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Technocracy meets populism: the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley

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Technocracy meets populism: the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley

Since the tumultuous campaign for the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections, even mainstream avenues have begun to ask if digital technologies have specific political leanings. Often, these discussions have been reduced to debating whether a website is liberal or conservative. However, the question of whether technologies are political is a deeper one than party affiliation: it is about foundational conception of politics – about the role of the state, democracy, and the regulation of social life. We thus need to understand how specific political discourses are constitutive of the things we call technologies and how different political actors discursively envision technology in a political way. In particular, I suggest that attending to the discursive dimension of technologies can help us make sense of claims that connect the recent upsurge of populist forces to corporate digital media platforms. I argue that to fully appreciate how technology is imbricated in today's populism, we also need to understand how technology is itself being constructed through mainstream discourses that are at the same time populist and technocratic.

The dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley

I address these pressing issues through the notion of “technological imaginary”, defined as a set of practice-based beliefs, individual and collective, implicit and explicit, about the role of technology in social life and social change (Ferrari, 2019). Drawing on media history and Science and Technology studies (Flichy, 2007; Jasanoff & Kim, 2015; Mosco, 2004; Turner, 2006), I argue that technological imaginaries are political, have material consequences, and are multiple and conflicting in society. While many actors can construct technological imaginaries, I examine the current dominant technological imaginary, which has emerged from Silicon Valley.

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This imaginary, an evolution of what has been called the “Californian ideology” (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996), has three key tenets. First, this imaginary portrays digital technologies as inherently free, democratic and supportive of personal autonomy (Streeter, 2005). Second, this imaginary suggests that social problems can and should be addressed through the development of technologies, as opposed to policy changes; this is what Morozov (2013) called technosolutionism. Third, despite celebrating technology as revolutionary, this imaginary is fully embedded into and functional to neoliberalism (see Mosco, 2004). In fact, this imaginary helps legitimize neoliberal capitalism, by portraying society as classless and free of socio-economic struggles (Fisher, 2008) and promoting the idea that the market, with its endless supply of technology, is the place for the improvement of people’s lives – not government. In this essay I highlight how the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley is sustained by a blend of technocratic ambitions and populist justifications and show how they are articulated in “Building Global Community”, a document released by Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg in 2017. In this document, issued to address pre-Cambridge Analyticaⁱ criticism directed at Facebook, Zuckerberg (2017) pitched his platform as the solution to global problems and as the model for building a global polity.

Technocratic ambitions and populist justifications

In this *de facto* manifesto, Zuckerberg (2017) positioned Facebook as uniquely suited to foster the construction of a global community that can address global issues, such as climate change and terrorism, that he deems nation states incapable of solving. The document pitched Facebook as a “social infrastructure” for civic engagement and borrowed the language of democratic politics (“referendum”, “collective decision-making”) to depict Facebook as a

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democracy of sorts. But Zuckerberg also spoke of Facebook as a blueprint for a global polity.

The key paragraph is the following:

We are committed to always doing better, even if that involves building a worldwide voting system to give you more voice and control. Our hope is that this model provides examples of how collective decision-making may work in other aspects of the global community. (Zuckerberg, 2017)

This is an explicit call for political institutions to model themselves after a website. For Zuckerberg, politics can only learn from the scale of Facebook and the solutions it is able to create “with” its users.

Yet Zuckerberg is not alone in portraying technologies as a substitute for political decisions and as a model for politics: it has been a constant refrain of Silicon Valley and techno-enthusiast commentators for a while. This refrain is the other side of the second tenet of Silicon Valley’s imaginary, i.e. technosolutionism; if technology is the arena for the resolution of political issues, why can’t politics just become more like technology?

To speak of technocratic ambitions might seem out of line. After all, the word “technocracy”, defined as the rule of scientific or technical elites, invokes either images of global conspiracies or of the Cold War military-industrial-complex. And yet, we should take seriously the way in which Silicon Valley has positioned its technologies as the avenue for the framing of social problems and for the imagining of their solutions; in so doing, it has envisioned a global sociotechnical order (Winner, 1986), largely outside the reach of democratic politics.

If the idea of technocracy seems less plausible today, it is because of a double shift in the perception of the state, whose legitimacy vis-à-vis the market has been undermined by neoliberalism (Harvey, 2007), and in the perception of technologies (Turner, 2006). No longer bureaucratically-run, oppressive, and massive, technologies have become portable and mundane,

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and thus portrayed as liberating and empowering (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996). Zuckerberg can voice his technocratic ambitions precisely because they are no longer seen as carriers of elite domination, but as providing empowerment and freedom and as challenging the establishment.

The populist tendencies of the dominant technological imaginary legitimize Silicon Valley's technocratic ambitions, making it more difficult to question its power. Zuckerberg (2017) even offered his own populist notion of "the people": the Facebook community, or rather "people's intrinsic goodness aggregated across our community", which is imagined in contrast to nation states and elites. In so doing, he tapped into populist readings of digital technologies that promise rebellion and redemption for the users of these technologies (Streeter, 2005). It is the belief that digital technologies are inherently free and democratic that is the key source of these populist discourses.

The dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley is at the same time technocratic and populist. It is populist because it builds on the anti-elite ethos of the Californian Ideology and provides a new definition of "the people", solely predicated on the access and use of digital technologies. But it is also technocratic because it blends technosolutionism and neoliberalism; Zuckerberg's letter exemplifies how these ideas support Facebook's technocratic ambitions of solving the world's problems by supplanting nation states and pushing governments to adopt Facebook's mechanisms. This shows how the technological imaginary of Silicon Valley has evolved: it has become more explicit in its technocratic ambitions. While the Californian Ideology of the 1990s was an insurgent message, Silicon Valley's technological imaginary of the 2010s is a discourse which legitimizes an established dominant industry, capable of influencing political actors.

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Yet, this dominant technological imaginary is no longer confined to Silicon Valley. It is now being employed to support the populist projects of different actors around the world (see Gerbaudo, 2018; Natale & Ballatore, 2014). If we want to understand how various populist projects of the left and the right can deploy the technological imaginary of Silicon Valley to further their interests, we need to uncover how Silicon Valley is using this imaginary to further theirs.

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ⁱ After Cambridge Analytica, Facebook has come under scrutiny by lawmakers. However, this 2017 document is important because it is emblematic of a moment of expansion, in which the ambitions of Facebook were largely unchallenged.