

Antisocial Networking

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Abstract

Antisocial Networking refers to a repository of projects that explore the pseudo-agency of online social platforms. It takes a number of recent software projects as its inspiration to reflect upon the fashion for 'participation' within the arts sector and culture in general. The concern is how the Internet is increasingly characterized as a 'platform' (or collective machine) for 'social' uses, but to question what is meant by such descriptions. Although social networking platforms rely on user-generated content, what is the nature of this participation? What alternatives can be identified? Emergent forms are undoubtedly dissimilar to the ways in which social relations have been traditionally organized, but in general, appear to reinforce existing power structures. The suggestion of the paper is that without the identification of antagonisms that underpin sociality, politics simply cannot be engaged.

Today the enemy is not called Empire or Capital. It's called Democracy. (Badiou 2002: 14)

project.ARNOLFINI

Antisocial Networking, <http://project.arnolfini.org.uk/antisocial/>

By 'anti-social', I do not mean (to be) unfriendly but to emphasize that social networking platforms are already anti-social in as much as they display contradictory tendencies - both connecting and disconnecting socialities. In this way, and undoubtedly part of a backlash to the popularity of social networking in general, I am not simply referring to 'antisocial web' sites such as Hatebook

that enable you to create a list of people that you don't want to be friends with (as opposed to Facebook that allows you to collect friends).¹ Rather, the application of the term anti-social is meant more in the tradition of 'negative dialectics' to highlight the paradoxical nature of positive criticism (Adorno 2000).² Despite rightly focusing on issues of ownership and distribution, some criticism is misdirected; for instance, in emphasizing the threat of social networking to established hierarchies of expertise and a defense of copyright (Keen 2007). Better to begin negatively.

With this in mind, the emphasis in these notes is to draw attention to how the production of non-antagonistic social relations has become central to economic production and social control. To take a typical target, the politics of Facebook with its 59 million users, reveals how social exchanges are mediated by the wider culture and political economy (Hodgkinson 2008). Personal information (ID and consumer preferences) is voluntarily submitted and can then be accessed by agencies reflecting pervasive viral marketing techniques, hegemonic corporate ownership and capitalistic economic principles – all designed to derive profit from friendship. Furthermore, the social relation is based on weak ties (as opposed to the relatively strong ties of peer production for instance) and an 'unstable social contract' between users and platform owners (Bauwens 2008). That services are provided on the basis of latent profitability indicates the capitalist logic of producing value as cheaply as possible and making sure ownership is kept in the realm of private property.³ A closer look at terms of service agreements reveals more detail here and confirms that ownership is carefully managed.⁴ The contradiction is clear: 'The social web facilitates an unprecedented level of social sharing, but it does so mostly through the vehicle of proprietary platforms.' (Bauwens 2008) In such ways, the social relation is produced in restrictive form.

No less significant is the issue of security in the challenge of managing the networked relations between technologies and biologies – in the management of life itself (referring to Giorgio

¹ Hatebook is an 'anti-social utility that connects you with the people YOU HATE' (<http://www.hatebook.org/>). Other antisocial networking sites include Snubster, Isolatr, Introvertster, and Enemybook (see *New Scientist*, "Antisocial networking", April 05, 2006, and Rajiv Mathew, "Now, anti-social networking!", *iDC*, 12 January 2008).

² In Adorno's view, theory and criticism are combined as negation responding to the apparent failure of political philosophy to realise its aims. Moreover, positive criticism leads to nothing and has become a self-serving commodity.

³ In this sense, the distinction between web 2.0 and 1.0 is just another example of capital recuperating the democratic potential of a 'new' technology and taking it into private ownership - including exploiting the work of the free software community in large part, and other publicly funded enterprise such the development of the Internet itself (Kleiner & Wyrick 2008).

⁴ This is something that Linda Hilfling's project *Participation 0.0* (2007) highlights effectively: <http://project.arnolfini.org.uk/projects/2008/antisocial/view.php?id=9>

Agamben's distinction between 'bare life' and the political subject, 1998). In other words, the network needs to distinguish whether you are a friend or not, and as such is a neat example of biopolitical control. The network has evidently become a manifestation of ideology in itself - and one in which connectivity remains a security threat beyond a purely technical form (in offering a platform for terrorism or counter-terrorism alike).⁵ Evoking Carl Schmitt's notion of enmity (in *The Concept of the Political*, of 1927),⁶ the political differentiation of friend or enemy (aka facebook or hatebook) lies at the centre of this. Nevertheless the starting point for these notes is antithetical not simply oppositional (or anti-Semitic or anti-America like Schmitt), and draws upon an understanding of the 'negation of negation' to understand how dialectics is not simply a method that proposes a reversal of one thing with another but a deeper and more reflexive engagement.⁷

With this in mind, these notes are arranged as a series of speculations that examine the paradoxical nature of the terms in common use: 'the social' (making particular reference to Bruno Latour's *Reassembling the Social*) and 'networking' (with reference to Ned Rossiter's *Organized Networks*); moving to the antithetical term of 'notworking' (after Antonio Negri) to shift attention to social relations that are unfriendly in character. The suggestion is that without the identification of antagonisms that underpin sociality, politics simply cannot be engaged. (Do I need to add?) Without politics, our friendships are empty of meaning and our exchanges lead to nothing but the commodification of life itself.

