

Richard Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*
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MIND-FORGED MANACLES?

As the dot-com bubble expanded during the late 1990s, a cadre of cyber-utopian theorists extolled the emancipatory potential of the internet. Digital technology would foster communication and collaboration: its decentralized networks would evade hierarchical authorities, unlock creative energies and spread radical ideas, rendering a vast field of information accessible and transparent. The more people became connected, the more freedom and democracy would flourish. Yet twenty years on, the Web has failed to deliver on these fantasies. Critics like Astra Taylor have shown how its ‘tendency towards monopoly’ allows corporations to circumscribe our online activity, undermining the McLuhanite ideal of free expression. In step with her analysis, a number of recent titles—Jonathan Taplin’s *Move Fast and Break Things* (2017), Siva Vaidhyanathan’s *Anti-Social Media* (2018), Shoshana Zuboff’s *Surveillance Capitalism* (2019)—have railed against the growing power of the tech giants and its deleterious effect on democracy. The psychological impact of our collective screen-fixation has been studied by Nicholas Carr, Sherry Turkle and Jaron Lanier, whose joint verdict is damning: the internet does not build horizontal communities; it engenders addiction and distraction, destroys sociability, encourages narcissism and diminishes our capacity for rational thought. Our cognition will be stunted if we don’t learn to unplug.

But if one writer is to put the final nail in the technophilic coffin, there is perhaps no better candidate than Richard Seymour. Raised in a dreary unionist stronghold on the outskirts of Belfast, Seymour moved to London in 1996, where he wrote his doctoral thesis on white supremacy in Cold War-era America. Since then he has pursued what he describes as

his 'dream of unemployment'. In the early 2000s he established a popular blog called *Lenin's Tomb*—featuring sharp, often blisteringly polemical essays on a range of political issues—and became involved with the Socialist Workers Party, from which he eventually resigned in protest over its cover-up of rape allegations against a leading member. His previous books include eloquent takedowns of David Cameron and Christopher Hitchens, as well as an extensive study of Corbynism that aimed to counter 'wishful thinking' about the movement's long-term prospects. In 2015, Seymour's disdain for false optimism and disillusionment with groupuscule politics moved him to co-found *Salvage*, a quarterly journal of socialist commentary whose distinctive aesthetic—based on edgy, self-aware cynicism—is summed up by its tagline: 'bleak is the new red'. In his latest work, Seymour turns this disenchantment on the miasma of social media, excoriating the belief that Twitter—defined as 'the world's first ever public, live, collective, open-ended writing project'—will instigate positive political change or democratize the means of communication. Following Taylor and Taplin, *The Twittering Machine* argues that this digital platform is irredeemably reactionary—that the consciousness it ingrains is indicative of a political toxicity that should dissuade the left from overestimating its value as an organizing vehicle or propaganda tool.

Seymour begins by asserting that the incredible popularity of the Twittering Machine (his shorthand for the online social industry) testifies to the degradation of social life under late capitalism. In his view, the basic function of Twitter and Facebook is remedial—to provide a stand-in for communities destroyed by decades of neoliberal rule—which means that digital platforms must be understood as a kind of dream-world: a site of instantaneous wish-fulfilment where we can retreat from the contemporary realities of hardship and isolation. Social media promises the limitless reign of the pleasure principle, and this fantasmal quality is what enchants techno-utopians. When they laud its capacity to connect people, this invariably attests to some failure of real interpersonal relationships; when they idealize its transcendence of the material world, this suggests an inability to tolerate that world, and a depletion of the will to change it. 'Where society was missing', writes Seymour, 'the network would substitute', constructing a shadowy 'simulacrum' populated by our innermost desires.

These desires—which can be expressed by actions as involuntary as hovering over an advertisement—are subsequently translated into data, which is bought by companies seeking to control our consumer choices (or influence our voting habits, as with Cambridge Analytica). 'We write to the machine, it collects and aggregates our desires and fantasies, segments them by market demographic and sells them back to us as a commodity experience.' The porous boundary between digital platforms and the unconscious allows

capitalists to penetrate the psyche, turning its libidinous impulses into marketable products. Yet Seymour detects a contradiction in the Twittering Machine's articulation of these subterranean energies. On the one hand, what we get out of social media reflects what we put in: the machine works like a mirror, or an echo chamber. But through this circular process our digital writing is simultaneously expropriated from us: when we post a tweet it 'acquires a life of its own', defying its author's intentions, attaching itself to related text clusters, summoning responses and affecting the macro-calculations that data analysts use to measure and manipulate behaviour. In this sense, the online avatar—the body of writing which represents a person in cyberspace—is at once an intimate portrait (expressing desires so private that the user herself may be unaware of them) and an alienated one.

