Krisis

JONATHAN GRAY

ON CRITICAL THEORIES AND DIGITAL MEDIA

Review of: David M. Berry (2014) *Critical Theory and the Digital*. London: Bloomsbury, 272 pp. and Christian Fuchs (2014) *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. London: Sage, 304 pp.

What might critical theory contribute to the study of digital media? And how might the study of digital media help to advance, complicate or challenge concepts, theories and agendas associated with critical theory, broadly conceived? These questions are central to two recent books by David Berry and Christian Fuchs, who both draw on the theoretical legacy of Frankfurt's Institute for Social Research to analyse the social, economic, cultural, and political implications of new kinds of information technologies.

The two books are set against the background of the accelerating and deepening entanglement of digital technologies and their accompanying concepts and practises with nearly all areas of human life, exemplified by phenomena such as 'flash crashes' caused by self-learning algorithms that trade with each other automatically; weaponised computer viruses capable of destroying military equipment; brain interfaces and 'secondary memory' devices; ubiquitous state and corporate surveillance; networked social and political movements; hyper-temporary digital jobs; gargantuan real-time data streams; drone assassinations; attention markets; 3D printed guns; darknets and megaleaks. Berry and Fuchs both argue for the continuing relevance of thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School (as well as their philosophical progenitors and progeny), whom have hitherto occupied a comparatively marginal position in new media studies, in understanding these developments.

Fuchs's *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* is a rich, readable and generously referenced primer to the controversies, promises and threats of many of the world's most prominent social media platforms, digital services and projects. His theoretical approach is informed by a mixture of readings of Marx, the Frankfurt School (including second generation thinkers such as Habermas as well as Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse) and the critical political economy tradition in media studies. Many of the chapters offer something like an immanent critique of the social media platforms under examination — unpicking and interrogating the promises and claims made about their transformative social and democratic potential with reference to critiques from popular and academic literature, as well as original empirical research conducted by Fuchs.

In this manner Fuchs critically examines the role of Twitter and Facebook in social movements such as Occupy Wall Street and the 2011 Egyptian revolution; the 'corporate colonisation' of social media which are often praised for their participatory and democratic character; the unpaid digital labour and inhumane labour conditions at hardware factories that underpin the profits of digital media companies; the ideology of 'playbour' (play labour) and working conditions at Google; Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's claim that 'the world will be better if you share more' in light of the company's business model as 'a huge advertising, capital accumulation, and user-exploitation machine' (171); the political mythologies of Twitter as a manufactured and pseudo-public sphere; the politics of WikiLeaks and their stated support for what Fuchs contends is a neoliberal conception of 'good governance'; and Wikipedia's reflection of capitalist

class relations and the 'infinite exploitation' enabled by its licensing model, in spite of its potential as an emancipatory digital commons project.

Throughout the book, Fuchs argues against technological determinist views that social media are inherently good or bad, progressive or regressive, illustrating the multivalent and contested nature of the platforms under examination with examples and readings in each chapter. The main problem with social media, he suggests, is that they are 'incompletely social', in that they 'anticipate a full socialization of human existence' but are also 'limited by capitalist reality' (256). In the conclusion of the book, he contends that 'an alternative Internet is possible', a 'commons-based' and 'classless' Internet, 'that is not based on capital accumulation, advertising, profit, ideology and a stratified attention economy, but rather enables knowledge, communication and collaboration for their own sake as social activities between humans' (257).
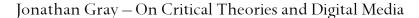
At the centre of this vision for an alternative Internet are a 'co-operative information society' (264), and 'participatory democracy', which he equates with communism (239). He proposes a programme of measures to create the conditions for such an alternative internet, including stronger data protection legislation, opt-in online advertising, corporate watchdog projects and the establishment of alternative internet platforms. Finally, Fuchs says that in addition to what Slavoj Žižek describes as the 'ever stronger socialization of cyberspace', an 'alternative societal context of internet use' is needed (259). This new 'collaborative society' requires both participatory democracy and 'collective ownership and control of the means of production' (265).

