook pages, but one of the complications of such a framework is the sheer number of duplicate accounts, fake accounts spreading false information, and active bots on these platforms. By approaching social media from this material perspective, as thinkers like Berry have advocated, the impactful micropolitical level of resistance is revealed to be not only at the level of contesting political discourse, but rather the technical, creative disruption of these platforms through the likes of hacking,

---

[616] Ibid: 9.

[617] Ibid: 53.

[618] Maria Bakardjieva, 'Subactivism: Lifeworld and Politics in the Age of the Internet,' in (*Re)inventing the Internet: Critical Case Studies*, edited by Andrew Feenberg and Norm Friesen, 85-108. (Rotterdam: Sense Publications 2012), p.93.

botting, message encryption, and ultimately, the creation of alternative, democratic, non-corporate platforms.[619]

Another way in which social media shapes the context of collective action is by 'providing real-time information about whether and when other people are participating'.[620] In sociology and political science, studies have shown that people are often more willing to contribute to public goods if they know that others are also doing so.[621] Thus, in the context of collective action, social media provides a highlighted visibility to participation, which allows pledges, movements and political campaigns to scale up their support. However, due to their individualistic user experience, they are also a source of instability and turbulence in political life, as whilst these low-cost acts can scale up to large-scale mobilisations, they can also easily collapse due to a lack of long-term commitment to the causes: for example, most online petitions fail, and quickly.[622]

In terms of collective action that results in political actors taking to the streets, Paulo Gerbaudo cites moments of what he terms 'liquid organisation' within social media by political activists, arguing that within this model, 'communication and organisation become almost indistinguishable, and the 'communicators' of a movement become also automatically its organisers and leaders. In spite of the egalitarian beliefs of many contemporary popular

---

[619] Kate Milberry cites tech activists that developed their own online space for democratic discussion and organisation away from the prying eyes of corporate surveillance: 'tech activists in the global justice movement bridge the divide between geek and activist communities, developing and maintaining a digital infrastructure that supports progressive activism on a planetary scale. Through their free software network, tech activists deliberately oppose the commercial take-over of cyberspace and adapt it to democratic purposes …does it indicate, or contribute to, a radical reform of the technical sphere? It remains to be seen. But it certainly offers hope that, indeed, another world is possible' Kate Milberry, 'Hacking for Social Justice: The Politics of Prefigurative Technology,' in *(Re)inventing the Internet: Critical Case Studies*, edited by Andrew Feenberg and Norm Friesen, 109-130. (Rotterdam: Sense Publications, 2012), p.126.

[620] Margetts et. al, 2016: 68.

[621] See Bruno S. Frey & Stephan Meier. (2004) 'Social comparisons and pro-social behavior: testing conditional cooperation in a field experiment,' *American Economic Review*, 94 (1): 1717-1722; Sarah Cotterill, Peter John & Lizzie Richardson (2013) 'The Impacts of a Pledge Campaign and the Promise of Publicity: A Randomized Controlled Trial of Charitable Donations,' *Social Science Quarterly*, 94 (1): 2000-2016.

[622] Margetts et. al, ibid: 84.

movements, the forms of political group communication found on social media are often characterised by a 'power law of distribution' in which a handful of people control most of the communication flow'.[623] He refers to this as 'communication that organises, rather than organisation that communicates'[624], hence the inexplicable nature of protest movements that began online such as Occupy to the corporate mass media: journalists had been trained to find a leader or a representative to interview, and to explain the protest through the prism of a handful of demands, rather than viewing Occupy as an ongoing site of political communication and organisation even as it emerged into a concrete street presence.[625]

Margetts et. al end their collection of social media studies by arguing that politics on social media is 'characterised by rapidly shifting flows of attention and activity'[626], analogising it with the turbulence of a weather system. The essential features of its chaotic system are 'non-linearity and a high degree of interconnectivity, which creates positive and negative feedback, causing changes to take place exponentially faster'.[627] The collection of studies merits caution regarding characterisations of social media as a platform that reduces information overload, and gives empirical validation to our dromological interpretation informed by Virilio.

Shelley Boulainne's meta-study of the empirical work on social media's relationship to political organisation shows that the 'few studies that isolate protest-type activities (marches, demonstrations, petitions and boycotts) suggest that social media plays a positive role in citizens' participation'.[628] Social media provides a fragmented hypersubjectivity, oriented

---

[623] Paolo Gerbaudo, 2012: 135.

[624] Ibid: 139.

[625]

[626] Margetts et. al, 2016: 196.

[627] Ibid: 204.

[628] Shelley Boulianne, (2015) 'Social media use and participation: a meta-analysis of current research,' *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(5), p.534.

towards neoliberal performance principles. However, digital natives and those adequately acclimatised to social media, are capable of embracing the information chaos. These actors may apply their working knowledge of social media technologies to coordinate collective action, the likes of which are contrary to neoliberal politics, and yet have been made ever more possible by the tools social media affords.

Simon Lindgren attempts to locate what he refers to as 'disruptive spaces'[629], spaces online which represent 'new noise- emergent cultural currents that are part of a dramatic transformation of the social and cultural fabric, and that enable unprecedented forms of potent rebellion'.[630] Social media reproduces the dominant ideology, but Lindgren contends we may exploit our relative autonomy to find either sites of resistance within these platforms, or nurture creative alternative sites of computer-mediated communication in cyberspace, in which these disruptive spaces can play the role of 'latent building blocks of a tentative alternative public sphere- a counterpublic'.[631]

Lindgren takes the reader on a journey through numerous case studies, such as Twitter hashtags focusing on Wikileaks, the Libyan uprising during the Arab Spring[632] as well as user comments underneath YouTube videos[633], and argues that there are small but significant 'affinity spaces'[634], a term coined by J.P. Gee that refers to 'interactive sites- whether online or offline- where people come together through common goals, interests and

---

[629] Simon Lindgren, *New Noise: A Cultural Sociology of Digital Disruption*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2013) p.2.

[630] Ibid: 3.

[631] Ibid: 21.

[632] Ibid: 59-78.

[633] Ibid: 100-109.

[634] James Paul Gee, 'Semiotic social spaces and affinity spaces: from the age of mythology to today's schools,' In *Beyond communities of practice: language, power and social context*, edited by D Barton and K Tusking, 214-232. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

activities'.[635] However, the extent to which political optimism can be garnered from individuals helping each other on message boards, providing insights in comments sections under videos, or coalescing to form debates alongside a Twitter hashtag, remains intangible. It appears that what Lindgren sees as potential sites of 'counterpublics' are what Trottier and others may see as sites where capitalism benefits from the unpaid collective labour of unpaid volunteers: we help each other, so the companies don't have to.[636] We may take from both these accounts, and the previous discussion of platform capitalism, that users may undertake counter-hegemonic activity on the dominant social media apps, operate within platform capitalism using its tools, and indeed benefit it in the short-term, if only to serve a more robust, solidaristic, long-term, anti-capitalist, democratic project. For example, online groups that expose bugs and glitches in computer games may serve to help the games company, but also publicly demonstrate their lack of rigour in the testing stages of the game. These micropolitical 'subactivist'[637] pinches at the social fabric that ideologically weaves capitalist economics together with visions of technological progress and neoliberal governmentality may, on occasion, prompt visible tearing.

Stefania Milan has argued that digital political action is best framed as 'cloud protesting', a concept she believes makes sense of the specific types of 'organisational relations between individuals within a shared identity'.[638] In computing, the cloud denotes the storing and accessing of data and programs online instead of on computer hard drives to maximise performance. In the context of political communication, the cloud provides 'an allegory for specific ways of creating meaningful connections among individuals in the social

---

[635] Lindgren, 2013: 141

[636] Daniel Trottier, *Social Media as Surveillance: Rethinking Visibility in a Converging World.* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2012).

[637] Bakardjieva, ibid.

[638] Stefania Milan, (2015) "From social movements to cloud protesting: the evolution of collective identity" *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(8), p.893.

media age'.[639] Milan argues that social media fosters behaviours which contribute to 'a politics of visibility'; firstly, by making oneself a visible protestor on social media, or a visible advocate for a political cause, each individual user becomes the protagonist of the unfolding story, with events developing in real time during online interactions. Secondly, social media allows individuals to appeal to other users, either directly through messages or tagging, or indirectly through hashtags or posts on group walls, which 'reiterate the collective definition of 'we'/'them', but also spread it to bystanders, setting in motion further cycles of exchange and negotiation'.[640] Thirdly, 'by empowering asynchronous interactions, social media lets users bypass co-presence and allow for a permanent re-enactment of social action in online platforms...[which] stretch[es] the duration and lifecycle of mobilisation'.[641] Finally, use of social media becomes habitual and ritualistic, which contributes to regularly affirming the collective identity in ways 'that regenerate bonds and promote group solidarity'.[642]

Milan concludes by arguing that the 'unmediated encounter between individuals enabled by social media results in the 'collective' being experienced through the 'individual'- a far cry from earlier conceptualizations of collective identity'.[643] By linking the hypersubject to the concept of cloud protesting, there are intriguing opportunities for future research into the paradoxical ways in which social media contributes to collective identification. There is also further research possibilities in concert with the growing neuroscience literature, as to the cognitive and sociological cost of hypersubjectivity, as well as the political concern that social media produces new forms of performative inequality (between those for whom hypersubjectivity is overwhelming and alienating, and for those empowered by computer literacy and familiarity with social media discursive norms).

---

[639] Ibid: 894.

[640] Ibid: 896.

[641] Ibid.

[642] Ibid.

[643] Ibid.

Returning to Lindgren, he argues that the meanings produced by disruptive spaces can be countercultural and potentially emancipatory 'without transgressing into the public'.[644] Nevertheless, to generate significant political and cultural change, they cannot exist in isolation from concrete activism: 'advocates of tactical media are now calling for a return to the streets; the network itself through ubiquitous and wirelessly dispersed technologies, is already there'[645], a view that embraces the demand for reclaiming the concrete public spaces, coupled with strategic plausibility.

Ultimately, social media operates as an ideological state apparatus insofar as it structurally supports the reproduction of the neoliberal capitalist status quo. It does so by interpellating the hypersubject, characterised by hypermodulation, where users are encouraged through the logic of self-branding to constantly update their social media profiles, distracted by a constant ongoing stream of unfiltered information which engenders emotional flatness, all within a system painstakingly designed to be as unconsciously addictive as possible to sustain the platform capitalist model. Social media encourages the user to see themselves as a brand to be constantly updated and improved upon; to see themselves as a consumer-citizen, to interpret the increasing intelligence and specificity of targeted advertisements as freedom through convenience, rather than submission through consumption; to see themselves as an isolated solver of their own problems - whatever it is, there's an app for that.

However, whilst social media inculcates these behaviours conducive to neoliberalism, it also provides tools for unprecedented levels of global communication at little cost, as well as an ongoing psychological familiarity with the bombardment of information. This has led to social media providing the catalyst for political action: we can envision a world where human beings can instantly communicate without geographical restriction, and information

---

[644] Lindgren, 2013: 150.

[645] Ibid: 152.

flows freely between one another, so why not demand that the simulation becomes real? Just as Davies wished, the hypersubject does indeed inject vitality and surprise into society, as demonstrated by political turbulence. Just as Lazzarato desired, social media provides the tools for an international fight against the globalising neoliberal project. So long as social media companies remain sufficiently monopolistic such that the user base is of a global scale, but also as competitive as to render censorious administrative behaviour harmful to the bottom line, there remains an opportunity to steer the political turbulence engendered by the hypersubject, and challenge the neoliberal status quo.

Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg conceded in an interview that the world was more divided than he had imagined[646]: he had assumed that by making the world more "open and connected", political differences would become surmountable: Zuckerberg and his contemporaries are truly the products of the neoliberal internet age.

Through our technospheric approach to ideology, I have demonstrated the way in which an account of subject formation allows us to see the chain that links platform capitalism, the ideals and dromological acceleration endemic to the design of social media, the phenomological affect of hypermodulation, and the way in which the ubiquity of online hyperreality produces a hypersubject, overwhelmed and disorientated, and yet once familiarity and mastery of the systems involved is achieved, nonetheless capable of political resistance. The revolution will not be televised, but it may well be cloud-accessible, and shared across multiple devices. Radical democracy requires an account of itself that acknowledges the social problems that politics must resolve as a consequence of our living within the technospheric condition, overcoming its earlier theoretical limitations and drawing from our earlier exploration of these interdependent social forces. Although an explicit outline of such an institutional arrangement is beyond the scape of my theoretical diagnosis,

---

646 Jeffrey Berke (2018) *World Economic Forum: Mark Zuckerberg Thought Facebook Could Solve A Lot of Problems.* February 13. Accessed April 16, 2018. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/02/mark-zuckerberg-says-he-thought-facebook-could-solve-a-lot-of-problems-but-the-world-is-more-divided-than-he-expected

I shall provisionally advocate for an expansive account of radical democracy that frames the institutional arrangement, participatory norms and constitutive agenda that is sympathetic - but nonetheless in contrast - to the predominant forms of western liberal democracy.

