

Networked Time and the “Common Ruin of the Contending Classes”

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Abstract: The rise of the network society has been hailed often as the bringer of many positive things and has been damned in equal measure. This essay discusses the network society in terms of its effects upon the theory and practice of bourgeois and socialist democracy. Through the theoretical prism of social and technologically created time, the essay argues that the network society has created a neoliberal “networked time”. This is a logic that functions at the global level and operates at computer network driven speeds—incorporating in its wake not only the polity, but economy and society, too. What the temporal analysis reveals in this process, is that “networked time” as a primarily digital form is unable to synchronise with the temporal rhythms of the forms of democracy that came to us from the age of Enlightenment—a slower time, with slower technologically-based social rhythms that stemmed from print and machine culture. What this means is that the Enlightenment-based politics of bourgeois and socialist democracy, and their future-oriented logics of progress, are no longer tenable in our digital age. Accordingly the much-neglected passage in *Manifesto of the Communist Party* that envisions the “common ruin of the contending classes” is coming to pass—and with it a seriously reduced scope for the resurrection of any form of democratic functioning that is based on Enlightenment politics and its temporal rhythms.

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1. Introduction

The *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 was Marx and Engels’ clarion call to the oppressed working classes of Europe. It was a pamphlet announcing that whatever their present objective conditions, and notwithstanding the extent of their exploitation and misery, they were to be the inheritors of the logic of history. A rampant bourgeoisie was busily remaking the world, but the pamphlet argued it to be also preparing its own grave in the process. The *Manifesto* positioned History’s material forces as shaping up for a titanic struggle between the power of the capitalist class, and the embryonic but inexorably growing power of the working classes. History would ordain only one victor, and so the proletariat would eventually win their world. However, what tends to be valued in the *Manifesto* today, with the non-appearance of the workers at the vanguard, is that it still expresses the revolutionary power of capital to change the world. This, on the face of it, is not much of a legacy for the modern proletariat; and nor is it for the bourgeoisie either, as we shall see.

But there is more that may still usefully be drawn from the *Manifesto* today; and it is an insight that has become apparent due to recent transformations in the nature of capitalism itself. What is interesting is contained in a line on the *Manifesto*’s first page. It is a phrase that plants a small seed of pessimism, and is perhaps why the author’s pass quickly over it so as not to dampen the overall revolutionary spirit. It runs: if, somehow, History does not unfold in a “revolutionary reconstitution of society” in favour of the working classes, then the “common ruin of the contending classes”, and with it the prospect of either a bourgeois or proletarian democracy, would be the baleful consequence. Beyond that contingency, Marx and Engels leave only a prognostic void into which we must place our contemporary hopes and fears concerning that particular fork in the road.

It is of course evident that a globalising capitalism oriented toward decisive class struggle did not transpire—either very soon after 1848 as the *Manifesto*’s authors predicted, nor over the 160-odd years that have passed subsequently. Expressions of faith in a positive outcome

sustained many interpretations of Marxism, however, right up until the implosion of the USSR in the early 1990s. And in our own time, the original revolutionary fire of the *Manifesto* still leaves embers glowing in the minds of thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek, Michael Hardt and Jodi Dean. I shall discuss these theorists in due course, but to take the latter as an indication of the flavour of much “radical” communist thought today, Dean writes in her 2012 *Communist Horizon*, that: “[...] the communist horizon appears closer than it has in a long time. The illusion that capitalism works has been shattered by all manner of economic and financial disaster—and we see it everywhere (21).”

Dean goes on to argue that the “fantasy” that “democracy exists as a force for economic justice” in the neoliberal context, should be dispelled. This is true enough. Capitalism evidently does not work, even on its own terms, and “democracy” as we presently experience it is no force for economic justice. But it is also true, surely, that the idea that the “communist horizon” is close at hand, is equally (if not more) fantastical. One closely reads this work in particular for signs of irony. But there is none. All that we need, as she restates at the end of the book, is “courage and confidence” (250). The urging for us “to get to work” to “collectively shape a world” (21) on the basis of such non-sense is intellectually irresponsible, and guarantees only frustration and failure for the very few who would even now feel motivated enough to act on such a 1930s view of how the world’s political and economic problems might be solved. Accordingly, beyond a warm glow that quickly fades, the use of what might be termed an “optimism of the intellect” as an activist’s guide for an understanding of present day networked society is very limited, and is so for reasons I will explain.

Globalisation today has become gripped by a new technological *force majeure*—computer-driven network technologies. This has meant that the capitalist processes of production, consumption and distribution have taken a very different trajectory from the arc of even a generation ago. The nature of power and the class struggle, similarly, has become transformed by a *temporally accelerated networked capitalism* (Fuchs 2010, 116-120). And this networked capitalism has transformed the space-time configurations of power, economics and politics in ways that have indeed brought to bear “a revolutionary reconstitution of [global] society”, but in a fashion that has perhaps terminally disrupted Marx and Engels’ projected path of History, and made the “common ruin” of *both* classes a prospect rather more salient than they would ever have liked to have anticipated. The *Manifesto*’s seed of doubt has grown to signal something important about the political process and class compositions if we view them from the perspective of a networked capitalism that has eclipsed the classical context that informed the birth of capitalism—and the *Manifesto*’s classical Marxist analysis of it.

To set this “revolutionary reconstitution” into proper context, it is necessary to construct a “temporalized” perspective on globalisation, as it exists today, and to obtain an understanding of the nature of politics and technology as they function within the network’s fast-flowing circuits of *information*—the very basis, we need always to be aware, of any form of politics.

2. Politics, Technology and Temporality

There is a growing literature that emphasises the role of time in social and political theory (e.g. Adam 1998; Rosa 2003; Scheuerman 2004; and Hutchings 2008). Whilst there is no space here to set the ideas out in any great detail, I will outline them briefly before moving to the substance of my argument. A theme that unifies much of the current work on time is drawn from the phenomenology of Husserl and Bergson and Heidegger. Broadly, this argues that time is not something abstract or somehow “outside” of the social world, as Isaac Newton influentially argued in his 1687 *Principia*, but instead is something that we experience, something that exists “within” us as a central dimension of what it is to be human. Moreover, the social experience of time in this schema is also the *social creation of time*. Forms of time reckoning therefore may be as varied as human cultures may be. Heidegger expressed this central phenomenological point unambiguously when he wrote that: “There is no time without man” (Heidegger 1972, 16).

