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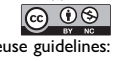
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Social theory and the digital: The institutionalisation of digital sociology

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Abstract

This article is a critique of digital sociology and a proposal for a very different social theory of the digital. As the article aims at fundamental aspects of the discipline, it may be perceived as a polemic, even if it is meant to be a serious intervention in a field crying for debate. Drawing on the analyses of well-known digital sociology textbooks, the article argues that digital sociology is aligned to its object by virtue of a common subjective stance towards the digital and shared new materialist ontological presuppositions. The extent of this subjective alignment is revealed by two complementary aspects: what it desires, namely, to be in the 'digital party', and what it acquiesces to, namely, to contemporary capitalism's disqualification and existential banning of the idea of intrinsic value, and its imposition of extrinsic criteria and measurements on any realm of life which claims intrinsic value. By thus doing digital sociology renounces the very ground on which an autonomous position as a social science can be built. The alternative social theory proposed seeks to undo that alignment by realigning sociology to a stance grounded on intrinsic values and a materialism attentive to antagonism rather than to naïve notions of matter.

Keywords

Nonhuman turn ontologies, materialism, research 'ethics', subjectivation, intrinsic value, tyranny of numbers, metrics, Tristan Garcia, Alain Badiou

Introduction

Digital sociology is one of several sub-disciplines specialised in 'the digital' which have recently emerged in the sciences and the humanities. The reason for that move in sociology is certainly not that others are doing the same. Rather it is sociology's 'vocation' or 'duty' – to use two terms that nowadays convey a totally *passé* air of intransigence, but precisely – as a social science, to try and tackle this

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latest manifestation of capitalism that goes under the name of 'the digital' and that is to be understood here neither as an addition to society nor as a separate realm, but as something so deeply embedded in our lives that it fundamentally organises and moulds social life and selves, work and leisure, intimacy and exposure.

And yet, confronting and thinking through the digital does not seem to be the most salient impulse in what sociology is after. Rather, the desire of sociology is to be part of the digital as 'digital sociology'. This desire is no secret, on the contrary, it can be felt immediately in textbooks and readers, our main focus in this article, although it is rarely made explicit. It is a desire, as Gregory and her co-authors put it half-teasingly but not less revealingly in their reader entitled *Digital Sociologies*, to *come* 'to the digital party' (Gregory et al., 2016: xxii). Or, in the case of other well-known textbooks which are also essential in the development of the field and speak confidently about its emergence and constitution (Boullier, 2016; Lupton, 2015; Marres, 2017; Orton-Johnson and Prior, 2013; Selwyn, 2019), the desire, unstated, is rather to *remain* in the digital party, for 'the status of digital sociology as a "born digital" field of study' (Selwyn, 2019: 93) is so much of a given that that desire needs not be voiced. Its explicit expression is not just metaphoric, and understandably so given the hard-to-escape pincer of enticements, for example, in the form of research funds and attached rewards, and enormous pressures, but an eagerly pursued and widely shared desire which, as we shall see, affects sociology in fundamental respects, including in terms of its nature as a body of knowledge and research practice. Nor should we seek just a psychological interpretation of a desire which must rather be understood in Freudian terms and thus as a libidinal dynamics conjoining the subjective and the social. It is by situating that desire at this critical point of articulation in the contemporary libidinal economy and therefore by considering it alongside the submissions it may entail in this conflict-ridden field that we can try to disentangle its nature and the tensions traversing it.

The argument I want to develop in this article is twofold: first, I seek to show that, in pursuing that desire, sociology becomes aligned to the digital. Second, I try to demonstrate, beyond this necessary critique and in continuity with my previous research (Frade, 2016), that a different social theory of the digital is possible, one that undoes that alignment by realigning sociology to thought, to the imperative of thinking. Strange as this may sound, however, the idea that social theory, and more generally social sciences, belong to the order of thought rather than to that of what there is, must be reasserted today, particularly in the presence of students and a youth which have grown up engrossed in the digital party and more often than not enthralled by it. We shall see as we proceed what this idea of being of the order of thought exactly means and what its significance and implications are. For now, suffice it to say that it is about an obligation that the social sciences have, as sciences and not just techniques, namely: to rise above mere descriptions and analyses of the given, all the more so considering that such descriptions have become the hallmark and a major resource of what some have dubbed 'knowing capitalism', or, given that 'knowing' is too exalted a name for what in truth is datafication and quantification of everything, 'platform' and 'surveillance capitalism', as it has also been called, and what we should name the 'total corporation', instead of 'smart' corporation, as it likes to present itself, based on totalising surveillance, continuous data extraction and algorithmically-determined intervention.

An analysis of the institutionalisation of digital sociology should in my view address above all the logic of its desire to be in the digital party and, say, its costs – a logic which involves three key moments: first, what the digital party is about, which is obviously *being connected*. Second, what sociology expects to find in the digital party, which is new possibilities and their correlate, *freedom*. Finally, to complete the portrait, what sociology brings to the party, which is *knowledge* of the connections, their extent, nature and above all their adequacy. In this article only the first moment and aspects of the other two will be examined, while a more comprehensive treatment of the second and third moments will be the task of future analyses.

As a critique of digital sociology as it appears in the well-known textbooks referred to above (a list to which we should add a few foundational or otherwise review articles, normally carrying 'digital sociology' in their titles, e.g. Carrigan, 2013; Mackenzie et al., 2016; Zhao and Wang, 2023), this article

is not directly or mainly concerned with the methods or techniques digital sociology resorts to. What is at stake in that critique is something prior and of more consequence, something that underlies the methods and the type of studies done, and which, for that very reason, may seem – but it is not meant to be – polemic, namely: the very ideas about what there is and the notions that conceptualise it, ideas and notions such as for example, 'possibility', 'body' and 'open' which function as presuppositions and carry what is taken for granted and seems self-evident and unquestionable. It is on the basis of these ideas and notions that the logic of digital sociology's engagement with the digital functions; and it is on such basis that we can attempt to formalize digital sociology, that is, unearth and conceptualise its fundamental axioms and show that everything of importance in it is a consequence of those axioms. Formalization (not to be mistaken for reductionist simplification or formalistic analyses) is a chief and well-known method in philosophy and the social sciences. There are different kinds of formalisation; exemplary among them is Marx's formalization of capital and the metamorphoses it undergoes in its endless circulation. There is also Weber's ideal-typical method, whose distinctiveness lies in that it combines a logic of conceptual formalisation, without it being pure (based on formulas) formalisation, and a logic of continuous confrontation with (what one understands every time as) 'reality', without it being shallow empiricism.

