

DIGITAL STALINISM

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'Flower power didn't work' as John Lennon put it with knowing irony. The tone he often adopted was essential because, despite the relatively humble background and the consternation his political stance was causing in US and UK secret-service circles at the time, Lennon, like the Dalai Lama or Princess Diana later, was only another unelected celebrity given platform to express their half-baked views. Being blunt, the same, minus the celebrity bit in most cases, could be said for many artists who see themselves as activists or liberators. And, considering the decade just gone, it has to be admitted that dedicated activists and political campaigners have not fared much better in terms of achieving anything. Listening to the most vociferous anti-Brexit spokespeople in Britain in recent years, and then representatives of Extinction Rebellion and environmental campaigners, and now the many commentators on Covid-19 strategies around the globe, you would be forgiven for assenting to the inherent 'we're all doomed' message. In fact, a curious mix of pessimism, and adamant moralistically-driven political tactics, has characterised the resurgent anti-establishment political movements, of which there have been many. On a positive note, the, undoubtedly impermanent, rise of the right within establishment circles, Trump, Johnson, Modi, Bolsonaro, Duda and the host of other old male conservatives dotted around the planet, can be interpreted as a reaction to the freshly charged embracing of all the old progressive

-isms, which were thought to be dead in the water in the two decades between ‘The End of History...’ and the global financial crisis (or GFC, as trendy economists call it) of 2007-2008. ‘So what. We start again’ added Lennon, way back then, but what are the challenges now? What sort of world are we living in it? Is there a need to, and if so a way, to transform it? These are not questions for artists perhaps but the antics some get up to may be revealing.

Observation was an important aspect of artistic training historically. In modernist times there was an overlap here with the ideals associated with science and political science, in the desire to be objective, and not let ‘idols of the mind’, emotion, illusion and so on, get in the way. Clichés connected with traditional drawing or the edict to paint things warts-and-all come to mind but of course observational approaches don’t need to be connected with representation, nor be media specific, nor confined to the past. Adopting such an approach then and applying it to the decade just passed, let us be frank: all the movements from the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, to Occupy, the new feminist campaigns, gender and identity politics, anti-racism, the school strikes for the environment and XR, anti-austerity campaigning, the ructions within the British Labour Party, the emergence of socialists sometimes aligned to the Democrats in the USA, and frequent trade union disputes, have oscillated between seeming over-confidence to disenchantment about what can be achieved. Some of these, risings if you like, have arguably failed, or even been followed by worse scenarios than before (e.g. Syria). The intuition for solidarity is inevitable, and the sheer impossibility of ignoring what is blatantly oppressive, means that resistance will continue. The ethics of fighting back is essential, and human: that is not being questioned

here, but, is there some linking thread or common problem with interpretation of the contemporary landscape, the strategies being adopted, in the makeup and the demographics of the political groupings, or in terms of ideology and appreciating history and past movements?

Though my own work as an artist makes no political claims, and is not intended as activism*, it would be disingenuous not to admit to its pointing at new and strangely overlooked aspects of the contemporary situation. Whilst much attention is given to the algorithmic, the digital and computational network, both the software/apps and the devices and hardwares associated with that, I am interested too in how that is directly reflected in changes to traditional, older heavier networks. Transformation is also palpable on road and rail systems for example, in logistics networks, heavy goods vehicles move materials from distribution centres, through warehouses, courier companies of many sorts are in operation, and all this is analogous to how data transfer works, via 'packet switching', and how information flows through communication networks. So, a disrupter firm like Deliveroo appears, new apps and interfaces are developed, agreements are discussed behind the scenes, and suddenly, the streets are peppered with cyclists and scooter-riders with turquoise coloured cubic boxes on their backs. What is essentially software, has material effects, the physicality and real impacts are instantly felt, not least by the riders themselves who risk life and limb, in precarious employment, to deliver what is already 'fast food', fast. It is also worth recalling that much of the language associated with software development; terms such as application, code, instruction, method, procedure, program, and routine, along with script, existed before, and still have meaning beyond

