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Yves Citton

Democratic Discontents and the Need for Mediarchical Re-Organization

For years and decades now, in large parts of the Western (dominantly white) world, electoral processes have been the subject of lamentations about the increasing rates of abstention (especially among "young people"), the prevalence of so-called "populist" parties, and the lack of substance in electoral campaigns that elude the most important and damning ecological and social issues. The assessment seems to have gone a long way beyond discontent: representational democracies are shipwrecked.

White Democracies' Laments

"Young people" do not vote: are they demobilized, distracted, stupid? Perhaps, more simply, they know better: they are no longer willing to play the fool. The hypocritical speeches and histrionic postures of most of the candidates are less and less able to hide the fundamental lie of *politics as usual* – a lie that is constitutive of our "political debates" because it is at the basis of our economic calculations. Neoliberal or Keynesian, everyone counts on higher growth and boosted consumption. In the US and the UK, in France and Italy, even if minoritarian left-wing and green parties do occasionally access to governmental power, the winning electoral cocktail has to promise more purchasing power, more work, more wealth, more trickle-down, better services, with less taxes, less regulations, less crime, less foreigners. You don't need to be an expert in differential equations to feel how desperate (and hopeless) are the "solutions" advocated by mainstream (mostly white) politicians to face/dodge the most pressing issues of our time (revolting inequalities, the 6th great extinction, climate change, the end of cheap nature).

The shipwreck of representational democracies is precisely located in the dramatic mismatch between, on one side, the lies that politics-as-usual must promise to win elections and, on the other side, the truths that nobody dares to utter (for they would exclude the utterer from any chance to be elected). This mismatch is not so much a matter of agenda, however, as a matter of infrastructure. What Benjamin Bratton derides as "the avatar model of political representation" is structured around a symbolical process, which he summarizes as such:

First, name an evil that does bad things to people, and then imagine the inverse of the bad thing which now becomes the good thing. Identify with the good. Next, find human avatars of this good thing: people who personify this identification and its proper articulation. [...] Collectively invest a plurality of avatars with official agency to articulate their various personifications within a sovereign forum in which potential policies are represented. There, the gathering of avatars will contest various symbolizations and then codify consensus declarations into decrees. These policies are text-based model simulations of future transformations that seek to ensure that the good is realized. Financial means are allocated to actualize the decree simulation in the real world. [...] If the process does not work, and there is not less of the bad thing, then return to the phase where avatars are honed and filtered for the purity of their personification with the good. Repeat¹.

This model of political representation—locally developed, but colonially promoted at a global scale—is clearly running out of steam. Even white folks can no longer believe in the white (and often supremacist) regime they advocate (and sometimes militarily enforce) for all human populations to admire under the label of (Western) "democracy". It would be foolish to simply rejoice in view of this downfall: while the European colonial arrogance deserves to be squashed, the merits of the regime of (relative and unequal) liberties developed in the Western world do keep a wide and understandable appeal, when considered from regions subjected to the pains of (unsophisticated) corruption, military

¹ Benjamin Bratton, *The Terraforming 2019*, Moscow: Strelka Institute, 2019, p. 35.

oppression and autocracy. But as representational democracy generates a mix of appeal and discontent, it requires a double movement of reframing and critique.

The reframing can be inspired by the alternative history of democracy written within the Black Radical Tradition. In *The Terms of Order*², Cedric J. Robinson sketched a non-white-centered approach to political power which deconstructs the notions of order, hierarchy, leadership, power, law, formalization, accounting, individualism—all presupposed by the dominant concept of democracy. In *The Undercommons* and in *All Incomplete*³, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten pursue his pioneering work by debunking the nefarious prevalence of a vocabulary based on concepts like interests, improvement, policy, politics, governance or logistics. This alternative tradition, firmly anchored in the claims of blackness as well as in the criticism of whiteness, provides us all with a different frame within which to consider what can be appealing or repulsive, necessary or dispensable in the way human beings share their incompleteness in their plural collective practices of inhabiting a territory.

