What is Wrong with Social Media? An Anti-Capitalist Critique

'The most revolutionary thing one can do is always to proclaim loudly what is happening.'

-- Rosa Luxemburg

As the liberal fantasy of a stable 'capitalist democracy' has steadily disintegrated in the last few years, and the nature of political discourse has grown increasingly bitter and polarized, the digital giants – Google, Apple, Twitter, and in particular, Facebook Inc. – have provided some of the most conspicuous evidence of this rupture, and been amongst the main arenas in which many of those discursive conflicts were played out.

This staging has led many people to draw an association between social media and this broader political moment, and often to suggest that there might be causation between the two. There are good reasons to talk about social media together with polarization and other social and political problems. There are also many urgent criticisms of digital platforms that are much deserved, both in connection with these political circumstances and in broader political-economic terms. Unfortunately however, many of the most frequently cited critiques of social media giants are not only inaccurate but harmful, because of the ways in which they obscure our understanding of the threats that social media *do* represent and the other more immediate causes of this political turbulence; the relative ease with which these erroneous charges can be rebutted; and the missed opportunities they amount to for understanding and protecting ourselves from social media apps appropriately, and responding to reactionary politics more effectively.

To resist these criticisms can sometimes appear, to a superficial reader, to be defensive of social media corporations, but the opposite is true: in order to mobilise against the forms of capital that social media corporations represent, the world needs to stop repeating unsustainable arguments that make unsubstantiated claims, and that exceptionalise and isolate the pathologies of social media corporations as though they were some kind of unprecedented surprise; and instead focus on the material and structural factors that are so commonly ignored by liberal and conservative commentaries alike. This essay will offer a summary and critique of these flawed arguments, suggest some alternative critical approaches, and then discuss some broader strategies for addressing the pathologies that social media *do* represent.

ARE SOCIAL MEDIA A PRIMARY CAUSE OF HARM?

At the risk of repeating some of what I have written elsewhere about the relationship between various forms of digital and social media, misinformation, and reactionary politics it may be helpful at the outset to summarise some of the ways that the critiques of social media and their relationship to reactionary politics have tended to be oversimplified and stripped of their political sting.[1]

These arguments appear in a number of different forms, but generally their thrust is that social media cause large numbers of people to be exposed to inaccurate, subtly manipulative or deliberately misleading messaging, originating from hostile foreign governments, 'populist' figures, or ruthlessly commercial bloggers and tricksters. Because the platforms where this occurs fail to challenge or rein in these malicious acts, and leave it to the users to challenge and contest each other, this exposure then results in behavioural modifications on a scale significant enough that electoral outcomes can be changed and political movements formed or directed.

One notable version of this argument is that social media platforms, and in particular Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp, are responsible for the phenomenon of 'fake news' which is in turn responsible for reactionary political movements such as the Trump campaign and subsequent administration. In early December 2016, as the world was attempting to make sense of Trump's victory, his losing opponent Hillary Clinton told the world of that there was 'one threat in particular that should concern all Americans – Democrats, Republicans, and independents alike, especially those who serve in our Congress: the epidemic of malicious fake news and false propaganda that flooded social media over the past year. It's now clear that so-called fake news can have real-world consequences.'[2]

According to this view, not only were social media apparently fine until the year Clinton lost the election, but these 'real world' consequences of 'fake news' included her defeat – an idea on she repeated and developed in her subsequent book about her 2016 loss, *What Happened?*[3] Only a fortnight before she had made this statement, an editorial in the *New York Times* had excoriated Facebook for the 'fake news' appearing there that had supposedly facilitated Trump's victory.[4]

It is fair to interpret these rather superficial analyses in the context of liberal America's acute trauma at that moment, but this narrative has been repeated many times since then by numerous pundits and journalists. In 2018, a study reported by the Washington Post suggested a link between exposure to 'fake news' and defection from the Democratic party between Obama's 2012 victory and Hillary Clinton's 2016 defeat.[5] We should always be happy to be corrected by a reliable set of research findings, but the study is instructive in ways other than those its authors hoped. Based on a single internet-based survey that asked roughly 1,600 participants to remember what they had been exposed to, it primarily focused on the 585 respondents who reported that they had voted for Obama in 2012 but not for Clinton in 2016. It did not account for the 32 per cent of US adults not using Facebook at all.[6] It also did not feature any reference to the – by then plentiful – work by scholars in the social sciences to understand why people *had* been motivated to defect from the Democrats to support Trump, or any analysis of the political developments of the preceding decades, nor did it mention the location of the participants or whether they were located in swing states or not.[7] No wonder it was not peer-reviewed. While of course it is only one study, it is

illustrative of precisely the fantasy that the Trump movement and the politics it represents could be explained away by way of reference to a small number of technology corporations, because of their large scale and lax regulation, without the need to look any deeper. In short, it was another iteration of the same banal technological exceptionalism that had led US liberals to believe that Twitter and Facebook alone could bring about the fall of repressive governments in the Middle East a decade earlier.[8] Technology, in the liberal story, is often either the main problem or the main solution, while structural factors are obscured or minimized. Another example of this tendency appeared when the UK riots occurred in 2011, and the encrypted messaging service BBM was blamed in the pages of the Guardian[9].

