

Reflections on Trevor G. Smith's Politicizing Digital Space: Theory, The Internet, and Renewing Democracy

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Abstract: Book review of Trevor G. Smith's *Politicizing Digital Space: Theory, The Internet, and Renewing Democracy* (2017). University of Westminster Press, ISBN: 978-1-911534-40-

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In times of a rise of the post-fascist alt-right, when the Internet is increasingly becoming a site of political dispute, Smith assembles an array of perspectives around a fundamental political question: How can politics be reinvigorated and transformed into something more participatory and agonistic by placing it online?

The current discussions about the Internet, its personalised technologies and echo chambers, its filter bubbles, its racist bots and pervasive trolls, reveal the need for a more precise analysis of the question. And yet Smith is mainly interested in the sort of problems and arguments that arise when we seek to be political online. Given this context, Smith's book can be read as an intervention in both digitising the political and politicising the digital. What is the role of the Internet for political participation? What are the benefits of politicising the digital?

Smith's approach is a fresh move to politicise the current debate about the Internet by drawing attention to the notion of the political and engaging with a number of scholars, from Arendt to Rancière, from Žižek to Mouffe. By doing so, he moves beyond perspectives of communication theory and political economy and asks: how does the use of the Internet bring about more political politicisation without turning a blind eye towards its many depoliticising ways? He reaches for reinvigorating the idea of politics by outlining a form of Internet-enabled politics that inspire engagement and empowerment, rather than cynicism and alienation. He does so by showing that the online political realm is not simply a space where activists debate issues and organise offline protests, but also an important site of political action itself.

There are several powerful arguments animating Smith's book. One is that the Internet is a useful tool for reinvigorating politics because it can provide possibilities for new beginnings. Another argument is that political theory can help restoring the "poor reputation of politics", provided it takes into consideration people's daily lives and their technological aspect (6).

The book is divided into six chapters. After a general introduction, the second chapter deals with the questions of public space and the place of politics: What does appear publicly when someone enters the (online) political realm? The third chapter turns to political subjectivity discussing questions of the "contestation" between anti-political identification versus political subjectivation (43). The fourth chapter addresses the importance of political participation in debates and decisions. In the fifth chapter, Smith emphasises the need of participating in conflicts and

disagreements. The sixth chapter draws a conclusion by laying down the steps toward the digitalisation of politics.

The basic lines of Smith's argument, that politics can be reinvigorated and transformed into something more participatory and agonistic by placing it online, are structured along five key points. Firstly, he states that politics does not enjoy a good reputation. This assumption is, secondly, followed by a call for a new and positive conception of politics in an online political realm. In order to elaborate how politics can operate online, as a third line of his argument, Smith claims that politics can be reinvigorated and transformed on four terrains: public space, subjectivity, participation and conflict. According to the author, all these terrains are spaces of contestation between politics and anti-politics, where anti-politics is defined as a mechanism which attempts to foreclose the emergence of political realms, political subjects, participation or conflict, by keeping everyone in their assigned place. This line of argument leads to another level of analysis. The political subject in an online political realm finds itself in a situation of universal emptiness in which its identity traits are unknown to others and this can cause the improvement of political participation. Finally, he argues that politics can be reinvigorated and transformed into something more agonistic by placing it online, if conflict, as a driver of politics in a pluralistic society, becomes the content of online political debates.

1. The Online Political Realm

In this chapter Smith convincingly elaborates on the question what a political realm entails and why it is needed. By referring to the experience of activists in the Arab Spring, Occupy, and Anonymous movements, Smith carefully describes how a political realm can be created on the Internet as political space. Unfortunately, as I will elaborate in more detail in the final part of this review, the author overlooks many other more current concrete examples, including political initiatives such as the Democracy for Europe Movement (DiEM25), the Women's March and political parties in general. What is suggested by Smith here is that the online political realm should not be reduced to the "hardware". As a product of the actions and movements of people, and here Smith is referring to Lefebvre, he defines the political realm as "a socially produced space" and a "product of human action" (26).

