

Geoff Cox (gb)Aarhus University
Researcher
geoff@anti-thesis.net

Introducing Really Existing Social Media

Social media facilitate unprecedented levels of sharing but the social relation is produced in restrictive form. As part of the friendly (inter)face of capitalism, restricted social relations are perpetuated through networks of friends (everyone is more a potential friend rather than enemy), such that antagonistic social relations are masked and the political dimension nullified. :) Evoking Carl Schmitt's notion of enmity (in *The Concept of the Political*, of 1927), the political differentiation of friend or enemy lies at the heart of this, and offers a definition of 'the political'. In order to examine the paradoxes of social media, its promises and its shortcomings, what is required is a more detailed examination of the power relations at work, and how they are configured within informational capitalism, and how social relations and control structures are managed. With no longer a centre of power to be found or established opposition as such, it is clear that the (class) enemy is increasingly hard to identify across its networks, and yet power continues to produce its own vulnerabilities, not least in the context of how social media are changing the face of the representational political process. This is partly evident in the apparent success of various campaigns that hope to influence the outcomes of elections and in the rise of services that offer effective participation in the political process.

A recent project by Les Liens Invisibles uses the tactic of over-identification to respond to an over-mediated democracy. *Repetitionr* provides a platform for activism with minimal effort, an online petition service with a difference; offering advanced web 2.0 technologies to make participatory democracy a truly user-centered experience (<http://www.repetitionr.com/>). The success of every campaign is guaranteed as just one click is all it takes to generate a whole campaign with up to a million automatic fake signatures. The project reflects the acknowledged need for new institutional forms that challenge existing systems of governance and representational structures, as a blatant expression of *non-representational democracy* – in other words, a form of democracy uncoupled from sovereign power. The approach challenges the discourse of neo-liberalism in general, offering a means to rethink politics within network cultures. If *Repetitionr* is an example of over-identification with *real existing* participatory democracy, then the provocation is that we need to develop far better strategies and techniques of organisation.

That forms of democracy and authoritarianism operate dialectically is in keeping with the liberal tradition, as Etienne Balibar explains, and the distinction between individual opinions and collective actions in the ways they ‘reciprocally “underwrite” each other’ (2008: 27). Individuals voice their diverse opinions, both for and against the ruling power, in order to legitimate its effects. Liberal democracy exerts a friendly power that doesn’t appear violent at all, and individuals actively imagine their participation in what ultimately is part of their subjugation/subjectivisation. Participation becomes a technique of power in restructured form, one that captures the willing subjectivity of the user in the participatory process.

Clearly we should neither be overly optimistic nor too pessimistic but recognize that this is a further site of struggle unfolding under particular conditions and with a particular history. Perhaps it is more fruitful to imagine social media in terms of arrested development, and continue to strive towards how private ownership can be returned to the public realm – and how server-client relations can be transformed in peer to peer relations. On the one hand, centralized forms (the server/sovereign state) have been proved unsustainable in the new technological and cultural situation (think of the end of ‘real existing socialism’), and on the other, real-existing liberal democracy has brought about the destruction of protections, aggressive competition, and economic corruption (Berardi 2009). However, the intention is not to make the mistake of imagining utopian alternatives as such (as the analogy to socialism in the title of the panel suggests), and only be disappointed with the lived reality, but to engage critically with really existing platforms.

To Jacques Rancière, the origin of the political lies in the properties of its subjects and in how they come together, how they ‘part-take’, or in other words how they participate in contradictory forms of action (2001). ‘Politics is a paradoxical form of action’ he says, and is defined in the contradictions at the heart of action – between acting and being acted upon. According to Rancière, it is the very ‘axioms of democracy’ – of ruling and being ruled – that require rupture to open up discussion of the constitution of the subject and its relations. Evidently publicness is constituted not simply by speaking, writing, arguing and protesting – but also through acting on, and modifying the domain or platform through which these practices are enacted (Kelty 2008). Social media require further modification but on condition that they are released fully into the public domain for further development.

Acknowledgements: Thanks to Les Liens Invisibles.
Repetitionr was commissioned by Arnolfini in 2010.

References

- Balibar, Etienne (2008) *Spinoza and Politics*. London: Verso, 2008.
- Berardi, Franco ‘Bifo’ (2009) *Precarious Rhapsody*. London: Minor Compositions.
- Kelty, Christopher M. (2008) *Two Bits: the Cultural Significance of Free Software*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Rancière, Jacques (2001): Ten Theses on Politics [Online]. *Theory & Event*, 5:3. Retrieved from: http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v005/5.3ranciere.html [Accessed 13 May 2010].