The process of time as technology-driven and as homogeneous and mathematically unerring became a powerful, if not dominant, force with the spread of clock time and the industrial revolution that it made possible (See Mumford 1934, 14; Thompson, 1967; and Thrift, 1996). Mechanical time functioned through industrialisation as a scheduler not only of machines and production, but of people too, inculcating what Nigel Thrift termed an “ideology of everyday time practice” that contributed to the formation of a system of “time discipline” (Thrift 1996, 193). Over many generations, this mechanised time practice and the growing time discipline it engendered, served to sublimate and displace the phenomenologically understood experience of time and the understanding the time as being socially created.

The revolutionary and affective power of the clock sunk deeply into the very core of industrialising western culture. It formed the “hidden rhythms” that served as the extensive metering for western societies’ ways of thinking and the institutions that were created in the 18th and 19th centuries (Zerubavel 1985, 1-31). The clock “entimed” the industrial world by coding it with rhythms whose main function were to ensure the predictable functioning of the base of capitalism. A superstructural effect of this was that the clock functioned as the meter for the ideas and the politics of Enlightenment-derived modernity (Debray 2007, 5-28; Hassan 2009, 34-55). These “hidden rhythms” gradually became the widely perceived *natural rhythms* of the economic, cultural and political world, functioning as backdrop to an increasingly regularised and temporally homogenous life. Beyond the historical works of, say, E.P. Thompson, the effect of the clock as a powerful determinant of social action and social relations was something that was rarely questioned or considered.

The temporal basis for this world, this capitalism and this modernity, the only world that Marx and Engels knew, functioned (more-or-less well) for nearly three centuries. The “hidden rhythm” of the clock throbbed so deeply at the base level of the functioning of capitalism, and its “integrating capacities” tied us so closely to its tempo, that we accepted this time as natural as opposed to humanly-constructed (Adam 2004, 104). However, since the 1970s arrival of the information and communications technology (ICT) revolution, the dominance of the clock has been challenged by what I term “network time”. A problem, though, is just as we generally failed to interrogate the nature of clock time sufficiently, to understand how profoundly it has shaped the modern world and its institutions, so too have we failed to view the time of the network as a new—and radical—temporal form. Still less have we been able to see this new temporal relation as problematic for social and political relations within the context of a newly networked capitalism.

3. Network Time, Social Acceleration and the Processes of Democracy

Network capitalism, or networked neoliberalism, has affected a crisis of representation in the realms of culture, society and politics—and, as just noted, it does so in ways that have barely begun to register. For example, David Harvey sees the central effect of the “resolution” of the crises of capitalism as one of “time-space compression” (Harvey 1989, 240). Harvey posits a post-modernity where the “acceleration” of capitalism has shifted society onto to a new temporal plane, one where we must reconsider our Enlightenment inheritance of space-time thinking. Building on this, sociologist Hartmut Rosa uses the term “social acceleration” to describe the process whereby social life speeds up at a much faster rate because more and more is being packed into the life span of the individual (Rosa 2003, 1-26). This has been made possible through the networking of both capitalism and the (now) billions of people who inhabit its virtual space-time.

Network time is a form of time that displaces or undermines the clock time context that has regularised polity, economy and society since the industrial revolution. Network time may be seen (experienced) as a temporal fragmentation of time(s) into numberless network contexts; into the time(s) that we create and experience online and in the increasingly networked forms of work and education and leisure that fill our waking hours. In the network the zoned hour of the clock becomes more and more irrelevant as the entire planet becomes the theoretical context of our networked connections and for the experience of time. In a Web 2.0 interaction, for example, it may be midnight where you are, and mid-afternoon for one of your

interlocutors; breakfast time for another. However, the conversation, or collaboration or communication, takes place in network time. This may be fast if the network is running smoothly, faster if you have a top-of-the-line computer and broadband fibre-optic access—or slow and filled with drop-outs or latencies or delays, if network conditions are busy and you are using a copper-wire telephone connection and (quickly) antiquated modem connections. These much more fragmented and temporally contextual times are now able to vie with “industrial time” for sovereignty for the duration of our stay in the virtual sphere, in our browsing of the Internet, in our conversations on a mobile phone, in our Facebook-ing at a Wi-Fi hotspot, or our texting to potentially anyone, anywhere. The key point is that although the times of the network are infinitely fragmented, as fragmented as there are numbers of connections, and the speed of these interactions vary greatly also, they all are governed by a network logic (a techno-logic driven by commercial competition) that orients almost all network users to an *accelerated existence* within network time (See Hassan, 2007 and 2012, chapter 4, for a fuller development of this idea).

The overall effect is that within the growing domain of network time, stability (such as it was) has become much less tenable in social life; a centre that would hold (more or less) as a fulcrum around which social life could be narrated as a project, begins to shake free of its moorings; and a society (and state) that once saw planning and regulation and the projection of a political future for its citizens as its central *raison d'être*, begins to turn toward market forces for meaning and inspiration. This broad social transition to a network time that displaces the dominant logic of the clock was described by Zygmunt Bauman as a “liquid modernity”, a hot cauldron of activity where the “long effort to accelerate the speed of movement has [...] reached its “natural limit” in the age of computing (Bauman 2000, 10).

A generalised social acceleration has meant a breaching of the “natural limit” of the political process too. Modern politics has its own temporality, its own rhythms and sequences that evolved in the context of the culture and society within which it came into being in the 18th and 19th centuries (Scheuerman 2004; and Hassan 2009). This was shaped (at least in its classically-derived form) through face-to-face communication and through political debate and dialogue—and like the rest of industrialising society, was given predictability and regularity by the clock and calendar. These rhythms developed at a pace and at a speed that people and institutions could more or less cope with and could more or less function effectively within. It was a temporal process that laid the basis for the speed of politics and the speed of modernity as expressed through the democratic process. And as Sheldon Wolin phrased it: “Political time...requires an element of leisure, not in the sense of a leisure class...but in the sense of a leisurely pace. This is owing to the needs of political action to be preceded by deliberation and deliberation...takes time because it occurs in a setting of competing or conflicting but legitimate considerations” (Wolin 1997, 4).

