Democracy, Cyberspace, and the Body

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Rousseau in Cyberspace

INTRODUCTION

Cyberspace, once a preeminent domain of science fiction, has entered contemporary political debates as a place where democracy's promises might be fulfilled. Some have likened it to other ostensibly participatory spaces, such as the agora of ancient Greece and the New England town meeting hall. Of course, cyberspace does not exist in real (or social) space, but rather is a virtual realm of information flows. It is constituted in the myriad interactions of people joined together via computer networks, including that global network of networks, the Internet.

Despite the exuberance, the democratic merits of the Internet are quite contentious. According to its varied proponents, the Internet can strengthen participatory democracy by enabling citizens to more easily engage in politics and by making government more responsive to the citizenry. Positive consequences also include the efficient provision of government services and information, and the creation of electronic "town meetings" where citizens can voice opinions and cast their votes on political decisions. The critics of cyberdemocracy are likewise as varied and vocal as the advocates. Critics with communitarian inclinations argue that the loss of face-to-face communication in cyberspace undermines the affective bases of communities, and those who might also favor representative-style democracy argue that the very rapidity of citizen input undercuts deliberation on weighty policy matters.

How can we make sense of such competing claims about cyberdemocracy? From the various perspectives of its proponents and its critics, this paper will outline the conditions under which participatory democracy is enhanced via cyberpolitics and those under which it is not. It will utilize the thematic of the body, a thematic which informs much of the current debate over cyberdemocracy. Indeed, the debate revolves around the concept of embodiment and disembodiment: specifically, the human body in relation to -- as a mediating "interface" between -- society at large and the Internet.

The clashing perspectives assess cyberdemocracy differently because each disagrees on the relative value of dis/embodiment for enhancing democratic practice. Cyberdemocracy's advocates assess the disembodiment of cyberspatial travels as positive, while often ignoring or down playing any constraints on people which arise from their social embodiment. The critics, however, tend to evaluate the influences of the society on the body as powerful, even with it "jacked in" to the Net -- to use a term of cyber-fiction author William Gibson (1984). The critics also do not celebrate the disembodiment of cyberdemocratic actions, arguing that the negative consequences of the technology prompt caution. Moreover, some post-structuralist critics like Jean Baudrillard would dismiss any notion that positive consequences could emerge in the first instance from the shifting surfaces and play of signifiers that is cyberspace.

It is by way of the Frankfurt School that I derive the central methodological tool of this essay: namely, immanent critique. This tool examines a concept or phenomenon both in terms of its societal preconditions and its implications as manifested in actual societal practices. Immanent critique highlights contradictions between what the concept/phenomenon supposedly is and its consequences in practice (Antonio 1981). McCarthy writes of the immanent critique of the "Frankfurt School approach" (1993: 141):

> Its guiding principle is that the full significance of ideas can be grasped only by viewing them in the context of the social practices in which they figure and by studying the genesis, structures, and functions of those practices. And its underlying intention is to transform our self-understanding in ways that affect how we live. Gaining a critical perspective on what is normally taken for granted -- for instance, by showing that the genesis of what has heretofore seemed universal and necessary involves contingent relations of force and an arbitrary closing off of alternatives, or that what parades as fair and impartial actually helps to maintain unjustifiable imbalances in social benefits and burdens -- can affect the way we act.

For examples of immanent critique, I have been influenced by the Frankfurt School's book entitled *Aspects of Sociology* (Frankfurt Institute for Social Research 1972) and its analyses of concepts like the family, the individual, and society.

Over the course of this paper I will interrogate post-structuralist, liberal, and other theories which extol the body or bodies shorn of its/their materiality. Presented first are

rival points of view on the consequences of the body and cyberdemocracy. The paper performs an immanent critique of cyberpolitics in terms of the material embeddedness of the body(ies) supposedly liberated in cyberspace. In methodological terms, we start with the "givens" as expressed in the terms of the debates over cyberpolitics: the implicit and explicit views of the body and technological embodiment. Next, the consequences of cyberdemocratic practices are presented.

As the paper will argue, the perspectives of both the advocates and the critics miss the practico-theoretical point. Cyberdemocracy, in its positive and negative dimensions, cannot be adequately theorized and will not be adequately liberatory unless we understand the materiality of the people and their bodies participating in it.

ADVOCATING CYBERDEMOCRACY

Many proponents of electronic democracy celebrate how the Internet extends the bodily scope of politics to (and within) cyberspace. In effect, the physical body is "removed" in cyberspace from the intentional actions of the subjectivity which coexists with the body. People, individually or in groups, can now do more politically as volitional agents without having to physically inhabit social places in order to perform their activities.

For some, the extensive realm of the mind or, in the case of cyber-fiction, the domain of cyberspace is more desirable and interesting than the immediate realm of bodily scope. For these people the body is "meat" (Gibson 1984) and is a hindrance to action or latest experiences. Older forms of communication technologies, like the telegraph, telephone, and two-way radio, have permitted humans to extend their "presence" to places where they were physically absent (Poster 1995b; Thrift 1996; Thompson 1995). As another form of disembodiment, then, cyberspace is not completely new. Nonetheless, the advanced telecommunications networks that are the infrastructure of cyberspace do provide new levels of instantaneity and human interactivity. Co-presence has become less of a limiting condition for human actions (Giddens 1984: 143).

The crucial precondition for cyberpolitics in general, and cyberdemocracy in particular, is that the person can become decorporealized, expressed as information in the purest sense of Norbert Wiener's cybernetics: flows of information that control processes via feedback loops (Wiener 1954; also R. Martin 1998). Cyberspace is sometimes described in ethereal terms (Strate 1999) or in metaphorical terms like a "wild" frontier (Adams 1997), all of which might seem to belie, or at the very least distract us from, its material bases. In William Gibson's famous phrase cyberspace is "a consensual hallucination," "a graphic representation of data" (Gibson 1984: 51). In cyberspace "[t]here's no there, there" (Gibson 1988: 40). In such a cyberspatial realm we "find" the presence of people who are nowhere in particular, and the absence of bodily physicality that is everywhere.