Only a month after the above described study was published in the United States, the Cambridge Analytica scandal broke in April 2018, as a result of a year of tenacious and exhaustive research by the investigative journalist Carole Cadwalladr and a couple of key whistleblowers. In the months leading up to the 2016 US election, the company, which was funded by hedge-fund philanthropist Robert Mercer and initially directed by Trump strategist Steve Bannon, had exploited a major loophole in Facebook's lax data policy and negligent enforcement strategy in order to build voter profiles which were used to determine what messaging would be most influential on individual Facebook users.[10] Not only had Cambridge Analytica also been used by some of the unofficial Brexit campaign groups, such as Leave.EU, but another linked company known as AggregateIQ, based in Canada and outside British jurisdiction, whose proprietary technology was also owned by Robert Mercer, had been used by the official Vote Leave campaign, and accounted for 40% of its campaign spending.[11]

This was undoubtedly an extremely important story for our understanding of the triple-helix of politics, the internet and capitalism. Any attempt to undermine democratic processes should be taken seriously, and it is perfectly fair to say that Facebook bore *some* of the culpability for what had happened. But what *had* happened? Once again, the reaction to this story was plagued by false causation, oversimplification, baseless assumptions, and a stubborn insistence on missing the point. That there was so much indignation about political interference when the scandal broke, including a call for people to delete their Facebook accounts entirely,[12] and that so much money had been given to Cambridge Analytica and its network of companies offering election outcomes to their clients using social media, underscored the irresistible appeal of the basic assumption that messaging on social media platforms is not only automatically and powerfully influential, but more so than the many other forms of political messaging that co-exist with social media – particularly television and mass print media. The long history of potent political interference by other means had seemingly been dwarfed, replaced or long forgotten.

In the context of societies on both sides of the Atlantic that were already amnesic about their long history of political meddling, internal and external, there was perhaps something

superficially understandable about this emphasis. The scale, accessibility and emotion-driven nature of social media platforms makes them *seem* like they *might* be effective in swaying public opinion, and it is obviously essential to discover as much as possible about the extent to which this is true. But it was and remains a monumentally foolish approach to reach this conclusion based on assumption alone, because the results of an election were unexpected, and thereby choose to remain blind to the many other factors that ultimately determine the winner of an election – not least the steady degradation of democratic processes and institutions by the market-driven world of the last few decades.

Indeed, there were many good reasons to delete a Facebook account before this scandal ever broke, and this momentary outrage appeared to ignore the fact that when the exact same techniques had been mobilized by the digital marketing sector to convince people to buy products they didn't need, destroy the environment, undermine their mental health, and waste hours of time, very few people had been interested. Perhaps some exceptionalism around the importance of democratic process was a good sign, but while the outrage was fair enough, the naivety was embarrassing.[13]

Amongst the manifold attacks on the democratic process that a political scientist or sociologist might point out, this particular way of eroding it – by subjecting it to the same data-driven advertising techniques that are central to all other forms of mass-persuasion common to contemporary capitalism – represented some kind of excess in the minds of an outraged public. In hindsight, putting this exceptionalism in the context of that familiar liberal tendency towards techno-centrism mentioned above, makes visible what may well have been an element of wishful thinking: please can we blame social media for Trump and Brexit, so that we can 'fix' those problems by fixing or punishing social media, and avoid our own complicity in the process?

Another area where superficial, selective arguments are offered about social media is in relation to political polarization itself. We have been regularly reminded about the scourge of 'filter bubbles' and 'echo chambers' on numerous occasions. Barack Obama said they were bad, David Letterman nodded, and the administrator of his Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, the legal scholar Cass Sunstein, wrote a book on why filter bubbles led to division, replete with standard enlightenment-derived liberal reasoning and John Stuart Mill quotations.[14] Strangely however, somewhere along the way, the original meaning of a filter bubble had changed from being a way of talking about the automated personalization features that Google and other corporations had been developing a decade earlier, which meant that different users would see different content – as per the original coinage from the writer Eli Parisier –[15] to being a way of mystifying the issue of political polarization such that technology was assumed (with almost no proof) to be its cause.

