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MARX & INSTAGRAM: CONCEIVING THE INTERNET AS A ZONE OF CAPITALIST RELATIONS

In recent years, there has been a widespread effort within the anthropological community to square the phenomenon of globalization with anthropological thought and ethnographical strategy. The Internet – given its rapidly increasing usage across the planet and its drastic effects on time and space – is a crucial part of this discourse. In this essay, I will explain how the Internet, despite the impossibly complicated global network it represents, can be understood as an intimate part of everyday life. This theoretical framework – known as "embedded Internet" – is favorable to an anthropological approach to "the global," because it implies that we can study the hermeneutic dynamics of the Internet; but it is likewise restricted by the methodological limits of traditional ethnography. In response to this dilemma, I will apply Karl Marx's theory of commoditization to a particularly germane case of "embedded Internet": Instagram. In doing so, I hope to bypass the ethnographical challenges of embedded Internet, and to forward a theory of how meaning can be made in in our digital world.

When considering "the Internet," it is tempting to understand it as a digital realm, entirely separate from physical reality and everyday experience. Seen this way, the Internet represents a "cyberspace" that we can "plug into." Its users temporarily "leave reality behind," assuming new identities, comprising new social and media networks, and constructing new portals and interfaces. Thenceforth the Internet then becomes a distinctly nonphysical sphere that we can occupy and "colonize" (Hine 2015:33) as users.

This paragraph was widely employed by the anthropological community in the early years of the digital age (Hine 2015:33), but anthropologists have largely moved away from it, and currently favor the alternate model of "embedded Internet" (Intel 2009, as cited by Hine 2015:32). Unlike the bounded nature of "cyberspace," embedded Internet is thoroughly enmeshed in the fabric of everyday experience. It is a dimension not outside of reality, but within it. Under this theoretical framework, the Internet ceases to manifest itself as an imagined domain, and now becomes an element of subjective meaning making. Its nature emerges *through practice*, in the consciousness of the user (Hine 2015:29).

This highly ethnographic approach to Internet is better suited to anthropology than the "cyberspace" archetype, because it does not allow for "imaginative abstraction," but rather fosters theories that are "closer to the ground" (Geertz 1973:24). The Internet, as with "culture" or "society," cannot be understood as a whole; that would be impossible. It must be recognized both multifariously and heuristically (Hine 2015:37), in the manifold "frames of meaning making" of its users (Hine 2015:33).

Yet although the "embedded" model of Internet is a good tool for anthropological theory, it is problematic in ethnographical practice. Perhaps the most fundamental obstacle is that, whereas ethnographies are traditionally conducted at a specific site, the Internet, by definition, does not have one. Users interact and make meaning on a digital platform, across vast swathes of time and space, thus making it difficult for the anthropologist to gain the "emotional and embodied understanding" (Hine 2015:55) that physical interface permits. And while this certainly does not mean the Internet is off limits to ethnographers, it restricts the ethnographer's access to the subjective experience through which the Internet reveals its anthropological complexion.

The ethnographical challenges of embedded Internet – and for anthropology of "the global" more generally – have spurred a wave of creativity amongst anthropologists, prompting new ethnographic strategies to use in the field, in addition to new considerations of what "the field" even is (Hine 2015: 58-68). Indeed, the difficulties that come with "global" ethnographic frameworks should likewise be seen as *opportunities* to improve anthropological methodologies.

Nonetheless, given the obstacles that inherently accompany ethnographies for embedded Internet, it is important for the anthropologist to possess a suitable theoretical framework through which to conduct them. Anthropological thought provides crucial guidance to ethnography, and in the case of the Internet, guidance is surely needed.

With this in mind, I believe that a Marxist approach would be invaluable to such ethnographies, specifically Marx's theories surrounding capitalist relations. These ideas dovetail nicely with "macro-ethnographic" inquiries like those for the Internet, because they draw conclusions from the social nature of large-scale structures, while at the same time wresting the implications within the "everyday consciousness" of the subject. Marx's theory of the fetishism of commodities (1867) is a case in point. Through deductive reasoning, Marx connects the global capitalist systems of industrial labor and exchange with the social cognition of its producers by arguing that "the social aspect of labor" – i.e. the meaning that producers make from their labor with respect to the social sphere – crystallizes not through personal relations, but rather through the material exchange of their products. As such, "the relations connecting the labour of one individual with that of the rest appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work but as what they really are, material relations between persons and social relations between things" (Marx:1867). I will expand upon this theory below, but for now it suffices to say that its dualistic mode of thought could fit the model of embedded Internet

particularly well: in the same way that Marx's theory bridges the illusive divide between the macroeconomic structures of capitalism and the individual consciousness of the subject, it could likewise straddle that between the vast, complicated network of the Internet, and the mundane, individualized experience through which it manifests.

The discourses on embedded Internet and Marxist capitalist relations would thus do well to overlap, and Instagram represents a great point of contact. Instagram is a highly popular social media app through which the user can share personal photos and videos with a network of subscribers – or "followers" – in addition to browsing through and commenting on those of other users. The distinguishing characteristic of Instagram is its digital editing interface, wherein the user can add "filters" to pictures, often giving them a more time-worn, nostalgia-inducing appearance, similar that of self-developing film. This, as we shall see, is not only a pertinent case of both embedded Internet and Marxist theory, but also a great example of how the latter application can be used to expand upon the former.

