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**On the Origins and Reflexivity of  
Autonomy and Social Movements in CybUrbia**

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## On the Origins and Reflexivity of Autonomy and Social Movements in CybUrbia<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

Social movement studies is an eclectic field with multiple traditions. Over the past three decades, the field slowly moved away from the idea of the rational actor and gradually opened up to poststructural concerns for identity, meaning-making, and emotions (cf. Benski et al, 2013). Recent work has “noted the anger, alienation, and outrage of people facing major hardships, but at the same time, these movements expressed hope for a better future” (Benski et al, 2013, p. 557; cf. Castells, 2012). At this point, I would like to inject an argument into the discussion that has been made almost 20 years ago in a different context: that the theory of ‘social action’ (i.e. situated conduct that has a “social meaning”) remains to be so widespread in academic knowledge production that we forget to ask (and thus face a severe lack of theorization of) how people manage to act at all (cf. Campbell 1996). In other words, where do our power of agency and capacity to act originate?

Akin to Campbell’s call for a theory of ‘action’ rather than of ‘social action’, in this thought piece I suggest that now is the time to consider in our work the benefits of thinking about ‘movement’ studies rather than ‘social movement’ studies. This necessitates specific emphasis on individual agency and autonomy and on the “free subject” (Foucault), in order to better understand how people manage to act and create movements at all. In what (other and less in-your-face) ways, and against which resistances, are the myriad lessons learned online applied to alter and negotiate human consciousness, and as an extension, physical urban environments?

The paper is structured as follows. In the first section I argue for a shift from social situationalism toward (more) methodological individualism. The next section resuscitates the free and intentional subject that I encountered when researching the Chinese-language Internet over the past decade but that is all-but-absent in much academic literature on the topic. The third section then contains musings on the reflexivity between the intentional self and place and emplaced social movements. These three sections are interpolated with what I perceive to be a gradual shift in Manuel Castells’ own writings over time.<sup>2</sup> This shift led him away from a predominantly statist belief that technology and network dynamics should be ‘mastered’ by societies through the state, toward a belief that social (and increasingly also individual) grassroots agency plays a crucial role in changing the dynamics of both technology and networks. The evolutionary trajectory in Castells’ conceptual writings suggests and gives us hope that despite untiring voices insisting on ‘rigorous, measurable social science research’ and complications of a methodological nature, autonomous individual agency is indeed worthy of our attention. To bring this point across, section one is paired with Castells’ original thoughts on his “Network Society”; section two with Castells’ ideas on “grassrooting the space of flows”, with Castells offering “corrections to [his] original analysis of the matter” (Castells, in Castells & Ince 2003, p. 58); and section three draws on core points from Castells’ recent

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the “Conceptualizing Cyber-Urban Connections in Asia and the Middle East” conference held at the Asia Research Institute in January 2014. The author was one of the conference organizers.

<sup>2</sup> Castells is a leading sociologist, communications and social movements scholar, and an expert on what he termed the “Information Age.” Arguably, over the past three decades, Castells found himself needing to theorize and re-theorize as existing conceptualizations have not matched the empirical sociological and social movement realities he encountered.

monograph “Networks of Outrage and Hope” (2012) in which he places particular emphasis on what he calls the “space of autonomy,” and where he revisits and updates the issue of social movements that he so comprehensively examined in his seminal 1983 monograph, “The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements.” Intended to spurn discussion rather than offering clear-cut conclusions, the paper then reluctantly offers some concluding remarks.

## FROM SOCIAL SITUATIONALISM TOWARD METHODOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM

### Castells’ Network Society: Good to Think With...

Manuel Castells describes his Network Society as a society that is constituted through a set of interconnected nodes that are all important for the network’s overall performance, and that can only exist and function within the network; such a society can take diverse forms, rooted in the identities that were developed by culture and history of the society in which it evolves, as well as in the technological changes that society undergoes (Castells 1996/2000; 1997/2004; 1998/2000). The strengths of networks were consolidated by the spread of digital communication technologies, which allowed for a multi-polar flow of information. Networks then began to outperform the historically vertical command and control structures and became the most efficient form of organization under the reign of global capitalism. In the late 1990s this ushered in what Castells termed the “Information Age,” a new technological paradigm that diffused rapidly throughout the world, characterized by the expanding use of wireless communication and computing capacity (Castells 1996/2000; cf. Mitchell 2003).

Castells’ Network Society describes a process of structural transformation. This process is associated with technological change and thus focuses on the interaction and integration of technology and society. It asks: Under what conditions do technological innovations lead to structural transformation, and *vice versa*? Technology is exposed as a powerful force that shapes and mediates change and ultimately activates a network-based capitalist social structure. In a sense then, a Castellsian Network Society is a social structure in which pervasive networks are constantly re-organizing both themselves and the basis of society. Castells’ Network Society is a society whose social structure is built around networks that are based on digital technologies. At the same time he recognizes that “[a]ll societies are cultural constructs, if we understand culture as the set of values and beliefs that inform and motivate people’s behavior” (Castells 2004, p. 38). Ultimately in the Network Society, the center-less network consists of a set of interconnected nodes that interact with each other. Those networks become the dominant organizing principle (and paradigm) of the new age, allegedly more important than individual people, governments or corporations.

The dynamics of Castells’ Network Society rests on four pillars: a) the creation of added value; b) the decision of what is valuable; c) the ability to re-configure the network; and d) a binary logic of inclusion and exclusion. Transcending barriers of space and time, social actors who use the Internet (i.e. an ICT network based on these new technologies) are thus empowered to create added value by recombining information products and processes, thereby engaging in the production of information and communication. The ability to create knowledge by recombining information becomes the driving engine for political power-making, economic productivity, and cultural creativity.

Capitalism (i.e. the accumulation of capital) is not the only value in Castells’ Network Society. The system of concomitant values is best imagined as a multidimensional social structure in which different networks have different definitions of what constitutes value. For example, if the highest value of capitalism is the accumulation of capital, then it has to be taken into consideration that the value of military domination influences the capacity of the state to settle on and implement new

rules. Concomitantly, state power largely depends on the beliefs of people and their willingness to accept these rules. Therefore, as Castells convinces us, the media system, including the Internet, “could precede state power, which, in turn, would condition the rules of money making, and thus would supersede the value of money as supreme value. Thus, value is, in fact, an expression of power: whoever holds power [...] decides what is valuable” (Castells 2004, p. 25).

