Chapter 7

Communication and political disenchantment

‘In fact you may say that idealism is the ruin of man, and if we lived down to fact, as primitive man had to do, we would be better off.’

James Joyce 1

From the latter half of the eighteenth century, public opinion appears as the invisible hand of politics, the real sovereign. One speaks about the *esprit public* and the opinion as the business of human reason. For politics, public opinion (*öffentliche Meinung*) becomes the functional equivalent of political truth and this fact provides the justification for freedom of speech and the press, and ultimately for the rationality of politics (Luhmann 2002, 280). As a political environment, as a manifestation of a *volonté générale*, public opinion assists political differentiation towards an autonomous social system. In the nineteenth century, it became fully loaded as a value-laden concept, and serves the building of the democratic nation state and its elections – and constructs itself politically in between the elections, through provocations and debate, to test the freedom of speech. It establishes itself on the basis of press freedom from the self-made conviction that it can influence elections and subsequently politics. The public facticity of newspapers has added authority to the editors and their moral criticism of political immorality from liberal, conservative and socialist perspectives. The notion of a critical public sphere has manifested itself as an idea (Luhmann 2002, 283).

How did sociology and political theory position themselves to the ideas of political modernity? Sociology and related social sciences are not seen, and rarely see themselves, as normative disciplines. Sociology normally abstains from recom-

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mending prescriptions for particularly good or just forms of democracy, because that would place sociology in a too obviously paradoxical situation. Weber wisely insisted on value-freedom as the prime methodological aim of sociology. The contribution of sociology in relation to the established Enlightenment political thought was to observe norms and values as inherent in sociological problems, as facts, not to enter into debate with them. However, such an analytical-descriptive ethos in sociology is nevertheless embedded in Enlightenment ideas of the good and just society. Particularly political sociology works in a tension between analysis and normativity. As a product of observation (reflexivity) and idealism, sociology is in the business of non-moralising and moralising at the same time.

This analytical – normative paradox has been with sociology since its inception and cannot be done away with. It is however handled in several ways, predominantly by emphasising the analytical-empirical dimension and by discursively trying to hold this separate from the moral values and ideals of modernity. And yet discourses on democracy, liberalism and human rights enforce themselves even more strongly on the agenda of the social sciences on the background of threats and challenges against these conceptions in a multi-religious and globalised society. At the centre of the debate stands the public and discursive foundation of political authority, normally conceived as a question of legitimacy generated in the public sphere. Public reason is seen as the social structure of liberalism – the concept that distinguishes liberalism from all other orders and which positions different variants of liberal thought. Political sociology is thus a paradoxical science in that it unavoidably describes and at the same time produces norms. It needs, as all academic activity, to be well aware of this paradoxical position, and to handle it accordingly.

In this chapter, I sketch out what I consider a realist position, particularly as opposed to theories of public reason. I address what the realist tradition has to offer liberalism in general, and to notions of the public sphere.

Realism moves beyond the approaches of public reason in order to establish greater distance from the idealist and moralist perspectives on political society, which accept and work from the inherent democratic potential of politics. It formulates a set of immanent critiques against mainstream liberalism, particularly the Kantian and neo-Kantian sorts. The realist counter-current at, for instance, Harvard in the 1960s and later at Oxford and Cambridge, took place within a larger liberal wave, that now has washed away most other competitive political orders. The task of political realism, I argue, is to move liberal political theory away from

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2. For a discussion of the normativity of sociology, see Ashenden 2010.
certain idealist deficiencies and back on a Weberian track. In order to understand contemporary politics as well as the Internet as a political infrastructure, I argue for a kind of disenchanted liberalism, a liberal realism as a foundation for political sociology that can provide better a view of those problems that politics and its media confront. The term political realism also marks the distance between those who associate realism with a one-sided pursuing of narrow self-interest and those who reject not only moralism, but morality as such in political thought. Realism stresses that there is a political morality.

Against the prevailing account of legitimacy as public reason, I have in this book presented alternative contestation-oriented views that see moral justification tending towards universality as highly unlikely and certainly unnecessary conditions for establishing legitimate constitutional regimes, and similarly, that law is not in any absolute need of such a consensual foundation. However, clarifying the conditions of legitimacy, such as the nature of mediated public discourse, remains one of the most central tasks for political sociology. For a conventional liberalist, legitimacy refers to the authority of the sovereign and how it commands the executives and legislators. For a realist, the problem of legitimacy addresses how politics creates order out of ‘chaos’. For a liberalist, legitimacy is a moral concern that connects political decisions to democracy. This is the preferable version to politicians themselves. It is no coincidence that mainstream political figures today prefer to speak of democracy rather than politics. To the realist, however, legitimacy is to a large degree self-legitimation; it is about how to make politics, including how to decide what politics is. Opinion polls and Internet-based media do not change this. Legitimacy is the magic of getting the applause even if what you did was only a trick, or even, attracting applause even if everyone realises that it is a trick. The functional trick of producing expectations goes right to heart of ‘the political’. Politics exists because we cannot do without it – because when it stops functioning, war and chaos take over.