In a very different (and potentially contradictory) way, the critique can find a leverage point in questioning the “precedence of the symbolic before the technical” denounced by Bratton in the “avatar model”—a precedence which may be the deeper cause of the current democratic shipwreck. Bratton suggests that, “instead of only looking at how political change may authorize shifts in climate policy, the focus must also be on the inverse: how abrupt climate-forced changes in human geography may in turn change the fundamental architectures of institutional governance⁴”. In other words: technical necessities (and affordances) need to be not only drastically reconsidered and reconfigured, but elevated from the status of after-thought to the status of pre-requisite. Our inhabiting our Planet Earth is technical, industrialized and automated through and through, like it or not. Our technical infrastructures do not come on top of our social life and political choices: they strongly condition them from below, in close connection with the availability of the resources on which they depend. This does not condemn us to adopt a top-down technocratic mode of governance, currently illustrated by China’s Communist Party—although it certainly encourages us much more attentively to study this (anti-)model, in its possible merits as well as in its obvious shortcomings and horrors.

This technically-oriented critique of the symbolic rituals performed by white democracies—with less and less success—can be illustrated with what constitutes perhaps the most dramatic blind spot in our prevalent conceptions and practices of democracy: the articulation between the avatar model of representative politics and the infrastructure of mediality which conditions our political processes as well as their outcome.

Mediarchical Lucidity

The fundamental lie upon which our discontented democracies are built consists in assuming that free-willed individuals freely chose the political agenda to which they will subscribe by electing this human avatar rather than another one. Upstream, this lie can be reframed by the Black Radical Tradition, which stresses how much individuals diminish their (collective) power when they consider their agency in strictly individualistic terms. Undercommon forms of sociality preexist laws, policies, contracts and regulations—they always precede and nourish whatever is retrospectively attributed to the individuals. Downstream, this fundamental lie of our representative democracies can be critiqued by recognizing (the consequences of) this obvious fact: what we consider as “politics” is a reality conditioned by the media infrastructure in which it takes place. Our political systems are fundamentally “mediarchies” (regimes of power structured by our technical means of communication and governed by the dynamics of mediality⁵), well before being democracies (regimes of power based on the will of “the people”). This has multiple implications and consequences, but it calls for a reinterpretation of our current situation.

² Cedric J. Robinson, *The Terms of Order. Political Science and the Myth of Leadership* (1980), Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016

³ Stefano Harney & Fred Moten, *The Undercommons. Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013 and *All Incomplete*, Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2021.

⁴ Bratton, *The Terraforming*, p. 36.

⁵ Yves Citton, *Mediarchy*, Cambridge: Polity, 2019.

1. The rise of the far-right, in the United States as well as in Italy and France, feeds on a certain regime of circulation of narratives and images, within which reactionary approaches to issues of “crime”, migrations, taxation and patriarchal white supremacy benefit from higher *telegeny* (a televisual equivalent to sex-appeal or to the “home advantage” in sports). The public problems debated around such issues provide an unfair advantage to simplistic solutions perceived as more convincing because they more spontaneously fit with prejudices widely considered as common sense.

2. While much of the accusations rehashed against “post-truth politics” tend to denounce social media (Facebook, Twitter, TikTok) as the main culprit of a deterioration in the public sphere, it would be more accurate to analyze a convergence between the rise of neoliberalism and the restructuring of the media landscape going back to the 1980s. The set of doctrine elaborated from the 1950s around the *Société du Mont Pèlerin* got greater traction on our Western societies in synergy with two major transformations. First, after the social contestations of the 1960s (on class, gender, race and the environment) and after the wide debates generated by the release of the Meadows’ Report of the Club of Rome on *Limits to Growth* (1972), big money was spent by corporations to counter-effect whatever could threaten the dominant regime of financial profit, with logistics forging ahead to set up a new mode of exploitation finely tuned at a planetary scale. Second, a mix of popular aspirations, governmental changes and millionaire’s activism led, around the 1980s, to a profound restructuring of our media spheres, with the weakening of the State-controlled audio-visual massmedia, the multiplication of free radios and private TV channels, the restructuring of the press and other cultural industries—an evolution which the rise of the Internet in the 1990s only pursued at an exponential rate and scale.