While Fuchs's book is intended as an introductory textbook, the brief account of critical theory that it gives at the outset is notably broad and presents a remarkably unified agenda. It foregrounds the commonalities rather than the tensions both between different thinkers and generations of the Frankfurt School, as well as between the Frankfurt School and other thinkers who are broadly characterised as critical theorists (from figures associated with the critical political economy of media to Michel Foucault, Stuart Hall, Jodi Dean and Evgeny Morozov). While some of these tensions are acknowledged in the text, as well as in the questions and exercis-

es at the end of several of the chapters, the heterogeneity of critical arguments could have been more explicitly used to enrich discussion of the implications of social media, as well to give readers a more nuanced view of the work of different thinkers whose work is used.

Fuchs's treatment sometimes makes it seem as though adherents of critical theory of all stripes were in possession of a shared and coherent overarching political programme. However, the politics of the Frankfurt School alone (let alone the other 'critical' figures alluded to in the book) were notoriously diverse – ranging, as one recent article argues, from the 'engaged withdrawal' of Adorno and Horkheimer, to the 'Great Refusal' of Marcuse, to the procedural democracy of Jürgen Habermas, to Axel Honneth's politics of recognition (Chambers 2004). A more granular exposition of these views could have benefited the book from both a scholarly and pedagogical perspective, as well as informing reflection about the different kinds of political responses to social media that have become more pervasive in the wake of concerns about privacy and the commodification of personal information – not to mention informing further critical engagement with the potential weaknesses and limitations of some of the critical thinkers alluded to in the book.

Little is said about the early Frankfurt School's rejection of the 'vulgar Marxist' conception of the reducibility of an epiphenomenal superstructure to an economic base – nor why purely economic analysis is not sufficient for the provision of a critical theory of society according to these thinkers (see e.g. Geuss 2004). Further discussion along these lines could have been complementary to the book's significant emphasis on the political economics of social media (including profit models and ownership structures), as well as opening up space to further explore how social media, digital technologies and the practises and discourses around them contribute to the reshaping of politics, culture and society in non-economic terms, and why this matters. On this score, there is a burgeoning wealth of literature on social media from a wide variety of different fields that could have been alluded to more extensively and more sympathetically, to discuss how the affordances and imaginaries of new media are guiding and reconfiguring ideals and behaviours in many different areas of life (such as – to give a few recent examples – Weller, Bruns, Bur-

gess, Mahrt, Puschmann 2013; Rogers 2013; Gillespie 2010).

To mention one more point: at the outset of the book Fuchs defines the 'critical' in critical theory largely in terms of the critique of power, inequality, ideology and political economy. Yet there are at least two other important senses of the term deriving from the post-Kantian philosophical tradition upon which the Frankfurt School draws, which are not explicitly highlighted in the introduction and which might nevertheless prove valuable for those interested in drawing on critical theory to study digital media. Firstly, in the wake of Kant's critical philosophy, early thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School – notably Adorno and Benjamin – had an interest in the conditions which enable and structure experience, as opposed to 'pre-critical' conceptions of experience as immediately given (see, e.g. Jay 2005: 312-360). Secondly, also following Kant, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School aspired to be both self-critical and self-reflexive (see, e.g. Rush 2004: 10). These two senses of the term could be potentially relevant, for example, when thinking about how experience might be structured and mediated by digital technologies, or when thinking about the concepts, theories and ideals which are deployed in examining them.

David Berry's *Critical Theory and the Digital* is more explicitly cognisant of both the heterogeneity of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, as well as the way in which it draws on and reacts against the Kantian conception of critical philosophy. While Fuchs's book guides the reader through a series of engagements with particular platforms, services and projects, Berry's book takes a much more expansive look at how the theoretical resources of critical theory might be used to think about and critically engage with digital technologies and digital media. He is concerned not only with social media, but with how 'computational capitalism' aspires to 'remake the world in its computational image' (127) – in particular focusing on the role of software. Central to his account is the notion of 'computationality', which is 'a specific historical constellation of intelligibility' (60) that is 'defined by a certain set of computational knowledges, practices, methods and categories' (94).

