

We do not prefer Facebook

A conversation with Spanish social critic César Rendueles by Geert Lovink

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Lately I have been preoccupied with the question of European answers to the techno-libertarian onslaught of Silicon Valley. Why are so many Europeans blind to the monopoly strategy of the new intermediaries such as Amazon, Google, Facebook, but also Microsoft, and embrace their online services without any second thoughts? Where is our digital intelligentsia, the public intellectuals who grew up with the Internet? There is plenty of use, the stats for Europe look bright. And there is just as much concern about privacy: the stream of hacker and whistleblower scandals is not drying up. But for an informed view that goes beyond journalistic reportage we need something else. What is lacking are not the geeks or business journalists who comment on the latest apps and gadgets but informed philosophers, thinkers who not only have the technical expertise but also enough knowledge about the political economy of the net to display self-confidence in debates. Where is the conceptual supremacy, the passion and rage of a German Jonathan Franzen, a Swedish dana boyd, a Romanian Andrew Keen? How can we surpass the resentments à la Roland Reuss and come up with a more imaginative, subversive attack on Amazon? The European cultural elite is still in a stage of denial, hoping and praying that the digital storms will blow over so that we can return to the normality of the good old newspaper and the Tagesschau at eight.



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In the age of Amazon redefining publishing, Netflix mixing up television, GroupOn attacking small businesses, Airbnb “disrupting” the rental market and Uber “targeting” the taxi business, what’s the response of the cultural sector? We can complain about the ruthlessness of the venture capital sharks, replacing a profitable set of businesses with unprofitable ones, and expect Brussels to do something about the new monopolies, for instance in markets such as book distribution, search and social media, but where are the European start-ups, relevant university courses and critical approaches in news reporting?

Twenty years ago, when Pit Schultz and I started the nettime initiative, we envisioned a trans-Atlantic dialogue between Europe and North America (and whoever wanted to join from elsewhere) to formulate an agenda for a “cultural politics of the net”. The idea was to strengthen ties inside Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. This would not only happen through meetings and online debates, collaborations and friendships but also through

crowdsourcing translations. This was supposed to happen as “mutual aid” in the context of “free cooperation”.

At a conference in Barcelona in June 2014 I ran into Madrid-based critic César Rendueles who told me about the success of his book *Sociofobia, El cambio político en la era de la utopía* digital in the Spanish speaking world, published late 2013. On the cover it reads: “the ideology of the network has generated a diminished social reality.” Rendueles (b. 1975) used to work for the cultural organization Círculo de Bellas Artes and now teaches at Complutense University, Madrid. I would characterize Rendueles’ approach as that of a straight forward academic, without the customary doubt, double meanings and postmodern cynicism, amplified by a clear populist-left set of demands (inspired by Latin-America) to re-nationalize public infrastructure, in this case the mix of telecom, knowledge production, education and media. This southern European variety of “cybersocialism” stands in contrast to the Blairist “third way” that originated in northwestern Europe and accepted limited state intervention in economic ownership. It is also distinct from a “commons” approach, where the commons are governed by an undefined coalition of “stakeholders” in which the real power of both monopoly corporate players and the state is obscured. Instead, Rendueles focuses on a more traditional analysis of economic and political institutions, one that may pave the way for political transformation in the technological field.

Why hasn’t *Sociofobia* been translated yet? Of course one can blame the slow politics of the publishing world with their outdated copyright system that hampers free cultural exchange within Europe and the absence of a subsidy system for translations of crucial cultural texts within the EU realm. How can Italian readers find out about the lively “post-Snowden” debates in Berlin? Should I perform the usual public self-criticism, admitting that I once preferred the sensual Italian over the harsh Spanish language – and now bear the consequences? Having said which, the book will come out in German (Suhrkamp) and in the United States – two years late. And I will be the first to read it. Time for an email interview, in English.