3. The mediarchical dynamics that emerged was more than ever dominated by the commodification of human attention, a phenomenon that started around 1830 when newspaper moguls had the clever idea of selling their daily at half-price, undercutting competition by providing advertisement space (i.e., readers’ attention) to announcers⁶. It took a century and a half for this economic model to invade and restructure the whole of the massmedia sphere—and, here again, the emergence of the world wide web should be seen as a continuation and exacerbation of a long-term trend, on top of being an absolutely unprecedented novelty.

4. The (almost) complete dominance of this “attention economy”—precisely defined by the fact that massmedia’s main means of survival come from commodifying their audience’s attention—leads to an arms’ race continuously improving the various Computer Assisted Persuasion Techniques (aka CAPTology). In order to survive in a ruthlessly competitive media landscape, each actor needs to multiply (new ways of pushing) “saliencies”, i.e., sensorial or discursive stimuli that an average human attention cannot help from noticing (like fire alarms, detonations or flashlights). One of the numerous consequences of this evolution is that, while it is fairly easy to catch human attention with a first saliency, it is much more complex to sustain human attention over longer periods of time—hence the corollary reduction of political discourse to soundbites.

5. The true novelty of digitalization, from this point of view, consists in the emergence of planetary-scale platforms capable 1° of collecting enough big data about our most minute and singular attentional gestures online, 2° of sorting them out through algorithmic computation, and 3° of commodifying them to allow financial interests to monitor, anticipate, influence and ultimately steer our behavior⁷.

As a result of these parallel evolutions, brutally summarized and excessively simplified here, we now live in a mediarchy where, apart from very active and ever-promising margins, the communication of discourses, sounds, images, ideas and affects among us is almost entirely left to the power of money—whether directly, when a millionaire purchases a media (Murdoch, Berlusconi, Bezos, Bolloré, etc.) or indirectly, when the capacity to reach an audience is mediated and filtered through the capacity to draw advertisement revenue by the recourse to saliencies. The Berlusconiization and the Trumpization of Western political scenes are not historical accidents, but logics of media production, where press, radio, television and digital platforms are less to be opposed

⁶ Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, New York: Penguin, 2016.

⁷ Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016 and Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, New York, Public Affairs, 2019.

to each other than to be articulated in new, more or less monstrous, assemblages. The rise of right-wing extremism is the result of media dynamics, long before it is a political process.

Politics = Conspiracy

A widely stated discontent about our representative democracies portrays them as surrounded and overwhelmed by an unprecedented assault of conspiracism. While it is extremely interesting to try and understand how rumors, paranoid anxieties and conspiracy fantasies have evolved during the recent years⁸, it may be just as important to take distance from the various warnings and recipes devised in the highest spheres of intellectual power to denounce and “debunk” conspiracies. As Jaron Harambam has hinted, and as the anonymous authors of the French *Manifeste conspirationniste* have provocatively stated⁹, anti-conspiracism may be a cure worse than the disease it claim to treat. It increasingly looks like a desperate attempt from those in power to reassert their authority—their definition of “reason” and “order¹⁰”—in a world made unsustainable, undesirable and uninhabitable by this very authority, rationality and order.

Those accused of conspiracism and those eager to debunk conspiracies often share a comparable mix of hyper- and hypo-criticism. The former submit every form of established authority to their corrosive and accusatory suspicion (often with interesting and enlightening results), while trusting their own beliefs without much critical distance and while appropriating every result from a Google search without enough prudent investigation. The latter claim a monopoly on critical rationality (often identified with “Science”), while refusing to understand that their worldview is situated, partial, and linked to a certain (often white supremacist) world order. They rarely acknowledge that other perspectives on the same realities can indeed lead to other observations, and justify policies that are in direct contradiction to those they advocate¹¹.

