

# **Democracy and revolution on the Internet**

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## The Internet Revolutions on the Facebook – the rebirth of history?

In recent political history, social networks were frequently used as organizing tools of protests, marches and uprisings. There are numerous examples of this. Moldova's Twitter revolution (2009), Iranian Twitter election protests (2009-2010), Tunisian revolution (2010-2011), Egyptian revolution (2011), Facebook anti-government protests in Croatia (2008), etc. It is a well known fact that Egyptian people thanked Facebook for its role in the revolution: pictures published all over the world showed protesters with banners reading "Thank you Facebook". The most bizarre example of displaying gratitude to this social network was the naming of newborn children after it. Some claim that Twitter and Facebook themselves played important role in political events. Clay Shirky stated that "under the death of vertical media system we are today facing the changes not only in production of media content, but also in nature of politics"<sup>1</sup>. Not only that the Internet was seen as a tool, used by revolutionaries and protesters, but that those revolutionaries and protesters were Internet corporations managers. A central figure of Egyptian protests Wael Ghonim, the Google manager mobilized protesters through the Facebook group "We are all Khaled Saeed". The group was an homage to young man beaten to death by a police. In one occasion Ghonim stated: "If you want to liberate society just give them the Internet".

If we take into account Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of cultural industries, the critique of standardization and commodification of culture, it is paradoxical to question "media hegemony", since standardization is obvious a matter of the past.<sup>2</sup> But what if the nature of contemporary mass-culture is still hegemonic? Is it not a fact that commodification today exists without mass-media standardization? Mark Zuckerberg, in an interview in the *Wired* magazine, stated that the thing he really cares about is "the mission, making the world open"<sup>3</sup>. On his Facebook profile, Zuckerberg writes: "I'm trying to make the world a more open place by helping people connect and share." But, isn't this an empty statement, a symbolic exchange in which we have "free choice" but at the same time we know which choice is the right one? Connecting

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1 Shirky 2009

2 Adorno/Horkheimer 1944 (2002), p. 94-136

3 Singel, 2010

and sharing on social networks is limited to proper codes and implied definitions. If nothing else, the freedom is limited by Facebook's "terms of service" which prohibits pornography and anonymity, while allows targeted advertising. As a result of this particular definition of "open communication", personal data became a common. Facebook's marketing system can target users according to several data: age, place, interests, similar to Google AdWords. We are witnessing the constant battle between company and its users on the matter of private data. There were several law suites against Facebook because of jeopardizing privacy of users. Among them there was Beacon scandal from 2007 when company implemented new model of commercialization of private information. The system collected information from partner web sites in order to more precisely personalize marketing on users's News Feeds. Private law suits forced Facebook to modify the Beacon system, so now it can be shut down.

Paradoxes of "open media" became obvious during the Arab revolution in 2010 and 2011. On the seventh day of protests in Egypt, Facebook published the statement stating that "the turmoil in Egypt is a matter for the Egyptian people and their government to resolve"<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, during the revolution, the Facebook corporation suspended one protest group because its administrators were using pseudonyms. Censorship was not provoke by the decision of Facebook to enter into the political arena, nor because corporation had any political preference in local matters, or specific point of view, but it was the logical outcome of Facebook's terms of service and the aim of this network to commodify private information. There is no use of the data if the company cannot relate the data to its user.

Corporation policy and the definition of public space clashed on the matter of identification. Many even today claim that anonymous communication over social networks is dangerous for the sake of the users. But it seems that it is more dangerous and unfruitful for states and companies. The value of the information about users can easily be verified. Study on the cost of marketing on Facebook showed that investing in Facebook pays off. The cost of obtaining fun is exactly 1,07\$<sup>5</sup>. Such precise calculation is the vital for existence of this network.

Mark Poster, even in the early days of the Internet, concluded that

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4 Melber, 2011

5 Flowtown 2011

corporations and the states represent the greater danger for the privacy of the users, nevertheless, limiting of the networks is legitimated with the fear of cyber-terrorism<sup>6</sup>. It is not symmetric relation with private users on the one side and corporations and states on the other. The benefits of sustaining the possibilities of anonymous communications are to easily overthrown for the false sake of the user. Many users themselves advocate the limitation of the open communication. But the agents who gain the most benefits from such limitations are corporations and states. As Poster visionary announced limitation of the Internet as a public sphere will happened in the form of the fear of private users. Benefits of anonymous communication are easily forgotten since anonymous communication is mostly seen as conformist practice.

Using social networks as public space for organizing protests revealed that anonymous communication is not only a conformist practice (practice of sharing pornographic content, for example). Protesters in Egypt extensively used Facebook as tool for organizing marches and protests precisely because it was the only way not to get prosecuted. Apart from the political issues in recent revolutions, anonymous communication was one of the fundamental characteristics of the Internet communication as such. In the early days of the Internet, Donna Haraway and other cyber-feminists considered the Net to be an ideal political sphere for deconstruction of gender and the tool for new emancipatory politics, since disembodiment creates a possibilities for overcoming of the logocentrism and patriarchal order<sup>7</sup>. However, the Arab Spring showed that the most valuable political aspect of Internet communication - disembodiment that allows anonymous communication is no longer possible, at least not on commercialized social networks. It is now clear that Facebook's definition of openness is fundamentally different from openness defined by early implementers of the Internet. It is also different from anarchical, illegal p2p file sharing groups. Facebook's openness presents a specific new media backlash. It is a process that aims at centralization of originally decentralized communication. Confrontation between users and the company is, nevertheless, part of larger problem of privacy on the Internet.

