

Elisabetta Ferrari, **Appropriate, Negotiate, Challenge: Activist Imaginaries and the Politics of Digital Technologies**, Oakland: University of California Press, 2024, 230 pp., \$95.00 (hardcover), \$29.95 (paperback).

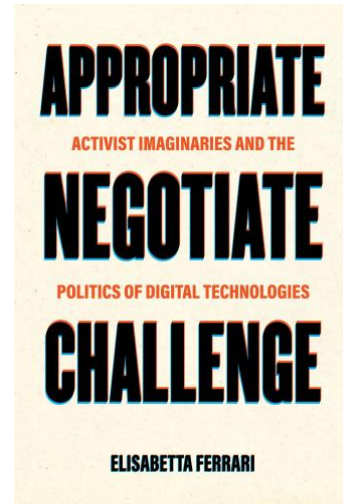
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The book ***Appropriate, Negotiate, Challenge: Activist Imaginaries and the Politics of Digital Technologies*** is about the politics of digital technologies in activist spaces; it is about how contemporary leftist activists make decisions about their use of digital media, following conversations that inform political acts and decisions. The book highlights “how social movements approach technology in a political way through discursive and imaginative processes” (p. 6)—and, as such, is addressed to scholars of media, technology, and social movements.

The author of the book is interdisciplinary media and political science scholar Elisabetta Ferrari, of Aarhus University (Denmark). This is her first book, developed from her dissertation research. With a background in international studies and political science, a PhD in communication, and a current interdisciplinary fellowship through the Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies, the author marries insight from essential disciplines to offer a manuscript about digital technologies and social change.

The book offers a theoretical framework that is both innovative and provocative. Based on the notion of technological imaginary—defined conceptually as a set of beliefs about the role of technology in social life and change, and achieved operationally through ongoing collaboration and negotiation among activists—the author draws from social movement studies, media history, science and technology studies, and sociology to provide an orienting framework that brings insight into social, political, and economic relationships to technology that matter to visions of, and mobilization for, social change. From the outset, dominant technological imaginaries are recognized for their deeply U.S. American ideological underpinnings, with their accompanying discursive modus operandi and intersectional lines of oppression. Part of the theoretical framework of the volume is also a careful description of how contemporary social movements confront technological imaginaries through the predominance of Silicon Valley actors and products.

The book makes for a fluid, approachable, and engaging read, all the while articulating nuanced and compelling claims. The sites of analysis are three leftist activist groups in Hungary, Italy, and the United States, examined qualitatively over the course of three years through methods of observation, interviewing, and visual focus group. The latter is the author’s own developed methodological approach, documented and published elsewhere as well (see Ferrari, 2024). The analytical chapters offer rich contextualization for the three different sites of analysis, necessary to discern the specific national environments in which the activist groups call for social change. What holds the book together are the three groups’ political commitments



against right-wing populist governments, as well as their similar protest strategies. It is helpful in this regard that the book's intent is to juxtapose the case studies and not to strictly compare them.

Following the first two chapters that provide introductory and theoretical remarks, the book alternates focus between the three sites of analysis. Chapter 3 details what the author terms the "mundane modernity" of the technological imaginary of Hungarian Internet protests, laid out as an example of appropriation of the technologies and values of Silicon Valley for a postcommunist, Central European locale. What is "mundane" about it is the everyday role and presence of digital technologies, especially Facebook in this case, repurposed in the fight for political freedom (and free internet, for the Hungarian protesters' purpose), in clear opposition to the policies of right-leaning Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, of the Christian nationalist Fidesz Party. The author notes the power of Western modernity in the symbolic appropriation of technology as a tool for development, equality, and rationality, in the protesters' rejection of the Fidesz model of illiberal democracy.

Chapter 4 focuses on the Italian student collective called Laboratorio Universitario Metropolitano, or LUMe, whose use of digital technologies—Facebook (tellingly labeled "the new television" by the LUMe activists; see p. 111), WhatsApp, and Instagram—is described as "an imaginary of negotiation," an ambiguous, contradictory, yet compelling protest of the neoliberal, dominant system while using its own tools for such critique (p. 89). Methodologically, this chapter is stronger than the previous one, providing more clarity about how the evidence of activist engagement with digital technologies is gathered. Noteworthy is the contribution of the drawings produced during the visual focus groups with Italian activists.

The book turns to the U.S. American context in chapter 5, in which Philly Socialists receive analytical attention. This group engages digital technologies imperfectly as well, primarily for recruitment to their cause, and through a posture of negotiation reminiscent of LUMe's activity. The chapter highlights the activists' commitment to socialist organizing and their rejection of "activist networking," or "performative lifestyle activism" (p. 126). It also examines their extensive multimedia strategy for communicating both internally within the movement and externally with broader publics. Ferrari labels this technological imaginary as "organizing where people are" (p. 126), to capture the ongoing negotiation of the critique of, and need to rely on, the repertoire of Silicon Valley tools.

The final chapter ties together the books' analytical observations, reflecting on processes of appropriation and negotiation while underscoring the inherently political nature of activism mediated through digital technologies. It provides nuanced reflection on the ongoing dominance of Silicon Valley, despite an increasingly regulated environment, and examines the challenge of finding alternatives—a challenge the book conceptualizes as both refusal and engagement with digital technologies native to Silicon Valley.

A strength of the book is the author's voice. She writes with theoretical rigor, intellectual insight, and nuance. I appreciated the vivid scenes she creates, which allows the reader to readily visualize the settings she describes—for instance, the cell-phone-lit gathering of protesters in Hungary in 2014 (see chapter 3, Figure 1, p. 76), the space reclaimed by LUMe for "politically meaningful cultural content" (p. 88), or the packed room for Philly Socialists' monthly "mass meeting" in the summer of 2018 (p. 123). Such

attention to detail brings the reader even closer to understanding the discursive practices of negotiation around technological imaginaries, even more than the theoretical and methodological features of the book.

A few limitations are worth noting. One conceptual observation refers to the separation of the three key political factors that shape how activists engage with digital technologies—the ideological commitments of the groups themselves, the political context in which they are embedded, and the presence and influence of other technological imaginaries deployed by other political actors; the last two are deeply interrelated, as the author herself argues that technological practices are deeply political and politicized. Another minor limitation is the thinner presence of the Hungarian case study in the concluding chapter (this is somewhat understandable given the more dated nature of the activism when compared to the contemporary uses of social media platforms by the other two groups).

Readers of this journal, as well as scholars of communication, media studies, and social movements, will all benefit from the theoretical contribution of the book. It is not a stretch to imagine Ferrari's observations—on the collectivity of technological uses, negotiation, and imagination, on the sociopolitical tendrils that shape such decisions in various spaces, or on the active production of discourses and practices that shape our contemporary media landscape—applied to a range of other issues. They will be especially relevant to understanding social engagement with artificial intelligence. Analyses such as the ones provided in this book will surely follow and build on this important scholarship.

### Reference

Ferrari, E. (2024). Visual focus groups: Stimulating reflexive conversations with collective drawing. *New Media & Society*, 26(9), 5486–5506. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221136082>