1. The Social

The use of the term 'social' has become commonplace and somewhat emptied of meaning especially where communications technologies are concerned. It is only vaguely defined at best. By returning to the first principles of sociology (the science of living together, and its Latin etymological root 'socius' meaning 'someone following someone else', a 'follower', an 'associate'),

⁵ If the network is a manifestation of ideology in itself, the question (in Hegelian terms) becomes how to encourage those that are part of network culture to make it operate for-itself (not simply in-itself).

⁶ The notion of enmity and the friend/foe paradigm is identified by Carl Schmitt as a fundamentally political one and the basis for his views on state sovereignty and autonomy (1996). The second reference to Schmitt is based upon his particular dislike to American consensus-democracy.

⁷ Negation of negation describes how negation operates twice - once, and then again upon itself in a reflexive manner. This logic underpins the Hegelian principle that it is only through 'abstract negativity' that 'concrete universality' can be attained. In other words, something only becomes 'concrete' when it reintegrates with its primary state. The role of negation, and its negation, in this context is important to understand some of the ways in which dominant ideas attempt to reproduce themselves, even when an oppositional stance is taken.

Latour proposes to examine what is assembled within social formations (literally *Reassembling the Social* as the book title confirms, 2005: 108). As a consequence of expansions in science and technology, he claims that a problem arises, such that the 'social seems to be diluted everywhere and yet nowhere in particular' (2005: 2). It is not that there is no such thing as society (as Margaret Thatcher famously put it) but there is a problem in regarding it as a given homogenous thing.⁸ Rather, it is possible to designate it as a tracing of associations of heterogeneous elements, according to Latour. It is not a thing but an assemblage.

In striving for a more 'relativist' definition of the social and drawing upon the 'uncertainty principle' (where the observer cannot be disentangled from the observed), Latour tries to develop 'uncertainties' over key concepts: the nature of group formations, actions by multiple agents, objects demonstrating agency, as well as ongoing disputes over the nature of facts and the truth claims of social science (2005: 22). The uncertainties do not represent confusion but an opening up of the performative dimension of the social. This comes close to action in as much as action is understood as a coming together of complex, diverse, and interlinking agencies locked into uncertain relations. This is the 'actor-network' that describes not a source of action but a 'moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it' (2005: 65).⁹ Indeed, other agencies are participants in action (participant-observers) that produce new fluid (liquid) associations that reflect the socio-technical operations of networks.¹⁰ If agency is embedded in subject-objects and object-subjects under dynamic mesh-network conditions, then in the case of social networking platforms, agency is evident in the software, the networks/spaces, users/subjects, and so on - in the production of a social relation and the networking platform through which it is reproduced.

Herein lies part of the problem (of ANT) that in describing such fluid and contingent relations the network is seen as having a determining effect on interactions therein. The assumption that 'society is ontologically flat is an excellent starting point, but a weak ending of the analysis' as Felix Stalder puts it (1999). This becomes a question of relative power in that not all connections in any network are equal and certain connections are granted privileges over others. This is a description of network power that follows 'power laws' of variable, uneven and unequal

⁸ The infamous quote, by the British Prime Minister ('There is no such thing as society'), appeared in an interview for *Woman's Own* magazine (Sep 23 1987).

⁹ Latour explains that it is never clear who is acting, like the actor on the stage who is never alone but part of a larger apparatus. It is forever unclear whom and what is making the action - like a puppeteer who does not have, or does not believe they have, absolute control over the puppet, and it is unclear who is pulling the strings (2005: 59).

¹⁰ By 'network', in addition to information technology as in the work of Manuel Castells, Latour is referring to the older ambiguous description of interconnected points informed both by a sociology of organization.

distribution, and that has learned from history to use all varieties of authority and organization at its disposal. Correspondingly, counter positions need to take advantage of the vulnerabilities in networks by exploiting power differentials that exist in the system.¹¹ What is required is more detail on network topologies and how power is organized therein.

