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Egemonia all'ombra della post-realtà. Individuando il senso comune nel digitalocene

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Abstract

Questo articolo indaga se “la forma egemonica” teorizzata da Jean Baudrillard si stia attualmente realizzando nel contesto di quello che qui viene provvisoriamente chiamato “digitalocene”, attingendo liberamente alla formulazione del capitalocene di Jason W. Moore, che considera il capitalismo non solo come un sistema di produzione ma come un sistema di vita. L’articolo si chiede se il digitalocene stia sostituendo le concezioni storiche di ciò che costituisce il senso comune e il buon senso tra i gruppi sociali, come teorizzato da Antonio Gramsci, inibendo la capacità politica di impegnarsi in pratiche intellettuali e attive contro-egemoniche.

Keywords

Senso comune, Buon senso, Digitalocene, Egemonia, Post-realtà

Hegemony in the Shadow of Post-Reality. Locating Common Sense in the Digitalocene

Abstract

This article investigates whether “the hegemonic form” theorised by Jean Baudrillard is currently being realised in the context of what is here tentatively called “the digitalocene”, drawing at liberty from Jason W. Moore’s formulation of the capitalocene that looks at capitalism not only as a system of production but as a system of life. The article questions whether the digitalocene is displacing historical understandings of what constitutes senso comune (common sense) and buon senso (good sense) among social groups as theorised by Antonio Gramsci, inhibiting the political ability to engage in counter-hegemonic intellectual and active practices.

Keywords

Common Sense, Good Sense, Digitalocene, Hegemony, Post-Reality

Hegemony in the Shadow of Post-Reality: Locating Common Sense in the Digitalocene

Benedetta Lanfranchi

Introduction

This article investigates the dynamics of hegemonic forms and the conditions for counter-hegemonic possibilities within the increasingly digitized modes of production that characterize the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).¹

While the beginning of the Digital Age is usually associated with the advent of the Third Industrial Revolution (3IR) (also known as the Information Revolution) – bracketed between the invention of the point-contact transistor in 1947 and the birth of the World Wide Web in 1989 – some maintain that we are now undergoing a new, “epi-digital” revolution that is characterized by robotics, advanced materials, genetic modifications, the Internet of Things, drones, neurotechnologies, autonomous vehicles, artificial intelligence, and machine vision.²

According to Karl Schwab, while 4IR is still to be conceptualized as part of the same Digital Age that also encompasses 3IR, the velocity, scope and systems impact and paradigm shift in technology policy that industry has been undergoing since the early 2000s are creating a break with both the Information Revolution and the previous two industrial revolutions in terms of the sophistication and integration of the digital technologies that are being developed:

A much more ubiquitous and mobile internet, smaller and more powerful sensors that have become cheaper, and by artificial intelligence and machine learning [...] It is the fusion of these technologies and their interaction across

¹ The term “counter-hegemonic” is used in this article to refer to generalized phenomena of counter-power and resistance rather than to the creation of a new hegemonic bloc by subaltern classes, as per Gramsci’s theorization of the concept.

² T. Philbeck, N. Davis, *The Fourth Industrial Revolution: Shaping a New Era*, «Journal of International Affairs», 72, 2018/2019, 1, pp. 17-22; DOI: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26588339>.

the physical, digital and biological domains that make the fourth industrial revolution fundamentally different from previous revolutions.³

Media theorist Robert Hassan argues that the pervasiveness of digital technologies is propelling us into a proper «condition», that of digitality, defined as:

The process of a machine, a logic, that has not only rapidly colonised every part of the inhabited planet, but has also suffused the consciousness of almost every person within it in terms of his or her engagement with each other through networks of communication, production and consumption.⁴

This article interrogates the impact that digitality is having on the political sphere by way of Antonio Gramsci's categories of *sensō comune* (common sense) and *buon sensō* (good sense), which the Italian thinker postulates as the building blocks of *any* process of political consciousness and action.⁵

The article questions whether this new «condition of digitality» is so far reaching that a new ontological formation is being ushered in with 4IR, one that is tentatively termed “the digitalocene”. The concept of the digitalocene is here proposed as a theory-in-progress that draws at liberty from J.W. Moore's formulation of the capitalocene as capitalism's world-ecology, underscored by the ontological formation of the Human/Nature binary.⁶ What is important in Moore's theorization of the capitalocene is that it doesn't just look at capitalism as a system of production, but rather as a system of life, one whose world-historical *praxis* is «the cheapening of the lives and work of many humans and most non-human natures».⁷

³ K. Schwab, *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*, Cologny-Geneva, World Economic Forum, 2016, p. 12.

⁴ R. Hassan, *The Condition of Digitality: A Post-modern Marxism for the Practice of Digital Life*, Westminster, University of Westminster Press, 2020, p. 2.

⁵ The Gramscian terms and the complexities entailed in their translation are thoroughly explained in the next section of the article.

⁶ J. W. Moore, *The Capitalocene*, Part I: *On the nature and origins of our ecological crisis*, «The Journal of Peasant Studies», 44, 2017, 3, pp. 594-630, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036>; Id., *The Capitalocene*, Part II: *Accumulation by appropriation and the centrality of unpaid work/energy*, «The Journal of Peasant Studies», 45, 2018, 2, pp. 237-79, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1272587>; *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. by J. W. Moore, Binghamton (N. Y.), PM Press, 2016; J. W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, London, Verso, 2015.

⁷ Id., *The Capitalocene*, Part I, cit., p. 8.