The question that is imposing in era of open media, is *what exactly is open?* Instead of open platform for sharing and connecting

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6 Poster 2001, p. 171

7 Haraway 1991, p. 149-181

(anonymously), corporations are offering form of centralized and commercialized services with ownership over the users data. Facebook is proposing what company defined as a concept of “radical transparency”. The term refers to supposedly voluntarily act of users to share their information without restraint. One of many Mark Zuckerberg’s statements that provoked public reaction, revealed the brutally of the system: “You have one identity. The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly.” He doesn’t hesitate to add: “Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity”<sup>8</sup>. Fundamentally, what Zuckerberg declares as “will to transparency”, is a distortion of original idea of openness. The success of Facebook is based on connecting people and promoting *transparent* communication – unimaginable until then. Anonymous usage of the Facebook is not its best use. Facebook’s success is an outcome of nevertheless bold idea about the users need for transparency.

Critics argued that Zuckerberg’s statement showed a lack of social intelligence, that distrustful approach on privateness is typical for young man, and that such pose would terrify any mature person. The problem is that Facebook executives still don’t understand that there are some things people would rather keep for themselves<sup>9</sup>. This remark on Zuckerberg is typical, because it supports the myth about socially unintelligent, but in any other way brilliant, young man. But while Zuckerberg’s other skills, such as programing, are questionable, his social intelligence is no less than visionary. Transparency is the most important element Facebook’s success. People really wants to present a picture of themselves with their real names and photographs. The problem is not a false premise on sociality of Facebook’s users. The problem is not that users of Facebook do not want to be transparent, instead, the problem is that the corporation is working under the system that could be defended as radically non-transparent. While radical openness should be radical transparency of the system, corporative logic defines transparency as the characteristic of users. Willingness to communicate openly with one’s real name and surname should not imply willingness to submit to exploitative corporative Panopticon. Such openness in the early day of virtual networks was guarantied; it was a radical openness of the networks.

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8 Kirpatrick 2010, p. 199

9 Kirpatrick 2010, p. 199

The Internet offered users the ability to communicate anonymously. The system structured around the commercialization and exploitation of users' data came in a conflict with the original structure of the Internet.

### Transparency of the Internet

Public debates include the more retrograde question: Why should network platforms be defined as a public sphere at all? Why should private corporate networks be the democratic spaces? The question is very similar to a common remark in the days of television: "You can always switch the program". Both statements are ignoring the perspective of the power - if nothing else the power of media to represent certain definition of reality - in which one who shuts down a program does not participate. The idea of the Internet as a public sphere originates from early days of the Internet and it is embodied in the structure of the Internet. The Internet radically decentralizes production and distribution of information, as it is the only media that directly interlinks two users without hierarchical mediator. Structural concepts behind the Internet, primary TCP/IP protocols, allow direct peer-to-peer communication between two computers. In his study, Protocol Alexander R. Galloway elaborates this shift in depth<sup>10</sup>. The rhisomatic structure is reconstituting a social structures, and not institutional structures. Media in the traditional sense are communication media (telephone, telegraph), or mass-media (radio, television, newspaper). The Internet is the first media that is at the same time a communication media and a mas-media. For that matter Manuel Castells writes on the Internet as the first *mass-self communication*<sup>11</sup> media.

Such structure empowered an optimistic notion of the Internet as the site of (cyber)democracy. Early virtual communities described by their pioneer and theoretician Howard Rheingold, were public spaces for communication. Rheingold coined the term *virtual agora* in order to accent the political aspect, and potential of democratization of society. Howard Rheingold described the cyberspace as "a social petri dish", the open virtual communities open toward experiment and opportunity for establishing new forms of democratic society<sup>12</sup>. In his essay "Cyberdemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere" Mark Poster

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10 Galloway 2006

11 Castells 2009, p. 58-71

12 Rheingold 1993

elaborated the importance to use Jürgen Habermas' idea of public sphere, but to redefine it so as to include virtual spaces of network communication<sup>13</sup>.

Even in the early days skeptical voices raised the question of the real political character of the Internet. Bennett Voyles, in his essay about popular the website e-thepeople.com (the site promoted democracy and provoked political debates), describes the network as a kind of “political karaoke bar”. Although the Net offers free public space for political debate, it is obvious, claims Voyles, that country does not want to be saved<sup>14</sup>. The debates are usually too emotional and focused on wrong things. In Web 2.0 era the phenomenon of slactivism emerged. Slactivism only straightened the view of the disinterested community. Slactivism is pejorative term for activism that is exhausting with the declarative support to the cause. Such declarative support was unquestionably present in the case of hoax campaign for saving Stork fountain in Copenhagen, which was not actually endangered. In his study *The Net Delusion* Evgeny Morozov claims that this is a classic example of social networks political activism that does not require any effort, and therefore serves only to impress friends<sup>15</sup>. Media activist Geert Lovink agrees with skeptical view on social networks, but he sees it as a result of the negative processes on the Internet. What the Internet lost after 2000 was the “illusion of change”<sup>16</sup>. Lovink see blogs as part of an unfolding process of “massification” that is degrading the medium. Such negative tendencies are accompanied with simplification of digital tools, transition of early virtual communities into Web 2.0 social networks, and at the same time commodification of the network communication.

