

## Book Review

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**@ is for Activism: Dissent, Resistance and Rebellion in a Digital Culture (2011).** Joss Hands. London: Pluto Press, 210 pp. ISBN 978-0-7453-2700-6.

Various events across the globe have shown the power of digital technology, particularly social media, in facilitating rebellion against established power structures. While the role of these new technologies in activism can easily be overplayed, it is equally unwarranted to dismiss it. Hands addresses the question of how the capacity of networked digital communications for resistance and rebellion can be understood, and what conditions and constraints are involved in this. The result is a compelling book, both rich and succinct, theoretically and empirically.

Hands guides the reader through a number of theoretical discussions and concepts, which serve as building blocks for his own account. He also discusses several empirical examples that illustrate his line of thought on crucial points. In the first three chapters, Hands develops his view on (digital) technology. With Feenberg [1] he conceives of the development of technology as a process that “*branches in many directions*” (p. 38), is guided by codes set within the cultural horizon, and is susceptible to local change and adaptation. Following Benjamin [2], Hands argues that the creation of radical cultural works “*should [also] actively work to transform its own conditions of production*” (p. 48). He discusses remix culture and open-source film making as new oppositional practices in production, distribution and consumption. These practices use the capacities of digital technology to record, cut, remix and redistribute existing audiovisual material, thereby creating new meanings and novel forms. When addressing the Internet Hands focuses on the technical codes and protocols that underlay it. He also underlines the importance of ‘distributed networks’, a concept derived from Galloway [3], which is a type of network with autonomy for individual nodes and without any hubs [3]. The Transmission Control Protocol and Internet Protocol systems, in particular, can be seen as providing a shared background grammar which enable communicative action. In this context, Hands adopts a reading of the Internet according to what he interestingly calls a ‘minor Habermas’. This approach to Habermas’ work does not focus on the ‘public sphere’ concept but on ‘communicative action’, which makes the linking of frames and joint-action coordination possible, whilst preserving diversity.

In Chapter 4, the central notion of the ‘quasi-autonomous recognition network’ (QARN) is introduced, which is characterised by certain shared values and by the recognition of overlapping discourses and identities on the one hand and the use of distributed networks on the other. This concept identifies “*intersections and transversal allegiances that [...] allow broader linking to occur*” (p. 109). Hands discusses the marches against the Iraq war in February 2003. The notion of QARNs leads to a critical investigation of the popular ‘intelligent swarm’ analogy, as used by Rheingold [4]. Hands succeeds in suggesting the usefulness of the QARN concept for analysing how all kinds of smaller groups with specific causes were able to mobilise in a global anti-war network. Hands acknowledges that the February 2003 marches were a failure in that they were not ‘recognised’ by those in power. This seems to indicate a missing link in Hands’ account, a plausible theory of power for the crossover from e-mobilisation to institutional politics. Hands does address the crucial issue of how activism can be articulated around

longer-term coalitions to develop strategic, and not only tactical aims. This discussion is illustrated with reference to cases of the alter-globalisation movement (the term which Hands prefers to ‘anti-globalisation movement’), highlighting the tensions between ‘vertical’ or hierarchical and ‘horizontal’ or autonomy-oriented tendencies within the movement. The wide-ranging conclusion is formulated that “*in the struggle between hierarchy and distribution, between control and autonomy, that the shape of digital resistance unfolds, and that struggle may well define the future of all social and productive relations*”. However, this still begs the question of how strategic aims can be pursued when addressing institutional power structures.

In his final chapter, Hands discusses the notion of ‘the common’ (using as well as critically engaging with insights from Hardt and Negri [5]) and addresses the role of labour, production and alternative modes of social reproduction. Firstly, he points to the fundamental condition of the network society that the informational and other ‘immaterial’ capacities and skills of labour that are valued by capital are also involved in resistance. Secondly, he indicates that the products of labour in the network society are in themselves social, communicative and common, thereby contributing to (new) forms of life. Thirdly, the character of production in the network society includes the phenomenon of ‘peer production’, which foreshadows the possibility of a radical democratisation of work. One of the practical challenges is to link this kind of labour and production with social movements.

Hands has written an inspiring book, both intellectually and in terms of informing the practice of political activism. Personally, my preference would have been for Hands to further engage with the role of the empirical social researcher, by charting some of the analytical and theoretical puzzles that have to be tackled when conducting such research. Among these puzzles are a more detailed account of the mechanisms of communicative action through digital networks for joint-action coordination and the explication of a theory of power, possibly including ‘counter-power’, a notion that Hands refuses to take on board. The theoretical and empirical material which he offers in the text, provide important challenges for his academic readers to follow him in that task.

## References

- [1] A. Feenberg, *Subversive Rationalization: Technology, Power and Democracy*, in: *Technology and the Politics of Knowledge*, A. Feenberg and A. Hannay, Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1995.
- [2] W. Benjamin, (1934/1970). *The Author as Producer*. *New Left Review* 62, available at [www.situations.org.uk/\\_uploaded\\_pdfs/AuthorasProducer\\_002.pdf](http://www.situations.org.uk/_uploaded_pdfs/AuthorasProducer_002.pdf).
- [3] A.R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004.
- [4] H. Rheingold, *Smart Mobs*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.
- [5] M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Multitude*. New York: Penguin, 2004.

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