Report from the [4ᵗʰ conference of the Communist Alliance *Ums Ganze*](#) on the Question of Technology in Hamburg/Germany (November 24-26, 2016). An audio recording of the session in which I spoke can be found [here](#) (in German).

Can big data be a solution for the current existential crisis of the liberal-leftist progressives? Recently, Evgene Morozov concluded in a contribution for The Guardian that data populism has "a genuine advantage, but only if it understands that the traditional progressive agenda, like everything else these days, has been utterly disrupted by digital technology. Instead of denying it, progressive populists should use the data debate as an opportunity to re-establish their relevance to the crucial economic debates of today." In short, data is not evil and should be used, politicized and made sexy. As Morozov suggests, we should seize the opportunity, since the populist right are clueless about Silicon Valley and have little idea how today's 'network society' operates. Can data, the 'oil of the 21ˢᵗ century', provide economic growth and create new jobs, and even be the magic vehicle to redistribute wealth? Or is this just a false utopia?

This was the question hovering over a gathering of the German radical-left coalition *Ums Ganze* (claiming it all) in an auditorium building of the University of Hamburg. Unfortunately, Matteo Pasquinelli did not show up, but fortunately I ran into Sandro Mezzadra (Bologna), whose work on migration and logistics I admire. He didn't know the organizers either. Communication in advance had been scarce; maybe they were too busy, or subscribed to a mysterious data exchange diet. Over the past decade a 'neo-Communist' movement is on the rise in Germany, specially in the young, educated milieu. Thanks to the accelerationists, tech is now part of their agenda. But what's their take?

In an audience of 400 young people Sandro and I were the only ones with a laptop, and there were zero smartphones in sight; an anthropological singularity these days. The ones I spotted after a while were switched off and remained untouched. A lot has been written about the discipline of the German working class and this was an impressive evidence how these young comrades were determined to overcome capitalist temptations. The audience wasn't dominated by 'identitarian' activists. For both Sandro and me the event was an immense time machine experience, being transported back 30+ years ago when we both lived in West-Germany and admired the high-level political debates, the level of intellectual rigor, and the philosophical

rhetoric of the strategic discussions inside the autonomous movement. It made us wonder: are these next generation communists Luddites, geeks, or both? Do we deal here with a (new) division between the offline public life (in which we're all making notes on paper, as they all did), while using digital tools, hidden, in their private lives?



(Posters/slogans at the *Ums Ganze* conference. The first proclaims that "Communism = Soviet Power + Digitization of the entire Cosmos". The second one states: "Of the big myths that needs to be attacked, is the idea that future design is destined to originate in Silicon Valley.")

We're dealing here with the 'digital productive forces' debate. Insiders of Marxist terminology will be familiar with this key term that describes why capitalism seems so vital and energetic. According to Marx, it is the [productive forces](#) that make capitalism so revolutionary. Marx's admiration for the productive forces is a problem for the young, turbulent, and romantic German mind that, by its very nature, is skeptical about the destructive and repressive violence of the machine. How do we work ourselves through these ambivalent feelings that are driven by objective contradictions? *Ums Ganze* explicitly asks itself why the century-old debates about technologies and the left need to be repeated, time and again? What does it mean to be thrown from the Accelerationist admiration of the digital productive forces to a radical Luddite condemnation of everything digital within one sentence? After all, we're in Germany and these comrades can hardly be accused of being either profoundly confused or ruthlessly pragmatic. The two contemporary realities are deeply dialectic, so enjoy your synthesis. The central slogan of the event was: "No Future is also not a Solution." In the

run-up to the gathering, *Ums Ganze* was criticized for this potential sell-out to a reformist agenda (which in this context ends up in the accusation that they are war-mongers, complicit in organizing the next genocide).

How can we give our schizophrenic relation to technology a productive dimension? We might have to introduce a strong and appealing language that describes what's actually happening in the digital realm, one that overruns the inevitability of the managerial talk ('agile, sustainable, disruptive innovation'). Take the example of the computer file. In the dominant view this is merely a mix of data and code. What would happen if we shift our perspective and see files as an accumulation of labor? How much human labor does your phone or laptop contain? We tend not to think that way because Silicon Valley has taught us to think along the lines of the 'economy of the free'. In short: what would happen if computer science, internet criticism and IT journalism were all dominated by grandchildren of Harry Braverman and Ernest Mandel? Or if social media analysts were Gramsci pupils? Or even better: if we completely revamped critical theory, without any reference to $19^{th}$ and $20^{th}$ century figures. We could reconstruct the 'grand disconnect' that happened between historical Marxism and digital technologies, but that's only interesting for historians. What would happen if we were to take up the vanished threads again, and develop a 'digital Marxism' without historical references that would develop a deep understanding of today's digitized production processes *as such* (and not limit itself to the critique of the working conditions)?

The Hamburg gathering had a serious look into the two options of destroying or reforming digital network infrastructures? Have a good look again at your smart phone and choose: do we take the hammer and smash it, or the screwdriver, to deconstruct and reprogram its software and hardware architecture? Whilst outside the whole world is nervously clicking, trying to figure out the meaning of Trump, the German perspective is refreshingly radical, and detached. Why bother with the latest tweets and items on your Facebook Newsfeed if you can think through its underlying structures?

The radical left gathered in Hamburg could hardly be accused of techno-fetishism. The dialectical struggle is therefor somewhat a-synchronous. On the positive side of things, the digital has transformed itself, almost overnight, from a hype and a ghost to the core of the capitalist accumulation process. At the same time digital technology is seen as complicit with the neo-liberal project that has created unpresidented income inequality and

environmental damage. In the 'doom' scenario, technology is creating a vast army of 'surplus population'. The 'bare life' living condition is here seen as the last stage of the marginalized classes before their extermination in war and genocide. Proletarization is the general trend around the globe. However, these are no longer (possible) factory workers. For Marx, and many after him, the industrial proletariat was the embodiment of capitalist productive forces. This is no longer the case. The entire world has become a factory and the inability to define where the borders of the factory is (both in terms of time and space), is precisely what defines the 'precarious condition'.

What seems utterly absurd for outsiders is a thrilling exercise for all those aliens from outer space among us that are ready to debate the most unlikely of all scenarios: what we are going to do after a revolution in Germany. This was seriously discussed in Hamburg without any irony. If we were to develop a 100 day program, what infrastructure should be taken over immediately, what can be used, and what should be switched off immediately? One can have a good laugh about such naive romanticism but this is what happens when you reach the upper limits of Hegelian thought and allow yourself the luxury (or necessity) to move up to the level of 'totality'. Slavoj Zizek has always understood this (whereas many other theorists and academic, including many in Cultural Studies, lost themselves at the micro-level of issues and trends). A similar larger-than-life angle that was raised is the 'Bilderverbot' (prohibition of images). Again, why not negate the entire world and pretend we can overcome Instagram, YouTube, television and film, in one radical move?

This is all liberating, at least for a moment: stop searching for the revolutionary subject. The avant-garde won't need to be re-invented and can be suspended. Let's fast-forward history, it is happening already. The multitude and precariat won't have a heavy responsabilty as a becoming class. The commons-based plan economy can now take off tomorrow. The computer came too late for the Soviet Union and East-Germany, but now that everyone is equipped with the unimaginative, unlimited computational power, if the collapse is immanent, why not prepare today for the take-over of the whole bloody network, tomorrow?