The principal divergence between those who are accused of propagating conspiracies and those who claim to debunk them often consists in two different definitions of “truth”. The latter enforce a *factual* definition of truth: a discourse is true if every element in its argumentation resists the trial of fact-checking investigations. The former are moved by an *integrative* (holistic) definition of truth: a discourse rings true if the whole pattern of explanation provided by its argument resonates with the experience and needs of its audience (even if some of its elements can be factually contested).

What is at stake behind this epistemological divergence? A deeper contestation about the status of ideology and its relation to “science”. Anti-conspiracists want us to believe that what they consider as rational or scientific is to be located *above* the systems of beliefs they deride as “ideologies”. Science and Technology Studies have taught us, however, that scientific inquiry does constitute a very specific and precious mode of investigation, but that it nevertheless remains embedded *within* worldviews and perspectival biases that are ideological in nature. This, of course, has a direct impact on one’s definition of democracy: anti-conspiracists tend to place (what they consider as) rational and scientific explanations above political contestations, whereas those accused of conspiracism tend to question the very premises of the (ideological) frames through which facts are observed, interpreted and accounted for.

The most fundamental lie which has understandably discredited the pretended superiority of Science to ideology can be found in what has been sold within white democracies as “the economic science”. While African and Latin American populations have long understood that the Washington consensus only painted old colonialist practices and ideologies under the prestigious shellac of

⁸ See Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy. Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, University of California Press, 2003 and Russell Muirhead & Nancy L. Rosenblum, *A lot of People Are Saying. The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*, Princeton University Press, 2019.

⁹ Jaron Harambam, “Against modernist illusions: why we need more democratic and constructivist alternatives to debunking conspiracy theories”, *Journal for Cultural Research*, 25:1, 2021, p. 104-122; Anonymous, *Manifeste conspirationniste*, Paris: Seuil, 2022.

¹⁰ A good example of this approach can be found in the (very interesting and valuable) report presented by Gérard Bronner to the French government, *Les Lumières à l’ère numérique*, Paris: vie-publique.fr, 2022.

¹¹ The best analysis of the symmetrical weaknesses of conspiracy fantasies and anti-conspiracist arrogance can be found in Wu Ming 1, *La Q di Qomplotto. QAnon e dintorni: Come le fantasie di complotto difendono il Sistema*, Rome: Edizioni Algre, 2021.

mathematical/scientific knowledge, it has taken a little longer for white populations to realize that the world order from which we profited could easily turn its economic rationality against our well-being, not only by subjecting increasingly precarious workers to higher degrees of exploitation, but also by destructing the very conditions which make our planet inhabitable.

What the propagation, analyses and denunciations of conspiracies reveal to our age, once reconsidered within a mediarchical perspective, is that economics is politics—and that democratic politics is essentially conspiracist. The anonymous authors of the *Manifeste conspirationniste*, politically close to the Invisible Committee which published *The Coming Insurrection*, remind us the etymology of the word *conspiracy*, which originally means “to breath together”. Any society is a conspiracy, insofar as it requires its members to breath in and to breath out a certain number of shared words, mantras, beliefs, values, rituals. All social groups and actors conspire to propagate certain sets of phrases, narratives and images among their contemporaries—calling it “propaganda” only to discredit other sets perceived as being incompatible with theirs. The set of phrases, narratives and images propagated within the US population during the invasions of Afghanistan or Iraq was substantially (if not formally) similar to the set currently propagated by the Putin government to convince the Russian population of the necessity, glory and success of the Ukraine war.

Our (justified) discontent with Western democracies could simultaneously stress the similarities between these forms of propaganda—on the basis of the equation *Politics = Conspiracy*—and acknowledge the difference between a regime that lets opponents to the war call for demonstrations and publications against it (as it was the case in the USA) and a regime that jails its citizens if they only dare to talk about a “war” (instead of a “special operation”). Black activists know the limits of this democratic tolerance, illustrated by the brutal repression of their emancipatory movement through the CoIntelPro “special operations”. Nevertheless, the difference in the mediarchical regimes should be carefully studied, rather than dismissed as only superficial. Faced with the discontents and the shipwreck of our representative democracies in times of runaway capitalism and environmental collapse, we need to address the possibilities of re-organization afforded by our current technologies of communication in order to overcome the shortcomings of our current mediarchies.