Seymour claims that this dialectic of intimacy and alienation gives Twitter an 'uncanny' atmosphere. A social-media profile reflects the idiosyncrasies of its creator, while also leading a strange, autonomous existence in which it is the plaything of corporate interests. And it is this tension, between the avatar as personal profile and as depersonalized proxy, that explains the platform's abhorrent political climate. As Seymour observes, the Twitter user is mostly cut off from society—solitary, hunched over her computer screen, tailoring her digital identity and honing her 'personal brand'. But she is concurrently participating in a mass collectivization of sentiment, as her tweets join with others (through threads, hashtags and trending topics) to form an 'omnidirectional wrecking ball' for which no single tweeter need take responsibility. The result of these collective outpourings, in which chaotic groupthink overrides the user's conscience, is widespread harassment and abuse; as one popular Twitter mantra has it, 'None of us is as cruel as all of us'. Thus, the antinomies of isolated individualism—a Foucauldian 'entrepreneurship of the self'—and an anonymous 'lynch mob' mentality coexist in the Twittersphere. Users move between narcissistic self-promotion and 'ecstatic collective frenzy', in an oscillation which confines political discourse to vain virtue-signalling and bullying moralism.

Because it is a public platform, anyone on Twitter 'can suddenly be selected for demonstrative punishment' should they affront this labile mob. Seymour argues that the constant awareness of this possibility creates a 'panopticon effect' which enforces intellectual conformity, undercutting the claim that social media stimulates vibrant discussion. In place of solidarity amongst oppressed groups, the petty-bourgeois identity politics inculcated by Twitter's individualizing technology boxes users into hermetic cultural categories in which they spend hours detecting and censoring political incorrectness. More importantly, however, it is this sense of being watched that makes Twitter so addictive. Every time a tweet is published, its reception—quantified in reshares and responses—either validates or reproaches its

author. 'In telling the machine something about ourselves, whatever else we're trying to achieve, we are asking for *judgement*.' For Seymour, tweeting is gambling: priming oneself for spectacular victory or crushing defeat. But, he reminds us, gambling addiction is not sustained by 'positive reinforcement': it is not a matter of 'winning' often enough to make the game worthwhile; rather, 'everyone who places a bet expects to lose'. On Twitter we can never 'beat the house', never elicit an adequate number of likes to rescue our ailing self-esteem, and it is this pattern of perpetual, guaranteed failure that gets us desperately hooked. In the *Twittering Machine's* ceaseless condemnation we find a 'God': a Big Other, an accusatory superego which highlights our inadequacy. And, to the delight of the data collectors, we cannot look away.

Our compulsion to call forth this digitized judgement is, Seymour's account, an expression of the death drive. The practice of online self-promotion exhibits a will to annihilation, evidenced by the tragic teenage suicides associated with social-media use. To explain this morbid phenomenon, Seymour cites Rana Dasgupta's work on celebrity culture, which asserts that to be a celebrity is to be '*always-about-to-die*'. When the celebrity projects her glossy public image outward, she launches an unconscious attack on her inner life, which is gradually eroded and replaced with a mirage. Celebritization is a form of self-harm that atrophies one's authentic identity to cultivate a hollow and commodified substitute. With the advent of social media, this condition has been diffused on a gigantic scale. Millions of people (especially school-age children) are now engaged in a frantic drive for followers and fans, inflating the online avatar at the expense of the everyday self. The narcissism promoted by the *Twittering Machine* is an exceedingly 'fragile' variety which, upon close scrutiny, looks indissociable from masochism.

Seymour's final chapters assess the extent to which social media can be harnessed for progressive ends, concluding that Twitter's 'incipiently fascist' qualities make it an inhospitable environment for socialist struggle. Noting that it is the right, not the left, which has led the most successful online mobilizations, Seymour pins this disparity on an in-built political bias. He points to the role of affect in digital messages: when confined to 280 characters, shocking and emotive content trumps considered formulations, benefitting those who stir up hatred. On top of this, the platform's competitive structure, pitting all against all in a ceaseless struggle for likes, creates a culture of social Darwinism in which the 'strongest' prevail; and its consequent promotion of hierarchies, or personality cults, inhibits egalitarian discourse while inciting would-be Führers. It is tempting to believe that we can turn the logic of Twitter against itself by exploiting the apparent tension between its free, all-inclusive networks and its regressive ideological function. But, for Seymour, any such attempt is doomed by these

immutable features—affect, competition and hierarchy—which inform the platform’s algorithmic makeup. Remember, he writes, we are chained to the ‘protocols and controls’ that govern these websites, so even when we use them ‘to promote images and ideas that contest those that gained consent in legacy media’, we will ultimately ‘confirm, corroborate and consolidate the machine’s power over us’. If Twitter’s power resembles that of a fascist dictator, it cannot be appropriated by well-intentioned leftists: it must be overthrown.

