

The Pastoral Politics Of Facebook

Alexandros Schismenos

A cloud is haunting the world, the Internet cloud.

When, on February 1848, the Communist Manifesto by K. Marx and Fr. Engels was published, the labor movement, especially in England, where the incendiary book was printed, already had an experience of decades of struggle and had already created self-organized democratic structures of self-education and collective action. The two radical writers recognized a “spectre” that haunted Europe in the activity of social movements, the rise of radical politics and the insurrectional dynamics that, in the same year, 1848, gave birth to the revolutionary surge called “The People’s Spring” that shook the foundations of European political authorities. The Communist Manifesto did not create this movement, but it was part of this movement, an attempt to incorporate the new revolutionary imaginary significations into a new normative schema, in terms of a “scientific” philosophy of history with a messianic aspiration, which claimed the ability to predict the future of social-historical dynamics, effectively obscuring the social-historical. Carl Von Clausewitz noted that strategic manuals always come after the end of the battle[2]. But is this also the case with political manuals?

If we consider the Communist Manifesto as an archetypal example, we can see it as a rather distorting mirror, where the activities of its contemporary social movements were refracted through the lens of theory on the temporal horizon of history and, beyond that, on the transcendent horizon of eternity. From this transcendent, ultimate, immovable, imaginary horizon, within which human creativity is reduced to “the laws of history”, theory derives its normative character.

In this way, the Communist Manifesto became an authority in itself, a set of principles for political action, the beginning of a new causal chain of motives, intentions, and planning that cannot be understood without reference to it. Prior to *Das Kapital* and in anticipation of *Das Kapital*, the Communist Manifesto obtained, by imposing a revision of the past in terms of a prophetic confidence proclaimed in the present before the future, the paralyzing force of a sacred document.

On February 2017, another manifesto was released, which at first seems to have nothing in common with the Marxist document. It was the Facebook Manifesto, written by the creator and founder of the dominant social network, the young multi-millionaire Mark Zuckerberg.

Unlike the Communist Manifesto, the Markian Manifesto (let's call it like the Gospel) did not have a problem of distribution nor printing costs. It was not addressed to the working class, or to some local / regional society, but to the whole of humanity directly. There was no restriction of distribution or reproduction, since it was shared with 1.9 billion people / users of the medium. It does not threaten the ruling elites or the ruling class, at least explicitly. It did not come out of the streets and the people nor does it refer to the streets and the people, but from the highest peak of the social pyramid, some Manhattan penthouse. It is not going to be banned, nor is it going to be transformed into a sacred document.

Yet, in essence, it is inspired by similar motives, namely the imposition of a normative schema on a diverse new social phenomenon, in order to reshape it into a political instrument. Like the Communist Manifesto, it uses descriptive terms in a regulative manner and refers these regulations to a necessity abstractly attributed to history. Like the Communist Manifesto, it aspires to start, through regulation and central planning, new social processes and actively influence the

dynamics of social relations. And to transform, to put it schematically, the social interactions of active people into the political capital of a collective organization, in our case, Facebook.

Is it worth taking such a move seriously? Zuckerberg is neither Marx, nor Engels, and Facebook is not a movement, but digital media have proven and prove every day, at least since the global crisis of 2008 , that they are tools of unpredictable political influence. The current president of the United States, D.J. Trump, said on March 16, 2017 that if there was no Twitter, he would not have been elected and it is possible that the same medium will bring his downfall as well.

But besides the ridiculousness, the admission that the most powerful political seat in the world can be hijacked with a series of nonsense in 140 characters has its own significance. Traditional systemic political mechanisms were the last to understand, after the Trump election and amidst a cyber war in which U.S. institutions are under attack by espionage, leaks and revelations, the fact that we live in the digital era. We understood it during the December 2008 riots in Greece, when rebellious students were communicating via SMS, but it was understood worldwide in 2011, during the Occupy World Movement and the Arab Spring, social outbursts that spread through the Internet. What we called an ontological revolution[3], is the creation of a new ontological field for the projection of social imaginary significations, for the dissemination of knowledge, for the reconstruction of the individual self-image and the formation of imaginary communities. The digital world expands in every social field, through individual activity diffused on a quasi-universal level, and constitutes a virtual social sphere, a digital magma of visualized significations associated with reality in terms of information transmissibility and user interconnectivity.