Depending on the outcomes of such power struggles, the ability to connect to the Internet also has “profound implications for the locations and spatial distribution of all human activities that depend, in some way, upon access to information” (Mitchell 2003, p. 144). This suggests that the new spatial structure of Castells’ Network Society is not placeless; it consists of networks that connect specific places through information and communication flows. Whatever happens in this communicative space has thus direct implications on specific places, and if a subject is not part of the pattern of power that configures the network, it loses control of the capacity to alter the network according to its own needs, desires, and projects. In other words, if (for example) a government or corporate entity decides not to take part in the processes of political power-making or economic productivity, then it loses the power to reconfigure the network. It is thus not surprising that governments and large firms are the primary motivators of technological progress (cf. Castells 1998/2000).

Finally, Castells describes the binary logic of inclusion and exclusion as a structural feature of the Network Society, as the reconfiguring capacity inscribed in the process of networking allows the programs governing every network to search for valuable additions everywhere and to incorporate them, while bypassing and excluding those territories, activities, and people that have little or no value for the performance of the tasks assigned to the network” (Castells 2004, p. 23).

Networks are thus not produced in order to communicate but in order to gain power, i.e. to “outcommunicate” (Mulgan 1991, p. 21; also cited in Castells 2004, p. 23). An important implication of this way of seeing is that only those who are included have the power to reconfigure the network whereas those who are excluded become “irrelevant” in the sense that they do not exist in the binary logic of the Network Society. Moreover, while exclusion from the infrastructure of the Network Society indicates an actor’s irrelevancy, inclusion in the way of merely using the Internet can not suffice one to become part of the dominant networks that shape society. To become dominant, business and government cooperation in the development of new technologies of surveillance and control, as well as the accumulation and manipulation of information, becomes a common strategy. The more information a network of cooperative organizations accumulates about its customers (citizens, in the case of governmental organizations), the more power and knowledge in a Foucauldian sense it can accumulate, and the more power and knowledge it accrues, the better it can avoid direct intervention and replace it by indirect and mostly invisible (yet highly manipulative) mechanisms of control.

Generally in Castells’ vision, value is given by those who “program” the Network Society; if a culture (or group, or individual) is assigned no value then it is considered “worthless.” As the genesis of the Network Society is intrinsically linked to capitalist globalization and technological revolution, this explains why actors such as the Chinese party-state realize that they are bound to join global capitalism in order to empower itself to reconfigure the network and sustain state power and legitimacy. The Chinese regime recognizes that with the global reach of the Internet, the traditional world of secrecy and information control that state bureaucracies indulged in can no longer remain the sole source of their power.

Castells' empirically and historically grounded elaborations compare favorably to alternative conceptions of communication-based network societies. First, many theoretical conceptions of a network society (see for example Messner 1997) tend to lack empirical grounding, and are thus utopias centered on themes of economic development, collective governance, political community, and the good life. By contrast, Castells provides substantial evidence that we indeed live in a network society. Second, while even preeminent postmodern thinkers such as Fredric Jameson (1991) cannot completely strike free from Marx's influence and continue to frame society predominantly through economic relationships, Castells stresses the presence and role of information technologies (cf. Kluver 2008). In substituting a psycho-social construct for Marx's economic reductionism, Castells subtly avoids an emphasis on mere economic relationships (ibid). Third, unlike technological determinists who contend that technology either dictates society or is determined by it, Castells argues that "technology is society, and society cannot be understood or represented without its technological tools. [...] In a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity [...] becomes the fundamental source of social meaning" (Castells 1996/2000, p. 5). Finally, in Giddens' network-oriented sociology (cf. Giddens 1990; 1991), time and space remain, first and foremost, static categories through which to analyze societal change. Going beyond such rather theoretical elaborations, Castells recognizes the importance of describing the empirical changes in our experience of space and time, actively incorporating these changes in his ideas around the Network Society.

Castells' work offers an erudite and valuable contribution to the long history of communication, especially through its emphasis on the centrality of new information technologies to the reshaping of cultural identities and political communities (cf. Calabrese 1999). He also frames communication as the new public space, which is in line with Zhao's (2008) call, in a Chinese context, to "foreground the central role of communication in the processes of China's social transformation" (ibid, p. 14). Thus in conclusion, Castells' grounded analysis is good to think with.

### **And Yet, ...**

Adopting academically-produced categories requires an awareness that these categories are often applied in ways that legitimize the structure and hierarchy of the framework in which they are deployed. In this light, I see some weaknesses in Castells' structurally and empirically apposite Network Society. These weaknesses relate to his sociological outlook, one that deems methodological individualism (i.e. engaging with personal identity) as methodology unsuited to the production of rigorous scientific knowledge, and – related to this – the comparatively little room he leaves for the conceptualization of individual as well as social agency (cf. Van Dijk 1999). In other words, the types and categories of knowledge produced by Castells' Network Society constrain our understanding of urban Asia's and Arabia's cultures and emergent cultural change.

To advance my argument concerning the necessity of making (conceptual) space for (more) methodological individualism, some theoretical elaborations are in order. According to Colin Campbell, all actions derive from a covert 'act of will'; an act that can only be known by looking at individual expressions of subjective meaning and agency (Campbell 1996). Campbell argues convincingly that sociology, political science, and communication studies all offer theories of social action (e.g. communicative action or interaction) and traditions of thought (e.g., rational choice theory). Although voluntarism is considered important in these traditions, these theories fail to recognize the critical role of emotions, feelings, or imagination in the accomplishment of (individual or collective) action. This goes back to the dominant paradigm Campbell calls "social situationalism." This paradigm undermines any concern with individual human consciousness, and assumes that human actors typically possess neither mind nor body. Social situationalism is focused on "social

action,” i.e. on situated conduct which has a “social meaning” (ibid). Scrutinizing such conduct thus inevitably leads to the (false) claim that individuals learn their behavior from others, through language and communicative acts, and that individual consciousness and agency can be neglected when studying social structure (ibid). Due to the dominance of social situationalism in all kinds of social science endeavors, we face a severe lack of theorization of how people manage to act at all (ibid).

Heeding the crucial importance of individual consciousness and agency, Campbell’s “action theory” is concerned with the ability of people to make choices—i.e. understanding why people perform the acts they do, when they do. Campbell argues that any action theory also needs to be a theory of agency. “However, to date, most theories have simply taken the actor’s power of agency for granted and concentrated instead on the question of how that agency is employed” (ibid, p. 157). The bottom line is that individuals fail to implement decisions for reasons other than opposition from others or a deficiency in knowledge or understanding. In other words, the real life problems individuals experience are not purely intellectual in character. People living their everyday lives are “neither beset by a continual need to make choices nor a desperate desire to understand the phenomenal grounds of their actions” (ibid, p. 159).