Cyberdemocracy would seem to address an old issue that has plagued polities since the rise of the ancient empires of the Mediterranean and the Orient: the loss or diminution

of small, face-to-face political communities. Writes the political philosopher Sheldon Wolin (1960: 77):

> Politics [in the ancient empires] . . . was being conducted in a way incomprehensible to the categories of ordinary thought and experience. The 'visual politics' of an earlier age, when men [*sic*] could see and feel the forms of public action and make meaningful comparisons with their own experience, was giving way to 'abstract politics,' politics from a distance, where men were informed about public actions which bore little or no resemblance to the economy of the household or the affairs of the market-place.

The Internet, then, might be able to generate 21st-century types of interaction and community, linking the local to the global in ways never imagined by those living hundreds of years ago.

How do computer networks and the Internet facilitate democracy? The writers included in this section focus in varying ways on the intra-national and international ramifications of cyberdemocracy. Of course, each may differ in their understanding and assessment of other writers with whom I have situated them. Despite any differences among the authors, each position stipulates implicitly or explicitly a notion of the positive benefits of disembodied politics for democracy. Herein, I will start with the many political applications of the Internet, move to the ways that the Net's structure itself enhances democracy, and then end with a list of the suggested positive consequences of cyberdemocracy.

The Democratic Uses of the Internet

Democracy is popularly defined as "rule by the people," a rough translation of the word's Greek roots. The people are sovereign and thus are the ones on whom the ultimate political authority rests. Of course, as David Held indicates, many questions are raised whenever we contemplate what it means for the people to rule (Held 1987).

The definition of democracy can be operationalized here so as to highlight some of its observable (albeit potentially contestable) characteristics. I will focus on two aspects of democracy that group together its various functional qualities: the extent to which government can be held accountable for its actions (based on the implications of popular sovereignty), and the extent to which citizens are able to participate in the political decision-making process (which involves the right to organize politically and to articulate their views both as expressions of interests and as forms of input, like voting in elections and referenda).

Those functions are made manifest in the three types of democracy: participatory (sometimes called direct or deliberative) democracy; representative (or indirect) democracy; and plebiscitary democracy (Barber 1998-99). Cyberdemocracy can encompass any of the three types. Its proponents are not always explicit as to which type

of democracy the technology supports. However, the participatory form seems the most related to the claims presented to support the promise of the Internet.

What is the relationship of the Internet to democracy? It is crucial to note that few would claim that the Internet is inherently democratic. It is a facilitating tool which can be turned to repressive and non-democratic ends (Barber 1998-99). Such non-democratic uses are exemplified in "cyberwarfare" (Ronfeldt 1999) and in the recurring threats to individual privacy by governments and corporations (Nye 1997; Shapiro 1999; also see Schiller 1995). Nevertheless, technology that facilitates two-way interaction and communications between people enhances democratic possibilities (Barbrook 2000; Enzensberger 1982; McLuhan 1964; Poster 1995a; Poster 1995b; Poster 2001; Sclove 1995). Of course, no technology can overcome apathy among the citizens (Cornfield 2000), or the social factors contributing to such apathy.

Participatory democracy is facilitated by computer networks and the Internet because government accountability is enhanced through a) the provision of government services and information; b) the provision of information during election campaigns; and c) the opportunity for citizens to gain information from sources other than the official ones. Local governments seem to predominate in the actual implementation of some sort of computerized system for the citizens. The extent and implementation of such systems varies by city (Tsagarousianou 1998b; Weare 1999). In addition, international efforts also have been popular with elected officials, such as former U.S. Vice-President Al Gore, who long promoted his vision of a "Global Information Infrastructure" and its putative democratizing effects on national polities (Gore 1994; see also Saco 2002: xiii-xiv).

The provision of government services and information is a staple product of computer networks (Borrus 2000). Several municipalities in Europe and the USA provide examples: Athens (Tsagarousianou 1998a); Berlin (Schmidtke 1998; Bologna (Tambini 1998); and Santa Monica (Docter & Dutton 1998; Varley & Hetherington 1997). In such cities citizens can obtain a wide variety of information relevant to their everyday lives via computer networks. Online services include voter registration (in Arizona, www.ServiceArizona.com; Government Technology 2004), as well as car registration (e.g., in North Carolina, www.ncgov.com). At the U.S. national level the E-Government Act of 2002 (Public Law 107-347) was signed by President Bush into law on 17 December 2002 (Bush 2002). Indeed, one can surf to the official U.S. home page (www.firstgov.gov). Among other provisions the Act provides that many government agencies are to make information and services available to the public. The Act augments the other U.S. government services and information that has previously been available (Bowman 2003). For instance, federal income tax can be filed online. Moreover, the American government provides an online clearinghouse for databases which permits searches for regulations (www.regulations.gov) as well as available benefits (www.govbenefits.gov).

As a counterweight to official sources of information, citizens can gain other perspectives from around the world via the Internet. Certainly, there is no guarantee that such information is any more reliable or unbiased than the official avenues of

communication. The point, rather, is that alternate sources can be tapped due to the freedom of expression that the Internet fosters. Perhaps the most obvious example over the last few years has been the proliferation of web logs, or "blogs," across the Internet. Blogs provide opinions and news -- both from professional and amateur journalists -- as well as links to various Web sites and other blogs. Such an online network of bloggers is called the "blogosphere."

The provision of information during election campaigns is another powerful use of the Internet. A Web presence allows the candidates to express their perspectives on the issues, solicit funds, and seek volunteers (Fineman 1999; Foerstel 1998; Whillock 1997). Web sites also enable candidates to criticize and satirize their opponents. For example, U.S. the Republican National Committee lauds the political uses of the Internet in electoral campaigning (*Rising Tide Magazine* 2005; Republican National Committee 2002). The Democrat Party likewise has a web presence (www.democrats.org), as do many minor U.S. parties (e.g., the Green party, www.gp.org; and the Libertarian National Committee, www.lp.org). These trends towards Internet-based outreach are expected to continue.

Also of importance for electoral campaigns is the use of Internet to mobilize grassroots support. A recent notable case is MoveOn.org, which has received both attention from both online, and other forms of broadcast, media. In preparation for the 2004 general elections, MoveOn.org sought to organize opposition to the Republican Party, starting in the summer and fall of 2003 (Frouhy 2004; Hazen 2003; Wolf 2004). Among various activities, MoveOn.org held an unofficial online primary, solicited and raised money, and facilitated the creation of a progressive virtual community. Such cyber-political mobilization will probably expand over time.

