

Including intro:

<http://non.copyriot.com/economy-and-power-of-the-net-interview-with-geert-l-ovink/>

By Achim Szepanski

*AS: Alexander Galloway speaks of ‘reticular pessimism’, a criticism of the network as the dominant model (of financial capital) to interpret reality. Galloway thinks that the network, through its dominance and ubiquity, forecloses everything that is not a network. It makes the world and its potentialities only graspable through the network. What’s your position on this?*

GL: The dominance of the network logic may have been prevalent 10 or 20 years ago but has been rapidly replaced by entities of a higher order, the platform or the ‘stack’, as Benjamin Bratton likes to call it. Judge for yourself if this is a Hegelian synthesis. The network logic that Galloway describes is still at work but is no longer the deciding instance. Let me give the example of your Facebook ‘friends’. These are networks in place. Without them, Facebook would no longer work. However, they no longer matter – they run in the background and their meaning has been emptied out. The social is in place, it no longer needs to be built up. Import all contacts, and there you go. In the case of the ‘internet of things’, it is questionable if all objects will truly be networked in the near future. We, the consumers, might not let that happen, and the dream of all things networks has already been recognized by many as a totalitarian one that will never work (for us). It is also, in the end, an idealistic construct. In my essay, *The Principles of Networking*, I have explained why networks are fragile in nature, easily reach a point of entropy, and then fall apart. Networks only work for a little while, much unlike their bigger brothers, the platforms, which are much more robust. In short, social networking has become automated and no longer excites us. Business no longer talks about it. This gives us, ironically, also the possibility to rethink networks and rebuild them in the shadows of the centralized platform publicity—a tactic that alt-right and other right-wing populist movement utilize best, leaving the liberal left in a panic mode as their ‘discourse policing’ no longer has a long-term effect because of their organizational weaknesses.

*AS: In „Social Media Abyss“, you write that “tomorrow’s challenge will not be the internet’s omnipresence but its very invisibility. That’s why Big*

*Brother is the wrong framing.” The most profound technologies in our age are those that disappear. We don’t know the algorithm of the social networks. As we speak, technologies weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life. There is merger going on of participatory technology, production of metadata, production of algorithmic governance and other network effects that constitutes a kind of vertical flatness or an invisible digital wall. What do you think of invisibility as part of algorithmic governance?*

GL: I can understand the background of the term, but I am careful to use it. I am not a mathematician, lawyer, or a computer scientist. I can neither read nor write an algorithm and depend on the knowledge of others who can. Computer literacy amongst ordinary users and non-tech expert is low and has in fact gone down (and I am no exception here). The rise of algorithms is part of what Frank Pasquale calls the Black Box Society (also the title of his book). These algorithms are secret, we cannot study them. Much like in Plato’s parable of cave, we can only see their shadows and guess what they’re like. In a way, algos are the follow-up of the proprietary software, which the free software movement has been fighting since the 1980s. To then use this term in combination with the term governance (as Michel Foucault used it) is ambitious. The concept is good, I support it, but it is simply not present. There is no governance of algorithms by some form of power or regulatory regime. It is something we can demand. If you look at Bitcoin and the rapidly expanding universe of crypto-currencies and the blockchain, there is even less (internal and external) governance than in the days of the classic internet. All this only adds to the problem of invisibility and the growing desire “to make things visible” (Latour).

AS: *When you speak about invisibility, you mean that a growing part of the population is forced to integrate the internet in their everyday life and struggles?*

GL: Most certainly. The common German perspective is an anomaly in this case. As a prosperous Western country, the internet and smart phone in particular were seen until recently as luxury items, a fad for a small group of geeks and fashionistas. The reason for this was the communication abundance that already existed (particularly in the early-mid 1990s) that had a particular order and logic and worked for everyone, not only for Burda and Bertelsmann, but also for the progressive, cultural left. No one at the offices of Texte zur Kunst or Spex or Die Tageszeitung were happy with the arrival

of the World Wide Web. For them, the internet remains something foreign and alien, from the world of geeks where others make the profit (a correct albeit conservative point of view). Geeks are not like ordinary engineers that work for the corporations and elite. It is their 'relative autonomy' that's the source of the problem. Their ability to 'make worlds' is what gives them magic powers.

For ordinary people, elsewhere on planet Earth, the arrival of these communication technologies meant something entirely different. The internet cafes, and then later the smart phones, became vital tools for the coordination of their increasingly busy, complex daily lives in which the urbanized population had to travel and work more and more hours (for less money), having to stay in contact with family, friends, and the larger tribe, even when they lived on opposite sides of the globe. Internet is, in part, also a necessary distraction (see the work of Petra Löffler). After a decade of initial excitement and ever-changing platforms and additional services, we're now in the next phase of consolidation and regression (if you like). Social media are becoming boring, and yes, more national. The dream of global platforms is over and is only being pushed by compromised liberal players such as Google and Facebook.