Another difference between conventional liberalism and realism is that the latter tends to be sceptical to the claim that civil conversation is inherent in politics. Clearly, to what extent one emphasises disagreement and struggle is a matter of degree, and most decisions in contemporary democracies would have the shape of compromise or even modus vivendi. Everyone involved would, regardless of actual results, have achieved order, and they all expect more in coming rounds. On the other hand, the argument about politics as conflict, hammered in by the contestation-oriented approach and Weber, assumes that one has discovered some deep secret in language, and has come up with the opposite conclusion than Habermas about communication and the future; public communication is inher-
ently irrational: It differentiates and polarises, dismantles argumentation into fragments, reduces discussions to hate speech. Contestation-theorists have yet to show convincing evidence for this. As I have noted in the discussion on empirical studies, findings go in different directions, in fact supporting my claim that the Internet is neither an undemocratic nor asocial technology, nor is it inherently democratic – or neutral. In fact, contrary to what the contestation perspective argues, the debate about consensus versus conflict can be shown not to be of essential importance. What to expect from a political debate in the public opinion or in formal politics must always remain open. Political decisions can resolve or create conflict: they can resolve some and at the same time create new ones; they can create hope and disillusionment. In most cases, the political process just goes on. To build a political theory on either consensus or conflict is therefore misguided.

A liberal understanding of the public sphere begins, as we have seen, with a normative understanding of democracy rather than a cool-eyed understanding of politics. What is needed is theoretical guidance that can lead to the construction of ideal types rather than ideals of politics and its media. Assumptions about the inherent democratic potential of the Internet have little place in such theory. Notions of democratic discourse must at least be balanced by a view on pervasive surveillance and central control.

NO MORE SPACE FOR IDEALISM

As we have seen, the deliberative model argues that political institutions cannot simply mirror the interests of the represented. It assumes that people’s views are less tightly connected to particular interests, and more to the political debates they engage in, and likely to be modified during political discourse. Discourse is not only a question of representing and making present particular problems, because interests and opinions are never fixed. More than stating interests, deliberative theory argues, the task is to enter into open, inclusive and rational discourses, which build on common interests and advance and shape preferences, with the purpose of developing consensus or compromise. This perspective strongly emphasises the power of the argument; it is possible, not to mention probable, to transform opinions by changing how problems are interpreted and weighted against other problems in an intersubjective testing of reasons. In this perspective, legitimacy is not reproduced simply by making established interests visible in political fora, but by producing a common interest through free, equal and public argumentation (Hayward 2009, 120; Benhabib 1996; Elster 1998; Habermas 1990; Manin 1987). Dele-
gates represent interests of people as they probably would understand them after
subjecting them to deliberation. Here the problem of the production of legitimacy
in the public sphere is put to the centre of the question of democracy: According
to the deliberative view, representation is a necessary but highly insufficient condition
for democracy and legitimacy. Politics is expected to handle political challenges as
a totality. Representatives do not only represent particular groups, they are represen-
tatives of society as a whole, and if successful, both particular issues and the
political system in total, benefit from trust and belief in the system.

Thus the public reason approach tends to explain oppression and conflict as
obstacles that can be argued away during political procedure. Procedure is
described as absent from dominance and privileges, as if everyone stands on an
equal footing in opinion-formation and policy-making. Typically, oppression and
dominance are recognised only as an effect that will change in the course of dis-
course. In a reform-oriented spirit, the elimination of dominance and coercion are
stated as conditions for moral-political discourses to work productively. Politics
thus reforms itself in a virtuous circle toward constantly improved conditions for
public discourse. Rawls and Habermas, in spite of differences, both represent this
general idealist model. They do not inscribe injustice into their models as anything
else than as a topic for discourse. By this, the theories not only distance themselves
as descriptions of actual politics, they produce an image of politics that is primar-
ily helpful for those in power, such as social-democratic and Christian-democratic
politicians, for whom ‘ought’ implies ‘can’, which again implies ‘will’ (‘when we
come into government’). The implied utopian ideal follows everyday statements
about how things ought to be.

