The digital age and its discontents

Matteo Stocchetti

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EDITORIAL

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Introduction

The problematization of the digital age in education through the interpretative lenses of Freud's Civilization and Its Discontents was inspired by a short comment on the relationship between the 'price of civilization' and education. In Freud's own word, the main point of that study was

> to represent the sense of guilt as the most important problem in the development of civilization and to show that the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt (Freud, 2005 (1930), pp. 137-138)

The role of education is shortly commented in a note, at the end of that sentence:

> 'Thus consciousness does make cowards of us all ... .' That the education of young people at the present day conceals from them the part which sexuality will play in their lives is not the only reproach which we are obliged to make against it. Its other sin is that it does not prepare them for the aggressiveness of which they are destined to become the objects. In sending the young onto life with such a false psychological orientation, education is behaving as though one were to equip people starting a Polar expedition with summer clothing and maps of the Italian Lakes. In this it becomes evident that a certain misuse is being made of ethical demands. The strictness of those demands would not do so much harm if education were to say: 'This is how men ought to be, in order to be happy, and to make others happy; but you have to reckon on their not being like that.' Instead of this the young are made to believe that everyone else fulfills those ethical demands – that is, that everyone else if virtuous. It is on this that the demand is based that the young, too, shall become virtuous. (Freud, 2005 (1930), p. 138)

With Freud, we believe digitalization is a social process as inevitable as civilization and the question of how to live with it is more interesting than that of how to live without it. Also with Freud, we believe that to pay attention to its discontents is a useful intellectual strategy to this end.

Our interest in discontents, however, depart from Freud's analysis in at least two fundamental ways. First, while for Freud the word 'civilization' describes a state of affairs independent from particular connotations (Freud, 2005 (1930), pp. 72-73), for us the word 'digitalization' describes a process whose connotation and outcomes depends on particulars and, more precisely, on ideology and education. Second, while Freud pays little attention to education and, when it does, he criticizes the education of his time for 'sending youth into life with (…) false psychological orientation', for us education is a key process to deal with the problems and even the risks associated to digitalization and to bring about a radical chance in its ideological connotation.

In this essay and, perhaps less explicitly, in the collection of essays (Stocchetti, forthcoming 2020) the focus is on the price of digitalization and the betrayal of education. In our case, the price of digitalization is the loss of freedom, in a contemporary enactment of ancient myths telling the story of creators becoming victims of their own creation. The betrayal of education consists in the uncritical endorsement of this loss and in the cowardly acceptance of pedagogical visions compliant with their ideological justification.

The question is not one of *choosing* among available options but one of *formulating* alternatives – and, in the process, questioning the origins of unduly restrictions in this direction, their legitimacy and the nature of the social forces that, consciously or not, support them. I probe this possibility through the double problematization of 'discontents' and the role of education.

The focus on digital discontents is part of a strategy with fundamental epistemic implications: a productive standpoint or critical heuristic, to look at the forces originating the need for alternatives and to lead the efforts of addressing this need. The educational standpoint describes not only the site of a problem (e.g., discontents about the role of technology in education) but also, and more interestingly, the production site of possible solutions (e.g., the role of education to address the causes of digital discontent).

Discontent and its heuristics

The starting point is the idea that the notion of discontent describes a point of view with epistemic implications: a heuristic based on alternative interpretations of a state of affairs and alternative evaluations of its implications.

In political analysis, "discontent" is a notion describing a particular condition of the political process. A condition between consent and opposition in which the first has ceased to exist and the latter does not exist yet. 'Discontent' is not 'opposition' yet but not anymore 'consent' either. In its static connotation, like a point in time, discontent can describe a liminal condition that signal the end of a regime of consent. Construed as a process, 'discontent' describes the beginning of the end of a state of affair and the humus where a new state of affairs will germinate.

Because of its indeterminacy, the condition of discontent is also a difficult one to capture through established analytical categories. To the extent that discontent is a sign of an imminent or even ongoing crisis of an existing order, and to the extent that this order can influence the practices of knowledge to its own advantage, the epistemic attitude is presumably one of denial rather than acknowledgment. The epistemics of discontents, therefore, lays the grounds for a process of change that, in the social world, always involve relations of power and relations of meaning.

