

Information Politics

Information Politics

Liberation and Exploitation
in the Digital Society

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Introduction: Information as a Politics

Information as a politics of exploitation and liberation is now central to the twenty-first century. The signs of this are around us: the privacy implications of Google and Facebook; the endless ‘terms of service’ that we do not read but which all too often claim rights over our information; the clouds that never rain; automated blocking of websites put in place by ISPs; the centrifuges in Iran spinning out of control to explode because of the Stuxnet worm; Green Dam and the great firewall in China; the NSA spying on everyone. All these, and more, are signs of an information politics at the core of living in the twenty-first century.

Sometimes examples and events link together, such as when some proclaimed an ‘information war’ in 2010–11. At that time, there was the controversy of US State Department cables leaked by WikiLeaks and then US government retaliation by proxy when companies such as MasterCard withdrew their services to WikiLeaks. Online retaliation against these attacks soon followed, with attempts to close down MasterCard’s and other companies’ websites. A second front was opened when, a little later, web-pages were blacked out around the world in protest against legislation, going under various names such as SOPA/PIPA/ACTA, that was held to be creating greater censorship of the internet. Around the same time, hackers within the movement Anonymous created ‘digital care packages’ that offered the promise of secure communication to Tunisian protesters as the Arab Spring switched into high gear. In 2010 and 2011, the drumbeats could be heard behind these events, calling up the spectre of war in the information sphere. From John Perry Barlow’s tweet, ‘The first serious infowar is now engaged. The field of battle is WikiLeaks. You are the troops. #WikiLeaks’ (Barlow 2010), to the pronouncements of Anonymous, the idea took hold that conflict in the infosphere had been let loose. Soon battles were joined, offensives launched – such as LulzSec’s ‘50 days of lulz’ campaign – defeats inflicted and victories claimed.

A proclaimed ‘information war’ is one symbol of the rise in importance of a politics of information, but even without the martial theme attention is often grabbed by talk about networks, search and social media. It may

be the publicity given to a new technological device being released – Google Glass, the latest iPhone – or it may be a debate about the effect of trolling and bullying online. A huge cybercrime might be splashed across the front pages of websites and newspapers. Taken together these are not just instances of an information society but are examples of the rise of a political antagonism of information. I argue in this book for the recognition and analysis of a type of antagonistic politics that arises wherever digital media and cultural objects are combined with the distributive and communicative powers of the internet. I make this argument all the while being sure that this information politics does not supersede and is not disconnected from other struggles, such as the ongoing bitter struggle of capital and labour, the revisions of life in which male and female are both produced and in which their freedoms and servilities are created, the racisms that rebound into the twenty-first century making scandals like ‘ethnic cleansing’ part of our vocabulary, or any of the other vital struggles through which we may create our liberations or be subjected into subservience. My claim, and the purpose behind this book, is that information has become one of these ongoing conflicts of exploitation and liberation as part of a multiple politics.

None of these political antagonisms offer up their internal dynamics for understanding without an analysis that both focuses on their specific nature and connects that nature to the dynamics flowing from other kinds of exploitations. The analytic complexity that must be navigated is to abstract the forces of a politics in a way that both honours the specificity of a particular struggle but does not also then assume that this struggle is either the only kind of politics or is the dominant form of politics that integrates all others. Such complexities are familiar in the history of resistance and liberation, one need only remember the mutual but also vexed relationship between feminism and socialism to recognise that this problem of thought has occurred before (Rowbotham, Segal and Wainwright 1979). Abstractly examining a politics of a particular form of exploitation and liberation, so that its nature can be understood, and then connecting that nature back to the politics of other exploitations is the double move that is needed. Only in this way can we understand the meaning of the deep inflection in the nature of ‘information’ and of exploitation and liberation that has been wrought by the connection of digitisation and the digital to the internet.