Here too, scholars from diverse fields including sociology, anthropology, political science and economics have offered other, much more convincing and thorough explanations for the sharply polarized political rupture we have experienced,[16] while studies show that we are often exposed to a *greater* range of political opinions on social media than via other forms of social contact,[17] that most people's primary motivations for using social media are not political,[18] and that other forms of social contact and media may have more influence on our political opinions than social media platforms. Despite all of this, the belief that 'filter bubbles' and 'echo chambers' on social media are the driving cause of political polarization remains remarkably persistent.

As indicated above, this is not to say that there is no issue at all. Facebook's own internal research showed in 2020 that the company's products did have a tendency to make an already-polarized society more polarized, before that research was later shelved by the company's executives.[19] Furthermore, one area where a filter bubble-like pattern can be observed is in the facilitation of already-extreme groups, such as Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany.[20] Indeed, the storming of the US Capitol in January 2021 in support of Donald Trump's false claims that the 2020 US election was rigged was largely blamed on digital platforms more friendly to the far-right such as Gab and Parler, but the statistics showed that there was far more activity on Facebook groups than on those platforms. Probably the clearest example is one from 2016, in which Russian technicians working at the Internet Research Agency in St. Petersburg are known to have organized two opposing protests – in defence of and against Islam – on different sides of the same Texas street, simultaneously[21].

This is of course irresponsible and stupid at best, and the issue is precisely that, as with disinformation and propaganda, more complex factors originating beyond social media are regularly ignored, despite being hugely interesting and of crucial importance. Why have societies as diverse as Brazil, Hungary, the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Turkey and the Philippines become so polarized? Is it because the Russians have successfully used Facebook to turn them all against one another? The more that we centre the answers on social media, particularly on the popular debates that are widely circulated, the more other questions and answers are obscured and neglected, just at a moment when the public's literacy around political economy seems to be so in need of development and reinforcement.

Even if we are to focus on the media ecosystem, a narrow, almost surgical isolation of social media seems bizarre. As Natalie Fenton and Des Freedman argue brilliantly in the 2018 volume of the *Socialist Register*, the mainstream media, whether commercial or state-supported, has played an extremely important role in the degradation of Western democracy.[22] If an incendiary and misleading Fox News article is shared widely on Facebook's platform, it makes sense that we should ask questions of Facebook about the extent to which that is appropriate, but we should also be asking about Fox News and the

general climate of right-wing media in the United States, not only on social media but on cable TV, radio, and in print. Why choose one and not the other? In fact, we could go further and ask about the US as a media eco-system, and why, far more than in the UK or other jurisdictions, it allows a purist and historically inaccurate interpretation of the principle of freedom of speech to prevent sensible media regulation that might mitigate some of these harms. A certain amount of culpability can and should be laid at Mark Zuckerberg's and Facebook's doors, but where, for example, is Rupert Murdoch's name in the debate about polarization and political extremism? We could ask the same about the efforts of the Internet Research Agency to use Facebook to stoke up US Americans' political disagreements. The truth is that while social media are technologically unique, and historically specific, they are not politically exceptional.

The idea that exposure to social media content that is mendacious, manipulative or of poor quality may lead to forms of political influence, conflict, or violence is one that need not be discounted in order that the analysis that is collectively formed avoids using simplistic or selective arguments and being peppered with untestable assumptions, fallacious reasoning and downright ignorance. The issue is precisely that in a world that is so often unwilling to do the work of engaging with nuance and complexity, to facilitate liberal social media-blaming arguments whilst ignoring the bigger picture is not a tenable position, especially for the left, however much we may loathe what social media corporations represent.

Moving away from the myths outlined above is motivated neither by pedantry nor a wish to defend social media corporations. On the contrary, just as with any apparent solution that is not really a solution, the greatest problem we face in our fight against the threats that social media corporations do pose is precisely that ineffective critiques *strengthen* the very system they appear to attack. Making Facebook and its executives primarily responsible for the rise of reactionary politics, for misinformation and disinformation, for unexpected election outcomes, or for polarization, or articulating critiques that *appear* to offer this simplified causation and selective reasoning, makes it harder, not easier, to fight against social media corporations, the reactionary politics for which they are blamed, and the ruthless forms of capitalism that they epitomise. It gives the ruthless public relations teams these companies employ an opportunity to easily and correctly respond: 'we are not the ones who caused these problems'. This makes it *more* likely, not less, that social media giants will be able to pass without meaningful challenge or consequence, and extend their reach into ever more intimate quadrants of our lives.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH SOCIAL MEDIA?

