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By Emily Drabinski

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IS THE INTERNET GOOD for us, or is it bad for us? Does Twitter ignite populist revolutions, sparking the Arab Spring and amplifying Occupy? Or is it a cesspool of Russian bots that swing elections to far-right demagogues like Donald Trump and Boris Johnson? Whatever normative claim has more purchase in the rhetorical moment, one thing is sure: the internet is always cast as exceptional. Whether for good or ill, the internet is surely different from every other political tool that has come before it. Or is it?

In her meticulously researched *The Revolution That Wasn't: How Digital Activism Favors Conservatives* (Harvard University Press), Jen Schradie shifts the political conversation away from moral questions and toward questions of power, asking not which deterministic claim is correct but instead how the tools of the web work in the very ordinary and unexceptional realm of electoral politics. Social media becomes a lens through which we can understand power, not an instance of power itself.

Schradie sets her analysis in the crucible of North Carolina politics. An ostensibly purple state that is now home to some of the most regressive social policies in the country, North Carolina is fertile ground for understanding what has happened to American politics in the last 20 years. Schradie begins in 2002, when, in response to a ban on collective bargaining for public employees, a group of left-leaning organizations came together to form the Hear Our Public Employees coalition. HOPE took aim at the law, itself a product of intense organizing and activism on the right. This was class war, as conservatives sought to extract more wealth from workers by making it harder for those workers to make demands on the state. Schradie analyzes the use of digital and analog tools in these groups as well as those in favor of the law and its expansion. On the left, the Coalition Against Racism struggles to hand out flyers to African-American public sector workers in rural parts of the state, battling legitimate fears of racist violence and retaliation by the boss. Updated websites and active Twitter feeds are not part of the picture. In contrast, the Koch-funded chapter of Americans for Prosperity features an active Facebook page and daily email newsletters alongside in-person meetings where nobody is afraid to show up.

Schradie demonstrates something that we all know but seem to forget — that "the digital" is built on some quite analog elements in order to produce and distribute power: class, infrastructure, and ideology. She reminds us that these factors, which have shaped social and political life across time, are not exceptional to the internet age. Instead, they intertwine and interact on the internet in ways that amplify the organized right while muting the effectiveness of a progressive or even revolutionary left. When it comes to digital activism, the left faces barriers that the right simply doesn't.

Some of those barriers have to do with money: the right has more of it, and they use it to do things like hire people to make and update websites. The left can do this as well, but works with much more limited capacity, especially the left that Schradie is interested in. This is not a barrier that matters between elites. Liberal Democrats who might disagree with the right on social issues like abortion but share their class interests are as likely to have professional social media presences — Hillary Clinton didn't lack for avid tweeters. But progressive movements that seek redistribution of wealth from elites on all sides of the aisle don't have those same resources. It's not simply about access to computers and broadband internet — though these matter too. As Schradie argues, "it's more fundamentally about the unequal distribution of political and economic power, particularly in the workplace [...] [u]ltimately, they were stymied not simply by their lack of digital tools or savvy but also by their status as groups of relatively powerless, exploited people." People with money and power can hire more social media managers and pay for more voter lists and buy more lobbyists than those who have less. It doesn't take an algorithm or a bot to advantage the right.

Progressive movements are also stymied by competing political claims that blunt the effectiveness of their messages, especially in a 280-character context. The right is interested in maintaining the status quo, preserving white supremacy and the continuing consolidation of wealth into their hands and no one else's. On the left, there is so much change to work toward, from racial equity to workplace protections for LGBTQ people to better wages and working conditions for everyone, and a whole host of problems that intersect and don't, requiring sometimes painful processes of consensus- and coalition-building. Schradie spends significant time describing the success of the Moral Monday movement and its systematic centering of different issues at statehouse protests each week. Ignited in response to the Republican takeover of the North Carolina state legislature and governorship in 2012, the movement was made up of organizations and individuals that had significant existing social ties. Schradie chronicles the protests from an initial gathering of 50 people in a church basement to their culmination in the Poor People's Campaign, a movement that drew mass public attention and its requisite hashtags and viral videos. But this was not a born digital movement. It began not with Twitter but with the North Carolina NAACP, led by William J. Barber, not with Facebook but with the North Carolina Public Service Workers Union, UE Local 150.

