

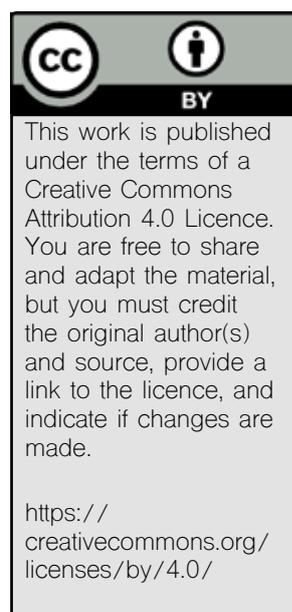
Book Review

Matteo Stocchetti (Ed.), *The Digital Age and its Discontents: Critical Reflections in Education*
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In recent years it has become all-too-evident that the digital age is far more problematic, fragmented, prone to crisis and isolating than was first imagined in the final years of the last century. This is especially so for young people who are often early adopters, primary targets and idealized subjects of digital media. This volume is timely because it responds to these sentiments and offers a range of critical concepts, practices, research and policy recommendations for education and learning in response to contemporary crises. This ‘toolbox’ of resources combines with a vision for what needs to be done in education in order to prepare learners for now, and the world to come.

Matteo Stocchetti’s introduction begins by recalling Freud’s attention to the pitfalls of progress, locating the current project as “a study of the downsides of digitalization and the reorganization of the social world that seems to be associated with it – what we refer to as the ‘digital age’” (p. 1). The project is taken up in the opening account, ten additional chapters and an Afterword by Michael Peters, which critically examine how technology development in the context of hyper capitalism has configured relationships between education and democracy. Used here, critical means something very specific: it entails the analysis of capitalism as a structuring force across social life, including in the ways technology now operates in public discourses (chapter 4 on Facebook), identity development (chapters 5 and 6 on the self and algorithmic culture), higher education (chapter 7 on platforms and the university), education and labour (chapter 9 on technological unemployment), and democratic action (chapter 10 on pedagogy and change). Within this central problematic, being critical also means paying attention to the range of injustices, failures and threats that



capitalist technological transformation has wrought. The critical theory of technology (elaborated by Feenberg, Schiller, Tehranian, Selwyn, Zuboff and many others) and education provides the spine and direction for this work, meaning technology is addressed as a social condition and vector through which democracy is made and unmade.

A fear of rising authoritarianism, seeping fascism in various regions and a crisis of democracy around the world are one context for the book, the other being the failure of digitalization to foster early dreams of emancipation. Chapters in the volume largely examine why this has been the case, and to a lesser extent what can be done through pedagogy and change within education institutions to bring about change. In Chapter 2, Marko Ampuja addresses the fetishization of digital innovation drawing largely on the work of the economist Mariana Mazzucato. He describes how “innovation fetishism” has impacted democracy and proposes a renewed political mission for the entrepreneurial state. Chapter 3 examines the vexed role of screens, here the cell phone and tablet, through the lens of a critical history of screen studies and concerns for attention, screen freedom and unfreedom. Lincoln Dahlberg’s chapter on “Facebook’s Response to its Democratic Discontents” is among the most interesting in the book, offering a review of the initiatives Facebook has undertaken to address concerns about the platform’s role in undermining public communication (Habermas, 1989) and democracy. Dahlberg’s analysis reminds readers that without simultaneously addressing “the political economy problem,” (p.77) – the fact that Facebook’s profit-driven, targeted advertising model discourages informed, civil and public communication – the content, interaction and architecture of Facebook will continue to impede democracy. I’ll return to this argument below, because while Dahlberg’s chapter is excellent, I remain ambivalent about the tone and terms of critical speech, learning and action this book professes.

The impact of digitalization on identity work and governance is the subject of chapters 5 and 6, each of which takes up the quantification of the self and its production through platform economies (Srnicek, 2017). Eran Fisher’s chapter addresses the ‘algorithmic self’ as a post-political identity, that negates the individual and now demands a form of collective identity and action in response. All the preceding chapters link their analyses to the place of education in responding to digital discontents. In chapter 7 Richard Hall focuses the lens on university institutions themselves and the role of educational technology and workload management platforms in governing educational change. The chapter concludes by asking how the deployment of these resources might be reimaged, in ways that show that “another university is possible.” In chapter 8, Norman Friesen reveals how ideas of educational dialogue and ‘personalized learning’ shaped the introduction of computers into education and how this notion has in recent years become a kind of myth that no longer references a

natural phenomenon *per se* but instead is used “to justify efforts in the ongoing reform and development in education” itself (Friesen, p. 155). Chapter 9 examines technological unemployment and the emergence of new markets, and in chapter 10 on ‘Pedagogical Fixation’ Christo Sims addresses how myths of education and technological-change impact managers and decision-makers at post-secondary institutions, embedding capitalist dreams and metaphors in ways that constrain policy and warp institutional priorities. Chapter 11 offers an instance of the critical use of technology in education to support humanistic visions of *Bildung* (a pedagogy of self-development and dialogue with society) through the uptake of MOOCs in a kind of revolutionary mode. Michael Peters’ Afterword brings the book to a close by turning to the nano-level and new cognitive science to remind readers of the formidable risks that threaten our very existence in an age of biotechnology and new digital intensities.

Stocchetti’s collection is addressed to critical scholars, graduate students and others interested in work that aims to reimagine higher learning and institutional change through a critique of capitalism and the search for democratic alternatives. A focus on specific projects, actions and resources helps to ground this vision, and educators and others working in teaching communities will find these elements to be highlights of the book. The absence of attention to critical traditions of race, decolonization and, more broadly, difference in the book is unfortunate given the text’s aims to locate injustice, address inequity and identify democratic change. There is also a formal tone to the text by which I mean that the living realities of educational change, vernacular culture and creative popular discontent seem to be missing from its pages. Returning to Dahlberg’s analysis in chapter 4 for instance, a crisp and formal mode of public sphere communication is offered there as a normative guideline to assess Facebook’s negative impact on democracy. The challenge however is that whether or not this form of communication may be achieved via Facebook, this very goal would seem to distract us from attending to the messy, new forms of politics that are always already happening on social media. There is much to like in *The Digital Age and its Discontents*, especially at a time when many are looking back, around and elsewhere for sustained critiques of capitalism and for routes toward other futures. It also seems timely, however, to bring this work into sustained dialogue with the critical energies that, in so many places, are clearly driving change across education and learning communities in the current moment.

References

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- Srnicek, N. (2017). *Platform Capitalism*. Polity