Digital sociology: surface diversity, underlying unity

Now the immediate objection to be raised against this approach is that digital sociology is not a homogeneous field, that there is 'no singular *digital sociology* methodology, nor a unified agenda' (Gregory et al., 2016: xviii, original emphasis), nor is there ultimately a unified, that is, *one* digital sociology either. And yet, there need be no one digital sociology nor unified study programmes and research agendas in order for there to be unity at other, more decisive levels. There are in this respect two crucial and closely interdependent aspects, a shared stance towards the digital and shared ontological presuppositions, which seem clearly much more important in terms of providing digital sociology as presented in foundational textbooks and articles with a deeper, subtler and more effective form of unity and consistency – what is more, it is precisely such shared subjective stance and ontological ground that allows variation in what concerns study and research programmes, methods and agendas.

That there is no one digital sociology but a plurality thereof is what the very title of the aforementioned reader (Daniels et al., 2016) declares: *Digital Sociologies*. Indeed, there is no consensus about what digital sociology is, which suggests that the attempt to conceptualise, or at least situate, that plurality may not be easy. What seems clear is that digital sociology, as a response to the digital, is an overlapping field located in-between the 'sociology of the digital', that is, 'use of established sociological theories and methods to study social phenomena influenced' by the digital (Ignatow, 2020: 12) which is not simply sociology in the digital age, and computational sociology or, more generally, computational social sciences, which we can describe as using computationally intensive data techniques to model and simulate social phenomena. It is the level of overlapping those two poles of that dimension (responses to the digital) what changes between different conceptions of digital sociology. These conceptions go, in an ideal-typical characterisation, from a strongly sociological digital sociology which, as is the case of the aforementioned reader (Daniels et al., 2016), continues to look at the substantive problems intrinsic to modern, capitalist societies, for example, social inequalities and their specific forms in the digital, without renouncing methodological innovation and the use of the latest digital applications, to a digital sociology closer to the computational pole and very eager about the possibilities the digital is said to offer. This type of digital sociology, which includes the aforesaid textbooks (with Marres, 2017 as the one that may best fit the ideal-type, while Selwyn, 2019 is more a comprehensive portrait of digital sociology than a development of a variant of it), embraces enthusiastically digital methods, an operation reliant on a rhetoric of creativity and innovation, but without renouncing to standard sociological theory and methodology, although there are also strong statements about the need to go beyond

such 'pre-digital' theory, as they call sociological theory, and develop proper *digital* sociological theory (see Selwyn, 2019: 40f).

It is thus true, as this limited but significant analysis shows, that there is a plurality of digital sociologies rather than a single one. It is also true that they are all traversed by a desire for big data and computational analytics, as has lately been recognised: 'Interest in Big Data brings digital sociology into the realms of what has come to be known as the "computational social sciences"' (Selwyn, 2019: 75). In effect, while digital sociologists have often been outspoken critics of big data and neo-behaviourist analytics, however, such criticism – and herein lies the paradox, showing the impossibility of serving two masters – could not hide the fact that they too desired to count and measure, and to do so 'in style', that is, using big data and the corresponding analytic instruments, which arguably was what made the digital party exciting, although apparently not any longer. Indeed, huge disappointment with the results of big data has led to the recognition, long overdue, of the dubious (epistemological, ethical) status of big data, and has meant that 'growing numbers of digital sociologists are now questioning what is being lost in the turn toward the computational social sciences' (Selwyn, 2019: 78) – a questioning still awaiting completion through self-questioning and self-critique.

This is possibly the fundamental manifestation of the extent to which digital sociology is aligned to the digital, but there are others. A typical one is the care the aforementioned textbooks and articles take to one way or another position themselves according to slightly different versions of a purportedly balanced approach which claims to fall neither into technophilia nor technophobia (Boullier, 2016: 6 and 320) while being sensitive to both pros and cons offered by the digital. A whole stance is thus sketched, one that endorses the given, but with improvements which it is the task of 'critique' as understood in this approach to suggest. We thus see that the plurality of digital sociologies is clearly delimited and brought together by this stance of subjective alignment to the digital.

The second crucial level at which that plurality is provided with a form of unity is the ontological one. In effect, the aforementioned textbooks and in part the reader which are our main focus here, draw significantly, tacitly and explicitly, on the nonhuman or posthuman or ontological turn, a whole wave of ontologies (including actant-network and assemblage theory, object-oriented ontology, speculative and agential realism and, colouring the whole wave, new materialism and posthumanism) which, despite their important differences, share fundamental ontological principles, as Žižek (e.g. 2017) has shown, the most important one being a flat ontological framing, hence 'flat ontologies', which places all entities (or objects, bodies) on equal ontological footing, with no privileged actor or object, human actors becoming just another object among the disparate variety of objects. We will address some of the fundamental features of these ontologies later on. For now, suffice it to say that this reliance is clear and explicit in Lupton's 'sociomaterial approach' (2015: 23) and 'more-than-human perspectives' (2020), in Marres' (2017) and Boullier's (2016) variants of actor-network and related approaches, and in Selwyn, who draws on typical tropes of new materialist and posthumanist ontologies, including the emblematic one about not simply the porousness, but 'the fast-dissolving boundaries between machines, humans and animals'. This leads Selwyn to claim, echoing an idea repeated *ad nauseam* in both the nonhuman turn and the digital sociology literature, that 'contemporary society is better understood as an *entanglement* of humanity, materiality and digitality' (2019: 14 and 24, emphasis added).

