Post-Digital Condition and Accelerated Technocapitalism

Tomislav Medak

Coventry University

ORCID 0000-0003-3844-0434

medakt@coventry.ac.uk

The article is an attempt to analyse how the transition into the post-digital condition can be understood from the changing global economic and political context that was conducive to digital network technologies becoming ubiquitous, and how now that this context is in a crisis these technologies shape political imaginaries, forms of actions and capacities of organisation in distinct ways. The enquiry proceeds in five steps by attempting: a) to situate the disenchantment with the Internet that is part of the post-digital condition in the trajectory of technological choices that have led to the maturing of Internet economy; b) to analyse that sector's role in the global 'division of labour' and its impact on the global capitalist accumulation; c) to place this technological trajectory in relation to the post-1989 rise of democratic capitalist hegemony and its erosion through the forces accelerated technocapitalism, with the resurgence of the far-right and figures such as Trump and Bolsonaro signaling its potential disintegration; d) to analyse the responses that have come from the far-right (I gloss on the technocapitalist neo-reaction, the alt-right and the 4chan shitposters turned misogynist mass-killers) to that erosion, drawing from that enquiry some conclusions for progressive organising in the post-digital constellation.

Keywords:

## Introduction

The definitions of the 'postdigital' are frequently concerned with the problem of periodisation (Cox 2013, Cramer 2015). The prefix 'post-' does not indicate something that comes after the digital, but rather a new attained quality of contemporaneity once the digital network technologies have become ubiquitous. The postdigital no longer denotes simply new computational devices and networked media that we can use or step into from our analogue 'real life', but a technosocial environment that we now move through, that is entangled with almost every aspect of our social reality and that enframes our activity beyond our being aware of it or having consented to it. Consequently, ubiquitous digital network technologies are now the generalised social infrastructure (Plantin et al. 2018) that operates in the background in 'complex, messy and difficult to untangle ways that is different from previous instantiations of the digital' (Berry 2015: 50): it combines the informational with the non-informational, the technological with the biological, the present with the historic (Jandrić et al. 2018).

In fact, the post-digital can now be understood as a reflexive condition of contemporaneity (Cox 2013) where the formal language and symbolic operations of new digital media can be retroactively applied to the old media (Cramer 2015: 21), creating post-digital forms of expression where the non-digital remediates the digital and the digital remediates the non-digital. For instance, as the old mass media of broadcast and print find themselves increasingly under pressure of the growing significance of born-online media and particularly social networks, they are re-organising their operations to feed into and back with a plethora of online channels that create an ecosystem with their primary old-media chanel.

The attained quality that defines the postdigital is also evidenced, as Florian Cramer notes (2015: 13), in the disenchantment with the Internet that has become mainstream in the aftermath of Snowden revelations. In this article I intend to analyse what are the economic and political processes that have accompanied this total turnaround from the enchantment that began to grow as the Internet access spread in the 1990s and petered out by the end of the 2000s. However, the attained quality that defines the postdigital was not simply the deterministic effect of diffusion and generalisation of a technology, but a result of what Andrew Feenberg (1999) defines as an ongoing process of social selection of alternatives technological designs. The question is what are the technological choices that have set the development path that has led us to here and what are the social and cultural drivers that made those choices desirable. Given that in the period leading up to the present disenchantment we have seen an enormous concentration of market power and resulting concentration of wealth in the digital networks, I'll analyse those drivers primarily by looking at how Internet as an economic sector has matured and what is its 'role' in the global 'division of labor' in the capitalist world-system.

Proceeding from this political-economic enquiry, I will analyse the larger political context wherein this maturing has happened and the hegemonic ideological framework through which some of these technological choices were motivated and legitimated. Namely, the proliferation of digital network technologies has unfolded in the post-1989 period of uncontested hegemony of liberal capitalism and neoliberal globalisation. In the post-Cold War world, it is the US that has assumed the role of the hegemon. Its dominant role has found its technological match in the digital networks, a form of concomitant political and technological hegemony that has only started to weaken with the economic rise of China and its highly protected internal digital economy. The liberal capitalism and neoliberal globalisation are the expressions of the larger, capitalist system of social means and ends that Feenberg (Feenberg 1999) sees as the structural background against which the process of social selection unfolds.

As the completely re-arranged global economy plunged in 2008 into a long recession, the liberal capitalist hegemony and the unfettered global markets it has been advancing have started to crack. The crisis has resulted in a series of upheavals such as the mass movements of the squares (Gerbaudo 2014) and new progressive political platforms that have challenged the structural privileges of class, gender and race. Yet with the violent repression against protestors and austerity packages imposed on new leftist governments these upheavals were squashed and stifled, resulting in the resurgence of the far-right across many stable and unstable democracies. With the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the hegemonic and developmental cycle that has started in 1989 seems to have come to a provisional end - with uncertain prospects what awaits in the future.[[1]](#footnote-2)

The acceleration of technological change and growing transnational interconnectedness of capital accumulation have in significant ways participated in the present crisis of liberal capitalist democracies. Rising structural unemployment, growing inequality and austerity have eroded the legitimational capacity of the political class that has presided over the period of liberal hegemony. The fourth industrial revolution and the environmental crisis are threatening to make things only worse, as they will erode fundamental conditions of social integration through labour, welfare and safety that the modern states have developed. From the US to Brasil, from Hungary to Austria, from Italy to Germany, the far-right has made significant gains or has come into power. Having analysed some imbrications of technological, economic and political trajectories of development since 1989 that have ushered in the post-digital condition, I will conclude by analysing how the far-right, primarily in the US, has responded to the legimational and systemic crisis of the contemporary social formation. These responses are interesting in so far as they are counter-reaction to the anti-systemic movements, shifting the horizon of public debate as to what can be a resolution to the present impasse and actively threatening with violence. If the current mobilisations around democratic socialism and the green new deal, or more radical anti-systemic programs such as post-work society or degrowth, are to be prepared for the counter-reaction they might encounter, they will have to, amongst many other tasks, also understand the mobilisational capacities, radical imaginaries and constituencies on the right.