Once we ascertain the role played by emotion, imagination, effort, attention, and will, we recognize that action and meaning are critically interdependent. Any interpretive inquiry into what actions ‘mean’ – without recognizing that individuals themselves have the capacity (agency) to manipulate this meaning beyond what is ‘prescribed’ in a given social situation – is doomed to fail. A model that acknowledges the covert dimensions of action must focus on the actor’s agency, i.e. on what is meaningful and significant to the actor. “This is true subjective meaning and it clearly indicates that only actors can possibly know what their action consists of. But then that should not be surprising because all action is ultimately performed alone, undertaken by the individual as the sole agent” (ibid, p. 161). Because all actions are an outcome of a covert ‘act of will’ centered around the individual’s ability to create and manipulate meaning, individual meanings and agency can only be known by looking at the expression of meaning and agency, and by asking individuals about them.

Scholarly engagement with the ‘cyber’ all too often looks at social action but not at individual agency and the expression of meaning through discourse as preceding, and indispensable basis for, social action. Likewise, the discourse that is visible online should not be interpreted as either in opposition to social action or as necessarily leading to social action. There are cultural developments and implications that go way beyond such dualistic simplifications.

As (arguably) is the case for all structural frameworks, Castells’ elaborations tend to downplay the importance of novel cultural practices that are rooted in discursive expressions of meanings and agency. His conceptual model is thus inadequate when it comes to understanding (the potential significance of) technological or social idiosyncrasies on a micro-sociological level where the patterns of social interaction constitute everyday life (cf. Gotved 2006). Castells makes clear that the “space of flows” he conceptualizes as a structural key element is made up of nodes and hubs, of electronic and physical networks of interaction, and also of habitats for the social actors who operate the networks, be it residential spaces adjacent to the nodes, spaces of consumption, protected and secluded, or global corridors of social segregation separating these corridors from the surrounding places around the globe (Castells 1996/2000, p. 20).

At the same time, “not all space is organized around the space of flows. [...] Most people live, work, and construct their meaning around places” (ibid). I believe there is not sufficient room for the reassertion of “space of places” – with its attendant experiences, meanings, and logics – within the

‘space of flows’.<sup>3</sup> Yet it already seems feasible to imagine the ‘space of places’ as conceptually separate from the space of flows, actually influencing it from below instead of being determined by it.

Unlike an actively networking communicative actor, the networked in Castells’ network society is limited to contemplating how to be in the network, and then making personified (instead of personal) and largely predetermined choices. Personal choice is thus similar to “choosing directions in crossroads: the roads are already there, and one’s personal (but networked) GPS system gives strong advice of what to do” (Peltola 2006, p. 10). This allows for self-revelations in public space (à la Arendt) but not for the invention of new forms of media and political action, by agents that initiate conflict and change through proactive measures and new networks not compatible with a ‘given’ network society’s code of conduct (ibid). It is simply not enough to study the technological foundations of China’s (or any other) society through either a communications or a shared identity paradigm (cf. Lovink 2007, August 20).

These research discourses/paradigms facilitate our understanding of both computer networks and society, but they do not sufficiently emphasize the critical capacity of these technologies to create new and potent channels and actions. What if these actions emanate from the populations themselves (and not from ‘authoritative sources’ such as government officials, economic leaders, planners, etc), allowing certain kinds of individuals and groups of people to shape the technologies and physical networks they tap into. In most research, the presence and agency of these individuals and emerging institutions/organizations are either ignored or overly generalized. To conduct further investigation into the political and geographical capacities of these actors requires experimental methodologies and creative leeway, and giving a voice to the perceptions and agency of those who are usually merely represented.

Following Campbell’s call to observe and ask individuals about their expressions of meaning and agency may allow us to excavate the diversity of voices and shared meanings that are essential as a basis for understanding agency-based action as well as mobilizations that are rooted in discourse but do not necessarily remain within this realm. Easier said than done, as doing so may hinge upon a re-framing of the meanings of politics and space that heeds to methodological individualism—a postmodern, bottom-up perspective that allows for (the interpretation of) changes to hegemonic views and power structures rooted in individual meanings and agency—thus rekindling hope for a more humane and solidaristic civil sphere (cf. Alexander 2006).

## REVITALIZING THE FREE INTENTIONAL SUBJECT

### Castells’ Grassrooting the Space of Flows: Re-discovering Individuals as Autonomous Subjects...

I contend that understanding Castells’ positionality is conducive to understanding his ideas. In this light I remember clearly his elated enthusiasm when, in his advanced doctoral seminar at USC in Fall 2005, he declared to have found empirical evidence that corroborates that a sovereign center is not capable of monitoring – and thereby controlling – a society of independently-functioning individuals. While Castells passionately shared the latest empirical data, I remembered that he began his academic career in a 1968 Paris, as a Marxist with a focus on urban grassroots politics. He describes the May ’68 movement as a formative experience, not because it was a political revolution but because of “the change of life, of being, of feeling” (Castells & Ince 2003, p. 13) that yielded ideas

<sup>3</sup> At least not in Castells’ original (and most frequently cited) writings on the Network Society

and ideals that “went on to change our way of thinking, and therefore, through many mediations, our societies” (ibid, p. 14). This and other experiences influenced Castells’ political perspective, and helped shape his initial and continued scholarly emphasis on understanding social movements from an empirical perspective (cf. Castells & Ince 2003), and arguably also his positionality as an “individual artisan of research” (ibid, p. 21) believing in “*Ni Dieu ni Maître*” (Neither God Nor Master).

Keeping this in mind while reading Castells’ more recent publications (particularly Castells 2000; 2004; 2007; 2008) and comparing them to his trilogy (first published from 1996 to 1998) and older work on the “City and the Grassroots” and the “Informational City,” I observe a gradual shift, from a predominantly statist belief that technology and network dynamics should be ‘mastered’ by societies through the state (cf. Perkmann 1999), toward a belief that social (and increasingly also individual) grassroots agency plays a crucial role in changing the dynamics of both technology and networks. The growing tension between his ‘space of flows’ and the ‘space of places’ has correctly been identified as the “leitmotif” of Castells’ writing on the network society (Calabrese 1999). The first represents the deterritorialized structural-morphological component of the Network Society, whereas the ‘space of places’ signifies a poststructural element of place-based agency that is enabling social action. Castells explains: “In 1999 I gave a lecture (later turned into a paper) entitled ‘Grassrooting the Space of Flows’, where I corrected my original analysis of the matter. So what is truly important is that the space of flows coexists with the space of places, and both express contradictory social interests” (Castells, in Castells & Ince 2003, p. 58). By shifting his position towards one of coexistence, Castells not only acknowledges that he does no longer deem network flows more powerful than the specific interests of the actors they connect, but also opens the (conceptual) door to allow individual subjects imbued with autonomous agency back into the picture.