But French historian Jean Chesneaux has warned about the desynchronisation between the political process and information networks, arguing that there exists now an “uneasy dialogue between speed and democracy” in a neoliberal context where acceleration has become one of the “paramount values” of our age (Chesneaux 2000, 407). However, such writings have been scattered and their effect on a better understanding of the role of time in society and in its political processes has been limited.

In a more systematic mode William Scheuerman analyses the effects of acceleration upon the political process in his 2004 book *Liberal Democracy and the Social Acceleration of Time*. He argues that classical bourgeois democracy was born in the 18th century with an innately *modern* temporality. In the U.S., he observes, through the separation of powers into judiciary, executive and legislature, bourgeois democracy was directed simultaneously toward the three time-orientations of past, present and future. What this means in practice is that in its focus on precedent for the justification of their actions, the judiciary is past-focused; through its ability to act quickly, the executive is oriented towards the present; and in its function as the planner and forecaster of social needs the legislature is oriented, primarily, towards the future (Scheuerman 2004, 30-36).

This deep-seated embedding of temporality within a modern teleology was augmented through bourgeois democracy's—and also socialism's—entrenchment in the Enlightenment

era communication networks of the 18th century and beyond—in the print-based communication networks that Robert Darnton called the “great epistolary exchange” that created the “republic of letters” (Darnton 2009, 11). This network of information exchange—communication networks that, as Régis Debray observed, “enable thought to have social existence”—fuelled democratic politics with its ideas as well as its communicative rhythmicities (Debray 2007, 5). Most important of all, through the powerful symbioses between bourgeois and socialist democratic movements and a rising capitalist industrialism, this teleology and these rhythms were given a structural coherence and coordinative logic through the clock which served to mathematically entime early modern societies, creating what E.P. Thompson famously described as the “new universe of disciplined time” (Thompson 1993, 84) and what Paul Glennie and Nigel Thrift saw as a specifically modern “mode of time consciousness” (Glennie & Thrift 2009, 49).

All this amounted to an unprecedentedly powerful temporal drive. What was in effect a systematic “machine time” allowed the classical form of bourgeois democracy to conquer all before it in terms of its functioning as the political annex of modernity and capital. Indeed, as Scheuerman puts it, over the 18th and 19th centuries: “The modern [liberal democratic] nation-state triumphed over an array of competing modes of political organisation (empires, loose networks of city-states) in part because of its superior manipulation of speed” (Scheuerman 2004, 19). Scheuerman’s book is a valuable one, but its systematicity on the subject of time falls short of a theory of time that would explain *why* there was an “acceleration” of social and political time. In an earlier essay, as in his book, Scheuerman chooses safe political science ground, and so we get a straight historical narrative that takes us up to the stage of 1980s globalisation when: “Ours [becomes] an increasingly high-speed society” (Scheuerman 1999, 27). But there is no attempt to make sense of why this might be happening. Shortly, I will give insight into the “why” question—as well as supply a solid theoretical basis to underpin the very important effects upon the constitution of class as well as the politics of class.

It was observed earlier that contemporary social acceleration might be explained by locating the process in the changes in the technological and political bases of capitalism, and that acceleration is achieved through the interaction of computing and neoliberalism especially. We need to develop this point some more. The *networking of capitalism* has transformed capitalism as a mode of production. Until the late 1960s at least, the post war Fordist and dirigiste structuring of society brought rising living standards to millions of western workers and took bourgeois (and social) democracy to new heights of power and legitimacy (Judt 2005, 360-390). Across the west, a rational and plannable mode of production fused with welfarist-interventionist and bureaucratically minded political institutions to create what has been described as a “total way of life”, with the nation state a primary actor (Harvey 1989, 61). But a growing affluence masked a mode of production that was increasingly beset by crises. At the global level, corporate profits began to stagnate or fall by the early 1970s, and the “managed economy” approach by governments, organised labour and big business was not working as well as it did in an earlier context of easy profitability (Jessop 2002, 95-139). In particular, businesses were increasingly feeling the suffocation of worker power and government restriction. However, in the background of growing economic crisis, ideas began to emerge (or re-emerge) that would stress the need for capital to be free to move to wherever necessary in order to seek acceptable returns. Naomi Klein in her book *The Shock Doctrine*, captures well the ideological determination through which Hayekian philosophy and Chicago School economics combined to create the neoliberal force that was oriented toward the resuscitation of the “flame of a pure version of capitalism” that burns with such phosphorescence today (Klein 2007, 17).

And as we also saw, information technology was central to making neoliberal globalisation possible. As competition became more fierce in the context of 1970s crisis, then speed, efficiency and the elimination of the human factor (through automation) were powerful incentives for the adoption by capitalists of computer-based “solutions” across almost every industry and every sector—a “revolution” that began in the Anglophone economies, but spread over the 1980s and 90s to become the politico-economic hegemon that approaches a similarly

“total way of life” today. The network society and the speeding up of social life have been the unintended consequences of the restructuring of Fordism. Digital networks have become the new base structuring of economy, society and, now, polity. It is a base, however, that is inherently unstable and inherently oriented towards the open-ended acceleration of its flows, with the speed limit constrained only by technological capability. Economic competition ensures that in the guise of innovation, network flows and the new power that they convey, cannot consolidate and concentrate; they must move ever faster.

The *political process* is the largely unrecognised casualty of this unintended consequence. Bourgeois democracy, and by extension, socialism, is temporal and is inherently temporalized with limits to how much its processes may be accelerated. It is/was nevertheless, a “vital mode of [the] experience of space and time” as Marshall Berman phrased it (Berman 1983, 15). The communicative networks that gave expression to the foundational ideas of bourgeois democracy and socialism were borne through the culture of print. The human element of face-to-face debating in parliaments, in chambers, in committees, and in the enacting of real-world political effect, joined with the fixity of print in time and space to give a forward momentum and broad rhythmicity to the democratic process for it to act upon the world and help build the structures and institutions of modernity (Berman 1983, 87-119). Of course these real-world and real-body processes still occur in the political process; and print culture and clock time still contribute to the temporality of bourgeois democracy as the dominant modality. But in this “slow lane” politics, the languishing realm of local politics, legislative assemblies and regional and state governances, the *power to shape society* through democratic means is increasingly atrophied and weakened by the imperatives of the market and the social acceleration that it generates. This is where Scheuerman makes his most important point on the functioning of the bourgeois democratic process: “[...] high-speed society places a premium on high-speed political institutions: the widely endorsed conception of the unitary executive as an “energetic” entity best capable of acting with dispatch means that social acceleration promotes executive-centred government and the proliferation of executive discretion, while weakening broad-based representative legislatures as well as traditional models of constitutionalism and the rule of law” (Scheuerman 1999, 27).

