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Reflections on Todd Wolfson's Book "Digital Rebellion: The Birth of the Cyber Left"

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Abstract: This article presents a review of and reflections on Todd Wolfson's (2014) book "Digital Rebellion: The Birth of the Cyber Left". The book criticises the fetishisation of the digital and the neglect of political organisation and the analysis of class and capitalism in recent social movements. I contextualise Wolfson's work by more broadly discussing the lack of engagement with capitalism, class, Marxist theory and political economy in social movement studies and social movement media studies as well as the naïve and celebratory idealism that results from this orientation and that does not help actual social movements in identifying the problems that their work is confronted with under capitalist conditions.

Keywords: capitalism, class, digital media, social movements, cyber-left, activism, Todd Wolfson

Todd Wolfson: Digital Rebellion: The Birth of the Cyber Left. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014, 240 pages. ISBN 978-0-252-08038-8 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-252-03884-6 (harcover), ISBN 978-0-252-09680-8 (ebook)

The world of activism has changed in the past decades. There has been much talk about "new" social movements. The fetishist aura of the new has in the realm of activism resulted in claims that we have moved beyond left and right and beyond class and capitalism into a world of identity politics, postmodernism, culturalism, and struggles for recognition. An associated assertion is that a break is needed with the Old Left and the working class movement. Postmodern activism has just like postmodern theory for a long time not realised that its very claims correspond neatly to neoliberal's culture of fragmentation and individualism as well as to a form of managerialism that celebrates the logic of networks and decentralisation in order to deflect attention from the fact that class and other inequalities have been increasing during the past decades of neoliberal governmentality and the commodification of (almost) everything. The move away from class politics has paradoxically taken place at a time when class inequality has intensified. Since the 1990s, new social movements have started using the Internet, which has resulted in yet another level of the aura of the new and of political fetishism. Todd Wolfson's book "Digital Rebellion: The Birth of the Cyber Left" sets out to unmask the myths surrounding the Internet's role in social movement politics.

   With the term Cyber Left, Wolfson analytically describes "the way activists have employed communication tools" and "the novel set of processes and practices within twenty-first-century social resistance that are engendered by new technologies" (4). There is no doubt that since the 1990s, when the question arose what role the WWW played in the EZLN solidarity movement and other political phenomena, the Internet and mobile technologies have become tools of organisation and mobilisation in social movements and political parties. The exact role is contested (Fuchs 2014b), but there is no doubt that any social movement and social movement researcher has since the 1990s to ask what role digital technologies actually play in contemporary movements. To prefix the term "Cyber" to the Left can however create the impression that technology is the key dimension of politics, which leaves out the fo-

cus on questions of the very demands and problems that movements make and that are immanently communicated by terms such as the working class/proletarian movement (capitalism as a political problem), the ecological movement (environmental devastation as political problem), the anti-racist movement (racism as a political problem), or the feminist movement (patriarchy as political problem). The media and the Internet are certainly political issues that require specific political attention, but the term Cyber Left runs counter to the intention of Todd Wolfson's book, namely to formulate a constructive criticism of network- and Internet-fetishism in social movement discourse. The Cyber Left can instead of seeing it as an actual historical development that follows after new social movements better be defined as a specific techno-optimistic ideological discourse that claims that digital media use is embedded into the practice of grassroots democracy in social movements, argues such media make struggles more effective and movements participatory, and neglects the actual resource limits, power structures and the political economy that protest movements inevitably face in capitalist society.

Todd Wolfson's book consists of two parts comprising a total of six chapters that are complemented by an introduction and a conclusion. The first part and its two chapters focus on the origins and history of the Cyber Left, especially the EZLN, Indymedia and the movement for alternative/democratic globalisation. The second part discusses the Cyber Left's logic of resistance, especially the role of network structures, democratic governance and communications strategies. The conclusion discusses political perspectives for the Left and what we can learn from the failure of Indymedia. The question why Indymedia arose, but then almost completely disappeared is the key empirical case that the book addresses and that Todd Wolfson uses for analysing the discourses and strategies of social movements in the Internet age. He draws on his own experiences in Indymedia Philadelphia and ethnographic research that he conducted.

