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In March 2009 a BBC article covering the mass protests leading to the reinstatement of the dismissed chief justice of the Pakistan Supreme Court reported on how cyber-activists (armed with live blogs, text messages, and Twitter) mobilized and reported in real-time on what was going on during the “long march” from Karachi to Islamabad.\(^1\) An unknown 26 year old woman from South Shields, UK, with no commercial backing and nothing except a computer, a camera, and an internet connection, became an internationally famous make-up artist solely due to You Tube where her videos have been watched by over a million people.\(^2\) According to a *New York Times* article, a fast-food ordertaker’s job in a McDonalds’ call center “involves being subjected to constant electronic scrutiny. Software tracks her productivity and speed, and every so often a red box pops up on her screen to test whether she is paying attention. She is expected to click on it within 1.75 seconds.”\(^3\) Increasingly democratized and interactive media space? Yes. A “friction-free capitalism” engineered by information technology?\(^4\) Not yet, anyway.

Christian Fuchs’s book, *Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age* (hereafter *I&S*), is about how the same technical forces that are opening avenues for new forms of cooperation in media and political space are also creating new forms of control and conflict. The book deals with a diverse array of issues. Transnational informational capitalism, intellectual property rights, peer-2-peer networks and the open-source software movement, the ecological impact of the information economy, the culture of competition and cooperation in virtual networks, the digital divide, and online politics all find mention. It also deals with several theoretical issues such as the foundational debate over structure versus agency, the question of technological determinism versus a dialectical understanding of the relation between technology and society, and the relationship between complexity theory and dialectics. Questions relevant to policy are also raised: should knowledge be common property or private property; are networks inherently non-hierarchic and inclusive or can they also be hierarchic, segmented, and exclusive; can the digital divide be bridged without first ending poverty and inequality; is the information society ecologically sustainable? But *I&S* is more than a collection of case studies or issues. It simultaneously tries to develop a theoretical framework derived from an interesting marriage between dialectical philosophy (Hegel, Marx, and the critical theory school) and the theory of self-organizing systems on which Fuchs has been working for some time now.

In the new knowledge society which is said to be emerging in the industrialized countries, services and not tangible goods account for a majority of employment and GDP.\(^5\) However, just

\(^2\)YouTube Channel: http://www.youtube.com/user/panacea81
\(^4\)The phrase is due to Bill Gates.
\(^5\)Purely operationally an information or knowledge society is one in which more than 50 percent of the gross national product (GNP) is accounted for by “knowledge sectors” such as research and development (R & D), education, information technology, and certain types of services (such as marketing, management, and advertising). See for example Binde et al. (2005).
as in the Industrial Age agriculture did not disappear but was transformed according to the logic
of industry (mass production-consumption, capital intensive techniques, world markets), so also
in the Age of Information/Knowledge, industry is being transformed according to the network
logic of informational and knowledge flows. I&S argues (following writers like Castells 2000)
that not merely industry but society itself is also transformed according to the network logic, and
the book takes on the formidable task of showing exactly what this means for how we live our
daily lives, conduct our politics, and make war and love. I should say at the outset that the
“society” in question is largely that of the Global North.

A book about the relationship between technology and society courts the danger of two common
types of technological determinisms: techno-optimism and techno-pessimism. Fuchs’s commit-
tment to dialectics arouses hope that it will avoid either type of determinism. On this score, by and large,
the book does not disappoint. Fuchs consistently eschews both techno-optimism (technology as the
basis of freedom from want, elimination of capital-labor conflict, and transformation of work) and
techno-pessimism (technology as “an instrument of capitalist domination, a means for intensification
of exploitation, and the enchaining of the world in commodity exchange,” Dyer-Witheford 1999: 42),
instead choosing to focus on the contradictory possibilities of technology.

The first three chapters elaborate Fuchs’s philosophical and theoretical standpoint, a combination
of dialectics (Hegel, Marx, Engels, the Frankfurt School, also Giddens and Bourdieu) and the theory
of self-organizing systems (Fuchs 2003a, 2003b). This is motivated by a desire to show that
dialectics, far from being a mechanistic worldview, is a theory of agency, cooperation, and self-
determination. Concepts such as phase transitions, feedback loops, and emergence of order are
related here to ideas in dialectics such as transition from quantity to quality and contradiction
(interpenetration of opposites) and negation of the negation. Although thought provoking, this
section also risks being the washer-man’s mongrel, pleasing neither the dialecticians nor the
complexity theorists. Complexity theory and the tools used to analyze physical and biological
complex systems (such as non-linear dynamics) are highly formal and mathematical and there is a
long-standing controversy as to whether dialectics can or cannot be expressed in the language of
mathematics. Rosser (1998) discusses this “anti-arithmeticomorphic” view alongside an exploration of
what non-linear dynamics can do for dialectics. Fuchs steers clear of this controversy and his own
treatment is non-mathematical. Whether his eschewing of mathematics and taking a qualitative
approach to establishing the parallels between dialectics and complexity theory is a smart move or
merely compounds the problem by opening himself to accusations of more fuzzy or imprecise
interdisciplinarity, I am not sure. My advice, if you find these chapters somewhat slow going or
unhelpful, is to persevere though them, since the later chapters will amply reward your persistence.