Such trends are a part of a broader phenomenon of depolitization of the public sphere, a process that started way before the Internet itself. It is a part of the process Jürgen Habermas diagnosed as dangerous “scientization of politics and public opinion”. In such depoliticized society “functions of the expert from those of the politician” are separating<sup>17</sup>. The final form of this political model would be absolute independence of the professionals. In the final form of that *technocratic*

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13 Poster 1996

14 Voyles 2003, p. 16

15 Morozov 2011, p. 186–187

16 Loving, 2007

17 Habermas 1980, p. 63

society, politicians would become “the mere agent of scientific intelligentsia, which, in concrete circumstances, elaborates the objective implications and requirements of available techniques and resources as well as of optimal strategies and rules of control”<sup>18</sup>. The process of scientization that can be tracked, even from Max Weber who himself followed the tradition of Thomas Hobbes, is present in the most radical way in the political definition of social networks.

Media is not standardized (uniformed as mass-media cultural-symbolic production), but, paradoxically, the political aspect of the media is fading. Standardization of the technical structure of social networking (that allows easy communication for technically non-skillful user) is a form of scientization and de-politisation of the Internet. Social networking sites played an important political role in imposing democracy in the Arab world<sup>19</sup>, but such a role was more an outcome of the Internet structure, than characteristic of media tools. Networks acted as impartial observers whose role is not political but economically-pragmatical. It is not a direct, but an indirect relation of installation of new market economies in the Arab world, in a form of depoliticized media tools.

### **Ideology today**

What is ideology in this post-ideological world? Post-ideological societies are already defined as a type of social network, depoliticized and quasi-universal clusters, specific for post-industrial capitalism. In his study *The End of Ideology*, Daniel Bell introduced the idea that ideology had to come to its end because of a triumph of Western democratic politics and capitalism<sup>20</sup>. Alain Touraine offered a reply to Bell's speculative endism, the dangerous belief that post-World War II societies are societies without political conflicts. Touraine sees that there is a need to re-define the theory of ideology, to offer the description of the new era of society in which new forms of hegemony occurred<sup>21</sup>. He mostly agrees with Bell's findings that conflicts shifted from industrial production to production of knowledge, culture and consumption. Nevertheless, alienated work is still the foundation of extrapolation of profit. The

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18 Habermas 1980, p. 63-64

19 Homogenization of citizens in the Egypt during the Arab spring through social networks is similar to the homogenization in nineteenth century, when newspapers played important role in forming the nations.

20 Bell 1960

21 Touraine 1974



problem with this post-ideological critique is also that Marx's formula of ideology cannot describe flexibility and dynamism of the relations between base and superstructure. (Raymond Williams offered plausible analysis of the problem present in Marx's spacial formula of base and superstructure<sup>22</sup>. The most important theories, such as Gramsci's and Althusser's, emerged from Marx, while insisting on relative autonomy of superstructure.)

Is ideology today a kind of cynical thought, as Peter Sloterdijk elaborated in his formula, while paraphrasing Marx? Sloterdijk stated that today, political subjects "know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it". Ideology would be cynical if an ideology would have been a matter of believing (knowledge). Since an ideology is a matter of acting according to certain ideas, it is somewhat different, reformulates Slavoj Žižek. So the final definition of ideology today is a form of inverted Marx formula of ideology as false consciousness. Contemporary subjects know "that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still, they are doing it"<sup>23</sup>.

Post-ideological societies are not societies in which ideology become insolvent, but societies in which ideology offers the most dangerous ideological gesture. In such societies, ideology or ideological "fantasy", in order to be effective firstly has to declare that it is non-ideological, even universal<sup>24</sup>. Declared universalism of the late capitalism is also inscribed in politics of social networks as a new type of public spheres. Although open, Facebook "terms of uses" describe the profitable oriented "public" space. As the Egypt revolution shows, such ideology is working beside the formal interface level. Capitalism, and social networks as its symptom, is a name of truly "neutral economic-symbolic machine"<sup>25</sup>. The only thing that is un-questionable is the fundament of capitalo-parliamentarianism, the matter of the capitalist way of production, and the accompanied democratic system that is providing the ideological framework. In Badiou's usage of the term<sup>26</sup> capitalo-parliamentarianism, this democratic framework, often excluded from the ideological arena, is crucial in the maintenance of the established

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<sup>22</sup> Williams 1980

<sup>23</sup> Žižek 1989, p. 31

<sup>24</sup> Žižek 1989, p. 30

<sup>25</sup> Žižek 2008, p. 156

<sup>26</sup> Badiou 2010, p. 31

order, since it is serving a conservative function. It can often be heard that capitalism is problematic, while democracy is not. But the Egyptian post-revolutionary state shows exactly that democracy served as an ideological framework for implementing capitalism.

Egyptian people lived long enough in a totalitarian system that the depoliticization of public sphere and the scientization of politics seemed like proper solutions for uniting and resolving conflicts and local antagonisms. The commodification of the public sphere today seems a minor problem. Social networks indifferent to political and religious perspectives of protesters, and at the same time operational tools for organizing protests, were the ideal type of media. Networks provided space for communication, tools for organizing events, aggregating of various contents from other web sites, etc. It was an ideal tool not only because of its efficiency, but, paradoxically, also because of its depoliticized nature. Egyptian people used Facebook as the public sphere. At the same time, what was missing was actually an authentic public sphere. Although Facebook is a corporative place, people used it as a public space, until the difference of their concept of openness resulted in conflict. In this case, the conflict was forgotten, represented as a minor casualty of the conflicted character of the political situation. But there were cases in which differences between the corporative logic of depoliticized market economy and the logic of revolution conflicted in a more violent way.

