



Petar Jandrić's Talk at the "Education for Democracy" Conference Critical teaching as hacking the neoliberal agenda

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Introduction

Dear friends, comrades, Maria, Creston, thank you a lot for inviting me to this exciting conference. I come from Croatia, fellow country from the Balkan peninsula, where things are very similar as here. Our people are poor, just like the Greek people are poor. Young people in Croatia have no access to work, just like young people in Greece have no access to work. Traditional working class and middle class, and everyone else but the 1% or the richest people, are rapidly falling into the rabbit hole of the precariat. The precariat is stripped of social and economic power, social security, and human dignity. The precariat is marked by poverty, sickness and lack of meaningful future. In Croatia, the precariat is still not in the streets, and still does not burn old car tyres and fight with the police. But it is getting there. It is getting there quickly. Just like in Greece, Spain, Italy, Portugal, and the

rest of the world, the new oppressed are ready to rise.

And why does that happen? We all know the causes. Small countries are being ripped off by big countries, nation-state is being made obsolete by corporations, and the 'winner takes it all' mentality has no mercy for anyone. We all know causes, and we all know their symptoms in our everyday life. Schools are impoverished, teachers are stripped of dignity and the opportunity to do quality work, students are hungry, lethargic, and hopeless. And yet, let us be honest and face facts. We, gathered today here in this room – teachers, academics, activists – are still better off than the huge part of the society that does not work, that has no income, that has no hope – and that has no means for fostering personal or social change.

Your great nation, the historic Greek nation, is in shambles. And my beloved country, Croatia, is also in shambles. Spain is in shambles, Italy is in shambles, South America is in shambles. At least half of the world is in shambles. In this precarious moment, we have no time for wasting. We need to identify problems, but we also need to actively seek solutions. When children are coming to our schools hungry, we cannot keep our eyes and voices down. We need to fight against such system. We need to use our position, humble as it is, for the benefit of everybody.

As Paulo Freire would say, what we do in our classrooms, what we write in our blogs and newspapers, and what we deal with on everyday basis is not a job. It is not even a divine calling, although it certainly has elements of one. What we do here, and in our classrooms, with and without our students, is pure politics. We work with young people, and that gives us the power to shape the future. We need to seize that power. We need to seize that power for the benefit of ourselves, for the benefit of our friends and families, for the benefit of our nations, and for the benefit of the world. We need to actively engage in all levels of politics – and we need to do that here and now.

Where I come from, there are many social commentators who lament about problems in considerable width and depth. Schools are under attack, they say. Teaching is stripped of any meaning, they say. Teachers are devalued, they say. And they are right. Their analyses of our problems are deep and correct. However, ladies and gentleman, my friends, comrades, identification of problems is far from enough. Instead of lamenting about consequences of austerity, therefore, today I want to talk about practical solutions. I want to start the discussion about alternatives. Of course, these alternatives will not be complete. Some of them will perhaps not be very applicable to your contexts and problems; others may be plainly wrong. Nevertheless, today I do not want to talk about what happens – I want to talk about what we can do in order to change what happens.

Today, I want to talk about digital technologies. You may ask, Why? Why would I want to talk about technologies in this precarious moment of history? Is it not more important to talk about people, about jobs, about crisis, about democracy? Is it not more important to talk about poverty, about sickness and about hunger? Is it not more important to talk about justice?

You are completely correct. These are the most important issues. However, as it stands, our current crisis is directly linked to information technologies. Certainly, computers are not responsible that we are poor – but they do transform the relationships between work and capital. Certainly, computers are not responsible for our debts – but they do help banks to calculate our debts with great precision. Computers are not even responsible for the corporate takeover of the traditional nation-state – but they do foster globalisation. In order to create viable social alternatives, therefore, we need to talk about digital technologies.

A brief history of computers

I will start my discussion about technologies in an unusual place – the history of their development. And I will approach this

history through three simple questions.

My first question is, who funded development of computers and why?