In his (often overlooked) paper titled “Grassrooting the Space of Flows,” Castells (1999; also cf. Castells 2000) introduces an important qualification of his earlier analyses. He states that as not all space is organized around the ‘space of flows’, most people “live, work, and construct their meaning” (Castells 2000, p. 20) and that most experience and social interaction is organized around places. The resulting “dynamics of interpenetration of uniformity and autonomy, of domination and resistance, of instrumentality and experience, within the space of flows” (ibid, p. 27) results in a new way of seeing (and writing) the world. He writes: “[T]he geography of the new history will not be made, after all, of the separation between places and flows, but out of the interface between places and flows and between cultures and social interests, both in the space of flows and in the space of places. The attempt by capital, media, and power to escape into the abstraction of the space of flows, bypassing democracy and experience by confining them in the space of places, is being challenged from many sources by the grassrooting of the space of flows” (ibid).

Thus, “through a blossoming of initiatives, people are taking on the Net without uprooting themselves from their places. And through this practice they transform both forms of the space” (ibid, p. 25). To allow empirical corroboration of this grassroots geography, Castells proposes a series of intriguing “dimensions of autonomous expression of social meaning” (ibid, p. 22):

- personal interaction (exchanging information, experiencing needs)
- purposive horizontal communication, among media and across countries (establishing information systems that are alternative to the media, thus bypassing both media and government controls)
- growing networks of solidarity and cooperation (reflection and debate)
- social movements (organized solidarity groups that use the net to mobilize control physical space)

- increasing linkages between people and institutions (information-based, but possibly leading to mobilization of the population on various levels, and to participatory democratic structures, linking grass roots groups, civil society, and institutions) (ibid).

These dimensions tie in well with the aforementioned thoughts around individual agency, and suggest a communicative process of learning and social action that begins with the expression of information. This then leads to debate and shared meanings, and ultimately suggests that such shared meanings could evolve into institutional structures and social movements that are the basis for societal change. Not only does the Internet hold the potential to enhance horizontal communication and political participation among citizens, in a process of empowerment for grassroots groups. “The Internet can contribute to enhance the autonomy of citizens to organize and mobilize around issues that are not properly processed in the institutional system” (Castells 1997/2004, p. 417). Thus “[t]he process of grassrootsing the Net begins with a process of mass education and social debate, in a cacophony of voices in a contested, plural and diversified space” (Castells 2000, p. 26).

Drawing on work by Ingrid Volkmer (2003), Castells conceptualizes communication as the public space of the network society, and acknowledges that “it is plausible to think that the capacity of social actors to set up autonomously their political agenda is greater in the networks of mass self-communication than in the corporate world of the mass media [,and that] the structural bias of this space toward the powers that be is being diminished every day by the new social practices of communication” and concludes that “[t]o a large extent, political legitimacy has been replaced by communication framing of the public mind in the network society” (Castells 2007, p. 258; also cf. Arsenault & Castells 2006). As of the time of his writing, these “networks of mass self-communication” were predominantly blogs, BBS, and Internet chatrooms (Castells 2007; 2008). While state and non-state actors influence people’s minds and foster social change through the media (both mass media and horizontal communication networks), Castells now recognizes that it is the “transformation of consciousness” that ultimately impacts political behavior, or governmental decisions (cf. Castells 2008).

The fact that self-assertive subjectivity is characteristic of modern societies also means that legitimacy can no longer be based on the kind of scientific ‘truth’ that emanates from a predisposed inextricability of a conundrum of power and knowledge. Instead, we need to understand those individual knowledges and powers as inherent in any free individual exercising her right to participate in the formation of her own subjectivity. In the context of China politics, Michael Dutton therefore correctly urges us to break away from wide-spread elite modes of political analysis (Dutton 2004; also cf. Dutton 1998) and the theoretical straightjackets they embrace. I concur with his suggestion that non-elite modes of analysis allow for a fuller examination of the complexities and potentialities of practices, by interrogating and destabilizing the processes of the creation and reproduction of static categorizations (ibid). Grassrooting Castells’ space of flows thus helps us to recognize and treat individuals as free and autonomous subjects.

### **... And Why We Should (And Even Foucault Would Agree)**

“The Foucauldian subject of 1980 was a free individual. It had the ability to pursue (or not pursue) techniques that would transform its subjectival modality—but which would not, one way or the other, disrupt its status as an independent locus of experience”

(Paras 2006, p. 123).

Akin to the famous chicken-and-egg debate, one important philosophical paradox and conceptual problem is that a self (that is both the target and the product of techniques) must already exist in order to construct itself through discourse. Acknowledging this conundrum, the notion that a subject is produced by an institutionalized and all-pervading process of domination can no longer hold true. Heeding ideas of autonomy, reflexivity, and lived experience, a subject can merely be modified or shaped by dominant practices. In what ways this modification and shaping by dominant practices takes place, of course, remains an issue. But this realization leaves conceptual room for alterations that are not primarily fueled by dominant practices, but are instead fueled by and the result of intentional and voluntary activity. In other words, instead of treating discourses or subjects in terms of the conditions of their possibility, the same phenomena can be treated as the result of free and creative activity.

Foucault himself went from being a philosopher who celebrated the disappearance of the subject (as autonomous individual) to one wholly preoccupied with it (Paras 2006). His trope of the “technologies of the self” has often been interpreted as techniques historically situated within power relations. This technique refers to ways in which people put forward and police their “selves” in society, and to ways that are enabled or constrained in their use of different techniques by available discourses. However, the most valuable contribution of this construct is that it opens up avenues of thought that allow for a creative making of the self, rather than a self that is produced—and hence limited to being deciphered and renounced. A creative making of the self means that a subject is capable of autonomy, i.e. the possession of truth, not through scientific discovery, but through creative introspection and expression, enabled by analytical reflection or through artistic creation (ibid). In the early 1980s, Foucault increasingly spoke of the artistic-creative (cf. experience) and the scientific-analytical (cf. system) as distinct, even unrelated categories (ibid). Therefore I concur with Eric Paras that “Foucault’s vision of the autonomous individual had undergone a substantial rehabilitation” (ibid, p. 141). Let me elaborate.

