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Radical Netpolitics. Some Perspectives.

I am supposed to talk about the internet and my perspective should be a German or European one. Now, there are two problems. This perspective does not exist. On the other hand, the internet is a global system - but it is still under American hegemony. Therefore I'd like to change my perspective: the American and European left should combine resources and powers to deal with some important tasks we have.

Our first task is to criticize.

Where technology becomes commonplace experience, fortunately, will have a sobering effect. Such is also the case with the Internet. Net enthusiasts and their techno-spiritualistic obscurantism - what phantasms did they project into the net during the past two decades: the net as an emerging higher being (as global brain); networks as general key of science for understanding society, politics and nature; the net as a vehicle of a capital economy with neither weight nor friction, where global interlinkage and ideal markets merge; the net as global and universal victory over space, time and material and so on and so forth.

Actually, nobody really believes this techno-pubescent nattering waffle any more.

And what about the Left? The Left ignored the net as long as it could, their then following phantasms weren't so very special either: the net promised them democracy, equality, and power at last, all those wonderful and most agreeable things. And the Left still believes to be able to newly unlock the world scientifically, also its society (such as Manuel Castells) or its politics (such as Michael Hardt and Toni Negri), all this with the connotation of the network and patterned after the model of the Internet.

But nets are no overall symmetrical, horizontal and hence democracy-friendly relationship structure, free from manifested inequalities, dissimilarities or hierarchies. There is no actor-symmetry in the net where the giants prevailed in a battle of the New Economy in which a value in excess of 1 000 billion Dollars was destroyed. Modern technology generates special inequality that is boosted by the logic of profit. Networks do not exert power; they are the media means of their masters. The power instruments of time contraction and space destruction are not available in the same manner at any place; on the contrary they and the access points are distributed in space in a most unequal manner.

Whoever disposes of these power instruments determines proximity and distance, defines privileges and disadvantages, and decides on inclusion or exclusion. That person generates space. That person generates the new maps of this century.

Our second task is to contribute to the theoretical knowledge.

Well now - was the talk about the Internet as mass medium any different? Hardly. The Internet, one said, was a quantum leap in media history: from "one to many" to "many to many". Every one of us opening his or her mailbox in the morning knows where this quantum leap led to: instead of "one to many" there is now "many to one". What became of the Internet as mass medium, what it is and what it could be is related to what it is in addition. Because the Internet is by no means just a mass medium - a narrowed concept to which we, alas, got used to. Once again: The Internet is not only a mass media. As the future - and sometimes even as the present - leading mass medium of neoliberal capitalism, its character, structure, function or style has at the same time very much to do with the Internet as technology, as cyberspace and network. Thus the Internet is something very special. It can link itself to all central social systems and penetrate them as deeply as their reconstruction in the form of digital information allows. Computer networks can be the ends and the means of work, communication and consumption, as well as utilization and control.

The Internet and those computer networks (and this is my starting-point) are central to a new capitalist type of production and distribution. Because, as a means of transaction, this new network is supposed to realize the function of *general mediation* (this is my favorite term for the basic social function of the Internet) which is why the net's political concept is one of universalism in an age of capitalist globalization. It's all about contact and connectivity. The function of this new medium of general mediation is to facilitate the technical integration of post-fordist capitalism in the globalization process, insofar as it is a network society (and this is only a small part of current global capitalism).

Our third task is to analyse the power structure of the internet and to contribute to the democratic control of the net.

If the political economy of the internet is about the trinity of control: who has control of the content, the architecture (programmes and networks), and the hardware (the central server, route and cables), then the left must be active on all these levels. Even in media politics prior to the internet, the left already focussed exclusively on content and generally mistrusted pluralistic structures over which it had no control. This would be a fatal error for the left's internet politics. Here, the left cannot go it alone. It must create content at the same time as confronting the enclosure of privatisation. Nobody will have their own hardware for the time being, but

there is an urgent need to democratise the control and management of the net, and for a politics of global redistribution of net power. The left has to be present in the various places where attempts are being made to develop and progressively use *tools for the multitude* on an architectural level - Blogs, Wikis, Nettime, Linksnet etc. The fact that thereby one is turned into a cheap distributor of ideas, sparing the commercialised giants development costs, could be decisive in uniting alternative production, the cooperation of the multitudes and the political left. Because a solution is only to be found in structures and projects that are construed in such a way that they may not easily be integrated or, if so, only if a part of their original opposition can infiltrate the hyperspace internet. The specific, associated appeal lies in creating a means of production and networks that are so transparent, democratic, self organised and autonomous, that one would rather not make use of them in capitalist business or government authorities.

