WORK AND DIGITALISATION 14.04.2023 | Ayad Al-Ani

Retreat into cyberspace

To save the planet, governments are pressuring individuals to adapt, reducing the likelihood of resistance. Cyberspace could be an escape

Germany's proclaimed 'historic turning point' (*Zeitenwende*) demands a lot from the individual: Increasing energy prices, inflation and interest rates lead to restrictions and behavioural changes. Nonetheless, it is becoming clear that these measures alone will not save the planet's dying environment or compensate for the negative effects caused by multipolar conflicts. Individuals must make more far-reaching adaptations because today's alternative energy technologies can hardly support our current standard of living. In a world with several centres of power, there are no more effective planetary solutions.

The ever more glaring contradictions of this transformation – monopoly profits rise as incomes for most of the population decline; programmes for armaments instead of the environment – are fuelling insecurity. Aware of this, the political class seeks to use funding to prevent resistance and also remind individuals to 'adapt'. The recently promised individuality and self-fulfilment by various concepts including 'New Work' (centred around the employee), start-ups and platform work are becoming irrelevant: 'In light of the threats posed by climate change, individual self-fulfilment is a secondary concern. Self-preservation can only succeed as a collective project', says Berlin sociologist Philipp Staab. For example, participating in state environmental measures would create an 'experience of collective freedom and mobilisation' for the individual.

Individuality versus societal pressure

If behavioural changes are necessary, the question arises about the effect of focusing on 'individual adaptation'. Individuals are already being heavily pressured to adapt, while around the world, participation and democracy are backsliding. Habermas's ideal of traditional institutions (politics, media, culture) democratically opening to discuss societal problems in the public sphere has not been realised – despite the potential of social media.

Calls for individual adaptation, as well as the lack of progress in political participation, are probably also related to the confrontational policies of the global hegemonies (the West, China, Russia and 'the rest'). The multipolar world actors assume the individual's hierarchical subordination, consider class antagonisms to be largely resolved, use global confrontations to legitimise their inflexible structures and, by extension, the individual's adaptation. The workers of Amazon and Alibaba are hence not cooperating in a global union: they belong to the disciplined workforce of their respective hegemonies.

A lack of resistance creates stagnation and the need for even more adaptation.

However, the more adaptation is demanded, the more difficult it becomes to resist in multipolar hegemonies. This is all too obvious in authoritarian societies, which paradoxically show the importance of resistance to ensure advancement and corrections. In his short story, *The Mirror,* well-known Chinese sci-fi author Liu Cixin writes: 'a society where no one ever makes mistakes in ethics is, in reality, dead.' A lack of resistance creates stagnation and the need for even more adaptation. Eventually that vicious cycle becomes intolerable for authoritarian hegemonies as well.

In democracies, hardly anyone *explicitly* demands restrictions and adaptations. So far, only the *Deutsche Bank* has pointed out that 'a certain degree of eco-dictatorship will be necessary' [for the EU Green Deal to succeed]. Indirect, fairly subtle means are needed.

In her famous political utopia, *The Dispossessed* (1974), Ursula K. Le Guin describes a planet that is an ecological desert with an egalitarian society, whose members voluntarily perform the social tasks they are assigned. However, a key conversation reveals how pressured they actually feel. They could refuse to work, but hardly anyone does because their 'social conscience' overrides their own ideas and personal motivations: 'we don't cooperate – we obey.' With respect to adaptation, Philip Staab cites the Korean students recruited to reforest their denuded post-war country. Although they could have refused, that would have conflicted with their sense of duty, so few did.

Individual adaptation reduces the likelihood of resistance. Moreover, the person would always be suspected of possibly working for a different hegemony. That's why there are no global ecology, peace or workers' movements. No large-scale 'counterculture' will 'hack' the digitally based hegemonic system. That's left for specialists like Wikileaks or

Greenpeace, who do not seek to be legitimised as mass movements and rely on professionals to undertake risky actions.

An exodus into cyberspace

With broad resistance hardly an option, the sole remedy is to flee. In coming years, the climate crisis and its economic and political effects will expose the world to mass movement from the increasingly unliveable regions at the equator.

At the same time, there will also be a new exodus into cyberspace. The first such movement began in the 1990s when, frustrated tech employees began to gather online after work hours to devote themselves to projects they found '*really* interesting' (open source, Wikipedia) and to make their results available to the public free of charge (including the Linux operating system, the Apache server and the Mozilla software community).

There are signs of a new, more massive movement into virtual space. Countries of the Global South, such as South Africa, are already trying to 'migrate' their workers to such platforms so they can work for Western companies without having to leave home. In principle, this path is also open to individuals in the West. The restrictions of the physical world (climate crisis, automation, multipolar conflicts) can be overcome or negated in cyberspace.

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Worldwide, approximately 35 million businesses can operate independent of their geographic location. So it's not surprising that countries like Tunisia (Metaverse Tunisian Summit), the UAE (Dubai Virtual Commercial City) and Armenia ('Network State, A Panarmenian Movement') are attempting to get their share by building digital partner 'states' that permit 'digital citizens' and their companies to connect to their national territories and services – and thereby be better positioned for hegemonic competition.

Perhaps, as US businessperson Balaji Srinivasan suggests – the cloud will eventually have its own communities with constitutions and collective bargaining and even its own 'state' (with members' globally distributed property linked online).

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri expect such new communities to

develop innovative technologies or use ‘digital public goods’ and for these ‘mechanical structures’ to force open gridlocked situations in a democratising way. Millions of workers are joining these cloud republics, deciding their domestic policies and improving their negotiating positions vis à vis their national governments. The latter will be forced to accept the cloud workers’ demands – or lose ground in multipolar competition.

Finally, these communities could link up: after all, there’s a certain consensus regarding motives and capabilities. Can a new collective voice like that be raised in the multipolar world? Often, the only solution is emigration. An active cyberspace movement can create something new on the run. Tellingly, Le Guin’s novel ends with the protagonist leaving his *planet* because he can only develop new solutions elsewhere.



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