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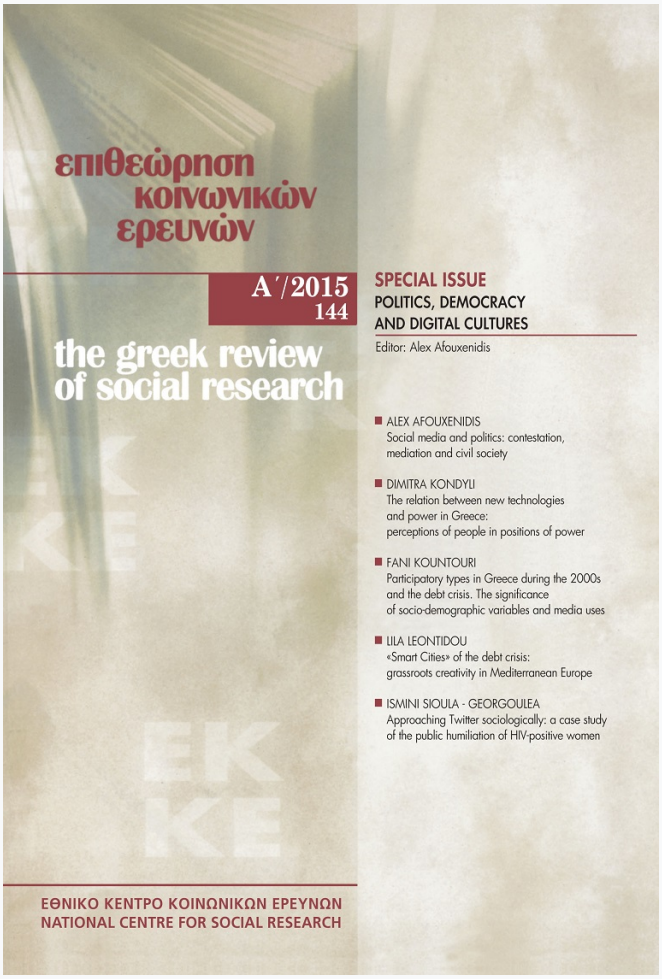

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SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICS: CONTESTATION, MEDIATION AND CIVIL SOCIETY

ABSTRACT

In this special issue we consider various perspectives and ideas underlying the current ever-changing political and digital environments. There have been a substantial number of theories, coupled by empirical research over the past few years, on the nature of political behavior with respect to the increased use of the Internet. The main aim of this edition is to explore a few aspects of 'digital politics' and what they may mean for contemporary democratic culture. This paper synthesizes and reflects upon concepts presented in the following articles and discusses some recent developments and debates related to the dynamics of the online world.

Keywords: *cultural politics, digital inequality, Facebook, political participation, Twitter*

DIGITAL CULTURE(S)?

Posted on 8 November 2015 by alex afouxenidis

'Digital' has been closely associated with the rise of computational machines, the pc, laptops, mobile telephones, apps, Internet platforms such as Twitter and Facebook and blogs. Essentially this association was (is) the result of the Western hegemonic narrative coming from the modernist period. The shift to the 'digital' era carried the usual postulates related to the neutrality of technology, its usefulness and logic, its dynamic potential, its inadvertent beauty and, last but not least, its capacity to emancipate.

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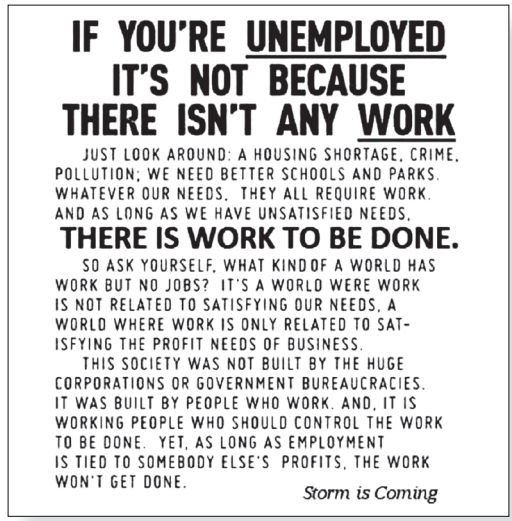

From Occupy London & Occupy Wall Street via Facebook

The advent of the digital epoch has also been closely associated with cultural politics. From early techno-futurists, such as Rheingold (*The Virtual Community,* 1993), to contemporary academics such as Castells (*Networks of Outrage and Hope,* 2015), Internet technology is fundamentally conceived in terms of a cultural public sphere. Reconstituting 'society' as a kind of continuum between individuals, collectivities, technologies and culture is not however a fresh idea. Nor is the utopian vision of global community and enhanced association by virtue of techno-progress. And yet none of these arguments are merely imaginative. Technology and cyber-culture(s) firmly belong to industrial and post-industrial material cultural civilization (see, *Techno science and cyber-culture,* 1996).