Attention and Human Vulnerability

There comes a point in the dystopia of late capitalism at which all principles and values other than the perfect functioning of the market, the maintenance of the status quo, or some ambivalent and inconsistent combination of the two, seem to have largely been forgotten, and need to be reinserted into the conversation. Accordingly, the first critique to be articulated here is based on a relatively straightforward moral objection: quite simply, the engineered exploitation of human frailty is something that we should always condemn.

This exploitation is precisely what social media corporations do on an unimaginable scale however, and it is the guiding principle in their design. But there are misconceptions here, too. Social media platforms do not normally 'sell your data' as is often alleged. Rather, they are built on a ruthless commodification of human attention, demanded, and extracted by any means their engineers and designers can think of, and then sold to advertisers. Data do play an important role, however. In order to sell our attention in a way that is effective, digital platforms need to know as much about our interests as possible, and take every possible liberty in order to find it out. Thus, the capturing of data is essential to the 'platform capitalism' model that this process represents, because those data enable users to be understood, and the likelihood of our attention and engagement predicted. [23] This means tracking every click and tap, keeping a record of everything you have 'liked', including on third-party websites and every message, comment or other interaction that you have typed on the site, even if you thought better of it and deleted before posting. It means crunching all of this data and applying sophisticated analysis to it, including in ways that mean that they hold information about users that the users themselves cannot access. If private citizens did to each other what Facebook and Google do, we would call it stalking. When the state does it, we rightly call it intrusion and overreach. When Facebook or Google does it, it is mostly greeted with a shrug, which in itself is instructive as to users' stoic acceptance of their relative disempowerment; but it also tells us that social media companies have nothing but contempt for the privacy of their users – a protected human right in much of the world.

Privacy can seem like something of an abstract, distant issue compared to the affectively-laden micro-proximity of the content and social relations mediated by social media platforms in their attempt to gain our attention, which perhaps also explains the shrug; so it is worth going a bit deeper to explore the ways that the attention economy has been built into social media platforms. Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, was a *psychology* and computer science double-major before dropping out of Harvard, but it does not take a genius of psychology to understand that the things that most effectively command our attention are not the banalities of life, although these have been enclosed by digital giants as well – particularly Google – but the most salient topics and media: cute animals, highly palatable foods, sociality, sex, politics, conspiracy theories and various other forms of controversy and intrigue. And for all the hedonism of watching a 45-second tutorial on a smartphone on how to make cheesy noodles at 3am in an attempt to calm one's anxiety, let us remember that we

do not need to enjoy media for it to command our attention. Sometimes we simply cannot look away from the very worst of sights. As Richard Seymour has noted, through the same attention-centric model, 'we can become attached to the *miseries* of online life, a state of perpetual outrage and antagonism'.[24] Sometimes it is precisely our anger, fear or indignation that makes it impossible to disengage.

In other words, the most potent reinforcers of the underlying business model that drives social networking platforms are many of the very same things that are said to be harmful about them. Particularly cruel is the fact that the *purpose* of social media is so utterly disguised. Users are lulled into the belief that they have been offered a free set of tools with which to build a profile and thus to present themselves, to socialise, and to discuss and learn about their shared world together. But nothing could be further from the truth. Every feature of social networks is rolled out with at least a tacit knowledge that many of the things that are best able to command our attention are also those things that have the greatest potential to mislead us, inflame latent social and political tensions that are already in the culture, and exacerbate insecurities and mental health issues that we may otherwise have been able to manage more easily. The intention may never be to harm users but, there is a sinister calculation that the potential for harm is a risk worth taking if it means more of our attention can be commanded and sold.

When fighting an adversary who often resorts to a language of false empiricism in self-defence, where possible we must try to be genuinely empirical about the impacts of the negative impacts we allege. The usage of social media is at the very least correlated with a wide array of psychological issues, such as depression, life dissatisfaction, body image dissatisfaction and eating disorders, and bullying, as well as being riven with the misinformation, rumour and bigotry that have heralded the general deterioration of capitalist market-driven societies in the last few years. The *timing* of their arrival also coincides with a steady increase in a number of the above issues. This is still correlation, however. Actual causation is very difficult to establish because of the intrinsic limitations on observation and measurement of social media users – data that only Facebook and its friends hold – and because most studies tend to rely on self-reporting questionnaires, which have severe limitations. However, some studies do claim to show direct causation. A major study from the University of Michigan found that use of Facebook directly led to a decline in the 'subjective wellbeing' and life satisfaction of participants in the hours and days that followed.[25]

But even if the data can't always reveal an unambiguous causation of depression, misinformation or loneliness, social media certainly do feed off them and exploit them.[26] Is that so much better? As far as causation is concerned, the most likely scenario is a circularity in which the use of social media leads to a decline in our wellbeing by worsening the severity of the very conditions that capitalism as a whole tends to produce, and that in turn drive

further social media usage: poor mental health, social isolation and alienation. For example, we can feel lonelier because of using social media and seeing what a great time everyone else appears to be having, but also use them because we feel lonely – the two are not mutually exclusive.

