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felix stalder

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polity

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Preface to the English Edition

This book posits that we in the societies of the (transatlantic) West find ourselves in a new condition. I call it "the digital condition" because it gained its dominance as computer networks became established as the key infrastructure for virtually all aspects of life. However, the emergence of this condition pre-dates computer networks. In fact, it has deep historical roots, some of which go back to the late nineteenth century, but it really came into being after the late 1960s. As many of the cultural and political institutions shaped by the previous condition – which McLuhan called the Gutenberg Galaxy – fell into crisis, new forms of personal and collective orientation and organization emerged which have been shaped by the affordances of this new condition. Both the historical processes which unfolded over a very long time and the structural transformation which took place in a myriad of contexts have been beyond any deliberate influence. Although obviously caused by social actors, the magnitude of such changes was simply too great, too distributed, and too complex to be attributed to, or molded by, any particular (set of) actor(s).

Yet – and this is the core of what motivated me to write this book – this does not mean that we have somehow moved beyond the political, beyond the realm in which identifiable actors and their projects do indeed shape our collective

existence, or that there are no alternatives to future development already expressed within contemporary dynamics. On the contrary, we can see very clearly that as the center – the established institutions shaped by the affordances of the previous condition – is crumbling, more economic and political projects are rushing in to fill that void with new institutions that advance their competing agendas. These new institutions are well adapted to the digital condition, with its chaotic production of vast amounts of information and innovative ways of dealing with that.

From this, two competing trajectories have emerged which are simultaneously transforming the space of the political. First, I used the term "post-democracy" because it expands possibilities, and even requirements, of (personal) participation, while ever larger aspects of (collective) decision-making are moved to arenas that are structurally disconnected from those of participation. In effect, these arenas are forming an authoritarian reality in which a small elite is vastly empowered at the expense of everyone else. The purest incarnation of this tendency can be seen in the commercial social mass media, such as Facebook, Google, and the others, as they were newly formed in this condition and have not (yet) had to deal with the complications of transforming their own legacy.

For the other trajectory, I applied the term "commons" because it expands both the possibilities of personal participation and agency, and those of collective decision-making. This tendency points to a redefinition of democracy beyond the hollowed-out forms of political representation characterizing the legacy institutions of liberal democracy. The purest incarnation of this tendency can be found in the institutions that produce the digital commons, such as Wikipedia and the various Free Software communities whose work has been and still is absolutely crucial for the infrastructural dimensions of the digital networks. They are the most advanced because, again, they have not had to deal with institutional legacies. But both tendencies are no longer confined to digital networks and are spreading across all aspects of social life, creating a reality that is, on the structural level, surprisingly coherent and, on the social and political level, full of contradictions and thus opportunities.

I traced some aspects of these developments right up to early 2016, when the German version of this book went into production. Since then a lot has happened, but I resisted the temptation to update the book for the English translation because ideas are always an expression of their historical moment and, as such, updating either turns into a completely new version or a retrospective adjustment of the historical record.

What has become increasingly obvious during 2016 and into 2017 is that central institutions of liberal democracy are crumbling more quickly and dramatically than was expected. The race to replace them has kicked into high gear. The main events driving forward an authoritarian renewal of politics took place on a national level, in particular the vote by the UK to leave the EU (Brexit) and the election of Donald Trump to the office of president of the United States of America. The main events driving the renewal of democracy took place on a metropolitan level, namely the emergence of a network of "rebel cities," led by Barcelona and Madrid. There, community-based social movements established their candidates in the highest offices. These cities are now putting in place practical examples that other cities could emulate and adapt. For the concerns of this book, the most important concept put forward is that of "technological sovereignty": to bring the technological infrastructure, and its developmental potential, back under the control of those who are using it and are affected by it; that is, the citizens of the metropolis.

Over the last 18 months, the imbalances between the two trajectories have become even more extreme because authoritarian tendencies and surveillance capitalism have been strengthened more quickly than the commons-oriented practices could establish themselves. But it does not change the fact that there are fundamental alternatives embedded in the digital condition. Despite structural transformations that affect how we do things, there is no inevitability about what we want to do individually and, even more importantly, collectively.