Power concentrates—tenuously vis-à-vis the logic of the market—within cabinet rooms and among a few select political insiders. No longer is power able to readily flow back to legislatures, and still less towards the political party and its constituencies. So by extension political institutions reflect only indirectly their traditional (and atrophying) class bases. And as Scheuerman reiterates in his 2004 book, this concentration of power can even be justified by the elites themselves in the neoliberal moment because: “[the executive’s] capacity for dispatch and efficiency offer the only serious alternative to further political or economic decay” (Scheuerman 2004, 95). But this is a relative and diminishing power that is oriented towards connecting with the needs of globalising capital, and it justifies its undemocratic nature as a kind of Nietzschean *amor fati*, or the necessity to “love your fate” because there is no other option.

Millions across the world may not love their fate, but millions feel unable to do much about it, especially when their elected officials seem without capacity to shape lives and events in ways that involve people and empower people. Paralleling this pessimism is a general and more positive acceptance of the “need for speed” through technology and through computing, especially. The irony is that social acceleration, information overload and the distraction that it brings in its wake is, according to Nicholas Carr: “chipping away [at our] capacity for concentration and contemplation” (Carr 2010, 7) making the recognition that speed might be contributing to the problem, that much more difficult. And so, to quote Jean Chesneaux once more: “As the [clock] time continuum is hastily and happily deconstructed, democracy dwindles to the shadow of itself, desiccated, short-sighted both upstream and downstream, reduced to purely functional and functionalist objectives and references. And speed enters the picture; it is expected to provide society with a new, introverted field of activism, as a substitute for the now obsolete horizons of the future as well as for the rich, successive layers deposited by the past” (Chesneaux 2000, 417).

4. The Double Revolution and the Rise of the “Nimble Witted Man”

In a review of the late Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm's *How to Change the World*, Terry Eagleton observed that: “Hobsbawm reminds us of a small but significant phrase in *The Communist Manifesto* which has been well nigh universally overlooked: capitalism, Marx writes ominously, might end “in the common ruin of the contending classes”. It is not out of the question that the only socialism we shall witness is one that we shall be forced into by material circumstance after a nuclear or ecological catastrophe. Like other 19th-century believers in progress, Marx did not foresee the possibility of the human race growing so technologically ingenious that it ends up wiping itself out. This is one of several ways in which socialism is not historically inevitable, and neither is anything else” (Eagleton 2011, paragraph 9).

Since the 1970s we have been experiencing what Marx and Engels' would surely recognise as a “revolutionary reconstitution of society at large” (Marx, Engels 1975, 36). But it has been/continues to be, in a way that favours neither revolutionary class, and brings with it the basis for their “common ruin”, the nihilistic scenario that both authors feared but sublimated. This has been a revolution for what German social theory from Max Weber to the Frankfurt School identified in the first half of the 20th century as “instrumental rationality”; a political and economic cost-effectivity calculation that has nullified the logics of progress that were intrinsic to both bourgeois and socialist politics, and derailed also the idea of an innately positive technological development that was imbibed from Enlightenment thinking.

The present revolution may be seen as a double revolution, an interaction between two processes, political and technological, that have brought about a regression of the Enlightenment dialectic of progress (Adorno and Horkheimer 1986). The *political revolution* spearheaded by figureheads such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan has been unlike any other in modern times. This revolution was not ostensibly about the violent struggle between two opposing worldviews; neoliberalism was a supposedly “positive” political solution to economic problems of efficiency and productivity. A more “free” market, it was claimed, would bring its own more abstract and individualised political rewards in the form of the freedom of the individual to do what he or she likes—something possible *only if* capitalism is free (Friedman 1962).

Similarly, the *technological revolution* of the 1970s was promoted as the miracle of computing. This was a technology *par excellence* and a “solution in search of problems”, as Theodore Roszak observed in his book *The Cult of Information* (Roszak 1986, 51). Computerisation, especially in the minds of the mainstream public, was accepted as the quintessence of efficiency and productivity. Just about every realm of life, according to hyper-positive boosters such as Bill Gates of Microsoft, would be transformed for the better through application of digital logic (Gates 1995). Jay David Bolter, writing in his *Turing's Man: Western Culture in the Computer Age*, was also emphatic and prescient about the importance of what was then happening, but from a more disinterested perspective. The computer, he maintained, was quickly shaping up to be the new “defining technology” and the key to understanding the tremendous changes taking place in our age (Bolter 1984, 8). Such was the “reconstituting” impetus, that the computer and computerisation moved rapidly from technological marvel that was a solution to just about anything, to a powerful cultural-consumer artefact, a must-have device for work and for leisure that stamped its presence and its potential into every nook and cranny of life.

The problem with this is that both the political and technological revolutions have been almost total in their fields of effect. Neoliberalism abrogated political power to the market place and in the process left the politics of bourgeois democracy weakened, and the politics of socialism almost extinct. Perry Anderson wrote in 2000 that there was now no “plausible” opposing worldview to a rampant neoliberalism (Anderson 2000, 1-20). Why is this? First we need to recognise that neoliberalism (or to give it its more neutral and generic appellation, *globalisation*) is far more than an economic doctrine put into practice. An example of this single-focus is evident in Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine* of 2007. The book is a fine analysis of the rise of neoliberalism/globalisation, and how these processes were theorized as eco-

conomic policy and then politically (and brutally) driven to the point of actualisation throughout the world by determined ideological offensives. However, nowhere does she indicate how neoliberalism/globalisation were made *practically possible*—which was through information technologies. Neoliberalism/globalisation is not simply the implementation of free-market programs around the world. It is the implementation of an informational logic of flux and competition and speed and “efficiency” that is interconnected and able to scale easily and rapidly from the macro-level of policy to the micro-level of individual practice. Moreover, this process was successful because its scale was unambiguously global and its effect (again, unambiguously) comprehensive; nothing and no one was deemed outside of the range of effect of the logic of networking. Accordingly, the suffusion of computer-based and networkable technologies across every realm of work, leisure, education and entertainment brought the cash nexus and the capitalist imperative not only into those spheres that were open to this radical connectivity, such as “normal” business, but also to those spheres that were, as Fredric Jameson presaged some time ago, “[...] hitherto sheltered from it and indeed for the most part hostile to and inconsistent with its logic” (Jameson 1996, 9).