Arguably one of the most broadly inclusive progressive formations since Obama's election, Moral Monday and the Poor People's Campaign remained limited in the use of digital tools. Schradie notes that the movement eventually used social media platforms to advance its messages, but that this came much later, after the protests had gathered steam through in-person organizing work. And much of that analog effort was expended in building an inclusive movement, making room for political voices that pushed for an end to racism, poverty, pollution, militarism, and a range of other issues. Progressive movements are necessarily plural movements, addressing the multiple ways the world must change if it is to represent something like justice and equality. In contrast, the right had a single message, which Schradie distills as an appeal to freedom: from taxation, from African-American people, from homosexuals, from the consequences of growing inequality. In other words, the right wants the freedom to continue to hold power, and very little fractures that party line.

The right's messaging mirrors the right's ideas about power: it should be hierarchical and anti-democratic. The left's commitments to democracy and plurality produce an openness that undermines messaging and strategizing. In her analysis of the Tea Party movement in North Carolina, Schradie finds a disciplined hierarchy with centrally controlled decision-making power. The goal in Tea Party meetings is not to hear from everyone or to come to collective decisions about how next to proceed. The point is discipline, getting everyone on a single message. On the other hand, progressive movements are often committed to ensuring that a wide range of voices are heard and respected. Groups spend time deliberating on their structures, valuing horizontalism and consensus decision-making that mean decisions get made much more slowly. Discipline is organizing the process rather than the message. Schradie looks back to Occupy Wall Street as the moment when this approach on the left began to solidify, and as the moment when the far right in US politics adopted an entirely different approach, one that was laser-focused on grabbing power through elections and the gerrymandering that would ensure their power would continue to grow long after an election or two.

If Schradie's argument is that it's easier to consolidate power through hierarchical decision-making, it's hard to imagine selling that to progressive groups whose commitments to process are at the root of their politics. Schradie is interested in explaining the dominance of the far right online, and she ties this to the status the right enjoys in the present. Like the United States itself, the right is enriched by capitalism, racism, and patriarchy. Enslaved African-American labor produced wealth extracted and consolidated by and for white people. Unremunerated household labor performed by women enabled men's dominance of the public sphere and its laws, the consolidation of wealth in their hands. What affords the right's success on Twitter and Facebook is their access to long-consolidated wealth and power, as well as the resonance between what they say and the world that they occupy. They already have power. They argue for the status quo, something that's easier to imagine in the world than something entirely new.

Schradie is a scholar of social movements, with a degree in sociology and new media from the University of California at Berkeley and a current position at the Observatoire Sociologique du Changement and Sciences Po in Paris. Prior to this, she was a grassroots organizer and documentary filmmaker in North Carolina, producing films for groups like Black Workers for Justice and the Shiloh Coalition for Community Control and Improvement and a documentary feature about fights over land between Filipino farmers and US golf boosters in Batangas, Philippines. Her analysis is rooted in deep experience of and contact with inequality and organizing against it, experience that shapes her contentions about the limits of the internet in progressive political spaces. Schradie's intervention in conversations around social media and politics from the grilling of Mark Zuckerberg in the House to the ways gender, race, and class are embedded in algorithms is to move an analysis of power to the center of the discussion. It's not that Facebook hasn't changed something fundamental about contemporary politics — that might be true — but that it does so in the context of existing struggles for power and resources.

We wish it was bots, that we could locate the problem inside nefarious digital practices emerging from Russia and other phantasms. Instead, as Schradie makes clear, the problem is within our borders, produced by legacies of racial and class-based terror that are as virulent — or more — in the digital age. Her work is less forthcoming about solutions, due in part to the complexity of the problems Schradie describes. While sobering, her work also makes clear that any way forward will be about amassing power on the left, which can be more fun than leaving voicemail messages for senators asking them to break up Facebook. There is very little pleasure, after all, to be found in futility. To the extent that Schradie reframes the struggle as one for and with each other rather than against nebulous internet evils, she offers us the pleasures that can be found in collective, concerted action that is explicitly about power. It is up to us to take it.

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