Digitalocene is here proposed to investigate whether the proliferation of multiple, virtual realities enabled by digital technologies are threatening the very existence of *senso comune* and *buon senso*, resulting in the inhibition of counter-hegemonic intellectual and active practices. This theory-in-progress of the digitalocene is not meant to be techno-deterministic, and remains rooted in a critique of capitalism. Following David Harvey's theory of the space economy of capital, which states that capital accumulation is profoundly influenced by geo-spatial limits, digitalocene is first and foremost seen as achieving the expansion of these limits through the production of new, digital spaces.⁸ Digitality, that is, is seen as operating as a spatial fix.⁹

However, my argument is that the changes that are being introduced with 4IR are not just of a socio-economic nature, but are also of an ontic and ontological nature, thus requiring something more than a social ontology for their analysis. Digital capitalism is not just producing new commodities, conquering new frontiers of capital accumulation, exploiting new forms of labor and producing new forms of alienation but it is actually fabricating new reality/ies. Even though the main driving force behind their production may be that of capital accumulation, the point is that their *effects* are so far reaching that they cannot be understood only in terms of economic production and labor relations.

Though these new realities are largely virtual and/or artificially generated, they increasingly possess ontic qualities, existing as real spaces with increasingly powerful material effects on more and more social relations. Since the advent of social media with the launch of Facebook in 2004, followed by YouTube and Twitter in 2005 and 2006, Instagram in 2010 and TikTok in 2016, recent statistics now indicate that there are currently 5.66 billion social media “user identities” around the world, making social media users a “supermajority” of the earth’s population, with users outnumbering non-users by two to one.¹⁰ In terms of innovations in artificial intelligence (AI), the year 2022 was ground breaking in terms of developments of large language model (LLMs) used in generative AI chatbots with the

⁸ D. Harvey, *The Limits to Capital*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1982.

⁹ D. Greene, D. Joseph, *The Digital Spatial Fix*, «tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique, Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society», 13, 2015, 2, pp. 223-47.

¹⁰ <https://datareportal.com/social-media-users> (23 October 2025).

launch of ChatGPT, followed suit by Gemini, DeepSeek, Claude and others. Generative AI is increasingly being integrated across most industries. As more and more time is spent in and interacting with these digitally generated spaces, the more our cognitive and social realities are being reshaped.¹¹ These changes call for a renewed self-understanding and renewed reflections on the socio-political categories that we can apply to understand how we individually and collectively think and act in these spaces. This article focuses on the Gramscian socio-political categories of common sense and good sense, questioning how these might operate in the digitalocene.

1. Antonio Gramsci's common sense and good sense

Senso comune and *buon senso* are two key, recurring categories of thought and action in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*.¹² The already complex layers and meanings that make up Gramsci's notions of *senso comune* and *buon senso* in the original Italian are further complicated by the English translation of these terms. As explained by Hoare and Smith in their critical edition of the *Notebooks*, with the term *senso comune* Gramsci refers to the incoherent set of generally held assumptions and beliefs common to any given society, while *buon senso* refers to the practical, empirical – though not necessarily rational or scientific – thinking.¹³ What Hoare and Smith highlight is that Gramsci's notion of *buon senso*/good sense is actually very much in line with the English widespread notion of common sense as popularly-held, sound judgment. This confusion is what makes the English translation of the Gramscian terms particularly arduous, since *buon senso* would normally be translated as common sense in English, whereas

¹¹ L. Floridi, *The 4th Revolution: How the Infosphere Is Reshaping Human Reality*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014.

¹² A complete English translation of the *Notebooks* is not yet available. The available critical editions in English are: Joseph A. Buttigieg's three volume edition for Columbia University Press, which contains translations of notebooks 1-8 (out of a total of 33 notebooks, if one includes the four translation notebooks which are not included in Valentino Gerratana's 29 notebooks edition, but which are being included in the new national edition of the *Notebooks* under the editorship of Gianni Francioni, Giuseppe Cospito and Fabio Frosini); the *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (1971); the *Selections from the Cultural Writings*, translated by William Boelhower and edited by David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (1985); the *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, translated and edited by Derek Boothman (1995). I will mainly be referencing Gramsci's translated texts in this article.

¹³ A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks (SPN)*, London, Lawrence and Wishart - New York, International Publishers, 1971, p. 322.

common sense has a different meaning in the Gramscian lexicon. Kate Crehan has also highlighted the complexity in translating these terms when she writes that:

It is important to note [...] that the Italian *senso comune* is a far more neutral term than the English *common sense*. The English term, with its overwhelmingly positive connotations, puts the emphasis, so to speak, on the ‘sense’, *senso comune* on the held-in-common (*comune*) nature of the beliefs.¹⁴

For all of the above reasons, Peter D. Thomas has opted for a retention of the Italian terms in his work, arguing for the conceptually unsatisfying solution of using notes to indicate the specificity of the concept for Gramsci while continuing to deploy the English translation. Thomas believes that the English deployment of the terms do not do justice to the philosophical import of Gramsci’s conceptualization of *senso comune* aimed, in fact, at redefining the nature of philosophy itself.¹⁵ This article maintains both the Italian and English terms interchangeably.

In terms of the analysis of the concepts, a thorough historical overviews is offered by Giuseppe Cospito in his article *Senso comune/ buon senso*, where he begins by tracing Aristotle’s first philosophical use of the term *koine aisthesis* (common sense or common perception) and its Latin, more politically inclined rendering into *communis consensus* – in terms of a shared consensus – by Cicero. Cospito then points to the term’s resurfacing in the early modern period through the writings of Gianbattista Vico, Thomas Reid, George Berkeley, David Hume, with different meanings, characterizations and focuses, from the ethical-political to the epistemological, moral and aesthetic.¹⁶ A key theorization in this history is Immanuel Kant’s theorization of *sensus communis* in relation to taste in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790).¹⁷ Finally, the nineteenth century revival of common sense is

¹⁴ K. Crehan, *Gramsci’s Common Sense. Inequality and its Narratives*, Durham-London, Duke University Press, 2016, p. X.