## The Internet as a Means of Communication, the Internet as a Means of Capitalist Transformation

In the Epilogue to *The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin famously writes: 'Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves.'(Benjamin 2007 (1968): 241) Writing in the 1930s, Benjamin was analyzing how the emerging mass medium of cinema - the first mass medium to represent proletarian masses - was being co-opted for the purposes of fascist propaganda. By the dint of representing masses through the collective rituals celebrating the Führer cult and the conflagration of war, cinema helped fascism aestheticize the 'political life' and impose 'cult values' on the proletarian masses. In doing so, it effectively contributed to preventing them from becoming the force of their own emancipation.

The mass medium of our own age is the Internet. In no more than twenty-five years the Internet has mutated from a promise of radical autonomy and democracy to a reality of blanket surveillance, manipulation of news, the extreme concentration of wealth and erosion of labour rights. Now, how did that happen? In its early days, the Internet was, after all, understood by many of its developers and early adopters as an antidote to the commercial monoculture, the diktat of the political establishment, and the oppressive normativity of the mainstream society that have hitherto dominated the media system. The communitarian ideals of 1960s counterculture directly shaped the values behind the development of personal computers and digital networks (Turner 2010, Kline 2015). Multidirectional communication should have enabled everyone to become their own medium, to speak to the global public, and to break the confines of nation-states, dominant identities and material limitations. And indeed, as a consequence of these convictions, its early applications have been built to enable the Internet to succeed in some of those envisioned tasks. If nothing, there was a far more equal distribution of the capacity to speak to a broad public than in the times when this was a privilege reserved for a small number of broadcasters and print media. However, the parallel privatisation of the Internet infrastructure and the deregulation of media and telecommunication ownership in the US that began in the mid-1990s (McChesney 2013) unleashed a process of accelerated commercialisation of content, the commodification of services and concentration of infrastructure. There were many design steps that needed to be chosen, innovated and successfully implemented for this transformation to unfold, but three stand out in particular. Arguably the single most important was the development of contextual advertising. Since the 1990s a lot of effort was invested to discover ways how to effectively bring advertising that works to the Internet. Google finally succeeded in this by revolutionising online advertising with contextual for its search engine with the introduction of its AdSense service in 2003. This led then to the expansion of personalisation and monitoring of user behaviour, particularly consumer behaviour, furnishing the key element in making advertising online effective (and indirectly weaponising the Internet into a powerful instrument of electronic surveillance). Only a couple of short years later, the moment of the decentralised and largely user-generated Internet, the so-called Web 2.0, finished almost abruptly - just as the *Time Magazine* named as its person of the year in 2006 'You', that is the users building Wikipedia, massively producing content on YouTube, 'wresting power from the few' and changing the world. The emerging social networks and services, primarily Facebook, started to close off the communication on their own platforms from the rest of the open web, placing emphasis on the social graph, personal information and clickstream-driven content by commercial media producers. At around the same time, Amazon.com launched its Amazon Web Services cloud platform, offering computing power, storage and software at such a flexible scale and incremental price that rendered all efforts to maintain an autonomous infrastructure infeasable. And thus, the business model and the scalable infrastructure were suddenly there, ushering in an endless tide of new commercial services battling it out for that most valuable of goods in the attention economy - the eyeball time.

Fast forward to the present. The Internet businesses have fully matured as a sector of the capitalist economy, and we can now discern with greater clarity what role they play in the larger dynamics and 'division of labour' in the capitalist accumulation. The majority of Internet giants - Amazon.com, Alphabet Inc. (parent company of Google), Facebook, JD.com and Alibaba topping the list both by revenue and market valuation - are principally in the business of advertising and retail. Google and Facebook command short of two-thirds of the online, and a quarter of the entire advertising market globally (WARC 2017). Amazon.com alone commands half of the US online retail market and effectively provides the platform for most of the rest (Reagan 2018). Its infrastructure was or is used by Netflix, AirBnB, Time Inc., NASA and many other large corporate and public entities.

The expansion of these giants has benefitted from the fact that since the 1990s the economic globalisation has placed the commodity circulation at the helm of the global accumulation process and the new imperial division of labour (Smith 2016). As the manufacturing moved from the advanced economies overseas, the non-manufacturing functions such as marketing, advertising and retail assumed a critical role of generating demand that allows corporations to contract the production capacity and thus is in a position to appropriate much of the surplus value produced by exploitation of cheap labour in the low-wage countries of mostly South East Asia.

In fact, already since the 1980s the introduction and generalisation of information technologies have helped the wide-spread introduction of just-in-time management, the development of new productivity-enhancing automation and the creation of truly global supply chains. This has at first had positive effects on capital productivity, particularly in the advanced economies such as the US. Yet by the end of the 1990s the positive effects of digitisation have petered out (for a detailed analysis of this dynamics see Basu and Vasudevan 2012). The dot-com bubble burst with a crash in the March of 2000. The period since has largely failed to bring back the growth of capital productivity to the rates it enjoyed earlier. However, those few dot-com ventures that survived and a couple of new that joined them would go on to grow to enormous valuations in financial markets - reflecting the lion's share of profits produced in the global economy they are able to capture primarily as gatekeepers of the advertising and retail segments of the digital economy.

Although digital networks have been pervading and transforming all aspects of daily reality in capitalist societies at what seems revolutionary pace, this has had a mixed effect on advanced economies. In manufacturing sectors other than information technologies profit rates have been squeezed due to the increased competitive pressure to invest in digitisation. At the same time, these technologies haven't produced the expected rise in labour productivity, locking up many advanced economies into low growth rates, leading some (Acemoğlu et al. 2014) to claim that the Solow paradox, whereby the effect of computerisation can be seen anywhere but in the macroeconomic performance, has returned. Not all technology leads to growth of productivity across the economic system and that seems to have been indeed the case with the digital network technologies since the dot-com crash. Finally, the distribution of profits has shifted from the productive to the commercial and financial capital (Foley 2013), leading also to highly unequal income distributions. While the Internet giants have seen windfall profits, the rest of the economy in the global North has struggled to expand and finally hit the wall in 2008.