After Mubarak's regime in Egypt fell in June 2011, Vodafone's pilot-advert arrived on the Internet. The advert implied that the company, with its technological solutions, had inspired the Egyptian revolution. The advert stated: "We did not send people to the streets... We did not start the revolution... We only reminded Egyptians how powerful they are...". The advert was pure falsification since Vodafone was one of three mobile operators that decided to shoot down the communication network at the order of Mubarak's regime. Mobile phones and the Internet were shot down for a week, resulting in chaos, not only in the communication system, but also in the logistics and transport of the wounded to hospitals. But the advert is more than a pure falsification, it is a symptom of post-ideological systems that are truly universal, open for different views and opinions, with a clear mission. The fundament of capitalist economy cannot be questioned. Instead of a political amalgam and openness, the politics of the Internet (if it can emerge from certain political gestures that are present on the Internet) should insist exactly on those topics that are conflictual. In the era of post-ideological

canalization of every conflict, the most important thing should be to insist on the conflict. Egypt's revolution was a historical moment in which the Egyptian transition toward post-ideological society began. The post-totalitarian system of Western democracy seemed like the ideal form open to different political and religious view points. But different voices and conflictual situations vanished, while the commodified reality took the lead.

### **Hegemony and the Internet**

There is a serious problem present in oppositional cultures, as well as in critical theory, sociology and other discourses that legitimated the counter-power of networks, the problem of repeating the post-ideological matrix, the same one that is responsible for contemporary ideological fantasy. Critical theory and sociology sometimes define network as a universal place, a non-conflict space that promotes an idea of openness, communication and plurality of identities. Pierre Lévy and Manuel Castells offered the basic formula. Castells described the Net as an abstract, universal instrumental place that transforms the Self that is both particular and historically rooted<sup>27</sup>. Pierre Lévy accented liberation of a subject through the universal character of virtual networks. For Lévy, the Net as “universal without totality”, is a place in which totality could not survive because the Net includes “all people with their differences, and even with differences within themselves”<sup>28</sup>.

Although Castells and Lévy emphasized the importance of the social context, they are still conceptualizing the media and communication practices within the dominant neoliberal post-political matrix. In such societies, as Chantal Mouffe concludes, “the aspect of detotalization and decentering prevails” while “dispersion of subject positions is transformed into an effective separation”<sup>29</sup>. Instead of dispersion and separation, there is a need to elaborate the Net and the society in a whole as a place of struggle. The counter-power of the Net can be described in different terms. It is not a power of universal instrumental place, but a power of “a radical democratic citizenship” in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s understanding of the term<sup>30</sup>. It is a democratic

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<sup>27</sup> Castells 2000, p. 3

<sup>28</sup> Lévy 2001, p. 91

<sup>29</sup> Mouffe 1993, 77

<sup>30</sup> Laclau/Mouffe 1985

citizenship of a common political identity that does not form a unity, but a new hegemony articulated through new egalitarian social relations, practices and institutions. Such an antagonistic character of identity is more plausible for the (possible) Internet politics than it is the theory of “openness”, since openness is already inscribed in the corporative canons.

The Internet is truly universal, but it functions as a symptom of what is missing in the contemporary definition of universal democracy. Complementarity and possibilities to overcome our particularities (which was the main agenda in the Arab Spring) is a typical political shift in the depoliticized society where subjects are becoming aware that their cultural background is something contingent. Instead of insisting on relations between the universal and the particular, they should change places. The series of universal interpretative matrices are all “answers to the ‘absolute particularity’ of the traumatic Real, of the imbalance of *antagonisms* which throws out of joint, and thereby ‘particularises’ the neutral-universal frame”<sup>31</sup>.

To describe democracy through its antagonistic character, means to recognize an ideology as a form of distortion. In *The German ideology*, Marx writes: “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas”<sup>32</sup>. But the paradox of the Net, is that “it emerges from openness, inclusion, universalism, and flexibility”<sup>33</sup>. It is an order described by all post-Marxist theoreticians of hegemony that insisted that hegemony is a matter of social consent. A political model of distributive media is in no way different from other spheres that articulate personal needs in neoliberal society. Those fields act as fields of struggle for cultural meaning. The neo-Gramscian perspective offers useful tools for understanding the paradox of media. In understanding cultural meanings, the one valuable concept is that of hegemony. In Western society, claims Antonio Gramsci, hegemony is not established by violent acts, but through a process of negotiations about meanings<sup>34</sup>.

The fundamental force behind Antonio Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, followed by Louis Althusser’s theory of ideological state apparatuses, is an accentuation of “the ‘spontaneous’ consent” of the

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31 Žižek 1996, p. 217 (my cursive)

32 Marx/Engels 1979, p. 321

33 Galloway 2006, p. 142

34 Gramsci 1971

masses. Gramscian theory of ideology is approached in the elaboration of the co-optation, or appropriation of authentic/alternative cultures (R. Williams, S. Hall, R. Johnson). Hegemony in an era of post-ideology is the “form of appearance, the formal distortion/ displacement, of non-ideology”<sup>35</sup>. In order to be effective, every hegemonic universality has to incorporate *at least two* particular contents: “the ‘authentic’ popular content and its ‘distortion’ by the relations of domination and exploitation”<sup>36</sup>.