the realm of computing. On this note the late David Graber argued that we in fact live in a highly bureaucratised world (2016). Adding to his thesis, if it is valid to make analogies between software in its multifarious modern forms and other extra-computational influencing codes, what about the thought that the proliferation of apps and invisible algorithms amounts to nothing less than high-speed bureaucracy? And what would that mean? As a rule-of-thumb at least, bureaucracy and policing have always been connected; bureaucracy is in fact characteristic of particular kinds of totalitarian rule and, what's more, is reflective of shortage and a need to limit supply to a certain group. In other words, if the new coded systems, online tools, the numerous apps accessed through smart devices, equate to something comparable with the menacing bureaucracies of old, then, what presents itself as easy means of accessing goods, services, resources and necessities, actually constitutes an opposite. It is commonly asserted that algorithmic systems, together with the associated hardware and surveillance machinery, are worrying or complicit in the control of populations, but can we equate them crudely with rationing? To illustrate the possible validity of such conjecture, take an ordinary example, the rolling out of self-checkout machines in supermarkets and shopping malls in recent years. It was discovered shortly after the introduction of this technology, that staff were needed, not only to direct and assist customers but, because as it turns out we do not live in an ideal world, also to guard against petty theft. At a later stage surveillance cameras and screens were installed, and this increased to a ratio of more than one per checkout (Mocksim: Isolation Artist Talk, 2020)! The resulting scenes, and levels of surveillance generally, would surely have

stunned even George Orwell. Certainly, it is a jump to see the entire landscape in that way, and to propose that software applications generally, rather than being facilitators of convenience, restrict access, but as we are on the subject, let us take it further.

In Leon Trotsky's 1936 analysis of the failings and advances of the Soviet Union, he employed the term 'bureaucracy' and its derivatives 367 times (2004). Something so seemingly neutral as bureaucracy can be associated with vicious despotism. Let us not forget that bureaucracy was a feature of pre-Soviet dictatorial structures too, not least Tzarist Russia itself, and the British empire. Hannah Arendt devotes a chapter in her pivotal work on totalitarianism to the topic, describing bureaucracy and race as '[t]wo new devices for political organization and rule over foreign peoples... discovered during the first decades of imperialism' (1962, pp.185–221). Later in the same book she mentions Franz Kafka writing that 'Austrian bureaucracy [in the transition from 'old-fashioned' to 'up-to-date' versions of absolutism] rather caused its greatest modern writer to become the humourist and critic of the whole matter' (1962, p.245). Kafka's Penal Colony (written in 1914) then is perhaps where we should turn to gain understanding of the nature of cool-headed bureaucratic and machinic violence (2017).

The ludicrous and sometimes comedic facets of bureaucratic rule-bound systems, now digitised, are easy to locate but is it unfair to compare the current computational and algorithmic network with something so extreme as yesterday's undemocratic Bonapartist administrations with their expulsions then show-trials, assassinations, mass surveillance, restrictions of movement, proscriptions on dissent including artistic freedoms, gulags and misuse of

psychiatry? The answer depends on how far you extend the perimeters for what is under discussion, which regions of the world and which demographics are being focused upon. Look at the use of killer drones in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and other countries, or the ‘hostile environment policy’ and experience of the Windrush generation in Britain in recent history. Also, what about the future? Imagine a society in rebellion: how might the currently, seemingly innocent, infrastructure and surveillance be deployed for less humdrum tasks than retaining customers, search engine optimisation or improving online recommendations? From Amelia Gentleman’s recent book:

Anyone who has tried to take on the Home Office will know that it is an unequal battle, with confused and frightened individuals spending hours held in automated telephone queuing systems, waiting to speak to government employees who read from scripts and have scant discretion to listen or to divulge any helpful information (2019, pp.20–21).

In the case of the Windrush scandal (Rawlinson, 2018) but in other situations too, dispassionate processes, their remoteness increased through use of Automatic Call Distributors (ACDs), human operators following sequential instructions, located in distant offices, centres or homes, the new reliance on bots, and the ways formal legalistic letters can be generated on the basis of rigid sets of criteria, all these phenomena have real and at times devastating consequences. This remoteness then, is one signature characteristic of punishing bureaucratic systems. Goldsmiths University of London based Forensic Architecture (FA) have been exposing

selected atrocities and providing clarity in instances of violent injustice, in inimitable style, for a decade now (Weizman, 2018). Drone strikes are the subject of five of their projects so far. In one situation ‘a strike on a community gathering in Datta Khel, Pakistan [in 2011], killed at least forty-three civilians’ (Weizman, 2013). ‘Civilian homes were the target of sixty-one percent of all reported drone strikes by the CIA in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas between 2004 and 2014’. The use of drones not only increases remoteness, but the algorithms are at play too:

Pattern analysis revealed the ways in which the tactics of the Taliban evolved in reaction to US strike policies and the algorithms behind them, adapting their patterns of movement and eventually retreating into urban environments; over time, hunter and prey co-evolved (Weizman, 2014).