Todd Wolfson questions the tendency of contemporary social movements to "uncritically celebrate" the "logic of horizontality as a deeply democratic form of movement building" (20). Such arguments not just focus on the organisational dynamic of movements, but also see the Internet as appropriate means supporting grassroots democracy. The blind spot of the optimism that the book questions is that social movements exist within a global capitalist world, in which time, access to space, resources, attention, money and power are asymmetrically distributed, which creates a political economy of asymmetrical resource distribution, by which all social movements are confronted. Social movements unlike companies do not sell anything and so cannot count on monetary resource inputs. They also do not have the privileged access to law-making and public resources that political parties have. They cannot count on sympathetic media coverage and often only become subject of the media as part of scandalising tabloid coverage that wants to discredit them and portrays them as chaotic and violent with the help of one-dimensional and distorted reports. Most activists or sympathisers have to earn a wage in order to survive, which limits their possibilities of and time for doing politics, a phenomenon that under conditions of neoliberalism and precarity becomes even more problematic. Occupations are for example time- and energy-consuming, which is further reinforced by the fact that the wage form is the main means of survival in a capitalist world. Activist and citizen media tend to have fewer resources and receive less attention than mainstream media. They are harder to maintain and often struggle with the difficulty of how to survive. Media activism and alternative journalism are often a story of voluntary, self-exploited and precarious knowledge labour (Sandoval and Fuchs 2010). If activists rely on established mainstream media, then they are confronted with the fact that capitalist media's managers are part of the 1% and may not favourably view movements critical of capitalism. Such conditions do not mean that all capitalist media always censor, exclude or distort information about social movements, but that there is significant risk and a power asymmetry.

Left-wing activists are of course smart in seeking ways of how to try to overcome such structural restrictions, but it is clear that capitalism's political economy poses problems and limits for activism. The lack of resources and time can easily result in unacknowledged power structures, under which those who control the scarce resources or have more time or speak-

ing skills than others, develop into de facto leaders, whereas the official ideology is that there are no leaders because one is a grassroots movement.

It is more honest to acknowledge that some form of hierarchy, representation and political organisation is inevitable and beneficial given the resource precarity that social movements face in capitalism. If these problems are not acknowledged, then a gap between on the one hand a strange ideology of horizontality that remains a mere discourse and on the other hand unacknowledged centralisation and hierarchy that form the actual practices can easily develop. The real issues of external power and political economy are then not adequately addressed, which can result in a fundamentalism of horizontalism and radicalism that accuses specific individuals or factions of hierarchism or reformism. Such misrecognition of how structural conditions impede social movement agency can weaken or cause the end of movements. Grassroots democracy is a nice idea, but within capitalism often does not work as organisational principle because there is a lack of time, resources and money. Being preoccupied with themselves, horizontalist movements often turn into political sects whose immanent struggles weaken their transformative capacities within society. Todd Wolfson argues in this context that most "Cyber Left institutions have weak organizational structures with little collective decision-making power because they have dismissed, a priori, centralized power and structures of accountability and leadership of any kind" (24). One of the effects of the ideology of practising decentralisation and participatory democracy within a world whose macro-societal structures are centralised and undemocratic is an "isolated localism that is in tension with democratic decision making" (155).

The Cyber Left's tendencies are often replicated in the study of social movements and social movement media. Gabriel Hetland and Jeff Goodwin (2013) argue based on an analysis of social movement textbooks and articles published over a longer time period (12 years and 6 years) in the two journals *Mobilization* and *Social Movement Studies* that "recent studies of social movements have not only lacked this anti-capitalist spirit [of the 1970s], but also largely ignored, with very few exceptions, the enabling and constraining effects of capitalism" (86).

> Recent scholarship tends to overlook not only the direct and proximate effects of capitalist institutions on collective action, but also the ways in which capitalist dynamics indirectly influence the possibilities for protest, sometimes over many years or even decades, by, for example, shaping political institutions, political alliances, social ties, and cultural idioms. Instead, recent scholarship tends to focus on *short-term* shifts in 'cultural framings,' social networks, and especially 'political opportunities,' rarely examining the deeper causes of such shifts; in fact, most movement scholars now treat this last set of factors as independent variables, neglecting the ways in which they may be powerfully shaped by capitalism (Hetland and Goodwin 2013, 86).