A networked neoliberalism was thus able to both *connect* individuals and *fragment* the basis for previous forms of community life. In this, the hyper-technological form of a digital capitalism set in train the groundwork for the “pure version of capitalism” that Chicago School neoliberals dreamed of. This is one where, as Sherry Turkle observes, we are essentially “alone together” and where the principal technologies of neoliberal/globalisation are informational and so powerful that they become the “architect of our intimacies” (Turkle, 2012 15). That is to say, they begin to shape our social lives and the forms of politics that we derive from their constructions. I will say more on this later.

The positive claims for networked solutions, from politics to economics, has increasing force today, where the market-as-solution ideology is still dominant, notwithstanding the global financial crisis of 2008. In the aftermath of the crises, information technologies remain at the very core of how the global economy works (and doesn’t work). Yet such are their seemingly magical properties, the cult of information continues undiminished. This was evident in a speech by Vivianne Reding, European Commissioner for Information Society and Media who, in neoliberalist fashion, argued strongly the need for more efficiency, and saw information technologies as the primary economic liberator and solution to the crises. To a high-level policy forum she insisted that only “ICTs provide [the] vital tools to recover from the [...] economic slowdown” (Reding 2009, 2).

With the totalising success of these revolutions, the dialectic has turned and become negative. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that Enlightenment reason and rationality only become instrumental when its processes claim to be both total and self-sufficient. In this ebb tide, rationalised reason becomes non-sceptical reason and non-critical reason: that is, reason that is oriented toward narrow technical and instrumental and short-term problems (Adorno and Horkheimer 1986, 3-42). What this means is that the totality of the neoliberal project and of the ICT processes of colonisation is leading to a global society and economy that is organised through its rationality toward the exclusion of other possibilities. Alternatives to the market and to ubiquitous computing almost by default are viewed as irrational and a waste of time and resources.

Instrumental reason thus reveals within itself a kind of “cunning” in the sense that Adorno and Horkheimer describe in their discourse on Odysseus’s ingenuity and cunning in his struggle against the Sirens. In our modern time this translates as “cunning as a means of exchange, in which everything is done correctly, the contract is fulfilled, yet the other party is cheated” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1986, 48). This is a view that could readily encapsulate a financial capitalism that grew through flows of information provided by advances in network computing (Schiller 2007). Computers and the network functioned “correctly” as did banks and bankers in their following of the logic of the financial system. Market logic and computer-aided living are said to create an environment in which we may blossom and become free and competitive and able to grasp life’s opportunities. Yet through the cunning of instrumental reason that we have erected as shield and sword for the creation of freedom and progress, it has turned on us in ways we still barely recognise. The effect may become clearer if

we use the critical theory approach of Adorno and Horkheimer to decode the reality of instrumental rationality. They give us an aphorism that speaks to the neoliberal image of the “rational actor” who must think fast and be alive to every opportunity: “the nimble-witted man survives only at the cost of his own dreams” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1986, 57).

Marx and Engels’ prophetic descriptions of globalisation did not (and could not) project what future technologies might make possible. Their globalisation was steeped in machines, steam power, clock timing; ours is based more than anything on the interaction between free-markets and computer technology. Of this particular “revolutionary reconstitution of society at large”, the *Manifesto*’s authors could scarcely have dreamed. To borrow Eagleton’s phrase, we have indeed become “technologically ingenious”, but not in a way that (yet) threatens imminent global destruction. We *have* become too clever when it comes to computing and their networked logic. We have been outfoxed by their sheer ingenuity. Through the “freedom” given to their development and application by the neoliberal approach, computers and computerisation have become in many ways autonomous. The fact that it would be folly to predict computer trends even five years from now would suggest that there are no plannable and organisable logic which oversees how computers develop or asks the critical questions regarding why we use them, and to what longer term purpose. Jacques Ellul prophesied just this effect through what he termed “technological rationality” in 1964, where utility, productivity and efficiency create what he called the logic of “technique”. He wrote: “Technique has become autonomous; it has fashioned an omnivorous world, obeys its own laws and has renounced all tradition” (Ellul 1964,14). Lack of autonomy removes from social classes the technological (and political) capacity to realise their historical projects; and the renouncing of tradition that Ellul speaks of does away with the role that history might serve as the temporal foundation for the understanding of technological development.

5. Class-Consciousness Melts Into Virtual Space: Politics Online

The new world of modernity that was the context for Enlightenment thought and democratic politics and the *Communist Manifesto*, was also the context for a historical trajectory wherein the bourgeoisie and the proletariat had each an arc plotted toward either final victory for one class, or it would be a “common ruin” for them both. “Ruin” connotes destruction and finality, and may be too powerful a rendering of the effects of the neoliberal network society. It is too soon to say. Certainly the historical trajectories of each class have been “commonly” *thwarted* by networked neoliberalism and network time. The bourgeoisie, through their neoliberal ideologues, pressed the self-destruct button just when the “solution” to the crumbling post-war social democracy experiment in the 1970s was calling for a more creative conservatism. By throwing their lot in with neoliberalisation, the middle-classes found themselves squeezed into relative historical impotency, as money and power was sucked up into a thin stratum of super-rich. Tertiary education and professional skills, long the marker and prerogative of the middle classes in the developed and developing worlds, became devalued and tenuous due to the massification of the higher education sector, and the de-professionalisation of many managerial and other occupations through technological (computer based) change (Barnett 2010). The middle classes have thus been thwarted on two fronts: the crumbling of the edifice of their class status, with its security and class-based privileges—and the dwindling of the traditional occupational categories that sustained them as an economic class. Their descent into individualism and its attendant dilution of class identification and *habitus* has been well theorised and documented as broad-based structural level transformations (e.g. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; and Putnam 2002).