It is important even at this early stage to be clear that my analysis, because it is framed within many forms of power and exploitation, is *not*

arguing that information politics is the new ‘master’ or all-encompassing frame of political conflict that will reconcile and integrate all forms of exploitation and liberation. Rather, I am arguing that there are many forms of exploitation, and so also of liberation, among which we should now count ‘information’. No one form of exploitation should be expected to encompass all others, instead multiple analyses of exploitation and power are needed. Amid this multiple exploration my arguments seek to locate the specificity of information as a form of exploitation and liberation in the twenty-first century, while also at no point denying the importance of many other exploitations and liberations. How these different political antagonisms inter-relate and may or may not connect is a further issue that will be examined in the following.

But too much has been said already! What is a ‘political antagonism’? And if there are several such antagonisms, what does it mean to talk of many political antagonisms constituting the politics of liberation? Moreover, what is referred to by ‘digitisation, the digital and the internet’? With so much thought and analysis already devoted to them, surely they could be more clearly defined? This first chapter will answer such questions by framing information as a politics in the following way. First, a brief outline of political antagonisms as the field of repression and liberation will be given. Second, the problem of understanding information as a political antagonism will be outlined in two parts; first, by defining information and, second, by outlining the particular information conjuncture formed by digitisation, digital and the internet. Finally in this chapter, I will preview the whole argument of the book by presenting it condensed into eight principles. These will present a first broad map of the information politics that the following chapters will examine and establish in detail, in four parts. First, an abstract theory of the dynamics of information politics will be given across three chapters linking the concepts of recursion, devices and networks and protocols. Second, particular recurring patterns of these dynamics will be examined, again in three chapters, as platforms specifically looking at clouds, securitisation and social media. Third, particular case studies will give concrete examples of information politics in three chapters exploring the relations between information and other political antagonisms. The three case studies will be the iPad, a moment of death in online gaming, and the hacktivist movement. Finally, I will propose a theory of information liberation and exploitation that draws the preceding analyses together.

The Politics of Many

The first stage of my argument is to outline the politics of many forms of exploitation and liberation. This can be seen in a political moment, such as a demonstration, where there will be many kinds of politics at play. In any protest different values are being contested, even as all contribute in some way to the broad banner that demonstration marches under: there may be local chapters of trade unions; green groups of various types, some locally based and some of the global-NGO type; splinter groups and anarchists; sub-cultures defined by music or clothes; and, since around 2010, it will not seem unusual to see the flag of online activist movement Anonymous flying proudly as feet tread the streets. Such a multiplicity will be taken for granted by nearly everyone familiar with protest.

In such moments there will be many assertions of the 'opposition'; almost certainly capitalism will be challenged by different groups, the need for a green revolution may be asserted, colonialism or racism will be attacked depending on the protest, and many hybrids of and connections between such identifications may be claimed. Analysts will often place these multiplicities into frameworks that unite and draw them together, seeking out central dynamics that allow the multiplicities to be better understood and in some cases to be brought together into one complex struggle. Moments such as a demonstration reference this ongoing conversation between the fragments and an imputed whole through which activists try to make sense of the possibilities for resistance and liberation.

The recurrence of these multiplicities, and the often contested nature of theories arguing for one form of exploitation and liberation, point to a different possibility than that of assuming there must be a conversation between fragments and whole. A path to understanding radicalism that offers an alternative, and also rich, tradition is one that refuses to draw together protests and struggles in a search for a core or fundamental conflict and instead suggests that struggles cannot be reconciled. Indeed, this tradition argues that such reconciliation is itself problematic because it requires the reduction of struggles in a way that puts them within and valued as part of one struggle. From this point of view, the assumption that there is a whole that understands liberation does not mean finding the true meaning of the fragments but removes their necessary complexity and, most importantly, removes the chance of seeing each struggle for its own dynamics. Instead of relations between fragments and whole this different tradition asserts that there is a field of struggle within which each kind of

political conflict must be understood both for itself and its own meanings from which non-reductive relations to other struggles may be grasped.

