Review - Future Politics: Living Together in a World Transformed by Tech

https://www.e-ir.info/2019/02/21/review-future-politics-living-together-in-a-world-transformed-by-tech/

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Future Politics: Living Together in a World Transformed by Tech
by Jamie Susskind
Oxford University Press, 2018

The End of Politics

We are living, perhaps, in the twilight of politics. The space of politics, argues James Susskind in *Future Politics* (2018), may now be closing because of the development of more capable, integrative and invasive information technologies. These systems are enveloping our lived experience into a digital lifeworld that we may not be able to control through politics. Susskind outlines two eventualities in this regard. The first is that the growth of information technology leads to a profoundly skewed distribution of human capabilities, creating far greater wealth, longevity, cognitive ability, physical strength and resilience for a few while leaving most of us marginalised and subjugated by the powers of high-tech corporations and supercharged states. In this case, human differences would become magnified to the point where the category of "the human" no longer makes much sense and nor, as a result, does the idea of a political community between people who no longer recognise themselves as equals. In a second scenario, the development of artificial intelligence technology results in the emergence of super intelligent machines endowed not only with superior capacities but their own volition. Such a development could mark the end of human sovereignty over history. In both cases, politics in the sense of "how we (as human beings) order and bind our collective life" (Susskind 2018, p. 74) would be shattered. The future, writes Susskind, stalks us, but we have more power to control it than we think (2018, p. 366).

That power lies in our political agency. Political action is always informed by theory of some kind. Susskind uses political theory to identify normative problems in the context of ongoing processes of technological change. How do we respond to the immense power of information technology corporations? How do we address the injustices that are embedded in algorithms that are formed through the continuous streams of data they receive from their users? How do we grapple with the intimate surveillance to which digital systems subject us? Susskind's book is concerned with subjecting technological change to political reflection and analysis. The result is not a declaration of what is to be done à la Lenin, but rather a consideration of what might be done with the aim of reshaping the emerging digital lifeworld in terms of our existing—and contested —understandings of liberty, democracy and justice.

The Facts of Life

Debates about the meanings of core political concepts that Susskind examines have been endlessly rehearsed. What makes the reiteration of these debates in *Future Politics* noteworthy is that they are tied to the unfolding reality of the digital lifeworld. What is this unfolding reality and what capacities might we have to intervene within it? Susskind describes the digital lifeworld in terms of the full development of modernity via the increasingly comprehensive and efficient management of information (2018, p. 29-61). He notes that the development of literacy and written records was essential to the emergence of early states. In terms of modern state formation, statistics emerged as political science—as the science of good order. Political science (in this early modern sense) steered state formation by

accumulating and acting upon a growing mass of information about the territory, natural resources and people governed by states. Within the domain of writing, the individual dossier displaced the historical epic. The characteristics of ordinary individuals—their health, education, productivity and pathologies—eclipsed the heroic deeds of warriors and kings. With the advent of digital systems, our dossiers have grown exponentially thicker. Susskind observes in this regard: "that by 2020 there will be at least 40 zettabytes of data in the world – that is the equivalent of more than 3 million books for every living person" (2018, p. 61).

These systems have become increasingly integrated and immersive. They are wielded by both information technology corporations and states. They are growing rapidly because of the increasing capacity of computers to process and store information and because of the way in which digital systems are increasingly materialising within the spaces of our everyday lives. They have become miniaturised and they have multiplied. We interact with them almost continuously, generating streams of data which enable digital systems to dispense customised treatment to us, based upon the ever-growing extent to which we can be scrutinised and analysed by increasingly powerful algorithms.

These developments have profound implications for how power is exercised. Digital systems can deploy new modes of force against us by virtue of how they operate. Contracts encoded with blockchain technology are automatically executed. Driverless cars proceed without our intervention. Most financial trades are executed by algorithms. Digital systems engage in ongoing calculations of actuarial risk. The force of digital systems shrinks the space of human agency because of the increasing multitude of ways in which they decide for us. Additionally, digital surveillance produces normalising effects. We conform to the requisites of systems that become increasingly capable of rating us—what credit, security or health risks do our increasingly dense information profiles present? Finally, and not least, digital systems can shape perceptions by filtering searches and customising content. The filtering mechanisms of media used to work on undifferentiated mass audiences (Herman and Chomsky 1988); now the public is becoming increasingly fragmented, giving rise to a post-truth politics where nothing is true and everything is possible.

