

Bridging the gap between technology and progressive politics in Europe

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The text below is a proposal, a strategic contribution and we are curious what you make of the ideas and questions we raise. For sure there are more topics and angles that could be added. Do you see any possibility for funding such an effort to come together? Should this be a festival, a translocal network, a support campaign for various movements? Please join the discussion and let us know what you think and if you want to get involved.

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There are a number of topics that overlap and point at a widening of agendas beyond politics and the use of internet technologies in society. We feel that we can no longer keep these spaces separated, or leave them surrounded by ambiguities and grey areas, or appropriated by alt-right groups, populism or regressive politics. We think it's time to bridge this gap, create new forms, and restore alliances between tech and progressive politics.

We feel there is a growing tension between the global, immaterial level of social media and the concrete sphere of local grass-roots level and related political action. Funny enough, digital technologies are becoming smaller, more invisible and even further integrated into our messy, always-connected everyday life. But this is not bringing neither tech policies, nor the use of tech by political parties and movements, down to earth: with the only exception of the few who make use of tech as propaganda to prove their group's horizontal, participative, open-to-all-credentials.

Overall, while the managerial cosmopolitan classes have a similar, exchangeable and shared lifestyle, wherever they operate, the gap between them and the local middle-lower classes is dramatically increasing.

It is therefore that we feel an unease to organize yet another new media festival event, or sign up for this or that NGO campaign. We notice that it is becoming harder and harder for techies and activists to talk to their local counterparts. They seem to have taken refuge in the way more familiar and comfortable zone of global, cosmopolitan, like-minded crowds. Think, just as an example, of the Tahrir activists who, once having liberated the country, were kicked out of the square and of their own movement, becoming completely alienated from local politics and then replaced by a grass-roots party, which has been now suffocated in its turn by a more repressive mix of local authoritarianism and global interests.



The tension between the fascination for the global language of the immaterial sphere with its 'planetary computation', and the particularities of the local and its idiosyncratic culture, manifests itself as a growing gap not only in the domain of finance and economics, but also in circles of technology experts and media activists who are increasingly becoming cosmopolitan and detached from local communities and struggles.

In the past, there was an alternative to broadcast media: it was to switch them off. This was easily accomplished by those who wished to silence the noise, and did not result in social isolation or disconnection. But networked media do not offer this ancient privilege, as signing off from social networking platforms translates into social suicide.

Today television, and broadcast media in general, do no longer have the strength to generate new political formations as they used to do in the past. They rather just remediate content from social networking platforms. The social spectacular at the time of Web 2.0 is peer-produced and generated by individuals who are at the same time victims and perpetrators of their own (networked) frustration and anger. This logic is reproduced in every domain, including that of politics, where people have to be co-producers and no longer can just absorb messages and content dictated by the mass spectacular. Political participation in the social spectacular is understood as a process of continuous remediation of inputs and messages that is undertaken by each of us, whether willing or not. Because we are our own re-mediators and no longer enjoy being remediated by broadcast media participation becomes exhausting. It no longer translates into political action, but stays relegated in the domain of endless remediation.

There is a crisis of representation on both the levels of politics and aesthetics. Even though it was evident in visual culture a long time ago, this is only now becoming apparent in the domain of politics. What does democracy mean in the absence of representation? Can democracy exist without mediation? The dream of direct democracy emerges at a time of even more complex bureaucracy, lengthy negotiations and long procedures in which a multitude of different interests are being brought together in a shady procedure, dominated by consultants, marketing and deal making behind closed doors.

Social media offers a device for collective fantasy that some call 'direct democracy'. This political culture has been generated by images that long time ago have abandoned their representative function. Images that no



longer inhabit the domain of representation. We witness the birth of a new, enhanced reality that no longer refers to politics as a classic realm. Memes are transitional objects in this sense. Whereas politics still uses the written form, even in the social media world of Facebook and Twitter, we can expect that in the near future politics will, inevitably, take a visual shape. How is such an image-politics going to look like?