Democracy is also enhanced by computer networks and the Internet when citizen participation is facilitated in at least some of the phases of policy making (obviously stopping short of dealing with confidential materials). Computer-mediated communications allows the citizen to voice political opinions, or even to "deliberate," by which is meant a continual discussion of particular political topics (Tsagarousianou 1998b; White 1997). Some of the critics, discussed below, would disagree with the extent to which such deliberation is possible or effective.

Computer networks also allow people to vote in elections. Internet-based voting is limited now to some municipal offices (Goldberg 1999; Tsagarousianou 1998a; White 1997) and in a few U.S. states to primary or caucus elections (like Arizona and, in 2004, Michigan (Moses 2004)). Such online voting serves as a complement to more traditional methods, whether at polling places via non-electronic machines or site-specific electronic voting systems, or else via mail-in absentee ballots. In the United States, some argue that electronic voting via computerized systems housed at a conventional polling place will become more common as any problems, like the potential for fraud, are solved. Later, it is anticipated, online voting from other places like home (called "remote voting") might then become more accepted (Madigan 2002). Within Europe, a pilot project utilizing remote voting on local governmental issues via the Internet has been conducted in

England (Peterson 2002). Also, the "world's first binding internet vote in a national referendum," as the Swiss government claimed, was held in September 2004 in the canton of Geneva (Associated Press 2004). For more information, one can visit the European Union's web site on eGovernment News (European Union n.d.). Moreover, governmental endeavors on electronic voting are bolstered by private sector businesses and organizations. For example, Accenture E-democracy Services will coordinate online elections for political jurisdictions (Accenture.com 2006).

Nonetheless, debate in America has risen since 2003 over the security of both site-specific computer systems as well as Internet voting. For example, Diebold, Inc. and other private vendors of e-voting systems have faced criticisms over the potential for hacking and fraud and the very real issue of glitches where votes have been lost. Such cases have prompted calls for a paper trial (or documentation) for all in-situ computerized voting machines (Zetter 2004). In addition, the Pentagon postponed the use of Internet voting for American overseas military personnel, citing its susceptibility to fraud and hacking (Starr 2004). A recent report by a team of computer scientists had seriously questioned the security of the system that the Pentagon was to use for the 2004 elections (Schwartz 2004). The debates and the experiments with electronically mediated democracy are both expected to continue.

Further encouragement to citizen participation in political matters is the way that computer networks assist in the formation of associations of mutual interest. Whether organizing in favor or disfavor of a political candidate or political issue the Internet can help to mobilize people (Henderson 1995). Indeed, the Net can enable smaller organizations to counter, or at least compete against, larger ones (Kaus 1995).

Such Net-based associations among like-minded people occur not only *intra*-nationally, but also *inter*nationally. The Internet allows for groups to protest issues across political boundaries, and even to mobilize transnationally (Ayres 1999; Bleiker 2000). Two sets of examples can illustrate this: human rights organizations and anti-government groups. First, human rights groups can analyze violations and distribute their information electronically: e.g., Human Rights Watch (www.hrw.org) and Amnesty International (www.amnesty.org). For another case, www.witness.org broadcasts video footage of human rights violations over the WWW. For a second set of examples we need only to study the various anti-government groups using the Web. A telling case is the Zapatista uprising in Mexico during the 1990s. The Zapatista movement (*Ejercito Zapatista de la Liberacion Nacional*, or EZLN) garnered support globally via the Internet-based support network established (Cleaver 1997; Cleaver 1998; Froehling 1997; Schultz 1998; but see Hellman 2000). Other anti-government groups also have utilized a Web presence: e.g., Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, (LTTE n.d.) and Peru's Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru (MRTA 2005; see also Dartnell 2001).

Citizen participation raises two other topics covered by theorists of the culture and politics of the Internet: the branching structure of the Internet, which allows it to augment the possibility of participatory democracy, and the plasticity of cyberspace, which allows

humans to modify their online identities regardless of how socially constructed their bodies are offline.

The Internet and Its Rhizomorphic Structure

The structure of the Internet that allows it to subvert political boundaries has been likened to rhizomes (Froehling 1997; Hamman 1996; Warf & Grimes 1997; Wray 1998). "Rhizome" is the evocative term used by Deleuze and Guattari to describe assemblages of thought and action that oppose the hierarchical (i.e., arbolic / arborescent) structures of the state and much of the Western philosophy that implicitly upholds them (Deleuze & Guattari 1987).

For Deleuze and Guattari a rhizome models a structure that is interconnected, spreads in multiple directions, lacks beginnings and endings, and continually branches as some parts die and others grow. Deleuze and Guattari contrast rhizomes with a markedly different type of structure (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). Conventional social and political organizations, including the modern state, are characterized by what they term an "arborescent" structure. Just as a tree has roots, a trunk, and branches arranged with predefined pathways so does a modern polity have authority arranged hierarchically in terms of superior and subordinate levels with the decision-makers typically at the top directing those below who execute the decisions.

To describe the Internet as a rhizomorphic structure highlights its acentered, anarchic, heterogeneous, ever flowing and mutating aspects. Although access to such a computer network can be controlled by government agencies (Bodeen 2002), the Internet itself is said to be rhizomatic. That rhizomes are subterranean systems adds to their allure as a way to express resistance to the dominant (arborescent) structures of states and corporations. In those ways, then, the rhizomorphic Internet can be said to structurally facilitate democracy.

Malleable Identities and the Internet

Just as political borders are more permeable via cyberspace, so too are identities more plastic, as conceived by many proponents of cyberdemocracy. In a world of information, much is open to change. Fluidity and malleability become the touchstones (to speak anachronistically) in cyberspace. Cyberspace can be "other spaces," or to use the social theorist Michel Foucault's term, "heterotopias" (Foucault 1986). Heterotopias on the Internet would be areas outside of the places of normality in society, places where difference can be constructed and explored (see S. Young 1998). With terms like "network" and "web" evoking a multiplicity of pathways, personal identity is also open for a multiplicity of (new) attributes. Hitherto repressive boundaries excluding people can be transgressed, almost with impunity. As some consider it, the plasticity of identities might allow for the construction of new democratic person(a)s (Poster 1995b; Poster 2001).

