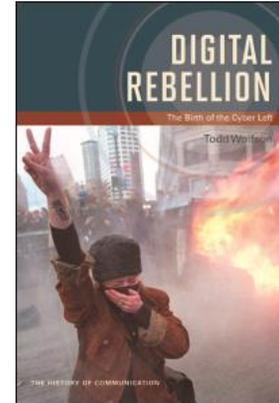


Todd Wolfson, **Digital Rebellion: The Birth of the Cyber Left**, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014, 240 pages. ISBN 978-0-252-08038-8 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-252-03884-6 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-252-09680-8 (ebook).

Reviewed by
Christian Fuchs
University of Westminster, UK



The world of activism has changed in recent decades. There has been much talk about “new” social movements. The fetishist aura of the new has, in the realm of activism, resulted in claims that we have moved beyond Left and Right and beyond class and capitalism into a world of identity politics, postmodernism, culturalism, and struggles for recognition. An associated assertion is that a break is needed with the Old Left and the working-class movement. Postmodern activism has—just like postmodern theory—for a long time not realized that its very claims correspond neatly to neoliberal’s culture of fragmentation and individualism as well as to a form of managerialism that celebrates the logic of networks and decentralization in order to deflect attention from the fact that class and other inequalities have been increasing during the past decades of neoliberal governmentality and the commodification of (almost) everything. The move away from class politics has paradoxically taken place at a time when class inequality has intensified. Since the 1990s, new social movements have started using the Internet, which has resulted in yet another level of the aura of the new and of political fetishism. Todd Wolfson’s book **Digital Rebellion: The Birth of the Cyber Left** sets out to unmask the myths surrounding the Internet’s role in social movement politics.

With the term *Cyber Left*, Wolfson analytically describes “the way activists have employed communication tools” and “the novel set of processes and practices within twenty-first-century social resistance that are engendered by new technologies” (p. 4). There is no doubt that, since the 1990s, when the question arose about what role the World Wide Web played in the EZLN (Zapatista) solidarity movement and other political phenomena, the Internet and mobile technologies have become tools of organization and mobilization in social movements and political parties. The exact role is contested, but any social movement and social movement researcher has, since the 1990s, had to ask what role digital technologies play in contemporary movements. To prefix the term *Cyber* to the Left can, however, create the impression that technology is the key dimension of politics, which omits questions about the very demands and problems that movements make and that are immanently communicated by terms such as the *working-class/proletarian movement* (capitalism as a political problem), the *ecological movement* (environmental devastation as political problem), the *antiracist movement* (racism as a political problem),

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or the *feminist movement* (patriarchy as political problem). The media and the Internet are certainly political issues that require specific political attention, but the term *Cyber Left* runs counter to the intention of Wolfson's book—namely, to formulate a constructive criticism of network and Internet fetishism in social movement discourse. The Cyber Left can better be defined as a specific ideological discourse that claims that digital media use is embedded into the practice of grassroots democracy in social movements; argues such media make struggles more effective and movements participatory; and neglects the actual resource limits, power structures, and political economy that protest movements inevitably face in capitalist society.

Wolfson's book consists of six chapters in two parts with an introduction and a conclusion. The first part and its two chapters focus on the origins and history of the Cyber Left, especially the EZLN, Indymedia, and the movement for alternative/democratic globalization. The second part discusses the Cyber Left's logic of resistance—especially the role of network structures, democratic governance, and communications strategies. The conclusion discusses political perspectives for the Left and what we can learn from the failure of Indymedia. The question of why Indymedia arose, but then almost completely disappeared is the key empirical case that the book addresses and that Wolfson uses for analyzing the discourses and strategies of social movements in the Internet age. He draws on his own experiences with Indymedia in Philadelphia and ethnographic research that he conducted.