However, now that the global economy is moving into the fourth industrial revolution, the Internet giants are looking to break out of the confines of commodity circuit. Alongside their older big-tech cohorts such as Apple, Microsoft, HP, Intel and IBM, they are trying to position themselves as providers of key administrative, logistical and marketing services for other industries. Already now if their services were to experience an outage, large segments of the economy would immediately come to a halt. In the near future, with their command over large network infrastructures, big data sets and algorithms needed to analyse them, as well as the push into the artificial intelligence, advanced robotics and the Internet of Things, they are likely to embed themselves even more centrally in the provision of economy, social services and infrastructure. According to the world's largest manufacturer of network equipment Cisco (Shah 2017), by 2021 the greater part of the 27 billion connected devices will not be channelling human communication, but will rather be part of the Internet of Things, where devices talk to other devices. The bulk of the information available about us will be generated by these devices comprising an invisible ubiquitous computing environment of our daily life.

These technological advances are threatening to have highly disruptive social effects. A famous study conducted by Osborne and Frey (2013) predicted that the advances in labour-substituting technology will slash up to 47% of all US jobs in the near term. While in the meantime a number of subsequent studies have corrected these predictions to a higher or lower figure (e.g. McKinsey Global Institute 2018), the prospects for labour are mostly bleak as the automation threatens to create further structural unemployment, reduce wages and deepen precarity. At the same time, the big tech themselves have come to employ a gigantic workforce, combining some of the best paid high-skill jobs with some of the most exploitative, low-wage, gig jobs. The latest figure for the largest among them - Amazon.com - is stunning 541.000 employees, a great majority of them working in low-wage positions.

Through the transformation of the Internet into a vast infrastructure that integrates all economic processes and one of the largest sectors of the global capital, the autonomy and democracy that the Internet had initially promised mutated into a double experience of a ubiquitous yet fragmented communication and navigation facilitated through our always-on devices - and of interconnected (and increasingly environmentally unsustainable[[2]](#footnote-3)) extraction of data, exploitation of labor and dataveillance[[3]](#footnote-4). Thus, returning to Benjamin's passage from the *Art Work* essay, one could analogise that the Internet as a means of communication has become the Internet of the proletarian masses, whereas the Internet that drives the transformations of global capitalism is the Internet of the capital. The Benjaminian displacement of historic agency - whereby masses are given a means of expression instead of a means of overturning the social property relations - seems to be again at work.

## The Rise and Fall of the Liberal Capitalist Hegemony

If we are to follow Benjamin, the principal political capacity of cinema as a mass medium resides in the representation of masses. In analogy, the principal political capacity of the Internet as a mass medium resides in the active participation of masses. Yet, while everyone can participate, the pluralisation of participation is bought at the cost of fragmentation of the shared horizon of conversation. As broadcasting model from the era of electronic and print media, where only few could afford or were given the access to the means needed to talk to the many, became replaced by the low-cost-of-entry two-way model of the Internet, the proliferation of contradicting views, informational overload and clickbait content began to play itself out politically. As anyone who has participated in the debates on the Internet can attest, a substantive discussion most of the times does not lead to an agreement, but rather to a growing disagreement and polarisation. Rational argument, even in cases where it is open and dialogical, tends to amplify the social, political and economic fault-lines that exist outside of the realm of communication. The Internet, lauded by many as an ideal medium of communicative action, democratic participation and the public sphere, seems to have helped plunge the deliberative assumptions of the liberal consensus-building only deeper into a crisis.

Although the shared horizon of a nation-wide public sphere could only ever be won at the price of exclusion of dissonant experiences of those living outside of the mainstream of society (Kluge and Negt 2016), and although it was the old commercial broadcast and print media that have colluded with the telecommunication companies in the 1990s to push through the deregulation (McChesney 2013) that was followed by mergers, rationalisation of journalist workforce and homogenisation of reporting, the liberal political and media establishment is now surprised at the overt manipulation in reporting, gross denial of accepted facts and spread of fake news. It is the feedback loops between the social networks, imageboards and fringe portals, amplified by Russian hackers, Macedonian bots and big-data hucksters, that are blamed for anything from deciding elections, stoking distrust in the political system to inciting hate. While there are elements of truth and elements of speculation to these claims, instead of taking such framing of the problem by the political and media establishment for granted, it is worth taking a step back and to put this narrative in a longer historical perspective.

Internet matured in the post-1989 period of the global triumph of free markets and liberal democracy. With the collapse of the real-existing socialist states, capitalist democracy suddenly became the summation and an end of world history (Fukuyama 1989). It is thus not surprising that in the period of uncontested ideological domination of bourgeois society, the hegemonising and legitimational watchword of Internet technocommunities, businesses and policy-makers would become the central political concept of that period - freedom: itself an ambivalent notion that scrambles the connotations of institutionally grounded liberties, socially guaranteed provision of goods and advancement of all with the freedom of choice, freedom of commodities to unimpeded circulation, freedom of capitalist enterprise (for the conflation between substantive notions of 'liberty, equality, fraternity' with 'freedom, democracy, free enterprise', see: Chun 2008: 10-11). The groundwork for this was already laid in the 1970s and 1980s as the countercultural values, which saw principal objectives in individual freedom and personal growth, started to shape the development of personal computing and the Internet. But in the post-socialist world, the freedom of choice and openness of resources assuring equal opportunities of choice attained a larger legitimation power. Free and open became the stand-in for liberty and equality. The privative self-determination of maverick entrepreneurs and cyber-communities, unbounded from constraints and inadequacies of social institutions, became the hegemonic vision of social transformation - and could legitimate itself by mobilising the notions of freedom and openness. The technological disruption and innovation, particularly if it was free and open (and much of the digital network technologies since the mid-1990s were), was developing the society and benefiting all. Although the process was resulting in a staggering concentration of market power and wealth, rarely have the values shaping the technological innovation and the social system of means and ends (Feenberg 1999) been a more complementary match in vision and direction than it was in the post-1989 global domination of liberal economic and political order.