Geert Lovink: Can you tell us what *Sociofobia* is all about? When I heard the title I was confused, and intrigued. What would it mean to be “sociophobic” in the age of social media?

César Rendueles: For many years I have been interested in authors that analyze the weakening of social bonds in capitalist postmodernity: Richard Sennett, Robert Castel, Jacques Donzelot, Guy Standing and, more recently,

Karl Polanyi and Christopher Lasch. They all raise different ideas, but agree on two theses: first, we live in increasingly individualized societies, characterized by weak ties that generate many psychological, ethical, cultural and political problems. And second, social weakness is related to mercantilist processes. Market competition destroys the social fabric, the anthropological basis for the survival of any group of people. As Robert Putnam has shown empirically, the implementation of the neoliberal agenda from the seventies is associated with a massive undermining of civil society, “associationism” and community life in western countries.

My contribution to this theoretical tradition has been to analyze the relationship between processes of social weakening and emancipatory political projects. The political Left has indicated that democracy and social justice have institutional conditions – such as freedom of speech or the rule of law – but also material conditions: if you’re an illiterate who lives in the garbage dump of Managua, freedom of expression seems like a bad joke. I think emancipation implies certain social conditions too. Democracy, equality and freedom are impossible in the social wasteland of neoliberalism. It’s important not to confuse contemporary social atomization – a kind of random suffering-filled drift – with freedom as a complex project that requires some degree of cooperation and mutual support, as Martha Nussbaum has shown.

That was how I came to wonder about the political role of social media. I found it surprising that the contemporary process of social weakening coexists with a technological ideology that extols cooperation and community building when they are mediated by digital technologies and derided in any other case. For example, in the Basque Country lies one of the largest cooperatives in the world, the Mondragón Group, which employs 80,000 workers. However, it has received little academic attention. The media belittle it as an outdated model, and it has even been suggested that it has links with Basque terrorism. However, small technological cooperation projects with just a few people involved receive enormous attention and their failures and weaknesses tend to be overlooked.

Summarizing it for the sake of brevity, I think that hegemonic understandings of social media promote the generalization of an institutional model similar to the market. It involves a social and political mistrust that has important similarities with economic liberalism. Liberals believe that in complex societies it is impossible or extremely expensive to achieve

consensus through political deliberation. When we try to reach agreements in mass societies we always risk triggering violent conflict or the oppression of minorities. That is the reason why they think it is preferable to promote the commercialization of the greatest number of social areas. This should facilitate the emergence of spontaneous coordination that requires no discussion or agreement but is the result of the aggregation of preferences through the mechanism of supply and demand.

I think the enthusiasm for social media responds to a similar impulse: a deep wariness of democratic deliberation and, therefore, a commitment to spontaneous coordination. We do not feel able to think together and build institutions. That's why we seek technological aggregation mechanisms that unite us without reaching consensus. We do not feel able to do things together; but technology allows us to do them anyway.

I would define "sociophobia" as a distrust in the possibility that egalitarian political participation allows us to solve our collective challenges. And "cyber-fetishism" as the claim that communication technologies provide a solution to this problem by establishing some kind of social relation dense enough to allow cooperation, cool enough to not require deliberative processes. In *Sociophobia* my main interest is not technological theory but political criticism. Analysis of mainstream technological ideology can help us to redefine important aspects of the emancipatory project.

GL: Can I describe your approach as a sociological one? Do you work on the political economy of social media? Are these terms you would use?

CR: My background is primarily philosophical. However, I work in between epistemology and sociology. My focus is a classical one, close to the tradition of heterodox Marxists such as Karl Polanyi. Basically, we believe that the economy should be much less important in our lives and therefore we speak obsessively about economics. More seriously, the point is that in capitalist societies the market permanently limits the scope for democratic political intervention. The same is true in technology. A society whose economy is based on the pursuit of private profit is doomed to make a suboptimal use of many technologies. It is a dilemma that has deepened in social media. They are a test tube where we can observe not only the contradictions of capitalism but also of those who are opposed to it. The Internet brings to light the limitations of the market in taking over an environment of abundance, but also the limitations of some very rude anti-institutional critics. The networks offer immense political possibilities, but for them to be

realized we have to decide how much cooperation, market competition and public intervention we need.

