COMMENTARIES

Reclaiming the Present or a Return to the Ash Heap of the Future?

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Years ago, when I was a professor at UCLA, I was invited by a medical researcher at UCLA's Ronald Reagan School of Medicine to train researchers to undertake ethnographic studies as part of the human genome project. Tempted by a promise of augmenting my modest professor's salary with much-needed funding, I flatly refused to have anything to do with the project, since at that time there were discussions around the question of ownership of over the genetic codes being investigated—would they belong to the so-called pre-literate peoples being studied in, for instance, Panama, or would the ownership belong to the principal investigators of the project? With the architectonics of physics being replaced by a shift towards biology, bio-knowledge, bio-capitalism, I neither embrace nor disavow the notion that we live in a postdigital age since the systems of intelligibility used to avow or disavow our digital landscape are constructed out of the very same mechanisms and machinations of choice—and the same systems of intelligibility—used to construct the very concept of postdigital, not to mention the subjective conditioning and worldview of those employing the term. The postdigital challenge is all around us (Jandrić et al. 2018a), I agree, but the postdigital was not just jolted into life at the point of conception. There are all kinds of social, political, geopolitical, and ethical implications surrounding the term postdigital.

Can we use the term postdigital, be committed to the same values that led us to choose this conception of the present and yet arrive at completely different conclusions? How can we avoid being trapped in Wittgenstein's language games? Explaining the world via a biological membrane or as a digital screen of numerical computations will certainly have implications beyond our expectations. So have we gone into a full tilt paradigm shift in the sense of Thomas Kuhn's notion of arriving at a new scientific consensus, where we are encountering a way of understanding media and technology in a manner that we, perhaps, would never have considered valid before? In other words, has our scientific field undergone a new "paradigm shift" in the Kuhnian sense or is it slouching along in the

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multilinear footsteps of some scientific community consanguineous with scientology or with a cluster of sofalizing trolls rather than, say, bearing a resemblance to a communal gathering of software geeks from Google? Will collective enthrallment with the postdigital animate our universe with ideas better equipped to normalize exploitation and oppression by creating a new, super-intelligent global brain? If so, what will be its prototype, classic exemplar, or touchstone? Will we choose global intelligence for cognitive performance or make the case for the creation of an intelligently passive human multitude? Or perhaps, given the geopolitical and sociocultural conditions of the times in which we live, will we choose to create an uncritical, angry mob, styled after Hitler's brownshirts or Trump's burly gammons? Capitalism's technological enforcers have been appointed to make us forget that we possess the capacity to alter or change our world. Will our postdigital universe emerge carelessly from the griffonages of a soggy-brained professor, afflicted with dysania, or from some bio-powered hard drive afflicted by a crapulent program created by some cocaine-addicted technician working a second job in a meth lab? Will it help us to re-function our idea of praxis, by conjoining negatively with "experience" as the event horizon of the real? Or will our postdigital world bring us challenging new ways to engage and transform oppressive social forces minted by history? Will the postdigital future commute the death sentence on the planet by repristinating our Mother Earth through technologies fostering sustainable ecosystems? Or will those technologies simply continue to reify a fetishized praxis of the pseudoconcrete?

After all, the conditions for the possibility of change, and for change itself—what we call praxis—cohabits the world alongside oppression. While analogue and digital seem to be incommensurable languages, both are constitutively necessary to explain reality and to understand what forces and relations shape the human condition. But are there not more dimensions to reality than those that can be explained as analogue and digital? Or postdigital? Having rejected its Marxist antecedents, is the postdigital in constant danger of being grasped one-sidedly, that is, as the "inside of consciousness" rather than the "outside" of economic forces and relations of production? Viewed as historically conditioned action systems, defined by their relationship to historical contingencies, does the idea of a postdigital reality require abolishing the conditions which require it—capitalist exploitation? To what does the postdigital society aspire? What will happen when 80 percent of jobs worldwide will be automatable within the next few decades? Are we talking about creating a viable counter-hegemony to the capitalist present—a concrete utopia? Or some intricately elaborate abstract pseudo utopia? Are we talking about a postdigital politics of mere resistance or a politics of transformation? What kind of socio-historical human agent do we wish to nurture in a postdigital society? One whose computational capacity and recursive self-improvement is enhanced genetically? A being that is emulatable by postdigital materials and powered by evolutionary algorithms? Can we face the fact that our claims about human intelligence or human agency agent can only be ideological? These are fundamental questions that must be addressed. We can never realize the full potential of this agency within a postdigital culture or society, we can only anticipate postdigital society in all of its glory in the absence of such a society and we can only understand it through the prison-house of our concepts and/or our experiences.