Associational Technics

How can an account of radical democracy ensure - or at the very least, hope to improve the chances of - a progressive replacement for neoliberalism being instituted before something worse takes its place, something that may undermine democracy completely? Much like earlier iterations of technology, social media is a *pharmakon* in the Derridean sense - it is something that may be used to reaffirm democratic values through the production of spaces of equal standing and collaboration; it can reproduce reactionary tendencies that reward extremist politics for shallow attention over difficult, but necessary conversations about the limits of political possibility, and it is also regularly positioned as a scapegoat, a form of technology that is itself the inherent problem with the world, as if the structures of the world were fine before social media came along and then abruptly ruined.

Political communication on social media lends itself to shallow partisanship - you are exposed gradually to a political discourse where users generate a collective group of thoughts, priorities and opinions, and as the algorithm ascertains which users you interact with more, you may be either kept within the context of that specific discourse or exposed to alternative opinions, and thus if your political education has been predominantly or entirely experienced online, your sense of both political reality and literacy may be ultimately determined by the voices that you are somewhat arbitrarily presented on your social media feed. In a social space where expertise is flattened - historians, philosophers and political scientists jostle for user attention using the same techniques as B-list actors, musicians and conspiracy theorists - and in a world of supposed equal standing, a user following provides

internal legitimacy, that is to say, if one person has a million followers and they tell you vaccines aren't real, and a doctor with a few hundreds followers responds, aside from the fact that many users may not even see their reply, they may have already sufficiently internalised the idea that the bigger account is inherently more credible. Even in engaging in these social media squabbles, there is a worry that whilst expertise becomes meritocratic in one sense (a bad political scientist is exposed regularly by members of the general public on Twitter), there is also the sense that there are no experts anymore - we are not tired of experts so much as deny their existence altogether. But moving through a social context in which each discourse is as good as any other means that the user's offline experience can drastically shape the perceived validity of certain claims within a given discourse - there are numerous examples of celebrities (and even journalists) that have drifted from one side of the political spectrum to the other, and have had social media as a running documentation of the ways in which their lived experience - not to mention the arguments they ran into online - have shaped them as political subjects. Shallow partisanship is both a strength and weakness for building radical democracy - one should remain open to changing one's mind, but the conditions of why and how often one changes their mind are currently suboptimal, far too contingent on the arbitrariness of algorithmic interference.

Another aspect of social media is the eclectic manner of political judgement. The standard understanding of political beliefs in popular parlance is the idea that there are certain core principles or concepts that are relatively fixed in one's belief system and that certain perceptions of the world invariably influence the extent to which you believe certain policy proposals or institutional arrangements are plausible or desirable. In the context of the flattened social field of contemporary social media, it is my contention that this conventional understanding is arguably too rational. This is not to say that we are giving political actors and citizens too much credit - that we previously perceived them as rational agents that followed rigorous logic to reach their political beliefs, and respond consistently

with their worldview - rather that politics is itself increasingly uncertain, complex and emotionally manipulative. If we assume ideological consistency in political actors in all cases, it misses the growing importance of affect analysis and irrational forms of political thinking that have become all too mainstream in recent years. In the context of alt-right cults such as QAnon, how does one begin to explain the belief that although their president-hero Donald Trump himself believed in the coronavirus, caught the virus, was vaccinated and advocated for others to be vaccinated, that the official line is that the coronavirus is a broad liberal hoax designed to enact repressive measures that intends to redesign society for the benefit of a clandestine elite global cabal? We might respond that this is one irrational actor, but cults such as QAnon have concerningly large and influential supporter bases, so such a collective of irrational elements must be understood (at least provisionally) as both incoherent yet robust - utterly nonsensical and yet nevertheless imbibed whole by a significant group of political actors.[647] QAnon cultists do not share a uniform set of nonsensical beliefs - in the truest American fashion, they are pluralists at heart - but they operate as a conglomerate, as a discursive sphere, as a subculture of their own. They often directly contradict one another, but they understand themselves as a unit through a binding meta-narrative of a common enemy. If you agree that Trump was and is fighting "the bad guys", you may be forgiven for dissenting on the prevailing opinion of who the baddies are and what they want. Nonetheless, we may find some form of sympathy and understanding with even the strangest of political views online by virtue of a shared sense of uncertainty, that something is not quite right - it is though people with fundamental flaws and prejudices are collectively reconstructing the arguments of C. Wright Mills' *The Power Elite*, flailing about without adequate political education, but motivated by the deep understanding that

[647] See Mia Bloom & Sophia Moskalenko, *Pastels and Pedophiles: Inside the Mind of QAnon*. (Boston, MA: Redwood Press, 2021).

the world is not fair and that structures are not always designed for the public good - a sentiment that radical democrats certainly endorse.

Eclectic judgement also puts a strain on our conventional understanding of overlapping political beliefs - exposure to differing political views does not allow lend itself to greater understanding, as due to the shallow partisanship of social media, users instead find themselves oscillating between extremes. Journalists will often talk of the "alt-right pipeline", where individuals from certain demographics (usually apolitical white middle-class male teenagers who use YouTube, Facebook and Twitter) find themselves shunted by the algorithm into a series of recommendations to extreme anti-feminist, anti-leftist, anti-immigrant content on the grounds that the algorithm has impersonally noticed that these videos attract long-term attention from this user base.[648] Similarly, there have been criticisms of the way in which Islamic fundamentalist terrorist groups are able to expose young Muslim teenagers to content that idolises Daesh militants and the extols the virtues of the imminent destruction of western civilisation.[649] Nonetheless, the rhetorical pitch and its underlying affect is the same - you are living in a society that does not value you; that does not treat you right - the only solution for a disrupted and increasingly complex world is the simplicity and certainty of absolutism, fidelity to the lamentable foundations solely articulated by political extremism.

What are radical democrats to make of such a digital landscape? Interpellation requires a common lifeworld: the technospheric condition interrupts the possibility of a common world of shared memories through social acceleration (undermining intergenerational continuity) and yet social media itself thrives on being a continuous archive of lived and shared experiences - all the world that existed before social media is flattened

---

[648] Luke Munn (2021) "Alt-right pipeline: Individual journeys to extremism online", *First Monday*, 24(6)

[649] Anna Leander (2017) "Digital/commercial (in)visibility: The politics of DAESH recruitment videos", *European Journal of Social Theory*, *20*(3), pp.348–372.

into "the past" and all that has happened since the introduction of social media has been painstakingly "remembered" by the shared community of social media users. The problems and opportunities such a circumstance engenders can be traced back to the earlier theoretical deliberations of "onto-politics" - our relationship to technics constitutes our sense of individual and collective understanding via the capture, mediation and curation of social memory. There is a significant issue to be overcome with the misremembering, contestation or denial of shared social histories, but there is an opportunity for radical democracy in the vast networked present (alongside the capacity to retrieve previously archived content) constructed through global platform usage. If radical democracy advocates a process that broadly entails replacing the neoliberal-capitalist attention model of social media with renewed public political intent, then the project becomes inherently international - an exciting but potentially overwhelming consequence of the reach of the hegemonic platforms. Radical democrats, perhaps out of necessity given the global reach of the hegemonic social media platforms, are compelled to offer a vision of transnational global democracy, a participatory model with a techno-social infrastructure that may intersect, but nonetheless run parallel to established political institutions.

In the absence of such a political project, theorists such as Stiegler fear an 'ultra-libertarian capitalism' that will 'absorb the social and the political into the technological and economic by crushing them: when technology is computational, it makes it possible to algorithmically dissolve the social'.[650] By reducing all forms of knowledge to consultation with digital systems, all forms of desire to those commodities and experiences we are steered towards by algorithms, we become inextricably tied to systems of immediacy to deal with the complexity of a lifeworld entirely configured to benefit the logic of datafication. If all social interactions and organisations are mediated in such a way, Stiegler argues that the ultimate outcome is the impossibility of social cohesion. Rather than the political project of staging a

[650] ibid, p.41.

people, and the common trajectory of a public being articulated through these processes, political institutions will become ever more technocratic in both appearance and design, as the network that currently connects the social foam together will instead be used to further individualise and "personalise" social experience.

Byung-Chul Han has raised similar concerns. Han argues that in contemporary (western) society the subject has been transformed by a combination of neoliberal governmentality and digital technologies into subjects that perceive their own exploitation as a form of freedom. Han argues that we live in an "achievement society" that compels individuals to internalise their own inability to grapple with the economic problems exacerbated by structural inequality and social acceleration as shameful behaviour. Han accepts the consumer-citizen interpretation of neoliberal subjectivity, suggesting a one-way call for transparency (disclose your social life so we may see if you are doing what you set out to achieve) whilst political decision-making becomes ever more opaque, subjected only to the scrutiny of passive, apolitical onlookers giving 'rise to a spectator democracy'.[651] Han agrees with Stiegler that we are moving from a system of 'passive surveillance to active steering', which he terms 'the age of digital psychopolitics'.[652] Han contends that 'neoliberal psychopolitics' are a 'technology of domination' that stabilises and perpetuates the hegemonic order through 'psychological programming and steering'.[653]

In my view, Stiegler and Han both fear a form of "perfect interpellation", a form of undetectable power, a form of power that even political theorists will find too difficult to trace and unveil, that will compromise our capacity to separate our desires derived from the preferences of will and the preferences of those who operate the underlying algorithms that govern our everyday media consumption. If we already grant that many of our settled ideas

---

[651] Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power.* (London: Verso, 2017), p.11.

[652] Han, ibid, pp.11-12.

[653] Han ibid, p.79.

about politics and society often serve the reproduction of the status quo prior to critical introspection, the overarching danger will be the normalisation of a collective cybernetic steering of social norms that takes ideological reproduction of the conditions of production to its absolute extreme, forestalling the possibility of social change that does not present itself within the hegemonic logic of neoliberal capitalism.

Stiegler wrote about the prospect of undermining such a social force, arguing that the industrial model of production and consumption found in western market societies was ill-equipped to deal with advances in control technologies as they emerged from digitalisation, and that a rejection of the (neoliberal) consumerist model of the citizen must be replaced with collective reassertion of public power.[654] Stiegler forewarned of a 'disadjustment between the mutating technical system and the other social systems without which it cannot function'[655], concluding that any 'industrial politics of the future must understand technological development as an essentially cultural question'[656], a position that I suggest we may adopt by retrieving Hirst's account of associationalism.

Associationalism is concerned with the administrative organisation of a system that combines civil society and its economic arrangements and may be understood as the meeting point between the procedural and historical accounts of democracy classified in political science and the more aspirational, abstractive accounts found in radical democratic theory. Associationalism, according to Hirst, ought to be interpreted as offering 'a principle of administrative renewal'.[657] It is principled upon the vigorous defence of voluntarily based organisations as a means of reducing the administrative workload of state institutions (rejecting the neoliberal solutions of privatisation) without diminishing the provision of

---

654 Bernard Stiegler, *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies.* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

655 Stiegler, ibid, p.11.

656 Stiegler, ibid, p.18.

657 Paul Hirst, *Associative Democracy: New Forms of Economic and Social Governance.* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p.6.

social services and public goods. The thought is that 'it enables market-based societies to deliver the substantive goals desired by citizens, by embedding the market system in a social network of coordinative and regulative institutions'.[658]

Associative democracy, as Hirst describes it, maintains the following core propositions: firstly, that as many social activities as possible (in our case, including social media) ought to be devolved to self-governing voluntary associations; secondly, that these associations will reduce state complexity and thus representative government will work better (in our context, overcoming institutional inertia); thirdly, that where possible, voluntary associations ought to replace hierarchical corporate power (ensuring all stakeholders, including those currently disempowered and disenfranchised, are capable of expressing their interests, however they may understand them); fourthly and finally, that essential public functions, such as health, education and welfare provision (and perhaps we may advocate information provision as one such public function), ought to be provided by public-funded voluntary associations.

Relevant for our contemporary problem, associationalism takes seriously the problem of social complexity, an issue only exacerbated by the technospheric condition, and it shares radical democracy's commitment to the expansion of democratic practices into civil society and public life. The most persuasive aspect of Hirst's proposition is the claim that associationalism does 'not require a revolution or the building of a new society'[659], presenting his vision of post-bureaucratic economic democracy as the new form by which social democratic policies ought to be shaped, a new form of politics built from the reordering of our existing institutions. If radical democratic theory accepts Hirst's analysis that 'the intellectual left's embrace of democratisation of state and civil society as a substitute for the goal of the socialisation of the means of production has had little concrete

[658] Hirst, ibid, p.12.

[659] ibid, p.13.

political impact'[660], then there must be a willingness to accommodate the problems faced by historical political movements.

Hirst's reconciliation of liberal institutions and economic democracy is premised upon the notion that associative democracy does not wish to supersede pre-existing institutions, as they continue to provide the juridical processes that protect individual and associative rights themselves, but rather can be seen as an extension and enhancement of liberal values into the economic domain.[661] Cultivating 'a self-governing civil society' that places the state as 'a secondary, but vitally necessary, public power that ensures peace between associations and protects the rights of individuals'[662], chimes well with both a commitment to a participatory democratic culture and a keen awareness of the ways in which social norms are resistant to change. Where will I learn to be a democrat in this accelerating world? Under the right associational conditions, with every interaction with social groups and institutions. Why will I be open to these forms of political change? Because unlike radical visions of democracy that require systemic overhauls and transformational subjectivities, these changes will occur slowly, organically reintroducing a demonstrable political agency to an otherwise disenfranchised population that will prove its worth as it empowers individuals going about their everyday life.