The appeal of this notion and the reason why it appeared so tempting an access point for a critique of digitalization is that it lays the grounds for the subversion of the relations of power and meaning it describes. In more technical terms, 'discontent' is a notion describing an epistemic attitude encompassing the 'three analytical levels' of critical hermeneutics, consisting in 'a theory of meaning, a theory of action, and a theory of experience' (Roberge, 2011, p. 16). With critical hermeneutics, the epistemics of discontent is a 'theoretical project seeking to radicalize the task of comprehension' (Roberge, 2011, p. 17).

Applied to the present stage of our digital age, the standpoint of digital discontent allows at least three important epistemic 'moves': First, the return of the suppressed as a destabilizing force for ideological meanings and their relations of power; second, the conceptualization of the future in terms of a 'space' between utopia & dystopia; third, a profound mutation in the discursive construction of the relationship between technology and education: from the idea that education must adapt to technological development to the idea that the education is the social activity that can address the root causes of digital discontent and avoid a dystopian future.

By conceptualizing digital discontent as an epistemic standpoint for a critique of technological development, we can avoid the opposite, but equally sterile, positions of endorsement and rejection, and choose instead the alternative angle of a process in the making: half-way between a state of affair that is no more and the inevitable change to come. By giving voice to digital discontent, however, we evoke an imminent ending and construe the future as a threat or an opportunity. The first step in this direction is to look at the 'return of the suppressed'.

The return of the suppressed

The second idea is that the performance of the intellectual functions associated with the critical hermeneutics of digital discontents, brings about what, in the lack of a better term, I would call the 'return of the suppressed'.

In psychoanalysis, suppression is a defensive mechanism consisting in the selective removal of conflicts from consciousness. While in repression this removal is unconscious, in suppression it is conscious. Suppression is a better term because our analysis of digital discontents deals not with its unconscious aspects but with realities who are simply neglected because incompatible with the projects that seek to instrumentalize digitalization.

The suppressed that is returning are, in essence, the democratic affordances of the 'information revolution' which had the potential to be a real revolution – a radical subversion of the existing distribution of power in society. And it was precisely because this potential was so great and obvious that it activated the forces who had both the interests and the resources to thwart it. The beginning of that 'revolution', in the late 1970s occurred when the compromise between capitalism and democracy known as the 'postwar consensus' had collapsed, the upheavals of 1968 had been sedated and Neoliberalism, in the US and UK, was set to dismantle the remnants of the welfare state in their respective societies. In those early days, the conflict associated with the competing affordances of new technologies – useful for democracy but necessary for the financialization and globalization of capitalism – were resolved with the suppression of their democratic potential.

Thirty years later, that potential 'returns' in dystopic forms. We are realizing that new technologies support not democratic but undemocratic participation (fake news, disinformation, filter bubbles, eco-chambers, etc.), undermining the credibility of democratic ideals and revitalizing ideologies of fear. Notions such as those of 'disinformation society' (Marshall, 2017) and 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff, 2019) describe the fundamental crisis new communication technologies have brought about in the relationship between capitalism and democracy. They describe the condition of a capitalism that is ultimately devouring itself, in which the state and the corporation cannot handle the instability and openness (once a fundamental condition for prosperity and capital accumulation) of a digital world of their own making.

The intellectual interest for Marxian interpretations of technological development (Fuchs, 2014; Fuchs & Mosco, 2016; Wendling, 2009) is perhaps a sign of this 'return'. For all practical purposes, however, one should not forget that, as other social processes, also this 'return' has dialectical aspects.

The return of the suppressed democratic potential in its dystopic forms feeds and legitimizes the deployment of ever more pervasive regimes of digital surveillance to protect a system in crisis, setting off a toxic spiral for democratic ideals and practices. This spiral, however, erodes also the viability of the system itself as both the state and the corporation increasingly depend on constant surveillance by a large and invisible army of experts. The price of this dependence is the progressive erosion of freedom (even economic freedoms!) for the sake of security and 'surveillance capitalism' is also a capitalism under surveillance: too weak to survive merely through its ideological appeal. Digitalization serves the return of political participation, albeit in its undemocratic forms, as well as the repressive forces this return seeks to challenge.