As Eric Paras (2006) shows in his seminal book “Foucault 2.0: Beyond Power and Knowledge”, the focus of Foucault’s inquiries shifted from the “society of surveillance” (cf. Foucault 1979), to the relation of the individual to herself. Paras argues convincingly that Foucault’s untimely death and his lack of publishing any major works during the last eight years of his life diffused the clarity and determination with which Foucault moved towards the study of the subject as an independent phenomenon, where individuals constitute independent loci of experience, located firmly outside of mechanisms of power. Instead of power as the only guiding principle (“permeating everything”), autonomy and reflexivity emerged as the characteristics of a Foucauldian subject that was empowered to shape its own existence—in other words, that possessed the liberty of action and was thus endowed with a basic humanity based in individual freedom. Conceptually, Foucault relied upon the deployment of what Paras terms a “prediscursive subject: that is, a subjective nucleus that precedes any practices that might be said to construct it, and indeed one that freely chooses among those practices” (Paras 2006, p. 14). This opposes Foucault’s own former view that individuality is completely controlled by power, and that we are individualized by and through power itself (cf. Foucault 1980). It also endows human individuality with free, independent subjectivity outside the mechanisms of power.

Granted, Foucault himself labored to undermine the ideas of liberty, individualism, “human rights,” and the thinking subject, before he abandoned this hard structuralist position in the early 1980s. Yet, instead of welcoming the resurgence of a free and conscious subject capable of autonomous action and expression into the academic canon, many scholars ignore the inconvenient and messy subjectivity that is based on any possibility of autonomous activity of consciousness. They instead insist on the existence of a meaning-producing ‘system’ based on anonymous discourse, happening as a series of interconnected relations in which the elements (people and things) are a matter of

indifference. Such practice may produce 'data' that can easily be 'analyzed', but it needs to be complemented by a scholarly outlook on individual action and agency that heeds the existence of a free and intentional subject.

To establish a connection between these abstract ruminations and the hybrid realm of the cyber-urban, it is useful to consider Foucault's fascination with the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79. He said in a 1979 interview: "In rising up, the Iranians said to themselves (and perhaps this is the soul of uprisings): 'we must change, certainly, the regime.... But above all, we *must change ourselves*. Our way of being, our relation to others, to things, to eternity, to God, etc., all must be completely changed, and *there won't be any real revolution save on the condition of this radical change in our experience*'" (Foucault 1979, cited from Paras 2006, p. 155, emphasis in original).

Based on my research in China and its cyberspaces, this statement reveals striking parallels between Iran and China. In Foucault's eyes, the Iranians' craving for personal freedom and revolutionary change was firmly connected with their desire to effect their own self-transformation rooted in new experiences. The same appears to be true for Chinese. I contend that instead of an immanent totality-producing individual subject as a result of some functional principles, it is (also) the individual consciousness of autonomous Chinese subjects rooted in place-based everyday life experiences that reconfigure the mechanisms of power, autonomy, and reflexivity. This reconfiguration ultimately leads to the aspiration for active self-transformation alongside the transformation of their surroundings.

In cyberspace, we see experiences as text: as the intentional expression of thoughts and ideas, and therefore as free and consciously reflected activities that underlie all discourse and action based in agency. It is important to remember that "[t]he concept of 'agency' is difficult to interpret, but literally combines action, mediation and power. [...] New hybrid spaces must be deliberately 'designed' to create free spaces within which the subject can withdraw himself, temporarily, from spatial determination. Given the power politics and the enormous strategic and economic interests involved, and the associated demands for security and control, it is clear that these free spaces will not come about by themselves or as a matter of course" (Kluitenberg 2006, p. 14). Following Kluitenberg's interpretation, (individual or shared) agency is to be understood not merely as a conduit through which greater structural forces are played out, but rather as the human facility to engage in meaningful intentional action. This engagement enhances the capacity to influence events and create change in our own lives and beyond. Human agents are not mere recipients but interpreters and expressionists of information. In Giddens' words, "[a]gents are normally able, if asked, to provide discursive interpretations of the nature of, and the reasons for, the behaviour in which they engage" (Giddens 1991, p. 35). This authorial agency is what creates ideas and thoughts that are able to influence and wield transformative power over subsequent discourse and action.

This individual agency is further corroborated by Donna Haraway, author of "Manifesto for Cyborgs," when she wrote that "[l]iberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility" (Haraway 1991, p. 149). Offering the new category "cyborg," she defines it as a creature both real and imagined, born of differences, blurred boundaries, and conflicting multiplicity. For Haraway, the cyborg is formed as "a matter of fiction and lived experience [...] a fiction mapping of our social and bodily reality" (ibid, p. 191). With this view, she puts forward a new way of thinking about how subjectivity is constituted that does not obliterate the authority of the subject. This flies in the face of the dominant narrative that subjectivity is something already there and thus to be discovered and excavated, rather than something constructed.

Arguing that the concept of place is indispensable to any inquiry into the nature of thought or agency, Jeff Malpas states that “there is reason to think that only if we can understand creatures as embedded in a world can we understand them as in any way capable of thought—whether believing, desiring, hoping, calculating, fearing, meaning or whatever—or indeed of purposive action. Only a creature that is oriented and located can relate to objects and to the world” (Malpas 1998, p. 36). Edward Casey (1996) is right to suggest that finding ourselves requires us to rethink the question of the nature and significance of place.

This leads me to believe that meaningful interpretation of lived subjectivity and agency rooted in the independent subject starts not from a universal conception of the subject, but rather by asking how we might understand a particular form of intentional subjectivity based on lived experience of the subject, through the study of an isolable, place-dependent practice, conducted by individual, intentional subjects rooted in an amalgamation of life in everyday urbanity augmented by its cyberspaces. We ought to consider what exists ‘on the ground’ (including online) and what happens in the eyes and minds of real people as at least equally important as so-called authoritative information and generalized representations of people, places, and cultures. In fact, what happens in the eyes and minds of real people is crucial if we endeavor to bring to light the subjectivities that penetrate virtually all representations of geographical space (online or offline) and the human actions within it. French philosopher Michel de Certeau, who focused on understanding the subversion of hegemonic social structures through the “practice of everyday life,” captures the relationship between real people and urban space by recognizing that “[u]nrecognized producers, poets of their own affairs trailblazers in the jungles of functionalist rationality, consumers [...] trace “indeterminate trajectories” that are apparently meaningless, since they do not cohere with the constructed, written, and prefabricated space through which they move” (de Certeau 1984, p. 34; emphasis added).