Raymond Williams in his essay “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory” (1980) described what can be defined as a *distortion* of authentic culture. Ideology is not simply a reflection of a ruling class idea, but, as matter of negotiations. Williams proposes, a formula for social dynamism between the dominant and subordinated groups. According to Williams, all groups in Western democracies are related to each other. Williams distinguishes between the “residual and emergent forms, both of an alternative and of an oppositional culture”<sup>37</sup>. The residual cultures are “lived and practiced on the basis of the residue — cultural as well as social — of some previous social formation”<sup>38</sup>. Where traditional Marxism would have seen only two types of cultures - the dominant and the subordinate - Williams proposes a duplication of subordinate cultures, which he defines as the “emergent cultures”. The difference between two types of emergent cultures is crucial. While the oppositional emergent cultures constantly create “new meanings and values, new practices, new significances and experiences” for the sake of changing the social order and gaining power, an alternative culture creates “a different way of life” in order to “be left alone”. While the oppositional culture aims at overthrowing the ruling culture, the alternative offers completely different forms of culture. Regardless of the degree of internal conflict between the oppositional and the dominant cultures, the oppositional culture will never “go beyond the limits of the central effective and dominant definitions”<sup>39</sup>.

The Gramscian theory of ideology positioned the alternative and the oppositional cultures at the center of social dynamism. The theory of

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35 Žižek 1999, p. 185

36 Žižek 1999, p. 194

37 Williams 1980, p. 40

38 Williams 1980, p. 40

39 Williams 1980, p. 31–49

ideology defined culture in capitalism as a dynamic field. The process of co-optation and appropriation of emergent forms of life is fundamental for capitalism. Williams's model can be applied on new forms of media production, in order to illustrate a twofold clash. The first is a clash between dominant but traditional cultural industries and emergent economic models, which introduce new forms of immaterial production and distribution. The second is a more complex form of a cultural battle, with logic that seems immanent to the so-called post-ideological era. It is a struggle between emergent oppositional media models of immaterial production and distribution, present in serial and heterogeneous forms (from social networks, digital e-readers, to mobile phones applications) and emergent alternative cultural p2p practices that are jeopardizing the foundations of cultural industries – copyright laws. While mainstream media offer an illusion of openness, and those are as such oppositional models, the alternative peer-to-peer economies are proposing radical opposition to neoliberal models of production, consumption and distribution.

Facebook is classical example of, what Williams defines as, oppositional emergent culture. The oppositional emergent culture appropriates some elements of an authentic (even of an alternative) culture, but in a form that is more or less adoptable and harmless to the system. Such culture acts as a parasite of the original authentic idea, but its only aim is to take over the dominant role. It is exactly a description of a culture of subordinated citizens who use Facebook as an open platform, and Facebook's business model as a form of emergent oppositional culture that distorts authentic practices so it can serve the economic needs of the ruling class. Distorted ideas, nevertheless, no longer have an authentic substance. Although today, emergent media cultures present horizontal media structure, and turn consumers into participants, the foundation of corporative market industry is modifying not only the open communication of its users, but also the original idea of the Internet openness. Company aims at modeling Facebook as a central place to browse, write e-mails, exchange data, etc. Such modeling threatens to become the model of using the Internet through the Facebook platform. Facebook's specific definition of freedom and free sharing is not imposing a radically different model, it is only installing new models of market economy, and innovation in businesses. Facebook, as emergent market model, presents a specific distortion of the original free culture of sharing and connecting.

Zygmunt Bauman illustrated liquid modernity by describing the

difference between Bill Gates and Henry Ford<sup>40</sup>. The model of progressive industrialist (Ford) is overshadowed by the playful industrialist (Gates): Long-term work (in Ford's factories) is overthrown by the liquid character of new types of job (in Microsoft corporation). Today, Mark Zuckerberg overshadows both icons, since he is a representative of an emergent capitalism, a new type of capitalist logic, at least on the matter of the exploitation of the work force. Zuckerberg's model of extrapolation of profit does not include production of material commodity that is copyrighted (as in Bill Gates case), but it is a widely implemented and relatively new model of profiting from users' data. New capitalism is not only liquid in the matter of physical working force (factories), or type of working conditions (work contracts), but it is also liquid on the matter of products and profit.

### **Conflictual character of the Internet**

Dominant cultures aim at the pacification of the economic conflict. What we are witnessing on the Internet today is establishing a new form of hegemony. Conflict between dominant and emergent cultures is more complex than the conflict of a traditional (dominant) and oppositional culture. In order to recognize one of the fundamental conflicts in the era of late capitalism, it is important to describe specific distortion of original network culture. The structure of the Internet is defined by standardization, agreements, organized implementation – all processes invisible to an average user. Although the structure of the Net seems unchangeable, its political character is subject to social consensus. The most important shift that takes place with the coming of the Web 2.0 is centralization on the ground of new economic models. Emergent models do not perpetuate existing cultural industries model, but propagate, in their historical essence, authentic ideas of openness and inclusion. Instead of a radical democratic vision, they are offering regeneration of neoliberal economies.

What could be the milestone in the contemporary conflict? The important difference that separates oppositional models from other political struggles is the question of access, proposed through the concept of free software. Johan Söderberg wrote that free software is a “political project for social change”<sup>41</sup>. Peer to peer services and

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40 Bauman 2011

41 Söderberg 2002

practices, as a result of the original structure of the Internet, as well as the idea and movement of free software, are among the most conflictual cultures, since there are opposing existing capitalist modes of production. In doing so, p2p culture represents authentic alternative culture in Williams's understanding of the term. The structure of the Internet itself is in conflict. The Internet is empowering users, but the technological means and structural relations are destructive for neo-liberal capitalist mode of production. When a user distributes any data (visual, audio, textual materials) another user becomes an owner of that data.