Our next task is to fight against the privatization of the internet and to help building public places for all.

As a means of general mediation, the Internet is at the same time the technological basis of a global cyberspace and its countless public and private spaces. And if you look at the history of technological modes of capitalist production, in the beginning they were developed, financed and organized by state - and in the long run, they were privatized.

This is also the history of the Internet. The Internet was created as a non-proprietary and non-commodified medium in the space of a state. Then its *material* layer (hence transfer medias, applications, address space, providers) was privatized, then commenced the privatization and commodification of programs and logs (its "*logical* layer"), and now it is a matter of privatization and commodification of its information and communication functions, hence the *Content* layer. A culture of control, of exclusion through commodification sprang up - in 2002, about two thirds of all websites limited access to a significant part of their pages. Obviously, the infrastructure of cyberspace is already private. And content is to follow suit. As did the industrial capitalism of the 19th century, the cyber capitalism of the 21st century passes through a predatory phase of original accumulation, to which the spiritual commons and public infra structures fall prey.

Today, products of the intellect are copyrighted at the moment of creation, patented before being released into the world, and trademarked before sale, born not as contributions to a shared body of knowledge or heritage, but as an "intellectual property" and an object of digital rights management. Every cultural micro-event (reading, listening, watching, browsing online) becomes a billable event. Erosion of public funding, creeping commercialization, and the left-wing illusion of not having to deal with questions of owner-

ship, and control within the big liberty of the net led to the transformation of this formerly libertarian project into a neoliberal one.

But a new generation of high-tech fences is required in order to appropriate intellectual common goods as privately as one once appropriated land. Its feasibility and capacity to prevail has not yet been made clear. This is what the battle is about at this point. Obviously, the privatization of the logical layer - program software, logs - has failed already, just as the privatization of content is by no means running smoothly. An example: Take a look at text.com, a site, "which is freeing texts". There is a new language of the commons being developed.

Thus from a Left perspective, we must think about an alternative public type of global technical integration and *mondialisation*. We must think about the commons and public goods. The debate and politics of public goods or global public goods deal are very much about economic issues. Public goods are those from which nobody should be excluded and which should therefore, from an egalitarian point of view - be available in the same quality at any place, and which should, finally and under economic aspects, be procured and held ready in the most effective and efficient manner - in particular in case of security and reliability in the supply of goods. The „commons“ - this is a culture or a concept rather than a thing or place or a good or a commodity. This is something, which is held jointly so that anyone may use it without special permission.

And if we consider the Internet a mass media, we must talk of protecting and developing the media commons, of a new language, of pictures and icons and the culture of the commons. And here the situation is not bad at all.

For the first time in the history of large-scale technologies political, technical and economic alternatives and their representatives have not successfully been excluded (just think of open source, free software etc). Some of the classic goals and traditional values of the Left exist in the core of that technology: Values like openness, access, transparency, decentralization, non-hierarchical collaboration, participation, sharing, reciprocity, social equity, diversity, and communality. Thus, in our everyday work we should promote and advance these values and criticize the new permission culture, which is a continuously expanding feature of privatization and commodification.

Our fifth task is to design another technical structure.

By now, people of the Left are, after all, able to handle the *internet as a network* quite competently. They realised early on that it would decrease transaction costs. They make use of the internet's effects of mobilization and organization. But they do not use it in a noticeably different or less efficient way in comparison to other po-

litical movements. What would such a "different" use be however? This is where the significance of net architecture comes into play. A different net architecture must be designed so that the technical structure is not controlled from a central point, so that the decisions of: who enters, who must leave, who may do what, what is to happen, will be made in an extensive democratic process of self-organization and not from the top. This is *na* That is the difference.

