

Subverting the digital fetish: Reflections on the possibilities for critical digital citizenship in Higher Education”

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Outline

- Brief background
 - Social justice, digital education and the university
- Critical digital citizenship: subverting the digital fetish
 - In ‘ameliorative’ narratives of digital citizenship in HE
 - In ‘folk political resistance’ to ‘the digital’ in HE
 - In ‘techno-determinist’ accounts of contemporary social justice movements in HE and beyond
- The case of the MSc Social Justice and Community Action

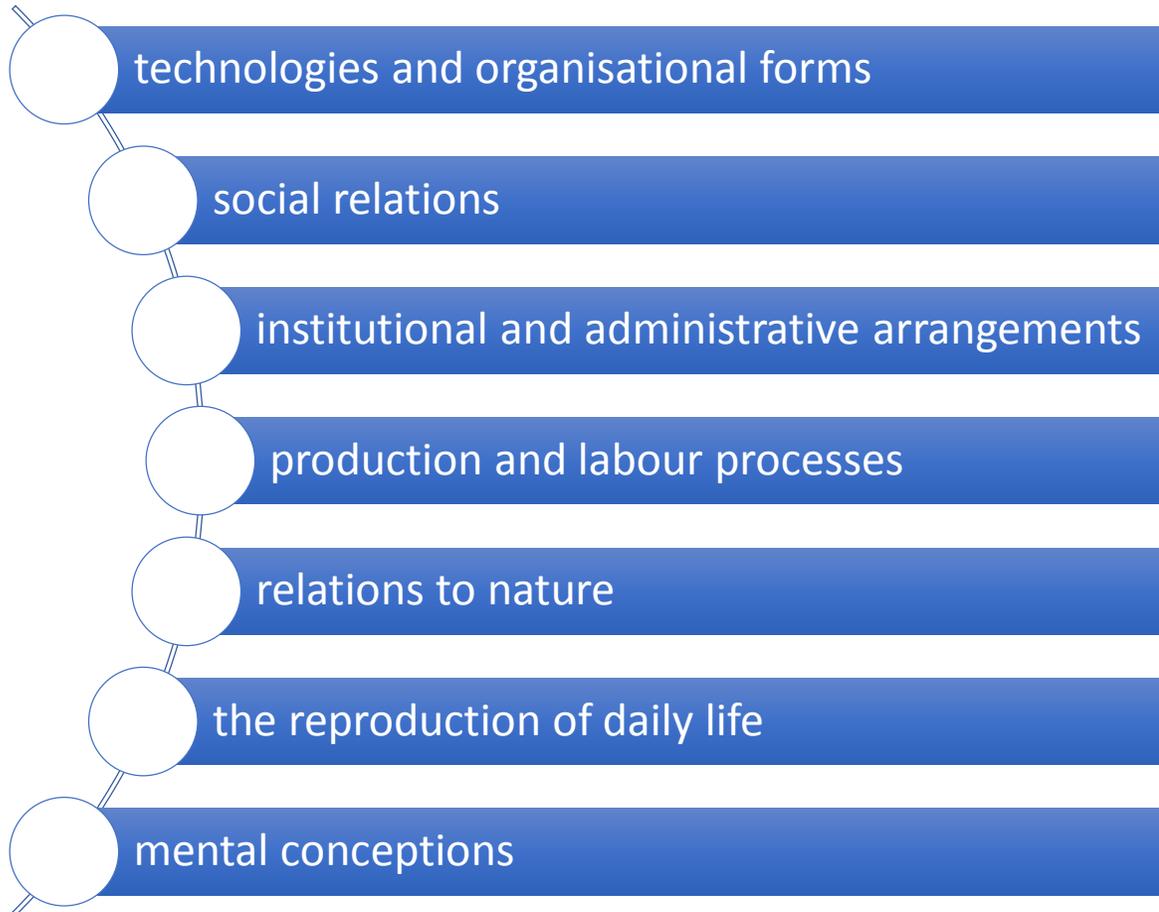
MSc Social Justice and Community Action



Policy briefing examples



David Harvey's theory of co-evolution in the context of technological determinism



- [T]he “interrelations [between activity spheres] are fluid and open, even as they are inextricably interwoven with one another” (Harvey, 2010, p. 128).
- “There has been an unfortunate history within social theory of favouring some spheres of activity over others. Sometimes this reflects a situation in which one or other of the spheres – such as class struggle or technological dynamism – seems to be at the forefront of the transformations then occurring”. (p. 134)

Digital fetish 1: Ameliorative digital citizenship

Ameliorative digital citizenship:

The ‘learnification’ of social and political problems (Biesta & Leary, 2012; Crowther, 2004) is enmeshed with a digital fetish, wherein it is imagined that “the construction of smart cities managed through the mining of vast data sets can be the answer to all urban ills” (Harvey, 2018, p. 126).

This is embodied in educational initiatives designed to ‘democratise knowledge’ about coding, algorithms and ‘Big Data’ for the benefit of those groups who are failing to be flexible in a disrupted world.



Digital fetish 2: 'Folk political' resistance

- One reaction to all of this has been to conflate digital education with the neo-liberalisation of HE. But this position is also guilty of fetish thinking, albeit from a dystopian perspective. It is arguably a reactionary position, which remains bamboozled by the apparent 'newness' of 'the digital' (conjured as a neoliberal folk devil), whilst the following are fetishes are reproduced in resistance to it:
- **The local** is fetishised as "the site of authenticity" (Srnicsek & Williams, 2016, p. 11).
- **The certitudes of the past** (a return to the social democratic welfare state or the 'spirit of '68' for example) are fetishised in ways which crowd out the "unknowns if the future" (ibid.).
- **Conjures a revisionist history of 'the academy'** as a public good to be 'reclaimed', rather than an instrument of 'coloniality' (Mbembe 1992), as well as a site of the reproduction of class privilege.