Even the aforementioned reader, arguably the less influenced, in what concerns its editors and their editorial work, by the ontological turn, cannot resist paying tribute to that dominant turn by extolling the virtues of a 'focus on the agency and materiality' which any object or thing is supposed to possess, providing cautionary notes about the risk of still upholding 'clear-cut distinction[s]', for example, 'between the individual, the self, and the social', and advocating the need to 'move beyond binary oppositions' and dualisms (Gregory, 2016: 5). This is all the more significant in that this very author, Karen Gregory, is among the very rare ones in this field who shows some much-needed distance from the digital and defends the necessity 'to not take the [new digital] tools so seriously that we lose sight of the very social conditions that have given rise to them' (2016: 4) – an attitude that can be a first step towards the full subjective interruption and turning around involved in the imperative to exit the cave.

The imperative to exit the cave

As emphasised from the start, the critique of digital sociology, critique understood in a Kantian sense and not only as criticism, far from being the main aim of this article, is at the service of a positive proposal for a different social theory of the digital. Its starting point lies in sustaining, as an affirmative counter to the desire to be in the digital party, a gesture of interruption which at the same time wants to be a move towards thought. There is nothing new here. It consists in repeating the Platonic gesture and exiting the cave, the famous Platonic cave. But I must warn that this exit has nothing whatsoever to do with the reactionary and devastating 'exits' we have to confront today. For the Platonic gesture, which is the inaugural philosophical event and in truth the inaugural gesture of all thought, is double: exiting the cave and *returning* to it. In reality, exiting is not a move towards the outside, since there is no outside – the cave apparently being the only abode in town – but an *immanent* exit, that is, a *subjective* move of exit and return we should describe, in Plato's words, as a subjective '*turning around'* whose radicality can be seen if we recall that the prisoners, for that is the cave-dwellers' condition, are constrained by their chains to stare in one direction alone, 'only ahead of them'.

Given the crucial significance of this subjective move in Plato's emancipatory fiction and in the theoretical approach to the digital I am proposing, where it has methodological priority over any objective analysis, perhaps I should add – in case one believes the cave is not the best of images to represent our world, or, given the many prejudices surrounding 'Platonism', are sceptical about its contemporaneity – that we are fortunate that Alain Badiou has conceived of a contemporary version of Plato's text entitled precisely 'Plato's *Republic*' in which the cave becomes an 'enormous movie theatre' (2012: 212).

In the digital movie theatre there are prosumers-prisoners, but these are prisoners of an altogether new kind who need not be literally shackled to their seats; all they need is to be connected so that they can be supplied with personalized messages and constantly invited to comment and air their opinions – indeed personalisation and exposure of one's persona feed each other. As Dominique Pettman argues in his *Infinite Distraction* referring to a social media platform, 'the spider configures its web to the precise specifics of the fly' (2016: 80). The astounding if routine observation that these prosumers-prisoners often experience themselves as free and autonomous agents is the best indication of the spider's indisputable success. Indeed, in the planetary movie theatre the prosumers-prisoners 'feel that they are "in the world" and "at home"', they are 'so passionately attached to their "view"' that they do not even suspect 'the possibility that what they take for the real might have the consistency of mere shadows' (Heidegger, 1998: 164–65).

Now, if there is something that is *not* given at all it is thought. Nor – as Deleuze often emphasized (e.g. Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 132) – does one think spontaneously, but only forced, as if pushed from the outside by some event or unexpected encounter. Thus, neither given nor spontaneous, thought also requires an obstinate discipline to sustain itself against both the givenness and unquestionability of what there is, of reality, and our deep-seated habit of going along with it. This is a complicated endeavour which necessitates a *philosophical* disposition. For philosophy, as is well-known, interrupted the religious narrative and the reign of opinions, and with them the mythical stories and the conventional views. The question is then: should not social theory do the same with respect to the digital, that is, to late ('communicative', 'cognitive', 'platform', 'techno', 'data' … 'digital') capitalism, just as Marx and Weber in their very different ways did with respect to classical, 19th century capitalism? Social theory is not philosophy – granted. However, social theory, and more generally the social sciences, are under a philosophical condition. What better witnesses to this than Marx, who developed his thought under the condition of Hegelian philosophy, and Weber, who laboured under the twofold, tension-ridden condition of Nietzschean philosophy and neo-Kantianism? 'And as for those social theories that claim to avoid philosophy altogether', one cannot but for once agree with Graham Harman that 'they invariably offer mediocre philosophies shrouded in the alibi of neutral empirical fieldwork' (2016: 4).

Thus, in contradistinction to digital sociology and its *connexionist* disposition, the first moment in our approach to the digital is an affirmative gesture of interruption which is simultaneously a move towards thought. The second moment is defined by the thesis that freedom is not about the realisation of *existing*

possibilities, e.g. those provided by the digital, but about the *creation* of possibilities. Finally, the third moment for us is that of the return to the cave, or rather the dialectics of exit and return, a dialectics not particularly marked by knowledge but, once again, by thought. For knowledge is in principle a figure of alignment, e.g. the knowledge sought for by Big Tech. This also means that, as Badiou (2019: 456f) argues in his shrewd analysis of the cave allegory, far from knowledge being by itself the carrier of emancipation, it is on the contrary emancipation, for which *dealignment* is a necessary although not sufficient condition, as we shall see, which renders truly significant knowledge possible. And given that it is this primacy of the subjective disposition what unmistakably situates social theory either in the order of thought or in that of the given, what would prevent us from saying of it what Seamus Heaney says of poetry, namely, that 'the vision of reality which poetry offers should be transformative, more than just a printout of the given circumstances … an act of writing that outstrips the conditions even as it observes them' (*The Redress of Poetry*, 1995: 159)?