During the 1950s and the 1960s, computers were developed in military institutes in the United States. Of course, the State did not invest money in computing in order to improve people's lives – it invested money to win Russians in the Cold War. Whatever the original reason behind development of information technologies, however, it is important to understand that computers were developed with government money, with tax-payer money. If something is made using public money, then it belongs to the people. Computers, I repeat, were not made by private money – therefore, they should not serve interest of private capital. It is the people who invested in the development of information technologies, and it is the people – meaning, all of us – who have the right to benefit from this investment.

My second question is: Who developed the computers? Who were those people?

As I said, technologies have been primarily developed in military institutes. However, it was not soldiers and generals who worked in those laboratories! No, it was young, middle-class white men, who worked in universities and research institutes, and who modelled the computers according to their understanding of freedom and community. As a result, everyone can post information on the internet. Everyone can build computer programs and share them online. Everyone can use computers to improve their own circumstances. In short, everyone can hack – if we define hacking as a subversive act of using technologies for empowerment and emancipation of people.

My third question is: What are the consequences of such development of computers?

In short, the act of developing computers and the internet is probably the largest act of hacking in the history. The army developed digital military tools; corporations use computers to make money. However, the end results – computers and the Internet we have today – are great tools that can enable critical emancipation. They are one of the opportunities to work against the system. They are also one of the main threats, as the system can easily turn computers against us. Examples of great heroes of today, such as Julien Assange, Edward Snowden, and others, show just how powerful these tools are.

Hacking and learning

However, emancipation through information technologies arrives at a price. Hacking cannot be thought of without learning. Actually, it can be said that hacking is a true celebration of learning, and empowerment, and emancipation resulting from learning and knowledge. Certainly, hackers' views to learning and knowledge are very different from those used in traditional educational systems. According to McKenzie Wark, i quote,

hackers desire knowledge, not education. The hacker comes into being through the pure liberty of knowledge in and of itself. This puts the hacker into an antagonistic relationship to the struggle on the part of the capitalist class to make education an induction into wage slavery. (Wark, 2004, p.055)

Such normative positioning puts the hacker culture in direct opposition to prevalent neoliberal agenda characteristic for worldwide schools and governments. Therefore, today I want us to reflect on ways we can use computers to create educational hacks for the benefit of ourselves and our students.

In lieu with today's theme, I want to talk about the two topics: the relationships between computers and democracy, and the ways we can use computers to create alternative spaces for critique and action.

Computers and democracy

So let us first explore the relationships between computers and democracy. In this task, I will use very useful definitions of Internet models of democracy by Lincoln Dahlberg (1998). By its architecture and making, the Internet offers opportunities for various kinds of democracy. It is very important to understand that technical infrastructure of the Internet does not favour this or that model of democracy. Instead, it can support various human visions and desires. The field is open – technological opportunities are therefore sites of struggle between various worldviews.

Unsurprisingly, the Internet has been taken over by a dominant neoliberal view of democracy. Its credo is – every man for himself – and its philosophy is deeply individualistic. So, if I know how to program computers, and if you do not how to program computers, that makes me more powerful than you. In consequence, I have more rights than you, and I am somehow entitled to more democracy than you. Of course, the same thing happens if I am rich, and you are poor. Then, I can buy more computer power than you can buy, and this again gives me an advantage over you. So neoliberal internet democracy is not for everyone – it is only for those who can afford it.

The individualist neoliberal model ignores the fact that the Internet has been developed with taxes collected from everybody. The individualist neoliberal model ignores the fact that the Internet can equally serve everybody. Instead, it privatizes the Internet, and turns it into commodity that can be bought and sold. It privatizes the network itself, and allows access only to some people. More importantly, however, it privatizes the content we put on the Internet using various copyright laws.

Certainly, proponents of the individualist neoliberal model will never talk about the Internet in this way. They sell their view to the Internet as freedom and democracy. They peddle the agenda of global neoliberal capitalism, and get support from corporations and governments. They are rich, they are powerful, and they dominate the contemporary society. They want people to believe in the individualist neoliberal model of Internet democracy – and, unfortunately, they are fairly successful at that. So this is why it is so important to talk about the Internet and democracy.