¹⁵ P. D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment. Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2009, pp. 16, 61.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ Of note here is Hannah Arendt’s important theorization of common sense in the *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* – delivered at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1970 and edited by and published posthumously in 1982 – where she develops Kant’s aesthetics into a theory of moral and political judgment. See H. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*,

evidenced in the pragmatism of James, Pierce and Dewey, the spiritualism of Bergson, the neo-Thomism of Gilson and Maritain and the analytic philosophy of Moore and Wittgenstein.

This overview meaningfully contextualizes Gramsci's engagement with the term, starting from his journalistic production in 1916, through his private correspondence in the 1920s and up to the writing of *The Prison Notebooks* in 1929-1935 (with the turning point in the theorization of these terms taking place in 1932, according to Cospito) within the Italian intellectual debates of the 1930s, also stimulated by the publication of Lucien Febvre and March Bloch's *Annales* (1929) in France – in which they explicitly aimed to research popular culture – and Benedetto Croce's *Filosofia come vita morale e vita morale come filosofia* (1928) in Italy.¹⁸

Guido Liguori singles out four cardinal tenets in Gramsci's delineation of *senso comune*:

- a) "every social stratum has its own 'common sense'" and therefore in a society there exist different common senses; b) common sense is defined as "the most widespread conception of life and morals" within a given social stratum; c) common sense derives from the sedimentation left behind by previous philosophical currents; d) common sense is in continuous modification (and therefore different common senses follow one another over time).¹⁹

Gramsci's characterizations of *senso comune* in the *Notebooks* are oftentimes unforgiving, with common sense discussed in terms of that uncritical, incoherent, simple, passive, unconscious or superstitious realm of thought that Gramsci clearly differentiates from critical, conscious and informed processes of thought that constitute what he terms «second level philosophy». ²⁰ And yet, despite these negative

Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982.

¹⁸ G. Cospito, *Senso comune/buon senso*, «Materialismo storico», 5, 2018, 2, pp. 6-77; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14276/2531-9582.1967>.

¹⁹ G. Liguori, *Senso comune*, in *Dizionario Gramsciano 1926-1937*, a cura di G. Liguori e P. Voza, Rome, Carocci, 2009, pp. 759-61; in English (*Common Sense/Senso comune: Gramsci Dictionary*) in «International Gramsci Journal», 4, 2021, 2, pp. 125-29: 125; <https://ro.uow.edu.au/gramsci/vol4/iss2/9>.

²⁰ Gramsci divides philosophy into two orders: first order philosophy, entailing a dimension of philosophy that is not strictly academic or scholarly, that lives in popular culture and expression and which is unconsciously held; second order philosophy entailing a critical, self-reflective activity that requires knowledge of history and of a national language. The question of whether common sense and folklore are to be considered as one single category in Gramsci's thought

categorizations, the nexus between common sense and philosophy is a central question of Notebook 11 (dedicated to the study of philosophy), as evidenced by Fabio Frosini.²¹ *Senso comune* is a central feature of Gramsci's broader intellectual and political project, the philosophy of praxis.²²

In advocating the idea that «[everyone] is a philosopher» and that «Each [person], finally [...] carries on some form of intellectual activity»,²³ in Notebook 11 Gramsci identifies a philosophy «common to all» in three specific realms of human experience:

1. Language itself, which is the totality of determined notions and concepts and not just of words grammatically devoid of content; 2. “Common sense” and “good sense”; 3. Popular religion, and, therefore, also the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing and acting, which surface collectively under the name “folklore”.²⁴

While the collective generative ground of *senso comune* is mainly a socio-cultural one, it harbours the potential of becoming *political* in its relationship to *buon senso* and eventually even to philosophy, which is why «Gramsci takes common sense seriously».²⁵ Gramsci takes common sense seriously because there cannot be social emancipation without it, because common sense is what resonates with the masses, without which processes of social transformation cannot take place, as emphasized by Crehan:

has been the subject of ongoing academic debate in the field, as has the question of whether Gramsci in fact ever redeems the category of common sense at all or rather maintains a negative connotation over it. For a thorough philological and philosophical analysis of these debates refer to Cospito, *Senso comune/buon senso*, cit.; Liguori, *Common Sense*, cit.; Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment*, cit.; R. P. Jackson, *Senso Comune, Buon Senso and Philosophy in Gramsci*, «International Gramsci Journal», 5, 2024, 4, pp. 165-85; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14276/igj.v5i4.4732>; F. Frosini, *Filosofia della praxis*, in *Le parole di Gramsci*, a cura di F. Frosini e G. Liguori, Rome, Carocci, 2004, pp. 93-111. For a comparative analysis of Gramsci's idea of philosophy see B. Lanfranchi, *Does This Mean That There is Philosophy in Everything? A Comparative Reading of Henry Odera Oruka's and Antonio Gramsci's First and Second Order Philosophy*, in *Rethinking Sage Philosophy: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on and beyond H. Odera Oruka*, ed. by K. Kresse and O. Nyarwath, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022, pp. 77-98.

²¹ F. Frosini, *Gramsci e la filosofia*, Rome, Carocci, 2003, pp. 168-82.

²² Frosini, *Filosofia della praxis*, cit.

²³ *SPN*, p. 330 and p. 9, respectively. Gramsci's famous phrase is that «all men are philosophers» but I am confident he would not object to my modifying it here so as to include myself and other fellow women into the category.

²⁴ *SPN*, p. 323.

²⁵ Crehan, *Gramsci's Common Sense*, cit., p. 186.