None of this escapes ideology. None of this escapes the fact that knowledge is created out of our social existence, as Marx has taught us. As Marx (1977) put it: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness." Denying the basic centrality of the basic forces and

relations of production as iterated by Marx guarantees that postdigital capitalist formations will not make exploitation obsolete. Because it is very likely postdigital materialism will be devoid of the historical materialism of which Marx spoke, and instead rewrite class in terms of some kind of subjectivizing role, a feature of subjective relations, a type of autonomous and self-generating *autopoiesis*. Does anybody think that de-hierarchized technology will be able to hide the ideological dimension? And do you think that by drawing attention to this dilemma in the lecture hall, you will be contributing to building a new world? Do you think you can outsmart your techno-mediated brain by fetishizing, libidinalizing, and ideologically weaponizing your postdigital materialities? Do you think you can retreat into a Spinozean ethics of embodiment or escape into the "structures of feeling" arguments introduced decades ago by the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies? Sorry, nostalgia will not help in this case. The disavowed other of class exploitation, of settler colonialism, will now be dressed in a new mask. Whether it takes the form of steampunk goggles of brass and leather, or whether it's made from new sheets of artificial skin used to cover your favorite tattoo, or from a cluster of singularities orbiting a vortex, it still ignores the reality that social being determines consciousness, as Marx would put it, and not the other way around. This is akin to trying to immanentize the postdigital eschaton, as if the digital in some kind of sublated residue belonging to a newly discovered postdigital ur-force of incommensurable power, suddenly becomes the object of our focus. So you think you can expunge contradictions between labor and capital and ditch the historical totality of capitalist social relations by rewriting the binary logic of history with some new rhizomatic discourse hidden in the metaphors of biology? Hats off to the techno-culture gurus moving from astrophysics to the genetic code. But you are still mystifying technology as an affectively autonomous force, as the impersonal inscription of human flesh in a new codex spawned from an imaginary space that will prevent us from recognizing that the causes of human suffering are embedded in the socioeconomic forces and relations that have produced us.

Will the quickening impulse of our techno-adventurers, as they forage through the hinterlands of a postdigital milieu, tap into some subliminal reservoir of luminosity while sucking into their digitalized lungs the effulgence of our evolutionary splendor like some cosmic vape, or merely re-birth their interiority and be overcome by the mimetic power of some new designer identity, as if some divine power bequeathed to them a cosmic e-cigarette? Just try to imagine Bogart and Bacall with e-cigarettes dangling from their lips? So what is behind, in front of, or beside this quest for the postdigital world? A digitalized intoxication with what is outside our intelligible world? A form of techno-gluttony? A search for some unsullied, undivided essence with or without casting aside considerations of evidential quality? Does it all boil down to a new search for a theory of mind? Does the brain produce mind or does the brain permit various expressions of mind? Are we not returning to the age-old question of whether or not consciousness preexists the brain? Are we not on a quest to break down further the boundaries of the supraliminal, subliminal, subjective, and objective? Before we decide which visual systems dominate, who has epistemic access to various cosmovisions, what causes the disparities between various psychological processes, or which populations of our collective neurons are privileged over others and under what conditions, we need to make sure the human population receives enough food and medical care.

U.S. fascism, as Carl Boggs (2018) notes, feeds upon the seamless merger of total administration (or what we call totalitarianism or a rationalized domination of the masses), a

process that is generated and protected by the technological rationality that is endemic to new forms of capitalism such as the move from global capitalism to transnational capitalism, and which serves to legitimate reactionary populist ultra-nationalism, the rise of white male evangelical and testosterone-driven Christian warriors in the thrall of a frenzied messianism and ready to defeat the Muslim hordes, the criminalization of abortion, the demonizing of gay, lesbian and transgender youth, the proliferation of neo-identitarian movements, the rationalization of the warfare state, the militarization of the police, the atomizing of the public sphere, the steady expansion of the surveillance state, the defense at all costs of US superpower hegemony, militarized state-capitalism, the creation of hundreds of military bases around the world that are the size of small cities, and the increasing power of the transnational corporate sector. Trump sits upon we, the people, as if we are his toilet. Only we are not gold-plated. Cannot you hear his bowels churn above our heads as he drops his putrefying nationalism into the holes that Fox News, and Breitbart, and InfoWars have drilled into our heads? All of this has, of course, been enabled by his cult of personality, that encourages millions of his followers who enjoy his lurid antics to pledge alliance to fascism: making fun of the disabled, grabbing women by their sex organs, condoning violence at his rallies, labeling immigrants as rapists and murderers, and supporting neo-Nazis as "very fine people." His penchant for lying blatantly about everything and anything has become normalized discourse now among the Alt-right. This constellation of tyranny is succored by a society that retains the façade of liberal democracy with its systems of checks and balances. But this system of checks and balances is itself embedded in an ideology of political disengagement among the masses, insinuated into a technological society that distracts the population with a politics of political disengagement, with weapons of mass distraction, as the saying goes. If digital technologies have provided new affordances for dialog, what will postdigital dialog (Jandrić et al. 2018b) look like and what socio-technical imaginaries will power them? What will postdigital reason look like? Will materialism, as Marx imagined it, be erased by new postdigital ideological front for matterism, in the same way that poststructuralism eclipsed social forces and relations of production with an emphasis on culture and experience, obscuring and maintaining systemic class inequality and exploitation? These are the questions that must guide us as we make our way tremulously into the postdigital era.

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