To be in the digital is to be connected and therefore to partake in the expectations it breeds

That the digital party is about *being connected* is no mystery. And yet, being *subjectively* connected carries much more than one may be inclined to concede. For example, 'being connected' is strongly associated with voluntary, antiauthoritarian relations like those established in surfing the web are supposed to be, relations which constitute one of the pillars of the spontaneous metaphysics of our time, a generalised *democratism*. In effect, being connected means to share in the promise this is said to bring, namely, to intensify and extend one's capacities and experiences; in other words, to share what the digital promises through its promotional discourses linking it to the general democratic ideology and culture of our time, which is certainly not a transcendent life, but 'what we already are – more and better', as Tristan Garcia (2018: 5) argues referring precisely to 'our democratic cultural life'. But 'being connected' is also a corporate and state project, one that has drawn heavily on and promoted that desire to make connections as a bait to entice people into what Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) called a 'connexionist world'. Another aspect worth emphasising is that there is a rather intimate affinity between that connexionist world and a middle-class whose putative defining features are, objectively, being connected, and therefore being a consumer, and, subjectively, being willing to engage in the aforementioned non-despotic, perhaps fleeting but freely chosen and enjoyable relations.

It is that will that has been and continues to be massively promoted and used as the perfect bait, but presented in different guises, to entice people into the digital. Indeed, it is for reasons to do with the need to periodically revitalise the effectiveness of the bait that the connective terminology has largely been displaced by that of 'the social'. This is the case of what should probably be called 'connective media' (van Dijck, 2013) but – in 'one of the smartest semantic moves in the history of media institutions' (Couldry and van Dijck, 2015: 3), assuming this was not surpassed by calling 'sharing economy' what feudal uber-corporations do – is called instead *social* media, and of *sociality*, which makes that connexionist world and the technical devices used to build it appear as social, while the social media itself is dissolved into a deluge of transient connections.

Naturally in this connexionist world sociology wants to be, so to increase its connections is almost an obsession, as is indeed for practically every individual, project, organization and institution, whether public or private. Augmenting and 'intensifying connections with digital devices and practices proliferating across sociology and social life' (Marres, 2017: 88) is a constant preoccupation which, since augmenting is also shaping, affects digital sociology at three crucial levels: at the disciplinary level, at the level of individual sociologists themselves, and, crucially, at the level of relations between sociologists as researchers and the subjects they study.

First of all, at the disciplinary level digital sociology is said to be 'inherently an interdisciplinary practice' because it 'draws from a long history of research done' in a number of sub-fields such as internet

studies, digital humanities and others. Interdisciplinarity is also felt to be a need created by growing connectivity: 'as we become more interdependent and more interconnected, we need an interdisciplinary sociology to make sense of the networked world' (Gregory et al., 2016: xix and xxiii). This seems to be the consensual view (see, Lupton, 2015: 15; Marres, 2017: 2 and 141; Selwyn, 2019: viii and 2). 'Interdisciplinary' here refers to inter-area studies and growing interconnections between disciplines, which means that it is *multi*-disciplinarity rather than the much more ambitious *inter*-disciplinarity what is at stake and shows how the excessive concern with connectivity affects the way in which digital sociologists perceive their field.

Secondly, the preoccupation with increasing connections also obtains at the level of the individual sociologists themselves, who 'need to connect, collaborate, and create new knowledge with others', and 'effectively "tag" our work as digital sociology' (Gregory et al., 2016: xxiii). If being connected is essential for individual sociologists, its importance goes well beyond that, to the point that it is constitutive, or rather co-constitutive, of digital sociology. For Deborah Lupton, for example, it is one of the four pillars or components of her 'definition of the sub-discipline'. Under the name of 'professional digital practice', it consists in 'using digital tools as part of sociological practice – to build networks, construct an online profile, publicise and share research and instruct students' (Lupton, 2015: 15). In plain language, all this is about self-promotion; it may seem harmless, so used we are to it. However, it implies conformism and calculated (initially) or unconditional (ultimately) submission to what the digital dictates, for example, to use the right catchwords to advertise oneself, to do research on the fashionable topics that bring reputation and material rewards, and so forth. Sociologists specialised in the digital recognise these problems in informal conversations; and yet, when pressed, they like to indulge in the idea that such problems constitute an external appearance, like a dress one puts on for the occasion, which does not affect the substance and the integrity of their scientific practice.

Finally, but fundamentally, the preoccupation with being as much connected as possible also obtains at the level of the relations between sociologists as empirical researchers and the subjects they study in the form of a need 'to involve research participants more closely and actively in their ongoing projects' (Marres, 2017: 31), and to do so not only at the moment of observation and information gathering, but also at that of publication and dissemination, and, ideally, during the phase of analysis and elaboration of results. The rationale for this is that research participants cannot be treated as passive subjects of study; indeed, if according to the nonhuman turn ontologies, highly influential, as we have seen, in the constitution of digital sociology, all existing entities are 'actants' and thereby co-creators contributing to whatever 'agential' activity is at stake, including knowledge generation, all the more so research participants, whose active contribution to knowledge production should be recognised, as should their status as research 'actors' in their own right – hence the injunction to treat them, in Deborah Lupton's words, 'as co-collaborators in research projects' (2015: 64).

This growing blurring of boundaries between social researchers and their subjects of study is a process awash with tensions and paradoxical consequences, for, as Noortje Marres cunningly puts it, '"is everyone a sociologist now?"' (2017: 143, original inverted commas). It is certainly a peculiar, decisive and unclear, not to say obscure, development. Peculiar in that while it is part of a process immanent to the digital – indeed it is fully in line with what has recently been called *The Participatory Condition in the Digital Age* (Barney et al., 2016) and more generally with what Günther Anders aptly named 'the oligarchic principle of technology' (quoted in Müller, 2016: 136f) which, by setting the parameters according to which participation takes place and is measured and thereby promoted, ensures that the higher the participation the greater the concentration of power – it is ardently embraced and implicitly presented as chosen. Decisive in that it seemingly involves a major reconfiguration of identities and social relations in what concerns the most fundamental social relation in research: the research relation, that is, the direct relation between the researcher and the research participants and the indirect relation with the society at large. Unclear in that the desired status of research participants as 'co-collaborators' and indeed of research itself seems to clash, as we shall see in a moment, with the status assigned to them by the bureaucratic machinery set up in all universities under the name of research 'ethics'.