Some researchers have focused on the new possibilities in cyberspace for people to remake themselves without reference to their embodied selves in the real world. With the "meat" left behind (W. Gibson 1984) so might the social prejudices attached to real bodies be left behind. The incorporeality of cyberpolitics enhances the play of signification systems. In a chat room or on a web site an older middle-class white male could "become" a thirty-something Latina lesbian, or vice versa, simply by using signifiers like names, words, or images that bring to mind the desired referent. The sign and its embodied referent found in real world encounters are severed, enabling the representations typed at the keyboard to signify the identity which the person desires. In and through cyberspatial interactions are formed virtual communities of all types and degrees of complexity: from an evening out in a chat room to MUDs (Multi-User Domains/Dungeons) in which role-playing games can span long periods of time to networked real-world neighborhoods (Hampton & Wellman 1999; Turkle 1995). In such virtual communities some argue that the participants achieve "altered states of consciousness" (Bromberg 1996), as well as learn to communicate in verbal and non-verbal ways that evoke face-to-face communications (Argyle & Shields 1996; Bruns 1998). The ubiquitous emoticons (**:)**) are a ready example. Some even argue that the fusing of humans and networks are subversive of dominant power relations (Plant 1996).

The blurring of technology and humanity is found in the concept of cyborg put forth by Haraway (1991). Haraway wrote of the cyborg as a disruption of the rigid boundaries between the natural and artificial (Balsamo 1995). Such disruptions allow us to conceive of the radical possibilities of a new, progressive type of society and human relationships. The metaphorical use of cyborg is becoming increasingly less of an allusion as more and more technological prostheses are incorporated into our bodies. Examples of cyborgs for Haraway range from people with prosthetic devices (e.g., artificial limbs or organs, and hearing aids) to imagined beings akin to the creatures of science fiction (see Clough 1997; Gregory 1994; Kunzru 1997). (For criticisms of the concept of the cyborg as necessarily liberating, see Carroli 1997; Lupton 1995; Munster 1999.)

The Internet offers us another variant of the cyborg. Accentuating the sci-fi aspect of the Internet is the way that it enables us to "jack in" and thereby to meld cyberspatial consciousness and identity to the body online at the computer. The Net thus allows for a technological mediation between our physical presence and the (wired) world out there. We -- our identities, even our physicality -- are "changeable" in the discursive, informational realm of cyberspace, and as a result say the cyber-proponents, our political and social equality accordingly can be fostered.

The Positive Consequences of Cyberspace

That the preceding aspects of cyberpolitics and cyberdemocracy occur or could occur arises from the disembodied politics of computer networks. We do not have to be physically present to act politically. Potentially positive consequences of disembodied politics as indicated by many of the varied proponents of the Internet include the following:

A. Freedom is accentuated on the Internet via its rhizomorphic qualities.

Freedom in general, if not outright cyberanarchy, is fostered in cyberspace. Democracy presupposes free interactions among equals, and for its advocates, the Internet lacks the rigid, centralized hierarchies of Big Brother and Big Business (see Adams 1997; Winner 1997). Such freedom empowers the consequences which follow below.

B. Disembodied politics allows for each citizen to freely create his/her identity.

Equality between citizens can be enhanced because the plasticity of cyberspace allows citizens to fashion new identities and to engage in interactions with less of the prejudices that come with embodied politics.

C. The means by which we create political organizations are being augmented.

Political organizations can form to pursue mutual interests utilizing the Internet to promote actions in cyberspace with potentially real world political consequences. Organizations in cyberspace would not necessarily be -- or even need to be -- territorially delimited, for cyberspace is neither place specific, nor mapped to any real world location.

D. New political communities can form on the Internet.

Cyber-communities displace the familiar concept of a community: the extant form of communities has a geographical connotation, albeit one often of perception and self-identity (A. Smith 1991). Virtual communities can be based on familiar differences like gender, race, ethnicity, or class, as well as -- and this is the point of much positive evaluation -- they can be fashioned so as to minimize those differences. In effect, virtual communities can attempt to create new bases for commonality and action.

E. The significance of locality and nationality is complicated by high-tech communications.

Resulting from the previous consequences, the transgression of locality occurs (along with its intra-national and international ramifications) as a result of being able to act at a distance. Transgressions of locality can occur within national borders, permitting people to participate beyond local areas, even to the point of spanning intra-national borders or regions. But also possible is the transfixing of international borders, thereby undercutting (but not necessarily destroying) the current system of sovereign states. As indicated previously, the Zapatista movement received global assistance via a support network established on the Internet.

As each new political border within and between countries is surpassed by cyberpolitics, a deterritorialization of politics is underway. Deterritorialization refers to processes that erode the conventional bases of political governance, including a nationally based citizenry. Although governments may not be enthusiastic about such

cyberpolitical effects, some have argued that a deterritorializing politics can be appropriate to our current era of globalization. According to William Connolly, the extant territorial states are facing a crisis that he calls the "globalization of contingency." Extra-national processes, such as market forces, impinge more and more on those within the states' borders and are often beyond the capacity of states to control or manage (Connolly 1991: 24-5). Only a globalization of politics can hope to address such a crisis of the state, indeed of the world (Connolly 1991: 215-220). Cyberdemocracy, its proponents might add, could offer a potential solution to problems of governance.

But the costs to existing institutions are high, for cyberdemocracy and its disembodiment can affect the territoriality of conventional politics. Pushed to its extremes some proponents hold open the possibility for new political forms of politics. Other supporters, however, implicitly reassert the extant territorial basis for politics, which takes for granted the international system of sovereign states. Such is found in many politicians' proposals for the use of the Internet. Regardless of attempts to contain the effects of cyberspace within current political boundaries, the personal disembodiment of cyberpolitics provides the basis for the Internet to augment, and perhaps to transfigure, conventional notions of democracy. At the very least, it challenges the status quo conceptions of a territorially based democracy.

Such are the purported benefits of cyberdemocracy by its advocates. We turn now to the critics.

