

Left Hooked on Twitter

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Mass social media, with Twitter as one of its key platforms, presents itself as the ultimate mass democratic instrument, forum for debate and action, and some on the left buy that. The Facebook logo was sprayed on city walls around Tahrir Square, as if the media platform was the original source of the rebellion, but in fact that mass movement was built on thousands of strikes and networks of activists way beyond and outside the computer and mobile screens. And, as Richard Seymour points out in his superb new book *The Twittering Machine*, in Tunisia at the birth of the 'Arab Spring', there were barely two hundred active Twitter users. A Twitter vice-president once claimed that Twitter is 'the free speech wing of the free speech party' - a claim that held out a promise to the libertarian right, and Seymour takes that claim to task, showing how Twitter has actually turned into 'a furnace of meaning' in which the more information we are bombarded with, the less able we are to find our way through it to sensible collective action.



Ian Parker reviews Richard Seymour's [The Twittering Machine](#), lured by birdsong into the pit of hell

The book's title refers to a painting by German anti-fascist Paul Klee in which scratchy-drawn bird-demons crank the handles of a machine that will draw people to their doom. Seymour unveils this dismal picture and the story of our entrapment by this mechanical cyber hell then takes turn after turn for the worse. Along the way Seymour traces the way in which 'operant conditioning' of human beings turned into objects demeans us all, including a deft brief history of the work of the behaviourist psychologist B F Skinner who trained rats to press levers for food and pigeons to peck their way to their deadly destination in the nose-cones of guided weapons.

Skinner's poor pigeons seem to guide the weapons, but, of course, the coordinates are set out for them well before they are popped into their seats. We are not so much in the driving seat in the Twittering Machine, but dragged along on a journey in which we cannot but be good consumers, providing the machine with the information it needs to keep pulling us further in. In the real world we move around and create multiple contradictory networks and relationships, and operant conditioning as devised by Skinner must always fail, but inside the Twittering Machine we at the mercy of the sophisticated regime of dripped out rewards in, as Seymour puts it, 'a wholly designed operant conditioning chamber'.

In this way the mass social media industry in Silicon Valley courted and fed by the Clintons and then Obama has created 'a panopticon effect', by which Seymour means a prison-like architecture in which we are continually monitored or, more to the point, we feel ourselves to be monitored. The terrible beauty of this machine, however, is that we are not observed and regulated from one central command tower - that was the original design of the 'panopticon' regime for ensuring good

behaviour in prisons at the end of the eighteenth century - but our response to 'likes' and attempts to game the system in order to get our point of view accepted means that we are perpetually observing and regulating each other.

Merely having a Twitter account means, as Seymour notes, that you have a 'public image', and posting a 'status' or responding to a comment means that you are caught up in this apparatus as a little entrepreneur of the self, someone with their own public relations strategy. This is what feeds 'identity' and then feeds the trolls who attack you when you display your identity. Identity itself, which is a potent progressive political mobilising force in the domain of collective action, is turned into a limiting cage of the self, which means that you are led to promote yourself and your particular identity inside the Twittering Machine.

It is in this context that the trolls come onto the scene, and as we turn on the trolls we also feed on that regime of competitive spiteful rage that the machine incites - no surprise that Trump is the Twitter President, in 2017 he was worth a fifth of Twitter's share value, feeding the machine - and as we attack, we troll. We are also then ourselves operating as the trolls the machine makes us into inside this hateful echo chamber. Perhaps, Seymour suggests in one of the few forays into pop-psychoanalysis of the machine, 'this collusion between troll and witch-hunter proves so extraordinarily volatile because it plays out something we already do to ourselves, intra-psychically'. Perhaps he is right, and what is so great about this book is the fine line it treads between acute biting psychological analysis and an account of how that form of psychology has been set in place materially, historically.

We are 'addicted' to Twitter, but Seymour is careful to track through exactly what this means, for it is too quick and too easy - much too Twitter-like, we might say - to assume that this 'addiction' is something that simply and naturally flows from our own bad choices. We need a deeper dialectical analysis of what the causes and consequences are of a society in which teenagers spend nine hours of the day looking at a screen, in which 88 percent of users spend an average of a quarter of their waking lives on their phones. It is actually not so much that we are the addicts, but that the machine treats us as if we were addicts. This diagnosis of the problem, a historical materialist diagnosis actually, enables us to understand how it is that Twitter (and other forms of mass social media) functions as the sickness that it pretends to cure. In fact, more engagement with these mass media platforms correlates, as Seymour says, with 'more misery, more self-harm, more suicide'.

The deeper dialectical analysis that Seymour lays out here stretches back to the machinery of writing - printed matter was, he says, 'arguably the first authentically capitalist commodity' - and forward to present-day society in which our lives are drained of meaning and we search for solutions on-screen; 'the addict is as poor as the object is rich'. The nasty twist in the tail, of course, is that objects, commodities, are in themselves not rich at all, and as we consume them, or consume them virtually as the Twittering Machine consumes us, we are all the more impoverished. This Twitter-sphere is then also the seed-ground for fascism. This is where the promise to the libertarian far-right bears its poisonous fruit.

We play in this sand-pit of misery at our peril, but we have no choice. What is important is that we do not make it our lives, do not let it colonise us, do not let ourselves believe that it is the cure, when it is actually but another symptom of a sick society. Does this mean we just keep out? No. Seymour is too smart to let this opportunity for intervention and debate go, and will himself post on social networks. He does this while reminding us there, and in this very smart book, that there is always an alternative. It is that alternative, that other world, the real world and potential future worlds that we ourselves will build, that is most important.

The book winds up with a nice review of what the internet could have been in other political-

economic circumstances, reminding us of the French Minitel state-organised system that was not organised around free-market click-bait advertising and information gathering gearing us into it as consumers. And then, of course, as he reminds us, there were the Luddites, named after a virtual hero, an avatar of the oppressed rebelling against the rule of the machines; it was not, Seymour reminds us, that the cross-dressing, carnivalesque Luddites were against machines as such, but were for machines as put to service for people. They were against people reduced to appendages of machines, just as we should resist being turned into push-pull mechanisms inside social media platforms.

Twitter makes us believe that all of our rebellion can be marketed and 'liked', as if that is all there is. There is more, and every intervention we might make into Twitter (or Facebook or the other social media platforms) should bear that in mind. We need to remember who we are as human beings working collectively when we tactically, carefully and cynically use the Twittering Machine from time to time instead of letting it use us.

Ian Parker

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