The Financialization of the Communicative Ideal in the Activist Social Sciences

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> The moral aim and political goal of such intellectual activity are the creation of greater individual freedom in culture and broader democracy in the economy and society.
> Cornel West, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (1993: 105)

> No problem, no profession. In this basic sense, service professions feed off the social miseries they are called in to remedy. Social conscience is not only in their interest, but in many cases their *sine qua non*.
> Bruce Robbins, *Consequences of Theory* (1991: 7)

> Any really 'loving' political practice must fall prey to its own critique.
> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic* (1990: 111)

Communication and the New Imperialism

As the quotes overhead illustrate, especially during the early 1990s a fair amount of intellectual effort in North-American humanities departments has been devoted to scrutinizing and communicating the relationship between academia and society, as well as the ethics and politics of the university. While the above quotations from these academics on one hand appear to be slightly at odds with one another – West simply emphasizing the goal of intellectual activity, Robbins questioning the egoism that such a goal might carry, while Spivak marking out an inevitable moment of tension within the propagation of this goal – they on the other hand all demonstrate a profound loyalty to some of the central tenets of the university today, namely those of the generation of new insights for the purposes of progressive social transformation. The spirit of the university to which they all profess has been for a long time, and indeed in my opinion should remain, one that is wedded to the ideals of truth and knowledge for the higher purposes of justice, equality, and emancipation. In order to execute these ideals, the university has since its early inception in medieval Europe relied on the production and dissemination of such knowledge by ways of an increasing multiplicity of technologies of communication, like books and journals, and later radio and television. The progressive innovation around ever-more sophisticated media tools has indeed become one of the linchpins around which such a dissemination – and in turn the spread of a revolutionary enlightenment – could occur. The humanities and the social sciences today likewise share much of their enthusiasm about new technologies with the so-called 'hard' sciences, which for centuries has relied on ever-more intricate machines for the purposes of probing and visualizing physical 'reality.' Any claim to immediate empirical access to the observation of reality and society, and by extension a claim to the problems,

incompleteness, or contradictions in the understanding of reality or society, therefore provides, as Bruce Robbins astutely points out, the life-blood of all the academic professions. This means that all these academic fields are rightly pressed to justify their existence in terms of their social relevance. And also because such relevance needs to be properly communicated to all members of society, it is in the very spirit of positive social transformation for a plethora of communities that the claim to a kind of universal communicability is made. It appears however that today, well-meaning academics in the social sciences and the humanities who specifically seek to fight the negative fallout of global capitalism find themselves increasingly in a conceptual and practical double-bind. This is because, while bringing about social transformation is one of the key aims of most progressive intellectual movements which increasingly seek to harness the powers of communication tools for all kinds of democratic and equality-fostering ends, 'change' also constitutes very much the clarion call of the current neoliberal paradigm with its hallmarks of destructive crisis and instability. We can notice this call for people-centered change especially in the mottos of contemporary technology and new media companies. The slogan of Philips Electronics for instance, which since 2004 reads "Let's Make Things Better," illustrates this well, as does Apple's famous motto "Think Different" and Google's "Don't Do Evil." The social media company Facebook meanwhile famously "helps you connect and share with people." Now one may be tempted to dismiss such company slogans as empty marketing gimmicks, but I would hesitate to relegate these mottos entirely to the dustbin of capitalistic false promise and deceit. Rather, I think that the very pervasiveness of the general sentiment of ethical social change that such slogans exhibit, should tell us a lot about the contemporary stage of late-capitalism in which the emphasis on social progress in and of itself has for a long time now been imbricated in technological innovation and the quest for the perfection of media and communication tools. In this sense, it is perhaps no coincidence that all the above quotations from those three intellectuals that critically investigate the role or the corruption at the heart of the university, not only rely on the acceleration of book printing technology via the powers of dissemination via digital tools of printing and distribution, but also emerge in the very decade that saw the realization of the Internet – arguably the ultimate database of books – as a widespread social phenomenon. Indeed, it appears that the coming into fruition of a certain ideal about communication by way of the new media coincided with a new-found skepticism about the public role of the university, in turn leading to a call for a renewal of its founding tenets.