Wolfson questions the tendency of contemporary social movements to "uncritically celebrate" the "logic of horizontality as a deeply democratic form of movement building" (p. 20). Such arguments not only focus on the organizational dynamic of movements but see the Internet as an appropriate means for supporting grassroots democracy. The blind spot of the optimism that the book questions is that social movements exist within a global capitalist world in which time, access to space, resources, attention, money, and power are unevenly distributed, which creates a political economy of asymmetrical resource distribution for all social movements. Social movements, unlike companies, do not sell anything and so cannot count on monetary resource inputs. They also do not have the privileged access to law-making and public resources that political parties have. They cannot count on sympathetic media coverage and often only become subjects of the media as part of scandalizing tabloid coverage that attempts to discredit social movements as chaotic and violent with the help of one-dimensional and distorted reports. Most activists or sympathizers have to earn a wage to survive, which limits their possibilities of and time for doing politics, a phenomenon that, under conditions of neoliberalism and precarity, becomes even more problematic. Occupations are, for example, time- and energy-consuming, a situation that is further reinforced by the fact that the wage form is the main means of survival in a capitalist world. Activist and citizen media tend to have fewer resources and receive less attention than mainstream media. They are harder to maintain and often struggle with the difficulty of how to survive. Media activism and alternative journalism are often stories of voluntary, self-exploited, and precarious knowledge labor (Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010). If activists rely on established mainstream media, then they are confronted with the fact that capitalist media's managers are part of the 1% and may not favorably view movements critical of capitalism. Such conditions do not mean that all capitalist media always censor, exclude, or distort information about social movements, but that there is significant risk and a power asymmetry.

Left-wing activists are, of course, smart in seeking ways to overcome such structural restrictions, but it is clear that capitalism's political economy poses problems and limits for activism. The lack of resources and time can easily result in unacknowledged power structures in which those who control the scarce resources or have more time or better speaking skills than others develop into de facto leaders, but the official ideology is that there are no leaders in a grassroots movement.

It is more honest to acknowledge that some form of hierarchy, representation, and political organization is inevitable and beneficial given the resource precarity that social movements face in capitalism. If these problems are not acknowledged, then a strange ideology of horizontality as discourse and centralization and hierarchy as practice and actuality easily develops. The real issues of the limits posed by external power and political economy are then not adequately addressed, which can result in a fundamentalism of horizontalism and radicalism that accuses specific individuals or factions of hierarchism or reformism. Such misrecognition of how structural conditions impede social movement agency can weaken or cause the end of movements. Grassroots democracy is a nice idea, but within capitalism, it often does not work as an organizational principle because of a lack of time, resources, and money. Being preoccupied with themselves, horizontalist movements often turn into political sects whose immanent struggles weaken their transformative capacities within society. Most "Cyber Left institutions have weak organizational structures with little collective decision-making power because they have dismissed, a priori, centralized power and structures of accountability and leadership of any kind" (p. 24). One of the effects of the ideology of practicing decentralization and participatory democracy within a world whose macrosocietal structures are centralized and undemocratic is an "isolated localism that is in tension with democratic decision making" (p. 155).

The Cyber Left's tendencies are often replicated in the study of social movements and social movement media. Gabriel Hetland and Jeff Goodwin (2013) argue, based on an analysis of social movement textbooks and articles published over 12 years and 6 years in the journals *Mobilization* and *Social Movement Studies*, that "recent studies of social movements have not only lacked this anti-capitalist spirit [of the 1970s], but also largely ignored, with very few exceptions, the enabling and constraining effects of capitalism" (p. 86).

Recent scholarship tends to overlook not only the direct and proximate effects of capitalist institutions on collective action, but also the ways in which capitalist dynamics indirectly influence the possibilities for protest, sometimes over many years or even decades, by, for example, shaping political institutions, political alliances, social ties, and cultural idioms. Instead, recent scholarship tends to focus on *short-term* shifts in "cultural framings," social networks, and especially "political opportunities," rarely examining the deeper causes of such shifts; in fact, most movement scholars now treat this last set of factors as independent variables, neglecting the ways in which they may be powerfully shaped by capitalism. (Hetland & Goodwin, 2013, p. 86)