The bringing into being of new, genuinely counter-hegemonic narratives—a crucial part of any social transformation—has to start with the world inhabited by the mass of the population. And that world is the world of common sense.²⁶

According to Gramsci common sense constitutes the very condition for a *certain type of thinking*, intimately bound to *feeling*, and necessary for processes of social transformation, as elucidated in Q 4, § 33 and again in Q11, §67:

The error of the intellectual consists in believing that one can *know* without understanding and, above all, without feeling or being impassioned: in other words, that the intellectual can be an intellectual if he is distinct and detached from the people. [...] Only if the relationship between intellectuals and people-masses, between the leaders and the led, between the rulers and the ruled is based on an organic attachment in which impassioned sentiment becomes understanding and hence knowledge (not mechanically but in a living manner), only then is the relationship one of representation, and only then does one get an exchange of individual elements between the rulers and the ruled, the leaders and the led, in other words, only then does a life of connectedness, which alone is a social force, become a reality, and the “historical bloc” come into being.²⁷

Feeling and impassioned sentiment are crucial in establishing a common ground, which in and of itself comes to constitute a new knowledge base through the embodied exchange of diverse social groups member’s different political experiences. «The passage from *knowing* to *understanding* to *feeling* and vice versa from *feeling* to *understanding* to *knowing*», allows for a transfer and sharing of the different experiences of being ruled and ruling, being led and leading.²⁸

Here the accent on the collective aspect of *senso comune*—which, Crehan rightly stresses, is more present in the Italian rendering of the concept, where the accent is placed more on «the held in common» of the *comune*—is crucial. Common sense constitutes a crucial node around which the relationship between first and second order philosophy must be worked out for philosophy to exist as an emancipatory praxis, linking universal political quests with the particular realities of specific social groups.

²⁶ K. Crehan, *Living subalternity: Antonio Gramsci's concept of common sense*, in *The Political Philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and B. R. Ambedkar*, ed. by C. Zene, London, Routledge, 2013, p. 113.

²⁷ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, vol. 2 (PN2), New York, Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 173. I am profoundly indebted to Fabio Frosini for calling my attention to the importance of this passage for the present discussion.

²⁸ PN2, p. 173 (Q 4, § 33: QC, p. 452).

However, social transformation only happens when a certain type of genuine dialogue between the intellectuals and the masses takes place, enabling those who live the condition of subalternity to come up with the coherent, effective counter-narratives necessary to overcome the existing hegemonic structures, which they cannot do by themselves, implicated as they are in the daily struggles of survival and resistance. Given the fragmentary, heterogeneous and socio-culturally specific nature of common sense, only *partial* processes of critical elaboration and social homogenization can take place via *senso comune*. For this reason, the further elaborations of good sense – and eventually, philosophy – are needed for the formation of a truly counter-hegemonic movement that is able to challenge the dominant hegemony by becoming a historical bloc of its own. Counter-hegemonic movements of social transformation are initiated through processes of internal homogenization and awareness on the part of each groups' organic intellectuals.

Leaving aside for a moment the characterization of common sense in terms of its negative or positive connotations and contents, what seems to be undisputed is the importance of the «held-in-common» of *senso comune* for processes of social transformation to take shape; the importance, that is, of the *shared experience* of the world that is made through popular culture, folklore, religion, language, scientific knowledge, magic, superstition, ideology, labour etc., as diverse and specific to different social – as well as cultural, ethnic, racial and gender-based – groupings these may be. For Gramsci, each social group exists on the basis of its function in terms of its productive force in the global economy and each group possesses its own common sense. In our current highly virtual and increasingly networked and fragmented social reality, where production and consumption are taking on radically new forms, what does common sense even look like? And how do counter-hegemonic processes unfold in a socio-economic landscape that makes it harder and harder for social groups to aggregate on the basis of their productive functions?

2. *The hegemonic form*

Serious challenges to the formation of political collectivities that characterized the earlier, industrial capitalism of Gramsci's time started arising long before the advent of 4IR, as the proliferation and heterogeneity of social groupings increasingly came to characterise our

postmodern condition. They began with capitalism's radical restructuring into neoliberalism in the late 1970s – underpinned by de-industrialization in the West, tertiarization and individual employment agreements – and were accompanied by the culture of postmodernism, expressed in philosophy, politics and the arts.

Political economists and sociologists have been describing the developments of capitalism in the information age in terms of post-industrial or late capitalism; information capitalism; new capitalism and immaterial capitalism, among others.²⁹ Newer forms of capitalism that are now being named by scholars as we progress into 4IR are cognitive capitalism; digital capitalism; surveillance capitalism; cybernetic capitalism; and platform capitalism, among others.³⁰ Some of the common evidence that the most recent critiques of digital capitalism highlight are: non-consensual practices of data extractivism, with data being the new commodity of digital capitalism; the new pockets of unpaid labour and new forms of labour exploitation – which includes new forms of child labour exploitation, even in developed countries – that are accompanying the digital revolution; the presence of new frontiers of capital accumulation, with new forms of alienation; and finally, the experimental nature of new forms of non-human intelligence that have increasing influence on human affairs without any real knowledge as to its long term effects.³¹ Some even argue that the four pillars that characterize modern colonialism – extraction, expansion, exploitation and extermination – also characterize the data harvesting conducted by Big Tech companies, thus constituting a novel form of coloniality involving data.³²

²⁹ M. Lazzarato, *Immaterial Labor*, in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. by M. Hardt and P. Virno, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, pp. 133-47; M. Hardt, A. Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2000; L. Boltanski, E. Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London, Verso, 2005.

³⁰ D. Schiller, *Digital Capitalism*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 1999; N. Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2016; S. Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, London, Profile Books, 2019; Y. Moulier-Boutang, *Cognitive Capitalism*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2011; C. Fuchs, *Digital Capitalism: Media, Communication and Society*, vol. 3, London, Routledge, 2022; J. Overwijk, *Cybernetic Capitalism. A Critical Theory of the Incommunicable*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2025.