However, when it comes to practical proposals for enacting this digital revolution, Seymour is short on ideas. It is impossible to change the machine from within, he claims, but disconnecting completely would constitute a form of reactionary nostalgia. We could switch to non-profit online platforms, but their reluctance to turn users into addicts makes them boring and frustrating, which inevitably limits their reach. Elsewhere, Seymour has dismissed the idea of digital strike action—in which users would collectively log-off until companies check their corrosive data practices—deeming it too difficult to coordinate. With these options eliminated, Seymour leaves us with the assertion that ‘we need an escapology . . . a theory of how to get out before it’s too late’. Yet his final vision of this escape sounds more like a self-help plan than a theoretical proposition: ‘What if, in deliberate abdication of our smartphones, we strolled in the park with nothing but a notepad and a nice pen? What if we sat in a church and closed our eyes? What if we lay back on a lily pad, with nothing to do?’

Seymour’s incisive commentary on alienation, addiction and celebrityzation encapsulates the overall strengths of his book. The pathologies he outlines will be familiar to the average user, yet their reappraisal under this theoretically sophisticated lens distinguishes *The Twittering Machine* from previous critiques. Moreover, the author’s fluid prose weaves searing philippics against social media into an unwaveringly clear and perceptive argument, combining the spontaneous energy of a blog-post with a rigorous intellectual framework. In *NLR* 77, Rob Lucas argued that Net literature is often thin on ‘socio-historical explanations’. Writers like Carr and Turkle can sketch the formal features of digital technology, and provide a credible assessment of its cognitive effects, but they neglect the ‘social and cultural formations such as classes, genders, castes or religions’ which shape both the internet and its users. This blind-spot leads them to separate the interaction between mind and machine from its wider historical context, so that technical and psychological dynamics are detached from ‘relations of ownership and power’. We may be affected by the internet, writes Lucas, but the internet is in turn conditioned by cultural and material factors which a serious evaluation of the digital universe should confront. Unlike its techno-sceptic forerunners, *The Twittering Machine* does not shy away from this confrontation. It views

the psychological and sociological valences of online platforms as contiguous, asserting that the mental damage inflicted by Facebook and Twitter is inseparable from their parasitic role in a capitalist economy.

This psychosocial analysis rests on a careful intertwinement of Marxism and Freudianism. Seymour interrogates the drives, complexes and desires operative in our experience of social media, and explains how these internal forces are activated by the tech companies' data-driven profit model. This injection of politics into the technology debate avoids the pitfalls of the Carr–Turkle approach. When they chart the rise of the internet, their silence on broader socio-economic issues imbues this narrative of technological development with a sense of inevitability. By ignoring the contingent historical structures that influenced the Net's progress (neoliberalism, 'homeland security'), they create the impression that there is no alternative to our current online reality. Their programme is thereby reduced to a mixture of personal guidelines ('no screens at the dinner table') and technocratic fixes to soften the least palatable features of the coming cyber-dystopia. Ironically, such determinism ends up replicating the internet-centric ideology that these writers intended to challenge, by viewing digital technology as an immutable, transhistorical deity to which humans must submit. The only disagreement between Carr and his utopian adversaries, on this front, is whether their god is cruel or benevolent.

Seymour steadfastly refuses this theological perspective. He insists that the malady of digital technology is a societal one—the result of broken communities, a mass impulse to escape the material world, and the emergence of an authoritarian corporatism which mines our personal data. But, while locating social media squarely within these coordinates, he also remains sensitive to how the machine functions as an individual sickness: a set of physical and psychical symptoms that afflict the atomized user. Freudianism gives Seymour a language to describe these symptoms without lapsing into an apolitical, psychologizing register, because psychoanalysis is based on the conviction that—to borrow a phrase from Mark Fisher—'the personal is impersonal': subjective experience is determined by collective forces which take root in the unconscious (and which, in Seymour's Marxian twist, are themselves contingent upon shared material conditions).

Yet, at various points throughout the text, Seymour's delicate balance of economic and psychoanalytic criticism is eclipsed by his relentless gloom about the prospective uses of social media. One of his recurrent arguments is that anything published on Twitter and Facebook will serve reactionary ends by empowering the tech giants. 'Social-media platforms are fundamentally nihilistic', he writes; no matter how much we 'vary our tactics on the medium', its algorithmic controls will drain our posts of their political content and repurpose them for profit. However, in a sudden shift of tone,

Seymour's conclusion acknowledges that Corbyn and Sanders have 'used professional social-media campaigns to outflank and subvert the old media monopolies', transmitting socialist ideas to millions. Since both these politicians have viable plans to dislodge the hegemony of the social industry (by closing its tax loopholes, clamping down on its labour practices and establishing publicly owned alternatives), surely their growing popularity, spurred by savvy Facebook and Twitter campaigns, has the potential to weaken—or even bankrupt—such platforms. This is a paradox which Seymour raises tentatively yet fails to elaborate—blinded, perhaps, by his unswerving commitment to 'bleakness'. The more people respond to a Momentum tweet, the more lucrative data is generated for Twitter, strengthening its machinery of exploitation; but if this process creates widespread support for a redistributive programme, then the company's short-term profit model may compromise its long-term interests.