Reinventing Politics

There is, Susskind maintains, no exit from the digital lifeworld, but we do have the possibility to reinvent politics within it. In a world where the super charged state can operate through digital systems that saturate everyday life, civil disobedience will have to take shape at the level of these systems, via hacking, and hacking will need to formulate normative guidelines for transgression if it is not to degenerate into mere criminality. Even more importantly, citizens will have to become more digitally capable. Susskind advocates, in this regard, a digital republicanism (2018, p. 206-7). People need to understand digital systems and become more able to participate in decisions about their development, rather than rely on the good will of corporations or states. With respect to reviving democracy, we must decide what digital systems can do and what we must do for ourselves. It might be possible to use digital systems to expand the scope of political representation beyond what currently exists. Digital systems might represent our preferences and interests more completely and systematically than we ourselves could. We would not engage in democratic participation; our data would. Susskind notes that such approaches would undermine how politics can develop our human faculties, as J.S. Mill argued. Or to consider Aristotle, how politics depends on character formation through the cultivation of virtues.

The digital lifeworld does not rule this out. 'Wiki-democracy' could revive direct democracy, engaging citizens directly in the formulation of laws. Digital direct democracy could circumvent the very limited modes of representation associated with elite/competitive democracy (2018, p. 117-57). The possibilities for these modes of political engagement might appear to be highly limited because of the massive de-politisation of society in the information age. But political apathy is not a necessary outcome of the digital lifeworld either.

This becomes clear through Susskind's consideration of the economic consequences of the digital lifeworld. Two key points stand out. First, increasingly capable digital systems will eliminate jobs, almost *en masse*. Neoliberal calls for people to develop human capital in order to insert themselves into increasingly competitive labor markets will become more and more senseless. What Susskind calls the paradigm of work—employment as the basis of income, status and meaning in life—may ultimately have to be jettisoned. A similar fate may await the paradigm of property, which

points to a second major economic transformation of the digital lifeworld: the increasing concentration of ownership over the means of digital production (algorithms, data, code and artificial intelligence systems). Just as the gilded age gave us anti-trust legislation, the digital lifeworld may call into the question the paradigm of private property associated with late capitalism, especially its vigorous defense of intellectual property rights.

The two economic transformations that Susskind discusses may engender a transformation of politics. As the paradigm of work disintegrates, the notion that we are political animals, as opposed to homo economicus, may gain traction. If so, then texts like Susskind's can provide a valuable framework for political action within the digital lifeworld. And if not, then, as Susskind warns, the very possibility for politics, at least as we have known it, may expire.

International Relations, Nature and Time

Susskind's account of future politics is compelling in terms of its capacity to characterise the coming of the digital lifeworld, point out its new economies of power and then suggest how we can reinvent politics within it. But his book has several conceptual limitations that narrow our view of the future. The first is that this book, like similar works (Frase 2016), is framed within a generically capitalist society. States, of course, are situated in a world of other states. Susskind's digital lifeworld is materialising within the framework of international relations. It seems to me that efforts to theorise international relations must also inform the digital reinvention of politics that Susskind advocates. Consider, for example, that digital systems depend on satellites, but that states are in the process of militarising space. The deployment of anti-satellite weapons could cripple the critical infrastructures of target states (Graham 2016). We must take into account the geopolitical vulnerabilities of the digital lifeworld.

Another key limitation is with respect to nature. Susskind has no account of nature. But this is not a neglect of an externality of the digital lifeworld because nature has long been incorporated into capitalism. Indeed, capitalism can itself be understood as a global ecology, which is shaped by both external constraints (in the form of climate change) and internal patterns of domination (Patel and Moore 2017). This ecology shows clear signs of disintegration and perhaps even collapse. An increasingly extensive and dense digital lifeworld is bound up with both domination and resource extraction. What democratic possibilities and spaces does the crisis of capitalist ecology open up?

These considerations point to another critical reflection that can be made about *Future Politics.* Susskind has a teleological conception of time: he understands the present as a moment that is being shaped by a future that is materialising right in front of us. Put differently, *the future is pulling us towards it*. Consider, in this light, the following passage from Susskind, which he presents as a summation of his argument: the great debate in the last century was "about how much of our collective life should be determined by the state and what should be left to market forces and civil society. In the future the question will be how much of our collective life should be directed and controlled by the powerful digital systems and on what terms" (2018, p. 361).

The logic of his analysis is "that was then" and "this is now". Now is a new moment. The problem with 'now' is that by overemphasising emerging technologies and forces, existing processes of economic, political and social transformation are discounted and the question of how we should act in the present becomes a matter of voluntarism. We need to decide to be different; we need to break with our digital apathy. But this disposition itself requires explanation (Brown 2015). Worthy of comment then is the way in which Susskind interpellates the reader. We are addressed always as the general you—as disaggregated readers spread across the world—rather than as specific classes and groups engaged in specific struggles. These struggles entail not just the pull of the future, but conflicts that are rooted in particular historical conjunctures that engage specific people. A richer sense of democratic possibility emerges when we can see how conflicts already inscribed in the past encounter the economic, political and technological transformations of the digital lifeworld.

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