2. Networking

The difficulty is, as with the term 'social', the term 'network' has become so pervasive that it is in danger of losing its meaning or of over-determining its effects. All the same, and in general terms, it seems clear that the network represents a key organizational principle for understanding contemporary politics and society in general (from the activities of peer-to-peer file-sharing to the viral operations of economic and financial markets). Indeed network forms of organization appear to increasingly prescribe power relations and control structures.¹² Emergent forms are dissimilar to the ways in which social relations have been traditionally organized, but, in general, they appear to reinforce existing power structures. According to Rossiter (2006), there is an urgent need for new institutional forms that reflect 'relational' processes to challenge existing hierarchical and centralizing systems. In contrast to what he calls 'networked organizations', emergent 'organized networks' are horizontal, collaborative and distributed in character offering a distinct social dynamic and new forms of agency appropriate to networks (based on the movement and flow between multiple agencies). The difference, not least, is how they have responded to developments in networked communications technology and the issue of intellectual property rights: on the one hand, using this as a regulatory mechanism to enforce or extend existing power structures, and on the other, advocating a loosening up of property rights. The contradictions between these characterizations reflect the political complexities and uncertainties associated with sociality and life in general.

The potential to transform social relations is somewhat demonstrated in the dynamics of social networking technologies. But it is the institutional nature of this, as a description of the organization of social relations that makes it a thoroughly political issue and why the many popular examples can be seen to be deeply compromised. For instance, Facebook demonstrates the potential for self-organization through its networked capacity and at the same time the drive to

¹¹ This is the position taken by Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker, in *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (2007).

¹² This position is underpinned by an understanding of *biopolitics* in the work of Foucault and *control* in the work of Deleuze.

commodify collective and communicative exchanges. Organized networks evidently represent relative institutional autonomy but they also need to operate tactically, engaging both horizontal and vertical modes of interaction. Rossiter stresses the point:

'The tendency to describe networks in terms of horizontality results in the occlusion of the "political", which consists of antagonisms that underpin sociality. It is technically and socially incorrect to assume that hierarchical and centralizing architectures and practices are absent from network cultures.' (2006: 36)

The plurality of nodes in networks does not guarantee a more inherent democratic order; indeed it is arguably serves to obscure its totalitarian substructure.¹³ This is the trick of social networking in offering the promise of democracy but though centralized ownership and control where the web platform itself mediates relations (unlike peer to peer file sharing for instance). Crucially, the software and the knowledge to shape it, is no longer stored locally on the user's hard drive but through the browser interface (and in this sense amateur production constitutes a lack of sufficient access to the means of production).

Network power can also be seen in the ways work is reconstituted and how as a consequence of more emphasis on socialised and communicative work new management techniques tend to stress horizontal rather than hierarchical organizational structures. As with the discussion of network control, this in itself is a technique of power that Maurizio Lazzarato takes to be more totalitarian than the production line, as it involves the willing subjectivity of the worker in the process (1999: 224). He explains the logic thus:

'If production today is directly the production of a social relation, then the "raw material" of immaterial labor is subjectivity and the "ideological" environment in which this subjectivity lives and reproduces. The production of subjectivity ceases to be only an instrument of social control (for the reproduction of mercantile relationships) and becomes directly productive, because the goal of our postindustrial society is to construct the consumer/communicator – and to construct it as "active". [...] The fact that immaterial labor produces subjectivity and economic value at the same time demonstrates how capital has broken down all the oppositions among economy, power, and knowledge.' (1996: 142)

¹³ As an example, information on the undemocratic nature of wikipedia has been much discussed: http://www.theregister.co.uk/2007/12/06/wikipedia_and_overstock/

The quote reflects the operations of social networking sites where social relations are produced as friendly rather than antagonistic. As the market outsources manufacture to its consumers, it somewhat resolves the contradiction between producers and consumers. It: 'tends not to sell any product at all to the consumer, but rather sells the consumer to the product' (Prada 2007). In such ways, the participatory work ethic of social networking is interpreted as an expression of new forms of control over subjectivity. The value that is stolen no longer relates simply to labour power but to subjectivity too.¹⁴ In the mesh-network of subjects-objects, the worker-user subject voluntarily produce themselves as an integral part of the user-generated objects they produce. Correspondingly, a shift is required in rethinking the social as a shared and common definition of what it means to be part of the same collective. This is important, as Latour emphasizes, because: 'If there is no society, *then no politics is possible*'. (2005: 250)