During the same period, computerisation and digital networks, technologically supporting the revolutions in logistics and finance, have helped the once bi-polar world become re-organised around a complex and integrated multi-polar topology of manufacturing centres in South East Asia, finance and consumer bases in North America and Europe, and fossil capital in the Gulf, all supported by an exterritorial shadow banking system. However, in 2008 the effects of that re-organisation precipitated a global recession of the gravity not seen since the Great Depression.[[4]](#footnote-5) In 2008 the crisis hit the core countries of the liberal capitalist world and capitalism in its totality. As suggested in the previous section, digital technologies contributed to the crisis in significant ways: by driving the erosion of profits, shifting the investments from production to financial assets and generating a crisis of overaccumulation. But now with the recession the economic globalisation came to a screeching halt. The financial markets burst. In the process of managing the crisis the political class opted to act in a way that bailed out the financial businesses that were largely responsible for the crisis, while pushing the austerity and further inequality down the throats of their populations, most of whom have already suffered the consequences of earlier economic restructuring in the shape of de-industrialisation. With the quantitative easing the financial markets were up and running in short order, while job markets took longer to recover than in any of the previous big recessions.

The long story short is that the political class in the liberal capitalist countries since 1989 has failed to make the project of globalisation it championed deliver for large segments of their working population. As a consequence of the parallel processes of placing the markets outside of the democratic reach, off-shoring the manufacturing, automating away the workplace and rolling back the welfare that population was pushed over the cliff - into growing economic insecurity and social de-classing (for how those parallel processes worked in Germany see: Candeias 2018). And to add insult to injury, the post-bailout austerity policies brought only more unnecessary suffering to them. Thus the legitimating promise of economic globalisation - that the globalisation was a tide that lifts all boats turned out to be hollow.

The political consequences are now that the centre has eroded, the most precarised have increasingly abstained from voting or have switched political allegiances, and there's a rising tide of support for the far-right across the world, most prominently in the core countries of the liberal capitalist order - such as the UK, France, United States, Germany or Austria, but no less alarmingly also in Brasil, across much of the Central and Eastern Europe and many other countries of the semi-periphery. A more protectionist and dictatorial geo-economic policy is what the resurgent illiberal, sovereignist, authoritarian right is promising, and it is promising to implement it with punitive resolve against the racialised, gendered and politically vilified underclasses, minorities, immigrants and any sort of social opposition - garnering thus support of conservative middle classes and national bourgeoisies. This is Trump, Boslonaro, Orbán or Kurz in a nutshell. But none of these self-proclaimed 'nationalists' has the slightest intent to withdraw from the global free trade. Rather, they want to make globalisation work again - that is, work again for certain factions of domestic capital (Slobodian 2018b). China, with its strict control over social unrest and protectionist economic policies, here sets both an example and competitive pressure making it plausible for others to seek within limits of their constitutional arrangements similar authoritarian trajectories.

It is well worth noting that the democratic capitalist state contains and mitigates the fundamental contradiction between the political sphere where the popular will decides and the economic sphere where the interests of capital accumulation have the last word. This contradiction is in the post-1989 world exacerbated by the neoliberal globalisation, a process driven by a doctrine of economic development that thinks that the stability of capitalist accumulation, given that its interconnected operation unfolds at the scale of world-system and not at the scale of national economies, is best secured when regulatory capacity is dis-embedded from democratic decision-making and embedded into trans-national institutions. This is essentially the project of neoliberal globalisation (Slobodian 2018a). As democratic decision-making largely remains confined to the national scale, the system-wide dynamic of accumulation is intensifying at the global scale. Neoliberal globalisation as a regulatory framework thus leads to the growing separation and distancing of the economic from the democratic, pushing the levers of the global accumulation process increasingly outside of the democratic reach.

These broad-sweep analyses of the combined development of digital network technologies and liberal capitalist order over the last three decades open to the question of how to understand the political responses to the fact that the processes of capital accumulation and technological change seem to have accelerated, complexified and attained disruptive force to a degree that it is increasingly difficult to bring them into the existing social structure and democratic governance? These accelerated and self-reinforcing processes of technological and capitalist rationality seem to be pushing against the limits of social arrangements of the modern welfare state that was, as Marcuse famously analysed in *One-Dimensional Man* (2013), needed to organise and coordinate the mass production and consumption in advanced industrial societies. They challenge not only the democratic order, but the more fundamental structures of social integrations of relations of production and technological change that populations have come to expect from modern states - at a minimum conditions where the most of the working-age population can secure subsistence through wage labour and where the rest can expect at least some level of social protection. The destabilisation of these conditions is eliciting a variety of political responses and imaginaries. It thus forms a background against which to analyse the specificity of various contemporary emanations of the far-right.

The new formations of the far-right are particularly interesting as the reactionary forces have since the French revolution always been resurging in periods of social upheavals in order to defend the existing order (for a history of conservative movements and their principally reactionary character see: Robin 2017). Contemporary emanations of the far-right, however, are not merely conservative of the existing social order, but are using the crisis of liberal capitalist hegemony to push beyond the existing national and trans-national institutional arrangements solidified over the last three decades and to push against the progressive social movements that have challenged the systemic drivers of exploitation, oppression and domination perpetuated by those arrangements. In the following sections I will, therefore, discuss three responses that have come from the far-right to the impasse that accelerated technological and economic rationality presents for modern states: exodus, sovereignist decisionism and passage to the act. All three mobilise imaginaries and forms of action that can be understood as specific modalities of working through the Benjaminian displacement where a mass medium deflects the historic agency of the masses toward an imaginary that preempts a systemic change.

