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Reclaiming the net

Luxembourg conference on the Left's engagement with the Internet

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Seven rather austere-looking middle aged men looked down on us as we discussed the way the Internet was raising new issues for the left. They were the former presidents of the transport union in Luxembourg. These men were brought up in the world of electricity, railways, giant factories and great industrial battles for decent working conditions and pay. They straddled the tremendous rise and relative decline of working class organisation as the industrial revolution transformed Europe and then devastated whole areas as globalisation and digitalisation destroyed, relocated and remodelled the working class.

Organised by Dei Lenk, the left party in Luxembourg with the support of the Left Party group in the European party, the conference met in the Transport union's historic building right beside Luxembourg's main railway station. It brought together over 60 activists and some specialists in this area to discuss how the Left should respond to the new challenges posed by the role of the internet in production, communication and society. What were the new questions that these seven trade unionists could never had imagined and what are the fundamentals of class organisation, struggle and programme that remain essentially the same?

The youngest contributors were from the Chaos Computer Club in Luxembourg and they were able to put across how the way they did politics was dominated today by the use of the internet. For instance Twitter was praised as a means of accessing live summaries of a wide range of political sources which you could later interrogate in greater depth through the web links embedded in the tweets. They also used their own experience of school to show how the teaching and curriculum was far behind the changes in the way young people used the internet.

Four pillars on which to build greater participation were outlined : much more use of open source software such as Linux rather than Windows/Microsoft; demands on governments to challenge the power of Google, Microsoft et al; a drive for a real differentiated publicly funded pedagogy throughout society to train people in using the new technology and finally the need to develop our own independent media against the big monopolies. These are all good points and were further developed throughout the conference.

Some of the older comrades present did pick up on some of the more extreme statements made by this group such as 'radio is dead', 'books will be replaced' and that 'brevity was best'. Radio as a medium is very resilient and often provides more depth and analysis than a more visual medium. Listening figures for stodgy old Radio 4 prove this. Digital books have encouraged more reading and printed books have not gone into a downward spiral, the new technologies have enabled a greater range of cheaper publishing, something the left has gained from too! Brevity is not always best, slow learning and following a complex but linear argument in depth is still important for learning. There is some research that raises questions about the negative effects of digital media on cognition and learning.

A representative from the German Die Linke party who works as an advisor for a Euro MP outlined in some detail the various legislative initiatives that the left can take to protect the neutrality of the net and to protect personal data. A later round table explained how private companies are interested in accumulating huge amounts of commercial data in order to try and sell us more stuff whilst governments and the security services are doing the same to monitor and control political challenges to the state. We should not underestimate the political importance of this battle given Wikileaks and now the data released by the Snowden about the NSA Prism programme which is relayed by our own GCHQ. Some debate took place over the importance of developing technical expertise on the Left in order to both defend ourselves and to intervene in the discussion.

Julien Bernard from the French Parti de Gauche gave an excellent presentation on the 'Power and Strategy of the

Multinationals on the web'. It is the first time I have heard someone explain this so clearly. He identified the actors and their interests very effectively – distinguishing between service providers such as Facebook, Twitter and Google, content providers such as Disney, Universal and Sky and the network providers such as Orange, Deutsche Telecom, AT+T, Virgin and BT.

The service providers get their income from advertisers and their true clients are other companies. They offer us free and 'cool' services to gather valuable information about us, the users, who become the products sold to the companies who advertise. Google and others mine key information about us and our relationships which are useful to businesses. The service providers are rather against limits and controls because their main interest is increasing the millions who access the web. Their model is a bit like the difference between the Guardian website (open access) and the Times (subscription).

However the content providers like Disney or Sky are managers of intellectual or entertainment rights and their strategy is to control the network access to organise sufficient rarity for the public to pay for access. Their main concern is the widespread piracy and free downloading of content which is very prevalent in Russia and the East. Hence they are for more controls and laws.

Finally the network providers such as Virgin and BT in this country need to get people to pay to go through their gateway. Their strategy is multiple payments so we pay for our internet service as end users but they also want smaller network providers to pay them to use their major networks and even the service providers. Of course they cannot force Google to pay since they are too big but they get payments from You Tube or Daily Motion.

Consequently as always there are some contradictions between competing capitalist interests and it helps us understand the different positions they take on various issues in the public domain.

The emergence of the 'Cloud' where software and data are concentrated and centralised is interesting because although service providers may be keen on this since centralising all the data enables them to sell more targeted advertising the network providers are much less enthusiastic as they want an ever increasing flow of information and data, they want traffic.

John Naughton in the British newspaper *The Observer* 28/7/13 has made some very pertinent comments about the risks of the Cloud – advising companies or institutions not to entrust their data to companies who have already handed data over to the spooks.

Julien outlined a few ways the left could fight back against the multinationals, for example by developing P2P (peer to peer) internet applications, more web servers outside their control and a more distributed network.

