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# Cyberactivism and social movements. The Oppositional Public Space in contemporary technopolitics

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## Abstract

The digital revolution has dramatically changed the conventional system of political representation and media, contributing to cultural changes in the public sphere that require a different conceptualization of the social mediation process. The momentous changes of participatory democracy in networks with new information technologies validate today, the existence of a new information ecosystem that makes it possible for the so-called oppositional public space (OPS). In the new mediatic culture, the communication process is fully released itself from the coordinates and historical restrictions of the traditional political culture, facilitating collective action of new urban movements. Complex cyberspace environments and technological networks demand within this framework a critical research able to describe and understand the conditions of e-world postmodern sociotechnics from practices and representations of the new imagery of contemporary technopolitics. The Communication Theory has not reconsidered however the notion to the use of public space to the emerging forms of exchange and collective action. This paper presents a conceptual proposal that, from the critical school, redefines ongoing processes such as the 15M or social movements like *Yo soy 132* from a structural analysis of the economic, political and social theory of mediation.

## Keywords

Cyberactivism, social movements, public space, communication theory, *15M*, *yo soy 132*

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## 1. Introduction

Available bibliography about new social movements tended to provide, in the last years, a greater relevance to symbolic and identity aspects related to communication and social networks (Santos, 2015, Mendes, 2013, Sabariego, 2007 and 2016, Della Porta, Kriesi and Rutch, 2009, Della Porta, 2009, Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005, Hardt and Negri, 2000). Said perspective questions an instrumental approach that limits the study of communication in processes of collective action to the analysis of the mobilization capacity and opportunities available in every moment. Instead, the study of the different dimensions inherently linked to the field of communication has generated a bibliographic corpus that thinks about cyberactivistic practices as space of citizen recognition (van de Donk, Loader, Nixon and Rucht, 2004, Lievrouw, 2011, López, Roig and Sádaba, 2003, Rueda, 2008). The contributions of Donatella Della Porta and Francisco Sierra are key in this issue (besides already mentioned, Della Porta and Diani, 2011, Della Porta, Snow, Klandermans and McAdam, 2013), to whom we must recently add a vein of analysis confirming the outstanding role of the cyberactivistic phenomenon (Sádaba and Gordo, 2008, Candón, 2013, Ibarra, Martí and Gomá, 2002, Webster, 2001) and its different derivations in cultural and transformation practices explicitly different in our time (Sierra and Montero, 2015).

In this framework, cyberactivism may be considered a riot of imagination before the collapse of the traditional political system. “Irruptions that disobey the modern cannon attributed to riots (...) have destabilized the monopoly of the representation of what is real, disputing, through the technopolitics, the ability to make-see, make-believe dominant narratives that annul or hinder self-representation possibilities for citizens and, what is more important: through this multipolar system, oblige conventional media to incorporate themes, issues, information that circulate from the network to the street and vice versa, which is not a minor achievement.” (Reguillo, 2017: 123). Based on this point of view, the new forms of protests are interruptions in the accumulation logics, in devices and domain processes of governmental and standardization systems, when altering action, the sayable, thinkable and visible in the public sphere. From this perspective, opposition is an interference of repetition. Interferences can originate combinations or conflicts of antagonistic nature (Tarde, 1986). Communications operate in the logic of composition and combining potentiality which, in the digital culture, widen the margin of autonomy and action of individuals thanks to the possibilities of media available for expression and the interface of new cultural ecologies adapted to the creativity and autonomy of new political subjects.

Nevertheless, in the specialized literature on the matter, we observe a noteworthy gap of knowledge about the genesis of these autonomous articulation practices. We are aware that in the networks era, counter-hegemonic forms of opposition and resistance have been unfolding from an antagonistic critique that, conceptually, would require a more consistent interpretation of the changes in the social mediation model. In this sense, we suggest a materialistic approach below, understanding Marxism as a fertile theoretical field to illustrate the collective action of cyberactivism as an autonomous process of social transformation.