Four Scales of Re-Organization

Measuring the shortcomings of the avatar model of representative politics, questioning the primacy of the symbolic in order to account for the conditioning role of technologies, realizing that politics = conspiracy: these are merely preliminary steps to face the question that really counts: what’s to be done—or rather: at what levels and in which directions can we act on our existing mediarchies to restructure them towards less ecocidal patterns? The question is obviously complex, and I will only sketch four different scales in time, space and agency where potentially promising evolutions could be precipitated—i.e., where successful conspiracies could significantly improve our life in the present as well as our prospects for the future.

First scale: *assemblism geared towards study and practical solidarity*. Assemblies in public squares (Occupy Wall Street, Indignados, Tahrir Square, Gezi Park, Yellow Vests) have been both lauded and criticized for enacting a radically localized conception and practice of democracy. Conspiracy should be understood in this case as breathing the same air, in the same space, at the same time. As Jonas Staal persuasively showed, this practice entails learning to inhabit a common space with unchosen people, in order to overcome some form of precarity¹². Apart from their mediatized resonance, such assemblies are the privileged and indispensable scale at which to perform what Harney and Moten describe as “study”, and to build concrete structures of solidarity—even if, as stressed by their critiques, they are highly temporary and do not translate into obvious long-term structures of common action.

Second scale: *organization after social media*. Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter have persuasively isolated the need for a specific mode of organization—“orgnets” for “organized networks”—which should be confused neither with the co-presence of assembly nor with the remote connections of social media: “instead of further exploiting the weak ties inside the dominant social

¹² Jonas Staal, “Assemblism”, *e-flux*, n° 80, March 2017. See also Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.

networking sites, orgnets emphasize intensive collaborations within a limited group of engaged users with the aim of getting things done¹³. Thanks to orgnets, conspiracies can extend beyond the locality of a neighborhood, a city, a country. While social media have been occasionally re-instrumentalized for the practical organizational needs from which they originally emanated, their platform dynamics steer them towards getting faces shown rather than getting things done. The development of orgnets is a prerequisite to extend conspiracies at the translocal scale needed to organize collective actions among remote agents.

Third scale: *diagonal coalitions towards collapsonaut pragmatism*. Contrary to Lovink and Rossiter's disdain for the more classical type of party organization advocated by Jodi Dean¹⁴, party politics, parliamentary strategies and governmental policies cannot be simply ignored. To preempt the traps of traditional party organisations, a proper theory of conspiracies could lead us to investigate and experiment with the untapped potentials of "unnatural" coalitions, i.e., *ad hoc* convergences between political ideologies and parties whose lines seem a priori incompatible. In their analysis of the puzzling mix of people gathered in street protests and in Facebook groups against governmental handlings of the Covid crisis, William Callison and Quinn Slobodian propose to label such reconfigurations "diagonalist":

Born in part from transformations in technology and communication, diagonalists tend to contest conventional monikers of left and right (while generally arcing toward far-right beliefs), to express ambivalence if not cynicism toward parliamentary politics, and to blend convictions about holism and even spirituality with a dogged discourse of individual liberties. At the extreme end, diagonal movements share a conviction that all power is conspiracy¹⁵.

A more sympathetic approach, sketched for instance at the end of the *Manifeste conspirationiste*, suggests that occasional agreements between deep ecologists and traditionalist opponents to globalization could lead to punctual coalitions made necessary in times of impending collapse. Beyond their ideological oppositions, diagonalists share a common capacity to pierce through the veil of rational authority set up by the ruling classes to mask the injustice of their dominance. By reimporting diagonalism within the sphere of parliamentary politics (which it originally rejects), pragmatic conspiracies could make the best of the much-derided and much-neglected tactical moves analyzed by Emily Apter under the heading of "unexceptional politics"¹⁶. Collapsonaut activism may force us to accept breathing with people we disagree with.