Our sixth and most important task is the project of demerger democracy

Now - the *medium* Internet is peculiar. It is multimedia. It offers a new depth of information due to its virtually unlimited memory capacity. It enables multidirectional and interactive deliberation (decision making) instead of data distribution via channels. As a generalized mass medium of individuals and of the world, it has assimilated the other one-way mass media.

That sounds good, however, does not change the fact that the internet has mutated from a medium of unusually low-level control to a *rigorously regulated medium with a high degree of control potential*. This is due to its ability to address and authenticate the actor's identity (author, sender, and receiver) with incomparable precision. Behind the labels "*personalization*" and "certification" a high precision distribution medium has emerged, a "digital panopticon". The consumption of information has been democratized, whereas in the field of production hierarchies have been strengthened dramatically due to the emergence of a highly professionalized culture of technology. An individual switching between production and consumption became the irrelevant exception. Nowadays, the demand is for operating expertise as opposed to media competence. Thus the universally accessible net has meanwhile been dominated by mainly commercially driven knowledge transactions, which are developed, configured and motivated in and by the realms of profit and consumerism. Neoliberalism has converted the net in a medium in order to optimize the ability to purchase, to observe and to listen, not the opportunity for action, speaking and being heard. But this is not the whole story. Why not?

The former understanding of mass media no longer applies to the Internet. The net is a medium that has generated a few million small collectives of producers. As soon as the step towards an intensive cooperative net production has been taken, an incredible realm of dynamic production of virtual goods and social relationships develops. The social net of production and communication collectives is a virtual social space of the second order. It is in close contact and feedback with producers and communicators. Via the weak ties of these networks (links, infrequent or random visits), the net's core indirectly influences the entire network. The internet as a medium of general mediation thereby also transmits the resulting thoughts and actions of political communicators and producers (and their po-

litical will) into spaces of possibly fantastic dimensions. The net dissolves the classic argument against public politics and the “special boundaries” of direct democracy. Admittedly, a project of *emerging democracy* knows no certainty concerning development or result: the result is the process of transformation. Weak ties generate a new politics of unpredictability and irritation. Such politics would imply significant gains for the Left in times of global capitalism and its hard-wired rules.

There are new hubs of the Commons

- Not only were interpreting services provided free of charge by the Babel Translator Association at the World Social Forum in Mumbai of the 100 000; it was also for the first time not necessary to rent equipment at exorbitant rates thanks to the combined use of FM transmitters (for Indian languages) and a computer-based system that digitalizes the translation. This system, called Nomad Interpreting Free Tools (NIFT) uses a simple computer that is able to make an interface between the speakers, the translators and the audience. NIFT is a joint effort of several groups, including APO33 and Babel, together with free-software actors in various countries.
- The Brazilian government had it her goal to have 80 percent of this year’s purchases of new computer systems run with an Open-Source software. Existing systems from Microsoft are to migrate to free software as well. In four Brazilian states, laws on supporting free software have already been passed. In June of last year, the German Ministry of the Interior signed a basic agreement for the application of Linux in their administration; capital cities such as Munich decided to rid their administration system of Microsoft. Microsoft has its German headquarters in Munich - small wonder they were not amused. Meantime, almost half of the 25 largest globally operating software companies work with Linus.
- One of the most important radio stations of the world - the British BBC - will put their entire archive into the net, and, so they say, on the basis of one creative commons license.
- It has been but a few days that the Neuro-Networking Europe congress took place in Munich on the occasion of the re-launch of the anti-racial internet platform D-A-S-H; not a regular congress by any means, but a collaborative workspace including more than 50 groups, initiatives and projects from all of Europe and a few non-european nations.
- In a few weeks, Vienna will host the fourth oekonux convention that poses the question how far the principles of free software can be generalized on a social level.
- The last years saw the creation of the internet project www.linksnet.de which now finds the cooperation of more than 20 left-oriented magazines, all providing access to their full-length articles - - open text, freeing texts.

These are all projects of a left multitude that deals differently with itself than previously. A multitude that is busy developing the commons of the Left - and not only that one. A multitude in the process of operating more and more intensively, globally, and by doing so is shedding its own ancient ballast of boundaries and left enclosures, as is shown during that convention.

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