Contemporary talks and publications about social movements, the media, and the Internet often confirm the same tendency that Hetland and Goodwin describe for general social movement research in the realm of social movement media studies: There is a predominant neglect of engagement with Marxist theory, class, capitalism, political economy and the dominance of a particularistic, decontextualised focus on media case studies of single movements in single countries lacking broader, holistic, global, macro-sociological, and historical contexts. Social movement media studies scholars tend to study the movements they have sympathies for, which results with exceptions in a neglect of the study of fascist and right-wing extremist movements and uncritical celebrations of social movements' alleged creative use of technology and horizontal network structures of social movements. Social movement media scholars' blind enthusiasm and celebratory methodology neither help social movements themselves nor do they contribute to critical studies of politics and the media. Typically the advantages of social movement's use of social media, mobile communication, networking, and the Internet in general are worked out and endlessly reiterated in such studies, while the structural and macro-sociological limits and problems that capitalism, class, asymmetric power structures, the lack of influence, time, attention, state power and money can pose for social movements and their media use are rather neglected (Fuchs 2014a, 2014b, 2015; Trottier and Fuchs 2014). If one in contrast however takes a more critical position in research

and analytically shows the problems social movements face in their everyday practices, then it also becomes easier to politically address them and think about how to overcome them.

Social movement media studies are typically untheoretical or only engage in micro-sociological analyses and theorising that neglect how macro-sociological structures condition social movements' practices, organisation and communication. Such theory-less micro studies tend to neglect issues of capitalism, labour and class as well as Marxism with the arguments that contemporary movements are "more complex", one should avoid "economic reductionism", that Marxism has a state-centred ideology and stands for political centralisation that social movements oppose. At the same time, actually existing global capitalism has resulted in culminating inequalities, immense precarious labour, especially among the young generation, a prolonged world economic and social crisis, and an intensification and extension of neoliberal austerity politics and along with it militarised right-wing law and order politics and surveillance ideologies. The neglect of the engagement with Marxist theory and political economy, class and capitalism in social movement research and social movement media studies makes these fields not just relatively uncritical, but also politically idealist and naïve. I do not argue that Marxist theory and political economy alone are always sufficient for understanding contemporary political problems, struggles and movements, but that a critical understanding of class and capitalism, whose analysis has been most advanced by Marxist theories, needs to be dialectically mediated with the analysis of non-class and structures of domination in order to understand contemporary society's contradictions, its social movements and their mediated communication. All contemporary movements are inevitably conditioned by and confronted with issues having to do with labour, precarity, the commons, the commodity form, neoliberalism, capitalism, the capitalist state, capitalist ideologies, etc. Ignoring this importance and the theoretical significance of these dimensions analysed by Marxist theories is inappropriate for social movements studies and deprives them from the political, theoretical and analytical richness they deserve and require.

In relation to the academic discourse about social movement media, Todd Wolfson questions both the optimists who celebrate the asserted claims about how digital media make activist communities politically effective and organisationally democratic as well as the pessimists who either neglect any role of technology in protest or aim to dismiss digital media as minor phenomena. Both technological utopianism and neo-Luddism are flawed. Both overstating and underestimating either the technological or the social dimension of movements is one-dimensional.

Wolfson rightfully argues for and practices a dialectical theory of technology. It is however in my view inappropriate that in this context he evokes Andrew Feenberg's approach (101) that is in respect to the Internet clearly techno-euphoric and in general dualist and undialectical in character, which is for example evidenced by the fact that Feenberg's main books never engage with or quote from Hegel's works on the dialectical logic and do not connect the philosophy of technology to Hegel's dialectic. A critical dialectical theory of technology and digital media cannot be grounded in a dualist, undialectical approach such as the one by Feenberg (for details of this argument, see: Fuchs 2016, section 15.11: How Not To Theorise Technology: Andrew Feenberg's Dualist Theory of Technology).