Another area of conflict is over so-called intellectual property rights. The net is transforming notions of property, for instance you do not buy software from Microsoft, you buy the right to use it in particular conditions. In fact this is rather symbolised by the fact that you do not even get a disk these days but a code that you key in and the software is downloaded to your computer. Microsoft sells us something we do not really own. Their software is a totally closed system. Possible solutions are to encourage more use of open source software, that no one owns but can also be continually modified and improved, and to time-limit intellectual property rights in time and nature (whilst protecting the lesser paid artists and authors in various ways).

Recent moves by Disney to extend copyright from 50 to 70 years so that it can continue to make money on its older back catalogue shows how these companies are using the defence of author's argument for their own profitable interests. People are often not aware how companies like Google have a huge power over the way end users can search over the internet. Today more and more scientific articles are locked up in very expensive subscription sites. Wikipedia and certain open access university courses provide examples of a democratic counter tendency that has always existed since the start of the web.

The left should try and build on this freedom loving, democratic tendency within the net community and should place the struggle within an overall one of increasing free public vital services that contribute to everyone's well-being – the notion of the commons.

Susanne Klinger, a left journalist from Germany made a contribution about women and the internet. She tried to answer the questions: Are there no barriers between men and women on the net? Is the internet more modern than society? As you might have expected the answer to both is negative. For instance although many women author blogs or host websites they tend to focus on homelife, cuisine or childcare. Men dominate the political blogs – I think this is borne out in Britain too. 85% of the Wikipedia editors are male. In some ways the record is worse than in the printed media.

A major part of her talk dealt with sexist verbal aggression on the web against women. Many men are unaware of this. She herself had experienced the most disgusting abuse. Just this week in Britain there is the example of Caroline Criado-Perez, who had led an admirable internet based campaign around women's representation on banknotes but received horrible abuse for her efforts. It is surely the anonymous, private nature of writing at a computer that makes some men think they can be verbally violent and somehow it is less serious than doing it face to face. Moderators and a serious response from service providers are important as a first step. Participation by women on the net is a function of the differential access to free time given the child care responsibilities and dual work burden often taken up by women. Susanne also raised the issue of organised women-only spaces on the web.

Dave Kellaway made a contribution to the conference about Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement (M5S) and how it has particularly embraced the internet, not just as an organisational tool but as the process and site for what it sees as a new democratic system. The M5S movement has made a huge impact on Italian politics in a relatively short space of time. It has gone from scoring an average of 3% in elections three years ago to 25% and claim to be the biggest single party. Today it is the main opposition in the Italian parliament to the austerity government that is backed by both the mainstream 'left' and right parties.

On the one hand the skilful use of Grillo's website for many years before intervening in elections did help build the movement and it subsequently drew into politics many people, particularly the younger generation. On the other hand those commentators who see the internet as the explanation of its rise are about as wrong as the people who reduce the Arab spring to the use of social media. There already existed in Italy an absolute rage against the way the mainstream parties of left and right abused their positions both corruptly, in getting kickbacks for contracts distributed, and legally through the immense expenses and state party funding they receive.

This rage worsened by the experience of the coalition Monti government which had imposed one of the most brutal austerity packages on the Italian people. Grillo had been denouncing the *particrazia* (or party mafia) for many years and had taken up radical demands around the young employed and ecological issues. Informed by his guru, Caseleggio who is an internet specialist, the movement has developed a political project based on the idea of removing the political parties and making parliament a transparent democracy organised through the web. They talk of direct democracy where local citizens would select candidates online and then once elected they would become delegates to be recalled at any time. Also the citizens would be able to put forward propositional referendums on any policy without the need to pass a quorum when it is voted. At the moment referendum can only abrogate legislation. Proceedings of parliament would be directly streamed at all times and the net would be organised for total access and with much better information for citizens.

At the same time the M5S organise itself completely through the central website run by Grillo, Caseleggio and his staff. There are no congresses, no regional structures and no possibility of forming platforms or tendencies. MPs are expelled after proposals from the centre and then an online vote – and this has already been used. The party symbol and name is personally owned by Grillo. Candidates are all selected online, some of the surprised winners in the

recent general election were only voted by a few hundred people. The fundamental criticism of this glorification of the net is that it does not take account the reality of state power or the control of the system of exploitation by a dominant class.

There is a naïve almost touching belief in an abstract pure parliamentary democracy. The parties are seen as the source of all evil and the system behind austerity is only intermittently criticised. In some ways the project reproduces a growing individualisation of politics where voters ask what is in it for me and mainstream parties relate to its electorate in a similar way. It is an individualisation which can have a radical, libertarian tinge that many younger people alienated from traditional politics can relate to. Verbiage about the superiority of online organising over the traditional party model is also used as a cover for a sham internal democracy that will be incapable in the end of providing a project for a better society.

Having said all this the Left can learn some positive lessons from the way M5S has skilfully used the net to build a movement without conventional mass media support. A fuller version of this contribution will be available shortly in an extended article. The contribution is also available, in English, in video form at this link <http://reclaimthenet.wordpress.com/2013/06/19/dave-kellaway-beppe-grillos-m5s-movement-and-the-internet-new-ways-for-political-participation-and-democracy/>