

Two New Critical Internet Studies-Books: Marcus Breen's "Uprising" and Eran Fisher's "Media and New Capitalism in the Digital Age"

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* Breen, Marcus. 2011. *Uprising. The Internet's unintended consequences*. Champaign, IL: Common Ground. ISBN 978-1-863-35866-8.

* Fisher, Eran. 2010. *Media and new capitalism in the digital age. The spirit of networks*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 978-0-230-61607-3.

1. Introduction: There's a Riot Goin' On!

The shooting of Mark Duggan by the London police on August 4th 2011 in Tottenham triggered riots in London areas such as Tottenham, Wood Green, Enfield Town, Ponders End, Brixton, Walthamstow, Walthamstow Central, Chingford Mount, Hackney, Croydon, Ealing and in other UK areas such as Toxteth (Liverpool), Handsworth (Birmingham), St. Ann's (Nottingham), West Bromwich, Wolverhampton, Salford, or Central Manchester.

Parts of the mass media started blaming social media for being the cause of the violence. *The Sun* reported on August 8th: "Rioting thugs use Twitter to boost their numbers in thieving store raids. [...] THUGS used social network Twitter to orchestrate the Tottenham violence and incite others to join in as they sent messages urging: 'Roll up and loot'". *The Telegraph* wrote on the same day: "How technology fuelled Britain's first 21st century riot. The Tottenham riots were orchestrated by teenage gang members, who used the latest mobile phone technology to incite and film the looting and violence. Gang members used Blackberry smart-phones designed as a communications tool for high-flying executives to organise the mayhem". *The Daily Mail* wrote on August 7th that there are "fears that violence was fanned by Twitter as picture of burning police car was re-tweeted more than 100 times". And also, as usual in moral panics, the call for policing technology could be heard. *The Daily Express* (August 10th, 2011) wrote: "Thugs and looters are thought to have sent messages via the BlackBerry Messenger (BBM) service to other troublemakers, alerting them to riot scenes and inciting further violence. Technology writer Mike Butcher said it was unbelievable the service had not already been shut down. He said: 'Mobile phones have become weaponised. It's like text messaging with steroids – you can send messages to hundreds of people that cannot be traced back to you.' Tottenham MP David Lammy appealed for BlackBerry to suspend the service". The police published pictures of rioters recorded by CCTV and asked the public to identify the people. The mass media published these pictures. *The Sun* called for "naming and shaming a rioter" and for "shopping a moron". The mass media also reported about citizens, who self-organized over social media in order to gather in affected neighbourhoods for cleaning the streets. After one a few month before had been told we had "Twitter revolutions" and "Facebook revolutions" in Egypt and Tunisia, one now heard about "Twitter mobs", "Facebook mobs" and "Blackberry mobs" in the UK.

The mass media presented a simplistic picture about the role of the Internet in society. And yet these discussions and the riots itself showed that it has become so obvious today that we do not simply live in a society, but that we live in capitalist societies and that capitalism needs to be considered as the context of the Internet. The two books that are subject of this review are all about analyzing the Internet in light of this context.