If, for example, we look at a struggle such as 'don't ask, don't tell', in which gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender members of the US military were tolerated on the condition of invisibility, we see a struggle that recurs within the politics of sexuality. This example outlines the meaning of struggle and antagonism here because the visibility, and hence normative status, of heterosexuality – particularly a kind of heterosexual masculinity – was created and maintained only at the cost of the invisibility of other sexualities. Visibility is not the only struggle in relation to sexuality, and it may have multiple meanings not always involving the equation of invisibility with oppression, but it was how the axis of struggle worked in this case (Britton and Williams 1995). The model suggested here is that one group must lose something to ensure that something else is gained by another dominant or exploiting group. This seemingly simple analytic structure can be seen recurring across radical politics: in class capital exploits workers' time; in patriarchy men benefit by extracting relations to child-rearing and domestic labour from women; in green politics rainforests do not disappear for the sheer pleasure of destruction but to fuel a pollution-dependent model of growth that disproportionately benefits certain elites.

To understand social relations as exploitation means defining the relations between groups in which one group benefits by extracting something from another group that is thereby impoverished. Such relations I will call the 'dynamics' or 'forces' that run through a political antagonism fuelling not only exploitations but also reflecting a fluidity which allows both resistance to exploitation and conceptions of a different liberated world to exist. Forms of exploitation can then only be understood within the particular dynamics of a political antagonism drawing on characteristic kinds of relations – for example, that of alienated labour in class politics, the control of women's bodies in gender, or struggles over visibility in gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender politics. A few remarks are now needed about what is meant by dynamics and forces, which will then allow the following analysis to pose the question of what kinds of specific forces an information world generates and is generated by.

Conceptualising the nature of forces and dynamics that underpin exploitations helps to establish what is under discussion, but also opens up the danger of a theoretical framing taking on issues of such complexity and dispute that the core topic of information politics will be deferred.

The danger is worth acknowledging and sets limits on what this short discussion will claim, but the opportunity is important, for without some, even introductory, sense of what is meant by 'force' it will be difficult to understand the arguments of the following chapters. To keep the discussion appropriately brief, I will limit it to drawing on the idea of force as derived from Deleuze and Foucault's work, which will also have the advantage of being conceptually consistent with the account of information given in the next section.

Inter-relations that produce inequalities between groups are the forces that are important for this analysis. This sense of force is found in the re-interpretation of Nietzsche associated with Deleuze and Foucault:

Humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare; humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination.

The nature of these rules allows violence to be inflicted on violence and the resurgence of new forces that are sufficiently strong to dominate those in power. (Foucault 1977: 151)

Forces are those relations in which dominations emerge. Tracing those forces should then offer insights into the nature of a political antagonism, and such a tracing should map out some of the abstract relations that constitute a theory of exploitation. Further, Deleuze argues for the importance of understanding in Nietzsche a general semiology in which all kinds of phenomena – things, organisms, societies, cultures – are reflections of states of forces. 'We can ask, for any given thing, what state of exterior and interior forces it presupposes. Nietzsche was responsible for creating a whole typology to distinguish active, acted and reactive forces and to analyse their combinations' (Deleuze 1983: x).

Deleuze argues for a Nietzsche that sees every body, and not just a physical human body, as constituted by a 'plurality of forces' in which some forces are dominant and others dominated. Active forces are those forces that dominate and that produce differences, a key point that will be returned to when conceptualising information, and reactive are those that are dominated. But reactive forces are not passive nor do they lose the characteristic of being forces. Reactive forces are in this sense those forces that actively obey, and in doing so they reveal that no dominant force is ever completely dominant because there is still something active in the

reactive that is dominated, even where that activity is to be dominated (Deleuze 1983: 40–1). The use of such a typology can be seen in Deleuze's outline of the Nietzschean concept of *ressentiment*, which is where a reactive force appears in the place of an active and produces a particular kind of body in which being dominated takes the dominant role and forms a relationship only between reactive forces, abstracting and divorcing active forces.