Instagram is deeply embedded in the mundane experience of the user. It is typically employed as an application on mobile smartphones, meaning that users can create, share, and browse digital content almost anywhere. Right away this separates Instagram from the traditional conception of "cyberspace," because its user is not "bound to a single point of Internet access," but is instead free to utilize Instagram "whilst on the move" (Hine 2015:39), thereby incorporating Instagram into her everyday experience. Furthermore, what makes Instagram particularly interesting is that it serves to document, enhance, and effectively redefine of that very experience. The principal idea behind Instagram is to provide a way for the user to capture otherwise mundane moments in her life, and, through the ease of digital editing, "transform the image into a memory to keep around forever" (Instagram 2015). Instagram is therefore tightly

woven into everyday life, not only through its fluid mobility and frequent usage, but also in the sense that it is specifically designed to give new meaning to the mundane experiences of its user.

The question, then, becomes what this new meaning entails. For although the paradigm of embedded Internet helps us to appreciate the degree to which Internet applications like Instagram are interwoven into the tapestry of everyday existence, the abovementioned shortcomings of ethnographical methodology fail to reveal how exactly they impact the subjectivities of the user.

Marx provides a theoretical solution to this dilemma. By drawing a parallel between the capitalist relations Marx traces through industrial society and the relations that exist through Instagram, we can see how the embedded nature of Internet can garner new modes of meaning-making.

In order to appreciate this Marxist application, it is important to view the content of Instagram, i.e. digital photos and videos, not as neutral documentation of experience, but as products of labor, i.e. *commodities*. This economic conception becomes evident, in the first place, on a metaphysical level: taking a photo or video is not the transcription of reality, because, as Foucault (1970:9) reminds us, the nature of reality cannot be transcribed. Pictures – especially edited ones – are creations, not objective reflections. In the second place, the economic nature of Instagram is also apparent at the level of practice. Its production is a calculated process – albeit a relatively uncomplicated one – which occurs both before and after the moment a photo or video is captured. The author of Instagram content must seek out, stage, and frame a given photo or video, and subsequently edit it using a wide variety of "filters" offered on the Instagram interface. Like this, mundane experience is not so much recorded here as it is realized as *social capital*, which is then utilized to produce a stylized commodity.

When we view Instagram content as commodities, it becomes clear that the nature of that labor is decidedly individual in nature. Even if a photo or video on Instagram depicts people other than the user of its source account, the "labor" that went into its production, more often than not, belongs solely to that user. Instagram thus atomizes its producers in a similar vein to industrial production: as with the model of, say, an assembly line, no physical interpersonal relations are involved here. Instead, the "social aspect of labour" exists *outside* the zone of production.

This comes with interesting anthropological implications, specifically with regards to hermeneutics. Consciousness, according to Durkheimian theory, is created, transmitted, and shared on a *social* level (1915:9-10). It is assumed to be a *communal* construct, defined not by objective perception so much as cultural subjectivities (see, for example, Boellstorff 2003:229-230). Thus, when we say that the "social aspect" of Instagram is dissociated from immediate social relations, this is also the case with user's corresponding techniques of meaning-making. The user's cognition is effectively whittled down to a singular point of physical reference – namely the interface of a smartphone – and is re-wired onto digital grids of cognizance, transcending immediate time and space.

Further employing Marx's economic approach, it follows that the social relations of Instagram *re-manifest themselves through the digital exchange of its content*. The rationale here directly mirrors that of industrial production: "since the producers do not come into social contact with each other until they exchange their products, the specific social character of each producers' labour does not show itself except in the act of exchange" (Marx:1867). Remember: what is being exchanged here is not raw information, but rather digital commodities. As such, the meaning that is being made through the Instagram platform is not achieved via direct social

relations, per se, but more precisely through "the fantastic form of a relation between things," i.e. capitalist relations.

Here the relationship between embedded Internet and capitalist relations begins to take shape, at least in the context of Instagram. As outlined above: the user, in commoditizing the mundane experience that Instagram is designed to capture, enters a new network of collective meaning-making, comprised of capitalist relations. Through this logic, Marxist theory demonstrates how embedded Internet can be reconciled with the broad structure that the Internet represents: the former is re-construed as social capital with reference to the capitalist relations of the latter. Hence the hermeneutics of the user – that anthropological dimension of the Internet which is unlocked by the paradigm of embedded Internet – are realized by Marxist thought.

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Clearly this argument is highly theoretical, and this is both its greatest strength and its greatest weakness. On the one hand, a theoretical approach has helped us overcome the limitations of ethnographical methodology that accompany the concept of embedded Internet; on the other, the conclusions we have reached require verification from those very methodologies.

While it is outside the scope of this essay to explore ethnographic strategies for this Marxist framework, one aspect is worth considering. One may think, given the grandiose scope and dramatic implications of Marxist thought, that the subjectivities acquired through Instagram would be a revelatory experience for the user. In reality, however, the entrance into digital capitalist relations is just as mundane as the experience the Internet is embedded into. The shift in consciousness is, to the user, "just as real and final as the fact, that, after the discovery by science of the component gases of air, the atmosphere itself remained unaltered" (Marx:1867). This aligns with Tania Murray Li's findings in the highlands of Indonesia, where she found that

capitalist relations – despite their drastic effects on rural society – "emerged by stealth" (Li 2014:9). The spread of capitalist relations amongst Lauje highlander did not occur through any sort of social upheaval, but rather through their "dull compulsion" (Li 2014:7) to commoditize anything that could be exchanged in the capitalist market. This same subtle process seems to be occurring with Instagram, except that, in this case, capitalist relations have metastasized into a more fundamental level, such that mundane experience itself is being commoditized. I believe the "routine" nature of this phenomenon is important to bear in mind if we are to attempt to observe it through ethnography. There is no "aha moment" to be found here; ethnographers must approach this phenomenon creatively, through multiple conjectures.

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