Hirst assesses the quality of a democracy's functioning by the quality of communication between 'the governing agencies and the agencies organising the activity being governed'.[663] The model is a continuous dialogue between political representatives, a transparent civil service, public voluntary institutions and free associations that exist co-harmoniously with the capacity to co-regulate and co-operate with each another to ensure a

---

[660] ibid, p.14.

[661] ibid, p.19.

[662] ibid, p.26.

[663] ibid, p.35.

consistency of an individual's democratic rights in all spheres of social life.[664] Associationalism operates with the view that economic democracy is required for the fulfilment of the needs and the protections of the rights that liberal democracy claims to wish to prescribe and defend. Social roles will always be reproduced by cultural conventions, but they should not be allocated by systems of asymmetric and unaccountable power. Unfortunately for practical action, this may require the state to curtail its own logic of self-preservation, devolving power downwards and reallocating tasks to these smaller institutions to enshrine the latter's democratic legitimacy in the transition from one political model to the next. The difficulty of getting the state to undermine itself through the existing institutional settlement is a substantial practical obstacle, but once the voluntary associations are instantiated, by virtue of their quasi-participatory model, their own public legitimacy will be reproduced through the transparency of their practices, and thus will no longer rely on the state as an institutional benefactor, granting them agency from above.

Associationalism also has a spatial component, in that democratic culture is less to do with discursive formations, and more to do with actual public spaces where people come together and "do" democracy. Not in the sense of the old Wildean adage that socialism will never work if it relies on so many meetings, more so in the sense that everyday life will become more collaborative, transparent and empowering. In the technospheric condition, all political and space is technologically mediated, but such information networks and computational power may be marshalled for politically progressive ends with an *associational technics* that prioritises the reproduction of conditions that support the flourishing of citizens and democratic practices over corporate profit.

---

[664] At the time of writing, the very latest literature has moved towards advocating practical transformations of social media beyond conventional regulation or nationalisation, citing guild socialism and associationalism as theoretical influences. See James Muldoon, *Platform Socialism: How to Reclaim our Digital Future from Big Tech.* (London: Pluto, 2022).

An associational technics in the case of social media, therefore, would resemble a combination of democratic oversight from representative political institutions alongside a voluntary association responsible for overseeing the algorithmic intentions of social media platforms - either in the regulation of international corporate platforms, or the instantiation and management of a publicly funded national platform, or both. Hypersubjectivity, and the tendency of younger people to better adapt to the nuances of social media operation and its discourses, renders plausible a collection of platform designers, coders and regulatory practitioners that skew younger than the average age of social media users.[665]

In the next section, I shall consider Aletta Noval's notion of aversive democracy, and suggests it may offer a provisional framework for the interpellation of radical democrats, insofar as its underlying commitments provide a foundation from which shallow partisanship may be transformed through the democratic process into a more mature, stabilised political subjectivity.

Aversive Spheres

Norval, informed by Stoker, maintains that a functioning and healthy democratic culture never prevents discussions regarding decisions from being reopened. To make the point in the language of political ontology, a democratic process must be receptive to the anarchical nature of the political, in that there is no final decision which leads to the superfluity of democratic deliberation - and certainly no final decision taken on our behalf by algorithms.

[665] Aside from the rarity of a scenario in which a younger demographic makes decisions for the general population, it may provide a vital bulwark against the spread of disinformation amongst older demographics, a collective equivalent of the apocryphal story of the Reddit user who claimed to have de-radicalised his father by scrambling his television and pretending that the cable package no longer supported Fox News.

Norval's conception of aversive democracy is characterised thus: 'aversion to the demand for conformity, politically draws attention to those aspects of a democratic grammar that highlight our democratic responsibilities, to the need to give attention to the exercise of our political voice and to the claim to community that it inevitably invokes and/or contests'.[666] Norval is less concerned with debates between deliberative democrats and poststructuralist theories of universalising democracy, where universalisation refers to either 'the generalisation of norms, or the hegemonisation of demands'[667] and is more interested with the way in which political demands are formed in an authentic, democratic way.

Simone Chambers argues that if agreement is the motivation behind deliberative democracy, then we must have an account of what people can agreed to, and how this process of agreement occurs. People cannot merely deliberate with each individual holding an individual interest utterly incompatible with any other, so politics presupposes the possibility of shared interests that can be ascertained, negotiated and secured through deliberation, which leads Chambers to the notion of generalisable interests.

Generalisable interests are characterised by three features: firstly, they are overlapping particular, but not necessarily identical, political interests that converge on agreeable norms. The example given is the overlap between one democrat who prioritises peacefulness and another who prioritises agape (the godly love of all humans) agreeing on religious toleration. Furthermore, they comprise both material interests and moral ideals (e.g. welfare provisions providing more resources to parents with children alongside moral norms regarding the importance of parents prioritising the wellbeing of their children). Finally, the process of arriving at generalisable interests is not presupposed as a means of uncovering universal human needs through discourse, rather that through robust criticism, compromise and

---

[666] Norval, *Aversive Democracy*, pp.7-8.

[667] ibid, p.19.

agreement, a collective can arrive at a plausible interpretation of a collective need to be addressed.[668]

Norval, informed by Chambers, concludes that 'practical discourse should be understood as a long-term consensus-forming process and not as a decision procedure'.[669] Democracy is to be conceptualised as a process without end, as to end the process would be to presuppose a finality to politics that cannot be affirmed without the dissolution of that which gives democratic politics its legitimacy (the capacity for individuals to deliberate). As Lefort contends, democracy is 'instituted by the dissolution of the markers of certainty', developing upon the notion of a space in which 'people experience a fundamental indeterminacy as to the basis of power, law and knowledge, and as to the basis of relations between self and other, at every level of social life'.[670] The only political certainty in an idealised democracy, therefore, is the capacity to overturn any perceived political certainty. Following this line of reasoning, Norval explains that 'a democratic order is one in which the locus of power becomes an empty place, a place that cannot be occupied'.[671]

Norval argues that 'the subject becomes a democratic subject not simply because she is rationally convinced it is the better option, thought that may be part of the story, but rather because she participates in democratic practices, which retrospectively orient her to identify as democratic subject'.[672] In a society where democratic practices are normalised, such as collective deliberation, critical appraisal, allowing oneself to be heard in a public forum and bearing witness to another's point of view with a charitable but robust sense of judgement, one becomes a democratic subject without realising it: as Zizek notes, 'an act is

---

668 ibid, pp.27-28.

669 ibid, p.36.

670 Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988), p.19.

671 Norval, ibid, p.45.

672 Norval, ibid, p.127.

never fully "present", the subjects are never fully aware that what they are doing "now" is the foundation of a new symbolic order- it is only afterwards that they take note of the true dimension of what they have already done'.[673] It is only after the fact, having learned democratic norms, having affirmed oneself as a competent speaker or assessor of public speech and having sharpened one's critical faculties to the point of being comfortable with public declarations, then *we become aware of what we have become*. As Norval states, 'this moment of subjective assent ('I am a democrat!') involves a process of identification – a picture gripping us, being occupied by something- that escapes the linguistic reductionism and excessively rational, disembodied account of much deliberative democracy theory'.[674] Responsibility for both individual and collective actions becomes reinforced by citizen empowerment alongside an associational technics that democratically regulates algorithmic interference on digital platforms. In other words, aversive citizenship is a form of democratic culture that justifies the practices of the voluntary associations as extensions of a broader open discussion about the trajectory of collective political action. The aim is to cultivate an active citizenship that feels both sufficiently informed and inherently entitled to contribute to either the business of representative politics or voluntary associations with which they resonate, with the authority of democratic subjects. The objective is the renewal, rejuvenation and expansion of the ideal of democracy, the practices of which act as the connective tissue between all spheres of social life. Here I reject the call to translate the virtual public sphere of social media into an offline agora in the hopes of producing a "public sphere" proper, the likes of which only exist in social contract fiction. The contention here is to embrace the hyper-fragmentation of social life as the uneasy and fraught maturation of human relations, accept the challenges that emerge from plural forms of the common good and individual goal-directed lives of self-defined meaning, yet reject

---

[673] Slavoj Zizek, *For They Know Not What They Do. Enjoyment as a Political Factor.* (London: Verso, 2001), p.222.

[674] Norval, ibid, p.124.

the individualistic culture that eschews logics of care and community, and accommodate these patterns of social life within a holistic democratic framework that affirms free and equal membership within the polity through all practices, as opposed to political decisions, rights and obligations being enshrined from above.

Furthermore, space itself must be constructed and configured to support democratic culture. In response to theories that overemphasise digital political communication, John R. Parkinson reminds us that 'the things that are communicated involve real people who take up, occupy, share, and contest physical space'.[675] Parkinson argues that democratic activity depends on the availability of physical, public spaces, and that the availability of these spaces must be defended. Parkinson focuses on the 'physical conditions of democracy rather than its cultural conditions'[676], defining public space as openly accessible, using common resources, having common effects and/or used for the performance of public roles.[677] He characterises democratic performance as the narrations of interests, opinion, and experience, the making of public claims, deciding upon those claims, and accounting for decisions and actions.[678] In parallel with our formulation, Parkinson is sceptical of the public/private distinction[679], and argues that the dominance of large commercial interests in the production of space contributes to the retrenchment of civic activity and the normalisation of consumer approaches to public life.[680] The neoliberal privatisation and policing of public space changes the way individuals engage with their communities, seeing themselves as shoppers, sports fans and consumers, rather than citizens.[681] For example, the high street is a

---

[675] John R. Parkinson, *Democracy and Public Space: The Physical Sites of Democratic Performance*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.1.

[676] Parkinson, ibid, p.8.

[677] ibid, p.16.

[678] ibid, p.48.

[679] ibid, p.69.

[680] ibid, p.85.

[681] ibid, p.171.

place where the expectation is that you will part with money or may even be moved along, deemed suspicious if not fully engaged in the practice of commerce.

The commitments of radical democracy lends itself to political opposition to the increasing closing off of public space into private hands, the division of spaces into strictly industrial and commercial zones, and other ways in which public space is constructed and reproduced in such a way that limits social experiences. Democratic spaces are open-ended; they allow individuals to enter an encounter without an express preconceived intention of how such a space ought to be interpreted or used. These spaces, interpreted through Sloterdijk's topology, may be understood as the liminal space between and across contiguous spheres. Radical democracy is necessarily opposed to individualistic societies structured as foam, reliant on hegemonic communications networks to provide us with a comprehension of our standing in relation to others, and instead encourages a plethora of physical-digital hybrid spaces to emerge over time through freedom of association and assembly.

Parkinson concludes with a suggestion of initiatives for encouraging democratic performance in public space, including heavily subsidised public transport, the public provision of meeting rooms and designated spaces for public claim-making purposes, a balance between preserving of memory and commemoration and dynamic features that allow citizens to feel as though they can influence urban architecture, which in turn presupposes an open and publicly accountable planning regime.[682] Citizens are then empowered to reconfigure the space in which further democratic demands will be made, and everyday life will be lived.[683]

---

[682] ibid, p.214.

[683] Although Parkinson has focused on urban centres, specifically drawing on comparisons between capital cities, research exists that also investigates methods for advocating counter-hegemonic political activity in suburban settings. See Oly Durose, *Suburban Socialism (Or Barbarism).* (London: Repeater, 2022).

Democracy as a Promise to the Future

> Is it possible to think and to implement democracy, that which would keep the old name 'democracy', whilst uprooting it from those figures of friendship…which prescribe fraternity. Is it possible, in assuming a certain faithful memory of democratic reason and reason *tout court* – I would even say the Enlightenment of a certain *Auflkarung* (thus leaving open the abyss which is again opening today under these words) – not to found, where it is no longer a question of founding, but to open to the future, or rather the 'to come', of a certain democracy?[684]

As Norval notes on this Derridean formulation, 'the promise of democracy here is a holding open of the future… it suggests that another future is possible, that there is more to democracy than what is called democracy today'.[685] The importance of a radical democratic theory open to the prospect of a future politics where the world is fundamentally different may seem aspirational in our contemporary context.

Derrida's expression of democracy to come necessarily calls for what he labels 'a militant and interminable political critique'.[686] Any committed democrat must be vigilant of the ways in which democratic processes can be eroded, undermined, scapegoated and potentially replaced, often in the language, or in the name, of "democracy", hence both our theoretical openness and indifference to feasibility conditions imposed by our immediate political landscape. Furthermore, the very belief that a future democracy will be superior to the democracies of today reinforces that understanding that democracy is the sole political regime that operates with an inherent openness, and therefore, a fragility, which is to be

---

[684] Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*. trans. George Collins. (London: Verso, 1997), p.306.

[685] Norval, ibid, p.137.