The p2p practices were initialized technologically, but at the level of discursive representations they emerged with the free software movement. Free software was, before anything else, a pragmatic solution for the scientific and technological development. Richard Stallman, a founder of the Free Software Foundation, was working at MIT in the early 1980s. Stallman simply reacted to the companies' quasi-natural right to own software. Stallman decided to develop the non-proprietary software program named GNU (acronym for GNU's Not Unix), a version of licensed Unix. The GNU project promoted free using and modifying of software, as long as it was distributed under the same conditions. Open software norms later applied to various cultural artifacts, including: music, design, literature, etc. Stallman insisted on the pragmatism of sharing that allows maximization of progress. Open software subversion in its beginning was, if anything else, the subversion within a system. Early implementers did not elaborate on the political and economic consequences of their ideas. However, it turns out that those ideas are among the most conflicted ideas in capitalist societies.

Johan Söderberg precisely diagnosed the problem by stating that to oppose copyright means to oppose capitalism<sup>42</sup>. The history of capitalism and copyright are connected, since the copyright reproduces the relations in production. The need for copyright was created through the emergence of a bourgeoisie class. The economy and politics of copyright is founded as the imperative to define every object, experience and person in the manner of its many equivalents, its exchange values. In order to reproduce relations of production, property regime developed the system of manufacturing authentic originals with copyright limitations. The Internet threatens such relations in production, as a new form of forces of production. The question of copyright is much broader, since the history of capitalism and accompanied democracy that legitimate the system is a

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42 Söderberg, 2002



history of the fight for autonomy over skills and knowledge, a trend whose origins can be traced to industrialism. As Söderberg noted, the fight for open information is only a contemporary variant of the historical fight in earlier types of societies. The Internet's conflictual character on the matter of intellectual property opened the site of revolution.

There are many examples that show that the Internet created the problem of intellectual property that became one of the central conflict in capitalism today. In order to illustrate this thesis, I will list only three examples: the first case is the law battles (SOPA, PIPA, and ACTA cases) against free sharing of data. These law battles showed that there is still an unsolved conflict between users and companies on the matter of open structure of the Internet. In the legal battle against piracy the postponed SOPA and PIPA acts and signed Anti-counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) were proposed as statutory instruments to give courts the power to grant orders to other entities suspected of infringing copyright. The aim of these laws was to re-define the fundamental decentralized structure of the Internet and to reaffirm capitalist logic of centralized production and distribution. The fact that the laws were not implemented in full shows that there is still a long way to go until public consensus forms on these matters.

The second case is that of copyright infringement of books. Two platforms, Ifile and Gigapedia (not operational from 2012) together created an open library with more than 400,000 e-books available for free, but as illegal downloads<sup>43</sup>. In 2012, academic publishers, including Cambridge University Press, Elsevier and Pearson Education, lead by Booksellers Association (Börsenvereine) and the International Publishers Association (IPA) organized an action against copyright infringement as a criminal business, and brought down the sites. If we focus only on the output of legal action, leaving aside the legal aspect, academic publishers truly acted as "the enemies of science"<sup>44</sup>. Shooting down piracy sites was nothing but the shooting down of the horizontal networks for distribution of knowledge. The p2p networks operate under the "plenitude economy", taking advantages of digital flexibility and the network decentralization.

It is obvious that in such radical democratization of the distribution of information, the p2p networks clashes with the foundation of capitalist production, with the surplus value imperative. In the process of

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43 Taylor 2012

44 Taylor, 2012

restructuring capitalism that started in 1980s, informational capitalism radicalized the closure of the commons and the commodification of the public sphere. The period after Second World War was a period of economic stabilization, the Keynesian model of optimal capitalist growth established unprecedented economic prosperity and social stability<sup>45</sup>. On the other hand, informational capitalism entered the world stage during economic crisis. During the early 1970s, with the growth of oil prices (in 1994 and in 1997), Western societies were facing the privatization of public goods and the breaking of the social contract between capital and work. After the contemporary crises starting in 2008, all the main goals of that capitalist restructuring again intensified. In such restructuring, as a result of the clash of the welfare state, academic publishers became owners of knowledge. Instead of discussing alternative models of defining knowledge and information in the context of the Internet as decentralized media, publishers aimed at limiting the decentralized distribution and production of knowledge.

Motivated only by the logic of profit, publishers not only distribute books under the copyright rules, but also frame the scientific process of “consuming” knowledge. One cannot discuss proprietary infringement outside the problem of profit. So, in order to propose fundamental questions on knowledge, aside from the realm of profit, it is necessary to leave aside that paradigm, even if that gesture is only for the purpose of imagination.

The third case shows how public debate often hides the intrinsic altruistic character of sharing. Such motives were present in several cases, the most dramatic of which is the one of Aaron Swartz, activist who made JSTOR academic journal articles publicly available. For this, Swartz was prosecuted with two counts of wire fraud and 11 violations of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, charges carrying a cumulative maximum penalty of \$1 million in fines and 35 years in prison. This sentence led Aron Swartz to commit suicide in January of 2013. Several other cases, among which the most prominent was Wikileaks case, and more recent Edward Snowden’s case, are pointing at the same legal fight against practices of open sharing. The legal battle against piracy is a clear evidence of the conflictual character of the free software movement, and the evidence of the fundamental force behind such ideas that is devastating for the cultural industries and states.