In the last few years, a number of what are essentially confessions as to the sinister nature of these technologies have surfaced from various co-founders and senior engineers who were key parts of Facebook's early development, clarifying in some cases that Facebook's plan was always to exploit key 'psychological vulnerabilities. In fact, these were the exact words used by Facebook's founding president Sean Parker, in a 2017 speech in which he reflected on Facebook's early aims.[27] Others, such as Justin Rosenstein, the inventor of the 'like' button, and Asa Raskin, the inventor of infinite scrolling, have similarly expressed regret for their role in developing these platforms, with Raskin confessing to the BBC that 'Behind every screen on your phone, there are generally like literally a thousand engineers that have worked on this thing to try to make it maximally addicting'.[28]

One does not need to allege calculated malice or assume reliable psychological impact or wholesale behavioural influence to observe that building a business that exploits poor mental health, poor literacy, and misinformation, and is correlated with a deterioration in all three, is utterly indefensible. Every time that we insist that Facebook simply needs to change its algorithm or add clear labels to address 'fake news', to moderate its content better, or introduce safety checks on certain Instagram posts, even if we mean well and are trying to ameliorate these harms, we are calling for a technological or operational fix in order to redeem a business platform that ultimately is built on the systematic exploitation of vulnerabilities in both universal and individual human experience on an unprecedented scale. These are approaches that, to use the words of Rosa Luxemburg, offer little more than the reform of capitalism and the 'the suppression of the abuses of capitalism instead of the suppression of capitalism itself'.[29]

Performative Censorship and Control

In recent years, in response to the perceived problem of misinformation and disinformation on their platforms, both Facebook and Twitter have refused to be held accountable for disinformation in political ads, or to take any action in respect of those ads. Users, they said, could decide for themselves what was true and what was not, which was another implicit articulation of the rudimentary John Stuart Mill-informed understanding of politics and public debate that has so often coloured conversations on these topics.[30]

Though large numbers of people may have been happy that Donald Trump was removed from social platforms, the elation at seeing him silenced should have been followed by a sense of dread at the sinister precedent this represented. One of the world's loudest and most

dangerous reactionary voices had been sideswiped by the awesome power of surveillance capital. In January 2021, the same month that the United States capitol building was attacked by Trump supporters who believed that the election had been rigged, Twitter was busy suspending a significant number of left-leaning anti-fascist accounts which had never spread any misinformation, nor advocated for any violence whatsoever.[31] This type of shutdown of was by no means new. It has happened to similar targets for years: content drawing attention to the occupation of Palestine, the Black Lives Matter movement, and many other progressive causes has been regularly censored or removed with little explanation or warning.[32]

In practice, it is not that Facebook, its subsidiary Instagram, or Twitter are deliberately or consciously hostile to left-leaning views specifically, although Instagram did implement a change to its algorithm in order *not* to remove content about Palestine quite so readily during the 2021 bombing of Gaza – in response to public outcry[33]. It is more that they are inconsistent: laissez-faire to the point of recklessness about what is on their platforms when it suits them, while being regularly over-zealous about removing content that is too prominent in the 'wrong' ways. YouTube has deployed a similarly unpredictable approach. While the platform is generally rife with disinformation, conspiracy theories, and other questionable content, the company has also been inconsistent and seemingly unsure about what should be allowed on its platform and what should be removed or have its advertising disabled – known as demonetization[34].

By contrast, the social media platform TikTok, owned by the Chinese multinational firm ByteDance, has happily embraced a more classic censorship model, according to moderation guidelines that were leaked to *The Guardian*. Not only are videos that contain swearing or sexual themes (even in text alone) at risk of deletion, or of being made 'visible to self', which renders them invisible to TikTok's discovery algorithm, content that mentions sensitive aspects of Chinese history such as Tiananmen Square, or controversial foreign policy, religious groups or ethnic conflicts is grounds for removal.[35]