CRITICIZING CYBERDEMOCRACY

The criticisms of cyberdemocracy are varied, coming from different theoretical perspectives. What unites them is the sense that disembodiment poses difficulties for democracy. The critiques listed in this section can be situated into one of two categories (although the critics themselves may disagree with my typology). The first type of critique holds that problems arise because disembodied politics obscures problems -- like society's distributive inequalities -- which can undermine the positive benefits of cyberdemocracy. The second type of critique maintains that problems arise from the same technological forces of society that permit the possibility of disembodiment. These two constellations of arguments spotlight how the various constraints of social embodiment persist despite the disincarnated political practices on the Net.

The First Set of Criticisms

The first constellation of criticisms revolves around two interrelated subsets of issues. The first subset centers on the ways in which disembodied politics changes, or otherwise affects, certain aspects of democratic politics (including its public dimension of interpersonal, even face-to-face contacts; its territorial dimension as the basis of political community; and its demographic dimension, in which some degree of similarity in terms of culture, religion, wealth, or ethnicity is presupposed). The second subset of this critique focuses on the ways in which disembodiment does not alter the distributive constraints on individual or group political behavior (e.g., the digital divide).

The 18th Century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau can help to illuminate several crucial aspects of cyberdemocracy. His political-philosophical writings explore features often deemed salient to democracy, like publicness, territoriality, and the demographic characteristics of its citizens. Although Rousseau stands as a somewhat contentious figure in political philosophy we do not have to pronounce our favor or disfavor of his overall ideas in order to use them to ask questions about cyberdemocracy: specifically, the relative merits of embodiment for democratic politics. His ideal of democracy, as gleaned from *The Social Contract*, is based on limits: to use the language of this paper, the limits of bodily scope provide the limits of a participatory-democratic polity (Rousseau 1978). The embodiment of politics is crucial for Rousseau's vision of democracy. In short, Rousseau enables us to better understand the issues at stake in a cyberpolitics which claims to be democratic.

For Rousseau, the preconditions of democracy, as I am calling his legitimately constituted polity founded on a social contract among the citizens, include a territory which is relatively small and contiguous as well as citizens who are demographically similar. The small scale of the polity's territory insures a type of publicness that favors the immediacy of relations between the citizens, and the practical ability of all citizens to convene in order to deliberate together, and thereby to form the general will (*volonté general*) that will guide the polity. Further, demographic similarities in religion, language, culture, and wealth make it easier to fashion a general will. For Rousseau, social inequalities, especially widely divergent ones, hinder the creation of a legitimately constituted polity (Rousseau 1978: Bk. 2, Ch. ix-x; Bk. 4, Ch. viii).

Rousseau's principle of immediacy precludes any form of mediation between people relating as citizens with one another. That principle is derived from his critique of the dissimulation and deception found in the theatre. In his famous letter to d'Alembert on the theatre, Rousseau writes (1960: 80-81):

> When the orator appears in public . . . he [*sic*] represents only himself; he fills only his own role, speaks only in his own name, says, or ought to say, only what he thinks; the man and the role being the same, he is in his place. . . . But an actor on the stage, displaying other sentiments than his own, saying only what he is made to say, often representing a chimerical being, annihilates himself, as it were, and is lost in his hero.

In Rousseau's works we can imagine the contours of a socially embodied polity. Citizens interact with one another at the personal level of the body. The malleability of identity which a disembodied cyberspace permits would be deemed disastrous for the trust and good will required among citizens engaging politically within a democracy.

Rousseau is very aware of the problems associated with social stratification along the lines of wealth or property. This issue is taken up in discussions on cyberdemocracy in terms of the so-called digital divide (Hill 1999). As reported, there are wide disparities between those with computers and computer literacy and those without either. The disparities are found globally between the economically developed and developing

countries and in the United States in terms of race, economic status, gender, and school districts (Clinton 2000a & 2000b; Hill 1999; Massey 1998). The exuberance over the worldwide expansion of the Internet thus must be tempered with ongoing studies to discover the contours of the digital divide.

The digital divide also can be approached in terms of distributive inequalities. It is generated by the functioning of a market system which results in haves and have-nots: those who fail to be competitive or who do not possess the requisite skills fall by the wayside. In order to alleviate some of the burdens the governments of welfare (or managerialist) states may intervene to act where markets fail to do so or else where markets seek to impose measures deemed politically undesirable. In the United States politicians have talked of using government resources to provide incentives for businesses to wire the unwired and to train the untrained (Clinton 2000a & 2000b). The George W. Bush presidency, however, claims that the digital divide has significantly narrowed and, as a result, related federal programs are no longer needed (U.S. Commerce Dept. 2002). Critics vehemently decry that the data warrant no such conclusion (Dickard 2002; D. Jackson 2002).

The Second Set of Criticisms

Problems for democracy also emerge from the same technological forces that condition the possibility of incorporeality in cyberpolitics. In this constellation of criticisms, labeled here as the second critique, we will discuss the speed at which cyberspace operates as well as the hyperreality engendered by the Internet. This is thus the realm of analyses informed by post-structuralism.

Paul Virilio analyses how the speed of human interaction has accelerated via the new high-tech forms of communication, including cyberspace (Virilio 1994; 1995; 1996). The speed of such synchronous communications has annihilated distance and thereby created instantaneity. Events happen via advanced technologies at the speed of light.

The increasing interconnection and the erasure of spatial distance have dominated much of the political analysis of globalizing technology. Virilio, however, says that what characterizes the new technology is virtualization. The virtualization of cyberspace allows for what he calls "instantaneous telepresence" (Virilio 1997: 10-11). Such "tele-action," or "action-at-a-distance," Virilio argues, has led to fundamental changes in our world (Virilio 1996). Virilio continues (1996):

> Action-at-a-distance is a phenomenon of absolute disorientation. We now have the possibility of seeing at a distance, of hearing at a distance, and of acting at a distance, and this results in a process of de-localization, of the unrooting of the being. 'To be' used to mean to be somewhere, to be situated, in the here and now, but the 'situation' of the essence of being is undermined by the instantaneity, the immediacy, and the ubiquity which are characteristic of our epoch.

Humans thus become disoriented due to the placelessness and speed of cyberspace. In the virtual, electron-swift realms of the Internet gone is the bodily immediacy which allows us to create meaning.