Left-wing academic, intellectual, and activist rhetoric, as well as social science methodology has indeed always emphasized the facilitation of collection and collectivity that communication technologies provide – whether this entails social community or the coherence and understandability of reality through the gathering of empirical data. Such research rhetoric therefore implicitly assumes that the media can or will 'change society for the better,' either by allowing for new communities or by allowing researchers to create a 'better picture' of society. Previously marginalized groups and individuals, so it is also assumed, can build new alliances through the media in order to facilitate social inclusiveness, and the social sciences can in turn show how new forms of sociality get formed by way of communication tools. It is for this reason that many social scientists have now for instance turned to

gathering 'big data' in order to tease out previously unrecognized relationships between individuals or other entities, and humanists to turn to the 'digital humanities' for the purposes of improving both teaching and research. Noteworthy here is that such research endeavors often need to rely on, or even buy access to, what is otherwise proprietary information exclusively owned by Google Analytics, Twitter's databases, and Facebook archives. But even beyond the direct enmeshment of the social sciences and humanities with corporate tools today, these academic fields have always relied on the fact that they are communicating their insights to society as additional proof of their own social relevance. Far from being a so-called 'ivory tower' then, academia is in fact replete with the politics and promises that modern communication tools offer for communities at large, whether these politics be capitalistic, humanistic, or socialistic. What goes by way of contemporary dominant research paradigms in the social sciences and humanities in turn will then also illustrate the unexpected effects and fallout of the execution of the communicative promises and potentials on society at large.

Such unexpected and perhaps even negative fallout of the endeavors and goals of well-meaning academics should not surprise us. For starters, the ideals of academia have for centuries gone hand in hand with an essentially elitist, masculinist, and Western-centric outlook onto the world in which a university education signified class status and social upward mobility. Any academic would be foolish to assume she can completely transcend such a complicity with the politics of the institution. But what is more, any push for change remains at a fundamental level incalculable, inasmuch as genuine change indeed seeks to *invite* that what or those who have been previously excluded,

suppressed, marginalized, or erased. This means that the workings of the university inhabit a deeply *aporetic* structure, since the march towards communicative enlightenment is fundamentally at odds with the fact that radical alterity is and should remain principally uncommunicable. The contemporary university then becomes a prime site of the technological acceleration of this aporia, as the promise of community, justice, and equality is exceedingly enacted through new media technologies. In the same vain, this article will claim that paradoxically, the utopian or hopeful rhetoric around media technologies, which is especially prevalent in the well-meaning humanities and social sciences, currently *facilitates* the ongoing acceleration and negative fallout of the neoliberal economy. This is because in particular this economy increasingly relies on the technological enmeshment of such meaningful rhetoric or the productive arguments around 'fostering change' and globally financialized information flows through the media. Most non-face-to-face communication today happens through media technologies that are intimately entwined with neoliberal globalization through a handful of media corporations, cable providers, and ISPs and IXPs – in fact, the ownership of the global backbone of the Internet today is largely in the hands of North-American 'Tier 1' companies like Cogent, Verizon, Level3, AT&T, XO Communications, and CenturyLink, signifying a new imperialism. This is also to stress that the facilitation of collection and collectivity that the new media allow social scientists and other researchers to carry out, has its appalling precedent in the data-collecting and classification efforts of for instance the British Empire during the many centuries of the aggressive colonization of other peoples' spaces and territories. Of course, the upshot of these efforts was eventually to render the subjugation

and exploitation of colonized peoples more efficient, and to make the needs, movements, and goals of such peoples more transparent; all in the service of an increasing expansion of global capitalism.

One can partly trace this ideal of communication to its nascence in North-American 1940s communication theory (which is today called 'information theory') and its problematic conception of meaning as resulting from channeling objects (like bits and bytes). This ideal in turn is epitomized in Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver's famous model of signals redundancy for electronic transmission in *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (1963), which became a major inspiration for American communications departments and their obsession with predictability and propaganda during the Cold War era. This has especially in the American but also to some extent in the European contexts led to a too optimistic understanding of modern communication and its social possibilities, as well as to a strong moral obligation towards communicative transparency and effectiveness. But even long before that, Western science and philosophy, in their very quest for total knowledge, suffered from what Jean-François Lyotard has designated in "Something Like Communication… Without Communication" as the "communicationalist ideology" of Western metaphysics (567), which in our postmodern era leads to the subjugation of peoples under an exceedingly socially-fragmented technocracy. Lyotard argues that the shift from modern to postmodern art can be identified with a shift from an occupation with beauty to an experience of the sublime, which marks the unconscious effect of awe and partial opacity of such art. If we translate this to the functioning of new media his means that the meaningful aspect of postmodern media – the way in which they may bind communities and audiences