In other words, techno-ideas represent the contemporary discursive 'state of the art', the avant-garde, of practices, ideologies, institutional frameworks and academic disciplines. With respect to some academic traditions and political and popular discourses, which are all in constant interchange and transmigration, an interesting variety of (neo) Futurism has occurred: a celebration of creativity, an appeal to the surpassing of tradition, a mythical almost magical notion of a polyphonic social order. It is a powerful message whose consequences are difficult to evaluate at present. In political and cultural terms this notion systematizes the point

of view that oppositional cultures are no more: they can be overcome and possibly/probably integrated within the global project of advanced post-industrial capitalism. This highly durable and influential concept, is rapidly dominating the current agenda on social organization. And perhaps, it represents the only significant and fundamental difference to the 19th and 20th centuries: at the time, modernist social and political strategies utilized space and territory to organize societies. Notions of culture and cultural politics accompanied and complemented those strategies. Nowadays this has almost been reversed. Territories no longer need to mirror collective representations. Instead, cultural *presentations* and the ways they manifest themselves electronically, have come to progressively define spatial juxtapositions. These are hegemonic, in the Gramscian sense of *consent*, politics of the highest level. Powerfully antagonistic and undeniably populist, they involve people *and* disavow five of the most critical philosophical categories which are, time/space, agent/subject, signifier/signified, real/imaginary and value/existence.

The necessary vocabulary to accompany new technologies is also an expression of the dynamics being played out at the intersection between culture and politics:

> You wake up and check your e-mail on your bedside iPad-that's one app. During breakfast you browse Facebook, Twitter and the *New York Times*-three more apps. On the way to the office, you listen to a podcast on your smartphone. Another app. At the end of the day, you come home, make dinner while listening to Pandora, play some games on Xbox Live, and watch a movie on Netflix's streaming service. You've spent the day on the Internet-but not on the web. And you are not alone. Over the past few years, one of the most important shifts in the digital world, has been the move from the wide-open Web to semi-closed platforms that use the Internet for transport but not the browser for display (cited in Jin Dal Yong, 2015: 3).

The above passage makes a valid point on the constantly changing techno-ecology of the Internet. You seek to analyze "the Web", you are instantly pretty antiquated. It can also be interpreted in a multitude of other ways. It's, primarily, indicative of the converging nature of digital devices *and simultaneously* of the extreme compartmentalization of the mediated public sphere.

Million Mask March photo, The Guardian, 5th November 2015

It is also a reflection of a particular variety of 'youth culture' which is relying heavily on the Internet and its various social media configurations and aesthetic types (Pew Research Center, 2010). This point of view could be associated with contemporary perceptions on the prolongation of youthfulness as a way of life. Gadgets, alongside an understanding of the language that describes them, play a role in sustaining and perpetuating contemporary material culture. You don't have to be particularly young to be hip. You just have to 'follow' trendsetters.

(•_•)
<))╯ Cause I just wanna copy and paste
/ \

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From YouTube, between comments about an indie play-list

An individual's relation to gadgetry may provide the basis for re-negotiating hierarchy within various societal contexts. The significance of objects, as Appadurai suggested, is of particular importance when examin-

ing industrial and post-industrial cultural configurations. In the context of digital media, the 'object' itself may mean much more than the function it actually performs. The messages received on your new smartphone, are deemed as secondary. What is important is the ownership of the device, the individuality that it portrays, and beneath it all the aesthetic essentialism which justifies its adoration. A phone or an iPad can be beautiful, gorgeous, attractive and 'smooth-edged'. The everyday gendering of language possibly goes unnoticed, although it should be resisted. In stricter political and cultural terms, the sublime *connotations* attached to various devices form an overwhelming nexus upon which power and domination are based.