Less well understood is that these technologically driven structural changes contain a powerful temporal dimension that has changed the temporal composition of capitalism and its class manifestations. In this the most important transformations have been at the molecular level where the dispersing and atomising of class solidarities and class identification and affinities, have had the effect of weakening and making “class antagonisms” more obscure—as opposed to “simplifying” them, as Marx and Engels had anticipated (Marx, Engels 1975,

60). This lack of class autonomy and mission and clarity allows the structural-technological transformation to continue, and to become even more autonomous and self-generating.

If the manifestations of the traditional middle-class culture has suffered, so too has its conservative roots become shrunken and withered. In a networked economy, culture and society where constant and rapid and materially destructive and creative change are the norm from Shenzhen to Silicon Valley, the conservative thinking in the tradition of William Burke or Michael Oakeshott or Roger Scruton, which emphasized reflection, caution, a wariness of material progress and unconstrained technological development by the neoliberal “enemies of the permanent things”—are marginalised or merely viewed as cranky. Conceivably, a more social and politically powerful tradition-focused conservatism could have outmanoeuvred a rising neoliberalism and thus able to tackle a faltering social democracy in order to stabilise capital for the continuation of the modern bourgeois project as a class project (Panichas 2008).

As for the proletariat, its fate has been grimmer because the fall has been greater. A fundamental effect of this has been that a hegemonic global and networked media that is oriented toward the neoliberal worldview are today able to dismiss socialism and the working classes, principally though ignoring them as valid social and political constructs that any longer warrant either fear or loathing. Whereas the bourgeois historical political project of a positive future enabled through democratic and social progress is withering in a largely silent and anguished retreat into the self-as-project (and into self-preservation), the collapse of working class solidarities through confrontation with neoliberalism since the 1970s has been more spectacular. Again, the structural effects are clear, and we see them in the oft-cited collapse of working class organisation through unions, where unions themselves have either disappeared or become timid shadows of what they were a generation ago (Howell 2005). We see them also in the shrinking or stagnation of working class wages since the 1980s; and we see them again in the atrophy of explicit political power through working-class based parties that tend nowadays to pay only lip service to their class-based roots.

Much has been made in recent years, especially in mainstream and blog media, of the new power of the masses being expressed through social media (e.g. Mason 2012). Here, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and so on are argued to be key to how democracy will be energised once more and societies transformed from the bottom up. This has been especially the case in North Africa and the Middle East. Paul Mason, an influential journalist-blogger who specialises on the region wrote that: “the combined impact of the social network and the individualistic self would facilitate a clear break with the old forms of organisation, including parties, unions and permanent campaigns” (Mason 2012, 138). However, as I have argued elsewhere, the very speed of the phenomenon, and the “clear break” with old forms of politics that this rapidity of politicisation constituted, was a central limiting factor in their success—or lack of it (Hassan 2012a).

Somewhat different politically, though related in terms of the claims made for information technologies, has been the emergence of the Occupy and Indignadas political phenomenon. Terminology is important here, and the use of the noun “movement” suggests a coherence and direction and structure that do not exist as an organizing logic in the mass reactions to economic malaise in the developed economies—or in the context of the Arab Spring. Writing on the Occupy and *Indignadas* phenomenon, Manuel Castells identifies Masons’ “clear break” with older forms of politics, in that the suffusion by information technologies across all classes has created the basis for what he terms “mass self communication” (Castells 2012, 6). The broader language in the book is more direct and Castells also eschews the term “movement” though he continues to use it through the book. He states clearly at the beginning, however: “There are usually a handful of persons. Sometimes just one, at the start of a movement. Social theorists usually call these people agency. I call them individuals” (Castells 2012, 13).

The “mass” in his “mass self communication” trope, then, refers primarily to raw numbers, and as Castells argues, it is the individual that acquires agency through the adoption of networked technologies. One can agree that what we see in the mass protest phenomenon is largely individualised political expression, but the “agency” Castells speaks of, or hopes for,

is of a very weak form indeed—precisely because it is individualised. By consciously or unconsciously constituting a “clean break” with older forms of working class political organisation, what the protest phenomenon actually breaks with is a traditional political *militancy*. This term, with its military connotations of strategy and hierarchy and planning, is everything that Occupy and the *Indignadas* are against. Political militancy has always been class-based, but the fact that the media tend now to reserve it for bearded Islamists, shows how far the “common ruin” or thwarting of class-based projects, proletarian and bourgeois, has declined.

In respect of the Occupy phenomenon, its own self definition as the “99%”, shows not only how traditional class strata (working and middle) have been rapidly lumped together as a raw number of (by definition) *individuals*, but also how this tacit acceptance of a “natural” mass self-expression on the basis of largely unreflected upon media technology use, dilutes the very basis for action based upon class consciousness. The street and square and social media mixing of so many different social perspectives and levels of income—the unemployed, indebted students, workers and retirees rubbing shoulders with doctors, engineers and lawyers—means that the combustibility and militancy that comes from a class-consciousness that reflects hardened and objective class positions, melts into the air of a generalised frustration and directionless rage.