One cannot stress enough that a belief in individuals and their sense of place are indispensable ‘ingredients’ that endue us (as researchers) with the capacity to capture everyday human experience and learn how what we learn through the cyber can be applied to negotiate and alter physical urban environments. The following section is thus dedicated to some musings on the connection between self and place.

## THE INTENTIONAL SELF AND PLACE

### Castells’ Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age<sup>4</sup>

Networks of Outrage and Hope claims to be “a simple book that organizes the debate and contributes to the reflection of the movement and to the broader understanding of these new movements by people at large” (Castells 2012, p. xii). And yet it is more than that: Through showing how novel patterns and processes of urban social movements align with the transformation of power and communication in the Internet Age, the book carves out the shape and sociological implications of contemporary social movements. Taking the crisis of global financial capitalism as point of departure, the book weaves together polls, studies, observations, and prior analyses into a comprehensive and adept study of what happened in the 2010s in terms of social movements around the world. Dedicating the book to his PhD supervisor and social movement theorist Alain Touraine, Manuel Castells returns to the issue of social movements that he has so comprehensively examined in his seminal 1983 monograph, “The City and the Grassroots”.

<sup>4</sup> This section is an edited version of a book review I wrote for the Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography (forthcoming in 2014)

The empirical chapters comprise a variety of grounded case studies. The chapter on 'Prelude to Revolution: Where It All Started' is dedicated to figuring out the commonalities of movements in countries as disparate as Tunisia and Iceland. Both countries' governments were perceived to have put the interests of their financial and political elites above the interests of the people. This constituted fertile ground for resistance to go viral and then extend into urban space, by occupying symbolic public squares. Castells argues convincingly that a "hybrid public space made of digital social networks and of a newly created urban community was at the heart of the movement" (ibid, p. 45). Having led to meaningful institutional political change in both Tunisia and Iceland, these movements then both inspired and have become role models for social movements elsewhere. As a case in point, the second empirical chapter is an in-depth study of what happened in Egypt. Castells tells the story of online activism leading to square protests, solidifying communal solidarity and creating a hybrid public space spanning all major urban centres. He concludes that the Internet extends the territorial character of revolutions from the 'space of places' to the 'space of flows', and provides the "safe space" where networks emerge and grow around the emotional mobilizing forces of outrage and hope. Framed in a (his) theory of networked communication power and counterpower (cf. Castells 2009), these forces combined with widespread online debate and networking turn people into fearless risk-takers; they leave behind their Internet social networks and create urban networks, by occupying urban space.

The following chapter takes a step back and accentuates commonalities among other Arab uprisings. Castells argues that hope inspired by the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt eventually spread to states all over the Arab world, where grievances-turned-outrage met with varying levels of concession and repression. Focusing on the dynamics of state reactions to power challenges, Castells finds that all Arab states respond according to their institutional rules, and those that fail to integrate public demands resort to their monopoly of violence. The next chapter shifts to Europe where the Spanish *Indignadas* movement grew from a small network of citizens concerned with implications of the Euro crisis into almost one million determined protesters in Madrid and Barcelona alone. Rejecting all political and economic institutions and the ideology of growth for the sake of growth, again, people confronted the system from the comparative safety of a shared hybrid space, both online and urban (squares). Attempts of police repression only reinforced solidarity and renewed peaceful indignation. The last empirical chapter then moves to Wall Street, where the Occupy movement, sparked by what happened in Tahrir Square, set out to revitalize American democracy. In a compelling narrative, Castells foregrounds the often neglected importance to overcome ubiquitous corporatocracy as explicit trigger for mobilization, and an increased awareness of Americans to the reality of class struggle. Born and virally diffused on the Internet, the movement's "material form of existence was the occupation of public space" (Castells 2012, p. 168). Once main stream media began to report on these events, this was then followed by quick and global expansion.

These empirical insights are framed by two of the most incisive chapters social movement studies has seen in a decade.<sup>5</sup> In them, Castells returns to his 1983 notion that social movements remain the levers of social change. Critics, disregarding Castells' comprehensive body of prior scholarship, tend to accuse Castells of techno-determinism and of refusing engagement with ideological debates and theoretical literature (for example, see Fuchs 2012; Barassi 2013). Perhaps indignant that the book is not filled with proper citations of prior work, reviewers fail to acknowledge Castells' valuable alternative ways of seeing. It is his grounded perspective that allows him to capture the commonalities of the various protests and related online activities, and emerging new forms of deliberation, organization and decision-making. One key commonality is that the movements are

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<sup>5</sup> In the acknowledgements Castells mentions that we may have to wait for a definitive and full-length analysis of processes that are still only unfolding. In the meantime, this 'simple book' makes the waiting just a little bit easier, and is an excellent basis for constructive debate.

intricately connected and facilitated by the Internet. Another is that occupying politically potent spaces in the city is crucial in gaining political leverage for pursuing reform.

Too much recent literature is aimed at understanding the role of new and social media as tools of protest, and thus tends to remain in networks of cyberspace. Sociology and urban studies have also lagged in linking urban space with cyberspace. Connecting the virtual and physical realms through the concepts of ‘hybrid public space’ and ‘space of autonomy’ (where togetherness is lived and shared symbolic meanings are cultivated) and zooming in on the processes of awareness and deliberation that transform people’s (individual and shared) consciousness, as Castells has begun to do, deserves recognition as path-breaking contribution to a contemporary urban social movement theory for the Internet Age.

### **“Performing Place” in the Cyber-Urban Placeworld**

“Social relations of production have a social as well as a spatial existence, thus space is a medium from which we can interpret how a change of spatial existence is a change of social existence”

(Lefebvre 1991, p. 129).

Neither living in cities in East and Southeast Asia, nor when exploring the city at large, can one escape daily reminders that in our increasingly globalized place-world we live with increasing architectural and (related) sensual-conceptual uniformity. Flattening and replacing the eclectic historical palimpsests of prior forms of living, this homogenous and homogenizing uniformity is constructed – through capitalist monuments such as shopping malls, office buildings, gated residential communities, etc. – so that our bodies and selves feel at home and not lost in them.

Philosophical-phenomenological treatments of geography include Edward Casey’s work on the “geographical self” and the meaning of being in the place-world (Casey 2001a). Tracing the relation between place and personal identity back to Locke, Casey finds that the quintessential modernist view is that there is no such relation, as place has been perceived and conceptualized as nothing more than part of space. Asking what the move from the modern to the postmodern means for the relation between place and self, Casey concludes that self and place are mutually constituting, and that the body has become a mediator that actively engages place. If places become increasingly uniform (or “thin”) then the same is true for personal identity. Casey therefore suggests that the more places are leveled down the more selves should “be led to seek out thick places in which their own personal enrichment can flourish” (ibid, p. 685).