³¹ The excessively intrusive, all-encompassing and increasingly destructive force of late capitalism has been described by Nancy Fraser in terms of cannibal capitalism in *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System Is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet – and What We Can Do about It*, London, Verso, 2022. Fraser's analysis however does not focus on the digital aspect of capitalism.

³² N. Couldry, U. A. Mejias, *Data Grab: The New Colonialism of Big Tech and How to Fight Back*,

It is important to remember here with Christian Fuchs that while digital capitalism is becoming the dominant mode of production, different faces of capitalist exploitation continue to co-exist across different global geographies (and also, I would add, across differentiated forms of racialized and gendered labor):

Capitalism is many things at the same time, it is to a certain degree informational, but also at the same time to a certain degree financial capitalism, imperialistic capitalism, hyperindustrial capitalism, etc. We have many capitalisms today existing within one overall capitalist mode of organizing society. Capitalism is at the same time a general mode of production and exploitation and a specific realization, co-existence and interaction of different types and forms of capitalist production and exploitation.³³

Despite the fact that these are different theories of digital capitalism, what they all have in common is a critique of the increasing pervasiveness of capitalism as a system of production that is encroaching on all spheres of human life, including all of our social interactions with others as well as the depths of our privacy. What they also have in common is that while sharing the view that information technologies and knowledge are novel centres of contemporary society, they are seen as inscribed in a continuous history of capitalism. This differentiates the digital capitalism theorists from the information society theorists who maintain that information technologies have brought about a new kind of society that has radically transformed social relations and economic production.³⁴ A more isolated yet strong voice in the debate is that of Yanis Varoufakis who argues that the economy of the digital age impinged by the Big Tech giants is actually bringing capitalism to an end, as we transition into an era of techno-feudalism.³⁵

Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2024.

³³ C. Fuchs, *Capitalism or Information Society? The Fundamental Question of the Present Structure of Society*, «European Journal of Social Theory», 16, 2012, 4, p. 419.

³⁴ An excellent summary of the difference between continuous and discontinuous information society theories is offered by Christian Fuchs in *Capitalism or Information Society? The Fundamental Question of the Present Structure of Society*, «European Journal of Social Theory», 16, 2012, 4, pp. 413-34. Examples of the discontinuous theories are D. Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*, New York, Basic Books, 1973; N. Stehr, *Knowledge Societies*, London, Sage, 1994; M. Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, London, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010 (1st ed. 1996).

³⁵ Y. Varoufakis, *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism*, London, The Bodley Head, 2023.

French philosopher Jean Baudrillard had started posing the question of hegemony in the context of late, information capitalism in the West as early as the 1970s, as he observed the increased pervasiveness of consumption through processes of total commodification, with alienation also becoming ubiquitous.³⁶ Leaving behind previous modes of domination characterized by the traditional tropes of slavery, obedience and alienation, Baudrillard theorized the hegemonic form as the ultimate, terminal phase of domination that was being realized through the liquidation of the real through the virtual in what he termed “hyperspace” or “hyperreality”.³⁷

Baudrillard thought that the hegemonic form was being realized through processes of simulacra and simulation, which entailed the liquidation of all referentials via the substitution of the real itself for signs of the real. These processes were challenging the distinction between truth and falsity, real and imaginary. He did not ascribe the origin of hyperreality to the advent of the digital technologies of the information age, situating the origin of the battle between the murderous power of images and the real all the way back to the byzantine iconoclastic controversy and other such religious controversies over the question of iconoclasm.³⁸ Still, it is clear that the new digital technologies of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s were instrumental producers of hyperreality, due to the sheer amount of copies that they were able to generate, as well as the levels of virtuality that they enabled.³⁹ Baudrillard saw these technologies as instrumental in speeding up processes of «the generation of models of a real without origin or reality», resulting in «*The desert of the real itself*».⁴⁰

³⁶ D. Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard*, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition), ed. by E. N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/baudrillard/>.

³⁷ J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1994.

³⁸ Baudrillard refers to the major religious and political dispute in the Byzantine Empire from the 8th to 9th centuries over the use and veneration of religious images (icons) as an example of his theories on simulacra and simulation. He refers to the iconoclastic controversy as a historical example of the tension between the simulacrum – the copy whose original has been lost, a process that was deeply feared and opposed by the iconoclasts – and simulation, as the process of creating models that replace reality, celebrated instead in the iconophiles’ embrace of images as a way to represent divinity.

³⁹ In his Introduction to the *Agony of Power*, Sylvère Lotringer notes how the French theorist «took a huge step forward when he discovered the “Silicon Valley” phenomenon, the home-based computer utopia». See S. Lotringer, *Introduction*, in J. Baudrillard, *The Agony of Power*, trans. by A. Hodges, Cambridge (MA), Semiotext(e), 2010, p. 11.

⁴⁰ J. Baudrillard, *Simulations*, New York, Semiotext(e), 1983, p. 2.

Baudrillard thought that the hegemonic form was coming into being through a triple sacrifice: that of value – whereby capital surpasses itself and turns against itself shattering the economic illusion –; that of representation – whereby power turns against itself shattering the democratic illusion –; and that of reality, where the entire system turns against itself shattering the metaphysical illusion.

Capital is both the total realization of value and its liquidation. Power is now the final form of representation: it only represents itself. The system is the total version of the Real and at the same time its liquidation through the Virtual. This is the hegemonic form.⁴¹

The French thinker was thus a forerunner in evidencing the challenges of mapping hegemony in the shadow of postmodernity, pointing to the political form of late, information capitalism as one in which everyone is both hostage and accomplice of global power via «the reality of networks, of the virtual and total exchange where there are no longer dominators or dominated» and which we enter into *consensually* (whether involuntarily or not).⁴² According to Baudrillard, the virtual dimension of hegemony is different from both «the domination of capital and different from the dimension of power in its strictly political definition».⁴³

While other postmodern and poststructuralist philosophers have been flirting for decades with notions that there is no such thing as truth but only narrative – encapsulated in the deconstruction between texts and meaning, the death of the author, the power of discourse and in the notion that gender – and other notions of identity – are but social constructs, the question now is whether post-truth is starting to take a new turn in the context of the digitalocene under the guises of *post-reality*.⁴⁴ Baudrillard was already hinted at this phe-

⁴¹ Baudrillard, *The Agony of Power*, cit., p. 42.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 33.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 45.