For Virilio, the problem of technologically induced speed is manifested in its very instantaneity and in its potential consequences for an interconnected hi-tech planet. Indeed, a globe-spanning accident is now possible, asserts Virilio: our interconnectedness potentially can allow a technological problem in one region to spread across the globe (Virilio 1994; 1996). The much-talked-about Y2K Bug offered just such a dangerous scenario for a global accident. Hence, for Virilio speed and any attendant social benefits come at a potentially high price. (For criticisms see Kellner n.d.)

The very plasticity of computer-mediated communications engenders not only new, fluid identities, but also the hyperreality studied by Jean Baudrillard. Modernist and pre-modernist notions of reality no longer hold nowadays. Argues Baudrillard, our present world is postmodern and in the postmodern world hyperreality holds sway: signs refer to other signs in expansive webs of self referentiality. He labels this condition "simulation" (Baudrillard 1988: 145). The systems of signs generated by simulation are called simulacra. There is no original referent, actual or conventional, for the depictions of reality conveyed by the simulacra.

Baudrillard can be applied to cyberspace. Cyberspace is a reticulated world of simulation: the signs "attaching" us to other people or things in the cyberspatial realm domain have no relation to reality. It is a world of surfaces where the signifiers (e.g., one's screen name in a chat room) can be connected to any signified (e.g., to any body or thing). Signifiers ultimately mean nothing (Jarvis 1998; Kroker & Cook 1986: 176-7; Nunes 1995). Baudrillard writes in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1988: 128):

> Everywhere the same 'genesis of simulacra:' the interchangeability of the beautiful and the ugly in fashion; of the right and left in politics; [and] of the true and false in every media message. . . . All the great humanist criteria of value, all the values of a civilization of moral, aesthetic, and practical judgement, vanish in our system of images and signs. Everything becomes undecidable.

The simulation processes generating simulacra re not to be understood as imitation (Raulet 1991). Imitation presupposes a reality "out there" to which the signs point. Instead, simulation **is** creation, for it is the creation of ever more self-referential signifying systems which are themselves the realties of postmodernity. For Baudrillard, the real is now hyperreal. And in such a world democracy, cyber- or otherwise, loses its meaning because all the rational and foundational bases of democracy have dissolved. (Criticisms of Baudrillard on hyperreality can be located in Best & Kellner 1991; and Bleiker 2000.)

The Negative Consequences of Disembodiment

The varied critics of cyberdemocracy -- whether philosophically mainstream or post-structuralist in inspiration -- would tend to agree that disembodied politics holds negative consequences for democratic practice. Such negatives, as described in the language of the critics' perspectives, include the following:

A. Cyberspace is not necessarily conducive to new democratic and/or trans-national communities.

Cyberdemocracy does not automatically provide the basis for new types of political community. Nationalism and ethnic sentiments loom ever more salient today as ways to orient territorially based communities. Moreover, cyberdemocracy does not render obsolete the extant nationally based political institutions -- a point reinforced whenever politicians tout the Internet as a way to augment, but not supplant, existing institutions. As Negative Consequence "B" elaborates next, the communities established in cyberspace are not identical with the public spaces that enhance intimate and stable interpersonal relations (Carroli 1997; Ryan 1997; Saco 2002; Sclove 1995). Rather, with disembodiment also can come the privatization of sitting in front of the computer (Solnit 1995: 229). A potential and perhaps ironic consequence of that, as Sunstein notes in his book, *Republic.com* (Sunstein 2001), is a certain parochialism: the high-tech personalization of Internet-based communication and media can permit the like-minded to focus on the like-minded, thus filtering out different or oppositional views. The social fragmentation of interests and the decline of the "marketplace of ideas," Sunstein argues, become real and dangerous possibilities.

In addition, access to the WWW and the Internet can be blocked or seriously restricted. In a report published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, entitled *Open Networks, Closed Regimes* (Kalathil & Boas 2003), it is indicated that countries could seriously impede the entrance onto the Web except for approved international WWW sites. The report argues that exuberance over the liberating aspects of cyberspace should not be exaggerated, given the capacity for governmental surveillance and control. It should also be noted that on other issues governments can control -- or at least attempt to control -- what is displayed on computers within the borders of their country. This directly pertains to the issue of censorship, a rancorous topic in the U.S.A. Within America there is a continuing debate on what public libraries and other public institutions like schools can and cannot filter from the end users, whether under-age students or library patrons (read, e.g., American Library Association 2002).

B. There is a poverty to virtuality and its disembodied politics.

What we gain in the distance at which we can inter/act, we lose in the richness of face-to-face encounters (Nguyen & Alexander 1996: 116). To be sure, Walt Whitman as a poet of American democracy does not write of communication technologies as such, yet we can feel the sense of meaningfulness that can be derived from close personal

encounters. As Whitman writes in "I Sing the Body Electric" (1959: 72, Stanza 4): "There is something in staying close to men and women and looking / on them, and in the contact and odor of them, that pleases / the soul well, / All things please the soul, but these please the soul well." There is a long tradition, including anti-Federalists in early America and communitarian thinkers globally, which holds that democracy is meaningfully embodied in the physically proximate relations among the citizens.

Rousseau would probably be concerned over the very thing that many find positive about the Net: namely, that new identities can be fashioned. For Rousseau, the refashioning of identity is a dissimulation that would not make for responsible, embodied citizens. Even with the commonality fostered in cyberspace Rousseau alerts us to what we give up by losing the intimate bodily scope of face-to-face communication. In the worst-case scenarios, the "meat" become desocialized, losing the ability to be a part of the society (Neill 1995).

C. A decline in political deliberation can occur.

Various critics maintain that political deliberation would be diminished via cyberpolitics (Conte 1999; Dooley 1997; Goldberg 1999; Ornstein 2000; Ornstein & Schenkenberg 1996; Sandel 1992). For these critics -- many of whom would favor conventional representative democracy -- electronic democracy removes some of the mechanisms that would mitigate the "tyranny of the majority." Cyberdemocracy allows for passionate feelings to rise quickly, and then via the speed of light an issue could be put to a vote. The calming effects of deliberation via extant political institutions would be lacking. The gate-keeping function of responsible, elected representatives also would be lacking. Consequently, some argue that special interest groups might be able to prevail in the cyber-arena due to their high degree of commitment and organization (Wright & Cole 1995). Other problems arise. Information can be easily manipulated, further eroding the truthfulness which undergirds democracy (Dworetzky 1992; Katz 1998) and compromising the security so necessary for online voting. Also, visit the U.S. Voting Integrity Project (U.S. Voting Integrity Project n.d.) for information on the possible problems of electronic voting and e-voting machines.