*AS: What does the invisibility of the 'net mean for a new politics of darkness, for a specific kind of resistant invisibility or anonymity or, let's say, a specific kind of blackness? On the one side, we have the black box as an opaque technological device for which only the inputs and outputs are known. On the other side, we have the Black Bloc: a tactic of anonymization often associated with the direct-action wing of the left. Galloway said that somehow these two things come together near the end of the twentieth century. Would you agree?*

GL: And we have Mbembe's brilliant Critique of Black Reason... I am just saying that when we use the word blackness, we might create some unnecessary confusion. I do not want to repeat the philosophy of color here. There was and will be multiple meaning of the color black, and white, and red for that matter (and the history of the combination of these three). The Black Bloc has been around since the 1970s. Anonymous cultures of mask-design have been with us for millennia. What Galloway stresses is the emergence of a political culture we can be proud of as a rare sign of community in action. If you do not like black, come up with something else that unites us. Create new stories. The left has all but given up its common

symbols, and this is what sets us back right now. The naïve idea of ‘unity in diversity’ (the rainbow coalition) is a beautiful idea on paper that is working against us in these dark times. The main problem we need to overcome now is precisely ‘networked individualism’ and the aversion to get organized, a ‘deep meme’ that infected us all, and can be blamed to the rise of neo-liberalism.

AS: *What is your opinion in this context about Culp’s Dark Deleuze?*

GL: Andrew Culp is one the most promising critical thinkers in the United States. I can highly recommend this book. His paradigmatic break with the harmless New Age positivism of most Deleuzians opened up a whole different field of radical thought and new perspectives for art and activism. He is one of the few who anticipated Bannon from a philosophical point of view, assisted by prophets of darkness such as Eugene Thacker but also Thomas Frank (journalism), The Baffler circle, Zero Books and Angela Nagle (cultural studies).

Contrast this, if you like, with Charles Clover’s insightful study *Black Wind, White Snow* about the rise of new nationalism in Russia. It’s a book about “why bad ideas win out over good ones” — the right question for our digital epoch. Everywhere we go, we see contemporary adoptions of fascist thinkers, in particular Carl Schmitt, but Heidegger remains popular too in even wider circles. The fascination for geo-politics in the present climate is remarkable and not widely discussed. Instead, all the focus is on Pepe the Frog. The primacy of culture has never been so widely felt (with the exception of universities where the articulation of ‘negative’ ideas can no longer play a role). There is a great need for philosophies that can fill the gap of daily emptiness, address real existing resentments, help to overcome depression and, for some, become a “total program for life and action” as Clover puts it. For sure, more studies will follow that reemphasize the importance of the fringe. Mainstreamers will not like this.

I am a bit wary of the antifa ‘know your enemy’ strategy. In the end, Foucault’s ‘non-fascist’ strategy should prevail. What do we have to offer? We can fight them in the streets, and we should, but that’s not enough. We should not mirror them, and we should stay away from the poisoned fascist sources. To study the bad guys might be necessary in some instances, but we have to be prepared by taking the anti-serum beforehand.

The work of Gabrielle Coleman on anon and geek culture is also important in

this respect, albeit for a different reason. She indicates the movements such as the alt-right may have been prepared in the shadow of regulated events (called 'news'), but that they never operate in a vacuum. This has also been my experience. The tech world is dominated by ideological fights between right and left wings, between statist liberal globalists and anti-state libertarians and so on. Bitcoin is a good example of a current forum where titanic ideological forces clash, without anyone in the 'official reality' taking notice. Everyone should read Culp for the simple reason that ideas matter. Reread your Hannah Ahrendt and Isaiah Berlin, please (insert your own classics on the history of ideas here).

We need a counter-hegemonic agenda that beats both the austerity policy of the liberal globalists and the xenophobic national revolutionaries. How do we attack the austerity agenda (see DIEM25), how do we disrupt the murderous neo-liberal consensus cult? Attack the technocratic pragmatists around you, ruthlessly, who still claim that ideas no longer matter. Unmask them. Their natural order is done and over with. Question their spreadsheet truth. The liberal consensus has imploded, even if that is not immediately visible in Germany (where events always arrive later, or simply never happen). This is easier said than done, and we need more inspiring examples in this direction. We need to get on the offensive, and Culp helps us to stand up to cut the crap. I do not need to explain the urgency here, reading two minutes of the 'news' headlines will do.