together – lies not so much in the possibility of representation, but in a shared experience of fragmentation due to new media's architecture. Lyotard thus likewise highlights that in a global society marked by a ubiquitous push for more connection and communication, sociality paradoxically ends up being destroyed – not in the least because media technologies fragment and bypass physical territory. (570) In other words, the assumption that 'improved' communication necessarily leads to positive social change elides the current relationship between a certain promissory ideal of communication and its complicity in a near-totalitarian and technocratic neoliberalism, that founds itself on the misconception of communication as transmission of meaning and the binding of communities through a shared understanding. Similarly, because mobilizing the media as a 'tool' for social change will inevitably also accelerate economic globalization and the unequal distribution of wealth, the dissemination of information entails a slippage or a displacement of the researcher's utopian aim or intention towards such acceleration and its violent side-effects. The propagation and promotion of the discourse of 'social change' and 'making a difference' is therefore today no longer antagonistic to, but exceedingly implicated in the ongoing disenfranchisement of under-privileged communities and disintegration of sociality worldwide. The activist and academic moral imperative to render 'the other' into a communicating subject has consequently become an increasingly oppressive or coercive gesture which binds individuals first and foremost under the compulsion to bow to the sublime power of what Jodi Dean aptly calls 'communicative capitalism' in *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*.

My argument about the ways academics and activists profess to the 'communicationalist ideology' is closely

mirrored by the work of Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard's cardinal argument throughout most of his later work is that increasingly all forms of politics, insofar as they come to exist as mere simulations of politics, find themselves wrapped up in a neoliberal logic that relies on the collapse of the realm of representation into the realm of capital circulation. This collapse is possible, argues Baudrillard in *The Mirror of Production*, because the expansionist logic of capitalism has found in the incessant mediation of signs an inexhaustible form of production and consumption. (105-106) Signs, in short, have become objects for consumption, and claims to differences in identity sustain the exploitation of the conceptual fallacy of binary oppositions ('self' vis-à-vis 'other') for accelerated economic growth. For Baudrillard, the concept of the signified emerges alongside the capitalist model of exchange value as a supposed derivative of use value. (103) Use value (in the form of needs and desires), says Baudrillard in 'For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign,' just like the signified (or the referent), is simply conjured up as an 'alibi' (78) for a capitalism that justifies itself by positing those needs and desires for emancipation of the marginalized person as natural. The conclusion for Baudrillard is, as he explains in 'The Melodrama of Difference,' that all contemporary kinds of otherness, and our desire to engage with it, liberate it, connect with it, ally with it, and even understand it, are *effects* of this new phase of capitalism. (126) Communicative facilitation therefore relies on the fallacy that such otherness is empirically real and outside the capitalist logic of reproduction. Otherness in certain kinds of alliance politics and liberation of 'the other' is then relative otherness, a mirror image of the self-same subject that does the facilitation or teaching. New media in particular facilitate this logic because they allow for the incessant circulation, multiplication, and

differentiation of signs. So the media do this by way of implicating subaltern imagery and voice into the networked flows of capital through their affordances of expedient electronic dissemination and differentiation. The media also provide the academic or activist with the illusion, due to the pervasive fantasy of media as transmitters of meaning, that this 'other' authentically *wants* such subjective empowerment and alliance – that we ourselves as much as any 'others' naturally want to be or are foremost *subjects* under neo-liberalism. But I suggest in line with Baudrillard's argument that such empowerment and connection become mere moments in the recirculation of signs, and hence of the acceleration capital flows. In "The Melodrama" Baudrillard therefore concludes that this new stage of capitalism marked is by a "humanitarian ecumenism" (131), in which the other becomes something to "be understood, liberated, coddled, recognised." (125) This means that this state of affairs, as we will see later on when analysing a few of its exemplary moments, still relies on the "authorising signature of Western humanist discourse" that Chandra Mohanty for instance already identified in her astute "Under Western Eyes." (63) However, it does so today not so much due to the cutting-off from the life-world of 'the other,' but due to the very attempts at bridging, communicating, or connecting with 'the other.'

Due to this entanglement between communication and financialization, I suggest that many well-meaning academics and intellectual activists find themselves increasingly in a double-bind; on the one hand, the possibility of saving radical otherness resides in the safeguarding of their existence as a 'secret' and the ever narrower possibility of miscommunication and invisibility, while on the other hand, the survival of otherness lies in them submitting to these totalitarian communicative techniques, like teaching them mass

and new media use, voicing-out, and in general becoming visible online or on television. The fact that this double-bind or tension remains largely unnoticed or hidden to many academics is firstly because their profession is already founded on the ideal of communication as community, which makes them blind to the possibility that today it might be otherwise; but secondly, and more importantly, because many designated 'others,' feeling the pinch of an exceedingly technocratic global society and its growing forms of disenfranchisement, will very often exhibit a voluntary involvement with these tools as a means to 'empowerment' in the form of mere survival. This involvement in turn gets misinterpreted by many academics as an authentic desire of the 'other' to use these media to their own benefit, as the more primary self-serving aspect of such teaching or facilitation are obscured, suppressed, or ignored. Superficial sociological conceptualizations of empowerment or resistance as merely requiring a display of communicative agency are therefore of little help in understanding the coercive nature of the entire scenario including the intellectual 'facilitator' and self-appointed 'agent of change' who both find themselves nonetheless differentially subjected to this ideal. Likewise, while the exercise of resistance or subversion though tools of communication often in sociological literature gets diametrically opposed to the violence of capitalism, there exists today a strong confluence of such tools and the ongoing financialization of the globe. In the following section, I will proceed to illustrate how this paradox or double-bind emerges in certain utopian or left-wing theoretical arguments generated in the well-meaning social sciences and humanities, also leaving the activists and academics that seek to render such ideals productive, trapped in a fundamentally schizoid situation and institutional space.

