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Book Review

Digital Rebellion: The Birth of the Cyber Left

Todd Wolfson

*Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2014. ISBN 978-0-252-03884-6 (hardback), \$85.00
ISBN 978-0-252-08038-8 (paperback), \$30.00, Pp. 248.*

I have always found – and my dialogues with colleagues have done nothing more than confirm it – that one of the greatest obstacles of part of the social movements scholarship is the absence of empathy with the studied phenomena. Many researchers analyse social movements as if they were dissecting insects, from a cold, and distant point of view: often, the result is that young scholars wanting to approach this fascinating field of research are somehow held back by this analytical coldness that lessens their enthusiasm for exploring collective action. Wolfson's monograph is the opposite of this. While maintaining a solid academic ground, he is able to bring to the fore all his passion as a political activist, organizer and founder of the Philadelphia's Media Mobilizing Project (<http://mediamobilizing.org>). Wolfson's book is a critical and historical examination of the implications of new media and communication technologies on the spatial and organizational fabric of social movements. The scholar starts his academic journey exploring the Zapatista uprising, and then focuses on Indymedia that he conceives as 'the exemplification of a new stage in social movements, the Cyber Left' (p. 17). The second part of his monograph is dedicated to scrutinizing three key interwoven dynamics that set the Cyber Left apart from early protest movements. First, the intense use of new technologies (strategy), then its decentralized and multiscalar network structure, and finally the governance aspect that defines this network as a 'local, national and global application of direct, participatory democracy' (p. 17). Besides his ability to blend rigorous ethnographic work and cultural and historical analysis with his knowledge and

experience as an activist, Wolfson's contributions to the literature on social movements and the use of communication technologies are various: in this review, I will focus on two of them.

First, his adoption of a diachronic perspective is able to shed light on social, political and cultural dynamics and processes of media change that many studies leave behind, since their obsession with the latest technological gadget prevent them from appreciating continuities and disruptions that illuminate the foundational role of Indymedia and of the global social justice movement in struggles such as Occupy, the Arab uprisings, the #YoSoy132 movement, the Spanish Indignados, and other contemporary uprisings. Second, Wolfson provides a lucid, articulated critique of the Cyber Left. Consequently, he discusses the four main interrelated causes that lead to the decline of the global social justice movement, namely: 'the lack of leadership from those most of oppressed' (p. 21), 'a deterministic understanding and use of technology' (p. 21), 'an inability to make proactive decisions and build long-term powerful social-movement organizations' (p. 22), and finally the 'lack of a shared strategy and political-education program to build clear and committed leaders' (p. 22). Through his first critique, Wolfson reintroduces the question of class relations and capitalism within the social movements/digital activism debate that often shies away from these issues. Furthermore, through a careful exploration of the activist laboratories that predated Indymedia (in Chapter 2), he is able to show that technological determinism and digital solutionism plagued the Cyber Left from its origins: this aspect helps to explain the current tendency to tech utopianism when analysing the role of media technologies for social change. The third critique relates to organizational issues, while the last one – lack of political education and leadership development – refers to two necessary ingredients whose absence hinders the 'long-term sustainability of movements' (p. 24).

The only problematic aspect that I encounter in Wolfson's book is its frequent use of the term 'logic'. Even if his understanding of the term is always multifaceted, and informed by his background as a cultural anthropologist, as a media sociologist I find that speaking of 'logics of resistance' could somehow suggest that activists' (media) practices are informed by rational choices to pursue clearly defined purposes, while their daily decisions are frequently crossed by uncertainties, confusion, and misunderstandings that rarely obey a predetermined set of rules.

Wolfson's monograph represents a valuable contribution to undergraduate courses in social movements, activism, (digital) media and civil society. Also, it can be used as an introductory book for graduate courses in communication, media studies and social change. Its vivid exploration and fine-tuned analysis of the contributions and pitfalls of the Cyber Left represents a timely addition to the ignited debate about the ambivalent roles of communication technologies within contemporary uprisings.

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