Wolfson argues that social movements develop in such a way that older political issues and dimensions are not extinguished, but take on different forms when new issues emerge. The Internet is one of these more recent political and organisational dimensions that does not eliminate older structures of class, power, domination, but gives a new quality and relevance to them. It is a dialectical system resulting in Aufhebungen (sublations) that at the same time eliminate, preserve and uplift other levels (Fuchs 2014c). A dialectical approach sees the "trilateral interaction between social movement actors, the history of struggles, and the contemporary socioeconomic environs" (185). Structures, agency and their histories and legacies shape social movement's possibilities and actualities.

Wolfson not just takes a dialectical approach in his analytical work, but also as political activist and organiser in Philadelphia's Media Mobilizing Project (http://mediamobilizing.org) that defines itself as working for building "a media, education and organizing infrastructure" in order "to organize poor and working people to tell our stories to each other and the world,

disrupting the stereotypes and structures that keep our communities divided"[1]. The Project describes its organisational approach the following way:

> MMP is now running public computer labs with 6 community organizations across Phila-delphia, providing basic to advanced technology and media training and computer re-sources to thousands of poor and working people. Many training participants go on to be-come leaders in MMP's ongoing grassroots media program infrastructure and organizing committees. These include a monthly TV show, MMPTV; three radio shows; and Labor, Political Education, Grassroots Fundraising, Fight for Drivers Licenses and End Fire Company Brownouts committees. Leaders developed through our work also consult with and contract to organizations leading struggles for justice locally, regionally, and national-ly, including Put People First PA, a statewide effort to organize thousands of unorganized Pennsylvanians toward building the sort of power we need to win lasting victories around health care, education, jobs, housing and all our human needs and rights[2].

Todd Wolfson's book *Digital Rebellion: The Birth of the Cyber Left* is an excellent reminder that social movements are confronted with dialectics of continuity and discontinuity, the tech-nological and the social, the mediated and the immediate, organisation and spontaneity, cen-tralisation and decentralisation, exclusion and participation, class and domination, the eco-nomic and the non-economic, distribution and recognition, the movement and the party, civil society and the state, etc. These dialectics have their own political economy that has to do with capitalist society's immanent contradictions that both pose new opportunities as well as limits and risks for social movements. The book is a powerful reminder that social move-ments should not oppose, but rather constructively embrace socialism, the critique of class and capitalism, organisation and left-wing political parties. This does not mean that they have to be economic reductionist and authoritarian cadre organisations, but that new fusions, alli-ances and convergences of class politics and identity politics, social movements and political parties, civil society- and state-/parliamentary-politics, reform and revolution (radical reform-ism), Marxism and anarchism, Lenin and Bakunin, spontaneity and organisation (organised spontaneity) are needed today.

On May 13, 2015, Indymedia.org was ranked the 29,107[th] most accessed website in the world (data source: alexa.com). On January 6, 2008, it in contrast was ranked on position 3,468 (data source: alexa.com). In 2015, Indymedia.org's last entry dated from November 29, 2013. What caused the decline of Indymedia? Todd Wolfson shows that its weaknesses, and in fact the general drawback of the entire Cyber Left, were its neglect of political organi-sation and leadership, its lack of political education programmes, the neglect of class and capitalism as political issues, scarce connections to blue collar workers, the poor and people of colour, as well as its deterministic and uncritical understanding of technology.

The relativist trap of horizontalism, technological determinism and prefigurative grassroots politics should be avoided in social movements, social movement research and social movement media studies. Embracing organisation, the form of the political party, technolo-gy's political economy and political power faces however a comparable trap, namely that political groups develop into orthodox, sectarian, undemocratic and authoritarian groups that recognise nothing but and beyond the industrial blue collar working class, oppose the use of the Internet as means of political organisation and communication, reduce their media prac-tices to selling their own unappealingly designed and written newspapers, and practice neo-Luddite technophobia as well as the paralysing politics of factioneering and endless funda-mentalist theory and political debates that turn actual minor differences into imagined major confrontations. Such centralised politics and organisational structures are just as limited, limiting and limitless inappropriate as horizontalism. What we today first and foremost need in theory and politics are dialectical practices that bring together dualities that often remain separated. Todd Wolfson's book is a good input for reflecting on the dialectics of theory, the media and politics in the digital age.

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[1] http://mediamobilizing.org/who-we-are/updates
[2] http://mediamobilizing.org/who-we-are/history#main

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