[686] Jacques Derrida, *Rogues. Two Essays on Reason.* trans. P.A. Brault and M. Naas. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp.86-87.

encouraged to allow for its own legitimate self-critique and self-improvement. As Norval puts it, 'it is this openness that advances both the call of and the risks to democracy; an urgency to institute, advance and reconstitute it, again and again'.[687]

Aversiveness is compatible with notions of participatory democracy found elsewhere in the literature. Framed in contrast to liberal representative democracy, participatory democracy 'encompasses self-exploration and self-development of citizens'.[688] If the conventional view of liberal democracy is the passive facilitation of perceived individual interests into a coherent agglomeration, or a legitimised compromise between competing claims, participatory democracy wishes to explore the conditions by which 'citizens discover what their real interests are'.[689] Similarly, Norval describes the aversive political identity as being inherently resistant to the formation of 'prevailing opinion', the tendency within liberal democracies for people to coalesce around a common approach, a candidate they think others will find favourable, to aim at that which will avoid political confrontation. This resistance to the political conformity that exists within a given society, 'this is the moment of the political *within* already constituted democratic regimes'.[690]

A radical democracy constituted as *aversive* and *associational* provides a provisional framework to theorise both local and international forms of democratic politics. Furthermore, I venture that a potentially transformative aspect of this formulation of democracy is its indifference to nationalism and national borders. Dryzek has noted in his work on deliberative global politics that 'transnational discursive democracy does not have to be integrated with any particular set of formal institutions (though it can target the influence over many such institutions, including states). Democracy is about communication as well as

---

[687] Norval, p.152.

[688] Peter Bachrach & Aryeh Botwinick, *Power and Empowerment: a Radical Theory of Participatory Democracy*. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992), pp.10-11.

[689] ibid, p.11.

[690] Norval, p.185.

voting, about social learning as well as decision-making'.[691] If we entertain the possibility that associational organisation could be implemented across transnational corporations (such as the hegemonic social media platforms) to turn previously hegemonic dominating institutions into transnational democratic institutions for those working within them, and thus accountable to those affected by their actions, perhaps Hirst's limited and considered vision for a more transparent civil society may be incorporated into a more ambitious radical political project. For example, Facebook users exist across the world. An associational model for a company of its vastness may involve unprecedented global democratic expansion: users could vote on different models of algorithmic intervention, on AI policy, or frameworks for content moderation, and collectively decide to withdraw the platform's availability from certain nation-states should they attempt to thwart the commitments of the platform's democratic mandate. In this context, social media shifts from being a meddling corporation to a techno-social institution with international influence comparable to the United Nations (and arguably greater democratic legitimacy and powers). William Connolly has argued that

> what is needed politically, today and tomorrow, is a series of cross-national, nonstatist movements organised across state lines, mobilising around specific issues of global significance, pressing states from inside and outside simultaneously to reconfigure stabilised convictions, priorities and policies.[692]

In associationalism, citizens choose the communities they will create with others and demands in return the duties of respect for others' rights to choose, retaining the elements of liberalism that protect our formal freedoms, but with a focus on ensuring that any free association and institutional interaction, where possible, is held accountable to the individuals that comprise it.[693] Here we may see the compatibility between the *aversive*

---

[691] John S. Dryzek, *Deliberative Global Politics: Discourse and Democracy in a Divided World.* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), p.25.

[692] William E. Connolly, *The Ethics of Pluralisation*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p.23.

[693] ibid, p.202.

character of non-conformity to institutions unwilling to change under critical scrutiny and the *associational* element that extends these democratic logics into the economic sphere. Democracy ought to be more than living in a society where certain procedures take place; it ought to be something that becomes identifiable as a constituent aspect of one's political freedom, to the extent that to live in a society where you felt your voice counted for nothing would feel like a state of unfreedom, an aberration of circumstance that prompts resistance: it must be understood as a non-negotiable freedom worth fighting for.

Sheldon Wolin considered democracy historically flighty and ephemeral. He used the term *fugitive democracy*, a form that emerges in certain historical periods of political intensity, and once capitalised upon, it disappears. He wrote that 'when democracy is settled into a stable form, such as prescribed by a written constitution, it is also settled down and rendered predictable. Then it becomes the stuff of manipulation: of periodic elections that are managed and controlled, of public opinion that is shaped, cajoled, misled, and then polled'[694]. My conception of radical democracy endeavours to resist such a characterisation: it is *aversive*, in that it resists closure and cultivates a culture of non-conformity and *associational*, in that it wishes to cultivate transparent and accountable organisations within economic and civil society as well as political institutions, potentially beyond pre-existing borders. To the extent that relies on aspiring to a democratic future that has yet to be practically realised, it may be considered perfectionist.[695]

---

[694] Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision. Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought. Expanded ed.* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), p.602.

[695] Perfectionist here is not a reference to the ideal/non-ideal theory debates, rather Stanley Cavell's definition, where perfectionism 'provides a position from which the present state of human existence can be judged and a future state achieved, or else the present to be better than the cost of changing it. The very conception of a divided self and a doubled world, providing a perspective of judgement upon the world as it is, measured against the world as it may be, tends to express disappointment with the world as it is, as the scene of human activity and prospects, and perhaps to lodge the demand or desire for a reform or transfiguration of the world'. See Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words. Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), pp.172-4.

Whereas neoliberal politics reduce the political to the technical, leaving an institutionally aligned elite to manage society and the economy, radical democratic politics may be understood as the collective and transparent cultivation of political technique with the purpose of empowering all citizens, analogous to a system that produces informed and enthusiastic amateurs rather than a sector of dogmatic professionals. If contemporary society resembles foam, we might say that radical democratic politics ought to prioritise public networks of *sphere-building*, public spaces where people can meet and collaborate across social divides and facilitate interactions that normalise interactions of public deliberation with equal standing. The hope is that the extension of democratic practices and culture across a given community will erode the citizen-as-consumer passivity inherent to modern social systems, and instead shift power away from existing political institutions and towards novel forms of collective organisation.

Radical democratic theorists must resist the temptation to become apologists for existing democratic states and instead advocate a technics of sphere-building, practical and institutional changes that empower citizens to congregate, remove cultural, economic and physical obstructions to fostering social ties between members and groups, and reorient democracy as a culture of everyday practices. Democrats must become envoys from a possible future - messengers of a politics to come.

Conclusion

'Today, the weakness of capitalism lies in the production of subjectivity'.[696]

'We trust and believe that the world is real precisely because we know it to be a simulation'.[697]

Franco 'Bifo' Berardi has gone as far as to claim that the future no longer exists in a credible manner. He argues that 'the future is not an obvious concept, but a cultural construction and projection'[698] and that our belief in a world of progress - whether it be social, political, economic or technological - is ultimately rooted in our collective psychological reaction to the material experience of 'modern capitalism, in the experience of the expansion of the economy and knowledge. The idea that the future will be better than the present is not a natural idea, but the imaginary effect of the peculiarity of the bourgeois production process'.[699] Since the early days of computerisation, theory has often been paranoid regarding the predictive potential of cybernetics, the intensification of systems that offer 'a deadly vision of peace between humans and non-humans'.[700] The far-left theory collective Tiqqun suggested that the only way to overcome the cybernetic capture of the openness of the future was through the political instigation of panic, 'understood as a change of state of the self-regulating system'[701], but as I have earlier argued, the condition

---

[696] Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*. (Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e)/MIT Press, 2014), p.8.

[697] Steve Shaviro, *Doom Patrols*. (London: Serpent's Tail Press, 1996), p.128.

[698] Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *After the Future*. (London: AK Press, 2011), p.17.

[699] ibid, p.18.

[700] Tiqqun, *The Cybernetic Hypothesis*. (Mass.: MIT Press/Semiotext(e), 2020 [2001]), p.94.

[701] Tiqqun, ibid, p.125.

of hypersubjectivity on social media platforms, in concert with the bleeding of political norms from platforms into society, creates the conditions for a counter-hegemonic radical democratic project.

Radical democratic theory needs to advocate for practices that communicate in public space the political agency of human beings, that place subjects into historical context, to empower collective action in service of those forgotten futures rendered implausible by ideology.[702] Radical democratic theory often talks of "constructing" or "staging" a people, of organising a body of political actors that represent the interests of the general population, either metaphorically, or literally, the latter often in an urban confrontation with order (almost always the police). The problem of such political spectacle is the capacity of legacy media to editorialise, to make any group attempting to represent broader interests out to be a self-interested or partial collective. Mass media has had a stranglehold on political communication in this regard: leaderless movements characterised as directionless, political demands framed as too simplistic and unrealistic, and protesters framed as politically illiterate for not simply "waiting to vote". Furthermore, almost all sustainable protest movements that survive this onslaught are promptly accused of being non-democratic themselves, often by implying or directly accusing them of violence, and thus, the argument goes, rendering their demands illegitimate. The exceptions to the rule are protest movements that have no quarrel with institutional power (and in the case of far-right protests, those who want to legitimise handing over more power, are regularly protected with police escorts).[703]

Social media has already shown itself to be a useful ally when appropriated by progressive protesters. The ability for live-streamers to broadcast unfiltered footage from

---

[702] Elsewhere with my co-author, I provide an evaluative account and normative framework for assessing the effectiveness of historical sites of commemoration for memory activists and political actors. See Jamie Ranger & Will Ranger, "Towards a resonant theory of memory politics", *Memory Studies*, (2022), *0*(0).

[703] William Finnegan, "Law Enforcement and the Problem of White Supremacy", *The New Yorker* (Feb 27, 2021) https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/law-enforcement-and-the-problem-of-white-supremacy. Last accessed: 21 Jan 2022.

protest sites without the mediation of corporate media subverts the centre-to-periphery communication paradigm, and has allowed mainstream media consumers to bear witness to social injustices, acts of state violence, and the unreliability of legacy media institutions to report certain confrontations.[704] The paradigmatic example would be the Black Lives Matter movement in the US; derided by mainstream commentators despite its clear messaging and reasonable political demands, the tide turned in their favour once social media videos went viral of both police brutality that had been shamelessly underreported (or misreported by taking unverified and inaccurate police press releases at their word) and the police response to peaceful protests.

The technical configuration, both in terms of circulating political demands and in terms of other institutions disrupting the clarity of a collective's presentation, is thus integral to understanding the relationship between the "staging of the people" and the people's reception of such staging. It's all well and good to have a theory of bringing political collectives together, but as we live in the technosphere, we also require a theory of how and why a "staged people" fails to resonate with their intended audience. In practice, it also means more than simply putting a video in front of a spectator: ideological space must be challenged such that when a confrontation between a staged people and state violence occurs, the average viewer identifies more with the newly constructed political body than with the institutions that purport to serve their interests.[705]

Another key political battleground to which radical democrats may lend both a theoretical and practical hand is memory politics. Memory politics, broadly described, is the

---

[704] Eric K. Jones, ""All Lies Matter!": Revealing Misleading Information in News Stories about Police Brutality", *Multicultural Education*, 25(3-4), (2018), pp.41-46.

[705] For example, Erin Pineda's critique of political philosophers of civil disobedience, accusing conventional liberal approaches of "seeing like a white state", and thus (unintentionally) reinforcing political assumptions that reinforce white supremacy, rather than criticising dominant narratives surrounding marginalised protest groups. She concludes that activism itself ought to be considered a form of practical political theorising. See Erin R. Pineda, *Seeing Like an Activist: Civil Disobedience and the Civil Rights Movement.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

disagreement between different social groups over interpretations of history, focusing on debates over meaning and historical truth. The most prominent examples are those sites of memories that intend to establish a certain historical perspective in the public arena. Memory politics concerns the concretisation of the intersection between historical knowledge and public political memory in society. Pierre Nora has argued that nation-states often employ sites of memory to ground unified historical foundations for national identity, presupposing a state that intends to crystallise social memories for intergenerational transmission.[706] Michael Rothberg's work on multidirectional memories has argued against the conventional framework of collective memory as competitive, where memory activists struggle in a zero-sum game to win the hegemonic historical interpretation, suggesting that memory politics ought to 'reject the reductionism of the nation-centred' model of memorialisation 'in favour of a more open-ended sense of the possibilities of memory'.[707] Bonnie Honig has argued that the social reality constructed by the existence of public things - not just historical sites of memory, but also architecture, transportation, civic landmarks, public artworks, etc. - anchor our collective sense of community.[708]

The struggle against politically motivated misinformation or simplification of historical knowledge is a contemporary issue that has seen a recent explosion of memory activism in the younger generation, including but not limited to the "Rhodes Must Fall" movement that began on university campuses in South Africa and spread to the Global North. Debates over the commemoration of colonial figures guilty of crimes against humanity led to discussions about the reproduction of white supremacy in the classroom, developing into strategies for decolonizing pedagogical practice itself.[709]

---

[706] Pierre Nora (1999) 'Between 'Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations,* 26, 7-24,, p.19.

[707] Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization.* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), p.310.

[708] Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair.* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2017).

[709] Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial & Kerem Nişancıoğlu, *Decolonising the University.* (London: Pluto, 2018).