⁴⁴ The above is an intentionally overly simplified, polemical summary of the major philosophical tenets of poststructuralism and postmodernist. The summary refers to the following major works, respectively: J. F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984 (1st ed. 1979); J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016 (1st ed. 1967); R. Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, in Id., *Image-Music-Text*, London, Fontana Press, 1977 (1st ed. 1968), pp. 142-48; M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1978 (1st ed. 1976); J. Butler,

nomenon when he described «the deregulation of reality through information, the media and virtual reality».⁴⁵ He described this «denial of reality» as «the most serious of all forms of self-denial».

This immense enterprise of deterrence from every historical reference, this strategy of discrediting, of divesting from reality in the form of parody, mockery, or masquerade, becomes the very principle of government. The new strategy – and it truly is a mutation – is the self-immolation of value, of every system of value, of self-denial, indifferentiation, rejection and nullity as the triumphant command.⁴⁶

As we transition more and more into 4IR with its rapid development in terms of AI, the denial of reality has increasingly new digital tools. I would thus argue that post-reality in the digitalocene is distinguished from the largely symbolic and narrative terrain of the post-modernists' musings because of its increasingly *ontic* quality, enabled by digitality.

3. Post-truth or post-reality?

The phenomenon of post-truth really started to become popularized in 2016, when the Oxford Dictionary named post-truth the word of the year. This was in the wake of the result of the UK Brexit referendum – with roughly 38 percent of the UK population voted to leave the EU securing a 51,9 percent victory for the leave vote and thus initiating the process of the UK's withdrawal – and Donald Trump's first election to the Presidency of the United States. A key element that both of these election campaigns had in common was the involvement of the British political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica, which was subsequently investigated for its appropriation of personal data for targeted political advertising of up to 87 million Facebook users without their consent. Political theorist Nanjala Nyabola maintains that the testing ground for Cambridge Analytica's activities was the Kenyan general election of 2013, a game changer in terms of digital politics in Kenya and beyond, entailing a shift towards the digital reporting of results and the increased use of social media platforms to disseminate political messages, unfortunately much in the form of hate speech.⁴⁷

Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, New York, Routledge, 1990.

⁴⁵ Baudrillard, *The Agony of Power*, cit., p. 49.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 50

⁴⁷ N. Nyabola, *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet era is Transforming Politics in*

The major tenets of post-truth have been identified by MacIntyre as «the obfuscation of facts, abandonment of evidential standards in reasoning, and outright lying».⁴⁸ Han traces the connections between post-truth and fake news arguing that while lying implies the truth by covering it, fake news represents an attack on the facts themselves, a “defactizing” of reality.⁴⁹ This is enabled by digitality’s undermining of «the solidity of the factual» by making producibility universal. According to Han, digitality’s universal producibility eliminates reality as the referent.⁵⁰

According to the Oxford Dictionary definition, the appeal to personal belief and emotion over objective facts is a corner stone of post-truth politics, which create a scenario whereby what is true or not is dependent on how we *feel* about it. The link with populism as a political strategy is obvious, as pointed out by Zabala, who identifies digital populism as a new form of populism that is arising in direct connection to the proliferation of digital media and genres and that it:

not only uses digital platforms to allow politicians to communicate with the electorate, but also bases its political programme directly in the power of social media and its potential for manipulation.⁵¹

Zabala argues that digital populism differentiates itself from traditional right-and left-wing populism because social media enables the direct conveyance of messages to – and even interaction with – the people, which is something that is common among both right- and left-wing populists.

In their detailed study on the effects of social media communications, Cinelli, De Francisci Morales, Galeazzi, Quattrociocchi and Starnini define echo-chambers as «environments in which the opinion, political leaning, or belief of users about a topic gets reinforced due to repeated interactions with peers or sources having similar tendencies and attitudes» that act as «a mechanism to reinforce an ex-

Kenya, London, ZED Books, 2018.

⁴⁸ L. MacIntyre, *Post-Truth*, Boston, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 2018, p. 1.

⁴⁹ B.-H. Han, *Infocracy*, London, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2022, p. 46.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

⁵¹ S. Zabala, *Beware of Digital Populism*, «Al Jazeera», 7 February 2020; see <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/2/7/beware-of-digital-populism/> (17 November 2025).

isting opinion within a group and, as a result, move the entire group toward more extreme positions».⁵²

Arguedas, Robertson, Fletcher and Nielsen point to the importance of differentiating an echo chamber from a filter bubble, with a filter bubble being more insidious than an echo chamber in the sense that «it is primarily produced by ranking algorithms engaged in passive personalization without any active choice on our part»⁵³. The use of personalization in the ranking of search engine results and social media feeds can really contribute to creating «a unique universe of information for each of us» thus insulating us more and more from a common world of information that we share in with others.⁵⁴

The grave problems of the widespread misinformation that characterizes post-truth politics in the present era should not be ascribed to social media alone. Sylos Labini and Caravani, for example, welcome the proliferation of news on social media, which they believe is all the more needed given the fact that mainstream media is so fraught with propaganda. They dismiss the idea that the spread of misinformation and problems of social alienation are inherently related to social media, inviting to set aside any romanticized notions of a mainstream media common sense. Rather, the problem for them resides in the concentration of media ownership, which is just as obscene for mainstream media as it is for social media, though social media actually remains freer than mainstream media, a fact that Sylos Labini and Caravani find evidenced by the very different coverage of the genocide in Gaza offered through mainstream and social media.⁵⁵ Sylos Labini and Caravani thus conclude that:

⁵² M. Cinelli *et al.*, *The echo chambers effect on social media*, «Public National Academy of Sciences», 118, 2021, 9, p. 2.