The examples show, at minimum, two problems with the existing

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45 Castells 2000, p. 18

capitalist modes of production and the state battle against free sharing. Firstly, the institutional fight against piracy is legitimated as a fight for authors and their rights. In that legitimation, public debate disavows the profit that industries make on authors, and the fact that the role of industries in the new mode of production is only to parasite between authors and users. On a more fundamental level, the actions against open culture demonstrate that the problem is not only with copyright as such, but with the mode of production and reproduction of relations in production. On the matter of the role of the states in such battle it is obvious that states legitimate limitation of the Internet communication and assist corporations with legal needs.

### **Marxism as theoretical apparatuses of the Internet revolution**

The collapse of revolutionary Marxism, and of all the forms of progressive engagement that it inspired, is one of the reasons for ethical nihilism and lack of any positive idea. It is easier to establish consensus regarding what is evil rather than what is good<sup>46</sup>. The nonexistence of any emancipatory idea is reassured through the outcasting of Marxism, after its political implementations in communist states has failed around the world. Communism (and consequentially Marxism) has been labeled as the “criminal utopia”<sup>47</sup>. One reason for taking historical materialism as a theoretical frame for the matter of intellectual property is simply a need to engage with different perspectives. The common approach towards the matter of intellectual property is grounded in the question of profit. Such approach is a priori negative – it aims at the limiting, prohibiting, blocking of the free information. However, from the point of view of revolutionary thought, the conflict that emerged with new technology that questions intellectual property is an important event. The Internet (and more specifically free software) became the site of revolution. If we define free software through Marx’s notion of the productive forces and relations of production, such ideas seems challenging for intellectual rights’ regime. In a more narrow sense, free software falls into the Marx concept of “general intellect”.

The important reason for approaching the concept of free software from the perspective of historical materialism is the fact that classical

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46 Badiou 2001, p. 10

47 Badiou 2010, p. 2

Marxism offers a lot on the “fettering of the general intellect”<sup>48</sup>. The most promising feature of free software is that it has mushroomed spontaneously and entirely outside of previous capital structures of production. On the other hand, as Söderberg noticed, the intellectual property regime has become a fetter to the development of the emerging forces of production. As Marx explained, capital fetters emerging forces of production, and such fettering is the main flywheel of the Capitalism. This can be taken as an indication of how the productive forces are undermining established relations of production<sup>49</sup>.

Marx described the term “general intellect”, as a form of new technology that comes into a conflict with existing relation of production. “At certain stage of their development, the material productive forces come into conflict with the existing relations of production”<sup>50</sup>. In *Grundrisse*, Karl Marx introduces concept of “general intellect”, which stress the intrinsic connection “between relative surplus value and the systematic tendency for the scientific-technical knowledge to play an increasingly important role in the production process”<sup>51</sup>. As capital continuously aims at maximization of productivity, it invests in “general intellect”, which is responsible for progress in scientific knowledge. Capital allows for an increase in the free time necessary for the growth of the general intellect. But capital allows it only in order to maximize profit.

In *Grundrisse* Marx explained the paradox of capital, and presented a solution:

“Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth. Hence it diminishes labour time in the necessary form so as to increase it in the superfluous form hence posits the superfluous in growing measure as a condition “question of life or death “ for the necessary...”<sup>52</sup>

“The more this contradiction develops, the more does it become evident that the growth of the forces of production can no longer be bound up with the appropriation of alien labour, but that the mass of workers

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48 Söderberg, 2002

49 Söderberg, 2002

50 Žižek 1998, p. 33-34, cited in R. Barbrook 2000

51 Smith 2013

52 Marx 1973, p. 706

must themselves appropriate their own surplus labour.”<sup>53</sup>

“If the entire labour of a country were sufficient only to raise the support of the whole population, there would be no surplus labour, consequently nothing that could be allowed to accumulate as capital.”<sup>54</sup>

The crucial moment is the moment when capital is forced to create disposable time: non-labour time, free time. As it depends on appropriation of surplus labour time, it must reduce labour time for personal development. Marx offers a solution that is in the realm of utopian ideas, since he imagines a society in which progress is not driven by the profit. This paradox that Marx located in the term “general intellect” is the paradox that inevitably leads capitalism to its end, since this contradiction of creativity of general intellect and capital profit orientation intensifies through time. In such context “even though production is now calculated for the wealth of all, disposable time will grow for all”.<sup>55</sup>

The Marx’s anticipation of a transition from capitalism to communism was highly criticized. This unfulfilled prophecy was heavily under attack by sociologists, such as Anthony Giddens<sup>56</sup>. On the other hand, Marxists Paolo Virno and Carlo Vercellone claimed that Marx only made a mistake on the duration of this transitional historical period and that “‘collective appropriation of knowledges’ has in fact occurred”,<sup>57</sup> mostly in the form of digital democratization of media and the Internet.

Why there is no major relating of the Marxist theory and free software movement? The free software movement is revolutionary only *in potentia*. There are several forms of modeling that idea, from truly authentic oppositions to models co-opted by emerged neo-liberal economic models. Conflict occurred in the free software movement itself, between Stallman’s free software idea and Linus Torvalds’s Linux program. Stallman insists that “GNU is not Linux”, because his initial project was uncompromising on the fact that it has to be open and free for everyone. On the other hand, Linux is an open-source project that can be commercialized and co-opted by cultural industries in the form of

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53 Marx 1973, p. 708

54 Marx 1973, p. 709

55 Marx 1973, p. 708

56 Giddens 1995

57 Smith 2013

open-source programs that are more-or-less harmful for market economy. (Such is the example of Red Hat commercial version of GNU/Linux operating system).