Theorists such as Jodi Dean acknowledge this problem. In a critique of the Occupy Sandy and UK Uncut phenomena that emerged in late 2012, Dean shows how channels for rage and frustration with the inadequacies capitalism can easily be represented in the media as safe “feel-good, mutual aid” forms of activism that deflect attention and any potential militancy away from the system itself. The solution, she writes, is “critical research, discussion, analysis and planning as well as the training of activists, organisers and even leaders. Their work is the work of parties: not the mass parties of electoral democracy, but the responsive and *revolutionary parties of the previous century*” (emphasis added) (Dean 2012, website). This tendency to continue as if nothing has changed in respect of the process of proletarian politics is too common on the intellectual left. Prominent here is Slavoi Žižek. In a 2009 essay titled “How to Begin at the Beginning”, Žižek surveys the planet, post-1989, and asks how it might be possible to move forward when the working class shows no indication of completing its historical “passage from in-itself to for-itself” (2009, 52). Like Dean, Žižek opts for a 20th Century (or 19th Century) model where, citing Alain Badiou, he argues that “we should reassert the communist hypothesis” (ibid). Using classical Marxian notion that theory and practice “reacts to actual contradictions” (ibid) Žižek deduces that it is only “the excluded that [now] justifies the term communism” (Žižek, 2009, 54). And presaging, possibly, the Occupy slogan of the “99%” a couple of years hence, and in unwitting agreement with my idea of “common ruin”, Žižek states that in the present situation “we are *all* excluded” and therefore “all potentially *homo sacer*” (55). After this analysis, Žižek’s “solution” much like Dean’s, is to leave the issue hanging precipitously by stating, in his very last words, that we should “act preventatively” without indicating how the “act” might be identified, practically pursued or carried through (55).

To continue to lack proper engagement with technological change beyond their surface manifestations, to ignore the objective conditions of capital accumulation and its class structuring, and to call for (and only to call for) the need to revert to first principles and a previous century’s approach which got the proletarian project nowhere anyway, is to engage in the same “fantasy” of neoliberal democracy that Dean excoriates in her *Communist Horizon*. I have argued that the true “revolutionary reconstitution” in our time has been through technological change, and that networked communication coupled with neoliberal economics has *individualised antagonism* through the nature of its effects upon production, consumption and distribution of commodities. We need to recognize technological change for what it is: the reorganisation of time and space into a radically different context to that which gave birth to capitalism, modernity and its contradictions. So we need to move beyond, though not wholly discard, the mindsets of previous centuries where the “hidden rhythms” of society were different. History and tradition and political legacies are extremely important, but they cannot be handled like fragile holy relics. Dean’s call for a politics from another epoch must be prefaced with recognition of their unique temporal context, and then think about whether traditional

political rhythms synchronise effectively with those of network time. There is much difficult thinking that needs to be undertaken to understand our times, as opposed to the reflex raising of old slogans that no one listens to any longer because they are completely outside the subjective consciousness of (especially) a younger generation that has been raised in online social networks.

Similarly, Žižek's call for a "reassertion" of Leninist principles raises the red flag of rigidity, where the theoretical vision of a vanguard party is both alienating and bizarre-sounding to a new generation, a large part of whom view party based politics as only relevant to the 20th Century and to another technological age. It is also lazy thinking. We need to *reassess* instead of reassert. The contradictions and the antagonisms of today need to be identified and theorised afresh, without clinging on regardless to the idea of "class antagonism" when it dissolves before our eyes in the streets of Madrid, or London or New York. Something else, something just as deep-seated as the contradictions that Marx observed in the early rise of capitalist accumulation, is going on in a globalised society where the basis for production, consumption and distribution (the basis of class) is being transformed.

6. A Common in Communism or Common Ruin?

The rise of the network society has had another significant effect that I have yet to bring fully to the analysis, and points more fully to the technological aspects of the "common ruin" thesis. I want to utilise an essay by Michael Hardt titled "The Common in Communism" that appeared in *Rethinking Marxism* in 2010. The essay is useful up to a point, but like Dean and Žižek, it also illustrates the lack of analysis of *contemporary networked society* in leading-edge Marxist criticism that effectively leaves such critics as still exist, largely marginal and ineffectual.

Hardt makes the obvious but nonetheless important point that "industry no longer holds the hegemonic position within the economy" (Hardt 2010, 348). The industrial age of machines and factory lines and blue-collar/white-collar class divisions that gave hope to many a traditional socialist, and a sense of purpose and identity for many a classical bourgeois, is now being surpassed. As Hardt phrases it, this classical composition "no longer imposes its qualities over other sectors of the economy *and over social relations more generally*" (ibid). (emphasis added)

This technological transformation—from industry to "informationalisation" as Hardt terms it—has tremendous social and political consequences through the creation of "immaterial and biopolitical production" (Hardt 2010, 348). He writes that: "By immaterial or biopolitical we try to grasp together the production of ideas, information, images, code languages, social relationships, affects, and the like. This designates occupations throughout the economy, from the high end to the low, from health care workers, flight attendants, and educators to software programmers and from fast food and call centre workers to designers and advertisers. Most of these forms of production are not new [...] but the coherence amongst them is perhaps more recognizable and, more important, their qualities today tend to be imposed over other sectors of the economy and over society as a whole. Industry has to informationalise; knowledge, code and images are becoming ever more important throughout the tradition sectors of production; and the production of affects and care is becoming increasingly essential in the valorisation process. The hypothesis of a tendency for immaterial or biopolitical production to emerge in the hegemonic position, which industry used to hold, has all kinds of implications for gender divisions of labor and various international and other geographical divisions of labor [...] (349)."

Hardt views this transition as potentially liberatory, and bringing into contrast two forms of property, material and immaterial. The coming to dominance of immaterial production brings with it special forms of property, that "because they are so easily shared or reproduced [...] there is a constant pressure for such goods to escape the boundaries of property and become common" (ibid). This for Hardt is the real potential of "informationalisation". It is the production of a new subjectivity; a new human for a new age where a new basis for a new autonomy from classical property relations begin to emerge. As he sums this up: "com-

munism is defined by not only the abolition of property but also the affirmation of the common [...] of open and autonomous biopolitical production, the self-governed continuous creation of new humanity. In the most synthetic of terms, what private property is to capitalism and what state property is to socialism, the common is to communism" (355). He adds as coda: "now to us the task of organising it" (ibid).