3. Networking

The parallel between social networking and working in general (or the network and 'worknet', if preferred)¹⁵ is encapsulated in the way the networked computer has become like a factory, and has redefined social practices and relations. This is the 'social factory' in which work is no longer confined by the walls of the factory, and is more dispersed, intellectual, immaterial and communicative. The dislocation of class antagonism in the social factory is close to what Marx referred to as 'real subsumption', to conceptualise the way that exploitation is dispersed and subsumed into the wider social realm. Consequently, the control of communications, and the labour related to communications, have become the key sites of antagonism. Furthermore, as labour time has become more difficult to measure and is less distinct from time outside work, much of it now practised as 'nonwork', outside of traditional production processes - 'notworking' as opposed to networking.¹⁶ The confusion over what constitutes work and 'not-work' turns attention to situations where work takes the forms of nonwork. Pil and Galia Kollektiv extend this point, by drawing on Paolo Virno's observation that work and action have become indistinct. They argue for uncovering latent action in non-work (2007).

¹⁴ Antonio Negri explains that two oppositions are at work: that between use value and exchange value of orthodox Marxism, and in addition 'objectified labor against subjective labor' (1998: 68).

¹⁵ The alternative term 'worknet' is sometimes used to establish the action involved in the interconnections of 'net' and 'work' and to stress the work involved in networking (Latour 2005).

¹⁶ Geert Lovink refers to 'networking is notworking', in connection to George Soros saying that chatting is a distraction from important work (2005: 3).

As forms of work become ever more undifferentiated, it is work itself that needs to be transformed and made more autonomous according to Antonio Negri, not by the reappropriation of work but by the refusal to work - networking. The position of refusal derives from Mario Tronti's essay 'The Strategy of Refusal' (of 1965), following the logic that capital 'seeks to use the worker's antagonistic will-to-struggle as a motor for its own development' (2004: 11). The strategy of refusal represents not liberation of work but from work associated with exploitation, and thus affirms autonomous production. But is simply refusing to use certain social networking sites effective refusal? I might refuse to register my account details and assemble my friends on facebook or enemies on hatebook, but the challenge is to make this into a more strategic political issue by identifying what is held in common – as part of the commons - or what Latour describes as redefining the 'well-assembled collective'.¹⁷

This is a socio-technical issue required better-assembled collectives of people and machines. There is need to identify the invisible architecture of the network and its protocols locked down by proprietary interests in order to make it more open, participatory and more public in the spirit of distributed infrastructures. For Rossiter too, organized networks offer a positive opportunity to develop strategies and techniques of better organization. For instance, peer production offers an obvious example of the opportunity to explore the limits of democracy and rethink politics from within network cultures.¹⁸ In such scenarios, a challenge is mounted to definitions of social wealth: a distinction between revenue and benefit sharing that the commons is founded upon (on the one hand, extracting monetary value from social processes and on the other imagining more sustainable alternatives to capitalist economy that have collective benefit). A peer-to-peer system in this respect might be considered anti-capitalist or 'post-capitalist'¹⁹ in the production of a social relation based on sharing and the common good. Virno, in *A Grammar of the Multitude*, makes a similar point when he argues for a political space in which 'the many' tend to common affairs (2004: 40). In such descriptions, terms like social networking holds the potential to transform server-client relations into peer-to-peer relations but only if held within the public realm, outside of private ownership and as part of the commons. In contrast, the rise of social networking as we know it with its participatory ethic has been largely stolen from free software development - interpreted by Dmytri Kleiner and Brian Wyrick as 'capitalism's preemptive attack against p2p

¹⁷ Confusion lies at the heart of sociology, according to Latour, 'between assembling the body politic and assembling the collective' (2005: 161).

¹⁸ This is what is referred to as 'non-representational democracy' to describe democracy decoupled from sovereign power. Rossiter is citing Virno's *The Grammar of the Multitude* (2004).

¹⁹ And to Bauwens, this represents possibilities for a new social order in which the commons relates to the market based on post-capitalist principles of value creation and sharing (2008).

systems' (2007: 16).²⁰ However, social networking demonstrates underlying contradictions: also standing antithetically for relations that reflect the dynamics of open network architectures and antagonistic political formations.

Political struggles need to reflect these socio-technical dynamics that seem to be encapsulated by conflicts over sharing digital content, such as those over peer-to-peer filesharing. In what Angela Mitropoulos refers to as the 'softwar' (2007), work and nonwork related to social networking software clearly invoke antagonistic not friendly relations. The suggestion of the paper - in support of *antisocial networking* - is that without the identification of antagonisms that underpin sociality, politics simply cannot be engaged. Better organization suggests new forms of agency that present coalitions of human and non-human actors enmeshed in radical networks.

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²⁰ This is what they refer to as the 'Info-Enclosure' as opposed to the 'Commons' (2008: 19). They point out that Usenet offered much the same services long before web 2.0, and how, in general, creative work is stolen from source.

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