“If for the Marxism the political action from below as vector of the politicization of subordinate classes is an antagonistic action in strict sense, what it is attempted to be sketched here are the elements of a Marxism theory of the antagonistic action in which the antagonist adjective entails the recognition of a specific feature or quality of the political action.” (Modonesi, 2016: 12). Specifically, in this paper, there is a formulation of the first approach to the concept of Oskar Negt’s Oppositional Public Space (OPE). For this purpose, the distinctive elements of participation and autonomy of the digital culture are defined, at the same time the conceptual baselines of analysis justifying the pertinence of this reading are discussed, when trying to understand, from a relational perspective, the forms of collective action in contemporary technopolitics.

## 2. Critique of mediation and event policy

The need of an economic-political approach of the emergent forms of digital activism on social networks starts, firstly, from the pertinence of a historical contextualization. It seems evident that crisis processes blooming with the new urban movements cannot be understood without correlating antagonistic processes, forms and dynamics that appear as result of the general logic of capitalism display and its accumulation process by dispossession. However, the recurrent interpretations tend to influence in the version of technological determinism. Thus, instrumental rationality would explain the new urban movements as a result of the expansion of digital networks and the opportunities offered for social self-organization. Key concepts of the Marxist theory such as entirety, alienation and antagonism, are eluded when analyzing the cyberactivism as they try to think the social articulation and regulation from the economic to the political plane, and from the public sphere or space to the productive field despite the evidence about the nature of the new protest movements, mainly originated by the precariousness of urban youth, with lowering wage conditions, scarce benefits, exclusion from the public sphere and, in some cases, in situations of clear vulnerability due to the violence and death the accumulation process by dispossession entails. Thus, the WorldProtest report (2006-2013) demonstrates that most mobilizations of the current cycle of protests is due to structural reasons or causes of economic-political nature. From the start of crisis in 2008, mobilizations, more than 840, have concentrated in most economically advanced countries due to reasons of economic justice, poverty and inequality (488 protest), representation crisis (376), global justice (311) and Defense of Human Rights (302). Therefore, talking about cyberactivism is not just thinking about technopolitics from the social aspect, but on the contrary instead, to understand the mediations of technology from the political aspect, as a problem of social construction and mediation (Fuchs/Mosco, 2017). Only this way it is possible to critically analyze cyberactivism from nuclear concepts such as the principle of connection, articulation, supremacy, policity, subjectivation and mediated social action, consubstantial to the will of self-determination of the new political stakeholders (Modonesi, 2016).

In this point, the pertinence of the concept of Oppositional Public Space (OPS) introduced by Oskar Negt and Alexandre Kluge is justified by the nature of the new urban movements, that attempt to burst into the mediatic fence to provide public expressions, beyond traditional institutions of social representation. In “*Historie et subjectivité rebelle*”, Negt and Kluge reformulate the conceptual core of Marxism shaping the meaning of the proletarian public space as a manifestation opposed to the dominant mediation system, in the ambivalent logic of social reproduction. From the analysis about what kind of space, what forms of interaction and exchange take place in the public domain and what

mediating function have both conventional information media as well as social media, the pertinence of this theoretical framework to think about cyberactivism, is rather convenient from the perspective of the relevance of questions and approaches essentially presented in relation to the distinction of dissimilar forms of organization of social mediation based on the dynamic and structure of the reproduction of a class society.

If we consider the confirmation of long-term experiences such as *15M* in Spain or the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ movement, we observe that both experiences involved a radical alteration of the conditions of enunciation and representation of the public space, both in the virtual as well as the physical plane. In this sense, it is worth mentioning that those theories that idealize the indispensable double articulation separately, end up oversizing the autonomy of communication or language. It is the case of Habermas’ Communicative Action Theory. Therefore, the thesis about OPE formulates a critique of the bourgeois public sphere and the Kantian idea of republic of wise men, which entails another radically different reading of the communicational process and dynamic tensions of access and control crossing the social area.

