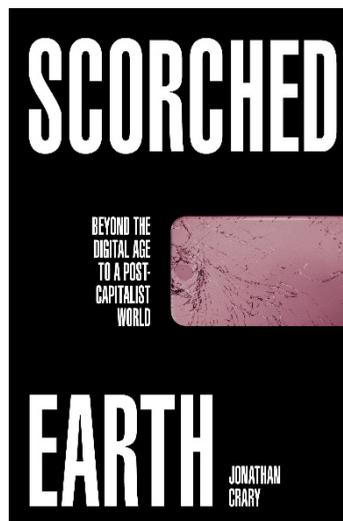# BOOK REVIEW

Jonathan CRARY, *What does climate change have to do with the Internet? Scorched Earth – Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World,* 2022

Among those who agree to become active in the face of the real catastrophe that is global warming, reducing one's carbon footprint is the most sensible thing to do, and there are several guides on how to do it more effectively. Activism to force political commitment to environmental protection measures is increasingly visible after the pandemic: demonstrations, protests and strikes are being organized in cities around the world, and anyone can follow these actions on social media. Sustainability must be ensured for any new development, often combined with new opportunities for economic growth through investment in green industries. But degrowth is also becoming a more popular concept, even though it has yet to find its way outside the academic discourse and into economic practice. However, people everywhere in the world have experienced ecological catastrophes caused by rapid forced industrialization, the destruction of arable land, the replacement of traditional agriculture with large monocultures, the immense pollution in so-called industrial cities, and the failure of nuclear power plants. From this perspective, one might think that the new global "we" today is on a good path. In this scenario, too, the Internet and the rapid exchange on social media would be the ideal basis for organizing and acting together. In order to stop this social engagement, all oppressive regimes would attack this very medium, restrict user access, shut down websites, or delete information aimed at revealing facts hidden from the public. Especially after the revelations that shook the world, not only through the media but also through the Internet's capacity for rapid dissemination, it seemed clear that in the future nothing could be kept secret and that a "free Internet" was once again the guarantee of open communication, human solidarity and social cohesion. But, as Jonathan Crary argues in

his essay "Scorched Earth - Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World", this is a false belief.

"Any possible path to a survivable planet will be far more wrenching than most recognize or will openly admit. … This means rejecting our digital isolation, reclaiming time as lived time, rediscovering collective needs and resisting mounting levels of barbarism, including the cruelty and hatred that emanate from online." (p. 4)

But when and how did the Internet become the enemy? To look for a turning point where the benefits of the "knowledge economy" were suddenly outweighed by its harmful effects on society (such as online criminal activity or the failure to guarantee privacy), or where an initially neutral or egalitarian project became an instrument of propaganda and manipulation, would again miss the point. Crary argues that the dream of the "digital commons" (p. 10) was never meant to be realized: it was the processes of financializing of all online activity that gradually took place. From the beginning, the strange combination of isolation and exchange would have tended to fragment society and produce factions rather than an organized majority. Although it has proved effective in terms of short-term mobilization, as Crary surely admits, the Internet would prevent long-term anti-systemic action. ("Demonstrations, marches take place but simultaneously, there is a re-immersion in the atomizing separation of digital life." p. 13) As a counterexample, Crary recalls the "far larger mass mobilizations …in the 1960s and ´70s without any fetishization of the material means used for organizing" (p. 11). And on page 14, in this same pointedness, the very hard thesis: "The truth is irrefutable:

there are no revolutionary subjects on the Internet". At least, not subjects of revolutions that everyone could join, as Crary goes on to explain:

"Edward Snowden's spurious claim that network technology is "the great equalizer" perpetuates an elitist hacker fantasy of covert empowerment that has little relevance to most people's lives or to the building of mass movements and new communities. (…) To suggest that the internet is where indigenous peoples, stateless immigrants, the unemployed and impoverished and the incarcerated should contest their marginalization and disposability is not just wrong but malevolently irresponsible. (…) When the availability of images and information is infinite, there is a fatal scattering of anything held in common and the relationships that make possible a society are dissolved." (p. 23).

This dissipation, as well as the increasing difficulty of distinguishing between what is authentic and what is fake, which also leads to increasing social injustice, addictive behavior, misinformation, and manipulation, has been widely noted and makes the use of the Internet and social media a subject of criticism. Crary also refers to the range of materials and books that teach constructive use of digital technology, and notes ironically that no permanent damage resulting from it needs to be made obvious, that any potential damage needs to be presented as "remediable" (p. 83). What runs throughout the essay are frightening and detailed descriptions of how the Internet is being used as a means of destroying "non-financializable forms of social interaction" (p. 42).