As the traditional forms of political representation and identity politics collapse, new social imaginary

identifications emerge on the Internet, which, under the schema of cinematic nostalgia[4], are formulated not in reference to social reality but to virtual constellations of figurative symbols, where truth values are relative, where falsification and verification are not valid, since propagation time has been shortened so much that each independent information becomes a quasi-undifferentiated element in a continuous information flow. Not only is communication time condensing, but the space of information dissemination expands indefinitely, as much as the possibility of global instantaneous dispersion is realized.

The metaphysics of Cyberspace consists in the fact that while this space seems infinite as it expands from within in proportion to the creation of web pages, it is also a space without extent, without distance. We have the dual invention of a spatial time where the past is constantly present and a chronological space where extent and distance is absent.

The global temporality that is formed in and through the Internet is at the same time synchronic and diachronic, but not in accordance to social time, which is essentially local. Direct accessibility flattens the critical significance of information within a continuous flow, where information sets can be articulated into pseudo-narratives, and where it is the quantity of information that ultimately constitutes a quality of meaning, however absurd. The fundamental properties of the Internet, speed and condensation express precisely this principle of expansion through contraction.

Without a common criterion of value or truth, which, in the non-digital world, is offered, at least partially, by the social-historical reality and the real limitations imposed by society as the "objective" (in the sense that it transcends subjectivities) world and by the "objective world" itself as nature, the only criterion of value remaining is popularity.

At the same time, every marginal idea, either radical and

liberating or reactionary and obscurantist, shares now an ability of propagation, previously limited to the dominant discourse, so that every individual or group share, at least in theory, the same potential public audience, that is, the whole of digital humanity. Without proof of validity, validity is gained and lost through the flow of information itself, contrary to what happened when the dissemination of information depended on the validity of the source. New funding tools, such as crowdfunding, available on the "visible" public surface of the Internet, offer opportunities to projects that would be hopeless. This visible public surface seems unlimited in range but is limited in scope, as a small part of the whole Internet, under which the invisible areas of the Deep and Dark Web lie.

This situation offers countless possibilities for worldwide spreading of "fake news", multiplying their influence in accordance to the disintegration of traditional institutions. As one should expect, the digital time of information flow quickly drew the political time of decision-making to its immediate and momentary pace, since information has a power of authority. But now it is not the legitimate or verified information which allow established authorities to plan for the future, nor the distorted information of the official propaganda mechanisms which allow authorities to manipulate the present, but information itself as a form of authority, information itself as a mechanism of regulation or deregulation, diffused to all points of the horizon, reconstructing the past and deregulating the future. It does not seem so important anymore to correlate information with some external reality if information can shape realities, creating alternative narratives.

As we know, social-historical temporality is always open to interpretations, since the social-historical is the field of every interpretation, and that makes the past as fragile as the future, conditioned by the present.

In the social media, time, if measured by information, is never crystallized to an inaccessible past, but the past is constantly present. Facebook recently introduced a "legacy" function that allows friends and relatives to manage, to inherit, the Facebook profiles of their recently deceased. Each user can appoint a friend as his/her page manager in case he/she dies, and if this fashion expands, in the immediate future, each user may become a memory bank himself/herself, a cloud of dead avatars around the star of the living user. At the same time, however, this living user, guardian and heir of the future, of an entire digital ancestral community, may see his/her digital influence multiply accordingly, since he/she will be the guardian of the most lasting memory invented by humanity, the digital profile. Which, being composed by fragments of the user's self-image and his/her interaction with other users, constitutes both a self-exposition and self-concealment, a self-reconstruction not limited by the body and the directness of actual human presence.