Communication for Social Change: the Rise of a Paradigm

Since the sudden intensification of global capitalism occurred about a decade after the new media found their nascence during the late 1960s Cold War military innovation, we can expect theories and practices around resistance and empowerment in the humanities and social sciences in the 1970s and early 1980s to unintentionally prefigure some of the push to 'interactivity' and 'two-way communication' that marked the corporatization of these media worldwide. Indeed, and if one were to put it in an unfriendly way, radical left-wing academia in America and Europe during these two decades has perhaps played the unwitting handmaiden to the globalization and corporatization of new technologies under the very alibi of fostering social justice, democracy, and equality by pushing the 'communicationalist ideology' the novel heights. What is more, some of the militaristic roots of the new media tools has found its way into the parlance and rhetoric around communication for social change, which often starts to speak in the 1980s in terms of 'target groups' and 'campaigns;' the latter being etymologically derived from the French *campagne* meaning an attack or the 'operation of an army in the field.' This is of course not to say that the more overtly pro-capitalistic or pro-military segments of academia were and still are the more obvious primary handmaidens, but that the academic left has found itself exceedingly coopted in the financialization of the globe while working under the false impression of its own radicality. Of course, I must stress here that I do not think that the acceleration of communication as such is a purely oppressive affair – after all, this article is itself also implicated in performing the hope for a radically different future by way of the conventional routes

towards publication and dissemination, even if in a perhaps more self-aware fashion. Rather, I wish to highlight how the stakes have been raised considerably for left-wing academics and activists to move beyond the mere logic of visibility, transparency, dialogue, and giving voice. In a sense, we find ourselves in an era were the logic of representation and communication has been surpassed and even been kicked into its reversal by a capitalism that has managed to largely collapse the semiotic realm with global financial transactions, and that academic efforts for social change have been symptomatic of and indispensable to this reversal. We may be working here with an outdated political agenda that does perhaps more harm than good today. Again, we see here that academia is a far cry from some sort of 'ivory tower' and is in fact replete with the politics and economics of its supposed 'outside' in unexpected and at times almost indiscernible ways.

One of the more exemplary theorists of communication for social change and novel pedagogical frameworks is without doubt Paulo Freire. Besides his famous *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in which he pressed for the conception of the classroom student as a co-creator of knowledge, Freire published many papers on how intellectuals and academics should engage in collaborative activism with especially the lower and marginalized classes. One such piece that remains seminal for the field of communication and social change, is his 1969 book titled *Extensión o Comunicación? La Concientización en el Medio Rural* (literally 'Extension or Communication? Raising Awareness in Rural Areas,' translated into English as *Education for Critical Consciousness*.) In this book, Freire makes a sympathetic call for the "democratization of culture" which according to him should include giving the masses, specifically those in the rural "subproletarian" areas, "experience at

participating and intervening in the historical process." (37) For these purposes, Freire presses for a type of literacy program that emphasizes dialogue with the help of visual and other communicative aids, claiming that such a program relies on a "horizontal" rather a "vertical relationship between persons." (40) The point of this is to make the person into an actor – political and otherwise – since Freire says that "the role of man … [is] to engage in relations with the world." (39) The success of his new method is later affirmed by one elderly peasant, who says that because he works, he "transforms the world." (43) A certain "self-transformation" is therefore the result of the program, whereby Freire, by "simply offering him the instruments," (44) allows these peasants to acquire "critical consciousness." (40) His program is therefore supposedly diametrically opposed to vertical teaching or "anti-dialogue," which will eventually help erase the among these rural subproletarians pervasive "magic consciousness" which is characterized by a repugnant "fatalism." (39)

