

Christian Fuchs: Internet and society – Social theory in the information age. London: Routledge. 2008

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This is both an interesting and unusual contribution for conceptualising the modern information and/or network society. A revitalised Marx is a main hero, but it also concerns itself with a very broad spectrum of 20th century sociological theory ranging from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Manuel Castells, Mark Poster, Pierre Levy, danah boyd, Donna Haraway, Slavoj Zizek, Scott Lash and Lawrence Lessig, just to mention a few theorists from the most recent period, and including many of those in between, for example, Ferdinand von Tönnies, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Ernst Bloch, Frits Hayek, Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas, Niklas Luhmann, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.

One main issue in the book is to argue that contemporary society is best analysed as a self-organised system, but contrary to predominant (Hayek/Luhmann-like) theories of self organisation, Fuchs suggests a different conceptualisation, as he wants to include human cooperation as part of the system.

The theory of self organisation and cooperation is the subject of chapter 2. In chapter 3 follows the elaboration into a general theory of society as a dynamic system, while chapter 4 addresses the present processes of globalisation and the rise of “Transnational Informational Capitalism” dominated by a neoliberal mode of regulation, and among many things characterised by “the withdrawal of the state from all areas of social life” and “the destruction of the welfare state and of collective responsibility” (p. 108).

These four chapters form the theoretical basis for the analysis of the Internet (chapter

5), followed by four chapters analysing the “antagonistic dichotomy” between competition and cooperation, which is found in “The Informational Ecology”, “The internet Economy”, “Online Politics”, and “in Cyber Culture”.

In spite of many strong, but not always convincing, claims, the book contains rich and in some respects detailed empirical analyses as well as many relevant critical reflections. For instance, in the midst of one of several attempts to revitalise Marx (not least *Grundrisse* and *Das Kapital*), we are given a typology of new business models on the Internet, based on three kinds of human activity (Cognition, Communication and Cooperation) and four kinds of exchange (payment, license fee, free access + advertisement, free access - advertisements, pp. 180-190). Even if such models are only metaphors, they are sometimes useful, and this is one of the most elaborated and highly informative attempts we have to characterise the wide range of new business models evolving around the Internet. Other models are less valuable or even misleading, for instance, the schematic presentation of web history in the development from so-called web 1.0 to web 3.0, defining web 1.0 as a tool for thought, web 2.0 as a medium for human communication and web 3.0 as “networked digital technologies that support human cooperation” (p. 127). Fuchs describes this postulated sequence as forming “an evolutionary hierarchy characterized by emergent features.” (p. 17). Today, what may be considered the “social web” originated with email communication in the 1970s and flourished in the 1980s on bulletin boards, mailing lists and usenet groups, which in the 1990s moved to the web as a variety of communities. Unfortunately for the theory, the assumed emergent features of web 2.0 existed before web 1.0. Furthermore, “cooperation” has always been at the very heart of Internet development, as is well known from the long history of open source software development. One should also be aware that “web 2.0” is only a widespread but badly defined metaphor referring to many different phenomena: specific kinds of software, (tagging, file sharing etc.); specific patterns of social communication such as Facebook updates; and new business models based on commercial use of user-generated content. Web 3.0 is more often used as a metaphor for the “Semantic web” project than for cooperation. In spite of this misleading model of the historical development, Fuchs is correct to stress the many-to-many character of the web and the fact that it allows individual citizens (not only grassroots) to articulate themselves in public.

Still, the book contains many valuable typologies and systematised overviews on the various themes. However, one might want to question the underlying theory. It is never made clear for instance whether the Internet should be understood as one globally distributed self-organising system covering the whole world including all sorts of states. Or should the Internet be understood as integrated in different societal and cultural practices and structures? Most of the empirical data stem from the United States, but they are never analysed as specific American data. The above-mentioned claim that the state withdraws itself from all areas of social life is also hard to combine with the fact that the children of the educated middle classes at least in northern Europe are increasingly brought up in public institutions as women are increasingly working on the labour market. In spite of the

otherwise well-informed analysis, one misses critical reflection on the different models of information societies suggested for instance by Manuel Castells or – on the level of older mass media – by Hallin and Mancini. What if there is not only one self-organising system formed around the Internet and what if the “self-organising” system is not simply organised around the Internet?

References to the media literature are also missing. Of course McLuhan is there, but Medium Theory (W. Ong, E. Eisenstein, J. Meyrowitz, R. Deibert etc.) is not. Modernity is there, but media and modernity (John B. Thompson and many others) is not. Without addressing the issue, the theory seems to presuppose that old media will be completely replaced by digital media. This might happen of course in a not known future, but it has not taken place so far, and the relations between old mass media and digital media become increasingly important if one wants to understand the fate of old media and the development of digital media. There are many theories concerning this out there (various forms of convergence theories, and theories of supplementation, of evolution and of co-evolution of old and new media), but none of them are mentioned in the book. Even if this is in accordance with the deep gulf between “old media centric” media studies which strives to move itself forward into the area of digital media, and the “IT centric” literature on IT and Society, which most often ignores old media, the gulf needs to be bridged.

One might also question whether the transition into transnational informational capitalism is really a neoliberal process or whether it is better conceptualised as a development in a neo- corporative direction: first, because there is no real withdrawal of the state from welfare systems, but more “governance” and network integration of state- market- and civil society activities; second, because of the increasing need for the states to guarantee the financial system against it self; and third, because of the increasing competition with state-capitalist systems such as that of the Chinese. A fourth argument for a neo-corporate interpretation might develop as a result of the climate crisis, while a fifth argument, at least in Europe, could be found in the breakdown of the autonomy of the universities and the tendency to bring the knowledge production of the universities into a much closer inter-relation with commercial knowledge production.

There are numerous tensions and dichotomies in what Fuchs defines as the transition into transnational information capitalism, and some of them are also closely related to the tensions between “competition” and “cooperation”, which Fuchs identifies as the fundamental antagonism of modern capitalism. However, whether one likes it or not, capitalism seems capable of surviving in spite of or even because of such dichotomies, which perhaps are better understood if seen as co-existences and ever-changing mixtures of the different principles of the market, the civil society and the state. One may even consider whether we will see the end of the modern educated middle classes before such tensions are transformed into antagonistic contradictions.

By initiating such debates, and many other debates which have to be left out in the present context, the book is both timely and very welcome.

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