Clearly there is a sense that the issue of 'appearance' is the biggest problem for postulating the possibility of an online political realm. Smith chooses to examine Arendt's version of politics as this is in his view the most sophisticated one when it comes to offline participation. He consults those places in Arendt's writings where she addresses portraying the appearance of the body in a public space. It seems as if the core of the problem, in Smith's view, lies primarily in this notion of politics when we think of an online political realm. In contrast to Arendt's claim that a political realm requires public embodied visibility, because what appears publicly is the body, Smith provides an account based on the idea of disembodied online interaction. As he points out, politics prior to the Internet was never face to face in the first place. Instead, in order to transmit speech from one to many and many to one, politics has always relied on some form of technological innovation (such as an amphitheatre or the printing press) (30).

Smith strongly defends his thesis that Arendt's notions of politics does not offer a plausible understanding of online political participation. He argues that the Internet "not only serves as an artificial means to augment speech but can also serve as the infrastructure for a version of the political realm which can drastically enhance the potential visibility of speech and action by providing a common space that is much

less exclusive and more publicly available than offline equivalents such as a parliament or even a protest” (30). As critically reflected by Smith, the online social space not being political is becoming more and more of a problem. He sees the danger in new online political spaces becoming a social realm rather than a political realm if they are not common and accessible to all (39). From this he draws the conclusion that “activists must focus on ensuring that the privacy of individuals is protected online, while continuing to push for the creation of political spaces which are open, transparent, and accessible” (40).

2. Disembodied Online Subjectivity

In Chapter Three Smith makes a strong point of an online disembodied political subject asking how operating in an online political space changes, alters, or reorients the political subjectivation process. The main argument here can be summarised as follows: Entering an online political realm automatically pushes people into a subjectivation process (46). The author argues that the online political realm allows individuals to stripe away from their offline identity. They are able to do so by hiding their identity, which is according to Smith the source of prejudices surrounding skin colour, sex, economic class, or cultural identity. As Smith puts it:

The act of going online can be emancipatory in itself, as a person’s offline minority status can be obscured, allowing individuals to easily emerge from their minority position which are used to disqualify them from taking part in offline politics. When one’s identity is the source of prejudice, to keep it hidden online makes revealing oneself as a unique individual with unique thoughts and opinion much easier. (48)

As I will argue in the final part of this review, Smith’s argument does not hold because it lacks an important aspect related to political participation: namely the danger of structural discriminations. However, Smith clarifies that the erasure or withdrawal from identity that is experienced when entering an online pseudonymous political space does not mean that we lose our private identities altogether. Instead of eliminating our private identities when speaking politically we experience them as wholly contingent and as something which has been the basis of political subjectivity. In this sense, we speak universally and not as an undifferentiated member of an identity whose concerns are only related to that specific group (48-49). Regarding the term “universal emptiness”, Smith gives the example of a movement that cannot be reduced to a singular identity or situation; therefore its “emptiness” enables plurality:

The political subject as universal means that the subject’s speech and action is relevant to all and is addressed to the public, while its emptiness enables plurality, as there are no specific qualifications or positive attributes that someone must have in order to become a subject. (41)

3. Participation in Times of the Internet

In Chapter Four, Smith addresses the broader concept of political participation and asks what political subjects in an online political realm actually do? Although Smith is not clear about what the practical implementation of his ideas could look like he

argues that a new vision of practical participatory politics is necessary, and that the Internet has the capacity to reinvigorate the debates on political participation (80). As I will argue in the final part his notion of participation fails to offer a critical horizon. Rather than addressing a critical activity his approach occurs more as an ideal theory. In more concrete terms, in Smith's view a political subject operating within an online political realm can vastly improve political participation by simplifying participation and making it more accessible. According to Smith, participation is one of the most basic requirements for politics, as the ability to speak and be heard and to take part in action is essential for any attractive understanding of politics. As he states:

The goal is to participate in government, not merely to be able to talk about what the government is doing with other people. [...] Instead of positing the Internet as a communications tool, alternative space, or useful supplement, the real potential lies in placing the infrastructure of politics online. (81)

4. A Call for Conflictual Online Spaces

In Chapter Five, Smith builds on a fundamental insight of Chantal Mouffe's agonistic democracy theory, which is that conflict is an inevitable outcome of the basic fact of human plurality and the primary driver of politics. In order to reinvigorate and transform politics into something more participatory and by placing it online, he advocates for participating in conflicts and disagreements on political issues, rather than trying to develop online political spaces where conflicts are reconciled or avoided. The author asks: "If all conflict disappeared, then what would political participants have left to do?" (97) According to Smith, we have to aim for the availability of conflictual spaces which help foster productive forms of conflict against the challenge of echo chambers, customised and personalised technology, filter bubbles and trolls. Enabling spaces that accept and embrace conflicting views is productive in fostering plurality and subject formation. Finally, he proposes that new algorithmic structures could be specifically designed to manage online political discussion maintaining the ability to disagree.