I think that in order to overcome the failures of both the market and collaborative spontaneity we need more public (not necessarily governmental) institutional intervention. It is a classic proposal, but many people consider it radical or even provocative. The reason is that many technological discourses, including antagonistic ones, have been built on within an area bounded by the neoliberal agenda. Some activists of the open movement have adopted a rather Spartan attitude towards workers of the cultural industry. They say, “publishers, cinemas, newspapers, publishers and libraries must adapt or die”. As if that were the verdict of a kind of technological Darwinism. Not only does this seem vile, it is also counterproductive to free culture. To take advantage of the collaborative possibilities of technology we need legal tools that allow us to share content, but also profound institutional changes that protect creation and mediation. A large-scale public intervention in this area could have explosive effects. Copyleft needs a Marshall Plan to complement spontaneous collaboration and commercial activity. The copyright crisis can be turned from a problem into a solution if we develop public investment programs to socialize the benefits of digital technologies without harming authors and non-speculative mediators. We know it’s possible. Some time ago scientific research was a task that was only available to a wealthy few. We democratized access to research by linking it to public institutions such as universities.

GL: The definition of “social” seems to have been narrowed down to “group of friends’. Would it be possible to redefine the term “social media’? What’s the social anyway?

CR: The words “society” and “social” as we know them today already became widespread during the early stages of capitalism. They were part of a desperate search for tools that would aid an understanding of the dramatic historical transformations that were taking place. The term “social” designated the type of relationships we establish when the ancient communities that once gave meaning to a shared life disappear. The paradox was that in the new industrial and individualistic world the effects of social interactions were much more radical than in the past. The great cataclysms were not natural (such as poor harvests and epidemics) but of human origin: financial crises, unemployment... The difference was that one could do more than just kneel and pray. It was possible to mobilize others in order to try to

change things. In this sense, the term “social” was a political battlefield. In its definition, the alternatives available to each side in solving the problems of the time were at stake. Adam Smith defined society apophatically, through negations: society was the absence of aggression between individuals. Central European political elites tried to block growing social conflict through authoritarian state intervention, a bureaucratic substitute for life in common: der Sozialstaat.

The anti-capitalist position was more complex and contradictory. On the one hand, the leftists celebrated the destruction of the ideological and cultural chains of traditional communities. The most famous expression of this rejection of the past is a passage from the *Communist Manifesto* where Marx and Engels are impassioned in praising capitalism. The idea is, roughly, that capitalism has done half the work in relation to socialism by destroying the oppressions that limited individual freedom. On the other hand, anti-capitalists reject modern individualism, the decline of solidarity and the emergence of mass societies. It is a powerful intuition: as Terry Eagleton said, being an individual human being is not like being a individual peach, but a project we have to accomplish in common. This ambiguity posed a fundamental ethical dilemma for the political left. We want to be free individuals and at the same time, part of a network of deep and genuine solidarity that is not merely bureaucratic. We want an efficient economy that allows us to choose between different occupations and encourages talent. But we do not want a job market that requires us to compete with each other. It is what happens to us as tourists. We travel in search of wonderful places, and they would indeed be pristine, were it not for all those other people who have also come to visit these sites.

In contemporary technological discourse the word “society” is used on the assumption that it is beyond conflict and political dilemmas. Society is perfectly compatible with the liberal scepticism about the social. When Margaret Thatcher said “there is no such thing as society” many people thought it was a statement of ontological individualism. Actually, it was a political programme: what she meant was that she aspired to destroying the postwar political consensus that had been expressed through a particular understanding of society. Mainstream social media platforms are fully compatible with this project as a result of the logic of preference: my identity as an Internet user is my browsing history, that is, what I preferred up to that moment. In comparison, my social identity is related to both my preferences and commitments.

