

From Marx to Mark: Philosophy of History in the Age of Facebook

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From Marx to Mark. According to the founder of Facebook, the history of all hitherto existing society is not the history of class struggles, anymore. It has been so, in the age of the imperialistic West, of coal industry and of iron architecture. Today, in the age of the global economic crisis, of the world without a centre, of informatics and of social networks, history has become something else.

Philosophers used to look at universal history and offered comprehensive interpretations of its development: philosophies of history. Philosophers obviously were at the centre, if not at the culmination, of history itself. Today, in the plural world without a clear Western hegemony, at the beginning of the fourth industrial revolution, of the abolition of space and of continued acceleration, the West has found other prophets. The weighty portraits of a Hegel or the bearded expressions of a Marx have been replaced by the shaved babyface of a Zuckerberg. You can call him "Zuck".

In a recently published post, the founder of Facebook tells his vision for the future of his company. In this context, Zuck engages in a sort of a philosophy of history: he offers an overall interpretation of the development of human history.

History is the story of how we've learned to come together in ever greater numbers -- from tribes to cities to nations. At each step, we built social infrastructure like communities, media and governments to empower us to achieve things we couldn't on our own.

Today we are close to taking our next step. Our greatest opportunities are now global -- like spreading prosperity and freedom, promoting peace and understanding, lifting people out of poverty, and accelerating science. Our greatest challenges also need global responses -- like ending terrorism, fighting climate change, and preventing pandemics. Progress now requires humanity coming together not just as cities or nations, but also as a global community.

This is especially important right now. Facebook stands for bringing us closer together and building a global community. [...] In times like these, the most important thing we at Facebook can do is develop the social infrastructure to give people the power to build a global community that works for all of us.

History of humanity is therefore presented as a progressive development of ever larger and more complex social infrastructures. This is a philosophy of history in a nutshell, and social networks are presented as the final outcome of the historical process. This position is peculiar, and worth a closer look. According to Zuck, the aim of such a development is a growing degree of wealth and freedom for everyone joining the community: «the purpose of any community is to bring people together to do things we couldn't do on our own. To do this, we need ways to share new ideas and share enough common understanding to actually work together». The aim of Facebook is presented as that of facilitating humankind towards the creation of the first global community, and of driving its development. To facilitate this process, Zuck declares that he is committed to promoting communities which are supportive, safe, informed, civically-engaged and inclusive. Zuck gives a lot of details for every point. If you don't bother reading through the entire text, what follows is a brief

summary.

Global community

Supportive communities are communities «that strengthen traditional institutions in a world where membership in these institutions is declining». Particular attention is given to «meaningful communities», which bring people to meet in person and to develop meaningful relationships, therefore strengthening our social fabric. A truly global community would be the first global social infrastructure to protect us from global threats which, «like terrorism, natural disasters, disease, refugee crises, and climate change need coordinated responses from a worldwide vantage point. No nation can solve them alone». Facebook is investing «more and more resources» to achieve this goal. The first devices (like Safety check and crowdfunding campaigns) have been a success, but more is still under development, like the use of artificial intelligence to identify dangerous contents, or cases «where our community should be able to identify risks related to mental health, disease or crime».

For what concerns information, Zuck mentions that a lot of criticism was raised about fake news and about targeted and univocal information ("filter bubbles"). His promise is that «it is our responsibility to amplify the good effects and mitigate the bad -- to continue increasing diversity while strengthening our common understanding so our community can create the greatest positive impact on the world». By the promotion of civically-engaged communities Zuck means basically two things. First, encouraging the engagement in the existing political processes: voting, engaging with issues and representatives, speaking out, and organizing. Second, and more interestingly, Zuck argues that a global community could establish «a new process for citizens worldwide to participate in collective decision-making. Our world is more connected than ever, and we face global problems that span national boundaries. As the largest global community, Facebook can explore examples of how community governance might work at scale». Finally, the new global community should be an inclusive one. Here Zuck essentially argues that the community should have standards and limits which are set by the preferences of the single user. The conclusion of the text sounds as follows:

History has had many moments like today. As we've made our great leaps from tribes to cities to nations, we have always had to build social infrastructure like communities, media and governments for us to thrive and reach the next level. At each step we learned how to come together to solve our challenges and accomplish greater things than we could alone. We have done it before and we will do it again.

False Disintermediation

Now let us try to discuss some aspects of this text. It's a very peculiar blend of American positivist, smart-liberal, progressive and civil-rights oriented political thought. It's philosophy of history made in Palo Alto: very smart, optimistic and with a lot of understated - but well-aware - corporate branding. A lot of values Zuck says to stand for are progressive and democratic, and the author of this article would stick to most of them. But the way in which Zuck's argumentation is carried out is interesting and worth a minute of attention.

In this worldview, the national state is presented as an outdated XIX century heritage, and the concept of supra-national state (recently rather unpopular) is not even mentioned as part of the story. Quite a few concepts are blurred and undefined. One significant example are what Zuck calls

«our values». Are they the values expressed in the Community Standards which every Facebook user declares he will stick to, in a sort of a (most of the time unconscious) social contract? Of course, a lot of faults along the path are not mentioned, like the remarkable shortcomings Facebook is experiencing in making its users stick to «our values», as recent investigations have shown (examples here and here). As obvious, Zuck proposes a neutral - if not entirely positive - view of technology.