⁵³ A. R. Arguedas, C. T. Robertson, R. Fletcher, R. K. Nielsen, *Echo chambers, filter bubbles, and polarisation: a literature review*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2022, p. 11; <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:6e357e97-7b16-450a-a827-a92c93729a08> (19 December 2025).

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

⁵⁵ While the privately owned Associated Press in the USA, the semi-governmental Agence France-Presse in France and the privately owned Reuters in the UK disseminated the majority of international news that is disseminated by mainstream media, currently the American Meta Platforms owns four of the biggest social media platforms – Facebook, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Instagram - all with more than 1 billion monthly active users each; the American Google owns YouTube with over 2.5 million active users globally; the Chinese company ByteDance owns TikTok, with 1,5 billion active users worldwide; and the American X Corp owns X (formerly known as Twitter) with 611 million monthly active users in the world.

When and how a media narrative that is more aligned with the complexity of reality – one that embraces its contradictions and avoids simplistic depictions of good versus evil – can be offered to a growing audience remains an open question, and the solution depends on creating independent channels of information that hold both prestige and credibility.⁵⁶

Nyabola draws similar conclusions from Kenya's first digital decade, which she locates between the two highly contentious general elections of 2007 and 2017.⁵⁷ As the country was swept up in the dramatic events of the 2007 post-election violence, media suffered censorship both through a media ban on live broadcasts and through self-censorship, leading to a scenario whereby:

Reliable and verifiable information was scarce, and the main source of information for those tracking the developments was the internet. [...] Internet forums like Mashada or the Concerned Kenyan Writers group became heated sites for conversations and argument, some of it extremely productive and some of it replicating the contours of the offline violence. On the whole, online forums opened up a new space for political discourse in Kenya that was being stifled in the traditional media and offline society.⁵⁸

Her theory that between 2007-2017 Kenyan politics served as a kind of laboratory for digital politics leads her to conclude that while producing devastating effects on the country on one side, this also «fueled a thirst for new politics, new discourses and new places to have them, the contours of which would soon mimic global shifts in how political information is created and delivered».⁵⁹ Nyabola believes that social media are simply a tool, and that their «efficacy depends greatly on the user and their ability to link online visibility with offline action» since «Twitter as an ecosystem still needs regular infusions of passion and direction from offline spaces in order to thrive as a space for political action».⁶⁰

These positive appreciations of social media in contexts where the main dissimulator of truth and reality is mainstream media are of extreme importance. They point to mainstream media's pollution

⁵⁶ F. Sylos-Labini, M. Caravani, *Conflict, Climate and Inequalities*, London, Springer, 2025, p. 86.

⁵⁷ Nyabola, *Digital Democracy*, cit., p. 19.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 29.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

of common sense through biased reporting and covering up of true facts, which is certainly not any more conducive to the formation of informed and empowered political collectivities just in virtue of its being less heterogenous and more analogue than social media.

However, I would argue that while social media is a vital aid against the dissimulation of truth and reality promulgated by mainstream media, it also poses an unprecedented threat in terms of what Baudrillard called the simulacrum, by pushing the simulacrum onto a terrain of ontic and not just symbolic mystification. This mystification is happening via the increasing difficulty of distinguishing between the analogue real and the artificially generated reals.

This is why I believe that it is important to place the analysis of filter bubbles, echo-chambers and digital populism within a framework of the digitalocene, in order to take into account the specific ontological formation of digitality that drives 4IR. These phenomena generate alarm not only because they are fuelling social polarization by locking individuals and groups into distinct, limited thought bubbles – *de facto* compromising their ability to engage with diverse opinions, knowledges and feelings – but because they are actually threatening the very existence of a common ground due to the fact that people end up inhabiting different – and mostly artificial – realities that possess increasing ontic standing and ontological significance. This has significant consequences for trying to think with Gramsci's categories of *senso comune* and *buon senso* in the digitalocene.

It could of course be argued that digital technologies are just new channels that amplify the disaggregate, incoherent, scattered knowledges that make up *senso comune*, whether in its analogue, digital, real or virtual manifestations. However, I would caution that while there are in fact parallels that can be drawn between *senso comune*'s analogue and digital manifestations, what has to be highlighted as a crucial difference is the *amount* of different realities that inhabit the digitalocene, which can in no way be equated to the different social grouping that made up the mid-twentieth century societies of industrialized nations or the globalized world economy of the millennials. Before the advent of the digitalocene, the number of social groups was more limited, with each group presenting higher degrees of coherence in terms of their specific ideologies. Let us take a filter bubble as an ex-

ample of a digital social grouping; what stands out is its fleetingness in time – so fleeting as to not allow for any kind of stratification of *any* type of knowledge, ideology or common sense – and also the heightened individualization in terms of its membership.

Finally, for Gramsci the specific type of knowing that develops from common sense is profoundly connected to *feeling* and to the strongly sentient and experiential domains of passion and organic attachment. Its characterization in terms of the bodily experience of «impassioned sentiment» reflects what Pizza has called Gramsci's «political attention to the living». ⁶¹ This political attention to the living is the essence of Gramsci's philosophy of praxis as outlined by Frosini, that was meant to overcome the monistic dualism of matter and spirit, subject and object, which he saw as perpetuated both by idealist and materialist philosophical approaches in favour of a unitary, critical and dialectical relationship between theory and practice. ⁶² It is what Pizza defines as Gramsci's anthropology, expressed in: «The intertwining between thought and life, the continued effort of elaborating a living theory». ⁶³ In Q11, §67 Gramsci is very clear that: «One cannot make politics-history without this passion, without this sentimental connection between intellectuals and people-nation». ⁶⁴

When trying to locate common sense in the digitalocene, we must ask whether this form of impassioned knowledge – which according to Gramsci provides the link between feeling, knowing and understanding, without which socially transformative processes cannot take place – can be transferred to the virtual sphere.