Unfortunately, Casey suggests that it is what Bordieus called “habitus” that ties place and self together. He describes habitus as “the socially encoded core of our bodily self” (ibid, p. 688), as a “middle term between place and self—and, in particular, between lived place and the geographical self” (ibid, p. 686). Yet although Casey recognizes that “a habitus is something we continually put into action” (ibid, p. 687), he states that “we are not the masters of place but prey to it; we are the subjects of place or, more exactly, subject to place. For him, such subjection ranges from docility (wherein we are the mere creatures of a place, at its whim and in its image) to appreciation (by which we enjoy being in a place, savoring it) to change (whereby we alter ourselves – our very self – as a function of having been in a certain place) (ibid, p. 688).

Casey thus unquestioningly adopts Bourdieu’s concept of self as a social product, as what Entrikin aptly termed a “strategizing maximizer of social capital” (Entrikin 2001, p. 696). Therefore it is not surprising that in Casey’s narrative, an autonomous self would strive to overcome the thinness of

place by becoming more responsive to geographic differences, rather than through actively pursuing change. Based on the last section's elaborating on a free, intentional subject I contend that it is because Casey has a very clear idea of action as inward-oriented that he fails to see the outward-oriented component, i.e. that the body/self has the capability to actively alter place and alter itself through the vehicle of an altered place. I contend that as individuals we have the capacity and desire to actively create those "thick" places in which our selves can thrive and flourish. This is where the concept of intentionality comes into play, and also explains why the (Chinese) Internet (as virtual place-world) is so extensive and diverse: because of a lack of alternatives for personal enrichment in urban China's physical place-world.

Intentionality is the phenomenon of 'aboutness', it is a philosophical concept "describing the power of minds to be about, to represent, or to stand for, things, properties and states of affairs" (Stanford 2005). The word derives from the Latin verb *intendere* which means being directed towards some goal or thing. Intentionality refers to mental states and events, with 'intentions' being just one of several types of intentional mental states. Intentionality is rather a feature of various mental states, including hopes, beliefs, judgments, love and hatred, and is thereby extending far beyond mere rational or conscious intentions (ibid).

My field research observations and interactions with Chinese bloggers and Internet users lead me to believe that the concept of intentionality, realigned with the existence of an emplaced free subject, is suitable for understanding the Internet in general, and related cyber-urban hybridities in particular. Only if individual subjects realize the concreteness of their mental grounding in cyburban place-worlds, and their capacity for real agency and action, can they set out to actively alter place and alter themselves through the vehicle of an altered place.

At the same time, expressing intentionalities first requires developing them, through a creative free-thinking process of thoughts and ideas alongside which individual subjects learn how to develop, express, and put into action their intentional dreams and desires. These pragmatic but naïve and idealistic dreams and desires are what make people take action—take up a specific occupation, pick up the habit of blogging, or blog about certain ideas or events. This seems to be specifically true for Beijing-based Internet users who – choosing and growing up deeply rooted in China's physical urban realities – developed the wish to change their individual (and collective) experiences and surroundings for the better. Therefore, the (Chinese) Internet as virtual place-world facilitates the transcendence and overcoming of existing biases toward the rational, orderly, and efficient.

In this light, the widespread academic consensus about the Chinese Internet being all about entertainment that leads to some form of 'mindless escapism' or even addiction has to be taken with a grain of salt. Isn't it exactly such 'mindless' entertainment that creates the playful mood through which creative fountains of ideas can flourish? Since Wittgenstein, we know that "[h]umor is not a mood, but a way to observe the world," and Bakhtin (1988) tells us that subversion of hierarchy and authority often happens by the means of "grotesque realism" and "carnival"—again mainly through humor (cf. Herold & Marolt 2011; Marolt & Herold, forthcoming).

If scholars involved in (critical) Chinese Internet studies want to understand and conceptualize the fluid and diverse individuals who broke loose and are at large in Chinese cyburbia, we need to assert the existence of an autonomous, active, self-assertive, situated, sensible, bodied self. This self is full of desire to create heterogeneous, exciting places which embody and thus create multiple identities that are no longer willing to give up their dreams. I concur with Casey that such a bodied self "is the only aspect of our being – individual or collective – capable of performing place, that is to say, making place a living reality" (Casey 2001b, p. 718; emphasis added).

Our capacity to envision depends on our ability to develop a phenomenal consciousness based on phenomenal experiences, i.e. to make things known to our senses. The realities of place-based experiences are too varied to be consistent with any meta-narrative. While the network has been identified as dominant organizing principle for society, individuals continue to craft identities on their own, with one foot in their physical and the other in their virtual everyday lives.

I would like to suggest that online engagement is not only about power but to a significant extent about reflexivity and autonomy. Reflexively and autonomously, myriad Chinese Internet users woke up and smelled the coffee. They reacted to and rid themselves of the imposed flattening of their physical place-worlds and related 'acceptable' intentionalities. They then took action and shifted their focus from altering themselves (Lefebvre's "social existence") to fit their surroundings to actively altering their surroundings (their "spatial existence") to build an alternative and thicker place-world: the Chinese Internet. This is an ongoing process, that no doubt happens in tandem with effects on urban experiences and environments.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery once said: "True happiness comes from the joy of deeds well done, the zest of creating things new". In the human quest for happiness, Internet practitioners in China are simply not content with only the first part of the equation. While the idea of a stable, essential self-identity slowly gives way to a plural, unstable self, they apparently realize that "[t]he future belongs not so much to the pure thinkers who are content – at best – with optimistic or pessimistic slogans; it is a province, rather, for reflective practitioners who are ready to act on their ideals. Warm hearts allied with cool heads seek a middle way between the extremes of abstract theory and personal impulse" (Toulmin 2001, p. 214).