Ultimately, though, Fuchs is motivated by more than theoretical parallels. He wants to take on
the neoliberal, or free-market, version of self-organization (an example of which is Adam Smith’s

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6To take just two examples, by 1992, components of the Ford Escort car were being manufactured and
assembled in fifteen different countries across three continents (Gereffi et al. 1994). Nike’s contribution
is not in the material production domain (say in centralized manufacturing practices) but in the intangible
domain of ideas and symbols (i.e. marketing of the Nike logo or brand). These types of global production
chains are made possible by the rapid advances in ICTs, and in turn the imperatives of accumulation on a
global scale fuel new innovation in ICTs. Furthermore, this material shift has a discursive dimension that
is shaped by and in turn shapes the materiality of the network society. Just as the paradigm of “production”
defined the Age of Industry in the first half of the 20th century, so the paradigm of “knowledge manage-
ment” defines the Age of Knowledge in the second half. And as “science” was the motive power behind
massive increase in productive forces, “Internet” seems to be the driving force of reorganization in the
world of knowledge (Sahasrabudhey 2008).
invisible hand and a strong proponent of which is Hayek) and replace it by a cooperation-based view of human society. Fuchs accepts Hayek’s critique of central planning and his argument that decentralized forms of self-organization and knowledge management are more appropriate for a socially and ecologically sustainable social order, but hastens to add that “It is wrong to assume that cooperation means centralization and that competition means decentralization” (29). Indeed in some ways the entire book is about the emergence of decentralized cooperation made possible by the Internet (for more on this theme see Benkler 2006).

Chapter four situates transnational informational capitalism or network capitalism in the context of the historical transition from the Keynesian welfare state to the neoliberal state. A growing literature since the 1970s has pointed out that major economic, cultural, political, and epistemic shifts have occurred in the later half of the 20th century. Peter Drucker’s “Knowledge Society” and Daniel Bell’s “Postindustrial Society” were two conceptual precursors of much of the later work dealing with the Information Society/Revolution (Drucker 1968; Bell 1973). Fuchs reviews this literature critically. The main import of chapter six (Competition and Cooperation in the Information Ecology) is that there is no techno-determinist solution to sustainability. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) will not automatically take us into a de-material, weightless economy. Rather, the social context will contribute towards the nature of ecological impact. Thus Fuchs faces up to the fact that sustainability can be achieved only if the economic (accumulationist) logic of capitalism is challenged. In chapter seven (Competition and Cooperation in the Internet Economy) Fuchs attempts to show which new avenues of competition and cooperation have been opened up by the arrival of the Internet. The section on the new management ideologies (7.1) argues that “... the reality of the network firm is decentralization of production and management combined with centralization of capital and control” (150). I think this part of the book is excellent material for a course that looks critically at recent management theory from a Marxist perspective.

Chapter eight is concerned with the way the Internet (and ICT generally) is transforming politics and with the twin phenomena of digital exclusion and inclusion. Fuchs puts great weight on the interactive, or multi-way, communication capabilities of the Internet (as opposed to the one way mode of television, radio, or print media) while not forgetting that the new “informational mode” of the capitalist world-economy has affected different parts of the world, as with any other technical development, in a highly differentiated or uneven manner.7 Chapter nine on cyberculture contains an informative discussion of the Wikipedia commons as an example of e-cooperation, though once again due to the scope of the book the treatment remains necessarily brief (for a more thorough treatment of decentralized, peer production see Benkler 2006). Also, conspicuous by its absence here is any discussion of the huge, multi-billion dollar online pornography industry. The concluding chapter brings various themes together in Fuchs’s overall dialectical/self-organization theory framework. It also produces a policy “wish-list” designed to achieve the cooperative potential of the Internet. The list is too long to bear repeating here, but includes items across the spectrum of political feasibility, from the legalization of file-sharing and advancement of free software, Wikipedia, etc. to support of self-managed corporations, full cancellation of all debts of developing countries, and full disarmament.

There are, however, some weaknesses and lacunae that merit comment. It would have been nice to see some discussion of the current developments in intellectual property rights, which constitute primitive accumulation in the sphere of knowledge. Depending on your point of view, the lack of

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7One measure of the resulting “digital divide” is that only about 11 percent of the world’s population has access to the Internet (though this number is rapidly growing) and 90 percent of those connected are from industrialized countries (Binde 2005).
quantitative data as well as formal mathematics could also be considered another weakness. While I have no desire to equate rigor with quantification and mathematics when discussing affinities between self-organization theory and dialectics, if the discussion is not to remain at the level of metaphors and analogies, mathematical models may be a necessary extension. The wish-list in the concluding chapter is to be lauded for its comprehensibility but would obviously require an intense and global level of political action. There is little discussion in the book of such politics, particularly, given the book’s Global North focus, politics of the type which seeks to challenge the “North-South divide.” Lastly, I found a plethora of typos, grammatical errors, and awkward sentence constructions which a good job of copyediting should take care of, and I would strongly advise the publishers to do this as the errors are frequent enough to be distracting.

All said the book is a very stimulating read and I highly recommend it.

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References


The Economics of Karl Marx: Analysis and Application.

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Since the publication of The Economics of Adam Smith in 1973, Samuel Hollander has been a phenomenon on the world stage of history of economic thought; some years ago Paul Samuelson referred