While as socially engaged left-wing academics we may feel enamored by Freire's call for dialogue and validation of the peasants' suggestions for topics to be discussed – and indeed may have enacted such dialogical methods ourselves inside and outside the university classrooms – there nonetheless is a distinct smell of no doubt unintentional condescension dripping from the descriptions in his book of how 'behind' these peasants are, and how 'silly' their "fatalism" is. There is no doubt that Freire seeks to educate these people into the ideals and practices of communicative democracy, but while doing so, not only ignores the fact that a dialogical relationship between facilitator and student is never 'horizontal,' but more seriously erases their radical alterity by designating their "magic consciousness" as irrational, out of date, and

unnecessary. One also gets the sense that Freire is only to proud to show off how the peasants have started to see themselves as "cultured" due to his program, indirectly affirming that his pedagogical method is superior. One wonders to what extent the peasants told Freire what he wanted to hear, if only in order to assure their own insertion into the new order, which he despite himself rather astutely terms the "dynamic climate of transition." (39) The rendering of these people into communicative subjects therefore is accompanied by a particular kind of invisible coercion, through which such people are eventually forced to give up on a 'magical' worldview that relied on the non-transparency or secrecy of certain aspects of life and existence. What is more, Freire understands the communication tools he uses to facilitate more participation – in particular visual and graphic "channels" like painting – as mere "instruments" that assist in the peasant becoming the "agent of his learning." (43) We can recognize here the typical conception of the media as ideally facilitating an 'interactive' setting, by which it functions as a model of, if not the transmission of top-down content or knowledge, then still the transmission of certain democratic and transformative *sentiments*. But it is exactly the latter that remains thoroughly one-way, as the potential counter-transference of the rural folks' "fatalism" is vehemently resisted and ignored by Freire, and indeed would find no place in our contemporary new media channels which are all about 'interactivity.' If one were to stick with yet slightly modify the Marxist terminology that Freire also subscribes to in his book, one could speak here about a form of 'alienation' that paradoxically occurs *because* the peasants are rendered into 'agents.'

This false claim to a supposed 'horizontality' in dialogue by Freire, which gives the program its 'alibi' of progressing towards social justice, is also what characterizes many of the other texts of the 1970s that are part of the now well-established canon of communication for social change. Another such text is Luis Ramiro Beltrán's 1979 article "A Farewell to Aristotle: 'Horizontal' Communication," published by UNESCO as part of the research done by the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems. The fact that this article was written in light of allegedly there being a 'problem' with the communications according to UNESCO, already provides an interesting pointer towards an attitude of 'solving' issues by way of improved communications. The article in intriguing ways foreshadows the advent of new media technologies by making an argument for theorists and practitioners to move from one-way or unidirectional communications to two-way or bidirectional communications, in which according to Beltrán the "natural" need of the individual to communicate is satisfied. (168) Beltrán starts his article with a sophisticated critique of what I have earlier called the 'transmission model' in communication studies, pointing out that especially North-American studies and theories, done in the spirit of Aristotle's and Harold Laswell's conceptualizations, focused too much on 'effect' and 'persuasion.' These theories, he likewise points out, confuse information with communication. Beltrán argues that such 'bucket theories' of communication – as Freire called them – wrongly assume a passive receiver, and that therefore such theories go hand in hand with the "dominating monologue" (165) that has historically been extended from the West to for instance Latin America. Beltrán rightly identifies the relationship of such mass media and their private ownership as ways of extending a "whole way of life" namely "capitalist ideology." (164) At issue therefore is according to Beltrán how to move

away from "vertical and alienating communication tools" (166) towards a model based on "access-dialogue-participation." (168) And while he admits that complete horizontality is untenable, he nonetheless claims that we should work towards "a fair balance of proportions" in communication. (169)

Interestingly, Beltrán in the article assumes throughout that 'Latin Americans' as a whole, being part of a colonized and neo-colonized culture, have always been skeptical of such unidirectional theories of communications. Now while I agree that this description of the general experience of marginalization of Latin America may provide a valid starting point against such continuous domination, what is of pertinent importance here is that Beltrán translates this experience as legitimizing the 'solution' of the development of more horizontal and two-way communication tools and settings in which the receiver also becomes "an active social participant." (166) He illustrates such participatory tools with examples like "special combinations of mass media with group techniques, or group communications built around modern audio-visual tools," like "mobile videotape units," "loudspeaker systems," and "audio-cassette units." (167) The first major assumption that he makes is hence that communication still operates technologically or mechanically – as a machine-driven flow or movement to and from persons – which leads him to conclude that two-way communication enjoys more parity between sender and receiver. But more seriously, he assumes therefore that Latin American 'culture,' once it finds its expression in the mass and new media tools, will lead to a more democratic situation, and that this situation will in turn rid Latin America of capitalistic forms of domination. But this rendition of some unified 'culture' problematically glosses over the vast divergences of interests among Latin Americans, as well as the large class differences with Latin America at large. We see here that the shift towards a neoliberal ideology concerns a false performance of cultural difference as innately radical or external to capitalism, even though such differences have themselves become signs for global production and consumption, and as such eventually function to obscure class and gender relations internal to a continent or a country. What is more, by calling the need to communicate a "natural" aspect of humanity, and claiming that all people have the "right" to access, dialogue, participation, and communication (168), Beltrán effectively paves the way for a reorganized 'communicationalist' paradigm, which inserts the newly-molded 'active' and 'creative' communicative subject into communicative capitalism. By making it seem that bidirectional communication as such is always more democratic or more horizontal, he foregoes any analysis of how those tools that exemplify such interactive properties are in fact part and parcel of the ongoing financialization of the globe, and its subjects, to use the apt quote from Frank Gerace that Beltrán uses to indict the mass media, becoming part of a form of coercion which "grabs the soul of man, turning him into the shadow of his oppressor." (165) What Beltrán forgets is that power relations are always already part of any communicative setting, whether dialogical or not; and that to assume that for a facilitator the problems of his privilege have been solved or mitigated by way of using two-way communication is disingenuous, even if, or perhaps today especially when, such a dialogue is carried out in the name of 'democracy' or 'emancipation.'