Indeed it seems that within the realm of political action, exercising power has become much more than holding public office or developing political strategies and policy solutions. It is more a matter of *demonstrating* public representation, of *performing* adversarialism, of amassing political ipseity. In this respect, social media becomes a vehicle for opacity and deceit. It is another way to hide the ways power is exercised, to make it even more difficult to understand the constitution of intricate power relations which operate vertically and horizontally across the political spectrum. Marketing politics and ideological agendas has become commonplace and dominant in the digital world refuting any notions of enhanced political participation and increased citizen involvement. In addition, issues of power and control internal to public (and private) organizations mirror the ways they interrelate with citizens, through systems such as e-governance. Kondyli, in the current volume, investigates the role of new technologies in public administration and informs us that the adoption of new technologies may also mean that traditional power will still be exercised albeit through the utilization of new means. If anything, techno-innovation may therefore generate the conditions for further disempowerment of the public.

bed=furniture that you drag yourself on at night cause you're sleepy. By the time you get there sleep is gone (125 'likes')

a lesson from recent elections: form a party shortly before the election and you might hold the balance of power!! (41 'likes')

picture of an empty street of Athens at 3 a.m. (17 'likes')

Scrolling down Facebook on any given day. By taking away the visual context text appears jumbled and incoherent

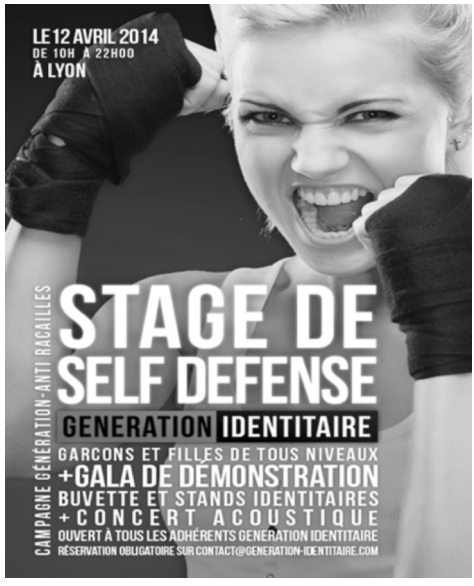
In this respect, Margolis (in Nixon and Koutrakou, 2007, p.1) makes a valid point when arguing on the possible impact of the Internet on citizen's political engagement by saying that political 'parties, together with their candidates and officeholders, dominate political activity not only offline, but also on the Internet. Cyberspace is replete with familiar political and commercial interests, whose broadly linked and much advertised websites reflect their dominance of political and economic affairs of civil societies in the real world'.

In fact the issue of political practices across digital media has been one of the most dominant ones amongst current academic writing. Fuchs (2013) in a very detailed account critically engages with social media platforms and the projection of a kind of participatory culture with respect to democracy and the public sphere. Christensen (2012) discusses the impact of the Net on democracy, by using the example of Finland's 'slactivism', to indicate that beyond individual satisfaction it may have no real impact on political life. Bartlett et al (2011) indicate that the use of social media by populist parties amplifies their message resulting in shifts on how we may view and understand 'populism' in the coming years. Bennett (2012) makes a good case regarding the 'era of personalized politics' which is also indicative of the fragmentation of political agendas with regards to the organization of mass mobilizations. Dahlgren (2011) carefully positions the whole theme of 'participation' into contemporary neoliberal practices and indicates that the Web is an ambivalent space which has to be examined with caution especially with regards to whether it shifts power relations and empowers citizens. Kaynak and Turkoglu (2010) argue that in the case of Turkey, political discourse on the Web is often identical to offline content and therefore it is used to reproduce already existing political positions. Carlisle and Patton (2013) look at the US Presidential Election of 2008 with respect to how it was played out in Facebook, and examine whether the medium enhanced individual political activity. They conclude that such activity has been overestimated. Leontidou in this issue, to a degree arguing along the lines set out by Castells (2010), analytically connects the contestation of urban space and popular mobilizations to digital manifestations. This new kind of 'space' offers possibilities for empowering political initiatives, but it has also to be seen as a vulnerable place where such position s maybe repressed.

Arguably, an emerging overarching theme which connects the above and countless other examinations of political participation through digitization, is – at the level of theory at least – a dismantling of the hype

concerning the 'benefits' of global 'virtual communities' and 'online' civil societies. The categories of domination and control, of conflict and antagonism *as well as* those regarding knowledge and politics *and* politics and culture, are slowly becoming embedded parts of a variety of analyses concerning the potential of digital technology.

And yet, advanced capitalism has penetrated to almost all forms of political and cultural expression, including the 'third space' and civil society. Lloyd and Thomas (1998) make a strong point about this issue by saying that cultural production has shifted in tune with 'the increasing intervention of capitalism in civil society, in the domain of 'values' and recreation, and through the intensification of a commodification of culture that is indifferent to aesthetic distinction except in the instrumental form of audience and consumer stratification' (pp, 160-161). In addition, this sort of 'intervention' ultimately produces and reinforces, especially through the utilization of blogging and micro-blogging, strong cultural stereotypes on almost all aspects of social and political life. As Sioula-Georgoulea argues, HIV-positive women were dehumanized on Twitter even by those who were critical of their prosecution. A valid case can be made with regards to civil society and the various forms it may take on and offline is that strong associational forms, autonomous organizations, pressure groups and even small organized collective interests may also act counter to democratic institutions in order to change them or overcome them.