Just like we saw in ugly examples of privatization of water, woods, or sea, the individualist neoliberal model strips the internet of its essential democratic functions. Individualist neoliberal model of the Internet is not real democracy. It is fake democracy. It is a joke. When the Internet stops being a common good, it begins to serve the capital. And we all know very well where it is headed. So, we should not be seduced by sweet promises of democracy brought by the Internet within the dominant individualist neoliberal model. We should not be seduced by the so called Californian ideology and the promise of the free independent entrepreneur. We need to realize that this fake democracy, and this neoliberal capitalist ideology, works directly against us – and we need to fight back.

One of the ways of fighting back is the communitarian ideal of internet democracy. At least theoretically, communitarianism recognises objective circumstances that people are in. Instead of focusing to individual merit, it focuses to group values, and it insists on shared values of the good and the bad. In the communitarian model of Internet democracy, the Internet becomes a vehicle for distributing and sharing these values. At a theoretical level, of course, this is all very nice. At a practical level, however, digital communitarianism or cyber- communitarianism can be bitterly misleading. Let us take a look into few examples.

How many of you are on Facebook? And on Twitter? And how many times a day you 'like' something, Tweet something, or blog something? What do you think, what is the real meaning of your communications? As we learned from recent social uprisings such as the Arab Spring, the Internet is a great tool for organizing social unrest. If you want to gather friends for a riot in front of the Parliament, or organise a picnic, this may be the way to go. However, what does that mean on a wider scale? What kind of community can we create over the Internet?

In the context of community and political engagement, unfortunately, having your page liked by 10 000 people, or by 20 000 people, or by even more people, means surprisingly little. Facebook groups do not create real communities; they do not create real resistance. Certainly, in the short run, they might gather people around a cause. However, if you think that people share values because they click Like or share something, then you will be disappointed.

Your click will never feed hungry children, your signature on online petition will never change a law, your viral video will hardly be remembered in few weeks from now, and the number of your online followers or online friends is a very poor measure of your social impacts. These are hard facts, proven by a lot of research. So in order to be an active member of the community at the Global Centre for Advanced Studies, I did not merely apply online. I first met Maria and Creston in person, then we did some work together online, and now I am again here in front of you. As Maria and Creston will surely tell you, the Internet is a great way to maintain the community – but it takes so much more than the Internet to build a community.

Of course, the media shovels us every day by successful examples of completely online communities. This is clearly a part of the propaganda. These examples exist, obviously, but they are mere exceptions to the rule, and their individualist nature makes them very difficult to reproduce. So these are hard facts. Of course, neoliberals want us to believe that our clicks matter, neoliberals want us to believe that our online petitions matter, neoliberalists want us to believe that Facebook can bring us real friends, because it is much easier to control people online than in the streets. Unfortunately, for the most of us, the Internet offers a false choice. For the most of us, the Internet offers false hope. Once again, let us make things clear. This fake choice and fake hope is not coincidental. It is not a product of mistake. Instead, it is something much worse. This fake choice and fake hope is a part of pacification strategy, aimed at producing people who click alone in their rooms instead of going out and doing real things together. It is a strategy aimed against the people and against democracy.

So, let us not be fooled by the communitarian aspects of the Internet! Yes, the Internet is a great tool that helps us to manage communities. Yes, the Internet can help us organise things, until someone – as, for instance, in Egypt – does not shut it down. However, it is a deep mistake to think that the Internet can create communities, and it is an even deeper mistake to think that the Internet can replace real political engagement – that is, as I said, just a clever strategy to keep us from organising.

The Internet model of deliberative democracy

For now, I briefly outlined the individualist neoliberal model of Internet democracy and the communitarian model of Internet democracy. Both models are based on will of the majority, both models are full of sweeping generalisations. Historically, these are the earliest theoretical models of Internet democracy. And they still dominate the public discourse, as we see them every day in our schools and media. However, as I have hopefully shown by now, both the individualist neoliberal model and the communitarian model bring fake democracy, and serve only as means to private and corporate interest. In order to oppose these powerful forces, obviously, we need a third, radically different model of Internet democracy.

So where should we seek the new model? Once we realize that the Internet is neither a Leviathan designed to control us, nor a perfect God-given tool for fighting neoliberalism, we are left with very little. Therefore, our model of Internet democracy will definitely provide less answers and less direction. This model has many names. Following mainstream research, I will provisionally call it the Internet model of deliberative democracy.