2. Uprising!

Marcus Breen's book *Uprising. The Internet's unintended consequences* is about proletarianization in the age of the Internet. Cultural Studies, Political Economy and Critical Theory inform Breen's approach. His book is a work in the field of Critical Media and Communication Studies. Breen draws on the approaches of thinkers like Walter Benjamin, Edward P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, Oskar Negt & Alexander Kluge, Thorstein Veblen, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, or Raymond Williams. In chapters 1 and 2, the notion of proletarianization is explained and defined in a cultural context. Breen connects the concept of proletarians to the subaltern, the underclass, the lack of means of subsistence, irrationality, the abject and transgressive knowledge on the Internet. Internet proletarians are consequence of the negative dialectic of the Enlightenment in the age of the Internet. Due to the Internet, proletarian subculture would today become more visible. The context of proletarianization today would be neoliberal capitalism. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 explain that the (up)rising of the underclass on the Internet is an unintended consequence of capitalism and the Internet. This development is the other, negative side and consequence of bourgeois life in capitalist society. Chapter 6 connects Internet proletarianization to the concepts of rationality and irrationality. The notion of unbounded irrationality is introduced. Chapter 7 discusses US IT policy as context of proletarianization. Chapters 8 and 9 outline specific examples of Internet proletarianization – online pornography and online Jihadism. Political studies of the Internet tend to focus on movements that nicely fit into the liberal worldview, that researchers positively identify with and that fit the picture of a liberal civil society and a pluralistic public sphere. Typical examples are the ecological movement, the movement for democratic globalization, the feminist movement, the human rights movement, or the anti-war movement. The darker side of movements, like fascist movements' or religious fundamentalists' use of the Internet, has been much less analyzed by Internet Research, which tells us more about the state of Internet Research than about the state of society. One of the reasons might be that these groups do not allow easy identification for liberals. Ignoring them allows to optimistically focus on stressing the participatory and democratic potentials of the Internet and absolves Internet researcher of having to think about alternatives to capitalism. Breen's two examples are well chosen because they give attention to phenomena that have thus far not been much studied.

Breen's proletarians constitute what Slavoj Žižek (2008, p. 428) termed "a proletarian position, the position of the 'part of no-part'" and what Hardt and Negri (2004) have described as the poor, who are part of the multitude: they are the unwaged, the homeless, the underemployed, illegal immigrants, etc. The poor, according to Hardt and Negri, are today "enormously creative and powerful" (p. 129) and they are seen as dangerous because they are considered as being "unproductive social parasites – thieves, prostitutes, drug addicts, and the like – or politically dangerous because they" are considered to be "disorganized, unpredictable, and tendentially reactionary" (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 130). Breen's book shows how the poor, the part of no-part, make use of the Internet.

Let's come back to the example of the UK riots. Breen's concept of the proletarians on the Internet allows us to grasp what happened. The underclass, troubled by misery, created itself visibility. It not only made itself visible by arbitrarily looting and burning down houses, shops and cars, but also made use of Blackberrys and social media for organizing itself. The use of these media was not the cause of the riots, but an organization tool supporting outbursts caused by decades of British neoliberalism. The calls for Internet and mobile phone surveillance were helpless attempts to rationalize and control the unbounded irrationality that came right out of British capitalism and hit the streets of London, Birmingham, Manchester and other English cities. So Breen's characterization of proletarianization fits excellently for the analysis of the UK riots. The British parts of no-part were "the expression of new social forms and unanticipated cultural attitudes manifest as outpourings of human activity" (p. 40) and are part of an "Internet proletariat" that is "bad and [...] in formation: it carries a Kalashnikov, a dildo, crack cocaine and dies and kills at will" (p. 45).

3. Ideology!

Eran Fisher's book *Media and new capitalism. The spirit of networks* is a study and critique of the ideology of the network society that has its origin in management thinking and has created myths about the Internet. Fisher's approach is informed by a combination of Boltanski and Chiapello's Sociology of Critique and Frankfurt School Critical Theory. Chapter 1 outlines different approaches for conceptualizing the relation of technology and society. Fisher stresses the need to analyze and criticize the ideologies that are connected to technologies in contemporary society. He especially stresses the importance of Boltanski and Chiapello's critique of the new spirit of capitalism. Fisher's book can be seen as an application of Boltanski and Chiapello's approach to Internet discourses, or what Fisher calls the digital discourse. He provides an extensive empirical analysis of how techno-deterministic thinking has shaped the writings in *Wired* magazine. Chapter 2 explains the notion of digital discourse and explains the empirical method employed in the book (critical discourse analysis). The empirical material is well chosen, as *Wired* magazine is the main spokesperson of the digital economy elite. It has been published since 1993 and is available as North American and European editions. *Wired* writers such as Kevin Kelly, Chris Anderson (who is the magazine's editor) and Nicholas Negroponte have in addition to their magazine contributions also published books that have both celebrated the Internet and neoliberal capitalism.

Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2007) argue that the new spirit of capitalism characteristic for the neoliberal turn of capitalism has incorporated the anti-authoritarian claims of the 1968 movement into capitalism so that the outcome was "the construction of the new, so-called 'network' capitalism" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007, p. 429). As a consequence, artistic critique – that calls for authenticity, creativity, freedom and autonomy in contrast to social critique that calls for equality and overcoming class (pp. 37f) – today "indirectly serves capitalism and is one of the instruments of its ability to endure" (p. 490).

Chapters 3-7 of Fisher's book analyze how the new spirit of capitalism shapes contemporary network society- and Internet-discourse. The discussion is organized around specific topics, namely the interplay of the Internet with markets (chapter 3), work (chapter 4), production (chapter 5), humans (chapter 6), and ontology (chapter 7). Chapter 3 shows that concepts such as distributed intelligence, spontaneous order, decentralization, chaos and flexibility are typical for neoliberal ideology and how they have been reproduced in *Wired's* writings about the Internet. Chapter 4 analyzes how the new spirit of networks makes use of the ideas of the blurring of the boundaries between work and leisure, workers and capitalists. The main implication of neoliberal ideology in respect to work is that we live in a post-class society, whereas in reality neoliberalism has resulted in a deepening of objective class divisions. Chapter 5 shows how the ideas of empowerment, democracy, participation, open source, crowdsourcing, emancipation, creativity, passion, flexibility, shape the new ideology in the context network production. Chapter 6 outlines how the digital discourse relates to the question of what it means to be human today. Various implications of the Internet for body, mind, identity, the self and the unconscious that the discourse identifies are discussed. The new ideology not only compares humans to computing technology, it rather also suggests that humans and technology become one in the form of cybernetic organisms. Chapter 7 presents the ontology that is ascribed to the Internet by the new ideology of networks. It shows how digital discourse "naturalizes, theologizes and teleologizes network technology" (p. 185). The new ideology considers progress due to network technology as being a natural law and inevitable. Digital discourse neglects negative aspects of technology and society and provides a profoundly undialectical picture of the Internet and society. The consequence, so Fisher, is that digital discourse "depoliticizes and neutralizes" (p. 209) the relation of technology and society. In chapter 8, the main lines of argument are drawn together in order to provide an overall picture of the new spirit of networks.

Fisher concludes that while the new spirit of networks has absorbed the artistic critique in order to stress the Internet's potential to overcome the lack of "individualism, authenticity, creativity, personal expression" (p. 218) in Fordism, it ignores "concerns for social emancipation" (218), i.e. top-

ics like income inequality, labour rights, job security, social security, welfare, etc – it ignores the topic of class and class critique. The main effect is the ideological legitimization and celebration of neoliberalism.

For Georg Lukács, ideology “by-passes the essence of the evolution of society and fails to pinpoint it and express it adequately” (Lukács, 1972, p. 50). An ideology is a claim about a certain status of reality that does not correspond to actual reality. It deceives human subjects in order to forestall societal change. It is false consciousness (Lukács, 1972, p. 83). One may therefore add that the new spirit of networks is an ideology precisely in Georg Lukács’ sense of the term as false consciousness: it proclaims that reality looks like in a certain way and that this reality is positive, whereas the reality of life in capitalism as such is precarious for many and is shaped by deepened class relations. It proclaims the substitution of class by a democratic world of labour, whereas in reality neoliberalism has deepened class inequality. There is a difference between claims that dominant actors try to communicate to the public and actual reality.

The history of modern media has also been a history of ideologies that mythologize information and communication technologies and thereby on the one side create moral panics that stress only negative effects for society and on the other side only celebrate positive consequences. They have lacked a dialectical understanding of the media and society (for the concept of the dialectical analysis of the media and society see: Fuchs, 2011, chapters 2+3). Take for example radio broadcasting, an information technology established in early 20th century. The new medium resulted in both techno-optimistic and techno-pessimistic speculations. So on the one hand commentators for example in a celebratory tone claimed that the radio “extends the hearing power of the human ear around the earth, or will do so, to enable anyone to listen to audible sounds anywhere else. Some day in the future man may even go out from his own planet and beyond his own atmosphere and if other planets are inhabited by sentient beings, he and they may find it possible to communicate” (*Popular Mechanics*, October 1926, p. 652). Others advanced cultural pessimistic assessments, saying for example that the effect of radio on children is that they “are actually frightened, or grow so nervous they can’t go to sleep afterward” and that they do not “set the table or do their homework” (*The Rotarian*, November 1938, p. 12).