In his critique to communicational idealism, Negt emphasizes the forms of deliberation, recognition and antagonism of dominated classes as differentiated forms. And defines the public proletarian space as the public domain in which bosom individuals shape their expression, interests and existential aspirations as stakeholders of infra-politics (Negt, 2007: 38). From this point of view, it is not possible to separate material life and meaning, and even less for a critique of social mediation. Likewise, as Balibar warns, we must formulate a critique of certain Marxist readings that have privileged an abstract and formal concept of citizenship (Balibar, 2004). Thus, the image and imagery of the public space tends to present before us as something fix and static when we know, from an historical perspective, that institutions and constitution of public domain change over time and in different societies.

In this same line, OPE theses start from the will of overcoming a limited concept of domain and public opinion that conditioned a restrictive reading of Kantian influence. In his main essay about Oppositional Public Space, Negt criticizes Habermas for his theoretical idealization of the dialogic process described in his Communicative Action Theory before common realities such as symbolic violence and asymmetries that traverse the real and concrete public space. According to Bisky, “the dualism Habermas considers is only achieved by hiding production relationships. With this omission the path is free to relate only work (instrumental action) with the development of man as a natural being and relate interaction (communicative action) solely with the development of man as a social being, with the social process; however, with a social process of which (initially) the economy and, above all, production relationships are excluded.” (Bisky, 1982: 105).

In short, the black box of Habermas’ public sphere concept is a rationalization that ends up by annulling, in an idealistic manner, contradictions involved in the whole mediation process. To the extent that the proposal of rationalization conditions of the dialog in the forms of communication and citizen deliberation do not occur, among some reasons, because communication is dominated by production relationships and an irrational control structure. Universal pragmatics of speech conditions have little to do before enunciation devices and logics deriving from subalternity and structure of class logics. At this point, “Habermas’ procedure is rather interesting: he abstracts from level to level, until

he believes to have found the universals that constitute the baseline of all discursive acts. But the subjects performing these universals are missing (because he abstracted from them). They are simply supposed.” (Bisky, 1982: 108). There prevails a pragmatic, linguistic, gritty concept. In such a way that the intersubjective validity of norms, and their enforcement, transcend subjects, as well as their history and social position. *Praxis* is relegated by an idea of truth that, claiming to overcome Marx’s limitations about it, end up moving from the positivism and determination to the idealization of exchange and communication.

In general, technologically deterministic interpretations and communicational idealism about digital political culture begin with addressing against the material nature of existing production relationships, denying the proprietary dimension of mediation networks and channels, as well as in general, the institutional framework of distribution, production and consumption of symbolic contents due to a mistaken interpretation of the projective dimension inherent to every social mediation process.

A usual problem in the interpretation of phenomena such as the Arab Spring or *15M* is the absence of grounds in terms of political economy, mobilization process and collective action that, due to influences of autonomist readings of culture, in vogue since the eighties from the so-called linguistic turn, either in Laclau or in Cultural Studies, ends up by not understanding the historic sense of latent forms of tension implicit in every social transformation process, when thinking about the cultural fronts and emergences of subordinate popular cultures would demand a consistent correlational reading of social mediation processes of higher reach and criticism, beyond visible eruption and irruptions, at social epidermis level.

From a critical perspective, we know that neither the conditions of validity of speech nor the rationalization of exchanges are universal, starting by the recognition of the other, nor the linguistic turn can explain on their own, material processes related to subjectivity, the particular body and space of cumulative social processes that define the social being in his specific manifestations. Like Postone says, “Habermas (and we would add Cultural Studies, in general) develops a theory of the internal logic of the socio-cultural development as a process of linguistification of the sacred” scarcely or not adequate at all to the reality of the connected multitudes (Postone, 2006: 328). On the other hand, we know that historically there is no social mediation without dialectics of experience. This means exploring the plane of immanence with all its consequences.