## Spontaneous Ideology of the Technocapital: Exodus

The erosion of the liberal capitalist hegemony and the transformation of public communication that have been unfolding since the second part of the 2000s are nowhere more in evidence than in the tweeting presidency of Donald Trump. Although Trump has played on the insecurities unleashed by the processes of globalisation in general and declares himself a nationalist, his victory was in part based on having successfully re-articulated these insecurities as a threat to the existing economic, gender and race privileges. This has - to no one's surprise - particularly resonated with the middle-class exurban conservative constituencies (Moody 2017). However, this re-articulation also conjured up the racialised and gendered trope of the left-behind white industrial worker, thus attempting to re-align the interests of certain segments of the American working class with the overt protectionism for certain factions of American capital - that could only be secured under the decisive leadership that only he himself could offer.

The factions of American capital that Trump took under his wing were certainly not the Internet giants. They have, after all, thrived while the remaining sectors of the advanced economies have struggled.[[5]](#footnote-6) Open architecture that benefitted from the existing telecommunication infrastructure, creation of completely new markets, network effect and demand of the post-1989 economic environment with globalised markets made it possible for them to become truly global monopolists. Unlike the operation of corporate giants of the old, which have acted as monopolies in the national or regional economic space while competing in international markets, their monopoly (one that includes massive tax evasion and stifling of competition) has become increasingly hard to regulate for anyone other than the US regulators. Both in terms of economic priorities and political values the leading figures of Apple, Alphabet (at that time still Google), Facebook, Amazon.com, and Microsoft were all misaligned with Trump. So, it is not surprising that they feared Trump's reaction, particularly attempts to limit their monopoly power or break them up. Thus, for a while there was an attempt to soften the new president for Silicon Valley.

Silicon Valley's participation in Trump's transition team was orchestrated by Peter Thiel, a successful venture capitalist who has made his fortunes by investing early in PayPal, Facebook and Palantir. Thiel is somewhat an odd figure in Silicon Valley (and has in the meanwhile relocated to Los Angeles), more important as an outlier than an exemplar. A philosophy dropout from Standford, student of the French cultural theorist René Girard, editor of a conservative student newspaper financed by the old-time neo-con Irvin Kristol, author of the bestseller *Zero to One* - and, here of particular relevance, an open advocate of monopoly capitalism and monarchy. As opposed to more prevalent positions among Silicon Valley technologists - such as that of anarcho-libertarianism, which insist on horizontal markets and small government, or social market liberalism, which prefers to balance out the entrepreneurial freedom with advocacy of redistributive policies such as universal basic income - Thiel claims that he no longer believes that 'freedom and democracy are compatible' (Thiel 2009). This view of political order falls in line with his understanding of monopoly. In his primer for enterpreneurs *Zero to One: Notes on Startups, or How to Build the Future* (2014), a condensed version of notes that Blake Masters took of Thiel's seminar at Stanford in 2012, Thiel develops a fundamental distinction between those innovations that mimic other innovations, resulting in an increased competition between similar products leading, as opposed to inventions that create entirely new uses, new forms of commodification and new monopoly markets. Drawing on Girard's theory of mimetic desire (2005: 152-178), where desire has no object of its own but rather desires what it thinks that the Other desires - and thus always engages in competitive behaviour, Thiel suggests that most innovations are pursuing the pattern of mimetic behaviour by approximating already existing inventions, yet the point is to create original, non-mimetic, *zero to one* innovations that disrupt the existing markets. The competing innovations result in competitive markets that result in a race to the bottom, draining profits and - as, for instance, Marxist historian Robert Brenner has suggested (2010) - leading to the falling rate of profit and slowdown of economic growth. In contrast, the non-mimetic, disruptive innovations introduced by the likes of Facebook, Google or Amazon.com created non-competitive, create monopoly markets that generate high profit rates. As Thiel explains in the segment on 'Monopoly Capitalism', their monopoly profits were socially deserved as they resolved unique problems. This makes Thiel's position, unlike those of libertarians and liberals who preach the competitive markets catechism (McChesney 2013: ch.2), a true spontaneous ideology of monopoly technocapital.

The disruptive character of technological innovation and capital accumulation leading to the extreme concentration of economic power and wealth can no longer be reconciled with the popular democracy that has a mimetic - egalitarian - desire at its core. Putting it bluntly in Thiel's words: 'The higher one’s IQ [sic!], the more pessimistic one became about free-market politics — capitalism simply is not that popular with the crowd' (Thiel 2009). Concluding from there, Thiel's fantasy is principally guided by an imaginary of exodus: capital and technology freed up, disentangled from 'unthinking demos' and safeguarded from the 'confiscatory taxes'. For him, the 'critical question then becomes one of means, of how to escape not via politics but beyond it.' And he offers three ways of conquering a new space of freedom: cyberspace, outer-space or seasteading, of which he considers the last one as only adequate and feasible.

This imaginary has found a more baroque elaboration in the writings of the neo-reaction's principle thinker Nick Land, who opines that the 'West [should] stop and reverse pretty much everything it has been doing for over a century, excepting only scientific, technological, and business innovation' (Land 2012). This includes the removal of democratic representation, which Land sees as democratically legitimated coalition-building between special interest groups seeking to capture redistributive rents from taxes, essentially a racket on capital, consequently advocating the reduction of the state to a minimal, preferably corporate-run, government. While Land articulates this as a strictly hypothetical proposition, his thought builds on the work and is representative of a whole group of organic thinkers of anarcho-capitalism such as Hans-Hermann Hoppe or Curtis Yarvin (a.k.a. Mencius Moldbug) that are trying to think through the various aspects of this radical social transformation and exodus from the present social formation.