So, while Seymour provides an accurate diagnosis of the Twittering Machine's structural position (as an instrument of capital), he understates our room for manoeuvre within this ideological matrix. His Marxist intervention in the tech debate stages the dialectical relation between psychology and sociology, or the individual and the collective, but it does not extend these dialectics into the realm of political action, from which Seymour—in his eagerness to dismantle internet-centric leftism—erases vital nuance. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the discussion of Twitter's reactionary affinities, attributed to its tripartite promotion of affect over reason, competition over cooperation, and hierarchy over horizontalism. Along with the dubious contention that competition and hierarchy are distinctly 'fascist' traits, rather than simply capitalist ones, this critique relies on a series of monolithic assumptions. The first is that affect is the exclusive property of the far-right—that the passion and concision which Twitter demands can only be weaponized by bigots. Here, Seymour's position endorses the Enlightenment dogma that cultivated knowledge must quash ignorant emotion in the interest of societal advancement. His implicit equation of 'feeling' with 'prejudice' turns the left into a conduit for abstracted rationalism, elevating objective truth over subjective instinct. (In this vein, the book's well-meaning critique of cyber-bullying—which Seymour ties to the reign of sentiment in the Twittersphere—sometimes sounds like a plea for more courteous political discourse: a liberal can't-we-all-get-along-ism at odds with his typically acerbic style.) In Seymour's reflexive rejection of affect, we therefore encounter the limits of the chic melancholia endorsed by *Salvage*. His uncritical rehearsal of this rationalist argument suggests that a suspicion of strong emotion—and resolve to remain desolate and disillusioned in the face of 'wishful thinking'—may in fact narrow one's analytical capacities.

A similar one-sidedness is discernible in *The Twittering Machine's* invective against competition and hierarchy. Seymour is correct that these discourses of power, ubiquitous on Twitter, emanate from an unequal society and replicate its governing logic. But he neglects to mention that on digital platforms there is often no distinction between 'competition' and 'class conflict', or 'hierarchy' and 'leadership'. The same 'protocols and controls' which give rise to ruthless authoritarianism can produce inspiring left figureheads, because Twitter—stubbornly indifferent to the content that it publishes—will amplify whichever voice happens to be most resonant at a given moment. Seymour would have us believe that this is always the voice of Donald Trump, but sometimes it is that of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Likewise, the platform's competitive dynamics, though born out of the pro-market doctrine that predominates in Silicon Valley, have been deftly exploited by outlets like *Novara* and *Jacobin*, whose ability to out-talk their Murdoch-owned rivals is enhanced by the decline of print. On this basis, the book's blanket opposition to the Twittering Machine—its unwillingness to find anything salvageable in this 'fascist' technology—can at times seem overblown. We are left feeling that Seymour's negativity is indicative of his trademark defeatism about the left's prospects in general, rather than its Twitter performance in particular.

Seymour's portrayal of Twitter as a fascist instrument also suffers from his refusal to consider that the right's online ascendance might best be explained by its offline reach. Although he elsewhere stresses the indivisibility of the virtual and material worlds, his final chapters tacitly separate them by attributing the left's woes on social media to the internal components of the platform, as opposed to broader social and ideological effects. By contrast, a thoroughly historical approach would not ascribe the left's deficit of powerful messaging and robust leadership to algorithmic bias, but to the culture of neoliberalism, whose elision of class struggle stripped socialist discourse of its affective force, creating a vacuum which the resurgent right has filled. This line of inquiry would allow more hope than Seymour's book can countenance, since it would reject the schematic distinction between 'hospitable' and 'inhospitable' sites of struggle, insisting that such limits on political contestation are neither practically nor theoretically defensible. In the conjunctural crisis of late capitalism, socialist principles have reasserted their relevance. Our immediate task is to harness the affective energy of those principles and channel it through digital and non-digital mediums, instead of abandoning the former as a hopelessly corrupted domain. Seymour's evaluation of the Twittering Machine is adept at exposing its power imbalances and structural limitations. But his refusal to work within these limitations—with an eye to overcoming them—evinces a political pessimism that needn't flow from his critique.