On a global platform there is contra-reformist moment in the Internet history, and major differences between authentic early technological radical media solutions and commercialization of Web 2.0 in a form of social networks. Following early enthusiasm, reformist modes acted in efforts to expand market economy on the Internet. The Facebook revolutions indicated the gap between initial definition of the Internet: between using the Internet as public space and limitation of the Internet as a form of implementing commercial platforms. How, then, to relate the free software movement to Marxist theory? The rear leftist commentators relate new conflicts in capitalist economy outbursts by the alternative modes of reproduction of forces of production with Marxist concepts.

There are several reasons why the free software movement and Marxist theory failed to merge. It is partly a reflection of the conflict between Marxists that detected the era of cognitive-capitalism, and more traditional demand for re-affirmation of classical Marx's elaboration of capitalism. Alain Badiou, in his study *The rebirth of History* from 2012, criticized Negri's optimistic position on capitalism on the eve of its metamorphosis into communism<sup>58</sup>. Badiou thinks that we are witnessing a retrograde consummation of the essence of capitalism, of a return to the spirit of the 1850s – the primacy of things and commodities over life and machines of workers<sup>59</sup>. He writes that new wakening of the history could happen not from capitalism itself, but rather from “popular initiative in which the power of an Idea will take root”<sup>60</sup>. In a study, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, Badiou dismisses a few forms within which we also find what he called an alter-globalists movement that presents itself in “a multiform [of] movement inspired by the intelligence of the multitude (elaborated by Negri and the other alter-globalists)”<sup>61</sup>. It cannot be disputed that a lack of systematic political-economic theory behind the movement is one of the major problems of free software and its successors.

But is it not partially a problem of Marxism today, since the Marxist view on what could be elaborated as revolutionary does not

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58 Badiou 2012, p. 10

59 Badiou 2012, p. 11-14

60 Badiou 2012, p. 15

61 Badiou 2008, p. 114

include informational progress? Marx himself insisted on the relation between production forces and class struggle. In the chapter of Capital “Machinery and Large Scale Industry”, Marx discusses the class conflict as determined by the progress of machinery. It would be possible” Marx observes, “to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working class revolt”<sup>62</sup>. As Dyer-Witthford presented, there are numerous passages in Marx where he stresses the relationship between scientific work (discoveries and inventions) and capitalism. In *Grundrisse* Marx wrote about the progress of machinery in the hand of capitalists who aim to instrumentalise machinery in order to “depend less on labour time and on the amount of labour employed” than on “the general state of science and on the progress of technology”<sup>63</sup>.

The reluctance to identify with hackers ideas is partially understandable from the point of view of Marxist analysis, which cannot start from the prediction that the Internet and digital forms of production and reproduction are imposing completely new means and forms. But the Marxist’s perspective on hacking, technology and copyright (present in the works of Richard Barbrook, Nick Dyer-Witthford, Johan Söderberg and others) starts from definitions that relate the Internet to long standing fights. Such perspective demonstrates that technology is in the center of class fight. What Barbrook and others saw is initial conflict in the technology, in ‘economy of gifts’ as opposed to profitable exchange and “market competition at the cutting-edge of modernity”<sup>64</sup>.

Movements and individuals that are promoting free software as leftist ideas are rare. Mostly there are reluctant to identify with communism. Such animosity is a result of the collapse of revolutionary Marxism, and of all the forms of progressive engagement it inspired (a process described in details in Badiou’s work). But if a different perspective can emerge, it could detect a communist hypothesis within movements that are opposing the fundamental notions of capitalism, with or without theoretical elaboration of such fight. If open software wants to be a political project for social change, it has to approach the problem of class fight.

Decisions about the limitations of the politics of plurality, and

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62 Marx 1977, p. 563

63 Dyer-Witthford 1999, p. 5

64 Barbrook 1999

possibilities for debate, create the ground for common sense and “doctrine of consensus” that Badiou proclaimed as “dominant ideology of contemporary parliamentary States”<sup>65</sup>. What every emancipatory project must do, what every emergence of hitherto unknown possibilities must do, is to put an end to such consensus<sup>66</sup>.

The case of free sharing is one of the rear moments in neoliberal-parliamentarism that is still without consensus. It is still a matter of a battle between citizens and corporations. The corporations are using all means available to win that battle. However, this battle is not only over the current legislation, but also over the public opinion. The means of this battle are not secret, as it is a battle over the public consensus. Google, Microsoft, and other companies have a classified job positions named Google/Microsoft “evangelist”, whose job is to preach or advocate certain technological solutions. Examples of breaking of doctrine of consensus, such as postponed SOPA and PIPA acts, show that any important cause (including that of free sharing) is not only a question of economy. The hegemony is created and redistributed through discursive economy, process of negotiations – the results of that battle are still uncertain. Criminalizing free software principles (free sharing of software, music, films, books, etc.) is a matter of public consensus. If such consensus fail, the project of limiting the p2p sharing will fail. For this reason, it is important to ask whether recent democratic processes have to do with free societies, and how commodification influences such processes.

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65 Badiou 2005, p. 18

66 Badiou 2001, p. 32



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