Another facet of this exodus imaginary is its Malthusianism, its lifeboat capitalism (Mitropoulos 2018). The continued acceleration of capital accumulation and technological change will cause environmental and social disruptions at the global scale that will lead to large displacements of populations and to a global rat race over increasingly scarce resources of the planet. The crisis cannot be prevented, that would likely too costly for capital and technology, so its effects need to be contained. This makes the degrading planet principally a security problem. Indicatively, Thiel has been funding a large seasteading project and is among a number of billionaires who have built their private safe houses in New Zealand (O’Connell 2018). If you have started the largest security analysis companies in the world, such as Palantir, then you're no stranger to the 'politics of armed lifeboat' (Parenti 2012). This is the racist glove of Trump turned inside-out. You don't leave the masses outside by building a wall, but you isolate yourself from the masses by constructing an island. While the visions of Thiel and his more radical neo-reactionary fellow travellers are esoteric and hypothetical, they are, however, the accelerated and unfettered capital accumulation and technological change thought to their radical consequences. It is a vision of delinking from the modern state and its 'pastoral power' governing with the welfare of the population in mind (as Foucault defined the modern state in the afterword to Dreyfus and Rabinow 2014), resolving the question of the well-run state as that of monarchical private property or at least a corporation.

## The Alt-Right's Counter-Reaction: Soliciting the Sovereignist Decisionism

As Jodi Dean has analysed in her theory of communicative capitalism (2009), the problem with the democratic participatory aspect of Internet communication is that it tends to exhaust itself in communicational exchanges and informational overload, resulting in the flood of non-binding statements that distort the material and relational dimensions of social reality of the communicating actors. Given that communicational exchanges have an ephemeral character, the investment into communication is neither oriented toward mutual recognition nor purposive action but rather toward a libidinal investment and denouement. Unequal existential conditions remain hidden behind the nominal communicational equality - and therefore they tend to become charged and over-coded with a sense of discontent, blockage and rage - for some because of the structural exclusions they experience, for others because of the structural privilege they fear to lose. These are then the antagonised positions of exclusion and privilege that dominate communication on the Internet. Yet they cannot be reconciled - neither by mutual recognition in the communicational exchange nor by mediation through the institutional environment that has in the course of neoliberal restructuring become punitive (Davies 2016). It is this irreconcilability of antagonisms has been purposefully exploited by the far-right.

Immediately after Trump's election a lot of critical acumen has been brought to bear on the fact that the alt-right and the alt-light have mastered the means of the tactical organising, counter-cultural transgression and irony in order to stir up a cultural war (see for example: Cramer 2016, Power 2017, Nagle 2017). Although the alt-right includes a multitude of disparate and sometimes even opposing positions, ranging from supremacist, anti-Semitic, anti-Islamic and anti-immigrant ethno-nationalists over GamerGaters, manosphere and Proud Boys to more old-school militant conservatives, their shared catalysing moment and thus their common denominator has been the push-back against a wave of social struggles that have in the aftermath of 2008 crisis started to questions the structures of class exploitation, race oppression, gender domination and territorial exclusion that define the present social system. Their actions have particularly focused on 'social justice warriors' and 'cultural Marxist': feminists, queers, persons of colour, leftists. If their actions have a fascistic character, it is in what Alberto Toscano (2017), drawing on Theodor Adorno, has described as '*conservative politics of antagonistic reproduction*, the reproduction of some against others, and at the limit a reproduction premised on their non-reproduction or elimination. Rather than an emancipatory concern with equality, fascism promotes a “repressive egalitarianism”, based on an identity of subjection and a brotherhood of hatred'.

Although they operate in an ecosystem of neo-nazi and supremacist groups that have organised marches and incited violent actions, most of the alt-right initiatives exist primarily as media projects: *Infowars*, *Vdare*, *Daily Stormer*, *Taki's Magazine* or *Breitbart* to name the most prominent ones. This alt-right infosphere is oriented toward communicative and propagandistic strategies of antagonistic reproduction. It has purposefully distorted the claims and the demands of those contesting the existing social system so as to elicit their reactions, which in turns allows it to continue baiting and attacking those groups, generating own visibility and relevance. If one digs into the pages of those media projects, one discovers a combination of conspiracy and reactionary clickbait content and commentary that solicits sovereignist violence in response to a condition that is purportedly leading to a loss of ethnic identity and systemic privilege in a war of races and civilisations. White, Christian, Western, property-owning, family-oriented social world needs to be protected from the threat of the miscegenation brought about by the social upheavals and free movement of people - either through a reassertion of the ethnic-identitarian nation-state or through setting up self-defended enclaves shielded off from the conspirational power of the big state.

And this can be only achieved through Schmittian decisionism (Schmitt 2010) that is needed to leave the present liberal hegemonic order that finds a strange involution in Trump's confrontational, litigative and bullyish *Art of the Deal*. By laying its hope with Trump and his explicit embrace of nationalist as opposed to globalist positions, the alt-right has effectively made itself useful to Trump by serving as a counter-reaction to anyone contesting his presidency. Trump's embrace of the alt-right, most drastic on display after the events in Charlottesville, as a legitimate opposition to the voices demanding structural change has, in return, helped push the Overton window of allowed political debate in the alt-right's direction and indemnify the violence coming from its ranks.[[6]](#footnote-7)

## Shitposters Leaving the Communicative Impasse: Passage to the Act

The third form of response that I want to highlight here is characterised by what Nina Power (2017) has called the visual language of brutality, moral indifference and transgressive irony. This response has gestated in the culture of shitposting and meming on the 4chan /b/ (random) and /pol/ (politically incorrect) boards and subreddits such r/The\_Donald, /r/altright, /r/TheRedPill or r/Incels. The 4chan imageboards have since the mid 2000s been the epicenter of production of some of the most popular pranks such as Rickrolling, memes such as Ya Dawg, Pedobear or Rules of the Internet, and coordinated hoaxes such as rigging the 2009 Time's 100 most influential people poll so that the 4chan admin poole would emerge on top followed by another 20 names whose first letters would spell the name of 4chan's two memes - 'marblecake also the game'. Initially, such complex coordinated actions were conducted and admired primarily for the 'lulz', that is for their entertainment value.