From the Frankfurt School tradition Berry mainly focuses on Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse – commenting in a footnote that he plans to examine the relevance of studying the digital in later figures like Jürgen Habermas, Albrecht Wellmer and Axel Honneth in another book (217). In addition to these thinkers from the Frankfurt School, Berry's book is well-versed in contemporary media and new media theory, and draws extensively on arguments, concepts and insights from a wide range of social theorists, philosophers and other thinkers in fashioning his own outline of a critical theory of the digital – from Latour to Kittler, Stiegler to Gadamer. But the two figures to whom Berry owes most in the book are Adorno and Heidegger. He refashions and synthesises elements of Adorno's negative dialectics and Heidegger's phenomenological account of technology in the service of a new programme for studying the digital.

While Heidegger's phenomenology serves as the backdrop to his account of computationality, Berry follows Adorno in challenging its 'metaphysical' character and in insisting on a re-reading which is more attentive to the social and historical mediation of beings rather than the 'epochal history of Being' (91-92). He argues that Heidegger's notion of technicity – characterised by the experience of beings as 'objects that can be submitted to control' – may be useful in understanding 'modern' technologies like electricity as 'standing reserve', but is a poor fit for understanding 'postmodern real-time data stream technologies' (60). To address this gap he proposes that the concept of 'computationality' is better suited to analysing the distinctive affordances of software and data streams, and their growing role in organising, schematising and providing a grammar for being, life, labour, politics, economics, society and culture in the twenty-first century.

Berry offers the phrase 'compactant' (or computational actant) as an analytical device to assist with studying the complex computational structures and processes with which we find ourselves surrounded. The 'paradigm case of computationality', he argues, is 'code/software' (95), which, as Rob Kitchin puts it, 'codifies the world into rules, routines, algorithms, and databases, and then uses these to do work in the world to render aspects of everyday life programmable' (123). Alluding to Adorno's critique of identity thinking, Berry asks whether computationality has not come

to represent 'the incorporation of identity thinking par excellence' (196), and illustrates this with an exploration of the history and mechanics of pattern-recognition in software (128-130). Throughout the book Berry discusses a plethora of examples of what he argues is computationality in action - including in the form of web bugs and user tracking systems, self-tracking and quantified self-movements, gamification, microlabour, the architecture of mass surveillance uncovered by Snowden, the algorithms underpinning financial systems and 'cognitive capture by corporations through notions of augmented humanity and the computational intervention in pre-consciousness' (193). These kinds of 'parameterization of our being-in-the-world' (167) and delegation of norms and values into 'an invisible site of power' in the form of algorithms (189) leads Berry to ask: 'how much computation can democracy stand, and what should be the response to it?' (193).

One response to computationality about which Berry remains deeply unconvinced is the loose-knit group of thinkers associated with Speculative Realism or Object Oriented Ontology (dubbed 'SR/OOO' for most of the book). This 'first internet or born-digital philosophy' (104) also draws on Heidegger, but Berry accuses its adherents of promoting 'onticology' (114) or 'philosography' (116), an essentially descriptive enterprise which fetishises the enumeration of beings, often in the form of the 'rhetoric of lists' (110) and 'cascades and tumbling threads of polythetic classification' (117). He accuses this group of thinkers – including Graham Harman, Ian Bogost and Levi Bryant – of seeking 'liberation' from 'repetitive accounts' of human inequality and suffering, eschewing any sense of historical or social context, and celebrating the ephemerality of the objects of computational capitalism (112, 118). Berry condemns this philosophical programme as an uncritical and apolitical theoretical derivative of computational capitalism, mirroring and venerating its manifold phantasmagorias, and abandoning conscience in favour of spectacle.