Furthermore, radical democrats may reinvigorate emancipatory political action through the cultivation of greater public understanding of political orientation, to ensure that citizens understand where they stand in relation to others: citizens need to have access to reliable information regarding their comparative material status, so as to ensure that they are not being manipulated or persuaded to take up causes that objectively diminish their material interests, as well as historical context for the existence of certain institutional settlements and social practices. That is not to say that citizens will never decide to sacrifice certain personal comforts on moral grounds, rather that citizens must be aware of what is at stake at all times.[710]

Returning to the relationship between the political and the technical, we may draw upon the participatory potential of digital communications technology, to overhaul the sender-receiver model of political communication made ubiquitous with radio and television, and instead understand citizens as active receivers, engaging with mediated messages, a system of attention that could be configured into a system of attentiveness. Vaidhyanathan has argued that 'instead of cyberspace becoming more like the real world, the real world is becoming more like cyberspace'.[711] It is no longer only social media users that are influenced by the political discourse on social media, as legacy media struggles to keep apace with the platform news agenda, and politicians increasingly pivot to niche positions on fringe issues to curry favour with their online base. With the right amendments made to the logic of our social media platforms, there is no reason as to why computer-mediated communication in cyberspace cannot exist as a technical supplement to the cultivation of democratic practices.

---

[710] For example, given the context of climate breakdown and the systemic exploitation of the Global South, there is an argument that the middle classes of the Global North are morally obliged to forgo, among other luxuries, their SUVs. See Ulrich Brand & Markus Wissen, *The Imperial Mode of Living: Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism*. (London: Verso, 2021).

[711] Siva Vaidhyanathan, *The Anarchist in the Library: How the Clash Between Freedom and Control is Hacking the Real World and Crashing the System*. (Basic Books: New York, 2004), p.xi.

Radical democratic theory stands in opposition to those that claim the world is all that it could be, that this is all we can achieve. Technology is an assemblage of human thought and application in constant motion, but like a flowering plant that leans towards sunlight, it is under the external influence of social trajectory, the material interests of neoliberal capitalism. Nevertheless, reforms made in service to technology find themselves more easily accepted than political reforms. The former are considered to be *prima facie* forward-facing, whereas political changes are considered dubious, impartial and invasive. There is general agreement that change is necessary to counteract the litany of social problems we must collectively overcome, and yet life continues apace, the design of everyday life changing to accommodate the whims of technology firms whilst public life remains stagnant despite political turbulence.

Post-foundational political thought argues that an expansive account of radical democracy, informed by the radical contingency of the social, provides opportunities for political change and renewal. However, I argue it is socially weightless in its current formulation - a helpful starting point for political action, but lacking in an account of internalised oppression, of systems that render citizens passive and disenfranchised, and of the power relations between people, and their institutions.

Power relations and internalised oppression are obfuscated by ideology, understood to be in service of the reproduction of a neoliberal capitalist settlement. Ideology is framed as inherently linked to the material conditions of society, so that any returning ideological contestation exposes material dissatisfaction and social contradiction. I argue that contemporary ideology operates as a political technology, hiding imperatives that serve the partial interests of capital as technical impartiality and expertise, and challenges to ideology are presented as implausible, unfeasible and naive on similar grounds.

I have endeavoured to make an original contribution to the discipline by arguing that the political and the technical are co-constitutive of the social, that the social is constructed between moments of collective action that resolve emergent conflicts and ruptures, and the application of intellect onto the world for the purpose of configuring the material (and in doing so, determining the feasibility conditions and collective memory of political actors). In modernity, the acceleration of technological progress began to contribute to social ruptures, disrupting everyday life as much as any other form of conflict (political, social, ethical, religious, economic, etc.). I claim we live in the *technospheric condition*. Alongside those social and economic problems already exacerbated by the neoliberal capitalist implementation of technology, there are distinct social problems *qua* technology. Social acceleration causes the problems of institutional inertia, frenetic standstill and information anxiety, as well as undermining the longstanding modern political norm of the public sphere, causing social fragmentation, and leading ever more towards lives mediated by networks.

Another original contribution is the claim that the social effects of acceleration are incompatible with neoliberal subjectivity, that neoliberalism fails to accommodate and adequately contain the negative social effects of the technological progress it encourages for the purpose of capital accumulation. Institutional inertia translates into depoliticisation, where neoliberal institutions simply disregard the efficacy of power, deferring political action to the private sector, and leaving corporate power as unregulated as possible in the hopes that these problems will be solved without political intervention. Frenetic standstill is internalised in the figure of the indebted person, shamed for their inability to thrive and adapt to the demands of the globalised economy. The neoliberal response to information anxiety is the commodification of knowledge, allowing the "information economy" to tackle these problems, opening the door to post-truth over collective meaning-making, as systems that prioritise personal validation are preferable to the consumer-citizen.

Social media becomes a site where the convergence of the ideological and the technological is at its most acute. Platforms attempt to reproduce neoliberal ideology, but also try to solve the problems caused by the technospheric condition. The clashes between reproducing neoliberal performance in social media users, and the platform's ability to simulate a world of transnational solidarity, facilitates the emergence of *hypersubjectivity*. I contend that this cultural condition - accessible to both digital natives and ubiquitous adopters of social media - places individuals in a "re-politicised" subject-position, capable of rejecting neoliberal hegemony (with either emancipatory or reactionary politics).

To an extent, hypersubjectivity is a cause for optimism for radical democrats, as it demonstrates the growing disjunction between the ideological and the technological, the emergent normalisation of counter-hegemonic thought, and the importance political theory must place in interdisciplinary research that incorporates analyses of the technical in the reinforcement or contestation of power. However, it also opens up the possibility of a politics of retrenchment that seeks to undermine the liberal gains of the status quo, and advocate for further anti-democratic policies in response to social crises. In any case, the political turbulence witnessed on social media demonstrates the validity of the post-foundational claim that the social is ultimately radically contingent.

I conclude that radical democratic theory needs an account of expansive democracy that tracks how technical configuration influences cultural attitudes and practices and intersects with ideological production. The reason is that radical democrats need strategies to overcome both ideology (to solve problems of material inequality with redistributive policies, to ensure the implementation of liberal norms of formal equality are realised in practice to ameliorate social oppression, etc.) as well as respond to the technospheric condition (the negative effects of social acceleration that make aforementioned problems more difficult to overcome, and authoritarian measures more persuasive).

What makes an emancipatory politics rather than a regressive one? Without becoming too prescriptive, the major distinction is the role of contingency. In regressive politics, contingency is an enemy of order, and there exists an inherent scepticism regarding the efficacy and viability of democracy as a political regime. In emancipatory politics, the problems of the social are not purported to be part of the natural order, nor are political decisions presented as impartial techniques. A radical democratic culture aims to carefully balance constitutional rights of citizens, the antagonism inherent to political discourse, and narratives that place historical examples of collective action into the public consciousness for the purpose of reaffirming individual and collective political agency. The political conjuncture is clear: radical democratic theory cannot reduce itself to reformist concessions to neoliberal capitalism. It must be a theoretical break from its norms, a departure from its techniques and thus in opposition to the dominant hegemonic consensus. Radical democratic theory cannot be a friend to contemporary contours of power, but a vocal and uncompromising articulation of an alternative: an *associational, aversive* alternative.

To conclude: *(1) to what extent does social media expand or restrict possibilities for radical democracy?* Social media, as the increasingly hegemonic communications technology, plays a contributing factor in the configuration of social life, which in turn influences political discourse, shared assumptions and expectations of one another, and contributes to collective memory. Social media allows citizens to defer the co-presence necessary for political deliberation - we become participants in a continuous real-time feed, a long-form network of overlapping and intersecting social and political discourses to which we may opt in or out at any time, whilst often being incentivised to lean towards opinions that will garner the most attention depending on our intentions as platform users. We cannot chastise social media for encouraging people to engage in the work of politics - communicating with one another, exchanging political opinions, opinions that often draw on historical interpretations of

events rather than simply current affairs, is itself necessary for the intergenerational continuity of political communities.

Social media commands our attention: nevertheless, the limitations of social media are clear: public political space cannot be totalised by neoliberal capitalism, steered by the interests of platforms, segmented and fragmented by the whims of democratically unaccountable algorithms. Social media is ultimately a market solution to a problem that has yet to be politically interrogated, and whilst it provides an insight into the radical contingency of the social, and the desire for connection present in our individualistic and discordant societies, it must be reconfigured to better serve the interests of a democratically empowered citizenry rather than limited by the context of the neoliberal imaginary in which it was originally forged.

(2) To what extent does the relationship between politics and technology account for the difficulties of democratic renewal? Democratic institutions are limited in their scope and imagination by the ideological commitments of neoliberal capitalism, but I also argue that the disempowerment of citizens can also be traced back to unresolved tensions between technology as a supplement to human capacity to achieve their goals, and technology as an obfuscating structure that alienates and isolates individuals from a sense of personal agency and responsibility. Therefore, as much as ideological reform is required of our existing political institutions, there is also a case to be made for the expansion of democratic culture into society more broadly, to empower citizens in their everyday lives, and our technological infrastructure must be incorporated into such a political project - the inherently interdisciplinary, and democratically necessary, practice of sphere-building.

Bibliography

A

Abramson, Jeffrey B., F. Christopher Arterton, and Gary R. Orren. *The Electronic Commonwealth: The Impact of New Media Technologies on Democratic Politics*. New York: Basic Books, 1988

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998

Aleman, Jorge. *Neoliberal Horizons in Subjectivity*. Buenos Aires: Grammas Ediciones, 2016

Alter, Adam. *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked*. London: Penguin, 2018

Althusser, Louis. 'Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses', *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings* (1966-67), edited by Francois Matheron, pp.33-84. New York: Verso, 2003

Althusser, Louis. *Philosophy of the Encounter. Later Writings 1978-86.,* trans. G.M. Goshgarian. London: Verso, 2006

Althusser, Louis. *On Ideology*. London: Verso, 2008

Andrejevic, Mark. 'Apprehensions of the Future: Internet Aesthetics and Ideology,' in *Ideologies of the Internet*, pp.19-35. (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press), 2006

Andrejevic, Mark. *Infoglut: How Too Much Information is Changing the Way we Think and Know*. London: Routledge, 2013

Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Christopher Rowe. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002

Ayres, Jeffrey M. 'Framing Collective Action Against Neoliberalism: The Case Of The 'Anti-Globalization' Movement,' *Journal of World-Systems Research*, (2004), 10 (1): pp.11-34

B

Bachrach, Peter & Aryeh Botwinick. *Power and Empowerment: a Radical Theory of Participatory Democracy*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992

Badiou, Alain. *Being and Event*. London: Bloomsbury Press, 2001

Badiou, Alain. *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return of Philosophy* London: Continuum Press, 2003

Badiou, Alain. *Logics of Worlds, Being and Event II*. London: Bloomsbury Press, 2006

Badiou, Alain. *Theory of the Subject*. London: Bloomsbury Press, 2009

Badiou, Alain, et. al. *What is a People?* New York: Columbia University Press, 2017

Bakardjieva, Maria. 'Subactivism: Lifeworld and Politics in the Age of the Internet,' in *(Re)inventing the Internet: Critical Case Studies*, edited by Andrew Feenberg and Norm Friesen, pp.85-108. Rotterdam: Sense Publications 2012

Ballard, J.G. *Kingdom Come*. London: Fourth Estate, 2006

Barker, Eric. TIME Magazine: This Is The Best Way to Overcome Fear of Missing Out. June 7 (2016) Accessed April 16, 2018. http://time.com/4358140/overcome-fomo/

Barrett, Brian. Why Net Neutrality is a Good Thing: A Wired Guide (2017) Accessed March 27, 2018. https://www.wired.com/story/net-neutrality-fight-wired-guide/.

Baudrillard, Jean. *The Ecstacy of Communication*. (trans.) Bernard Schutze & Caroline Schutze. New York: Semiotext(e), 1998

Baudrillard, Jean. *Selected Writings*. 2nd edition. Mark Poster (ed.) Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001

Benjamin, Ruha. *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Cambridge: Polity, 2019

Benhabib, Seyla. "Models of Public Space" in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 73–98

Benkler, Yochai. *The Penguin and the Leviathan: How Cooperation Triumphs over Self-Interest*. New York: Crown Business, 2011

Benton, Ted. *The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism*. London: Macmillan Publishers, 1984

Benvenuto, Sergio & Roger Kennedy. *The Works of Jacques Lacan: An Introduction*. London: Free Association Books, 1986

Berardi, Franco 'Bifo'. *After the Future*. London: AK Press, 2011

Berke, Jeffrey. *World Economic Forum: Mark Zuckerberg Thought Facebook Could Solve A Lot of Problems*. February 13. (2018) Accessed April 16, 2018. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/02/mark-zuckerberg-says-he-thought-facebook-could-solve-a-lot-of-problems-but-the-world-is-more-divided-than-he-expected

Berman, Marshall. *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* Verso: London, 1982

Bernays, Edward. *Propaganda*. London: Routledge, 1928

Berry, David M. *Critical Theory and the Digital*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014

The Big Issue. 'The mum who drove her Range Rover into Insulate Britain protesters is selling merch now', https://www.bigissue.com/news/the-mum-who-drove-her-range-rover-into-insulate-britain-is-selling-merch-now/ (2021) Last accessed: 24 December 2021.