There's a formal aspect to 4chan as a communication channel that has allowed for this transgressive subculture to thrive. It's the ephemerality of Internet communication pushed to the limit: posts are not archived and are visible only for a very limited time; the frequency of posting is high, responses are instantaneous, amplifying the relevance of initial posts; users are mostly signed in as anonymous and transgression is their principal currency. As a reflection of these constraints and affordances, communication is dominated by those who are native to online communication and subcultures - savvy, quick and cynical. It is a competition in graphic transgressions and snarky comment that has perfected the art of trolling with no patience for political correctness, moralising language or rational argument. It operates in the affective mode of sarcasm and offence.

However, around this ephemerality, grew a context valuing anonymity and capacity to coordinate complex actions that around 2008 coalesced into the signifier Anonymous. Over the next couple of years this monicker was used for diverse collective interventions connecting the online and offline activism - ranging from protests against the censoring activity of the Church of Scientology, DDoS attacks in response to the SOPA regulation, support for Wikileaks, support for OccupyWallStreet, to policing Internet for child pornography (for a detailed ethnography of the Anonymous see Coleman 2015). Then in 2014, together with its more transgressive fork 8chan and Reddit, 4chan was turned into a coordinating platform for the #GamerGate harassment campaign targeting female media critics and game developers who have stepped forward to criticise the prevalent sexism and misogyny in the gamer culture. While 4chan imageboards always tested the limits of free speech, this marked the turning point after which these imageboards and forums became the crucibles for the transgressive articulations and actions of the manosphere and subsequently other factions of the alt-right - including the early embrace of Donald Trump during his electoral campaign as 'God-Emperor', transmutation of Pepe the Frog into a Trump stand-in and a right-wing symbol, and development of the Cult of Kek as the cult of grievance over political correctness and sanctioning of hate speech.

What makes 4chan so distinctive were the coordinated actions that have managed to exit the closed feedback-loop of communication and enter 'the real life'. Something that developed initially as the frivolous, perverse and reflexive underbelly of the Internet communication, would coalesce into a site gestating politics on its own terms and would, in turn, become embraced by politics at large. The digital became post-digital. In the larger shift from the politics focused on contesting censorship, intellectual property, surveillance and online abuse to the politics focused on free speech and male privilege, the male-dominated chan culture catalysed a metamorphosis where the self-deprecating irony of geeks paved the way to discussion groups for incels (i.e. involuntary celibates), NEETs (i.e. school dropouts), neckbeards (i.e. unattractive and awkward underachievers). These have become communities in their own right and have turned irony into a toxic subculture that marries a negative and frequently self-loathing obsession with male body image with misogynistic fantasies of male domination. The toxicity has resulted in violent acts perpetrated by members of these communities, who have committed a number of mass shootings aimed against women, claiming dozens of lives and catapulting the shooters into hero-warrior stardom celebrated for taking revenge on women.

While imageboards seem a marginal Internet venue, there's a formal aspect in imageboards that is anything but marginal: their interfaces - an ante-diluvial imageboard platform - symptomatically reveal uncanny similarity to more mainstream feed-based platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The interfaces of these social media are organised too around quick interactions, involving as many users as possible in as many short exchanges as possible, in a visually rich communicational environment where the differences between the activity shared by friends, news-bites and ads are purposefully blurred. This concentration of attention economy and its weaponising for ever-quicker consumption of ads is arguably the political-economic mechanism behind the political impasse that the Internet represents as a means of communication - not a medium of mutual recognition or purposive action but rather of libidinal investment. Shitposters have found a way out of this impasse, in the passage to the act that, in the case of Incel rebellion, is ready to unleash gratuitous violence in order to make the reality conform to an imaginary socio-Darwinian order of male entitlement to domination.

## Conclusion: The Internet as a Means of Organisation

The three examples discussed in previous sections can be read as responses to the present impasse that accelerated processes of technological change and capital are generating. They are the articulations under the post-digital condition, where the separation between the rationality of technology and capital and political reason has assumed a concrete form, preventing a meaningful resolution - and birthing fascistic imaginaries and forms of action. As Trump's presidency has unfolded and faltered in many of its promises, these responses have quickly been sidelined. In their marginalisation they have in part deflated and in part radicalised even further, unleashing the terror of violence and death perpetrated mostly by lone shooters with big anonymous echo-chambers.

Yet, as the Marxist geographer Phil Neel (2018) has warned in his travelogue across the hinterlands of the US and China, while the alt-right has helped the new 'far-right culture gestate, it is only via the rise of "Patriot" groups that this culture seems able to take flesh' (p. 27). By pursuing the politics of assistance to communities that have been left to struggle by the alternating effects of de-industrialisation, extractive destruction of their environments, restrictive programs of conservation, rollback of welfare and punitive social control, these right-wing groups have been striking roots deep into the small town and rural expanses wedged between the two US seaboards. Many countries have now such 'stagnant' regions outside of globalised cities that have seen the effects of modernisation ebb, places where support structures of the modern state are just as absent as the organisational forces of the left. It is there that the new alternative structures of providing social support are built by the forces that exist on the ground - in the case of the US in the form militarist organisations, religious groups and the extended family structures building inroads for conservative victories beyond reactionary responses to the anti-systemic movements. These situations, however, don't always need to be conservative in their outlook. Similar processes of retrenchment have been felt in the peripheral France that has burst in revolts of 'Gillet Jeunes', 'Yellow Vests', against the cost of green transition being imposed through the regressive consumer taxes on the proletarian masses that have already soaked up the cost of neoliberal restructuring over the last three decades (Barthet 2018).