Online can be the privileged mode. Distance is a positive principle, not
ess, important online. * Text has been troubled: many modes matter in
We should attend to the materialities of digital education. The social isn't
er neutral nor natural: it creates and depends on closures. * Can we stop
l education reshapes its subjects. The possibility of the 'online version' is
get it right online. 'Best practice' neglects context. * Distance is temporal,
* Aesthetics matter: interface design shapes learning. * Massiveness
brings complexity and diversity. * Online teaching need not be complicit

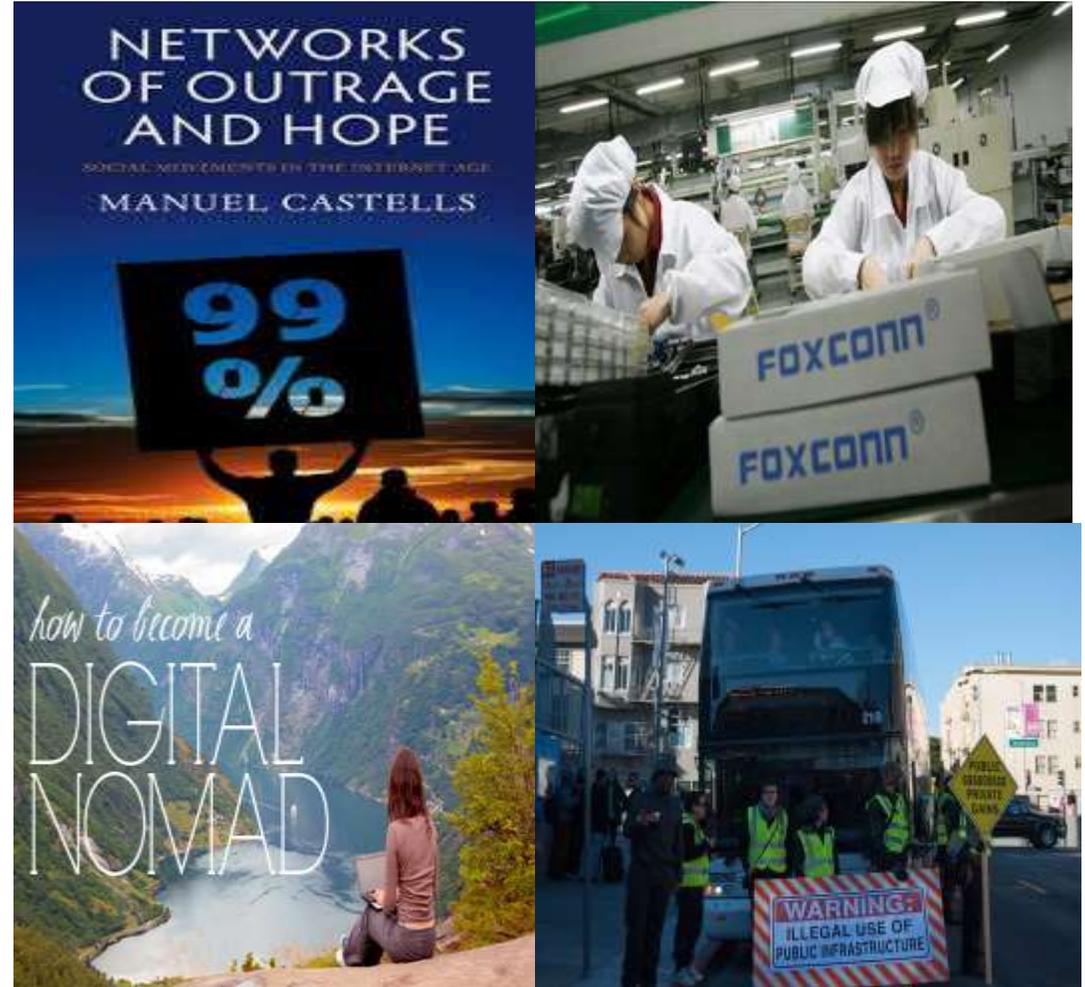
Folk politics can be defined as 'a collective and historically constituted common sense that has become out of joint with actual mechanisms of power', through the assumption that 'immediacy is always better and often more authentic, with the corollary being a deep suspicion of abstraction and mediation.' (Srnicsek & Williams, 2016, p. 10). Furthermore, the 'voluntaristic image that sees mediations, institutions and abstractions as opposed to freedom simply confuses the absence of artifice with the full expression of freedom.' (ibid.).

Digital fetish 3: 'Network Society' and the digital commons

Resisting the digital fetish of the 'new' means we must analyse the 'old' (and yet essential) politics of exploitation, expropriation and recognition, which, as the background conditions of digital activism and 'commoning' are often hidden in plain sight

- 'Strategic mineral extraction'
- Environmental despoliation
- Labour exploitation and expropriation
- Population displacement and housing crises
- The gendered and raced labour of ostensibly 'horizontal' and 'leaderless' digital activism

(see [Emejulu & McGregor, 2017](#) for an in-depth discussion)



The MSc Social Justice and Community Action : Enacting critical digital citizenship in HE?



- Curriculum focuses on the theory, politics and practice of social justice. *Partly*, this involves critical analysis of digital technology in social movements.
- From problem solving to ‘problematization’ (Bacchi, 1999).
- Assessment designed around the principle of productive alignment with practice.
- Digital learning technologies foster international collaboration, and allow students to study flexibly.
- Between a rock and a hard place: neoliberalism and coloniality versus ‘folk politics’