The arts have all but disappeared behind the hypertrophic realm of the visual. Everyone is a maker and is destined to output creative works, whether they like it or not. This is why art as a discipline has disappeared into each and every object and action, and the form of technique or technology. On parallel, there is a gradual withdrawal of the strategic importance of visual arts as a socially or politically meaningful (if not explosive) activity. The arts are not longer the golden gateway to resolve complex issues in society. This is a sad reality we can only start to deal with and mourn. This is why there are so few artworks that can convey, facilitate and amplify social and political issues. In response, artists have retrieved themselves into the safe realm of cosmopolitan networks in which their works circulate as empty signifiers. People are not following artists. The interpreters of our time are 'influencers', not artists. What's left for the few of them is the global art market, while a majority of them have been co-opted and retrained as precarious creative workers.

Our aim is to trigger a discussion on how to bring the two realms of tech and politics into dialogue again. We would like to achieve this by bringing together multiple forms of knowledge and practices, with people from different backgrounds and skills. We are ourselves not immune from the processes that we describe here. We are definitely experiencing these contradictory dynamics ourselves.

Proposed topics:

From Web 2.0 to Political Power

Italy's Five Star Movement started off as an individual blog. They like to call themselves 'the people of the networks' in critique of the classic political party model. Politics as a profession has always been their main target. The movement presents itself as a pro-active, everchanging entity which borrows the dynamics of the Web 2.0 using terms such as participatory democracy, horizontality, P2P, equal access. In contrast with this vocabulary, the actual organization of the movement was built around a personal blog (Beppe



Grillo's). Only an internal group of elite members was involved in the decision-making process (using the platform called Rousseau). At the same time Grillo travelled across the country and invested a lot of time and energy to build up a grass-roots structure, an activist base to support the movement. The secret of its success can be read as a combination of web-based networks and local grass-roots support.

In the previous decade, the left has lost a connection to both vital elements. It neither understood the organizational dimension of the internet, nor did it find ways to reinvent the relation to the local. What lessons are to be learned from the 'unconventional' way the right-wing populism in Europe has gained visibility and influence? Can the web element, the global and virtual one, and the very concrete grassroots level be combined for progressive politics? or is the 'glocal' mix only serving conservative agendas? How can social movements re-invent their relation to local interests? Has the left of today become an elitist group that only relies on its global, immaterial ties? If one would have to start all over again, would a Facebook group be the new blog à la Grillo, the tool to build a movement from scratch? Are social media platforms the best place to shape an organizational structure for a political movement? To build a new grass-roots movement one would need time. Do we have time in the real-time age? What are the arguments against taking a decade to build such a movement? Would another option be to renew connections between the political left and progressive grass-roots movements, such as refugees welcome, eco activism, commons-based initiatives and self-organized spaces?

Beyond the Self: Towards Collective Action

Recent analyses of the online-self have produced two divergent readings. The first one concluded that the celebration of the self in social media resulted in a culture of isolated individualism, disorganized precarity, ultimately leading to mental stress, burn-out and depression: organized sadness. The other interpretation holds on to the older promise of the liberation of the self as a progressive value. Empowerment and self-determination should lead to more creativity, more diversity and new forms of socio-economic innovation. In both analyses, the focus is still on the individual.

Is this really the core question or, rather, ideology? Is there any space inside the online self for collective experiences? Can there be a plural self, or is it quintessentially a libertarian self-obsessed category? Is there any desire to



overcome the self-referential ego land? Where can we find 'they', the once agonizing, desperate lonely souls that are ready to morph into another state? How can the scattered fragments ever come together? The 'festival' shows us a way out but how do we deal with such one-off events that have such a temporal and local quality? How do we build a continuity in this process? How do we re-invent a social glue that lasts?

The Social Media Question: Where are the Alternatives?