Rather than simply calling for better systems of moderation, we need to ask some bigger questions. The first, as the companies themselves often disingenuously ask regulators in their bid to escape responsibility, is whether we really want large private interests to be responsible for deciding which ideas and what content are permissible? As Derek Hrynyshyn wrote in the previous volume of the *Socialist Register*, 'the decision of where to draw the line [about what to remove] is an inherently political one, and leaving this judgment up to the owners of the platforms is not a democratic way to ensure communication serves the public.'[36] Often however, it is not their encroachment into the political so much as their cynical and selective retreat from it that betrays their real motives. Opaque procedures and inaccurate algorithms mean that the content control mechanisms of these platforms are open to serious abuse. In August 2021, *VICE News* broke the story that mercenary scammers had been manipulating Instagram's automated content control mechanisms as a client-facing service, in order to have

users suspended on demand[37]. The co-ordinated abuse of reporting features that allow users to flag offending users and content is a common tactic of military campaigns, and was used by Israel's 'Cyber Unit' in May 2021 to remove hundreds of posts and accounts advocating support for Palestine[38].

This leads to the second question. Is 'censorship' in the normative sense really the best way to characterise what we see here, on the part of the platforms themselves? While the type of 'classic' censorship utilized by TikTok is undeniably disturbing, and amounts to ideological intervention in a way that befits the label of 'censorship', as is that of the Cyber Unit, a narrow rhetorical focus on this type of censorship provides an element of deniability for platforms that are more motivated by profits than by the desire to suppress messages on the basis of ideology, and obscures another element in the content control and moderation approach used by Facebook, Twitter and YouTube: a prioritization of surplus value over any control of political speech. For example, the harsh reality is that in suspending Donald Trump's account, Twitter actually eliminated a valuable asset for their enduring relevance and visibility as a platform, under *popular* pressure. Executives did not want to 'censor' him, and it was pressure from the public and from rank-and-file employees that brought his removal[39]. More than anything else, this should illustrate how truly flawed the model that social media platforms embody really is. Until five minutes before Twitter and Facebook removed Trump's accounts, they were benefitting from his presence there. YouTube even allowed the Trump 2020 campaign to plaster its front page with ads on election day.[40] For those in the business of attention, any proposal to limit the salience or appeal of content exerts a downwards pressure on revenues that is likely to be met with the aloof reluctance that the executives of Facebook, Twitter and other social networks have shown over and over again.

Thirdly, given this realization, is whether there really is any version of this model that would actually be acceptable? Is the contradiction between needing Trump and deleting him; between enclosing and then intensifying public spheres for private gain, and taking responsibility for the problems that this business invites, something that can be fixed with a bit of tweaking? Ultimately, this does not seem to be a matter of 'getting the balance right' between freedom of expression and enforcing 'community standards'. The functional, inclusive, pluralistic public spheres that Facebook's proponents are always so quick to tell us they want is and has always been an illusory construct that meaningfully benefits only Facebook's and Twitter's shareholders. No amount of technical adjustment from California's scores of twenty-something techno-utopians, or policy updates from its cold-hearted middle management, will ever get around the fact that the company does not really care about what actually appears on its platforms, so long as it gets our attention – it only cares about how much it *appears* to care. Content removal occurs largely at the performative level in order to preserve an air of legitimacy in an otherwise irredeemably flawed model and keep regulators

from closing in. No surprise then that we see here too a familiar disregard for the quality of those public spheres that have arisen on social media – the same contemptuous, reckless lack of interest as the one with which social platforms address the psychological impacts of their products or the privacy of their users.

GREED AND CAPITALISM

Looking at all these issues with social media together provides insight of its own, and so it is perhaps helpful to summarise them here. Even if they do not cause it, social media *do* lubricate and amplify the spread of harmful misinformation – for example, disinformation about COVID, or bigoted or dangerous conspiracy theories. And in so doing, their platforms *do* cause further harms in terms of the public spheres that they host. Whereas some media do this with licensed broadcasting from the 'top down', social networks dredge from the bottom up, their greed for our attention encouraging us to attempt to mislead and influence *one another* with little restriction or regulation. Likewise, social media do erode our privacy and exacerbate poor mental health for the sake of gaining and then targeting our attention. In so doing, they exacerbate a mental health crisis that, even prior to the pandemic, was one of the most serious public health crises in Britain, the US, and other countries.