Similar one-sided claims that neglect the complex dialectic of the media and society are today made about social media. Let’s return to the example of the UK riots. On the one hand there was the techno-pessimistic claim that the Internet caused the riots when commentators spoke of “Twitter mobs” and “Blackberry mobs”. On the other hand, there were reports about the emergence of an Internet “broom army” that “sweeps in to reclaim streets” in order to “clear up the debris”. “Armed with broom, brushes and rubber gloves, London’s defiant middle classes turned out in force to reclaim the streets after the most widespread night of violence on its streets for decades. They responded in their hundreds to calls on Facebook and Twitter, as well as radio and TV, to help to clear up the damage caused by looting, arson and violence by mobs on Monday night” (*The Times*, August 10th, 2011, p. 3). Claims about the “Facebook and Twitter-broom army” reflect exactly the “spirit of network” that “revolves around connectivity, flexibility, cooperation, decentralization, de-hierarchization, spontaneous ordering, creativity and play, ad hoc assemblages, and, most prominently of course, the very notion of networks [...] At the center of the spirit of networks [...] is network technology” (Fisher, p. 211). The myths about social media in the UK riots (and other rebellions, such as the political revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia) are surrounded by the techno-optimism that Eran Fisher characterizes as typical for the new spirit of networks as well as by a techno-pessimism that has throughout the history of modern media accompanied techno-optimistic claims. Both ideologies are similarly deterministic. Eran Fisher’s book is a ideology critique of Internet fetishism.

4. Revolution!

Maria Bakardjieva (2011, p. 61) argues in her contribution to the *Handbook of Internet Studies* that Critical Internet Studies in contrast to statistical and interpretative approaches seeks answers to normative questions relating to the Internet’s role in empowerment, oppression, emancipation, al-

ienation and exploitation. Critical Internet Studies would relate the analysis of the Internet to both domination and liberation. The field of Internet Studies has been dominated by an uncritical, positivistic mainstream that neglects issues about class, exploitation, capitalism, domination and emancipation. However, during the past few years, especially since the start of the new capitalist crisis in 2008, one can in general observe a rise of voices in the social sciences that question capitalism (see: Fuchs, Schafranek, Hakken & Breen, 2010). This has been accompanied by a renewed interest in the works of Karl Marx. The critique of capitalism and exploitation has returned and has also entered Internet Studies (Fuchs, Schafranek, Hakken & Breen, 2010). It seems that Critical Internet Studies is on the way of establishing itself as a new field within Internet Studies.

It is refreshing to see that it has become more common that concepts like proletarianization, class, exploitation, ideology and communism are being used in Internet Studies. Marcus Breen's book *Uprising* and Eran Fisher's book *Media and new capitalism in the digital age* are two excellent examples that show the rise of Critical Internet Studies. Critical Internet Studies advances the analysis of the Internet in the light of critiques of capitalism and capitalist ideologies. The future will show if it can build power and challenge the uncritical mainstream of Internet research. One thing is for sure: we are today witnessing demands for an alternative society. And as part of this struggle, we find demands for an alternative Internet. Boltanski (2011, p. 41) has in this context recently argued that critique in the era of neoliberalism has been characterized by "the absence of a 'project' or an 'alternative' to the present situation" and that today it would be the time for critique to discuss capitalism's "replacement by less violent forms of utilization of the earth's resources and ways of organizing the relations between human beings that would no longer be of the order of exploitation. It could perhaps then restore the word communism" (p. 159). We should today engage with books like the ones by Eran Fisher and Marcus Breen. They remind us of the need for struggling for a truly participatory Internet and a participatory democracy (Fuchs, 2011) and contribute to the establishment of intellectual means of struggle.

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