D. Reasoned political debate is irrelevant.

For other critics, cyberspace heralds the irrelevance of the possibility of reasoned debate. Such emerges as a consequence of the disembodiment that arises in turn from the speed of advanced electronic communication and from the surfaces of cyberspace's hyperreality.

For Virilio, technology allows for virtualization: a body is able, as he puts it, to touch things at a distance. But the price of disembodiment is individual loss of orientation to the world and the potential for dangers of a generalized crisis (his so-called information bomb). Democracy is not enhanced via cyberpolitics.

From a Baudrillardian-style perspective, the simulation found in the hyperreality of cyberspace spells negative consequences for democracy. Presupposed in democratic theories is the ability of individual citizens to gain sufficient knowledge of events to make (ideally) an informed decision. However, the insistent maelstrom of data does not provide information about the real world. For Baudrillard, the severance of signs from their referents, however defined as actual things or as social conventions, destroys any condition for the possibility of truth. Without the criterion of truth there is no knowledge, and without the possibility of knowledge comes the irrelevance, perhaps erasure, of the basis for participatory democratic citizenship.

E. There are (distributive) inequalities in cyberspace.

Some advocates would say that information wants to be free, and that the Net as a dialogic, rhizomatic structure supports such freedom. Yet there are already restrictions in place (Froehling 1997; also Carroli 1997; Munster 1999). Sites exist where entrance is barred via password systems contingent upon payment or other forms of control. Other sites require add-on technology in order to view or hear them. In cyberspace, then, we find that the Net is not necessarily a free, undifferentiated, informational space.

The critics of cyberdemocracy also might point out that efforts to redress distributive inequalities are confronted with various obstacles. A much-heralded effort to tackle such problems has been the creation and attempted distribution of a smaller, more affordable, Internet-capable computer called the "Simputer." The Simputer is manufactured in India for use across the developing world (Simputer.org 2000). A similar project sponsored by the One Laptop Per Child organization is also attempting to manufacture and distribute a $100 Dollar Computer for the world's poor (One Laptop Per Child n.d.). However, commentators highlight the lagging sales of the Simputer (Srinivasan 2005) and the cost uncertainties of the $100 Dollar computer (Kanellos 2006) -- all difficulties that do not greatly mitigate the global digital divide.

CRITICALLY ASSESSING THE ASSESSMENTS

The advocates discussed above offer us the possibility of enhancing democracy via cyberspace by removing some of the historically existing burdens on citizen participation, whether they are in the form of territorial boundaries, or in gender, race, and class status impediments. However, they often do not probe very deeply beneath the surface to arrive at the fundamental material relationships that condition social interactions. The many glowing statements by proponents of cyberdemocracy have been challenged by the critics of cyberdemocracy. While the critics do probe into the negative aspects of cyberdemocracy, they themselves offer little basis or hope for us to theorize the emancipatory aspects of cyberspace. This section will set forth the materiality that mediates social interactions, cyberspatial or otherwise.

Via keyboards, mice, and virtual reality devices human bodies are connected to a computer network which itself is connected to the Internet, all of which is situated within a social *milieu* and its crucial social relationships of power. This network/bodies/society

constellation is embodied materially in the sense that actual interrelated "things," rather than their symbolic and fluid representations in cyberspace, exist and provide the necessary conditions for the possibility of cyberspace.

Computer hardware, fiber optic cables, and geosynchronous satellites are the necessary components of cyberspace. Without those very real things and the social relationships of production, distribution, and consumption (as well as the attendant relations of power) there is no "real" domain of cyberspace. The Web surfers and customers of ecommerce, the political activists and the hackers, and the "console cowboys" of Gibsonian cyber-fiction all depend on the materiality of the hardware to achieve the realm of incorporeality in cyberspace.

Yet even in the descriptions of cyberspace its definers are themselves defined by what they distinguish cyberspace from: namely, the real world. Both fiction and nonfiction discussions of cyberspace usually make some mention of various devices (and their very materiality) that are necessary to participate in the cyber realm, such as via jacks or electrodes. Social embodiment thereby is implied even by the absence of any explicit analysis of it. People connected to a computer network, traveling disembodied through cyberspace, still (must) leave their bodies sitting in front of the screen (Bruns 1999).

We may apprehend the world through our linguistic constructions and theoretical frameworks, but society remains untouched unless we put into practice what we theoretically apprehend (e.g., Clarke 1991). Indeed, unless we theorize how humans are reflexively interacting with the material realm -- in the sense of praxis, as Marx stated in his "Theses on Feuerbach" -- we have no way to critically assess our frameworks of reality. Materiality thus is never abandoned, even though the Internet does allow us the luxury of forgetting about it for awhile in our disembodied political actions.

Even with all of the policies and partisan rhetoric the digital divide reminds us quite forcefully about the societal embodiment of the Net: cyberspace cannot be accessed without the wherewithal to get there in the first instance. Indeed, capitalists themselves are well aware of the costs associated with wiring the world (Golumbia 1996). Such costs must be recouped via various marketing strategies to commercialize the Internet or to require payment for access.

Because the body has not escaped the materiality of social embodiment, social inequalities will be perpetuated in cyberspace. The freedom promised by cyberspaces and electronic democracy is still constrained by concentrations of power found in corporations and state apparatuses (Warf & Grimes 1997), and by the intrusion of objectionable behaviors like sexual harassment (C. Baker 2000). As numerous examples witness, cyberspace does not foreclose the intrusion of corporate commercialism or government intervention (Crang 2000; also see Huang 1998/1999; Rodan 1998). Indeed, some have argued that the body before the computer is trained and rendered programmable to be a cog in the overall market system (Neill 1995: 190-1). At the very least, we cannot assume that cyberspace's fluidity and the malleability of disembodiment will avoid the prejudices found in the real world (Fernandez 1999). Preconceived notions

of race, gender, and class have persisted in the fashioned online identities (Kendall 1998), because such notions are themselves constituents of offline identity (Crawford 2002; Postmes *et al.* 1998).