September 2013. Greek far-right blog. The Identitarians are promoted in a text which argues that nationalist activism is necessary in order to win back 'our' streets and cities. The aesthetics are basically influenced by current pop imagery

Moreover, the political process is not characterized by equitable distribution of power. Civil society is certainly not a homogeneous realm, with some organizations being closer to power than others thus accepting for themselves a relative loss of autonomy in order to sustain whichever benefits for their members or, simply, to extract more funding and protection for their organizations. These organizations which gain in terms of increased legitimacy, more access to funds and therefore more political power, have an additional advantage with regards to framing the issues which are deemed socially relevant (Mawson, 2010). Increased leverage in the political process means that a substantial number of organizations will compete fiercely for limited funds, which in turn means that they shift further away from *grassroots* political cultures and become aligned with the dominant political system.

Somewhere in Europe in 2013

In this respect civil society organizations can be analyzed as entities in a continuous state of flow, simultaneously undermining *and* enhancing the democratic process by being positioned in opposition and contention to the dominant political culture *as well as* in active support to systemic politics. In other words civil society may be *simultaneously* disrupting liberal political community as well as reinforcing it. For example, during the times of crisis in Greece, political parties, local authorities and the state assimilated

Agents/Institutions/NGOs	Main activities	Vocabulary used
Niarchos Foundation	Donations, arts, education, health, welfare, young people, scholarships	Inspiration, common good, vision, need, initiative
Onassis Foundation	Arts, education, scholarships, health, welfare, church	Humanitarian aid, offering, need, assistance, strength
Bodosakis Foundation	Education, scholarships	Vision, solidarity, strong civil society, equal opportunity
Latsis Foundation	Research, education, scholarships, welfare	Need, offering, support, social responsibility
Kakogiannis Foundation	Arts, education, children, young people	Vision, support, power, faith in the youth
Piraeus Bank	UNICEF, Medecins Sans Frontieres, The Smile of the Child, Sos-villages, scholarships	Protection, support, spirit of volunteerism, corporate social responsibility
Alpha Bank	Sos-villages, day of volunteerism, employees volunteerism, education, environment	Cooperation, corporate social responsibility, support
Municipality of Athens	Bazaar, support to the homeless, support to strayed animals, support to families in need	Cooperation, civil society, common action, coordination
Praxis (NGO)	Humanitarian actions	Our values, people at the centre, strength, action
WWF	Environmental actions	Future, people at the centre, responsibility, transparency, active citizen
Greenpeace	Environmental actions	Our values, common action, volunteerism, acting now
Action Aid Hellas	Humanitarian actions	Our vision, equality, solidarity, transparency, support
Medecins Sans Frontieres	Humanitarian actions	Assistance, help, people in need, vulnerability

Some examples of constructing universal truths by using the vocabulary of humanitarianism: donors, charities and NGOs websites promoting their image

parts of the rhetoric of civil society and volunteerism in their discursive repertoire. Messages were communicated through an easily identifiable *corporate language* used by state agents, larger local authorities and metropolitan areas, such as the Athens Municipality and by private donor institutions. This sort of 'vocabulary', accompanied by the necessary imagery, contributes to a specific type of moralistic view of the world that is attached to individual attitude and preference, and bears a striking resemblance to an individual omnivore consumer. It inherently encompasses a new sort of freedom of association where the referential point is manifested through the politics of pretentious idealism with respect to the organization of the public domain. More importantly, the inherent 'recommendation' is that the organized state has to cease acting as a provider (Rodger, 2013). Instead, it is deemed better if the state is *reconstituted* along the lines of becoming a coordinating facilitator of predominantly 'free' - private - institutions, which can ensure what is best for the public interest.

Politics and political culture(s) thus, are not necessarily re-negotiated because of the existence of the medium. Rather, digital platforms reflect, or 'replicate' as Margolis and Moreno-Riano (2009) argue, the offline world. In the case of, for example, the Athens Syntagma Square 'indignados', the Net functioned as a tool which assisted the organizing of mobilizations by

LGBTQ community demonstrating in Athens, 2015. The main message reads, 'yesterday in the closet-today on the streets-tomorrow with our children'

people. Some of them were already part of the activist movement. In this context Kountouri makes an interesting point by suggesting that Internet usage seems to be an autonomous variable with regards to political interest: it may act as a 'stimulant' to politics rather as a reinforcing element in the articulation of political interests.