5. Conclusion: Offline Exclusions, Online Problems

Smith's intervention in the debate of political participation and the role of the Internet is an important challenge to the current political theory of democracy, where questions of the online political realm are often too easily dismissed. Here the book provides interesting insights, especially in clarifying the idea of an online political subject, which he elaborates in Chapter Two.

He makes a convincing case for an online disembodied subject which is capable of withdrawing from its own identity and entering a situation of universal emptiness. But I also found much to challenge. Turning back to the argument of the book, that politics can be reinvigorated and transformed into something more participatory and agonistic by placing it online, I want to critically reflect on the following two points: structural exclusions and political theory as a critical activity.

1.) Structural exclusion and other challenges in an online political realm

Smith's argument that the Internet opens up the potential for a political space and political subject formation process that is unavailable elsewhere is a provocative one (129). He seems to draw a blind eye to the challenges which affect both the offline and the online political realm. He tends to elide the crucial question linked to democracy that is the limited access to participation and decision-making as a consequence of structural exclusions. Smith's treatment of political participatory issues never pushes the conversation beyond the discussion that individuals get excluded because of other prejudices concerning skin colour, gender, sexual orientation, economic class, or cultural identity. As a result, Smith struggles to problematise structural exclusions in the first place. Even worse, there is the risk of reproducing structural discriminations by turning a blind eye towards this issue and therefore to relativise it.

Furthermore, Smith has little to say about post-fascist movements that have also taken shape and operate online. It seems that he remains abstract when talking about anti-politics. More conflicting examples about how certain social structures get reproduced online would have been nice to read here. For instance, he does not elaborate on the increased automation of social relations taking place online. Contrary to Smith, for whom the "key to understanding online disembodied subjectivity is that when we use the Internet to discuss politics, we are primarily interacting with other people and not with a computer, smartphone, or other web-enabled device" (53), I do think it is important to pay attention to the social relationships which are pre-formatted by technology which deploys – for instance – filters, algorithms, auto-functions, fake news and bots. These forms of "artificial stupidity" spread through media and can be seen as the opposite of what we usually call "artificial intelligence", and must be considered as a powerful instruments when it comes to processes of political participation and decision-making.

2.) Ideal theory rather than critical activity

The innovative potential of the book lies in showing how an online layered politics might operate. However, in doing so the author reveals the need for a more reflexive approach to the possibilities for its implementations. Smith reflects on the political realm and subjectivity but not so much on political agency itself. Although Smith stresses that the Internet provides possibilities to usher a new form of radically democratic politics, he does not specify his notion of "radically democratic politics" (1). As I see it, his "radical" argument implies the assumption that by placing politics online the idea of democracy as participation AND decision-making can more successfully be realised. Although his call for placing politics online is ubiquitous, the offers of his approach seem rather timid. It is not only questionable whether it can provide adequate answers to the big democratic challenges, the upsurge of nationalist governments and right-wing movements and the growing discomfort with liberal democracy, but also to examine their real connection with people's everyday experiences. Additionally, the examples used to underline his argument that more participation can be reached by placing politics online are lacking a connection to recent experiments like the political parties Podemos or Syriza. Furthermore, the pool of movements mentioned by Smith, which include the Arab Spring and Occupy, misses current examples such as the anti-austerity movement 15-M, the many occupations of public squares, Gezi Park, Nuit Debout, DiEM25 and the Women's March. This is surprising considering that Smith refers to present phenomena such as the election of Trump, the victory of the Leave campaign in the Brexit referendum

of 2016 and the rise of the alt-right or post-fascism. To sum up: Smith's approach seems to be more an ideal theory than a critical activity.

About the Author

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Rahel Süß is a political theorist, PhD student and lecturer. Her research and writings focus on experimental radical democracy. She is the author of the book *Collective Agency. Gramsci – Holzkamp – Laclau/Mouffe* (German title: *Kollektive Handlungsfähigkeit, Turia + Kant*, 2nd. Edition 2016) and the initiator and co-editor of the magazine *engagée* for political theory, activism and art: www.engagee.org