It takes effort to question the adage that the ubiquitous data available on the Internet provides us with a seductive data set that we 'only' need to analyze in order to gain insights into the social issues surrounding the Internet, e.g. those relating to the Internet's effects on society. However, limiting 'going native' to simply going online overlooks that all groups, and individuals within groups, are embedded in embodied, physical, culturally specific worlds (ibid). The Internet is not merely a technology, a tool, or a metaphorically-oriented communication medium, it is also the latest 'version' of what Carey describes as "a manifestation of a basic cultural disposition to cast up experience in symbolic forms that are at once immediately pleasing and conceptually plausible, thus supplying the basis for felt identities and meaningfully apprehended realities" (Carey 1997, p. 11). Heeding the fluid individual, socio-cultural, and geographical nature of all mediated communication requires us to draw empirical connections between the ubiquitous data available online and their embodied and place-rooted creators and manipulators. Avoiding either individual or shared cultural specificities and diversity is not an option.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

"'When I hear the word culture, I reach for my gun.' This infamous statement of Nazi sentiment is not limited to Fascists: many critics become combative when discussing culture. They prefer to patrol boundaries rather than venture into the no-man's-land of hybridity."

(Saler 2008, June 4, n.p.)

In lieu of a conclusion, let me relate these musings back to the difference between a theory of 'social action'/'social movements' and a more general 'action theory'/'movement theory' that heeds expressions of meaning and agency that go beyond the 'social'—i.e. beyond reaching some form of understanding based upon social interaction/communication. All in all, Castells' analysis tends to see

individuals as communicative animals who are parts of larger groups. Thus despite many Chinese Internet practitioners expressing that they write their blogs and online comments mostly for themselves, Castells labels this form of mass self-communication as “electronic autism.” He is of course right to say that “any post in the Internet, regardless of the intention of its author, becomes a bottle drifting in the ocean of communication, a message susceptible of being received and reprocessed in unexpected ways” (Castells 2007, p. 247). But while the reception and re-processing of a message “in unexpected ways” is useful in terms of a ‘social meaning’ (or to frame it even more narrowly: a meaning for ‘social action’), what is at least equally important is the critical role of emotions, feelings, or imagination in the accomplishment of such (individual or collective) action. Focusing on a communicative public sphere and consequently labeling unread blog posts as autism disregards that individuals do not learn everything from others. Autonomous subjects perform the acts they do, when they do (for example: the decisions to blog or generally express themselves; to blog about a specific topic; in a specific way; or using specific lingo) based on individual meanings and agency rooted in consciousness. These individual meanings and agency can only, and best, be known through looking at the expression of meaning and agency and through asking individuals about them. Yet only through adopting a positionality that is both rooted in specific locales and cognizant of methodological individualism can we possibly heed this recommendation.

There can be no doubt that the Internet as decentralized multi-nodal communication system transforms subjects who engage within it. In this sense, it is a social space resembling a nation, a community, or a family, rather than an object or mere tool of communication (Poster 1999). The implicit difference in the way of seeing Internet users is crucial. In the latter case a user is construed as pre-constituted instrumental identity, while in the former case she is an active free agent, shaped by and concomitantly shaping the social spaces she engages. This interpretation allows us the supposition that humans – as free subjects – engage in activities in which they ‘tell the truth’ about who they are, and we can then ask them about their authorial intentionality behind these truths. This assumption shifts emphasis to authorial agency and intentionality of the author as individual subject and as independent locus of experience, on his conscious activity (i.e. creating thoughts and ideas), and what he meant to say. Underlying this room for re-interpreting lived subjectivity and agency is a scrupulous antirealism that is starting not from a universal conception of ‘the subject’, but rather asking how we might understand our particular form of subjectivity. This understanding can then be based on lived experience of the subject, through in-depth studies of isolable, place-dependent practices.

My longstanding observations of the creative energy and talent evident in the burgeoning Chinese blogosphere from its inception in 2002 until today led me to believe that the virtual civil sphere a.k.a. the Chinese Internet brings encouragement to Chinese people, by creating awareness that they are not alone. It also provides the basis of knowing that there is a wider range of thoughts and ideas than the party-state line, espoused by mass media. My empirical observations and engagement strengthen the hypothesis set forth in the introduction: that insights that lead to innovation and change can be intercepted and that the ‘Internet of thoughts and ideas’ already contains multiple seeds for societal change. Although we may be unable to predict the direction of that change we can nonetheless strive to find pieces that help solve the puzzle or at the least help us catch a fleeting glimpse of the actions and emplaced agency that undergird societal change. For all of us, this change is ultimately rooted in the fears, hopes and dreams (aspirations) manifest in the thoughts and ideas of individuals that one way or another touch our lives.

As Max Weber has argued, individuals who are deprived of their societal support systems (in the Chinese context, e.g. an “iron rice bowl”) tend to devote themselves (unceasingly) to inner-worldly goals in an attempt to relocate their spiritual values. While some thoughts and ideas from previous times are abandoned, others become adapted and transformed, in a geographical setting where it is

possible for the agents involved to locate themselves coherently in space. Augmenting urban China, the Chinese-language Internet fulfills that function. Its new kinds of identity- and agency-enhancing public spaces need to be actively imagined both by actors and researchers, as otherwise the orderly, controlled visions and dominant, hegemonic representations of existing political space do not leave room for such spaces and actions that may emanate from/through them. (After all, if they – or we as researchers – lose access to, or belief in, existing islands of imagination and reason where unmediated interaction takes place, they – or we – may have to build them.)

As we move forward, we should bear in mind that neither cities nor cyberspace are a flat surface, but rather a palimpsest of diverse cultural spaces and expressions that are continuously produced and reproduced. Cyberspace may now overlay physical distance yet it does not erase the prior geographies (Dear 2004). It actually augments these geographies, creating ever-shifting cyber-urban landscapes well worthy of our attention. These landscapes are discursive arenas where manifold forms of unmediated political thinking and interaction takes place and where counter-hegemonic discourses can be created by dissatisfied, dissenting groups of society. Unfortunately, more often than not, academic politics of domination and hegemony have turned cyberspace into a technological determinist sphere working with the logic: data → information → knowledge → truth → freedom (cf. Interrogate-the-Internet 1996). Please note the striking similarities with the logics of Enlightenment, modernism, and late capitalism.

A firm belief in methodological academic rigor is justifiably part of the production of knowledge. Yet avoiding complexity and related incommensurabilities by retreating into familiar certainties requires nothing but a closed mind. The effect has been that social scientific research, well capable of pushing our structural understandings of larger processes, has seriously underestimated the efforts needed to examine and conceptualize the individual, spatial, and cultural aspects of ongoing cyber-urban transformations. As this thought piece points out, we are now in dire need of more empirical work that heeds the political importance of the actions and agency of critically aware subjects. This includes work that attempts to comprehend how individual and socio-cultural capacities to act emerge and are altered through horizontal network technologies, and how social movements draw upon, grow or are stifled by, such forms of action.

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