Ultimately however, the issue is not whether these or any harms flow from social media, but whether it is appropriate to respond as though these harms flow *largely* or *only* from social media. Simplistic causation and pure exceptionalism must give way to the certainty that social media platforms are proliferated by their owners and creators in reckless indifference as to whether they cause any harm or not. The truth is that they are quite prepared to tolerate the harms that their platforms may produce if these are offset by the value created for shareholders. They *know* that they may do harm – they just don't care. This inhumane, nihilistic, reckless, greedy disregard for the human beings on which their businesses are founded – those that tend to be called 'users' – reveals a character of Facebook and other digital platforms' development over the last decade and a half that is both familiar and predictable. It is the same one that is destroying our planet. Marx and Engels themselves wrote that the bourgeoisie had 'left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, callous 'cash payment'' and had 'resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom—Free Trade'.[41] The aspects of social media that I have critiqued above can be seen as a development and intensification of exactly those tendencies within capitalism, despite the huge interval in time between Marx and Engels' critique and the arrival of today's 'social' media. The point is precisely that to make sense of social media properly, the meaningful picture we must grasp is one of global and transhistorical scope that cannot be isolated to a handful of technology companies in the 21st century. A narrow and selective focus on certain misdeeds of tech companies, however grave, only serves as a way of *not* having to critique or even discuss the capitalist system more generally, which

reproduces the self-obfuscation that the capitalism system benefits from, and is at best is a missed opportunity and precious time wasted, and at worst abject disingenuity. If we are to have any chance of redressing these harms, we need to see them in the context of, and as a predictable extension of, the detrimental commercial imperatives, social expectations, and cultural and political pathologies in capitalism that the globalized market-driven world has only intensified in the last few decades. The social media platforms have brought enclosure, commodification and the pointless cycle of sublimated demand and unsatisfying supply further and more intimately into human life than any prior form of capitalism. It is our responsibility to criticize them for *that*, as well as the specific damage that their products do.

LOOKING AHEAD

The question of what is to be done, or where we can go from here, is always the most challenging and controversial within the left, and could be an entire essay by itself. There are both practical and philosophical ideas to be considered, and having argued against social media exceptionalism makes it necessary to address capitalism more broadly as well as offering ideas specific to social media.

Firstly, on a more practical note, as with so many pathologies of capitalism the place that conversations usually start about how the harmful effects of social media, may be addressed is with regulation. Even in light of the hollowing out of the state and the 'fake democracy' that has slowly arisen in recent years, there are undoubtedly legislative challenges to be undertaken. [42] One key aspect of this is that in fighting back against a problem of global significance and impact, we can and must be ready to call for *international* regulation, as more than just a backstop for national government initiatives. Binding international treaties, including incentives and peaceful sanctions, even with all their complications, represent a means by which meaningful long-term change will be brought about in respect of anything that happens via the internet. But even the most comprehensive international regulation is not a magic bullet. There will probably always be some place where the instruments of global capital can hide. In the context of social media specifically, as Derek Hrynyshyn has noted, the combination of complexity, opacity and the business model of targeted attention limits the realistic prospects of regulation: 'Capitalist platforms […] inevitably require the hidden operation of algorithms in ways that enable the social harms that regulation is intended to counter. Platforms would have every incentive to not co-operate with regulators, and regulators would have little ability to ensure compliance.'[43]

Another practical approach is the possibility that the left might learn better how to produce technology, rather than to leave it to predatory entrepreneurs and libertarian hackers. Indeed, free and open-source technology continues both to set a precedent and to provide an opportunity for meaningful agency that, all too often, the left has ignored. As Hrynyshyn has

also explored, with better government support and alternative funding models, open-source alternatives to social media and their ruthless business models may become more feasible than at present. Here too, there are some important caveats however. First, it is vital to remember that technology fixes practical problems, not political problems, and attempts to produce political solutions using code are generally doomed to failure, or to cause further harm. Second, building one small means of production will not immediately guarantee independence from all the others that are part of the problem. If someone were to build an app tomorrow that proved to be a useful tool for organising political movements, for example, it would still rely on hardware developed by the merciless logics and supply chains of Apple, Samsung or Huawei – not necessarily an insurmountable obstacle in the long term, but an important consideration nonetheless. Third, it is intrinsic to the user experience of timeline media as we know them that they are sorted and curated by algorithms. A 'pure', un-curated timeline that simply shows you everything your connections have posted would be unfeasible for most users, so our demands need to be for better, and radically transparent, algorithms rather than for none. Finally, social media usage is motivated partly by the need for compensatory media experiences that are necessitated by the affective maladies of capitalist life and a public, open version with anything like the same levels of engagement would not escape this reality.[44]

Besides exploring these practical possibilities, however – especially given their limited prospects – there are some tactical and discursive avenues to consider. If the conversations we have about the digital giants and their pathologies require that we engage with the fundamental qualities of capitalism, and capitalism systematically manufactures obfuscation about its own processes and pathologies, part of how we challenge these social media corporations must be to make explicit what has been obscured about capitalism itself.