Bhambra, Gurminder K., Dalia Gebrial & Kerem Nişancıoğlu. *Decolonising the University*. London: Pluto, 2018

Binkley, Sam. 'Happiness, positive psychology and the program of neoliberal governmentality,' *Subjectivity*, (2011), 4(4), pp.371–394

Blaikie, Norman. *Approaches to Social Enquiry*. Cambridge: Polity, 1993

Bloom, Mia & Sophia Moskalenko, *Pastels and Pedophiles: Inside the Mind of QAnon*. Boston, MA: Redwood Press, 2021

Brand, Ulrich & Markus Wissen. *The Imperial Mode of Living: Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism*. London: Verso, 2021

Braverman, Harry. "Technology and Capitalist Control" in Donald MacKenzie and Judy Wajcman (ed.), *The Social Shaping of Technology (2nd Edition)*. Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2011, pp.158-159

Boffey, Daniel. Academy School Chain Outsource Jobs Privatization By Stealth (2014) Accessed March 20, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/sep/20/academy-school-chain-outsource-jobs-privatisation-by-stealth.

Bory, Paolo. *The Internet Myth: From the Internet Imaginary to Network Ideologies*. London: University of Westminster Press, 2020

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Weight of the World.* Cambridge: Polity, 1999.

Bowen, Charles. *Modem Nation: The Handbook of Grassroots American Activism Online*. New York: Random House, 1996.

Bridle, James. "Opinion: Data isn't the new oil — it's the new nuclear power". Ideas @ TED (2018). https://ideas.ted.com/opinion-data-isnt-the-new-oil-its-the-new-nuclear-power/

Brockman, John. *Is The Internet Changing The Way We Think?* New York: Harper Perennial, 2011

Brown, Abram. "People are begging for cash on Twitter - and Jack Dorsey says he'll donate to them" March 18 (2020) Accessed 14 June 2022. https://www.forbes.com/sites/abrambrown/2020/03/18/people-are-begging-for-cash-on-twitter-and-jack-dorsey-says-hell-donate-to-them/

Boulianne, Shelley. 'Social media use and participation: a meta-analysis of current research,' *Information, Communication & Society*, (2015), 18(5), pp.524-538

Buckingham, David. *Youth, Identity and Digital Media.* Boston: MIT Press, 2008

Butler, Judith & J. W. Scott. *Feminists Theorize the Political.* New York/London: Routledge, 1992

C

Cadwalladr, Carole & Emma Graham-Harrison. Facebook and Cambridge Analytica face mounting pressure over data scandal. (2018) Accessed March 22, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/18/cambridge-analytica-and-facebook-accused-of-misleading-mps-over-data-breach.

Carr, Nicholas. *The Shallows: How the internet is changing the way we think, read and remember*. London: Atlantic Books, 2011

Casey, Ed. *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993

de Castro, Julio Cesar Lemes. 'Social Networks as Dispositives of Neoliberal Governmentality,' *Journal of Media Critiques,* (2016), 2(7), pp. 85-102

Castells, Manuel. *The Information Age, Vol I: The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford/Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996

Cavell, Stanley. *Cities of Words. Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004

Cerulo, Karen & Janet M. Ruane. 'Reframing sociological concepts for a brave new (virtual?) world,' *Sociological Inquiry*, (1997), 67(1), pp.48-58

Chun, Wendy in Geert Lovink, *Sad By Design: On Platform Nihilism*. London: Pluto Books, 2019

Clark, Andy & David J Chalmers. 'The extended mind', *Analysis*, (1998), 58(1), pp.7–19

Critchley, Simon. 'Re-tracing the Political: Politics and Community in the Work of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy' In David Campbell and Michael Dillon (ed.), *The Political Subject of Violence.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993

Crouch, Colin. *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism.* Cambridge: Polity, 2011.

Cohen, Donald. The American Prospect: Public Infrastructure as Stealth Privatization. (2016) Accessed March 20, 2020. http://prospect.org/article/public-infrastructure-stealth-privatization.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. London: Routledge, 1991

Connolly, William. *The Ethics of Pluralisation*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995

Cotterill, Sarah, Peter John & Lizzie Richardson. 'The Impacts of a Pledge Campaign and the Promise of Publicity: A Randomized Controlled Trial of Charitable Donations,' *Social Science Quarterly*, (2013), 94 (1):, pp. 2000-2016.

Couldry, Nick & Andreas Hepp. *The Mediated Construction of Reality*. Cambridge: Polity, 2016

Couldry, Nick. *Media, Voice, Space and Power*. London, Routledge, 2020

Curran, James in Robert McChesney, *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy*. New York: The New Press, 2013

D

Davies, Will. "When is a market not a market? 'Exemption', 'externality' and 'exception' in the case of European state aid rules," *Theory, Culture & Society*, (2013), 30(2), pp. 32-59.

Davies, Will. *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition*. London: Sage Publications, 2014

Davies, Will. *The Happiness Industry: How Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-Being*. London: Verso, 2015

Dean, Mitchell. *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society, 2nd edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2010

Deleuze, Gilles & Felix Guattari. *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1974

Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*. trans. Barbara Johnson. London: Athlone Press, 1982

Derrida, Jacques. *The Politics of Friendship*. trans. George Collins. London: Verso, 1997

Derrida, Jacques. "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides". In *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*. Giovanna Borradori (ed.) (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003, pp. 85–136)

Derrida, Jacques. *Rogues. Two Essays on Reason*. trans. P.A. Brault and M. Naas. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003

Deuze, Mark. 'Media Life', *Media Culture & Society*, (2009), 33(1), pp.137-148

Diani, Mario. 'Social Movement Networks Virtual and Real,' *Information, Communication & Society*, (2000), 3(3), p.386-401

Dillet, Benoit. "Proletarianization, Deproletarianization, and the Rise of the Amateur", *boundary 2: an international journal of literature and culture*, (2017), (44: 1), pp. 79-105

Dreyfus, Hubert. 'Nihilism on the Information Highway: Anonymity versus Commitment in the Present Age.' In *Community in the Digital Age: Philosophy and Practice*, edited by A. Feenberg and D. Barney, pp.69-81,. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, (2004)

Dryzek, John S. *Deliberative Global Politics: Discourse and Democracy in a Divided World*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006

Durbin, Paul T. In Eric Higgs, Andrew Light and David Strong, *Technology and the Good Life?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000

Durose, Oly. *Suburban Socialism (Or Barbarism)*. London: Repeater, 2022

E

Eagleton, Terry. *Ideology: An Introduction*. London: Verso Books, 1991

Eichhorn, Kate. *The End of Forgetting: Growing Up With Social Media.* Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019

Ellul, Jacques. *The technological society*. New York: Vintage Books, 1964

Espinoza, Tania "The Technical Object of Psychoanalysis". In Christina Howells & Gerald Moore, *Stiegler and Technics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013, pp.151-164

Esposito, Roberto. *Immunitas. The Protection and Negation of Life*. Cambridge: Polity, 2011

Eyal, Nir. *Hooked: How To Build Habit-Forming Products*. London: Portfolio Penguin, 2014

F

Fairlamb, Horace L., *Critical Conditions. Postmodernity and the Question of Foundations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994

Feenberg, Andrew *(Re)inventing the Internet: Critical Case Studies*. Rotterdam: Sense Publications, 2012

Ferretter, Luke *Louis Althusser*. London: Routledge, 2006

Finlayson, Lorna *The Political is Political: Conformity and the Illusion of Dissent in Contemporary Political Philosophy* London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015

Finnegan, William "Law Enforcement and the Problem of White Supremacy", *The New Yorker* (Feb 27, 2021) https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/law-enforcement-and-the-problem-of-white-supremacy. Last accessed: 21 Jan 2022.

Fisher, Mark *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books, 2009

Fleck, Ludwig *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*. Frederick Bradley and Thaddeus J. Trenn (trans). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, [1935] 1979

Flisfeder, Matthew *Algorithmic Desire: Toward A New Structuralist Theory of Social Media.* Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2021.

Floridi, Luciano *Information: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010

Freeden, Michael *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003

Freeden, Michael *The Political Theory of Political Thinking: The Anatomy of a Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013

Freeman, John *The Tyranny of E-mail*. Scriber: New York, 2009

Frey, Bruno S. & Stephan Meier. 'Social comparisons and pro-social behavior: testing conditional cooperation in a field experiment,' *American Economic Review*, (2004), 94 (1), pp.1717-1722

Fromm, Eric *The Art of Loving*. New York: Harper, 1956

E.M. Forster, *The Machine Stops and Other Stories*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1997

Foucault, Michel "Of Other Spaces", *Diacritics*, (1986), 16:1, pp.22-27

Foucault, Michel *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France 1978-79*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004

Fuchs, Christian *Social media: a critical introduction.* London: Sage, 2014

Fuchs, Christian *Critical Theory of Communication: New Readings of Lukacs, Adorno, Marcuse, Honneth and Habermas in the Age of the Internet.* London: University of Westminster Press, 2016

Fukuyama, Francis *The End of History and the Last Man.* New York: Free Press, 1992

Fukuyama, Francis *Our Posthuman Future* New York: Picador, 2003

Furedi, Frank *Populism and the European Culture Wars: The Conflict of Values between Hungary and the EU*. London: Routledge, 2018

G

Alessandro Gandini, 'Digital work: self-branding and social capital in the freelance knowledge economy,' *Marketing Theory*, (2015), 16(1), pp.123-141

Paul Du Gay, *Consumption and identity at work*. London: Sage, 1996

Gee, James Paul 'Semiotic social spaces and affinity spaces: from the age of mythology to today's schools,' In *Beyond communities of practice: language, power and social context*, edited by D Barton and K Tusking. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005 ,pp.214-232

Gerbaudo, Paolo *The Digital Party: Political Organisation and Online Democracy* London: Pluto, 2018

Gershon, Livia "The Birth of Planned Obsolescence" JStor Daily (2017) https://daily.jstor.org/the-birth-of-planned-obsolescence/ Accessed: 1st March 2021.

Gilbert, Margaret *A Theory of Political Obligation: Membership, Commitment, and the Bonds of Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006

Gilbert, Margaret *Joint Commitment: How We Make The Social World.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014

Gilliland, Nikki (2020) "30 Brands With Excellent Social Media Strategies". June 25. Accessed 14 June 2022. https://econsultancy.com/30-brands-with-excellent-social-media-strategies/

Gille, Bertrand *The History of Techniques.* New York: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1986

Gordon, Jill 'John Stuart Mill and "The Marketplace of Ideas"', *Social Theory and Practice,* (1997), 23(2), pp. 235-249

Graeber, David *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory.* Simon & Schuster: London, 2018

Graeber, David and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity.* London: Allen Lane, 2021

Gramsci, Antonio *Selections from Prison Writings*. trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971

Gunnell, J.G. *Between Philosophy and Politics: The Alienation of Political Theory*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986

Gouge, Catherine 'Citizenship in the Cyberspatial Frontier' in David L. Erben, *Adrift in the Technological Matrix*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2003

H

Habermas, Jurgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. trans. Thomas Burger. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, [1962] 1989

Halbwachs, Maurice *La Mémoire Collective* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950

Hallward, Peter *Badiou. A Subject to Truth*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003

Han, Byung-Chul *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*. London: Verso, 2017

Hands, Joss *@ is For Activism: Dissent, Resistance and Rebellion in Digital Culture*. London: Pluto Press, 2010

Haraway, Donna "The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Determinations of Self in Immune System Discourse", *Differences*, (1989), 1, pp.3–43

Harvey, David *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005

Heath, Don in Leslie David Simon, Javier Corrales and Donald R. Wolfensberger, *Democracy and the internet: allies or adversaries?* Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Canter Press 2002

Heidegger, Martin *Being and Time*. trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, [1927] 1962

Heller, Agnes 'The Concept of the Political Revisited' in David Held (ed.), *Political Theory Today*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, pp. 330-346

Helm, Tony & Denis Campbell. 2013. Doctors Bemoan NHS Privatisation By Stealth. Accessed March 20, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/mar/02/doctors-bemoan-nhs-privatisation-by-stealth.

Herman, Edward S. and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* New York: Pantheon, 1988

Herzog, Don *Without Foundations, Justifications in Political Theory*. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1985

Heywood, Paolo (2017) The Ontological Turn, Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology. https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/ontological-turn Accessed: 18 March 2021.