Zurich/Vienna, July 2017

Acknowledgments

While it may be conventional to cite one person as the author of a book, writing is a process with many collective elements. This book in particular draws upon many sources, most of which I am no longer able to acknowledge with any certainty. Far too often, important references came to me in parenthetical remarks, in fleeting encounters, during trips, at the fringes of conferences, or through discussions of things that, though entirely new to me, were so obvious to others as not to warrant any explication. Often, too, my thinking was influenced by long conversations, and it is impossible for me now to identify the precise moments of inspiration. As far as the themes of this book are concerned, four settings were especially important. The international discourse network "nettime," which has a mailing list of 4,500 members and which I have been moderating since the late 1990s, represents an inexhaustible source of internet criticism and, as a collaborative filter, has enabled me to follow a wide range of developments from a particular point of view. I am also indebted to the Zurich University of the Arts, where I have taught for more than 10 years and where the students have been willing to explain to me, again and again, what is already self-evident to them. Throughout my time there, I have been able to observe a dramatic shift. For today's students, the "new" is no longer new but simply obvious, whereas they

have experienced many things previously regarded as normal – such as checking out a book from a library (instead of downloading it) – as needlessly complicated. In Vienna, the hub of my life, the World Information Institute has for many years provided a platform for conferences, publications, and interventions that have repeatedly raised the stakes of the discussion and have brought together the most interesting range of positions without regard to any disciplinary boundaries. Housed in Vienna, too, is the Technopolitics Project, a non-institutionalized circle of researchers and artists whose discussions of techno-economic paradigms have informed this book in fundamental ways and which has offered multiple opportunities for me to workshop inchoate ideas.

Not everything, however, takes place in diffuse conversations and networks. I was also able to rely on the generous support of several individuals who, at one stage or another, read through, commented upon, and made crucial improvements to the manuscript: Leonhard Dobusch, Günther Hack, Katja Meier, Florian Cramer, Cornelia Sollfrank, Beat Brogle, Volker Grassmuck, Ursula Stalder, Klaus Schönberger, Konrad Becker, Armin Medosch, Axel Stockburger, and Gerald Nestler. Special thanks are owed to Rebina Erben-Hartig, who edited the original German manuscript and greatly improved its readability. I am likewise grateful to Heinrich Greiselberger and Christian Heilbronn of the Suhrkamp Verlag, whose faith in the book never wavered despite several delays. Regarding the English version at hand, it has been a privilege to work with a translator as skillful as Valentine Pakis. Over the past few years, writing this book might have been the most important project in my life had it not been for Andrea Mayr. In this regard, I have been especially fortunate.

Introduction

After the End of the Gutenberg Galaxy

The show had already been going on for more than three hours, but nobody was bothered by this. Quite the contrary. The tension in the venue was approaching its peak, and the ratings were through the roof. Throughout all of Europe, 195 million people were watching the spectacle on television, and the social mass media were gaining steam. On Twitter, more than 47,000 messages were being sent every minute with the hashtag #Eurovision.[1] The outcome was decided shortly after midnight: Conchita Wurst, the bearded diva, was announced the winner of the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest. Cheers erupted as the public celebrated the victor – but also itself. At long last, there was more to the event than just another round of tacky television programming ("This is Ljubljana calling!"). Rather, a statement was made – a statement in favor of tolerance and against homophobia, for diversity and for the right to define oneself however one pleases. And Europe sent this message in the midst of a crisis and despite ongoing hostilities, not to mention all of the toxic rumblings that could be heard about decadence, cultural decay, and Gayropa. Visibly moved, the Austrian singer let out an exclamation – "We are unity, and we are unstoppable!" – as she returned to the stage with wobbly knees to accept the trophy.