For a capitalism in a state of coma, the distinction between dream and reality is blurred by agonizing pain and fear of an imminent termination. It is in this space, in the twilight of a dying order and its unborn heir, that ideas such as the radical democratization of technology and the radical digitalization of democracy return like ideas of the past projecting themselves into a 'postdigital' condition with utopian and dystopian features.

From digital discontent to the 'postdigital'

A third idea is that the epistemics of discontent can perform critical hermeneutic functions for the conceptualization of digitalization beyond its current condition (Peters & Besley, 2019). The importance of the debate about the 'postdigital' consists precisely in this: an effort to open up a conceptual space where the relationship between technological development and society can be

thought, discussed, written about and ultimately socially experienced outside hegemonic relations of meaning.

The epistemics of digital discontent seeks knowledges, new or suppressed, bearing the potential to discard the capitalist appropriation of the digital 'revolution'. It can do that, for example, by pointing to the ambivalent effects of the return of the suppressed on the crisis of capitalism. The mobilization of new/suppressed knowledges, depends on interpretation and ultimately in the conceptual organization of a problematic reality.

The problematization of a new concept, the 'postdigital', signal the effort to develop a conceptual space, between the extremes of utopia and dystopia, where the three analytic level of critical hermeneutics – involving meaning, action, and experience – can be deployed in support of the formulation of alternatives.

The debate the notion itself is useful because, notwithstanding some definitional troubles, it creates a discursive space for the 'subversive rationalization' of technology sought by Andrew Feenberg or, in other words, to redesign industrialism in ways more compatible with democracy (Feenberg, 1992, p. 318).

The development of alternatives 'orders of discourse' is necessary to challenge the symbolic power of ideological interpellation but is always a difficult process. One may recall the aversion of philosophical postmodernism for the institutionalization of power/knowledges that occurs in the practices of defining our concepts. And one should also recall the Marxist critique of the political effects of this aversion (Callinicos, 1989; Norris, 1990) and heed the warning about the political implications of postmodern epistemics:

> What could be more reassuring for a generation, drawn first towards and then away from Marxism by the political ups and downs of the past two decades, than to be told (…) that there is nothing that they can do to change the world? (Callinicos, 1989, p. 170)

The definitional problems in the current debate about the postdigital (Arndt et al., 2019; Jandrić et al., 2018; 2019; Knox, 2019) have two main causes. First, the complexity of the intellectual task this concept is designed to perform (describing, interpreting and prescribing). Second, and more importantly, the epistemic problem of the 'critical dimension of the 'post' prefix' (Jandrić et al., 2018, p. 895) or, in other words, to develop the tools to study and change what we study *in emancipative direction*.

With epistemics grounds compatible with those of critical hermeneutics, another important merit of this debate is to focus the attention of its participants to the postdigital in education (Fawns, 2019; Jandrić et al., 2019; Knox, 2019). This is important because it signals the possibility of a radical re-thinking of the role of education.

Utopia or dystopia? The role of education

The finally idea, thus, is to problematize education as part of the solution: not merely the place of more or less deliberate 'resistance' against digitalization but as the fertile ground for a democratic digitalization. While seeking conceptual openings to rethink the relationship between technological development and society, within the extreme possibilities of utopia and dystopia, the debate about postdigital education configures the role of education as crucial to steer our societies in this space.

Bringing education into the picture of digital discontent, opens a space for the radical revision and subversion of the relationship between technological development and education in comatose capitalism. The salient aspect of this opening is the realization that, as the time to choose between capitalism and democracy has arrived, the ideological competition for the control of education is a key arena.

Problematizing digital discontent in education questions the neoliberal equation that neutralizes the radical potential of education by subordinating education itself to the reproduction of

the labour force. On ideological grounds, it challenges the interpellation of students as future 'human resource' instead of citizens; as skilled labour or 'critical' consumers, instead of legitimate, competent and active repositories of political sovereignty.

The 'return of the suppressed' here is the democratic potential of education: the 'power' of education as a secularizing force capable of challenging hegemonic visions of technological development and formulate alternative digitalization. The social construction of the future depends on education (the politics of education as it were) and, if this is true, we need to modify the terms in which we think the relationship between technology education and society. From 'the impact of technology on education' to *the impact of education on technological development*.

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Matteo Stocchetti
Arcada University of Applied Sciences, Helsinki
✉ matteo.stocchetti@arcada.fi