

Book Review

Social Media, Politics and the State. Protests, Revolutions, Riots, Crime and Policing in the Age of Facebook, Twitter and Youtube. 2015. Edited by Daniel Trotter and Christian Fuchs. London: Routledge.

This edited volume aims to establish an agenda for ‘critical Internet and social media studies’, defined broadly as studies that ‘go beyond the digital version of the Laswell formula’ of politics (p. 3). More concretely, the introductory chapter by the two editors defines the core issue of the agenda as the study of social media in the context of neo-Marxist theories of state/politics, critical sociology and radical democracy. The introduction provides a good entry point to this ‘critical theory of social media’ agenda to which the two editors are already ardent contributors. The volume actually entails two introductions as the contribution by Donatella della Porta and Alice Mattoni is also listed as an introductory chapter. This chapter aims to ‘critically bridge social movement literature and media studies literature’ (p. 46) by identifying the particular ‘repertoire of communication’ at work in the ‘cycle’ of austerity protests reaching from Iceland in 2008 to Brazil in 2013. Other attributes defining this cycle of protests include the national focus of action, the use of protest camps, experimentation with direct democracy and the use of ‘we the people vs. the elite’ as the dominant frames. It would have been interesting to learn more about how the editors view the relation between their own agenda and the social movement approach to social media represented by the second introductory chapter. There are more than a few differences between these research agendas, but clearly also a potential for productive interplay. As it stands, however, the introduction(s) do not develop this interplay.

Even setting aside the issue of this dual agenda, the volume appears rather loosely integrated. The ideal edited volume brings together individual chapters under an integrated framework, or argument, and makes a number of specialists pull convincingly in the same direction. Admittedly, this is a tall order. Nevertheless, the volume does fall short in this respect. All chapters certainly appear relevant in relation to the overall theme, but there is no clear logic or progression of argument aligning them throughout the volume. Neither of the introductory chapters attempts to provide a clear rationale, or principle, for the organization of the volume, nor is there a concluding chapter that brings together, or at least summarizes the lessons learned. Every reader of edited volumes is obviously familiar with the sometimes trite and programmatic use of such devices, but simply giving up on them is not exactly helpful.

This brings us to the merits of the individual chapters. The bulk of the remaining nine chapters have a more or less clear-cut case focus on, respectively, Anonymous, Golden Dawn in Greece, the G20 Melt-down organization spearheading protests at the G20 summit in London 2009, Montreal student protests in 2009 (labelled somewhat hyperbolic as the ‘Quebec spring’), the 2011 Egyptian revolution and the protests against the 2007 Montebello Summit on the North American ‘Security and Prosperity Partnership’. Kompatsiaris and Mylonas’ chapter deserves special mention here. The authors proceed from the claim that Golden Dawn must be understood straightforwardly as a Nazi party (p. 113) to a comparison of the party’s communication strategies with Joseph Goebbels’ propaganda manual for the use of ‘spectacularisation’ and ‘relativisation’. The chapter raises the thorny issue of the extent to which the space opened up by social media in the political realm has been filled by populism always drifting towards fascism. As such, the chapter provides an interesting counterpoint to Gerbaudo’s chapter on ‘Populism 2.0’, which debates social media activities as a renewal of direct democracy and invokes a more common and rather different pool of examples than Golden Dawn: Indignados, Occupy, MoVimento 5 Stelle

and Partido X (p. 75). The issue of populism in social media activities, and the problem of democratic vis-à-vis fascist incarnations of populism is an interesting focus point for critical studies of social media.

Fuchs' chapter on Anonymous sticks out for two reasons: 1) an introduction that reads somewhat like an outtake from an updated version of David Foster Wallace's 1996 novel 'Infinite Jest' and 2) an attempt to do the kind of bridging between the critical theory and social movement approaches to new media, lacking from the introductory chapters, by asking 'what kind of movement' Anonymous is (p. 89). The answer is twofold: Anonymous is a loosely coupled network, albeit always with a certain number of hubs (p. 97), and an 'immanent critique', 'parody' and 'absurd theater' of liberalism (p. 104). However, this conclusion seems to reaffirm the issue of the intersection between the two agendas on a more concrete level: what is the relation between these two characterizations? Is the development of looser network-based modes of organization for social movements intrinsically related to the objective of 'demonstrating' and 'disclosing' the contradiction of liberalism, and if so, why and how? On a related note: it would probably have been helpful for the author to revisit Foucault's analysis of liberal governmentality. This analysis concerns a distinct form of neoliberalism, against which the network-form and absurd theater orchestrated by Anonymous maybe is less effective, and not, as Fuchs seem to suggest (p. 99) the type of Anglo-American laissez faire liberalism commonly referred to as neoliberalism.

The broader theme at stake here is the understanding of social media activities as counter-power against state power, which could be called the core question for critical theory of social media. The volume at hand is rather representative of critical studies of social media in this respect by approaching state power more or less exclusively in terms of policing (surveillance, control of communication content and media technology) and criminalization. These are clearly important dimensions of state power, visible in countless attempts to quell and control social media practices. However, policing and criminalization also invariably come back to disciplinary government and the authoritarian state, thus defining counter-power in the terms of 'revolutions', 'riots' and 'counter-policing' (as illustrated most directly by Trottier's chapter on policing top-down and bottom-up). In Fuchs' analysis of Anonymous, the revolution is invoked in more Marxist terms as a missing step from an immanent to transcendental critique of the 'negative dialectic of freedom in capitalism' and the 'regression' of enlightenment from freedom to its opposite reality in capitalism (p. 103).

However, the preoccupation with the authoritative state (in whatever guise it may appear) and disciplinary government amounts to a moderate case of tunnel vision. The state is not always authoritarian, and it does not always approach social media practices with disciplinary instruments. Bringing liberalism back to authoritarianism through the critique of capitalism misses the important point that liberalism has also helped to shape the anti-disciplinary paradigm of 'communicative governance' informing governmental practices in many liberal democracies. Communicative governance is not a democratic practice, but neither is it simply authoritarian. The overriding concern of communicative governance (including network governance, digital era governance and participatory governance) is 'connectivity' and the transformation of the state based on the very imperatives of network society that define most social media practices. The intervention in social media practices favored by communicative governance might be described more aptly as 'nudging' and the 'construction of choice architecture' [1] than policing and criminalization. In other words: perhaps it is time for critical Internet and social media studies to discuss power and counter-power beyond the formula of policing and resistance?

Reference

- [1] Thaler, R.H. and Sunstein, C.R. (2009) *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Loss Aversion*, London: Penguin.

A/Prof Anders Esmark,
Department of Political Science,
Copenhagen University,
E-mail: ae@ifs.ku.dk.