Virtually all of the major global challenges we currently face – our inability to get to grips with the COVID-19 pandemic on a global scale, the turn to nationalism and reactionary libertarianism, the decline of public literacy that leaves us vulnerable to disinformation and conspiracy theory, and most of all, the existential global threat of the climate catastrophe – are all products of the same capitalist system that has also given us Facebook, Google and the monstrous edifice of 'surveillance capitalism'; consequently our conversations must have an equally broad scope. Despite the electoral failures of left-wing leaders such as Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders for the time being, the crises their projects responded to represent an opportunity to break with the discursive and dogmatic associations with which positive left-wing political articulations have been unfairly laden for so long, and to make mainstream the importance of frank conversations about the realities of capitalism. Indeed, historically speaking, there has not been a more important moment, or a better opportunity, to have critical conversations about capitalism for a very long time, and it is a moment that should be

seized. From there, there is a further opportunity to outline bold, ambitious, positive visions of the world that needs to be built.

Crucial to these processes will be media, both conventional and emergent, but since the focus of this essay has been social media, and there are other writers more qualified to discuss conventional media, let us consider two things. First, is the question of *whether* these same platforms, accepting all the limitations outlined above, can be put to use in the service of left policies and agendas. Although this essay has taken issue with the self-defeating, oversimplified ways in which the critique of social media is too often formulated, and argued that the model these platforms represent is flawed beyond redemption, it does not follow that they offer no short- to medium-term practical benefits for progressive politics. Indeed, left-aligned political movements in several countries have already made use of social media in ways that provoked a regulatory response from right wing governments, including Donald Trump when he was president.[45] As long as the trap is avoided of assuming that such content automatically makes a meaningful difference, and the nature of platform capitalism is not forgotten, these media may still be helpful as part of a broader communicative pivot towards more affective and creative advocacy for left wing causes, and there are some cautiously encouraging examples. For example, even allowing for intergenerational and other sociological factors, it is hard not to look at the way that May 2021 escalation in aggression towards the Palestinans was covered on TikTok or Instagram, for example, and not wonder if those representations might have played a role in raising awareness of the occupation and its brutality, particularly for younger audiences and those who did not already have strong views on the subject. Indeed, even despite the censorship described above, and often in defiance of it, TikTok in particular contains a lot of political, economic and scientific content that is sympathetic to progressive and socialist politics.

Despite the obvious caveats, Tanner Mirrlees, writing in the prior volume of the *Socialist Register*, has called for cautious participation on existing platforms in order to help catalyze support for socialist politics.[46] In the short term, this is the right approach. Natalie Fenton and Des Freedman are absolutely correct to say that 'we need to figure out how best to build a radical political project in which truth-telling and communicative capacity emerge from the bottom up and not through paternalistic diktat or pure market exchange'. They rightly argue that we need 'a democratic communications system genuinely in the hands of its users as opposed to controlled by billionaires and bureaucrats'.[47] This is surely a longer-term goal, however. In the short term we need to cultivate forms of communicative capacity and bottom-up truth-telling that complement the conversations that are already taking place on the platforms people currently use, exploitative and flawed though they are. This may amount to 'dancing with the devil', since as Mirrlees puts it, 'the relationship between platform owners and users is authoritarian, not democratic'. But for now, we do not have the luxury of

considering ourselves above a participative approach, at least while we do what we can to erode the power of these platforms and build something better.

Secondly there is the question of *how*. Crucial to this process are sources from which those conversations and interventions can draw, and so a key part of the escape from a market-driven world is the construction of new networks, institutions and organizations. This is not for one second to overlook the work of those successful collective structures we have built, particularly some of the smaller, newer trade unions that remain untainted by corruption, or networks such as NEON, Acorn or Progressive International. Rather, it is precisely that we need to build many more of these, both to act as collective repositories for sharing all the creativity and talent we already possess, and to develop our movements and causes further. In fact, besides the synergic benefits of working together, collective action is *itself* an important ingredient of political freedom. Received wisdom is generally that the left is collectivist while the free-marketeers, libertarians and the right are individualist and distrust any notion of the common good; but this conflates intention with method. As any recent history of right wing media and institutions will show, the neoliberals and the right are adept at collective action so long as it is in service of an ideal which enshrines individual freedoms and protects private property.[48] By contrast, especially without the financial backing that the right and the market fundamentalists enjoy, and possessed only of the abundant intellectual and cultural strengths we have, the question posed so often by those motivated to ameliorate many of the crises we face is an individualist 'what can I do?'; but there are better places to start. As Byung-Chul Han has written, riffing on Marx, 'being free means nothing other than self-realization with others. Freedom is synonymous with a working community.'[49] If there is an escape from the power of social media corporations, the market-driven society that facilitates them, or capitalism itself, it is almost certainly one that is collective, creative and collaborative.

NOTES

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