In the normal or healthy state the role of reactive forces is always to limit action. They divide, delay or hinder it by means of another action whose effects we feel. But, conversely, active forces produce a burst of creativity: they set it off at a chosen instant, at a favourable moment, in a given direction, in order to carry out a quick and precise piece of adjustment. (Deleuze 1983: 111)

Ressentiment is a body in which such creativity becomes impossible, as each side of the dominant/dominated relation of forces is seeking delay and hindrance and in which what appears to be active is reactive (Deleuze 1983: 114). Such relations are important as they make clear Deleuze's particular approach to creativity and activity through the sense in which active forces are those that make differences. This will become central in the next section when considering information as something that can only appear when a difference is made. The concept of the body can also refer only to recurrent patterns of forces as there is no relationship of active and reactive that can be identified until that relationship is ongoing and can be referred to other relationships for comparison. The Nietzschean concept of the body will be interpreted in the following as a particular dynamic of forces, with those forces understood as the quality of relations between groups which define them as active or reactive.

Nietzsche, Deleuze and Foucault's views offer a resource for defining forces as relations in which domination may occur, as well as connecting domination to recurrent patterns as bodies/dynamics and in understanding domination as becoming reactive and so without creative abilities to initiate differences. If we were to briefly consider this typology of active and reactive forces in relation to other theories of exploitation, I could draw attention to the intervention of Italian workerism that reconceptualised labour and the worker, moving the latter away from being a passive alienated subject and toward a subject capable of activity, even if that activity is refusal (Berardi 2009: 21–5; Wright 2002). Instead of conceiving

of the body that is capitalism as a relation in which capital is active and labour passive, within the typology outlined here labour is reconceived as both reactive – that is, capable of activity but dominated or subjected to the active force of capital – and as potentially active, because its kind of reactivity involves activity that can turn into making a different dynamic than that of capital-labour. This inter-relationship then offers an insight into the nature of capitalism, just as the Italian workerists, and many of the Autonomists who were inspired by them, argue that capitalism is an unstable struggle between forces of capital and labour, and that this very struggle, though it involves the exploitation of value-extraction, has the potential to explode the body and produce new relations of force and a socio-economic body in which labour could be the active force.

What I wish to take forward is the sense that what needs to be examined are the dynamics, the recurrent patterns, of different forces that seek in relation to other forces to be creative or to restrain creativity. This may often be tied to the sense of struggle and battle that Deleuze draws from Nietzsche, but it may also refer to less violent imagery that also stresses differentiation and relational forces. To see this I can briefly look to other theorists who, while not particularly drawing on Deleuze's account of forces, have also taken up what might be seen as a general affirmation of creativity or differentiation in action. Most powerfully, I find in Haraway's work a critical attitude to a contemplative, internalised sense of existence and a masculine understanding of struggle and contest, while also affirming the creativity, difference-making and pure joy that is possible in the intra-actions and inter-actions of beings of all kinds (Haraway 2008: 367–8). I have elsewhere argued that – combined with Levinas' ideas about the multiple interactions of Selves and Others, which always take the form of simultaneous conversation and a hostage-taking making them always relations of both care and capture – Haraway's sense of joy and liveliness provides both an existential and cultural reading of bodies of all sorts, as can be seen in her account of relating to another species (Jordan 2013a: 32–41).