Marres' pointed question epitomises some of the tensions and contradictions pervading social research in the digital. However, that question loses its critical edge as Marres goes on to advocate the 'democratization of social research' (2017: 144). 'Democratization' here has very little to do with democracy proper; rather, it refers to a levelling of conditions such that the present situation, in which 'only a select set of institutions have access to the analytic equipment and data required to produce authoritative knowledge about society' (2017: 144), can be overcome. In other words: democratization of research simply means that everyone, if it is true that 'everyone is a sociologist now', be able to do as digital megacorporations do, at least in terms of accessing big data and the analytic applications to treat them – that was the big desire back then, when people entertained great expectations about big data. Hence Marres' criticism of the existence of 'highly asymmetrical regimes of social enquiry' as configured in digital architectures. However, what is criticised is not the power structures defining such asymmetrical regimes, but only the fact that they 'are not responsive' in the sense that 'do not really enable mutual adjustment between the concerns of users, researchers, technologists and other actors' (2017: 165) in the research process. So, the asymmetrical regimes and the power structures sustaining them are taken as a given and thereby naturalised; all that is needed is for the big digital platforms to become responsive, e.g. to the need of social researchers to access big data and the analytic tools to treat them.

Digital sociology, happy carrier of democratic materialism or materialist democratism

Marres draws here, as other digital sociologists do, on the spontaneous metaphysics or ideology of our time and also on the aforementioned new wave of ontologies which constitute different philosophical elaborations of that spontaneous metaphysics. She relies on both the normative and the ontological sides of this metaphysics, sides to do respectively with democracy and materialism. First of all, she relies explicitly on its normative side – a side to do with what we have called 'democratism' because it involves a desire for equality and concord between all beings which expects such equality to happen without effort and struggle and ignores the huge inequalities and power structures pervading our contemporary world. Democratism finds its main philosophical expression in the flat ontology common to the aforementioned wave of nonhuman turn onto-narratives. Very usefully described in *The Democracy of Objects*, this flat ontology is said to 'democratize being' (Bryant, 2011: 280). Its founding axiom reads thus: 'objects of all sorts and at all scales are [their being is] on equal ontological footing' (Bryant, 2011: passim), with neither hierarchy of objects nor ontologically privileged ones.

Marres also relies, secondly, on the ontological side of that metaphysics, the side concerned with what there is which in the last two decades has seen the rejection of the poststructuralist emphasis on textuality and more generally of the 'linguistic turn', and the emergence of a 'rehabilitated materiality' (Andrejevic, 2016: 194) which puts a strong emphasis on 'the common materiality of all that is' (Bennett, 2010: 122) and thus on 'the tangible physicality of aspects of digital technology manufacture and use', including its '"invisible" material aspects' such as 'the labour of the prosumers', the materiality of 'digital data objects', and 'the fleshly dimensions of human subjects and their interactions with others' bodies and with objects' (Lupton, 2015: 25, 26 and 38).

But this corporeal materialism, as we may call it, and with it the idea that all that exist is matter, is trivial and noncontroversial. In reality, new materialism, which is at the core of the nonhuman turn and thereby of digital sociology, is much more than that: it is a naïve materialism of matter based on a largely substantialist conception of matter which admits no qualitative differences between beings and entities, but only differences of degree or intensity. Here it is perhaps necessary to state that the idea that matter is not something inert, for it is traversed by an aleatoric dynamics immanent to matter itself, is by no means new. What is peculiar of new materialism is its conception of matter as vital or sentient, even as conversing, remembering, yearning and thinking matter, as Karen Barad (2012) claims, and its attempt to, on these bases, rehabilitate *animism*, that anti-modern trait which results

from a misconceived effort to overcome anthropocentrism – animism which finds one of its best-known manifestations in the animistic materialism, which she prefers to call 'vital materialism', of Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010), an influential book which has the merit of being both anti-Marxian, as it seeks to revalue and restore the fetishism of things-objects-commodities, and anti-Weberian, as it purports to re-enchant the world, that is, to restore meaning to the world as religions do. Digital sociology's materialism, based as it is on these new materialist ontologies, endows the agential capacities it attributes to everything that exists with 'affective forces' supposedly able to enchant the world, which gives us the other side of corporeal materialism, namely, 'enchanted materialism', as Lupton (2020: 30–34) claims.

Now, the democratic and materialist aspects we have expounded are *inseparable* and only together, as 'democratic materialism' (Badiou, 2009: 1f; 2018: 14) or materialist democratism, do they constitute the spontaneous metaphysics or ideology of our time – a metaphysics whose founding ontological axiom Alain Badiou formulates thus: 'there are only bodies and languages', or, in a narrower anthropological variant, 'there are only individuals and communities'. This metaphysics is what we all 'instinctively' think today, that is, what we take for granted in our immediate plans. It is therefore a spontaneous, non-reflected metaphysics or a 'natural' belief ('natural' in the sense of inculcated nature) we all, or nearly all, share. Almost everyone is a democratic materialist today, and digital sociology is no different – on the contrary, it is a happy carrier of the digital variant of democratic materialism, a variant whose foundational onto-anthropological axiom I propose to formulate thus: *there are only bodies-selves and connections-sociality*. With this axiom in mind it is easy to see what the fundamental problem for digital sociology will be: to study how different kinds of bodies-selves affect and are affected by different types of connections-sociality.

However, fully accounting for this foundational axiom and showing in concrete terms how it underlies digital sociology's logic and dynamics is a task for a future study. Here suffice it to say that everything centres on life, on living bodies-selves that experience pleasure and pain, enjoyment and suffering. So the proposed axiom in reality means – we continue to follow in Badiou's footsteps (2009: 1f, and 2014: 341f and 375f) – that there are basically two kinds of bodies-selves, suffering and enjoying bodies-selves, and two types of connections-sociality, authoritarian or imposed by different forms of coercion, and voluntary, freely negotiated and entered into, which in practice means contractual (whether formally or only informally contractualised). But these categories are rarely spelled out; they are simply resorted to in a spontaneous way, as if they went without saying. Regarding surveillance, for instance, it is said that there are 'coercive and social exclusionary modes of surveillance', but this needs not to be so; in effect, 'digital surveillance may be coercive … or it may be benign' (Lupton, 2015: 142 and 34). These are the basic, truly distinct categories, but they of course admit intermediate types.