For example, I find absurd the widely accepted idea that we “choose” the romantic partners with whom we build a life together. In which catalogue did we browse in order to make that choice? The characteristic of deep interpersonal (social) bonds is that they are neither impositions – like forced marriages – nor mere expressions of preferences. The same goes for some of the personal experiences that we consider most valuable and the characteristics of a good life. Nobody *prefers* to get up at night to prepare a bottle for the newborn. Nobody *prefers* to participate in a boring political assembly. Nobody *prefers* to walk the dog at seven in the morning, in the rain. I would even say that nobody *prefers* reading Proust to turning on the TV to watch Big Brother. We need to embed social uses of technology in a critical theory of society and question the dominant motives that are used all the time.

GL: There is now an established discourse of American authors, most of them not academics, that are critical of Silicon Valley and that comment on the dominant Internet cultures and its corporations such as Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Amazon, Apple, Yahoo! and Twitter. We can think of Nicolas Carr, Andrew Keen, Evgeny Morozov, Jaron Lanier and Sherry Turkle. I suppose in the Spanish-speaking world there is the usual theory import with translations, speeches at IT business conferences and so on. What do you make of these public intellectuals and their agendas?

CR: I appreciate the work of all of them. I think it has been an important step to challenge the dominant consensus on technology. However, what I miss in their theories is a sharper political edge. An error that someone like Michel Bauwens from the P2P Foundation avoids. It is not enough to denounce the overestimation of the political or social role of technology and the power of large corporations. We also need to understand how these ideological dynamics are part of large socioeconomic processes related to capital accumulation in recent decades, for example, between the so-called “knowledge economy” and global financialization.

GL: The critical net discourse Made in Europe is thin. What stops European thinkers from getting involved? Internet has been around for a good two decades, also in Spain. Is this too a matter of labels and marketing?

CR: In the world of philosophy it is quite naturally, even proudly, accepted that a dichotomy exists between analytic philosophers (Anglo-Saxon) and continental ones (European), which in my opinion is a grotesque and

counterproductive division. European social scientists have fallen into a very self-indulgent reverie. We have not made an effort to use clear and understandable language. I think that has prepared us badly for technology analysis, which requires us to use a kind of conceptual Esperanto to talk with people from very different disciplines: computer science, art, laws, philosophy, biology... This has been very negative for two reasons. First, the European theoretical legacy is powerful and has much to contribute in this area. Second, European and Latin American political traditions allow us to observe changes in technology from a different perspective to the Anglo-Saxon.

GL: Do you have colleagues in the Spanish-speaking world? Where in Spain do you see critical and artistic practices evolving? We know about the alternative social media platform Lorea. What else?

CR: I was interested in the Spanish open movement during its early years but I moved away from it. I think it shares much with the hegemonic political and social discourse. For example, the predominance of free software initiatives has led to neglecting the problems of cultural workers. Many of the proposals that were made seemed to me classist and unrelated to the Spanish social reality. In fact, during the golden years of the Spanish housing bubble there was a blooming of artistic and cultural institutions interested in free culture, but always from a very formal and elitist point of view.

Things have changed since 2008. Today there are strong social movements that demand political, social and economic democracy and that is reflected in our understanding of collaborative technology. I usually say that 15M and the Occupy movement showed that technology is very good when people take to the streets but much worse at getting people to the street. Spanish social movements have taught us what we can expect from technology if we change the political scene. Parties like Podemos are using technology to accelerate and increase political deliberation in the context of a process of popular empowerment. I have high hopes for what might happen in Latin America. Countries like Ecuador, Bolivia or Venezuela have spent years trying, with varying fortunes, to deepen the process of democratization. And in that context the commitment to free knowledge can have explosive effects. Digital collaborative tools have a completely different meaning in a place that has opted for social justice after having suffered decades of neoliberal assault.