Contemporary talks and publications about social movements, the media, and the Internet often confirm the same tendency that Hetland and Goodwin describe for general social movement research for the realm of social movement media studies: There is a predominant neglect of engagement with Marxist

theory, class, capitalism, political economy and the dominance of a particularistic, decontextualized focus on media case studies of single movements in single countries lacking broader, holistic, global, macrosociological, and historical contexts. Social movement media studies scholars tend to study the movements they have sympathies for, which results, with exceptions, in few studies of fascist and right-wing extremist movements and uncritical celebrations of social movements' alleged creative use of technology and horizontal network structures of social movements. Social movement media scholars' blind enthusiasm and celebratory methodology neither help social movements nor contribute to critical studies of politics and the media. Typically, the advantages of social movements' use of social media, mobile communication, networking, and the Internet in general are worked out and endlessly reiterated in such studies, while the structural and macrosociological limits and problems that capitalism, class, asymmetric power structures, and the lack of influence, time, attention, state power, and money can pose for social movements and their media use are rather neglected (Fuchs, 2014a, 2014b, 2015; Trottier & Fuchs, 2014).

Social movement media studies are typically untheoretical or engage only in microsociological analyses and theorizing that ignore how macrosociological structures condition social movements' practices, organization, and communication. Such theory-less micro studies tend to omit issues of capitalism, labor, and class as well as Marxism as theoretical approach with the arguments that contemporary movements are "more complex," that one should avoid "economic reductionism," and that Marxism has a state-centered ideology and stands for political centralization that social movements oppose. At the same time, global capitalism has, however, resulted in culminating inequalities, immense precarious labor (especially among the young generation), a prolonged world economic and social crisis, and an intensification and extension of neoliberal austerity politics—and along with it militarized right-wing law-and-order politics and surveillance ideologies, which proves the basic points of Marxist theory are still right today. Neglecting to engage with Marxist theory and political economy, class, and capitalism in social movement research and social movement media studies makes these fields not just relatively uncritical but politically idealist and naïve. I do not argue that Marxist theory and political economy alone are always sufficient for understanding contemporary political problems, struggles, and movements, but that a critical understanding of class and capitalism, whose analysis has been most advanced by Marxist theories, needs to be dialectically mediated with the analysis of nonclass and structures of domination in order to understand contemporary society's contradictions, social movements, and mediated communication. All contemporary movements are inevitably conditioned by and confronted with issues involving labor, precarity, the commons, the commodity form, neoliberalism, capitalism, the capitalist state, capitalist ideologies, and so on. Ignoring this importance and the theoretical significance of these dimensions analyzed by Marxist theories is inappropriate for social movements studies and deprives them of the political, theoretical, and analytical richness they deserve and require.

In relation to the academic discourse about social movement media, Todd Wolfson questions both the optimists who celebrate the asserted claims about how digital media make activist communities politically effective and organizationally democratic and the pessimists who either neglect any role of technology in protest or aim to dismiss digital media as minor phenomena. Both technological utopianism and neo-Luddism are flawed. Both overstating and underestimating either the technological or social dimension of movements is one-dimensional.

Wolfson rightfully argues for and practices a dialectical theory of technology. It is, however, in my view inappropriate that in this respect he evokes Andrew Feenberg's approach (p. 101), which is, in respect to the Internet, clearly techno-euphoric and in general dualist and undialectical in character. Feenberg's approach is, for example, evidenced by the fact that his main books never engage with or quote from Hegel's works on the dialectical logic and do not connect the philosophy of technology to Hegel's dialectic. A critical dialectical theory of technology and digital media cannot be grounded in a dualist, undialectical approach such as the one by Feenberg (for details of this argument, see Fuchs, 2016, section 15.11: "How Not To Theorise Technology: Andrew Feenberg's Dualist Theory of Technology").