We believe that, a core element at this point is problematizing social experience, the act or process of meaning that makes possible the social reproduction between the normative system and the individual or political stakeholder’s experience. As a historically specific theory of social mediation, the appropriate approach, beyond Habermas, is a theory of specific modalities of awareness and subjectivity, according to Postone. Only this way it is possible to think new phenomena as the ideology of technopolitics when thinking about the relationships between activism, subordinate communication and conventional media. In the same line, the work displayed by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge is completely relevant whereas it positions the role of mediation in the interface between rebel subjectivity and live work. Both position the field of communication, mediated experience, at sociocognitive level, and the logic of value, from new parameters, to understand the social production of communication applicable today to the network model nurturing digital activism. From this enclave

or vantage point we can profile, in our opinion, a new research agenda and a solid framework of interpretation of the new emerging phenomena of the mass self-communication mentioned by Castells.

### 3. Towards a materialistic theory of digital culture

We are aware that Internet constitutes a potent tool of solidarity and co/ involvement. Through virtual communities, belonging and identification links disarticulated by capitalism are reinforced. In this sense, the net of networks is an informal space of articulation of meeting spaces, of recognition and common awareness in the formation of collective projects. Now, another issue is to what extent the new wave of mobilizations and social protests makes room for new logics of transformation of the public domain, what reach and dimensions must be noticed as singular realities in the new forms of technopolitics and collective action. The aim of this paper is not to itemize each and every one of subscribed problems regarding the discussion formulated herein. Considering the pertinence and up-to-date nature of a materialistic reading of the new processes of social remediation, and according to rationales briefly exposed, we will at least limit to point out several research lines related to cyberactivism today.

In the fieldwork of the R+D project we have been working on, we can confirm that the primary communication in social networks develops new practices, interpersonal modes of construction of subjectivities different from usual ones, starting with recognizing that they lead to projective forms of collective imagery of unusual reach, compared to the pre-existent forms of the analogic era. If we needed to outstand several aspects susceptible of being managed by social research from the concept of Oppositional Public Space, in our opinion, we must at least mention four priority lines to rethink emerging communication processes in cultural fronts that accompany digital activism from a Marxist reading. That is to say:

- A. **Technological appropriation and social organization.** Technoculture makes room to a multiplicity of new practices, forms of mediation and social self-organization, that alter and reformulate social reproduction reference models. Because “cyberculture, understood as the space of communication and interaction created by the Internet network, generates huge inequities within, exclusions and practices of power and domination through information networks, but also opens a possibility for imagination and social creativity” (Rueda, 2006: 20). Participative communication must be observed, in this sense, as a logic of multiplicity constitution and social autonomy. In this sense, cyberactivism is a sort of recomposition and assembly of the moral economy of the multitude. According to Dean, “names, tactics and common images are putting fragments together, making them legible as the numerous fronts of a unique fight against capitalism. Whereas proliferation of affairs and identities disperse and weaken us -promoting the sarcasm that glorifies its critique even when it undermines solidarity -, multitudinous events of the last decade are forcing a new sense of collective power. They caused that expectations of multiplicity make room to experiences of collectivity” (Dean, 2017: 41). In the same line, the concept of appropriation must be rethought as a category in movement. Not only social and communicologic research must necessarily be creative and aware of productive effects on social reality. In the appropriation process, it must recognize, in essence, that common people develop the creative capacity of new uses and meanings of

objects and/ or social mediation processes. This insubordinate will, people's experiences, forms of mimesis and subversion, both in the appropriation as well as in the self-management process, do not follow an univocal logic, but instead occur in a different way, depending on individuals and interests, the same as language does, as Bajtín demonstrated, it is always polysemic on popular cultures, they associate, in brief, to different social meanings directly linked to an expansion of its use and a conformation of quotidian practices and procedures that usually exceed marketing or bureaucratic strategies of *a priori* programming and definition of the social. We understand that "all relationships of representation are grounded on a fiction: the presence of something up to a certain level that strictly is absent from it. But considering that at the same time it is a fiction and an organized principle of certain social relationships, the representation is the terrain of a game which result is not predetermined from the start" (Laclau/Mouffe, 2004: 161). Taking these terms in mind, the proposal of the Oppositional Public Space, demands exploring all communication modes, aesthetics of resistance, outlines of the antagonistic public space in its forms of expression and self-management, starting by analyzing participation patterns, organizational structures, forms of protest and institutional policies of recognition and autonomy in their singular, specific, real and concrete manifestations.