Consider another feature of the internal dynamics of powerful nations today. In the USA and Russian Federation larger proportions of people are incarcerated than elsewhere.** Interest has grown in the use of AI in criminal justice in order to increase efficiency and, peculiarly given the overwhelming evidence of uneven justice in the USA (Mauer and King, 2007), ostensibly to help eliminate human bias. One software developer and researcher into the supposed impartiality of machine intelligence states the, mostly overlooked, obvious as follows:

Many people instinctively think of computers as being objective computing machines – like calculators that always give you a logical result. AI

systems are anything but, and research has shown that they are as riddled with inherent bias as the human decisions that trained them. Therefore, they will emulate those decisions in practice, biases and all (Weber, 2018).

Another paper located biases in Natural Language Generation (NLG) systems, which 'have a direct impact on society and broader AI applications' (Sheng et al., 2019).

Presumably, impacts which fit somewhere between the two extremes of the minor irritations for consumers and the catastrophic scenarios touched upon above, are more likely, for most people, most of the time. The severity of the effects of the new automated bureaucracy will depend on a person's financial standing. For example, smart metering of utilities such as electricity and water with monthly charges being estimated by algorithm could be felt as convenience, or oppressive, depending on household income. Fees associated with everyday banking, the automated scripts determining rent or mortgage increases, debt recovery methods, credit scoring, torturous social welfare and benefits application processes will affect some but not others. In many modern customer-facing workplaces staff not only follow scripts of various sorts, and are checked on adherence to those, but are now expected to give the impression of being continuously upbeat. Their 'affective labour' (Myerscough, 2013, p.2) is for sale. Job candidates at café and sandwich chain Pret a Manger,

must show that they have a natural flair for the 'Pret Behaviours' (these are listed on the website too). Among the 17 things they 'Don't Want to See' is that

someone is 'moody or bad-tempered', 'annoys people', 'overcomplicates ideas' or 'is just here for the money'. The sorts of thing they 'Do Want to See' are that you can 'work at pace', 'create a sense of fun' and are 'genuinely friendly'. The 'Pret Perfect' worker, a fully evolved species, 'never gives up', 'goes out of their way to be helpful' and 'has presence'. After a day's trial, your fellow workers vote on how well you fit the profile; if your performance lacks sparkle, you're sent home with a few quid (Myerscough, 2013, p.1).

Other incongruities have surfaced during the Covid-19 crisis. As of July 2020 travellers from the UK to the Republic of Ireland needed to fill in a form providing the state with contact details and whereabouts, at the risk of having a hefty fine, €2,500, or even prison sentences of up to six months, imposed and they were advised to isolate for two weeks, but travellers could cross the border in the north having travelled from England or Scotland, with impunity (Hewett, 2020; Travelling to Ireland from a location that is not on the COVID-19 Green List, 2020). A distinctly digital example, but incorporating again affective obligations, is video conferencing company Zoom, which by June 2020, during the Covid-19 crisis, was reporting a '169% jump in revenue on new paying customers' (Waters, 2020). Along with a more obvious linking of the many surveillance and confidentiality concerns about the platform with authoritarian pasts, questions of a structural nature arise about the kinds of meetings, discussions and events the tool expedites. Thirdly though, the company slogan 'We Deliver Happiness' (Video Conferencing, Web Conferencing, Webinars, Screen Sharing, 2020) and much of the associated aesthetics, graphic design

and photography is eerily reminiscent again of Soviet Socialist Realism, looking not dissimilar to North Korean state-sanctioned art (O'Connell, 2020, 2010).

There is not space in one chapter to discuss the implications of the legacy of the failure or demise of key twentieth century emancipatory ideologies, which surely remain an unconscious factor today, nor second, to consider the obstacle of literally bureaucratic, top-down methods and relative privilege evident within pseudo-leftist political organisations and trade unions, such as they are. The subject touched upon here relates to the nature of the economic and political system often termed neoliberalism, late capitalism, or even referred to as postcapitalism (Mason, 2015) but would Digital Stalinism be a better descriptor?

*Which is not to suggest that, separately, I am politically neutral and uninvolved in campaigning activity, far from it.

**In 2018 there were 655 prisoners per 100,000 population in the USA compared with 140 in the UK (England and Wales), 78 in Ireland and 41 in Japan (Walmsley, 2018)

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