Hidden, Nolan *The Anatomy of Fake News: A Critical News Literacy Education* California: University of California Press, 2020

Hill, Kevin A. & John E. Hughes. *Cyberpolitics: Citizen Activism in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998

Hirst, Paul *Associative Democracy: New Forms of Economic and Social Governance*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994

Honig, Bonnie *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*. Ithaca/London: Cornell University, 1993

Honig, Bonnie *Public Things: Democracy in Despair*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2017

Hornborg, Alf "Technology as Fetish: Marx, Latour, and the Cultural Foundations of Capitalism", *Theory, Culture & Society,* (2014), 31:4, pp.119–140

Horrocks, Chris and Zoran Jevtic, *Baudrillard: A Graphic Guide*. London: Icon Books, 2012

Howard, Dick *Defining the Political*. London: Macmillan, 1989

Howells, Christina and Gerald Moore. *Stiegler and Technics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013

Hughes, Kate "One in 10 investors 'taking tips from social media'", The Independent (16 Feb), https://www.independent.co.uk/money/investing-fraud-online-socialmedia-scams-help-check-b1802779.html

Hyder, Shama (2020) "How Social Media is Helping Cryptocurrency Flourish", Forbes (Nov 23) https://www.forbes.com/sites/shamahyder/2020/11/23/how-social-media-is-helping-cryptocurrency-flourish/?sh=782ca7e8717d

I

Ingram, David (2002) *The Political.* Oxford: Blackwell

Irwin, Stacey O'Neal *Digital Media: Human-Technology Connection*. New York/London: Lexington Books, 2016

J

Jacquette, Dale. *Ontology.* Chesham: Acumen, 2002

Janicka, Iwona "Are these Bubbles Anarchist? Peter Sloterdijk's Spherology and the Question of Anarchism", *Anarchist Studies*, 24:1 (2016), pp.62-84

Janca, Aleksandar and Clothilde Bullen "The Aboriginal Concept of Time and Its Mental Health Implications." '*Australasian Psychiatry',* 11, no. 1_suppl (October 2003): S40–44.

Jarvis, Jeff *Public Parts: How Sharing in the Digital Age Improves the Way We Work and Live*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011

Jay, Martin *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute for Social Research 1923–1950*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1996

Jeffries, Stuart *Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School.* London: Verso, 2016

Jones, Eric K. ""All Lies Matter!": Revealing Misleading Information in News Stories about Police Brutality", *Multicultural Education*, 25(3-4), (2018), pp.41-46

Jones, Seth G. (1994) 'Understanding community in the information age', In *CyberSociety: Computer-mediated communication and community*, 10-35. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Jones, Seth G. (1997) 'The Internet and its Social Landscape.' In *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, edited by S.G. Jones, 7-35. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Jones, Seth G. (2020) Who Are Antifa and Are They A Threat? Centre for Strategic & International Studies. https://www.csis.org/analysis/who-are-antifa-and-are-they-threat Accessed: 18 March 2021.

Jordan, Patrick W. *Designing Pleasurable Products: An Introduction to the New Human Factors.* Philadelphia, PA: Taylor & Francis, 2002

K

Kaufman, Dan "Locke's Theory of Identity", *A Companion to Locke*, Matthew Stuart (ed.) (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016, pp. 236–259

Kalpokas, Ignas *A Political Theory of Post-Truth.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019

Keen, Andrew *The Internet is not the Answer.* London: Atlantic Books, 2015

Kelly, Kevin 'The Waking Dream', in John Brockman (ed.), *Is The Internet Changing The Way We Think?* New York: Harper Perennial, 2011

Koshy, Yohann (2017) Vice: Why Social Media Can Never Fill the Void in Our Depressing Lives. https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/5377w5/why-social-media-can-never-fill-the-void-in-our-depressing-lives. Accessed April 13, 2018.

Kuhn, Moritz, Moritz Schularick & Ulrike Steins (2018) "Research: How the Financial Crisis Drastically Increased Wealth Inequality in the U.S", Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2018/09/research-how-the-financial-crisis-drastically-increased-wealth-inequality-in-the-u-s

Kuhn, Thomas *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962

L

Laclau, Ernesto 'Reading the Political. Exploring the Margins of Politics' in *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*. (London: Verso, 1990); *Kari Palonen and Tuija Parvikko (eds.) (*1993) *Finnish Political Science Association*, pp.6-16.

Laclau, Ernesto *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*. London/New York, 1990

Laclau, Ernesto *Emancipations*. London/New York: Verso, 1996

Laclau, Ernesto *On Populist Reason*. London/New York: Verso, 2005

Laclau, Ernesto, Slavoj Zizek and Judith Butler, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality. Contemporary Dialogue on the Left*. London/New York: Verso, 2000

Lacoue-Labarthe, Phillippe & Jean-Luc Nancy, *Retreating the Political*. London: Routledge, 1997

Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980

Lakoff, Sanford *Democracy: History, Theory, Practice*. Boulder, Westview Press, 1999

Lane, Jan-Erik & Svante Ersson, *Democracy: A Comparative Approach*. London: Routledge, 2003

Laplanche, Jean and Jean-Bernard Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*. London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1980

Lazzarato, Maurizio *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*. Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e)/MIT Press, 2011

Lazzarato, Maurizio *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*. Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e)/ MIT Press, 2014

Lefebvre, Henri *Critique of Everyday Life*. London: Verso, 1947/2014

Lefort, Claude *Democracy and Political Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988

Lefort, Claude in Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007

Lemmens, Pieters & Yuk Hui 'Reframing the Technosphere: Peter Sloterdijk and Bernard Stiegler's Anthropotechnological Diagnoses of the Anthropocene', *Krisis*, (2017),(2), pp.26-41

Leopold, Joy & Myrtle P. Bell 'News media and the racialization of protest: An analysis of Black Lives Matter articles', *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion,* (2017), 36:8, pp.720-735

Levine, Robert *A Geography of Time*. Basic Books: New York, 1997

Lindgren, Simon *New Noise: A Cultural Sociology of Digital Disruption*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2013

Lorenz, Taylor (2018) "The Atlantic: Raising A Social-Media Star". January 17. Accessed 17 November 2021. https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/01/raising-a-social-media-star/550418/.

Lovink, Geert *Sad By Design: On Platform Nihilism*. London: Pluto Books, 2019

Lund, Pamela *Massively Networked: How the Convergence of Social Media and Technology Is Changing Your Life*. San Francisco: PLI Media, 2011

M

Macey, David *Dictionary of Critical Theory*. London: Penguin Reference, 2000

Mainwaring, Simon *We First: How Brands and Consumers Use Social Media to Build a Better World*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011

Margetts, Helen, Peter John, Scott Hale & Taha Yasseri, *Political Turbulence: How Social Media Shape Collective Action*. Princeton, MA: Princeton University Press, 2016

Marchart, Oliver & Simon Critchley (ed.) *Laclau: A Critical Reader*. London/New York, Routledge, 2004

Marchart, Oliver *Thinking Antagonism: Political Ontology After Laclau*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018

Marcuse, Herbert *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970

Martin, Emily *Flexible Bodies. The Role of Immunity in American Culture from the Days of Polio to the Age of AIDS*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994

Marx, Karl in Franco Berardi, *The Soul At Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2009

Marx, Karl *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. trans. M. Nicolaus. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973 [1861].

Mbiti, John *African Religions and Philosophy*. Doubleday: New York, 1970

McCarthy-Nielsen, Patrick "Education as Pharmakon: Plato and Derrida's Dialectic on Learning." (2016) *Philosophy of Education Archive.*

McChesney, Robert 'The global struggle for communication,' *Monthly Review*, (1996), 48 (3): 1-20

McKenna, Katelyn in Adam Joinson, Katelyn McKenna, Tom Postmes & Ulf-Dietrich Reips, *The Oxford Handbook of Internet Psychology* (ed). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007

McLean, Ian *Democracy and New Technology.* Cambridge: Polity, 1991

McMullin, Irene 'The Amnesia of the Modern: Arendt on the Role of Memory in the Constitution of the Political', *Philosophical Topics*, (2011), 39:2, pp.91-116

McNay, Lois *The Misguided Search for the Political: Social Weightlessness in Radical Democratic Theory* Cambridge: Polity, 2014

McTague, Tom (2019) "Jeremy Corbyn is like Donald Trump, not Boris Johnson", The Atlantic, US. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/11/jeremy-corbyn-like-donald-trump-not-boris-johnson/601957/ Accessed: 18 March 2021.

Menkiti, Ifeanyi, A. *'Person and Community in African Traditional Thought'*, In. R.A. Wright (ed.), *African Philosophy: An Introduction*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1984, pp.171-81

Milan, Stefania "From social movements to cloud protesting: the evolution of collective identity" *Information, Communication & Society*, (2015), 18(8), pp.1-14.

Milberry, Kate 'Hacking for Social Justice: The Politics of Prefigurative Technology,' in *(Re)inventing the Internet: Critical Case Studies*, edited by Andrew Feenberg and Norm Friesen, Rotterdam: Sense Publications, 2012, pp.109-130

Milkman, Ruth 'A New Political Generation: Millennials and the Post-2008 Wave of Protest', *American Sociological Review*, (2017), 82:1, pp.1-31.

Mill, John Stuart *On Liberty, Utilitarianism and Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1859] 2015

Millman, Oliver (2019) "Greta Thunberg condemns world leaders in emotional speech at UN", The Guardian, UK. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/sep/23/greta-thunberg-speech-un-2019-address. Accessed: 18 March 2021.

Mishra, Stuti (2021) The Independent: Tuvalu investigating how to stay a country if it is submerged by rising sea levels. Accessed 1 December 2021. https://www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/news/tuvalu-sea-level-rise-state-cop26-b1955865.html

Mondak, Jeffrey J. & Karen D. Halperin 'A Framework for the Study of Personality and Political Behavior,' *British Journal of Political Science*, (2008), 38(2), pp.335-362

Moore, Jason W. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016

Morozov, Evgeny in Geert Lovink, *Sad By Design: On Platform Nihilism*. London: Pluto Books, 2019

Mouffe, Chantal *The Return of the Political*. London/New York: Verso, 1993

Mouffe, Chantal *The Democratic Paradox*. London/New York: Verso, 2000

Mouffe, Chantal *On the Political*. Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2005

Mouffe, Chantal *Agonistics: Thinking The World Politically*. London/New York: Verso, 2013

Mouffe, Chantal *For a Left Populism*. London/New York: Verso, 2018

Mumford, Lewis *Technics and Civilization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1934] 2010

Munn, Luke "Alt-right pipeline: Individual journeys to extremism online", *First Monday*, (2021), 24(6), https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v24i6.10108

Muldoon, James *Platform Socialism: How to Reclaim our Digital Future from Big Tech*. London: Pluto, 2022

Munck, Gerardo L. *Measuring Democracy: A Bridge Between Scholarship & Politics*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2009

N

Michael Nielsen, *Reinventing Discovery: The New Era of Networked Science*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012

Negri, Antonio & Michael Hardt, *Empire* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000

Negri, Antonio & Michael Hardt, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* London: Penguin, 2004

Negri, Antonio & Michael Hardt, *Commonwealth* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009

Norris, Pippa "'Who Surfs Cafe Europa?', Paper for the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, (1999), Atlanta, GA.

Nora, Pierre 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations,* (1999), 26, pp.7-24

Aletta J. Norval, *Aversive Democracy: Inheritance and Originality in The Democratic Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007

L

Leander, Anna "Digital/commercial (in)visibility: The politics of DAESH recruitment videos", *European Journal of Social Theory*, (2017), *20*(3), pp.348–372.

O

O'Connor, Rory *Friends, Followers and the Future: How Social Media Are Changing Politics, Threatening Big Brands and Killing Traditional Media*. San Francisco: City Light Books, 2012

Ong, Aihwa *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press, 2006

Oosterling, Henk 2007. 'Interest and Excess of Modern Man's Radical Mediocrity: Rescaling Sloterdijk's Grandoise Aesthetic Strategy,' *Cultural Politics*, 3(3), pp.357–380.

Oxfam (2013) A Cautionary Tale: The true cost of austerity and inequality in Europe. https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/bp174-cautionary-tale-austerity-inequality-europe-120913-en_1_1.pdf

P

Packard, Vance *The Hidden Persuaders* New York: Pocket Books, [1957] 2007

Pagel, Mark. 'Brain Candy and Bad Mathematics,' in John Brockman (ed.), *Is The Internet Changing The Way We Think?* New York: Harper Perennial, 2011, pp.11-14.

Vassilios Paipais, *Political Ontology and International Political Thought: Voiding a Pluralist World* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017

Palumbo, Antonio & Richard Bellamy, *From Government to Governance, 1st Edition*. London: Routledge, 2010

Papacharissi, Zizi 'The virtual sphere: the internet as a public sphere,' *new media & society*, (2002), 4(1), pp.9–27.

Parenti, Michael *Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media* Boston, MA: Cengage Learning [1986] 1992.

Parkinson, John R. *Democracy and Public Space: The Physical Sites of Democratic Performance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012

Pateman, Carole *The Disorder of Women. Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989

Pecheux, Michel "The Mechanism of Ideological (Mis)recognition" in *Mapping Ideology*, London/New York: Verso, 1994, pp.144-151.

Pettman, Dominic *Infinite Distraction*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016

Pineda, Erin R. *Seeing Like an Activist: Civil Disobedience and the Civil Rights Movement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021

Pitkin, Hannah, *The Attack of the Blob. Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1998

Pradeu, Thomas. *The Limits of the Self. Immunology and Biological Identity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012

Pradeu, Thomas "Organisms or Biological Individuals? Combining Physiological and Evolutionary Individuality", *Biology & Philosophy*, (2016), 31(6), pp.797–817

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, "What Is Government?" *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*. trans. John Beverly Robinson. London: Freedom Press, [1851] 1923

Poster, Mark *The Information Subject*. London: Routledge, 2001

Postman, Neil *The Disappearance of Childhood*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1982

Power, Anne and Ellie Benton (2021) "Where Next For Britain's 4,300 Mutual Aid Groups?" LSE Blogs. (May 6) https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/covid19/2021/05/06/where-next-for-britains-4300-mutual-aid-groups/ Last accessed: 15/12/2021

Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000

Q

R

Ranciere, Jacques *On The Shores of Politics* London: Verso, 1995

Ranciere, Jacques *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999

Ranciere, Jacques *On the Shores of Politics*. London: Verso, 1995

Ranciere, Jacques *Disagreement*, 1999; *Hatred of Democracy*. London/New York: Verso, 2006

Ranciere, Jacques *The Emancipated Spectator*. London: Verso, 2009

Ranciere, Jacques *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. London/New York, Verso, 2010

Ranciere, Jacques *Staging the People: The Proletarian and His Double*. London: Verso, 2011

Ranger, Jamie 2020. 'Slow Down! Digital Deceleration Towards A Socialist Social Media', Triple C: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society, 18, pp.254–267.