This prefiguration of an intensified 'communicationalist' regime in many research projects, in which academics as well as many activists press for more efficient tools that provide and simulate

interactivity, dialogue, and participation, segues well into the beginnings of the twenty-first century. Especially the social phenomenon of so-called 'online social movements' has seen a veritable barrage of academic studies over the last decade, even generating its own sub-discipline of 'online social movement studies.' These studies work primarily with social scientific methodologies that collect empirical data on activist behaviour, and almost all inhabit a vision of the media as transporters of activist information. This vision of 'transportation' that guides many such activist media projects as well as analyses of online social movements in the social sciences hence all implicitly assume that new media *enhance* the possibility of far-reaching – in the double sense of the word – collective moral or democratic action and justice. Since neoliberal capitalism and its military apparatus is eventually the 'innovator' behind these new media, such new media often appear in the communication studies as if they themselves are the revolutionary force behind the 'progression' of mankind's sociality and morality. It is for this reason that some of such studies mistakenly speak of 'Facebook' or 'Twitter' revolutions – utterly bypassing the fact that these new technologies are part and parcel of a new global economic logic that has caused the oppression and disenfranchisement that many such revolutions were arguably up in arms against. These studies therefore also often tend to justify the supposedly 'ideal' economic form that is contemporary late-capitalism and the apparently default political democratic system that allows for and requires extensive online participation. For online social movements and their affiliated academic researchers, communicating more, faster, and more efficiently seems the ethical and rational thing to do, and more sophisticated activist projects and academic techniques should and will logically strive for the general

dissemination of 'valid,' and for the elimination of 'noise' or 'false' information. We can notice here not only the return of the Shannon-Weaver model, but also once again how the push for more communication finds its nascence in the *aporetic* structure of Western ideals of transcendence, emancipation, and liberation, due to how contemporary capitalism has led to an upturned situation in which the arena of politics has moved away from media representation as having a relation of correspondence to democratic representation.

Victor Manuel Marí Sáez's first chapter in his 2004 book *The Network Is for All: When Social Movements Take over the Net* (original Spanish title: *La Red Es de Todos*), which is part of the *Communication for Social Change Anthology*, provides a final example of how such contemporary social movement research now not simply prefigures, but instead becomes the mirror-image of the imperative of communication that marks the usurpation of meaning-making in financialization. Mari Sáez mounts a sympathetic polemic against the ravages of capitalist globalization and the ongoing liberalization of markets, and sides explicitly with those social movements that are epitomized by the now-famous slogan "another world is possible." (1010) He notices that the "new solidarity and communication networks" of these activist movements are marked by "flexibility, horizontality, interconnection capability, and closeness" between members. (1010) Such networks are according to Mari Sáez "strengthened by incorporating new members" and "connecting everything with everything," so that networking is "not only a more efficient form of organization" but also provide a "map of [our] relationships." (1011) While he appropriately remarks that global capitalism has rendered information into "merchandize," (1011) Mari Sáez nonetheless argues that these new media consist of the perfect manifestation of activist grouping in general

before the advent of new media, and as such lend themselves perfectly to any form of activism that is anarchist (since new media are 'decentralized'), feminist (because feminism relies on 'solidarity networks'), and ecologist (because eco-movements "expose the interconnection of everything with everything." (1013)) Mari Sáez therefore concludes that in order to make the anti-capitalist movements more effective, the academic and activist must assume "a communicational state of mind" that gels better with the goals of social transformation. (1013) The abstract emphasis on 'change' by way of talking about a plethora of activist groupings, is palpable in his piece. The irony or paradox here is of course that Mari Sáez is arguing for a specific practice against neoliberal capitalism that precisely also constitutes the latter's *sine qua non*, to extend Bruce Robbins astute observation at the top of this article. Again, we find here that the well-meaning academic is today caught in a moral and political tension or double-bind, which gets suppressed by way of creating a problematically unified image of anarchists, feminists, and ecologists vis-à-vis capitalism. This image erases not only the differences within but also the differential complicities of these supposedly coherent groupings in global class structures.