Multi-billion social media companies exploit a new kind of capital, the communication of the users themselves. Facebook now has a vast net worth capital, but it does not depend on the production of a product or the participation in an investment but on the activity of its users. Use value is exchange value in this field and the product, which is communication itself, is provided by the user. The product is the user himself, since profit is essentially generated by inter-subjective communication. This capital is inherently profitable, as its surplus value is net worth value, generated not by the exploitation of overwork, that is, the exploitation of the working part of individual time, but by the exploitation of recreation, that is, the exploitation of the "free" part of individual time. If all users decided to abstain from the medium, Facebook would collapse together with its net worth capital. The ability of the medium to generate profit equals the ability of the medium to generate communication, that is, the ability of the medium to form a

community, a capacity that depends on each user individually, since Internet communities are imaginary communities of subjective identification, i.e. fragile. These imaginary communities cannot fully integrate the person. This makes every imaginary digital community fragile, but with strong penetrative dynamics, circulating from the private space to the public without the risk involved in any personal physical participation in the physical public space.

On Facebook everything is recorded, while face-to-face conversations are not. But Facebook users are much more prone to misunderstandings, pompous opinions and insults than they would be in a face-to-face confrontation. It seems that the instinct of danger is primarily physical, or ultimately, that we are more ashamed before the presence of the others than before our face mirrored on the screen.

Let's go back to the Markian manifesto, which was duly noted in the U.S. where social media were used to "crush" politics. Let us simply point out that this would not have been possible without the devaluation of traditional political institutions and norms. As it would not have been possible without the globalization of the economy, the expansion of the doctrine of growth, and the sense of a social and moral degradation that irreparably weakened the "tradition of authority" of modernity.

The founder of Facebook seeks to fill the power vacuum that opens up beneath the broken bridges between authority institutions and social reality, in a more modern manner than the strategy used by Trump and the alt (ernative) far right. He sees the medium as an instrument for substituting the institution and proposes to complete the colonization of institutions by digital media, replacing the institution with the instrument, re-defining politics in terms of digital communication.

His manifesto[5] begins as follows: "To our community. On our

journey to connect the world, we often discuss products we're building and updates on our business. Today I want to focus on the most important question of all: are we building the world we all want?"

He goes to present his own, simplistic, philosophy of History, which is a story of communication. "History is the story of how we've learned to come together in ever greater numbers – from tribes to cities to nations. At each step, we built social infrastructure like communities, media and governments to empower us to achieve things we couldn't on our own."

Let's briefly examine this point. First of all, the historical hierarchy that Zuckerberg proposes, placing the community first, the medium of communication after, the government at the end, is the schema of a simplistic metaphysics of history as progress. But this reveals his ambition. He addresses an existing community as the owner of the dominant medium clearly aspiring to governance: Facebook's upgrade to an institution of social association and co-ordination of social action alongside and beyond traditional institutions.

Hence the correlation of community, media, and government under the class of things that help us achieve things that we could not achieve "alone".

To which community is the manifesto addressed? What does "our community" mean? Obviously it means Facebook users in total. But is this community similar to the community, let's say, of newspaper readers? Obviously not. Because newspapers offer content not produced by the public itself but by journalists who are (supposedly) judged by public opinion in the public domain and must provide evidence to support the facts, so that newspapers (supposedly) constitute an essential part of modern public space and public time without taking up or replacing public space and public time.

However, social media have no content, but just a function.

The content is created by the user of the function without the need of evidence, the content is given by the users, the public audience themselves are the authors and the readers. So every imaginary digital community is both private and public at the same time, and every user is both an individual and a member of the community in an indeterminate manner, while the only criterion is not deliberation, but popularity. Thus, the essential part of public consultation that (supposedly) newspapers serve, that is, keeping the public informed and authorities checked, is further degraded.