With her aesthetically convincing performance, Conchita succeeded in unleashing a strong desire for personal

self-discovery, for community, and for overcoming stale conventions. And she did this through a character that mainstream society would have considered paradoxical and deviant not long ago but has since come to understand: attractive beyond the dichotomy of man and woman, explicitly artificial and yet entirely authentic. This peculiar conflation of artificiality and naturalness is equally present in Berndnaut Smilde's photographic work of a real indoor cloud (*Nimbus*, 2010) on the cover of this book. Conchita's performance was also on a formal level seemingly paradoxical: extremely focused and completely open. Unlike most of the other acts, she took the stage alone, and though she hardly moved at all, she nevertheless incited the audience to participate in numerous ways and genuinely to act out the motto of the contest ("Join us!"). Throughout the early rounds of the competition, the beard, which was at first so provocative, transformed into a free-floating symbol that the public began to appropriate in various ways. Men and women painted Conchita-like beards on their faces, newspapers printed beards to be cut out, and fans crocheted beards. Not only did someone Photoshop a beard on to a painting of Empress Sissi of Austria, but King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands even tweeted a deceptively realistic portrait of his wife, Queen Máxima, wearing a beard. From one of the biggest stages of all, the evening of Wurst's victory conveyed an impression of how much the culture of Europe had changed in recent years, both in terms of its content and its forms. That which had long been restricted to subcultural niches – the fluidity of gender identities, appropriation as a cultural technique, or the conflation of reception and production, for instance – was now part of the mainstream. Even while sitting in front of the television, this mainstream was no longer just a private audience but rather a multitude of singular producers whose networked activity – on location or on social mass media – lent particular significance to the occasion as a moment of collective self-perception.

It is more than half a century since Marshall McLuhan announced the end of the Modern era, a cultural epoch that he called the Gutenberg Galaxy in honor of the print medium by which it was so influenced. What was once just an abstract speculation of media theory, however, now describes

the concrete reality of our everyday life. What's more, we have moved well past McLuhan's diagnosis: the erosion of old cultural forms, institutions, and certainties is not just something we affirm, but new ones have already formed whose contours are easy to identify not only in niche sectors but in the mainstream. Shortly before Conchita's triumph, Facebook thus expanded the gender-identity options for its billion-plus users from 2 to 60. In addition to "male" and "female," users of the English version of the site can now choose from among the following categories:

> Agender, Androgyne, Androgynes, Androgynous, Asexual, Bigender, Cis, Cis Female, Cis Male, Cis Man, Cis Woman, Cisgender, Cisgender Female, Cisgender Male, Cisgender Man, Cisgender Woman, Female to Male (FTM), Female to Male Trans Man, Female to Male Transgender Man, Female to Male Transsexual Man, Gender Fluid, Gender Neutral, Gender Nonconforming, Gender Questioning, Gender Variant, Genderqueer, Hermaphrodite, Intersex, Intersex Man, Intersex Person, Intersex Woman, Male to Female (MTF), Male to Female Trans Woman, Male to Female Transgender Woman, Male to Female Transsexual Woman, Neither, Neutrois, Non-Binary, Other, Pangender, Polygender, T*Man, Trans, Trans Female, Trans Male, Trans Man, Trans Person, Trans*Female, Trans*Male, Trans*Man, Trans*Person, Trans*Woman, Transexual, Transexual Female, Transexual Male, Transexual Man, Transexual Person, Transexual Woman, Transgender Female, Transgender Person, Transmasculine, T*Woman, Two*Person, Two-Spirit, Two-Spirit Person.

This enormous proliferation of cultural possibilities is an expression of what I will refer to below as the digital condition. Far from being universally welcomed, its growing presence has also instigated waves of nostalgia, diffuse resentments, and intellectual panic. Conservative and reactionary movements, which oppose such developments and desire to preserve or even re-create previous conditions, have been on the rise. Likewise in 2014, for instance, a cultural dispute broke out in normally subdued Baden-Würtemberg over which forms of sexual partnership should be mentioned positively in the sexual education curriculum. Its impetus was a working paper released at the end of 2013 by the state's

Ministry of Culture. Among other things, it proposed that adolescents "should confront their own sexual identity and orientation [...] from a position of acceptance with respect to sexual diversity."[2] In a short period of time, a campaign organized mainly through social mass media collected more than 200,000 signatures in opposition to the proposal and submitted them to the petitions committee at the state parliament. At that point, the government responded by putting the initiative on ice. However, according to the analysis presented in this book, leaving it on ice creates a precarious situation.