In the Internet model of deliberative democracy, the Internet is defined as one more public sphere. In its social function, it strongly resembles traditional public spheres such as newspapers, schools, public squares and other places where democracy happens. However, the old public spaces are being rapidly dismantled. How many books do your students read per year? What happened to journalism in Greece during the past twenty years? How many schools and universities have been privatized? Therefore, the Internet is not just one more alternative public sphere. It creates new public spheres, but also – and more importantly – it replaces the old public spheres. This is why it is so important to speak of Internet and democracy.

In its offering of new political spheres, the Internet also builds new rules of conduct in these spheres. Some of these rules are modifications of old rules – for instance, child pornography is equally and rightfully banned in all media. However, some of the rules are completely new. Who would have thought, only 20 years ago, that one of the most valuable things we possess will be our privacy? Who would have thought, only 20 years ago, that one small box in our living rooms or even in our palms could contain more knowledge than the National Library?

In this way, the Internet has become a newspaper, and a TV channel, and a square. It is a place where we can express, and it is a place where we can educate ourselves in our circumstances. Whether we like it or not, this place has taken up many functions we did elsewhere. And its consequences are different and unpredictable. However, there is no time to stand aside and see what happens. We all know what happens – the dominant neoliberal view of Internet democracy has already entered our homes, offices and classrooms. Communitarian view has fooled many people into benevolent practices. As public educators, we need to reclaim the public sphere. More importantly, we need to teach our students how to reclaim the public sphere – for their benefit, and for the benefit of the society.

Critical education as hacking the neoliberal agenda

This is where education finds its place in the nexus between the Internet and democracy. This is why we should not ignore the Internet, and this is why the Internet belongs to the conference such as this – and to any other conference on democracy. And this brings us directly into the realm of critical pedagogy. On that basis, I will finally outline some opportunities for critical teaching as hacking the neoliberal agenda. These opportunities are founded on two dialectically connected pillars.

The first pillar is critical pedagogy. Please allow me, again, to briefly turn to history. When Paulo Freire worked on literacy with poor peasants in Brazil, what did he use? He used images, and he used graphoscopes. When Henry Giroux set out in his explorations of critical pedagogy, what did he explore? He explored media and media literacy. He analysed films and TV programmes. When Peter McLaren wrote *Life in Schools*, what was his focus? His focus was access to means for teaching and learning. Critical pedagogy, since its very beginnings, has been closely related to technologies of the day. So when we face challenges pertaining to the Internet, we are not alone. These machines and problems are not as new as they may seem. There is a whole, very rich tradition, that can help us to confront our problems. We need not despair. Instead, we need to stand on the shoulders of our notable predecessors and build our own critical pedagogies. As Peter McLaren wrote back in 2000, I quote,

The globalization of capital, the move toward post-Fordist economic arrangements of flexible specialization, and the consolidation of neoliberal educational policies demand not only a vigorous and ongoing engagement with Freire's work, but also a reinvention of Freire in the context of current debates over information technologies and learning, global economic restructuring, and the effort to develop new modes of revolutionary struggle. (McLaren, 2000, p. 15)

So the first pillar for education as hacking the neoliberal agenda is the tradition of critical pedagogy. The second pillar, unsurprisingly, is our praxis. We need to understand that our praxis is of vital importance for the whole society. However, nowadays we are surrounded by experts. So technology experts tell us what to do with computers, curriculum experts tell us what to teach, financial experts tell us what to do with our money. And, what happens? Our computers break, our curricula become worse and worse, and we are poorer by the day. Obviously, there is something deeply wrong with the rule of the experts.

I am not saying that we do not need experts – that would be stupid and wrong. But I do want to say that teachers should stop bowing their heads in front of false experts. And I do want to say that teachers need to take matters in own hands. We are the ones who teach. We are the ones who go to classrooms every day. And we are the ones who know the power of learning and knowledge to emancipate people and make them free. So, as far as the Internet is concerned, we have a dual responsibility. First, we need to learn as much as possible about its functioning. Second, we need to critically assess the 'facts' that we are being fed by the superstructures.