Instead, Berry advocates the 'public use of critical computational reason' (214), as well as pursuing various strategies and practises to make the digital infrastructures of computation 'visible and available to critique' (209). He suggests that the exercise of such critical computational reason requires more than a purely theoretical engagement, and proposes the de-velopment of a 'critical praxis' centred around what he calls 'iteracy', or the practice of 'being able to read and write texts and computational processes' (188). He argues that 'the constellations of concepts that underlie and sustain computational capitalism need to be rigorously contested and the software that makes it possible hacked, disassembled and unbuilt' (204) – and that 'future critical theory of code and software is committed to unbuilding, disassembling and deformation of existing code/software systems, together with leaking, glitching and overloading these systems' (147). Iteracy would be included in a programme of what Berry dubs 'digital *Bildung*', or the 'totality of education in the digital university' (188). As well as disassembling, disrupting, hacking and challenging the infrastructure of computational capitalism, Berry proposes the 'democratisation of cryptography', the creation of 'protective structures' and the 'composition of alternative systems' (147, 205). While these kinds of projects 'might offer some respite', he maintains that in the longer term 'more collective responses will be needed' (205). In the future, he says, 'an active citizenry will be a computationally enlightened one' (193).

Berry's book is a significant contribution towards rethinking the study of new media in light of critical theory, and for the study of critical theory in light of new media. His fluency and dexterity in assembling, animating and enlisting such a wealth of material in constructing his case will no doubt provoke further encounters between the fields upon which he draws. I shall restrict myself to commenting on two areas around which further elucidation would be welcomed.

Firstly, in pursuance of the self-reflexivity which he commends in the Frankfurt School, it would be interesting to hear further reflection on the visions and ideals which inform his outline of a critical computational praxis – from the 'glass boxing' and 'glass blocs' that are his response to black boxes and blocs, to the emphasis on computationally savvy forms of disruption recognisable to both 'cyberlibertarian' hackers and Silicon Valley pundits (as discussed in, e.g. Barbrook & Cameron 1996; Turner 2008; Streeter 2010). While he makes an intriguing but undeveloped allusion to 'open access and transparency as ideology' (193), he doesn't otherwise expound on the politics of megaleaks or computational, organisational or political transparency and openness, which would have been useful in

light of recent critiques of their malleability and use in advancing many very different kinds of political projects (e.g. Roberts 2012; Tkacz 2015).

Secondly, while Berry explicitly states that he is largely focusing on the early Frankfurt School, it would be interesting to see how, if at all, his encounter with the critical theory tradition might assume a different form and emphasis through engagement with later thinkers. To mention just one point of interest in this regard: it would be informative to see his response to Wellmer's reservations about the critique of identity thinking and the 'homelessness of the political' in Adorno's work (Wellmer 2007).

Where do these two books leave us with respect to using critical theory to think about digital media? Has critique run out of steam, as Bruno Latour suggests (Latour 2004)? Or do our authors succeed in showing that there may be life in it yet? Even if we do not share all of their conclusions, Fuchs's and Berry's respective readings and reworkings of elements of the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory may offer alternative and complementary frames, lenses and conceptual instruments for studying digital media to those already available in the nascent new media canon. Through their dialectical forays into the social, cultural, historical, economic and political contexts in which digital media and the mythologies around them are performed, they challenge more rigidly descriptive approaches and encourage more ambitious theoretical experimentation. They both call for a stronger normative dimension to the study of digital media, for the development of critical praxis as well as critical theory, as well as for a fundamental re-imagining and recomposition of the digital structures and systems which shape and mediate ever more aspects of earthly life.

Jonathan Gray is Doctoral Researcher in Philosophy in the Department of Politics and International Relations at Royal Holloway, University of London and Research Associate at the Digital Methods Initiative, University of Amsterdam. More about him can be found at jonathangray.org.

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