We may jack in to cyberspace at our keyboards but we do not fully leave the social context that constitutes cyberspace. Indeed, cyberspace itself is not the point. As Crang writes (Crang 2000):

> Spatial metaphors make the low-level abstractions of machine code tangible, but may naturalise some configurations of cyberspace; thus images of (techno-)frontiers may offer connotations of a mythical, individualistic libertarian past with a faith in progress, while (information) highways and their ilk bring the baggage of state intervention. . . .

In addition to state intervention, the much-trumpeted freedom of individuals on the Net conflates (confuses?) humans with businesses, thereby obscuring the disproportionate power wielded by corporations over people (Winner 1997). Society in its manifest inequities intrudes into cyberspace in a myriad of dominating and repressive ways.

Democracy cannot be practiced fully without also addressing the disparities in power that inhibit the free expression and social interaction among equal humans. In fluidic, informational cyberspace we will not fulfill the ideals of democracy as long as our societal embodiment retains disparities in access and concentrates structural power in the hands of corporations and state apparatuses (see Hirschkop 1996). The Internet's materiality and its ongoing constraints hence call into question the effectiveness and fairness of current cyberdemocracy at ultimately enhancing political participation.

That critical point is informed by another facet of our social world. Cyberpolitics and cyberdemocracy do not necessarily address that crucial tension between capitalism and (liberal) democracy which lies at the heart of modernity. Capitalism and liberal democracy, as historically practiced, are based upon ultimately contradictory logics (E.M. Wood 1995). The contradictions arise because of a vital characteristic of the capitalist mode of production: namely the separation of politics from economics. Economic decisions are not subject to democratic decisions by the citizens themselves. A managerial (welfare) state can monitor and regulate some economic actions, but does not fundamentally challenge the "right" of corporate entities to private ownership of the means of production.

Capitalism involves a logic of accumulation and the imperative to lower the costs of production and transactions while simultaneously expanding markets for products and services. Following the tenets of capitalism, everything has a price tag: "things", including a person's labor power, are valued only insofar as they produce goods and services for sale. Liberal democracy, however, involves a logic embracing the fundamental equality of individuals in the political sphere. Following the logic and rhetoric of liberal democracy, citizens cannot -- indeed, should not -- be conceived in

terms of exchange value. On the contrary, citizens are intrinsically irreducible because they are in principle use values, that is, values which are good in and of themselves.

Nevertheless, the practices capitalism in a capitalist liberal democracy betray the ideals of democracy, even the circumscribed ones of liberal democracy. The life chances of citizens are affected by capitalist decisions; citizens are treated in terms of exchange values rather than use values. Liberal democracy limits decisions to the political realm while avoiding the democratic control over the economic decisions of capitalists. As a consequence, the potentials of democracy can be achieved only with the sublation of capitalism by a more fully democratic system of social organization. Many advocates of cyberdemocracy do not directly address the capitalist relations which underpin the infrastructure of the Internet. Thus, they do not theorize the constraints on the realization of the democratic ideals.

CONCLUSION

The potentials and the perils of cyberdemocracy have been presented above. From the myriad positive and negative dimensions we can derive certain conclusions about the democratic vistas of the Internet.

The central conclusion of this work can be summarized briefly. In cyberpolitics the political actors are disembodied on the Net, while simultaneously and crucially still embodied within the social *milieux* -- a fortiori, social relations of power -- which mediate the actors and the Internet. Embodiment thus establishes a limiting condition on cyberdemocracy: namely, the body remains implicated in political actions, regardless of whether those actions occur in a virtual realm or not. In short, the Internet's basis for a potentially new democracy also establishes its most serious limitation. In cyberspace the Internet has removed the bodies from political actions *without* removing the society from the bodies at the computer. Such societal embodiment -- bodies fundamentally and inextricably tied to the materiality of life -- is problematic for cyberdemocracy.

Democracy, as rule by the people, implicitly or explicitly requires the people to debate and render their collective decision. This process in ancient times traditionally presupposed a location where the citizens could gather. Certainly, the face-to-face style of participatory democracy has all but vanished at the national level in modern polities. Yet it is preserved in some forms and to some degree in local communities where the members of the community could convene in common places. Cyberspace has been heralded as the way to rekindle a more participatory democracy by uniting people with people and citizens with their government. Via computer-mediated mechanisms new public forums are created to enhance politics and to implement the ideals of democracy. Such new forums, proponents of cyberdemocracy will tell us, could also transfix political borders and help to unite different people in pursuit of common political purposes.

Cyberdemocracy holds open great political promise, but its equally great flaws should not be ignored. This paper utilized the dis/embodiment thematic of cyberpolitics as a way to interpret the changing practices of democracy in a high-tech world. Indeed, in an era of

virtuality the body is all the more vital to interrogate precisely because a disincarnated body is also a problematic body. The Internet removes the physicality of bodies from (cyber)politics, but political action on the Internet does not necessarily remove or otherwise transform the embodied materiality of the society which is the precondition for the existence of the Internet and its cyberspaces. Ironically, disembodiment highlights all the more the imperative to practico-theoretically address the social relations of production which provide the material bases for our emancipatory projects.

The Internet can provide the citizens with more information and allow for more input into policy decisions at scales that extend past the limits of the body. Cyberdemocracy as presented by various authors gives us a conceptual realm of information flows in which people can participate politically. Yet cyberpolitics as such leaves untouched the social relationships in which the computer technology is embedded -- and embodied, for human bodies will continue to remain the focal point of much activity by governments and corporations. A disincarnated political "presence" ultimately does not mean a discarded body politic.

People around the world may learn online of political actions and social movements, like those of the EZLN. Sympathetic persons and "fellow travelers" may even take part in efforts to help those in the struggle. But it is the Zapatistas themselves who have their bodies on the line in Mexico. Thus, more information or easier access to politicians is not enough to counter the often repressive power of unequal actors within current social relationships. In the struggles for democracy at national and international levels there is no effective replacement for an embodied politics which seeks to inform, organize, empower, and motivate bodies in real (social) space against relations of oppression and exploitation.

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