You want to sell me the neoliberal concept of the Internet? Of course you do, it will make you money! You want to sell me the communitarian concept of the Internet? Of course you do, it will keep me off the streets! In order to fight against such manipulations, we need to dismantle these models as plainly wrong! By understanding the Internet as the new public sphere, and by helping our students to understand the Internet as the new public sphere, we are doing the first step towards emancipation. So, what is the first step, what is the first hack, that teachers and public intellectuals can make against the neoliberal agenda? Well, it seems to me, that the answer is in good old-fashioned Freire's critical consciousness.

Now that we arrived in the familiar terrain of critical pedagogy, it is time to develop our hacks. One possible hack would be helping our students to read the technological word and read the technological world. Another possible hack would be an attack on the banking model of education. Another possible hack would be an attack to standardized testing. Opportunities for hacking the neoliberal agenda are all around us! By taking standard concepts of critical theory and applying to our technological reality, we can develop various small hacks in our teaching praxis.

Conclusion

Of course, after this conclusion, you may ask: So, you flew all the way from Croatia to tell us about critical pedagogy Paulo Freire? So what about technologies? What are our hacks promised in the title?

Well, in response, I can offer you this. Unfortunately, critical pedagogy does not offer one-size-fits-all solutions. Critical pedagogy offers dialogue, analyses, contextualisation, critique. It raises critical consciousness of own circumstances, rather than preaching about other people's circumstances. Therefore, it does not offer off-the-shelf hacks – instead, it helps people to develop own hacks. If you want to ask me about specific uses of technology to support critical education for democracy, buy me a beer after this talk and I will be happy to listen. Only after I hear the whole story, and only if this story is close enough to what I do, I might

be able to help. Other than that, unfortunately, this short talk can just offer some background for development of your own praxis.

Having said that, I believe that this background is extremely important. First, we need to clearly say that technologies should not be left to technicians. Computers belong to all of us, they influence all of us, and we should all be their masters. So, it is time to stop buying capitalist propaganda. Computers were designed by the people, paid for by the people, and belong to the people. The internet is not a commodity that should be bought and sold – it is a commons, a public good that should be at service of all of us.

Second, let us not be fooled by misleading definitions of the relationships between the Internet and democracy. The individualist neoliberal model of Internet democracy is so pervasive, that many people take it for granted. However, this is deeply wrong, as the individualist neoliberal model is based on injustice, and works against the community and for the global elites. The communitarian model, in spite of all its good aims, has very limited use. Let us not be fooled that our clicks mean anything! The communitarian model, unfortunately, mostly keeps our political activity off the streets and classrooms – and this works directly against us.

The Internet model of deliberative democracy provides a balanced approach by saying that the Internet is the new public sphere. In spite of its problems, this understanding of the Internet does not provide a one-sided view. As a public sphere, the Internet may sometimes serve our aims, and it may sometimes serve aims of our enemies. We should never take the Internet for granted! Taken as a public sphere, however, the Internet offers choice – and presents an important new battlefield. And in this digital battlefield, we need to fight our enemy – global neoliberal capitalism.

So how should we fight at this battlefield? First, we need to realize that the struggle is not new. There is a whole tradition of critical pedagogy that we can count on, and this tradition needs to be reinvented in our contemporary context. This opens spaces for numerous hacks, which are exclusively context-related and cannot be prescribed. However, it is important to realize our power as critical educators. Instead of leaving computers to technicians and capitalists, we need to use the power we got. We need to take matters of technology and democracy into our own hands. We need to develop our understanding of the Internet as a public sphere, and we need to help our students develop that understanding. And we need to do that now. Dear friends, comrades, teachers, public intellectuals – thank you a lot for being such a great audience. I truly appreciate your attention. And I do hope that this lecture will turn into a dialogue by the end of the conference. Thank you very much. I cannot wait to hear your opinions. Thank you.

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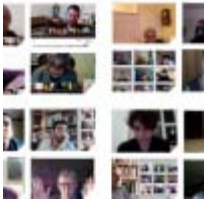
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