Fourth scale: *strategic restructuring of the media sphere*. Assemblies, orgnets and diagonal coalitions are all immersed in the overall circulation of discourses, narratives, sounds and images that compose our mediaspheres, which are both increasingly fragmented and lastingly common (filter bubbles notwithstanding). Our lives are ever more intimately entangled in a multiplicity of webs spreading at a planetary scale. The complex articulations between (old) broadcast media and (new) social media bring us the bulk of what we can see, hear and learn about the wider world of these entanglements. Leaving the overall structuring of our collective *sensorium* (and *affectorium*) to the capitalist rules of commodified attention is no longer an option. The first demand of any progressive political agenda—and the first issue on which a diagonalist coalition could be reached—should aim for a drastic restructuring of the media sphere, keeping at bay both governmental oppression and commercial exploitation. New models of income distribution need to be invented, not only to pay for digital labor, but also to allow investigative journalism, ideological pluralism, cultural diversity and aesthetic creativity to thrive. Highly heterogeneous segments of the population, parties, associations and activists can conspire towards imposing such a strategic restructuring through the legislative process—taking advantage of the opening made by the European Directive on Copyright and Related Rights (which redistributes income between the platforms and content providers).

¹³ Geert Lovink & Ned Rossiter, *Organization After Social Media*, Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2018, p. 10.

¹⁴ Jody Dean, *Crowds and Party*, New York: Verso, 2016.

¹⁵ William Callison & Quinn Slobodian, "Coronapoltics from the Reichstag to the Capitol", *Boston Review*, January 12, 2021.

¹⁶ Emily Apter, *Unexceptional Politics: On Obstruction, Impasse, and the Impolitic*, New York: Verso Books, 2018.

The shipwreck of democratic discontents calls for a fundamental and ambitious re-organization of our mediarchical systems. Sheer will power will not suffice, but shifting circumstances may converge with technological developments to turn the tables towards a more favorable configuration. We may be reaching a turning point in the circulation of discourses, narratives and images within our various mediaspheres. With the multiplication of mega-fires, mega-floods, mega-droughts, mega-heatwaves and other mega-hurricanes, a *reversal in telegeny* is taking place: while French President Jacques Chirac could say, in his 2002 speech at the Johannesburg Earth Summit, that “our house is on fire, and we look the other way”, it becomes increasingly difficult *not to* watch the countless screens on which our (neighbor’s) house is actually burning down. Apocalyptic footages of climate catastrophes finally manage to draw the audience’s attention: their dramatic saliencies bring profit to media businesses.

Watching our house on fire, rather than looking the other way, may be a necessary first step¹⁷. But it is far from sufficient, as long as we don’t know how to act collectively to prevent (or at least mitigate) its collapse. That is why we need to transform our current discontents with representational democracies into fugitive planning towards more sustainable medialities, as well as more rewarding socialities. The four scales of interventions sketched above, in the very heterogeneity, offer countless occasions for such fugitive planning. Most of them are yet to be invented and experimented by trials and errors. This creative and experimental approach to democratic politics has been practiced, over the last decades, by activists involved in the tactical media movement as well as by Net Artists¹⁸. Our current dystopic view of what used to be called “new media” should not lead us to throw the baby of mediartivism with the bath water of platform capitalism. The challenge of experimenting with media should only be elevated to a higher expectation: from creating new works, contents or forms of activist art to co-organizing the rise of new active publics¹⁹.

¹⁷ See Thomas Mullaney et al, *Your Computer Is On Fire!*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021, and Jonathan Crary, *Scorched Earth*, New York, Verso, 2022.

¹⁸ See David Garcia & Geert Lovink, “The ABC of Tactical Media” (1997), available online at http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors2/garcia-lovinktext.html.

¹⁹ See the special issue of the journal *Multitudes* devoted to the theme “Créer des publics”, 79, 2020.