- B. Interactivity and new social mediation models.** The new informative ecosystem suggests the need of thoroughly discussing the levels and forms of interaction. Since the inter-penetration of work and life, the public and private, production and reproduction of the social, undergo new forms of mediactivism according to the different logics of ambivalence. This entails discussing processes and methodologies, for instance, of participation of citizens on institutional spaces such as municipal websites as well as the governance and management models of social exchange. Thus, according to Luckacs, not all innovation is progressive. Therefore, the irruption of information technologies in contemporary life must be questioned from the perspective of the general social reflexivity, in terms of science and society, of organic models or of social engineering, exploring cultural matrices and development projects that accompany the configuration of allowed and denied forms of mediation. "It is not about the essence but instead of the event, what we need to know is not 'eles', but 'ely': concatenations and movements that constitute a machine" (Raunig, 2008: 24).
- C. Memory and local management of knowledge.** The digitalization of cultural codes and repertoires, present challenges and problems that go beyond copyright or the safeguard of the immaterial patrimony, as they affect citizens. Projects such as 'Europeane' do not conceive, for instance, the problem of cultural policy envisioned in the new cyberculture of post-nationalism and the free neoliberal change where Cognitive Capitalism expropriates and dispossesses subordinate classes of their cultural codes. This is, the challenge of the so-called cognitive society, it is not about financial sustainability nor respect to the moral right of works, but instead the democratic and political configuration of digital exo-memories and the autonomy capacity and the self-determination of popular cultures in a scenario that, as Dallas Smythe sensed, turns the economy of attention into an intensive process of colonization and exploitation of experience and particular life of every individual. If we want to understand this logic, it is worth saying that the intervention process at this level of social mediation demands a round-trip: from politics to technique and from technique to politics. Otherwise, as E.P.

Thompson would say, we find ourselves before dead ends, lost causes and oblivion of losers in history (Thompson, 2002: 16).

**D. Politic Economy of the Technological Change and Social Innovation.** The sociocentric view of policy in the network limits potential interaction dynamics of tools in the Internet Galaxy. Only the modernizing and administrative conception imbues the institutional public discourse in the change processes mediated technologically. But neither the supposed politics of transparency nor participation incorporate a different form of articulation with democratic quality. The issue is to see whether digital networks allow articulating spaces that are socially open, innovative and autonomous, whether they contribute to establish rules and procedures, counter-powers and spaces of interlocution and empowerment or, on the contrary, reproduce traditional domain logics. An example of that is the so called *smart cities* or digital cities. In other words, despite the discourses proliferating in the Information Society, the creative practice of concatenation of bodies and signs, of economy of signs and spaces, setting and social re-appropriation of the city, its imageries and cultural forms of representation, are not necessarily new nor original in the forms and contents of social planning. Therefore, it is essential to problematize politic economy and the culture of social innovation associated to new technologies and digital revolution. This, from our point of view, refers to *praxis* and the constituent dimension of imagination and imageries, following the trail of Castoriadis' concerns. But the aim here is not exploring the imaginative capacity, linked to experience, of the political subject and the subordinate classes in the Oppositional Public Space. Just mentioning instead, that this element is relevant for understanding contemporary technopolitics, whereas there is the need to politicize, critically, the social generation of communication and culture in a time of increasing disaggregation and mercantilization of the symbolic universe by the logics of mercification of technological and social innovation.

Therefore, it is necessary to rethink the popular and the new moral economy of the multitude connected from other more consistent theoretical and conceptual baselines. In this sense, to do it from a materialistic reading might, undoubtedly, contribute to better understand the reach and nature of the new protest movements that undergo the crisis cycle of accumulation the capitalism experiences today around the world. Otherwise, the theory and the study of collective action, will only enlighten the description of the same in a superficially different way based on the positivistic repetition of events as a story of fastening machines that proliferate in previous experience, as Debord illustrates, with the development of the consumption society.

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