These stagnant inner peripheries ravaged by retrenchment indicate the complexity that mobilizing proletarianised and de-proletarianised masses faces today. If the post-digital is an attained quality of technological and capitalist development, so is the pre-digital and pre-industrial condition that these stagnant regions have gone back to. The work of mobilisation cannot be left to the communicative action but must be first and foremost understood as organisational. Bringing back the economic and technological dynamics under the democratic governance, or at least making them an effective part of the vision of social struggles, while creating bridges between the working class of the highly technologised and dynamic cities, with all their internal differences of race, gender and pay, and the underclasses of socially stagnant hinterlands is fundamental to taking the social complexity head-on. The first step in that task is to create time and place for these plural experiences to be voiced and heard, the second is to organise those experiences into an agential whole.

There is a way to meaningfully bind activity on the Internet and activity in real life, without getting caught into the feedback loops of capitalism and clicktivism. Beyond the Internet as a means of communication and the Internet as a means of capitalist transformation, we can view the Internet as a means of organisation. It configures forms of connecting and acting together. However, Phil Neel's writing suggests, the organisation becomes effective only as it, in however small ways, transforms the existing social reality that communicating actors encounter on the ground. There are ways to make the Internet strategically work as an apparatus of politicisation if organising can prove that it is able to organise collectivities to effectively intervene in that social reality. The messiness of the post-digital does not imply simply that the digital touches everything, but also that everything touches the digital. Overcoming the separation between democratic politics and accelerated technocapitalism that the digital reinforces can thus start from the entrenched material-relational world. While this does not go as far as the promise to revolutionise the existing social reality, it might be part of the necessary task of transforming it.

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1. In fact, Donald Trump is the 'first internet president' of the US (Barba-Kay 2019), sovereignly navigating the post-digital mediatic environment. His rhetorical style, running commentary of Fox News and CNN broadcasts, and constant arguing via Twitter are the perfect match for the media environment where politics has to court clickbait-worthy controversy in order to get any attention. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Digital networks themselves have come to demand ever larger quantities of energy and matter. In 2018 the world was following with alarm the warnings and studies (de Vries 2018) indicating that should Bitcoin's electricity glut continue to grow at the pace it was growing back then, the cryptocurrency mining might need all of the world's electricity by early 2021. As unlikely that is, nonetheless our aggregate digital infrastructure currently consumes around 7% of global electricity demand (Greenpeace International 2017). And not only do the digital network technologies have an accelerating direct impact on the planet, but the intensification of global exchanges facilitated by digital networks has resulted in the speedup in throughput of material and energy resources that threatens to push the planet far beyond the holocenic boundaries that have allowed human societies to thrive over the last 10.000 years (Rockström et al. 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. As a recent study reports (Allen-West 2017), stable autocracies are spending around US$110 per person for comprehensive surveillance of their populations, making blanket surveillance comparable to the Social Credit System of China seem relatively a low-cost affair. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Not that the period since 1989 was not marked by a number of crises, if not one global crisis, for large parts of the post-socialist and post-colonial world. What was formerly the Second and the Third World found itself relegated even further to the peripheries in that new geo-economic landscape that is changing primarily through the present run for the resources. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. With the small exception of fossil fuel industries, which seemed particularly close to Trump's heart - he initially appointed Rex Tillerson, the former CEO of ExxonMobil, as his Secretary of State. This was a short-lived appointment. Even more short-lived was Trump's plan to bailout coal and nuclear power plants. Finally, he pulled the US out from the Paris Agreement, undermining effectively whatever small progress was to be made toward preventing the global warming rise beyond 1.5C on the basis of that agreement. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. In addition to contesting claims and demands of social movements, the alt-right infosphere has also littered the Internet with a dense nebula of interlinked false claims, moral panics and conspiracy theories. In disputing the authority of facts deemed scientifically established and the expertise that legitimates policy decisions, they have effectively sown doubt in the institutional arrangements that underly the production of scientific facts and science-based policy. This strategy of sowing doubt the alt-right has gleaned over from the long-standing organised denial of various progressive policy initiatives that were aimed at reducing the negative impacts of free enterprise on society, health and environment. Indicatively, many of the right-wing and pro-enterprise think-tanks such as George C. Marshall Institute have their roots in the Cold War politics, and some of them such as Competitive Enterprise Institute are nothing but astroturfing organisations set up and funded by the polluting industries (Mann and Toles 2016). These organisations are not staffed only with shady opportunists claiming to be experts - they have also enlisted the services of many renowned scientists who have decided to cash in their expertise. In the early days, many of these scientists would have come from the nuclear program - with their mindsets genuinely shaped by the Cold War concerns and ideological preference for unfettered free enterprise. Ironically, the first global climate models have developed from the research motivated to understand possibilities of weather manipulation (Edwards 2010) and the studies of atmospheric fallout impacts of the above-ground nuclear detonations (Masco 2017). So, some of these scientists have had a good grasp of the environmental mechanisms underlying climate change, yet they became the central cog in the denial machine (Oreskes and Conway 2011). The links between the far-right's defence of systemic privilege and climate denial, though, are easily explained. As sociologist Aaron McCright and his fellow researchers in their repeated empirical analyses of denialism have consistently shown, 'the US conservative movement [has] mobilized to defend the industrial capitalist system from claims by scientists and environmentalists that the system is causing significant social, economic, health, and ecological problems. The conservative movement’s defence of the economic system is crucial since it provides an air of legitimacy to industry arguments that would otherwise be dismissed as self-serving' (McCright et al. 2016: 184). Denialism is overwhelmingly present among the conservative white males who have a propensity to system-justification for reasons that they are in a position of privilege in that industrial capitalist system (McCright and Dunlap 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)