In *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe theorized the form of power of the postcolony in terms that resonate deeply with Baudrillard's hegemonic form, whereby the Foucauldian tropes of surveillance and punishment no longer act as the main *dispositifs* of political power, but rather «an intimate tyranny that links the rulers to the ruled». ⁶⁵ For this reason, Mbembe warns that in order to

⁶¹ G. Pizza, *L'antropologia di Gramsci. Corpo, natura, mutazione*, Rome, Carocci, 2020, p. 67 (my translation).

⁶² Frosini, *Filosofia della praxis*, cit.; Pizza, *L'antropologia di Gramsci*, cit., p. 67.

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁴ SPN, p. 418; QC, p. 1505.

⁶⁵ A. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2015 (1st ed. 2001), p. 128.

understand postcolonial relations it is important to go beyond the standard, binary categories of resistance vs. passivity, autonomy vs. subjection, state vs. civil society, hegemony vs. counter-hegemony as these do not account for the «mutual ‘zombification’ of both the dominant and those apparently dominated» that share the same living space.⁶⁶

In his more recent *Critique of Black Reason*, Mbembe argues that digitality is entailing «the becoming black of the world», a universalization of «the black condition» in terms of the creation of new subaltern groups that will be made to experience the condition of «non-humanity» historically inflicted on racialized subalterns.⁶⁷

Mbembe's reflections on digitality were further developed in the context of the mass quarantine measures enforced by governments worldwide in 2020 in an effort to contain the spread of the new SARS-COV-virus that was causing mass hospitalizations and deaths around the globe. On April 13, 2020 he wrote a post on a University of Chicago blog that was initiated by the philosophy department inviting philosophers to reflect on the Covid pandemic and the experience of lockdown.

I will here quote extensively from that blogpost because of the poetic beauty and honest transparency of Mbembe's reflections, which went well beyond the imminent pandemic, openly discussing his worst fears for the digitalocene, with the lockdown featuring as a new type of existence reliant on digital, rather than physical, interactions:

There is no doubt that the skies are closing in.

[...]

Papering over the cracks simply won't do. Deep in the heart of this crater, literally everything must be reinvented, starting with the social. Once working, shopping, keeping up with the news and keeping in touch, nurturing and preserving connections, talking to one another and sharing, drinking together, worshipping and organizing funerals begins to take place solely across the interface of screens, it is time to acknowledge that on all sides we are surrounded by rings of fire. To a great extent, the digital is the new gaping hole exploding Earth. Simultaneously a trench, a tunnel, a moonscape, it is the bunker where men and women are all invited to hide away, in isolation.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 104; M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York, Vintage Books, 1979.

⁶⁷ A. Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, Durham (NC), Duke University Press, 2017.

They say that through the digital, the body of flesh and bones, the physical and mortal body, will be freed of its weight and inertia. At the end of this transfiguration, it will eventually be able to move through the looking glass, cut away from biological corruption and restituted to a synthetic universe of flux. But this is an illusion, for just as there is no humanity *without bodies*, likewise, humanity will never know freedom alone, outside of society and community, and never can freedom come at the expense of the biosphere.

[...]

We must start afresh. To survive, we must return to all living things—including the biosphere—the space and energy they need. In its dank underbelly, modernity has been an interminable war on life. And it is far from over. One of the primary modes of this war, leading straight to the impoverishment of the world and to the desiccation of entire swathes of the planet, is the subjection to the digital.

In the aftermath of this calamity there is a danger that rather than offering sanctuary to all living species, sadly the world will enter a new period of tension and *brutality*. In terms of geopolitics, the logic of power and might will continue to dominate. For lack of a common infrastructure, a vicious partitioning of the globe will intensify, and the dividing lines will become even more entrenched. Many states will seek to fortify their borders in the hope of protecting themselves from the outside. They will also seek to conceal the constitutive violence that they continue to habitually direct at the most vulnerable. Life behind screens and in gated communities will become the norm.⁶⁸

Conclusions

This article is of an exploratory/inquisitive nature, intended to raise questions and perplexities more than to provide answers. While it is not intended as a piece of techno-scepticism or digitophobia, it does aim to shed light on what may be areas of risk in the digitalocene. The article wants to raise concern regarding the risks of displacement and/or loss of what constitutes our common sense as framed and understood by Gramsci because, to quote Liguori: «What is at stake is the conception of the world of the subalterns, which must be transformed or replaced by launching a hegemonic challenge».⁶⁹

The loss of common sense means the loss of the intelligibility of the world by the subalterns, because one of the most characteristic forms of collective ensembles that subaltern opinion takes for Gram-

⁶⁸ A. Mbembe, *The Universal Right to Breathe*, «Critical Inquiry», 47, 2021, 2, pp. 58-62.

⁶⁹ Liguori, *Common Sense*, cit., p. 129.

sci is *senso comune* (common sense), as stated by Crehan: «Subalterns, we might say, inhabit a world rendered intelligible by common sense».⁷⁰

The loss of *senso comune* (common sense) puts at stake the subalterns' conception of the world – and therefore also the possibility to change their condition by initiating a process of counter-hegemony. Without that specific form of intelligibility – the feeling-knowing-understanding of the world – counter-hegemony becomes *de facto* unthinkable and unactionable.

⁷⁰ Crehan, *Gramsci's Common Sense*, cit., p. 186.