A good example of this is the speedy appearance of the *Menoume Evropi* ('Residing in Europe') initiative to respond to the possibility of Greece having to exit the Euro-zone due to a failure in the negotiations which resulted in the referendum during the tumultuous summer of 2015. The initiative utilized all forms of digital media including the setting up of a website. One of their basic proclamations is the wish to remain 'in Europe' at whatever cost. The organizers of the group relied heavily on 'spontaneity' (individuals of different political persuasions gathering impromptu) to pass their message across coupled by 'hip' populist aesthetics of youngsters, EU flags and the word 'YES' written in capital letters on the Greek flag. One of their main ideological positions however, was related to the acceptance of the rationale driving market forces.

'Menoume Evropi' appeared to be a, profoundly liberal, quick response to the Syntagma Square demonstrations which primarily problematized the whole context of liberal political rationality but could not offer an alternative. Ephemerality was a common element in both sets of popularized movements as well as the extended use of social media to communicate their respective concerns.

Menoume Evropi demonstration, 2015.
The banner reads 'Greece in Europe'

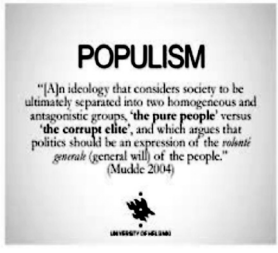
One can argue that, the primarily binary identity of the demonstrators themselves, namely the distinction between those who raised issues concerning alternatives ways to organize democracy and those who protested because their individual rights were violated, became a matter of digital presentation by various journalistic and academic sources. Individual stories and videos of protesters went side by side with more 'refined' intellectual and academic analyses on the context and the political message of events. In discursive terms, popular language was used to describe individual and collective activity. Demonstrators became heroes, or villains, holders of a new political discourse, or simply populists who did not understand what is at stake. Demonstrations became, for a while, spectacular objects to be admired or condemned.

Athens, 'Thank You banner' 18.02.2012. It went viral for a day or two.

Within the heavily ideological context of the time, analyses constantly collided with each other in an attempt to gain political, and more importantly moral, superiority. Analysts and opinion makers were distributed in groups reminiscent of older (sub)cultural politics: mods versus rockers, punks versus skins, emos versus grunges and so forth. The 'righteous' versus the 'unorthodox', the 'populists' versus the 'rational modernizers/elitists', the 'intellectual ideologues' versus the 'pragmatic scientists'; the list is endless signifying an almost complete collapse of traditional forms of social cohesion, mutual empathy and understanding. In general grand narratives dominated interpretations in an attempt to formulate meaning out of an overwhelming flow of information and a rapid series of events. Theo-

ries about 'spontaneity' in a so-called 'society without civil society' were interchanged with approaches regarding the re-positioning of people and politics around the principles of 'autonomy' and direct democracy. These, in turn, clashed with more traditional elitist explanations which regarded the 'social' as problematic and in need of change and 'modernization'. Within the digital landscape these points of view were at once reproduced *and* deleted, 'liked' *and* abhorred, generating multiple smaller spaces/cocoons of ideology and insensitive constitutions.

Instead of digital space becoming a tool to engage in relevant conversation, that space reinforced unreasonable argumentation and unimaginative articulation. It, essentially and for a while, became transformed to a hyper-battleground where cyber neo-tribes tested their respective armor. Within that context various individuals who were in positions of authority used digital media to gain an audience and play the celebrity card. Supposed 'anti-populists' utilized what basically can only be described as popular language and imagery to contextualize their interpretations.



It is indeed peculiar that authoritative renditions on populist politics fail to identify 'populism' in the everyday realm of marketing and consumption strategies. To put in simpler terms, political populism is negative while manufacturing, branding, marketing and selling popular products ('things') is positive. The transgressive relation between neo modernist capitalist cultural and aesthetic appropriation of styles, film, music, art and artists, painting and literature, with the political system, is almost never examined. Instead of identifying 'populism' as a tool, a specific set of functional strategies, it is currently almost exclusively identified as a party-political issue with special reference to nationalist movements, leftist governments and so on. The question raised some time ago by Stuart Hall regarding the distinction between 'populism' and popular democracy is worth revisiting. Is politics collapsing onto the trajectory of unfettered materialism?

'Anti-systemic' individuals and groups used systemic for-profit social media networks to gain high visibility by connecting media sources and blogs. Ultimately online 'communication', at least in the context of the Greek case, was not facilitated. Political discussion turned into heated confrontation, accusation and gossip and having lost its original meaning it has now evolved into a *performative* act. We suspect this to be a more than a national site-specific phenomenon. And we remain convinced that the hubris of power has lain in its acceptance of alternative spheres of political and cultural expression.

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