Therefore, the Facebook user community, defined as the set of social media users, is a community of functional, tautological identification, without any specific moral or political or cultural content. It is therefore a community that is potentially universal in the most trivial sense. Potentially, but not actively.

Zuckerberg understands that and tries to take advantage of the situation by equating Facebook's community to the global community. "In times like these, the most important thing we at Facebook can do is develop the social infrastructure to give people the power to build a global community that works for all of us.", he declares. That is, through Facebook, Zuckerberg aspires to reshape the existing global digital community into a political global digital community, a community that works in common for common purposes. But we have already noticed that the absence of common goals, beyond the common purpose of promoting individual purposes through a universal communication tool, is what makes the Facebook community a global, if trivial, one.

Let us also notice that this community, defined as a global community, seems to exceed and overlap every society by reversing the classical distinction between community (*Gemeinschaft*), defined by common ethics and customs, and society (*Gesellschaft*), defined by impersonal institutions.

Does Zuckerberg's proposal provide any place for a digital democracy? It should be clear from the above that no. How does he visualize the social infrastructure he will offer? He introduces new features in Facebook software that will allow the creation of "meaningful groups" around social and political demands in particular regions. The application will connect people who are interested in related issues and live in a particular area, around a common goal, aspiring to link these imaginary communities to their local territorial terrain. So, of course, it localizes activity inversely, as this function also works as a classification and identification of regions. The members of such a community are certified as residents of a region, ex post.

And of course, these local digital meaningful communities are organized not around some collectivity, but around a personality, since the individual is the only inalienable element and the vector of the essential dynamic of the medium. This person is called the "leader" and acts as a user / node around whom the regional community is formed within the expanded global user community. As we can see, the dominant oligarchical schema of political representation is kept intact, and Facebook paves the way for the campaigns of the political "leaders" of the future.

Facebook, a private digital communications company, a privately-owned company that does not generate nor create anything, explicitly aspires to become the model of the political institution of the future. Zuckerberg aspires to regulate the uncontrolled activity of trolls, false news, information and chatting for the explicit purpose of controlling the uncontrolled actual political and social movements by integrating them into a regulatory model of digital communication. In a peculiar manner, he combines Alexander Hamilton's centralist governance programme with Jurgen Habermas' communicative democracy project.

Let us not fall into the trap of Zuckerberg, who wants to

further exploit social media communication in order to create a form of governance under a single company, which, like the Catholic clergy and the Communist party before, displays the abusive claim that it represents mankind.

So let's not laugh at the initial parallelism of the Communist Manifesto with the Facebook Manifesto. It is better to see how the latter intersects with central political issues that emerge in the struggle for free public space and space on a global horizon. That is,

(a) the issue of political representation and democratic deliberation, which Zuckerberg degrades to a technical and functional procedure.

1. b) the issue of the commons that Zuckerberg obscures, by defending the means of communication itself but not the right to free communication.
2. c) The issue of the institution of the political community that Zuckerberg identifies with the community of Facebook users, that is, the community that he himself, like another baron, exploits for his own personal profit.

In other words, the result of the Zuckerberg Habermasian-Hamiltonian hybrid would not create a global digital democracy, (a global "digital democracy" is an obscure idea in itself, since democracy requires the actual presence of the individual and roots in locality) as he declares, but some global digital neo-feudalism with himself on the throne, corresponding to the global economic neo-feudalism. Perhaps Zuckerberg's Manifesto will become a historical joke, as opposed the Communist Manifesto. However, they share the same ambition, the ambition to regulate the future, and both texts can be classified in the tradition of pastoral politics.

[1] This article was originally published in Greek, in the

Kaboom journal (issue 2, May 2017). See also:
<https://kaboomzine.gr/kaboom-2-contents/>

[2] C. Von Clausewitz, Vom Krieg, III, Strategie, 72

[3]

<https://www.socratesjournal.com/index.php/socrates/article/view/146>

[4]

<https://www.socratesjournal.com/index.php/socrates/article/view/109>

[5]<https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/building-global-community/10154544292806634/>