The determined and continuous evolution of the Internet into this powerful tool of repression is what Crary presents in his

essay in parallel with shocking testimonies of environmental damage, especially in the Global South (deforestation and land clearing for monocultures, the search for precious metals for the construction of digital tools through violent extraction methods, and more). The conclusion:

> "The Internet is the digital counterpart of the vast, rapidly expanding garbage patch in the Pacific Ocean. (…) One of the foremost achievements of the so-called knowledge economy is the mass production of ignorance, stupidity and hatefulness" (42).

From the outset of his essay, Crary argues that it would be a mistake not to recognize the correlation between the climate and social crises, which are linked to a socio-economic structure he terms *Scorched Earth-Capitalism*. Furthermore, digitalization has the potential to become the ultimate extensive appropriation of personal and societal existence. Referring to Jean-Paul de Gaudemar's 1980 analysis of capitalism needing to expand within the social body to "reconquer the entire social space" (p. 9), Crary argues that this objective has now been realized with the internet complex serving as the all-encompassing global tool. The firmly supported assertion suggests that any economic policy promoting degrowth (i.e., "eco-socialism or no-growth post-capitalism" p.4) in the interest of averting a climate disaster must also take into account the social and environmental effects of the internet and the global digitalization. As amplifiers of consumerism, they are accelerators of the energy crisis:

> "The many digital devices and services we use now are made possible through unending exacerbation of economic inequality and the accelerating disfiguring of the earth biosphere by resource extraction and needless energy consumption" (p. 5).

During the undeniable climate change crisis, when resources have become scarce and long-term strategies cannot sustain the idea of infinite growth, Crary accuses that "one, last, mad spree of plunder is now ongoing all over the planet. Fracking, mountain-top removal mining, rainforest clear-cutting for biofuel farming, offshore drilling (...), the expropriation of the remaining fragments of a commons (...)" (p. 27). While the main objectives of stopping global warming are often assumed to be attainable through the ending of the carbon era and nuclear phase-out, Crary argues for another extreme measure. Instead of thinking about new means for "growth" and fetishization of a politicized "science" as producer of new technologies, there is need for a radical stop:

> "these minerals have to stay in the ground and the urgent task is the radical scaling down of a need for unlimited 24/7 energy and for all the unnecessary, disposable products and services that warp our lives and poison the earth (p. 31)".

This refusal would include the Internet, insofar as it has evolved into a machine for producing false needs, demanding 24/7 availability, and transforming individuals into non-empathic consumers in a disintegrating and non-creative, increasingly violent society that is unlikely to produce authentic forms of resistance. In other words, we must recognize that in the same way that *Scorched Earth-capitalism* claims planetary resources, the main resources of the human soul, imagination, empathy, creativity, and social engagement, are threatened by online uniformity (Crary speaks of an "atomized crowd" p. 119), which is not equalizing but

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equally harmful to any kind of profound affiliation.

In a tone reminiscent of Friedrich Nietzsche's second Untimely Meditation, Crary lists the disadvantages of an existence that revolves around the Internet: The assault on youth (p. 38), digital uprootedness (p. 47, following the phenomenon described by Simone Weil), uniformized speech (following Hanna Arendt, p. 40) and its continued and exacerbated "expropriation and depletion" (p. 118), the tendency to "neutralize" the future (p. 54), the degradation of human finitude (p. 68), and the alienating disembodiment of online existence (quoting the framework of David Abram and other authors: "we have lost our bodily understanding of the world..." p. 108).

At the end of his essay, Crary turns to one of his main themes, human seeing, the human eye and attention. We read about the colonization of this very last bastion of human uniqueness (there are poetic phrases about the iris), for example, through eye tracking as the main focus of user experience design (UXD). And it is also the face, the smile and the voice that are being subjected to studies of consumer response.

In order to return with all of our senses to an animate world of real face-to-face encounters (Crary cites Buber, Agamben and Sartre) the essay ends with an impassioned plea to "reconceiving the bonds between humans and animals, salvaging what remains of biodiversity and recovering the spirit of festival and arts defined by group participation" p. 123.

It is a strong point of this essay not to see the climate crisis as something to be solved by technical means, and also to see ecology, economy, and social developments within the historical framework that includes the technologies that produce them. All of this is undoubtedly the better way to approach a much more complex phenomenon than most of us can fully grasp. It remains to be seen whether the core of the problem can be identified in the Internet or the digitalization of social life as the last form of Scorched-Earth capitalism to be left behind, or whether it will only be followed by more violent forms of colonization (of more and more of the body itself), because we still don't know the real name of the danger that threatens us from within.

„Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst
Das Rettende auch". (Fr. Hölderlin)

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