But what is even more difficult to tell is who is talking in this post. The text is mainly organized in the first person plural: 'we' appears 169 times, 'our' and derivate words appear 113 times. But the way in which the first person plural is employed is tricky:

On our journey to connect the world, we often discuss products we're building and updates on our business. Today I want to focus on the most important question of all: are we building the world we all want?

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In this passage 'we' and 'our' are employed to refer both to humanity at large, to the large community of Facebook users as well as to the small group of the Facebook team («we at Facebook»). The same pronoun refers to billions, millions, and to a few people. This rhetorical device gives the impression of an overlapping of the different layers, and of Zuck's voice with the user/reader's voice. It's very difficult to disagree with what his babyface is arguing: what he says is almost identical to what we say. This thin line goes throughout the post. The text is in fact designed to disguise the role of the «we at Facebook» within the «we» of the community.

Here we arrive at one of the fundamental issues at stake in this text. The force that lies behind all of the passages of this peculiar philosophy of history is the driving role of the «we at Facebook», if not of Zuck himself, in shaping the development of the global community. There is an intentional attempt to disguising this role, presenting it as the natural outcome of the will of every Facebook user. In other words, this text aims at disguising the mediation role of the social network itself. But what we learn beneath the surface is that disintermediation does not exist. Mediation just gets disguised or displaced.

Facebook and Accountability

This happens, on the one hand, because Facebook is trying not to remind us that there still are a lot of issues with new high-tech global industries. The first example is the gigantic fiscal problem: Facebook and other high-tech giants are masters in the art of tax avoidance. Moreover, information collectors and providers like Facebook and Alphabet (Google) have been making ever easier profits after the advent of smartphones. Unlike some years ago, now a lot of information they collect does not need to be looked for. It is automatically generated and provided by the user. Facebook and Google are like geographers with self-designing maps. But they do not sell these maps for free. And a lot of the information these companies control can be extremely profitable. For example, it is possible to construct psychometric models from our likes, and to infer from them accurate estimates of our skin color, intelligence, sexual orientation, attitudes and political preferences. Some have even argued that such models have played a key role in bringing Trump to the White House. From

here, the step is quite close to building a global ranking of users: from grade A to grade Z. Some rumors have come out about a great interest from Facebook in the Chinese government plan of designing a global ranking of the Chinese citizens, in order to be able to allocate resources more efficiently and to keep potentially dangerous individuals in check by denying them access to certain services and rights.

This brings us to the central point: the point of power and accountability. It is evident that despite his innocent babyface Zuck is in a very special position. He owns a network of tremendous power, which on average is collecting data, relationships, memories and emotions of more than 1.86 billion people every month. Actually, Pandora itself owes a lot to Facebook. You probably reached this article from a Facebook link to it. Events organized by Pandora are usually advertised on Facebook as well. We organize our editorial meetings and we coordinate many of our activities through Facebook. After that, what really constitutes the strength of our project are the actual people, ideas and real meetings which are substantiating our web space and paper space alike: Facebook remains a means (a medium) to us. But the question remains in the background: should we hope or not that Zuck will consider our pages and contents as «meaningful» for the development of a «supportive community»? Should we accept not to have any voice in how such a decision would eventually be taken?

More generally, should we accept the complete absence of accountability of these new organizations of growing power? Is it fair that the owner of a machine like Facebook is not responsible to the community of users if not through his good will? Zuck is right in saying that technology is opening unprecedented and spectacular opportunities, but that should be depicted in all of its dimensions. If this happened we would gradually realize the power that these organizations play in our daily life, we could wonder about how these organizations are making their profits and question whether we agree with that. Reflecting on these issues and putting them in context would develop a growing politicization of technology. Technology is making the building of global communities possible, and this opens new and unexplored possibilities. The path along the formation of modern states has almost always been contradictory, conflicting and violent. And most of the time it was the people to pay the consequences of these processes, because they did not know.[1] I'd rather not «leap» into a new age of fooled fools.

Wrapping up, philosophy of history is made by winners: by people and organizations who feel in the position of knowing, and in some cases controlling, the mechanisms of history. In his post, babyface Zuck places Facebook in a position very close to that of the Hegelian modern state: social networks (and Facebook more than anyone else) are the ultimate outcome of the historical progress of humankind. It is hard to tell whether he genuinely believes this or not, behind all the intermediation curtains with which he is trying to disguise himself. What his text shows is that people at Facebook are quite comfortable in presenting themselves as one of the frontiers of human development. But at the same time the very fact that they thought they needed to publish a text in which they tried to explain their program for their next steps is an interesting sign. It is impossible to tell whether this reflects the perception of an already changing attitude of users towards technology and the consequent need to address it, or simple good will.

Surely, taking technology as something problematic, and re-placing the narrative of the shaved babyface among its broader and intertwined network of power, lack of accountability and disguised mediation can be a way of raising some doubts. In a nutshell, we should not forget that the real look of a guy who attempts a philosophy of history should be close to this one:

[1] Tilly, C., et al. (1975), The formation of national states in Western Europe, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 24.