Playing this combinatorics one can easily tell the happy associations between bodies-selves and connections-sociality from the inappropriate ones. One can immediately see, for instance, that authoritarian connections-sociality produce suffering bodies-selves, or that bodies-selves of enjoyment only desire voluntary connections-sociality. Digital sociology can be considered as an expert field in this digital combinatorial cuisine – a cuisine which becomes a bit more complicated as soon as we add other categories of healthy and happy bodies-selves, for example, those involved in 'Wellness' (see Till, 2017), the bizarre corporate term used for this mix of work and 'health' which aims at making workers, for example, academics, endure overwork, exploitation and oppression, and results in a third type which perhaps points to a truly distinctive mark of digital capitalism: *subjugated* bodies-selves and *nudging* connections-sociality.

Research 'ethics', or the connections-sociality that are said to be 'ethical' in research

This combinatorics comes with its own 'ethics', predictably so, since nowadays there is no major undertaking, whether to care or to kill, that should not be done 'ethically'. 'Wellness' itself is the corporate health 'ethics'. It is an ethics of the living based on avoiding (avoidable) suffering and harm to bodies-

selves and favouring their enjoyment, all done with a view to form submissive or, *à la* Foucault, docile bodies of enjoyment, full of enthusiasm and willing to participate. It was precisely when Web 2.0 was being developed, and with it the digital participatory culture and the 'social' media, in the early years of the century, that the academic research 'ethics' was set up in UK universities. And that is the irony of it, that a set of totally extrinsic regulations and protocols aimed to *contractualise* the research relation was put in place at the very moment when the big tech corporations began the gigantic process of automated extraction, appropriation and total surveillance of people *qua* data – a process of planetary dimensions we came to know about after Edward Snowden's massive leaks. Nothing has changed since then, except that the corporate-state surveillance complex has extended and deepened even further its grip and power to manipulate, as is made clear by the case of Cambridge Analytica and its multiple associate and descendant companies in the tech industry linking the private and military intelligence and security sector to the behavioural-cognitive-military complex (Biddle, 2017; Shaw, 2018).

Now, formal consent is at the heart of the academic research 'ethics'. In effect, the imposition of a request to obtain 'informed consent' from research participants through a written form constitutes a key operation of that 'ethics', for it is what guarantees the transformation of the research relation into a business relation based on the involved individuals' and above all organisations' interests – indeed a crucial stipulation of that bureaucratic apparatus is that 'possible criticism of commercial and government organisations needs to be flagged up when negotiating consent' (Holmwood, 2010: 117). Hammersley's (2010) article's very title says exactly what this is: 'Creeping Ethical Regulation and the Strangling of Research' (see the special issue section on research ethics in which Holmwood's and Hammersley's articles appear). That such bureaucratic apparatus with its 'ethical' research protocols and panels 'function to shield power from scrutiny' (Wilson, 2018), making serious, uncompromising research impossible, should surprise nobody.

As corresponds strictly to the workings of an *apparatus* (Agamben, 2009), which creates its own subjects (pliable researchers and eager bureaucrats populating 'ethics' panels) rather than simply modelling and governing already existing ones, researchers and research participants, mediated as they are by the interposed consent form, become *separate* beings, prevented from – and this is what is decisive to the highest degree, indeed it is a variant of probably the oldest antipopular political strategy – the possibility of establishing social relations involving a level of affinity and above all trust, and still compelled to enter into a relation that can only be a business relation between 'partners', that is, associates and competitors. This is what research participants and researchers become in the context of a research 'ethics' framework which obliterates the intrinsic value of research and deactivates its immanent logic.

Democratic materialism, the tyranny of numbers and the desire to live without ideas

The conclusion to be drawn from what we have seen so far is that digital sociology is so deeply aligned to the digital that it reproduces the most basic patterns of digital existence. This goes well beyond the empirical fact of being an active participant in social media platforms and having properly curated selves in the relevant websites – in truth the connexionist disposition according to which such laborious self-marketing is matter-of-factly considered and openly recognised as one of the 'main activities in which digital sociologists can engage' (Lupton, 2015: 15) is much more significant. But what is truly decisive is, first of all, that such disposition binds sociology inexorably to the regime of communication and circulation prevailing in the digital and in today's world – a deeply inconsistent and illogical regime which undoes the logic of any consistent temporality while it presides over an endless traffic made up of a hotchpotch of commentaries and remarks, preferences and images, all commanded by the omnipresent metrics, that is, by the ranked counts of 'likes', 'friends', 'shares' and so forth which invite participants to unleash still more traffic. At the same time, secondly, digital sociology reproduces the dominant ideology of our time, an ideology perfectly suited to contemporary capitalism in both its form, as a spontaneous belief or a

'natural' way of 'thinking' which goes along with and naturalises the given, and its content, as democratic materialism is a materialism that seeks to include everything in what concerns fleshly, bodily and objective life, everything but the Idea, but thought. Who can be surprised that such materialism should tend to end up in obscure spiritualist moves like the above-considered anti-modern animism? In brief: for all its vibrancy, it is a crude and destitute materialism, a materialism of matter divested of subjectivation.

However, what I have just formulated negatively, as a major lack, can be considered positively. In effect, a convinced democratic materialist would argue, with Tristan Garcia (2018: 12), that, far from that lack being a flaw, it is democratic materialism's virtue, perhaps its greatest one, which lies in that it 'has learned to no longer dogmatically judge using the intrinsic value of works and ideas'. This is an absolutely spot-on formulation, and this for two closely related reasons: first, because the exclusion *and* obliteration of intrinsic value is constitutive of the form of valuing which has become still more dominant with the digital and whose political name is 'tyranny of numbers' or some similar expression. This form of valuing has been conceptualised by Espeland and Stevens (1998: 324) in an article that is a major reference in the digital sociology literature as 'commensuration', a 'form of valuing [that] denies the possibility of intrinsic value, pricelessness, or any absolute category of value'. For example, what counts in an online post or a journal article is not the intrinsic value of its contents or its truth, but the number of likes, downloads or shares. Espeland and Stevens also argue, in the sentence preceding the one just quoted, that according to the logic of commensuration 'all value is relative'. This may please democratic materialist sensibilities, but Espeland and Stevens forget to add: except the value-claim that states that 'all value is relative', which is obviously *absolute* – a neglect that is in stark contrast with the association, correct otherwise, of intrinsic value to absolute value, which surely horrifies contemporary democratism. This is how a major ideologeme of contemporary subjectivities, with their rampant relativism, is reproduced in full under the guise of scientific analysis.