The rise and spread of the digital condition is the result of a wide-ranging and irreversible cultural transformation, the beginnings of which can in part be traced back to the nineteenth century. Since the 1960s, however, this shift has accelerated enormously and has encompassed increasingly broader spheres of social life. More and more people have been participating in cultural processes; larger and larger dimensions of existence have become battlegrounds for cultural disputes; and social activity has been intertwined with increasingly complex technologies, without which it would hardly be possible to conceive of these processes, let alone achieve them. The number of competing cultural projects, works, reference points, and reference systems has been growing rapidly. This, in turn, has caused an escalating crisis for the established forms and institutions of culture, which are poorly equipped to deal with such an inundation of new claims to meaning. Since roughly the year 2000, many previously independent developments have been consolidating, gaining strength and modifying themselves to form a new cultural constellation that encompasses broad segments of society – a new galaxy, as McLuhan might have said.[3] These days it is relatively easy to recognize the specific forms that characterize it as a whole and how these forms have contributed to new, contradictory and conflict-laden political dynamics.

My argument, which is restricted to cultural developments in the (transatlantic) West, is divided into three chapters. In the first, I will outline the *historical* developments that have given rise to this quantitative and qualitative change and have led to the crisis faced by the institutions of the late phase of the Gutenberg Galaxy, which defined the last third

of the twentieth century.[4] The expansion of the social basis of cultural processes will be traced back to changes in the labor market, to the self-empowerment of marginalized groups, and to the dissolution of centralized cultural geography. The broadening of cultural fields will be discussed in terms of the rise of design as a general creative discipline, and the growing significance of complex technologies – as fundamental components of everyday life – will be tracked from the beginnings of independent media up to the development of the internet as a mass medium. These processes, which at first unfolded on their own and may have been reversible on an individual basis, are integrated today and represent a socially dominant component of the coherent digital condition. From the perspective of cultural studies and media theory, the second chapter will delineate the already recognizable features of this new culture. Concerned above all with the analysis of forms, its focus is thus on the question of "how" cultural practices operate. It is only because specific forms of culture, exchange, and expression are prevalent across diverse varieties of content, social spheres, and locations that it is even possible to speak of the digital condition in the singular. Three examples of such forms stand out in particular. *Referentiality* – that is, the use of existing cultural materials for one's own production – is an essential feature of many methods for inscribing oneself into cultural processes. In the context of unmanageable masses of shifting and semantically open reference points, the act of selecting things and combining them has become fundamental to the production of meaning and the constitution of the self. The second feature that characterizes these processes is *communality*. It is only through a collectively shared frame of reference that meanings can be stabilized, possible courses of action can be determined, and resources can be made available. This has given rise to communal formations that generate self-referential worlds, which in turn modulate various dimensions of existence – from aesthetic preferences to the methods of biological reproduction and the rhythms of space and time. In these worlds, the dynamics of network power have reconfigured notions of voluntary and involuntary behavior, autonomy, and coercion. The third feature of the new cultural landscape is its *algorithmicity*. It is characterized, in other

words, by automated decision-making processes that reduce and give shape to the glut of information, by extracting information from the volume of data produced by machines. This extracted information is then accessible to human perception and can serve as the basis of singular and communal activity. Faced with the enormous amount of data generated by people and machines, we would be blind were it not for algorithms.

The third chapter will focus on *political dimensions*. These are the factors that enable the formal dimensions described in the preceding chapter to manifest themselves in the form of social, political, and economic projects. Whereas the first chapter is concerned with long-term and irreversible historical processes, and the second outlines the general cultural forms that emerged from these changes with a certain degree of inevitability, my concentration here will be on open-ended dynamics that can still be influenced. A contrast will be made between two political tendencies of the digital condition that are already quite advanced: *post-democracy* and *commons*. Both take full advantage of the possibilities that have arisen on account of structural changes and have advanced them even further, though in entirely different directions. "Post-democracy" refers to strategies that counteract the enormously expanded capacity for social communication by disconnecting the possibility to participate in things from the ability to make decisions about them. Everyone is allowed to voice his or her opinion, but decisions are ultimately made by a select few. Even though growing numbers of people can and must take responsibility for their own activity, they are unable to influence the social conditions – the social texture – under which this activity has to take place. Social mass media such as Facebook and Google will receive particular attention as the most conspicuous manifestations of this tendency. Here, under new structural provisions, a new combination of behavior and thought has been implemented that promotes the normalization of post-democracy and contributes to its otherwise inexplicable acceptance in many areas of society. "Commons," on the contrary, denotes approaches for developing new and comprehensive institutions that not only directly combine participation and decision-making but also integrate economic, social, and ethical spheres – spheres that Modernity has tended to keep apart.