Wolfson argues that social movements develop in such a way that older issues are not extinguished but take on different forms when new issues emerge. The Internet is one of these political and organizational dimensions that does not eliminate older structures of class, power, and domination; rather, it gives a new quality and relevance to them. It is a dialectical system resulting in *Aufhebungen* (sublations) that simultaneously eliminate, preserve, and uplift other levels (Fuchs, 2014c). A dialectical approach sees the "trilateral interaction between social movement actors, the history of struggles, and the contemporary socioeconomic environs" (p. 185). Structures, agency, and their histories and legacies shape social movements' possibilities and actualities.

Wolfson's approach in his analytical work is not just dialectical; he is a political activist and organizer in Philadelphia's Media Mobilizing Project (<http://mediamobilizing.org>), which defines itself as working for building "a media, education and organizing infrastructure" in order "to organize poor and working people to tell our stories to each other and the world, disrupting the stereotypes and structures that keep our communities divided" (<http://mediamobilizing.org/who-we-are/updates>). The project describes its organizational approach as follows:

MMP is now running public computer labs with 6 community organizations across Philadelphia, providing basic to advanced technology and media training and computer resources to thousands of poor and working people. Many training participants go on to become leaders in MMP's ongoing grassroots media program infrastructure and organizing committees. These include a monthly TV show, MMPTV; three radio shows; and Labor, Political Education, Grassroots Fundraising, Fight for Drivers Licenses and End Fire Company Brownouts committees. Leaders developed through our work also consult with and contract to organizations leading struggles for justice locally, regionally, and nationally, including Put People First PA, a statewide effort to organize thousands of unorganized Pennsylvanians toward building the sort of power we need to win lasting victories around health care, education, jobs, housing and all our human needs and rights. (<http://mediamobilizing.org/who-we-are/history#main>)

Wolfson's *Digital Rebellion* is an excellent reminder that social movements are confronted with dialectics of continuity and discontinuity, the technological and the social, the mediated and the immediate, organization and spontaneity, centralization and decentralization, exclusion and participation, class and domination, the economic and the noneconomic, distribution and recognition, the movement and

the party, and civil society and the state. These dialectics have their own political economy that has to do with capitalist society's immanent contradictions that pose new opportunities as well as limits and risks for social movements. The book is a powerful reminder that social movements should not oppose but rather constructively embrace socialism, the critique of class and capitalism, organization, and left-wing political parties. This does not mean that they must be economic reductionist and authoritarian cadre organizations, but that new fusions, alliances, and convergences of class politics and identity politics, social movements and political parties, civil society and state/parliamentary politics, reform and revolution (radical reformism), Marxism and anarchism, Lenin and Bakunin, and spontaneity and organization (organized spontaneity) are needed today.

On May 13, 2015, Indymedia.org was ranked the 29,107th most accessed website in the world. On January 6, 2008, in contrast, it was ranked 3,468 (alexa.com). In 2015, Indymedia.org's last entry was dated November 29, 2013. What caused the decline of Indymedia? Todd Wolfson asserts that its weakness, and in fact the general drawback of the entire Cyber Left, was a neglect of political organization and leadership, its lack of political education programs, the neglect of class and capitalism as political issues, scarce connections to blue-collar workers, the poor, and people of color as well as its deterministic and uncritical understanding of technology.

The relativist trap of horizontalism, technological determinism, and prefigurative grassroots politics should be avoided in social movements, social movement research, and social movement media studies. Embracing organization, technology's political economy, and political power, however, creates a comparable trap whereby political groups develop into orthodox, sectarian, undemocratic, and authoritarian groups that recognize nothing but and beyond the industrial blue-collar working class, oppose the use of the Internet as means of political organization and communication, reduce their media practices to selling their own unappealingly designed and written newspapers, and practice neo-Luddite technophobia as well as the paralyzing politics of factioneering and endless fundamentalist theory and political debates that turn minor differences into imagined major confrontations. Such centralized politics and organizational structures are just as limited, limiting, and limitlessly inappropriate as horizontalism. What we need first and foremost today in theory and in politics are dialectical practices that bring together dualities that often remain separated. Todd Wolfson's book is a good input for reflecting on the dialectics of theory, the media, and politics in the digital age.

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