The second reason why Garcia's formulation is practically perfect is that it provides the ideological core of democratic materialism seen from its historical angle, and it is certainly not by chance that it comes in the form of a historically learned lesson. Indeed, that was exactly the thesis of the 'end of ideology' doctrine proclaimed by Daniel Bell (1960) and other conservative intellectuals in the late 1950s – a thesis very close to the 'end of absolute values' (temporal definition of the age in which 'all value is relative') which one should read, first of all, literally, as the end of Ideas. Secondly, as the expression of an obscure desire and the corresponding injunction to live without Ideas, and without thought. And thirdly, as can be seen with big data neo-behaviourism, as a given of the situation: thanks to God, we can live without Ideas, all we need to do is count what exists and compare the counts in order to improve it. For that is the whole purpose, to improve what there is or what we have, and the best method to achieve this is the 'mutual adjustments' at the core of Marres' approach. This implies, in perfect accordance with the nonhuman turn ontologies' aversion to binaries and polarised oppositions, that there is no conflict or struggle, which seems to take us to the 'end of history' thesis and show *en passant* how close it is to the 'end of ideology' (and of absolutes) theses and indeed to democratism – after all democratism is nothing but the contemporary, post-modern variant of these three 'end-of' theses.

'Live without Ideas' is the very motto of the cave, and is also what Garcia's formulation amounts to, for if respecting (truly, i.e. uncompromisingly) the intrinsic value of ideas or spheres of life such as e.g. education is a dogmatic attitude one has to cast off, then there are no principles, nor truths, and everything is tradeable and anything permissible – a situation suspiciously resembling our world. True, people are not (normally) explicitly enjoined to live without ideas. As a well-meaning ideology, democratic materialism encourages the free expression of the capacities of one's being, and more generally urges people to enjoy as much as they can. But this takes place in the context of what goes without saying, which is adaptation to what there is and rejection of any notion of intrinsic value. Nevertheless, if need be, people are explicitly enjoined to adapt to things as they are and dissuaded from taking positions which would be almost immediately qualified as dogmatic, even fanatic, as is the case when showing true respect for intrinsic values.

This twofold injunction and aspiration is not a new or recent development; it had already been diagnosed in philosophy, psychoanalysis and indeed social science. Weber diagnosed it at the very end of *The Protestant Ethic* through the famous figure, often considered enigmatic, of the 'specialists without spirit, hedonists without heart' – a conjunctive couple, with its two inseparable components, explicitly presented by Weber as a variant of the Nietzschean last humans, those who believed they had discovered *happiness* and blinked. In this view, which can be considered as Weber's critique *avant la lettre* of Daniel Bell's well-known thesis in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), there is no disjunction between what Bell described as an irrational and permissive cultural sphere enjoining individuals to consume madly and seek instant gratification, and a rational and authoritarian economic sphere imposing strenuous work, 24/7 availability and other forms of algorithmically-determined servitude. Indeed, does not the practice of prosumption show the unreality of that contradiction between supposedly separate spheres? Nor could Bell lament that what he once celebrated as the 'end of ideology' returned in the real (not as any cultural contradiction of capitalism, but) as *nihilist subjectivity*, so well captured by Weber's conjunctive couple as the foremost subjective figure of capitalist modernity.

Materialism of the idea and the materialist dialectic, digital variant

Let us pause for a moment and declare plainly that, in this situation, it is absolutely imperative for social theory to be able not only to extricate itself from the digital traffic, but to counter that destitute materialism and more generally to undo its alignment to the digital. But this is not something social theory can do by simply pulling on its own hair, as the Baron Munchausen is said to have done to save himself from drowning. To achieve that, social theory needs to propose and assert a principle of interruption (of the spectacle) and separation (or unbinding from digital habits and existence) which must also be an affirmative principle of orientation and projection, that is, as Heidegger argues in his painstaking interpretation of the cave allegory (2002: 43, original emphasis), 'a projective *binding of oneself*' to the Idea(s). This can be considered as a very apposite understanding of *subjectivation*, which is certainly a binding to a *principle* that is itself an unconditional requirement for thought and therefore for the conduct of life, not something one can tamper with. But a principle can also be a truth, an Idea, an ultimate value-idea (ultimate because reducible to no other) or an intrinsic value, all of which can be embraced as a cause or otherwise as a vocation, since they are valid for all thinking beings. Now it so happens that it is exactly this – a binding or real commitment to principles, ideas, causes or truths and the consequent deployment of forms of action and conduct to make such principles effective in the world – what the contemporary world declares as non-desirable or impossible and discredits as dogmatism and fanaticism. Indeed, the digital combinatorial cuisine, which must not be confused with what academics themselves may declare to desire, does not admit, as we have seen, relations of friendship and trust (e.g. between researcher and research participants), nor can digital capitalism tolerate faithfulness to truths, principles and causes.

It is very significant, in this respect, but not surprising that the intrinsic values denied *and* obliterated by the tyranny of numbers, or of 'commensuration', are also disregarded by digital sociology textbooks (with the possible exception of Daniels et al., 2016), concerned as they are with being seen in tune with the digital. It is not surprising precisely because such values can fulfil the function of principles of interruption, orientation and projection we said social theory necessitates in order to exit-return to the digital. For, let us ask: what does it mean that a form of life or a realm of activity such as education or healthcare have intrinsic value? It means that they have 'dignity', that is, in the strict Kantian sense, that they have no price, since they are worthy in themselves and, as such, constituted as *ends* of life and not as mere means or instruments one can dispense with, commodify or 'privatize' and tamper with.