Post-democracy and commons can be understood as two lines of development that point beyond the current crisis of liberal democracy and represent new political projects. One can be characterized as an essentially authoritarian system, the other as a radical expansion and renewal of democracy, from the notion of representation to that of participation.

Even though I have brought together a number of broad perspectives, I have refrained from discussing certain topics that a book entitled *The Digital Condition* might be expected to address, notably the matter of copyright, for one example. This is easy to explain. As regards the new forms at the heart of this book, none of these developments requires or justifies copyright law in its present form. In any case, my thoughts on the matter were published not long ago in another book, so there is no need to repeat them here.[5] The theme of privacy will also receive little attention. This is not because I share the view, held by proponents of "post-privacy," that it would be better for all personal information to be made available to everyone. On the contrary, this position strikes me as superficial and naïve. That said, the political function of privacy – to safeguard a degree of personal autonomy from powerful institutions – is based on fundamental concepts that, in light of the developments to be described below, urgently need to be updated. This is a task, however, that would take me far beyond the scope of the present book.[6]

Before moving on to the first chapter, I should first briefly explain my somewhat unorthodox understanding of the central concepts in the title of the book – "condition" and "digital." In what follows, the term "condition" will be used to designate a cultural condition whereby the processes of social meaning – that is, the normative dimension of existence – are explicitly or implicitly negotiated and realized by means of singular and collective activity. Meaning, however, does not manifest itself in signs and symbols alone; rather, the practices that engender it and are inspired by it are consolidated into artifacts, institutions, and lifeworlds. In other words, far from being a symbolic accessory or mere overlay, culture in fact directs our actions and gives shape to society. By means of materialization and repetition, meaning – both as claim and as reality – is made visible, productive, and negotiable. People are free to accept it, reject it, or ignore

it altogether. Social meaning – that is, meaning shared by multiple people – can only come about through processes of exchange within larger or smaller formations. Production and reception (to the extent that it makes any sense to distinguish between the two) do not proceed linearly here, but rather loop back and reciprocally influence one another. In such processes, the participants themselves determine, in a more or less binding manner, how they stand in relation to themselves, to each other, and to the world, and they determine the frame of reference in which their activity is oriented. Accordingly, culture is not something static or something that is possessed by a person or a group, but rather a field of dispute that is subject to the activities of multiple ongoing changes, each happening at its own pace. It is characterized by processes of dissolution and constitution that may be collaborative, oppositional, or simply operating side by side. The field of culture is pervaded by competing claims to power and mechanisms for exerting it. This leads to conflicts about which frames of reference should be adopted for different fields and within different social groups. In such conflicts, self-determination and external determination interact until a point is reached at which both sides are mutually constituted. This, in turn, changes the conditions that give rise to shared meaning and personal identity.

In what follows, this broadly post-structuralist perspective will inform my discussion of the causes and formational conditions of cultural orders and their practices. Culture will be conceived throughout as something heterogeneous and hybrid. It draws from many sources; it is motivated by the widest possible variety of desires, intentions, and compulsions; and it mobilizes whatever resources might be necessary for the constitution of meaning. This emphasis on the materiality of culture is also reflected in the concept of the digital. Media are relational technologies, which means that they facilitate certain types of connection between humans and objects.[7] "Digital" thus denotes the set of relations that, on the infrastructural basis of digital networks, is realized today in the production, use, and transformation of material and immaterial goods, and in the constitution and coordination of personal and collective activity. In this regard, the focus is less on the dominance of a certain class