*AS: Another aspect, as you said, is the internet as a facilitating ideology, a term you borrowed from Arthur Kroker.*

GL: My encounters with the Krokers, and in particular The Virtual Class that Arthur wrote with Michael Weinstein, had a major impact on me in 1993-94 when Pit Schultz and I started nettime. Here is my reading of the term. A facilitating ideology is not major but minor and presents itself, as all cleaver ideologies do, as self-evident. The major ideology here is neo-liberalism. The internet merely facilitates. Procedures and protocols are technical and neutral, not moral. The idea of disruption, which only came up late in the cyber story, is openly confrontational (think of Uber) and marks the end of the silent phase of facilitation when the power of the Big Five no longer could be denied, and lobbying in Washington DC and Brussels became necessary. Another term of the Krokers is also relevant here: the idea that technology is 'harvesting' us, that it eats up our attention and bodies (think of spine injuries etc.).

AS: *You state that surveillance is for the masses, and privacy for the elites. At the same time, invisible algorithms can make or break our reputation, they decide about the lives of both workers and entrepreneurs, Algorithms decide if you get credit or not, if you eligible for health care and as part of high frequency trading they are an important element of the financial system, that can literary ruin the lives of the proletariat, while elites operate offline in order to strengthen their power.*

GL: All true. So how can we hit back? Would it be possible to counter-strike the financial markets? In early debates amongst members of the Deleuzian Robin Hood 'hedge fund' (before it was turned into a blockchain startup), it was discussed if people could hedge against a next financial crisis. I am a big fan of the original George Soros strategy of shorting the world. If smart investors can make money out of the next crash, why don't we? We should not merely see ourselves as eternal debt victims. A few days ago, Julian Assange announced that he himself wrote an algorithm, a kind of bot that was ultimately responsible for the 'leak' of the US Democratic Party emails of John Podesta. What's interesting here: can we transfer that knowledge? Can investigative journalism make use that software to get sensitive data? Is this a question of open source, or also one of (lacking) computer literacy? Let's stop complaining and hit back. For decades, I have been interested in the grey zone between hacking and leaking. The 2010/2011 period of Wikileaks and Anonymous is still a treasure trove for new strategies and alliances, but also dilemmas, which, for me, equals Arab Spring and Occupy. Strangely enough, we're still processing that extra-ordinary period and learning lesson from what went wrong then, in terms of activist strategies.

AS: *Communication technology nowadays constructs and configures the social as relations beyond class relations. You are interested in "organized networks" that are configured in the dark and as a new collective form of resistance. Tell us more about them. You write: "What is lacking is a collective imagination. (..) We need to develop dissident knowledges." Stiegler speaks in this context of the "proletarianization of knowledge through algorithmic governance and automation." How can we come to a dis-automatization of knowledge?*

GL: Organized networks, a concept that I am working with my Sydney friend Ned Rossiter, are a possible answer to the dramatic situation that Bernard Stiegler paints. I am merely a media theorist and internet critic. Bernard tries to bring our critical insights to a much higher level, the one of (French)



philosophy. I admire his project. He is one of the few contemporary thinkers who have taken up the challenge of the media, the digital, and the internet, and has been doing this systematically for the past 20-25 years. And I am proud to be part of his circle (Ars Industrialis) and visit his summer schools. That is 'dis-automization' in practice: disrupt our own unconscious routines and habits, deconstruct the self-evident concepts, tools and images, and discuss, together, in ever-wider circles, how the commons and peer-production could look like.

We try to practice all this with our small centre in Amsterdam. Many other initiatives are part of these networks. It is not all that hard. We need to get to know each other, then work together and not run away with the first slight tension, conflict, or set-back. Yes, I believe in organized networks as an alternative to both 'networked individualism' (the neo-liberal community model that deteriorated into social media conglomerates) and the regressive move back to the political party that is presented as an alternative to the discredited horizontalism of recent social movements. Our first challenge is to overcome eventism. We should not have to start all over again each time. The next networks will be driven by strong ties, not friendship (Facebook has all but discredited that term) or comradeship, but cooperative forms of making politics.

*AS: Internet users pay for access, hardware, and software but not for content. How can we pay people that produce content? The current platforms seem do nothing to accommodate the rising group of precarious workers.*

GL: I would recommend reading some chapters in Social Media Abyss. I can't repeat that all here. Our MoneyLab project is still running, the second reader appears late 2017. In general, I am in favor of a general redistribution of wealth (presumed that the global wealth in the 'financial markets' will not all have evaporated after net crash). There are short-term solutions, which are not all ideal, such as crowd funding and the subscription system, and long-term automated peer-to-peer solutions, which groups such as Commonfare are working on. The issue here would be to participate more into the ideological struggles inside the blockchain and cryptocurrency teams. This far more urgent than the liberal 'privacy' concerns that has been dominating the German geek agenda for decades. Money has gone digital, and that opens up whole new challenges — and possibilities.