Ranger, Jamie & Will Ranger 2022. 'Towards a resonant theory of memory politics', *Memory Studies*, *0*(0)

Read, Jason 2009. 'A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity,' *Foucault Studies*, 6(1), pp.25-36

Rehmann, Jan *Theories of Ideology: The Powers of Alienation and Subjection*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2014

Reich, William *On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology*. Michael Rosen (ed.) Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996

Resnick, Brian (2018) "Vox: Conspiracy theories flourished after the Parkland shooting. Here's why." Accessed March 26, 2018. https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2018/2/26/17045560/parkland-shooting-conspiracy-theories-psychology.

Rhodes, R.A.W. *Network Governance and the Differentiated Polity: Selected Essays, Volume I*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017

Ricoeur, Paul *Time and Narrative, Vol 1*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990

Ricoeur, Paul *Reflections on the Just*, trans. David Pellauer. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007

Roberts, John Michael *New media and public activism: neoliberalism, the state, and radical protest in the public sphere* Oxford: Policy Press, 2014

Rodrigues, Francisco (2021) "Twitter and TikTok Embrace NFTS: Mainstream adoption incoming?", Coin Telegraph (October 9), https://cointelegraph.com/news/twitter-and-tiktok-embrace-nfts-mainstream-adoption-incoming

Rothberg, Michael *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009

Romé, Natalia *For Theory: Althusser and the Politics of Time*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021

Rosa, Hartmut "Social Acceleration: Ethical and Political Consequences of a Desychronised High-Speed Society", *Constellations,* (2003), 10(1), pp.3-33.

Rosa, Hartmut "Social Acceleration: Ethical and Political Consequences of a Desynchronized High-Speed Society", In Hartmut Rosa and William E. Scheuerman (eds.) *High-Speed Society: Social Acceleration, Power and Modernity*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009, pp.3-33.

Rosa, Hartmut *Alienation and Acceleration: Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality*. New York: NSU Press, 2010

Rosa, Hartmut *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013

Rosa, Hartmut *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*. Cambridge: Polity, 2019

Rosenthal, Irena"Ontology and political theory: a critical encounter between Rawls and Foucault", *European Journal of Political Theory*, (2016), 18:2, pp.238-258

S

Sarikakis, Katherine & Daya K. Thussu, *Ideologies of the Internet*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2006

Brian F. Schaffner, Matthew Macwilliams & Tatishe Nteta "Understanding White Polarization in the 2016 Vote for President: The Sobering Role of Racism and Sexism", *Political Quarterly,* (2018), 133:1, pp.9-34.

Schement, Jorge Reina & Terry Curtis, *Tendencies and Tensions of the Information Age: The Production and Distribution of Information in the United States*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction 1997

Schumpeter, Joseph A. *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1976

Schmitt, Carl *The Concept of the Political*. (ed.) Tracy B. Strong, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007

Self, Will *The Book of Dave*. London: Vintage Press, 2008

Selwyn, Neil *What is Digital Sociology?* Cambridge: Polity, 2019

Shaviro, Steve *Doom Patrols*. London: Serpent's Tail Press, 1996

Shirky, Clay *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age*. New York: Penguin, 2010

Silverman, Hugh J. *Questioning Foundations. Truth/Subjectivity/Culture*. New York/London: Routledge, 1993

Simondon, Gilbert *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*. Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, trans. Taylor Adkins, 2020

Simanowski, Robert *Data Love: The Seduction and Betrayal of Digital Technologies*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018

Sloterdijk, Peter *Infinite Mobilisation*. Cambridge: Polity, [1989] 2020

Sloterdijk, Peter *Spheres, Vol. 1: Bubbles*. Semiotexte, MIT Press, 1998

Sloterdijk, Peter *Spheres, Vol. 2: Globes*. Semiotexte, MIT Press, 1999

Sloterdijk, Peter *Spheres, Vol. 3: Foams*. Semiotexte, MIT Press, 2016

Sloterdijk, Peter with Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs, *Neither Sun Nor Death*, trans. Steve Corcoran, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press/Semiotext(e), 2011

Smith, Ken and William Marshall (2018) "What is Marxism? What is the State?", *marxism.org*, http://www.marxism.org.uk/pack/state.html. Accessed April 13, 2018.

Srnicek, Nick *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017

Sterelny, Kim (2021) "How equality slipped away". Aeon: https://aeon.co/essays/for-97-of-human-history-equality-was-the-norm-what-happened. Accessed: 21 June 2021.

Stiegler, Bernard *Technics and Time, Vol. 1: The Fault of Epithemeus*. trans. George Collins and Richard Beardsworth. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998

Stiegler, Bernard *Technics and Time, 2: Disorientation* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009

Stiegler, Bernard *Acting Out* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008

Stiegler, Bernard *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies*. Cambridge: Polity, 2011

Stiegler, Bernard *The Age of Disruption: Technology and Madness in Computational Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity, 2019

Stiegler, Bernard *Nanjing Lectures (2016-2019)*. London: Open Humanities Press: 2020

Stokel-Walker, Chris (2018) New Scientist: Fake news travels six times faster than the truth on Twitter. Accessed March 26, 2018. https://www.newscientist.com/article/2163226-fake-news-travels-six-times-faster-than-the-truth-on-twitter/

Stoker, Gerry *Why Politics Matters. Making Democracy Work*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006

Stone. Rosanne A. 'Will the real body please stand up? Boundary stories about virtual cultures,' In *The cybercultures reader*, edited by David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, 2000, London: Routledge, pp.504-528

Strong, Tracey B. in Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*. (ed.) Tracy B. Strong Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007

Sober, Elliott *Philosophy of Biology*, 2nd Edition. Boulder: Westview, 2000

Sontag, Susan *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*. New York: Anchor Books, 1990

Sotiris, Panagiotis *A Philosophy for Communism: Rethinking Althusser*. Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2020

Sunstein, Cass R., *Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008

T

Tanner, Grafton *The Circle and the Snake: Nostalgia and Utopia in the Age of Big Tech* London: Zero Books, 2020

Tanner, Grafton *The Hours Have Lost Their Clock: The Politics of Nostalgia* London: Repeater, 2021

Technopedia (2017) What is Web 2.0? - https://www.techopedia.com/definition/27960/web-10. Accessed: 2 November 2020.

Thaler, Richard & Cass Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness* New York: Penguin, 2008

Tiqqun, *The Cybernetic Hypothesis*. Mass.: MIT Press/Semiotext(e), [2001] 2020

Tranvik, Tommy (2000) "'Surfing Together and the Rise of Social Capital?', paper for the 'Investigating Social Capital' Conference, 18-21 May." Solstrand, Norway.

Trottier, Daniel *Social Media as Surveillance: Rethinking Visibility in a Converging World*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2012

Trottier, Daniel & Christian Fuchs, *Social Media, Politics and the State: Protests, Revolutions, Riots, Crime and Policing in the Age of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube*. London: Routledge, 2015

Torfing, Jacob *New Theories of Discourse. Laclau, Mouffe and Zizek*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999

Tufekci, Zeynep *Twitter and tear gas: the power and fragility of networked protest*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2017

Tumber, Howard & Michael Bromley 'Virtual soundbites: political communication in cyberspace,' *Media, Culture & Society,* (1998), 20(1), pp.159–167.

Turken, Salman, Hilde Eileen Nafstad, Rolv Mikkel Blakar & Katrina Roen. 'Making Sense of Neoliberal Subjectivity: A Discourse Analysis of Media Language on Self-development,' *Globalizations*, (2016), 13(1), pp.32-46.

U

United Nations Department of Global Communications, "UN tackles 'infodemic' of misinformation and cybercrime in COVID-19 crisis", United Nations - (March 2020) - https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19 Last accessed: 27 October 2021.

V

Vaidhyanathan, Siva *The Anarchist in the Library: How the Clash Between Freedom and Control is Hacking the Real World and Crashing the System*. Basic Books: New York, 2004

José van Dijck, Martijn de Waal, and Thomas Poell, *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018

van Driel, Loes & Delia Dumitrica 'Selling brands while staying "Authentic": The professionalization of Instagram influencers', *Convergence*, (2020), (27)1, pp.66-84

Villa, Dana R. *Arendt and Heidegger. The Fate of the Political*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996

Viriasova, Irinia 'The Political Totalisation of Carl Schmitt: Deciding on the "Absolutely Unpolitical"'. *Telos,* (2016), 175, pp.85-104

Virilio, Paul *Virilio Live: Selected Interviews*. John Armitage (ed.) London: Sage Publications, 2001

Virilio, Paul *Open Sky*. London: Verso, 1997

Virnoche, Mary & Gary Marx '"Only Connect" - E.M. Forster in an age of electronic communication: computer-mediated association and community networks', *Sociological Inquiry*, (1997), 67(1), pp.85-100

W

Wacquant, Loic 'Crafting the Neoliberal State: Workfare, Prisonfare, and Social Insecurity,' *Sociological Forum*, (2010), 25(2), pp.197-220

Wajcman, Judy *Pressed For Time: The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011

Walker, Mark (2017). "EventBrite- Study: Millennials Want Experiences Over Anything". Accessed February 20, 2018. https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/blog/millennials-want-experiences-ds00/

Walker, R.B.J. "Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory", Cambridge Studies in International Relations (24), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993

Watercutter, Angela (2020) Doomscrolling Is Slowly Eroding Your Mental Health -https://www.wired.com/story/stop-doomscrolling/ Accessed: 18 March 2021.

Weasel, Lisa "Dismantling the Self/Other Dichotomy in Science: Towards a Feminist Model of the Immune System", *Hypatia,* (2001), 16(1), pp.27–44

Wellman, Barry & Janet Salaff 'Computer networks as social networks: collaborative work, telework, and virtual community,' *Annual Review of Sociology*, (1996), 22(1), pp.213-238

Wellman, Barry & Caroline Haythornthwaite, *The Internet in Everyday Life*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002

White, Stephen K. *Sustaining Affirmation. The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000

Whitty, Monica J. & Adam N. Joinson, *Truth, Lies and Trust on the Internet.* London: Routledge, 2009

Wilson, Jenny (2011) UN Report Declares Internet Access A Human Right. Accessed 2017. http://techland.time.com/2011/06/07/united-nations-report-declares-internet-access-a-human-right/.

Winner, Langdon 'Do Artefacts Have Politics?', *Daedalus*, (1980), 109: 1, pp.121-136

Winner, Langdon *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought.* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977),

Wolff, Richard D. "Ideological State Apparatuses, Consumerism and U.S. Capitalism", *Rethinking Marxism,* (2004), 17(2), pp.223-236.

Wolin, Sheldon *Politics and Vision. Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought. Expanded ed.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009

Wolin, Sheldon *Fugitive Democracy and Other Essays.* (ed). Nicholas Xenos, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016

Woolley, Samuel & Philip Howard, 'Political Communication, Computational Propaganda and Autonomous Agents', *International Journal of Communication,* (2016), 10, pp.4482-4890

Wu, Tim *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Struggle to Get Inside Our Heads*. London: Atlantic Books, 2017

X

Xu, Beina & Eleanor Albert (2017) "Council of Foreign Relations: Media Censorship in China." February 17. Accessed March 27, 2018. https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/media-censorship-china.

Y

You Magazine (2020) "MLMs: The 'inspirational' social-media scams ruining women's lives", (Jan 12) https://www.you.co.uk/social-media-scams-multi-level-marketing-mlms/

Z

Zantvoort, Bart "Political inertia and social acceleration", *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, (2017), 43(7), pp.707–723

Zienkowski, Jan 'Politics and the political in critical discourse studies: state of the art and a call for an intensified focus on the metapolitical dimension of discursive practice', *Critical Discourse Studies,* (2019), 16:2, pp.131-148.

Zimbardo, Philip & John Boyd, *The Time Paradox*. Rider: London, 2010

Žižek, Slavoj *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989

Zizek, Slavoj *For They Not Know What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*. London and New York: Verso, 1991

Zizek, Slavoj *For They Know Not What They Do. Enjoyment as a Political Factor*. London: Verso, 2001

Zizek, Slavoj *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*. Routledge: London, 2004

Zolin, Nicola "From Compassion to Fortress Europe: The migrant crisis in pictures", Politico. (2020) https://www.politico.eu/article/from-compassion-to-fortress-europe-the-migration-crisis-in-pictures/. Accessed 28 June 2021.