The Dissemination of 'Social Change' on the New and 'Social' Media

The enactment of the university's ideals of justice, community, and equality then exceedingly takes to the new technologies of communication, as these have always been mistakenly perceived as the straightforward embodiment or incarnation of these ideals. Logically then, we can see that many academic and non-academic research centers around social change have taken the Internet by storm. This is also unsurprising because it was the intimate collaboration during the Cold War period between American universities and the United States military that led to the birth of the early Internet (the ArpaNet) in the first place. This means that academia on a fundamental level shares with the military its ideals of transparency, connectivity, and communication, as well as a general tendency to incorporate more and more people and places under its regime. In "Becoming-Media" Joseph Vogl for this reason argues that the new media intensify the fact that any medium, in "the very act of communication simultaneously communicates the specific event-character of the media *themselves*," (628) so that these new technologies with their militaristic logic of targeting, as he in turn claims in "On Hesitation," translate the "global world [into] a world of universal addressability." (144) Since the prime logic of new media technologies, as I also discussed via the work of Baudrillard earlier, consists therefore of a combination simulation and dissimulation, we can expect to find that the websites of those research centers in important ways obscure the ways in which their use of new media are implicated in an increasingly dire economic and social situation for many globally. One more obvious example of this consists in how the prefix 'social' in social media in fact hides its complicity in social fragmentation; the 'social' media pretend to be about a sociality that actually erases the possibility of coming into contact with radical otherness (that what or those who do not gel with or abide by the Lyotardian 'communicationalist ideology.') Another example is how many websites of those research centers display the domain name suffix '.edu' or '.org' in their online addresses, as if they are unrelated or in opposition to capitalist entities that carry the '.com' or '.gov' suffix. A case in point is for instance the Amherst-based center for Communication for

Sustainable Social Change (CSSC, http://csschange.org), the University of Queensland Centre for Communication and Social Change (CfCSC, http://uq.edu.au/ccsc/), or the non-governmental Communication for Social Change Consortium (CFSC, http://www.communicationforsocialchange.org) which has head offices in New Jersey and in London. All the traffic to and from these websites nonetheless flows via ISPs and IXPs that, as I mentioned before, are by and large owned by a handful of mostly North-American companies.

Now I want to stress that no doubt a lot of good work is done under the umbrella of these centers and organizations, and that I by no means wish to dissociate myself from the general left-wing spirit of justice and equality that these entities stand for. But I do think that especially the recourse of these entities to new communication and visualization technologies illustrates how the acceleration and subsequent displacement of these ideals has reached its apex today. This is because the usage of the new media naturalizes for its audiences – who are anyway already foremost the privileged sections of society for whom such techniques work to their advantage – the paradigm of transformation, communication, and innovation, both via the websites' content and their design. The CSSC website for instance proclaims as one of their key objectives the creation of awareness among policy-makers and administrators of "innovative applied communication and technology processes" for community development in so-called 'developing' countries. It also professes to the creation of interdisciplinary and international alliances for the purposes of communication and social change. The CFSC website meanwhile claims that "within marginalized communities, there is tremendous untapped potential to use communication for collective

good," since "communication has been an essential tool for development since early in the 20th century." Part of their mission is "to help people living in poor communities communicate effectively." The website also, much in line with the neoliberal obsession with technological change, strongly emphasizes the role of "nurturing innovation, research and scholarship in communication." It displays many photographs of African peoples and communities going about their daily business, like fishing, preparing food, and dancing, so as to imply a link between the dissemination of communication tools and the supposed 'improvement' in efficiency around these daily activities. Once more, there is a distinct sense of condescension present in these developmental narratives that claim to help people help themselves, which shows that these organizations still operate much in line with its colonialist and messianistic heritage of 'good works' for the purposes of the 'enlightenment of the natives.'