*AS: We are all part of a supply chain of data, produced through participation*

*in the financial system, the security system and the open internet that is mined to produce financial wealth. What new forms of resistance have to be developed to fight the deep relation of capitalisation and infrastructure (debt strikes, blockades, riots etc.)?*

GL: Certain forms of appropriation and commodification are inevitable. We should stop worrying about these dangers, as paranoid fear may as well paralyze us. There are desirable forms of the gift (let's discuss Burning Man!), sharing practices and community property, no matter how much the 'sharing economy' has become a compromised term, thanks to Airbnb and Uber. We need to share memes (compressed attractive concepts that travel fast and light) and experiences (both the good and bad ones) and overcome fractionalism (yet organize in groups). Try out as much as you can! Presume that you are with many, that there are no 'personal' problems. Power is abstract these days. That's certainly a minus. This is why it will be major challenge to translate all we do into the language of images and slogans. Populism comes with easy solutions within the known national boundaries. It is up to us break through these regressive walls and show that new form of collective work and ownership is beneficial for all.

To reduce one's daily data output is certainly possible, but make no mistake, there is no easy way to disappear and get off the grid. First of all, I do not believe in individual measures. If we leave this or that platform, let's do it together, otherwise it becomes a lifestyle choice. Resistance is not a moral duty but a collective uprising, to say NO, we don't take it any longer. Usually this is triggered by a small group that takes the lead. These activists are neither leaders nor avant-garde. I admire them, but also know about the high personal costs of being the first to stand up in the frontline and then not give up or give in. We have forgotten most techniques of mobilizations, and this is the key weakness of most political discontent that starts to express itself. Riots do not occur overnight. We know that. How do we deal with real dangers of ethnic tensions in this light? How can discontent be 'democratized' and shared by different groups? Can we take power when a political vacuum occurs? Are you ready for that, fully? Otherwise others might take control. Can we defend public infrastructure, or our own, for that matter?

AS: *It's said that reducing labour time under capitalism would bind the people in their free time even more to the supply chains of the net. Universal basic income would be the ultimate triumph for capital, finally subsuming*



*everything into the market and 24/7 capitalism: doing more unpaid work with every like, chat, tag and poke being turned into profit.*

GL: True, but on the other hand... more and more people see the downside of the economy of the 'free'. Silicon Valley's power is no longer unquestioned. The digital is out of the box and has left the Californian West Coast. There is lots of evidence for that. With power also comes responsibility, and in the case of the West, also accountability. In a few years, the adolescent trick of not paying taxes no longer works. We're mapping and monitoring Facebook and Google in a similar way as we did with Shell during the Apartheid days, with Monsanto in the case of genetic manipulated seeds. It all takes times. Going after their tax evasions, in the wake of Panama Papers, is an effective investigative journalism strategy that's paying off.

Social media critique in many Western countries has so far been moralistic, driven by resentment of (old media/elite) interests, focused on making individual user feel guilty. Show me the first major Marxist study of Silicon Valley. Indeed, it has yet to be written. Where is the Rudolf Hilferding of crypto capital? We have to wait another decade for that one? Who's going to write the theory of the financial intellect? I am not joking. These are urgent matters. The digital regime moves on and right now merges the computer code with money. In the 1980s, after it had lost its reference to gold and became digital, money went to heaven (as we used to say, back then). These days, we can no longer say money is a simulacrum. Baudrillard was the last one to so. He was right back then. But we, the children of postmodernity, have to live with the new crypto reality. To look down on this whole regime as a 'system of signs' is an innocent, rather weak gesture. What lacks here is critical insider-knowledge that is necessary to get involved into the politics of it all. If we want to beat financialization, we need to know what we're talking about. We need to politicize radical thought again. It is not enough to condemn it all as capitalist conspiracies.

AS: *The alt-right rapidly added tech to their arsenal. The Left should not copy the alt-right and needs to mobilize faster, becoming more coherent in its use of technology.*

GL: Agreed, I am really open to that. We need other strategies, that much is clear. As you say, we need to mobilize faster and maybe also get away from the old-school focus on G8 or G20 summits of a bunch of presidents and prime ministers. This reflects such as old-fashioned understanding where power is ultimately allocated. Power these days is abstract, it is digital and

moves around at the speed of light. To go faster is a bit ridiculous. This is ultimately the problem that I have with the accelerationists. The computers and networks we use are fast enough. We do not need to slow them down, I am not arguing for 'slow politics' either. What we need are sustainable networks that do not fall apart over night.

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