Hardt's final appeal is unavoidably vague and empty sounding, because there is no social (or theoretical) basis for its organisation or its realisation in his schema. The "task" is of a qualitatively different order. Immaterial or biopolitical production is real enough; we see it in action in the global phenomena of social networking and the politics this generates. But the autonomy of the biopolitical that Hardt stresses, the basis for transformation and the "task of organising" are based upon forms of power. However, through *digital information networks* (the most important development of "informationalisation", and an element Hardt makes very little use of in his broader corpus) the dynamic of power is transformed. In *Commonwealth*, Hardt (with Antonio Negri) makes the point in respect of biopolitical power, that it is produced through the dialectic of resistance, and that: "history is determined by the biopolitical antagonisms and resistances to biopower" (Hardt and Negri 2009, 31). However, as Scott Lash phrases it, in the critique of information society we see that "power is elsewhere" (Lash 2002, 10). Biopower needs institutional as well as corporeal loci within which it can settle and take root, evolve and resist. In public politics biopower *needs time* to manifest itself within contexts that allow resistance to occur through an understanding of the forces of repression and the organisation of programmes of action that may counter them. In the network society, power is constantly "elsewhere", forever shifting and being contested and rendered evanescent through myriad social and economic contexts wherein temporal acceleration denies power the chance to consolidate as it could and did in "slower" times. Building upon what I argued earlier, it follows that the network politics of the kind emerging from the Occupy and Arab Spring phenomena can be seen in this light where "resistance" is expressed as a diffuse anger that is able to coalesce rapidly. However, and with the signal exception of the reactionary and long-time organised Muslim Brotherhood that was able to fill the power vacuum in Egypt in 2011, networked politics has no institutional dynamic, and lacks the focus and shared worldview with which to direct shape programmatic and organised resistance that is oriented toward longer term goals—as well as the immediate ones.

Networks and their immanent dimension of network time thus create the dissolution of "informationalised" divisions of labour by flattening occupations to code-based forms that all exist within the same digital logic. Biopolitical production does not "escape" into some nebulous realm of potential organisational freedom; there is nowhere for it to escape to. Instead it is enveloped by the network logic along with economic class positions and cultural hierarchies and distinctions that were once the bedrock for modern politics. Networks thus "commonise" classes into an atomised dependency that is increasingly subject to the imperative of markets and market-driven social acceleration. In the biopolitical production that takes place in the context of the network society, the architect and the taxi-driver share the same circuits of information flows. By sharing the same informationalised space, they are subject to and respond to networked market signals. In contrast to Hardt, I argue that it is their objective class position that has been made "common" in the production of a common networked subjectivity. Hardt's "commons in communism" is then a "common ruin", or thwarting, if the temporal effects of networks are considered. And presently in this "common ruin" state, there is presently no basis for the commons based organisation that Hardt calls for.

7. Conclusions

Network logic and the social acceleration it carries with it has radically undermined the basis upon which modern politics was founded. These have similarly rendered as problematic the class bases from which much of revisionist Marxism, still draws on for analysis and critique. And so we see that almost by stealth, a new relationship with temporality has transformed the historical communicative processes that were based upon print, upon face-to-face interaction, upon the broader machine-based rhythms of society, which in all their myriad con-

texts and variations, “enabled thought to have social existence” (Debray 2007, 5). The political thought that inspired democracy in its liberal-bourgeois and socialist forms is of course still with us. Indeed it is more readily available than ever before, but the networked communicative contexts in which we relate to these texts and their ideas is too fast for the communicative contexts in which they were created and entimed, an historically specific context where information flows and social action were broadly in synchrony.

Writing her *Junius Pamphlet* in 1916 Rosa Luxemburg raised the slogan “socialism or barbarism”. Concluding that the world was on the brink of the latter, she observed that “Violated, dishonoured, wading in blood, dripping filth—there stands bourgeois society” (Luxemburg 2008, paragraph 6). Echoing Marx and Engels, Luxemburg posited a stark choice—socialist revolution or a hyper-degenerate capitalist order, with the bourgeoisie culpable for the degeneracy. Luxemburg, like Marx and Engels before her, wrote in heightened prose for heightened times. We live, however, in the midst of a different revolution, a technological one, where uplifting rhetoric is reserved primarily to describe the wonder with which we view computer driven “progress”.

To be sure the barbarism of a nuclear exchange, or the barbarism of an ecocide are still immanent within the logic of contemporary capitalist society. However, “our” barbarism from “our” capitalism is one of low-grade cruelty, nasty small wars, sporadic hunger, and persistent poverty; a “soft-barbarism” that is systemically containable as opposed to one that is class-combustible. The *political manifestation* of this barbarism, or common ruin, is where the historical differences really lie. The dissolving of traditional class composition has left us with the rule of the neoliberal worldview, and its technological progeny, the network society. This is a kind of soft political totalitarianism to accompany the soft barbarism; one where choice or alternatives are not explicitly banned, but, rather, seem implausible or impossible or invisible. The most profound totalitarianism in this, our networked age is, as Paul Virilio noted, that of “the dictatorship of speed” and the vaporising of the temporality of modernity and all that it produced in terms of its political forms (Virilio, 1995). The enforced speed that the network imposes upon society is leaving the political forms from another time *in that other time*. Until we properly recognise the role and function of time and social acceleration, the soft barbarism and soft totalitarianism resulting from common ruin of the contending classes will continue to thwart the possibility for either class realising its historical potential.

For Marxists, in a very real sense we are back where we started in terms of the class struggle—“back at the point”, as Leszek Kołakowski put it, “where the political and theoretical work of resuscitating a workers’ movement...must begin anew” (Kołakowski 2010,19). Writing in 1956 Stalinized Poland, Kołakowski recognised that a new society needed new analyses that are able to reflect and incorporate the new conditions without discarding certain fundamental principles. Dean and Žižek still cling to an unbending Marxist canon and the fundamentalism this unavoidably expresses. More reflective and supple is the thought of Michael Hardt who attempts a synthesis of new information theory with classical tenets of production. However, it fails to go deep enough, to theorise what networked flows of information do to the experience and the production of time—and *what it means* for social time to become networked time.

For Kołakowski, the new society necessitated a new socialist frame of reference that enabled him to see mid- 20th century communism for what it actually was: totalitarian. Our 21st century society is a networked society, with transformed means and forces of production. Its effects upon class composition must be more deeply theorised, of course. But just as important, we need also, as just noted, to recognise that this society contains a new relationship with time. The clock technology that built the modern world also rhythmmed the theory and practice that built Marxism; this is being displaced by network time. Until we start to bring that fact into our critical analyses of networked capitalism, there will be little basis for the *political traction* necessary for the *political organisation* that Dean, Žižek, Hardt and too few others rightly call for. An understanding of the temporal within the political would be a more relevant and workable basis for a new beginning.

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