



Is the Internet really evil?

Description

Vast technological infrastructures rely on global capital. They also sustain it. As wealth is accumulated by the few, the rest are lulled into the role of acquiescent consumers, buying products they don't need or can't afford, in order to preserve existing concentrations of capital.

Digital systems further exaggerate inequalities, providing new channels for exploitation and inequality to emerge. So far, we cannot escape capitalism, so the best we can do is to maintain a persistent critical stance, and ameliorate the worst of its inequalities. The critical scholar takes on the vital task of cataloging and explaining the ever-increasing litany of ludicrous capitalist follies and injustices.

Benjamin Bratton captures the critical mood.

“With significant exceptions, the web has largely been developed through technologies and protocols of British, European, and American origin, with many of the most powerful governmental and economic players still located there.” Its global growth could be read then as the creeping spread of cyber-empire and part of a larger superpower monocultural campaign, starting in Silicon Valley and Washington, DC, and spreading to world capitals like an invasive machinic species. Some European activists, on both the left and the right, describe it this way• (35).

One difficulty for cultural critics is that they must rely on digital infrastructures as they develop their critiques. Some are even fascinated by the affordances of the technology, not least how it enables academic scholars to communicate and publish. It's not all bad; not all good.



Shock and awe

I think that the challenges posed by critical theory overwhelm nuanced considerations of the technology. Digital infrastructuresâ?? positive instrumentalities encounter only grudging acceptance or advocacy. The most that critique can concede to the makers, developers, engineers, entrepreneurs and designers of digital systems is a resigned and ironic indifference to their labours.

The critical literature also promotes a kind of fetish for the technological other, such as extreme examples of techno-science, current or in prospect: genetic engineering, space travel, satellites, surgical reconstructions, outrageous buildings projects, massive digital surveillance and social manipulation, and vast infrastructures.

Back to the 1990s

It is difficult to be critical of professional critics, but there are problems with Critical Theory and the Frankfurt School, identified by scholars of various persuasions, including Anthony Giddens and some phenomenologists. Hereâ??s a (far too brief) summary of some of the points directed towards critical theory.

- Liberation and emancipation are (or were) Critical Theoryâ??s watchwords, but where is the safe ground for the critical theorist? Emancipation to where?
- Global capitalism (or neoliberalism) is the generalised agency of domination, but such agency is difficult to identify in concrete situations.
- Giddens maintains that Critical Theory narratives mask other sources of social problems, such as fundamentalism.
- Revolution is impractical, but persists as a leitmotif of the left.
- Complicity. Itâ??s hard to assume a generalised disdain for global digital capital when you are part of it.
- Critical theory moves towards irony ahead of a programme for ethical action.

Critical Theory famously develops its own critiques of itself and its advocates, in a restless movement where nothing is settled. See post [Hermeneutics and ethics](#) dated 2010.

Reference

- Bratton, Benjamin H. 2015. *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- Giddens, A. (1994), *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics*, Cambridge: Polity.

Note

- Image: Dubai in 2009

Category

1. Ethics

Tags

1. critical theory
2. digital technologies

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