Similar to the CFSC website, the CfCSC website is profusely laced with images of Australian aboriginal, Indian, and other Asian rural communities, together with a smattering of white faces. The showcasing of these photographs appears to be functioning as 'proof' of the overall positivity of the imperative of communication and the joys of using the media. This 'proving' is similar to the case of for instance the protesters in Egypt during the so-called 'Arab Spring' holding up signs with "Facebook" and "Twitter," not because these are at all intrinsically revolutionary, but because these protests' spectacular imagery was set up for consumption by a largely Western and privileged global audience in dire need of a re-affirmation of the emancipatory promise of technological innovation as such. The 'other' is in the case of the CfCSC and CFSC website namely portrayed as 'authentically' desiring

communication and collaboration with these centers, where in fact such a 'need' is conjured up or produced by the unequal relations of power globally that the new media tools are implicated in, as well as between the facilitators and such 'others.' Again, true radicality is erased by way of displaying an 'other' who apparently posits no challenge to this global financial regime of development and innovation, and who can be 'coddled' and 'liberated' by the well-meaning academic and activist. As Vogl astutely remarks in "On Hesitation," such images and stories of happy collaboration render an impression that "friend and foe are just as close, almost indistinguishable from one another." (144) They therefore obscure the manifold ways in which organizers and researchers are *not* in any way in some kind of 'horizontal' dialogue with these peoples, whose entire ways of being in the world is challenged at a fundamental level in favor of a capitalist logic of mere survival. It may be for example of interest here that Australian aboriginal culture traditionally emphasizes the vital non-communicability and secrecy that is part and parcel of earthly existence; a worldview that is bound to perish in a global world obsessed with universal communicability and transparency. The general conceptual and opportunistic error that these academics, researchers, and activists therefore make, is to rely on an analogy between technologically improved communications – again, much in the vein of Shannon and Weaver – and the general democratization, perfection, or emancipation of communities under threat. In some socially engaged humanities scholarship of the 1990s, a very similar slippage concerned the misplaced overlapping of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's rhetoric of 'assemblages' and 'rhizomes' in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* with the supposedly 'horizontal' structure of the Internet. This misconception of the function of new media is due to the confluence of the semiotic realm with the capitalist acceleration of information flows; under such conditions, 'radical' content comes to render opaque and legitimize the actual function of new media in the ongoing financialization of the globe. Once more then, the true purpose of these new and social media lies on their operational, and no longer the representational, level.

Conclusion: the Promise of the Double-Bind?

This article has demonstrated that the today, social scientists and humanists who want to mobilize communication tools for social change, find themselves increasingly in a double-bind, even if they may not explicitly recognize this bind as such. The tension between the imperative of communication and dissemination that is at the base of all academic professions, has segued, via a particular discourse of 'dialogue,' 'horizontality,' and 'self-transformation' in the 1970s, to the mechanized 'interactivity' that heralds in the era of new and social media in the 1990s. These discourses and practices all build on a fundamentally mistaken notion of communication as the transmission of meaning, and as such of the 'improvement' of community. In the performance of the academic profession and legitimation via this misguided notion of communication, the relative 'other' of the communicative subject is misinterpreted as the radical 'other;' in other words, the desires for ever newer media tools are wrongly taken for desires that are outside or resist the continuing march of neoliberal globalization. This contemporary form of economic acceleration that such communication (and its theories and practices of 'harnessing' it for social 'change')

hence paradoxically entails a certain problematic inertia or *non-change* in favor of contemporary nodes of power and privilege. This does not at all mean that the above projects are utterly misguided or deluded; rather, my point is that the very quest for justice and democracy that Cornel West so eloquently expressed and which all these projects and practices – and indeed this very article – dutifully perform, inhabits an *aporetic* structure that allows capitalism to accelerate the imagery that is wrapped up in this quest. And our quest for justice must then also question the particular accelerated form this quest takes today.

But this should not have us despair. As Spivak's prescient quote at the start of this article already announced, every form of idealism eventually will be or needs to be subjected to its own critique, and perhaps eventually even succumb to it. As much as the practices of these theories, centers, organizations, and left-wing academics are the outflow of a logic of increased visibility and transparency, they also render into visible form the perverse logic of 'incorporating' and 'connecting' everything and everyone, which Mari Sáez outlined as a virtue, in an exceedingly staged visual profusion of relative otherness. So the acknowledgement of this profound tension at the basis of the university and the ways it has intensified itself to such an extent today that more and more academics are starting to become disillusioned or confused about their calling, perhaps provides us with the return of that "fatalism" that Freire so eagerly sought to eradicate. We may want to welcome the upsetting force of such a fatal attitude towards the ideal of 'communication as community' as the true antidote, or perhaps even the quintessential shadow, which has always secretly accompanied the university's quest for total communication and transparency. The possibility of radicality via communication and its functionalist theories may then finally and surprisingly lie in its unexpected outcomes, both positive and negative. I will be 'keeping the faith' together with Cornel West then, since also *owing to* all these theories and projects, the future may be more radically open than ever before.

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