The consequence of this is that what has dignity is worthy of 'respect'. But this does not mean that such realms are unproblematic and nonconflicting, or that they cannot be changed – they can, provided that it is done in accordance with their immanent logic and constitutive principles. But it is this, exactly this, what the tyranny of numbers or the despotism of quantification is constituted against – indeed it is

the very existence of spheres of activity which have intrinsic value and hence dignity, and are therefore constituted as autonomous (which does not mean 'independent') realms in a fundamental sense, what that power cannot admit or tolerate. In effect, this power, which is perhaps the main manifestation of capitalism today, does not admit alterity, otherness. Hence the imperious drive to make universities 'more data-driven, competitive, and market-focused'; hence the fact that 'universities, staff and students are translated into calculable objects, evaluated and ascribed [capitalistic] value' (Williamson, 2021: 51). Indeed, subjecting such autonomous realms to extrinsic values and measurements, to a whole metrics, is the weapon used to, first, strip them of their dignity, second, make them disreputable and, finally, destroy them and bring the resulting debris into the only realm entitled to exist, that of capital, and under the total rule of the only legitimate masters: the 'investors', quickly become 'educational rentiers' and self-serving 'futurists' (Komljenovic, 2021), and their servants or managers, those in charge of eradicating any notion of the intrinsic value and imposing extrinsic (bureaucratic-capitalistic) metrics.

What we rely upon as an affirmative counter to the crude and destitute materialism prevailing today and the obscure desire to live without Ideas is precisely a materialism of the Idea as outlined in Badiou's philosophy (see Ruda, 2015, for an excellent analysis). But does this mean that an Idea, be it in the form of a cause (e.g. equality, emancipation) or a vocation (e.g. for education, science, care), has a material reality? What is crucial to understand here is not so much the evident fact that the cause or the vocation exist in a material sense only to the extent that there are militants faithful to the cause or professionals committed to their vocation, and that this material existence is all the more consistent the more that faithfulness and commitment be organised in institutions, movements and different practices. Even more important is the fact, often neglected or obfuscated, that these very material carriers are themselves the effect of the cause or the vocation. In this dialectics, which is the process at stake here, the Idea itself (as cause, as vocation) causes and motivates all those individual and collective carriers and the institutions and practices through which they organise their actions. In brief: Ideas are effective.

The consequence we are compelled to draw from this dialectical relation between the Idea and its material carriers is that, although we agree with the democratic materialist axiom that there are only bodies-selves and connections-sociality, yet we object to it that this is not the whole story or that this is not-all. Why? Because there is thought. Thus, the foundational axiom of the 'materialist dialectic' (Badiou, 2009), digital variant, I initially propose, has this provisional formulation: there are only bodies-selves and connections-sociality, *except that there is thought*.

In this statement, the 'except that' clause – which, given that thought obviously works with Ideas, principles, truths, or intrinsic values, can in principle also be said with any of the latter – is in position of *exception* to what there is, to what seems self-evident and unquestionable. Critical here is to understand, first of all, that the opposition between democratic materialism and materialist dialectic is not a strict dialectical contradiction in the classical Marxist sense – if it were it would mean that democratic materialism is rejected *tout court*, but that is not the case because the existence of thought is not in continuity with what there is, nor is it a supplement to bodies-selves and connections-sociality; rather thought exists in another realm, heterogeneous to what there is. Secondly, Badiou's opposition defines today's fundamental struggle not as the classical one between materialism and idealism, but as one between two forms of materialism, democratic and dialectical, and therefore situates the struggle within materialism itself as the dominant or hegemonic ideology of our time.

By way of conclusion: the dialectical labour of exiting and returning to the digital cave

The Irish poet's stance, cited before, that poetry ought to be transformative, not just a printout of the given, is all the more relevant for us in that sociologists I have spoken to are convinced that digital sociology should above all provide a printout of reality, and disinclined, or opposed, to go beyond that. In truth, one soon discovers that they do not believe that there is anywhere else to go, and they refuse to

seriously consider the necessity of exiting the cave, which is not surprising, for this move, to which they initially wanted to appear as sympathetic, is obviously wholly antithetical to the desire to be in the digital party.

But what can that stance, common to art, science and politics mean for social theory? It means, quite simply, that what is important is not what there is, but what is missing or lacking and has to be developed. Therefore, a social theory of the kind we have outlined in this article will not give priority to providing a printout of the given, but will focus instead on what is not given, that is, on the exceptions regarding thought and therefore principles, truths and vocations. It is these exceptions which constitute, on the one hand, the foundation of subjectivation, of the existence of subjects devoted to causes, truths and values, and therefore of autonomous realms of life ruled by those principles and norms, and, on the other hand, what the capitalist logic driving the digital cannot tolerate – hence the other important object of enquiry, namely: studying how such autonomous realms are corrupted, stifled or made marginal and insignificant.

In truth, the very printout of the given is very different once the exceptionality of thought and what it involves is affirmed: to begin with, the focus will be on what is not immediately given, namely, on how the digital condition, including algorithmic monitoring and control, structures our world, giving it, as Günther Anders thought, an ever thicker oligarchic shape, and on how the development of properly democratic and therefore egalitarian societies is made extremely difficult if not impossible. More generally, the totalizing democratic materialist axiom underlying digital sociology (there are only bodies-selves and connections-sociality, and this is all there is) is *de-totalized*, which is crucial to construct and maintain the aforementioned autonomous realms (e.g. of enquiry, education), spaces autonomous with respect to the statist-corporatist ambitions of total surveillance and constant examination of the whole population, of *all and each* – the totalising 'all' and the individualising 'each', *omnes et singulatim*, as Foucault had it, grouped, re-grouped and profiled according to a variety of fragments and segments, and subjected to ever more predatory forms of capture and addiction-inducing techniques. The significance of such autonomous realms is all the greater in that they constitute both the guarantee and the result of the dialectics of exit and return to the digital cave, an activity which is itself the basis of the creation of new possibilities to transform both self and world in an emancipatory direction.

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