Facebook is perceived as the number one enemy, yet everyone keeps using it. The question is not whether to find a way out of Facebook as there's also Instagram, WhatsApp and the likes (not to mention Google). It is not an option for many of us to delete Facebook, as this leads to social isolation and cuts off short-term possibilities for events and campaigns to mobilize and inform potential publics. We need a post-colonial alternative as large parts of the world population heavily rely on Facebook because of a lack of physical spaces as alternatives where to meet up and discuss/conspire. To leave dominant social media platforms is therefore a white-men elitist choice. How can we develop alternatives for organizational purposes in the shadow of the platforms and then bring the outcomes there, using them exclusively for 'broadcast' purposes -as the critical mass of people is there? Can we undermine the social media business model by 'hacking' the platforms and exploiting or squatting them by producing the least amount of data?

In the meanwhile, can we develop a Five Year Plan to organize the mass exodus? Can open source still help us in this effort to develop alternatives, or has it proven to be too nerdy, too far away from people, several decades after these principles were first launched? Similar to the left, it has retrieved to co-working spaces, far away from the streets, and withdrawn in safe spaces where coding for code's sake has become a self-referential elitist activity. Apart from the usual re-appropriation of capital, such as Microsoft's latest acquisition of GitHub, what can we still expect from the geek class? Why are social media alternatives never on the agenda of the big hackers' meeting? Why are they solely focused on surveillance and privacy issues that are the quintessential expression of the neo-liberal self? Is there a way for the progressive tech community who is part of the creative industry-start-up logic to serve a collective political goal? Is the leak à la Wikileaks and Snowden the only possible political gesture?

The Ghosts of 2011 Protest Movements: Resurrection or Burial?



There was a time when political movements seem to be on the rise. From the Arab world to the USA, from Greece to Spain, there was a celebration of grass-roots movements. Seven years have passed and the vital social energy seems to have completely vanished, either disappeared in complete silence or crushed into blood. Is there a residual potential of left-overs of the street festivals in Cairo and New York, or should we bury any hope? When we visit these places all we find is depression, expulsions, exile and fear. We witness a restoration of old regimes in an even harsher form, the rise of neo-liberal ideology: whether in the form of its authoritarian face or in its market features such as brands, shopping malls and online services that are the same across the globe, causing a numbing flatness and culture of indifference wherever we go, pushing people inside their houses. The appearance of the body in public space is carefully orchestrated and managed, both by authoritarian and market regimes, pushing people indoors, thereby preventing the potentially dangerous physical presence of bodies coming together. This results in the global state of depression and apathy, no matter where you are.

Can we preserve the 2011 images and make them alive again? Where are the activists? How can we catalyze the human potential that's left—if any? Instead of forgetting, how can we stage a serious discussion about what has happened, and step out of our isolation, out of the private spaces (on social media), reconvening again with our bodies? Is the occupation of spaces still working is a method and, if not, what could replace it? Can we use our imagination to find new strategies and tactics beyond those that have been tried out? Is the global connection of local struggles still possible—and desirable — or should we reconcile with small, fragmented clashes that, for the time being, do not resonate with events elsewhere? Is there anything happening in the first place, or are we blinded by our informational overload? Is it possible to find communalities in struggles?

Future of Europe and the Polis Networks

Right-wing movements portray Europe as a bureaucratic monster that only claims more power and financial resources for itself. Progressive left regards it as a club of the few representing global industrial interests of banks and financial giants. How do we find a way to redefine Europe in other terms rather than within this limiting opposition? How do we reconcile the local element that we celebrate here, with transnational forms of solidarity? How do we bridge the macro with the micro, preventing that the macro becomes



the distant, immaterial dimension, whereas the micro degenerates into boring and selfish provincialism? Can we find an inspiration in networks of rebel cities that stand up against both populist nationalism and global capital? It seems more doable to arrange concrete exchanges between cities, its citizens and officials, rather than the empty gestures of bilateral meetings. But those exchanges presume strong forms of local organization and cannot be advocated in all cases. Without movements, without winning elections, not much will happen. How can the boredom, projected onto the national level, be overcome? What does it mean that we donate the organs of the nation state to right wing populists, for a long time to come?