Whom and what do I touch when I touch my dog? How is becoming with a practice of becoming worldly? When species meet, the question of how to inherit histories is pressing, and how to get on together is at stake. Because I become with dogs, I am drawn into multispecies knots that they are tied into and that they retie by their reciprocal action. My premise is that touch ramifies and shapes accountability. Accountability,

caring for, being affected, and entering into responsibility are not ethical abstractions; these mundane prosaic things are the result of having truck with each other ... Touch, regard, looking back, becoming with – all these make us responsible in unpredictable ways for which worlds take shape. (Haraway 2008: 35–6)

It would be misleading to see this as re-interpreting Haraway as a Deleuzian analyst of forces, particularly as Haraway is at times powerfully critical of Deleuze's thought (Haraway 2008: 27–30). Instead I hope this renders my interpretation of Deleuze, Foucault and Nietzsche's theory of forces and power into a more Haraway-like analysis that sees 'becoming-with' and dynamics as relations not just of 'force' but also of 'touch'. The world of becoming-with is also one of differences, active and reactive, but is a world in which force is only one term for such relations (Jordan 2011). Levinas' combination of care and capture addresses this range of inter-relations of forces that may occur that may sometimes be those of battle and hostage-taking and sometimes be more like conversation.

If we understand the analyst of forces as a semiologist or physician seeking the symptoms and causes that make a particular body what it is, then the following understanding of forces looks for interactions of all kinds of entities, from technological to living, through whose multifarious points of contact flow forces coloured as active or reactive and in whose relations of both joy and domination, of caring for the Other and of taking the Other hostage, we find forms of exploitation constituted. When forces or touches flow so that some benefit and because of that benefit others are impoverished, then we have a dynamic or body of exploitation. 'Benefit' must remain abstract or vague at this point because so many kinds of benefit have been embedded in exploitations; for example, labour (of several types), visibility and bodies have all been mentioned so far. This conceptualisation offers a theory of what a political antagonism is within what is assumed to be a political field of many such antagonisms. Trying to grasp the dynamics and forces, the bodies and touches, of exploitation can be done in relation to a number of political antagonisms and to understand any one such antagonism it is crucial to focus on it to be able to grasp its specificities. The aim in what follows is to find the culturally and socially embedded, historically persistent dynamics that enable exploitations and the potential for liberation and to do so in relation to information.

One of the characteristics of each political antagonism is that because each is a frame through which culture and politics is viewed, the issue

is not what particular aspects of social conflict are encompassed by an antagonism but how such aspects are understood and organised in relation to other elements of social conflict. Each antagonism understands all of society but each also understands society differently. It may then seem a puzzle what each antagonism may leave out, in the sense that there is likely to be something about any element of society that is relevant to an antagonism. What is different is how each element will be understood within the frame of each antagonism. For example, within a class analysis, domestic labour may be understood as the reproduction of labour power and the maintenance of a reserve army of labour, but may be framed differently within a gender analysis as the destruction of female self-regard, as in de Beauvoir's comment that house work is an endless 'refusal of life', and an essential support to public male power in patriarchy (de Beauvoir 2010: 488). Both views of domestic labour carry truths but are framed differently by the antagonisms of class or gender. The question may then be asked of a political antagonism 'what does it *not* cover that others do?', and the answer is that it may cover all things other antagonisms may cover but not in the same way. Information is likely to be present in nearly all aspects of life, as are class, gender, race, sexuality and more, but in each case it is the nature of the view we gain by looking at an aspect of life for its role in information exploitation and liberation that is key for understanding information exploitation and liberation (Jordan and Lent 1999).

The key task of this book is to examine dynamics of forces and exploitation in the glittering towers and desperate ruins that make up our information landscape. There is no recourse to a reconciliation of such dynamics of exploitation within capitalism, patriarchy or other such antagonisms (Dyer-Witheford 1999: 186–91; Daly 1978). This is for the fundamental reason that understanding one struggle against exploitation from the viewpoint and values of another form of exploitation will necessarily mean some form of reduction of one struggle to the other. The approach followed here demands separation and concentration on the specifics of a form of exploitation, which then also turns attention to connections that are made. There is no doubt that such things as homophobia, patriarchy and capitalism are important to understanding information politics and it will be key to connect to them. No one who pays even the slightest attention can be unaware of sexist and homophobic cultures in such places as 4Chan but also of how these places have become important to internet-dependent political movements, most obviously Anonymous (Stryker