One cannot expect differently from politics – presenting visions is a part of the
political rhetoric. However, political theory is expected to observe this from a dis-
tance and to analyse it within its political context. When it does not, it may serve
as ideology. Charles W. Mills argues (alluding to Rawls) that ideal theory presents
a ‘distortional complex of ideas, values, norms, and beliefs that reflects the non-
representative interest and experiences of a small minority of the national popula-
tion – middle-to-upper-class white males – who are hugely over-represented in the
professional philosophical profession’ (Mills 2005, 172). They abstract away from
sociological realities like class, gender and race. The alternative found in material-
ism and realism from Machiavelli to Nietzsche is to grasp moral and ideal theory
in political and social contexts as phenomena that are not given, but to be
explained. In a realist manner, Mills argues that: ‘[T]he best way to bring about the
ideal is by recognising the non-ideal, and [that] by assuming the ideal or the near-
ideal, one is only guaranteeing the perpetuation of the non-ideal’ (Mills 2005, 182).
In Rawls’ defence, one could respond that he did not intend a sociological analysis of the US, but rather to excavate an old philosophical tradition and situate it in the late twentieth century US. Rawls did not try to examine actual political processes, but describe a regulatory ideal against which existing political arrangements could be measured. Even as such a benchmark, however, it may be argued that the concept of overlapping consensus had little to offer. It did not take into account necessary aspects of any political arrangement. Rawls insists that this concept is a moral conception based on equally moral and reasonable reasons. Precisely as a regulatory moral ideal, it may legitimate arguments that are really expressions of strategic power. Following realism, the result in Rawls is peculiarly apolitical: The purpose is to constrain politics morally by ‘identifying a core set of political liberties and depoliticizing all decision-making that touches on them’ (Bellamy 2010, 420). Politics is squeezed between legal procedures and rights on the one hand, and cultural pluralism on the other. Rawls in fact makes a point of removing controversial issues from the political agenda, in order to ease the public reason from the ‘burden of judgement’ in processes of social cooperation. For instance, to Rawls, the abortion issue is foremost a difficult issue that must be handled morally in a way that considers all relevant sides according to the norms given by public reason. It is not allowed to appear as a subject of deep political and moral conflict, which needs to be handled politically. There are specific constraints, historically developed in and through the development of democratic politics that would be decisive in a question like that. If Rawls had accepted historically produced expressions of strategic compromises and similar non-moral arrangements as elements in the concept of overlapping consensus, the ideological effect had been avoided.

POLITICAL ACTION AND JUDGEMENT

Political realism advances the claim that political philosophy must be realist in the sense that it must concern itself with how actual institutions operate in society at a given time, and what really moves individuals to act in given circumstances. Here ideals and motivations are of interest to the extent that they actually influence behaviour. What is of interest is not ideals and utopias as such, but what agents do and how imaginations play a political role here and now. Moreover, political philosophy must recognise that politics is about human action and its historical contexts, not only about beliefs, propositions and principles. Also, politics has similarities to the exercise of a craft or art. As a skill or craft, politics should be studied as
practices, not as a set of principles or theories. Often their successes is conceived of as ‘political judgement’ – among other things ‘the ability to determine which analogies are useful, which theories abstract from crucial aspects of the situation’ (Geuss 2008, 98). Geuss recommends a return from neo-Kantianism to ‘neo-Leninism’. We may add that politics is characterised by bounded rationality – filled with moral intentions, and more or less sound judgements, confused or conflicting beliefs and desires. Often, policies are only locally consistent, half-baked and indeterminate, but nevertheless able to achieve stability (Geuss 2008, 4). Politics may be rational in that it may learn from previous failures, but it may also not learn, or draw lessons that may later prove fatal. The imperfection of politics prevents us from speaking confidently of learning processes as a general rule (Geuss 2008, 5).

Raymond Geuss argues that realism implies ‘that one does not think about politics in terms of general moral categories or vague aspirational concepts like ‘freedom,’ and democracy. Rather the analysis begins by, as Max Weber taught us, observing action and its (unintended) consequences. Political judgment is always embedded in a context of action’ (Geuss 2010, 5). Politics unfolds in interaction between individuals involved in political matters who may have different and contradictory powers and agendas. Similarly to Weber, Geuss notes the aspect of power in attempts to control the actions of others on the basis of actions and positions in the past. Underlying issues are adjustments to new challenges as well as consistency over time. To speak of political judgement alone is therefore an abstraction, ‘an artificial isolation of one element from a wider complex of actions and action-related attitudes, habits, and institutional arrangements, within which alone the judgement (finally) makes sense’ (Geuss 2010, 8).

Nevertheless, politics is also a question of demonstrating human capacities or virtues in public (Dunn 2000, 42). There are shifts in political engagements and consequences according to persona and habitus. Consider the different styles of government between Margaret Thatcher and John Major, or (in Norway) Thorbjørn Jagland and Jens Stoltenberg. We need to recognise and learn about the fact that the meaning of politics lies partly in the simple fact of personality, for example personal religious faith. Political judgement is a product of immediate incidents and statements and long-term developments, of past and future, of morality and efficiency. Weber’s two political ethics’ and his notion of Augenmaß account for this in enlightening ways.

Deeds speak louder and clearer than arguments. Wittgenstein, Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss all refer to Goethe’s Faust who refuses to translate the first sentence of St. John’s Gospel: ‘In the beginning was the Word’, but rather as Im Anfang war die Tat. For politics in Williams’s interpretation, this means that
theory can only change political ideas and action ‘by virtue of the historical situation in which it is presented, and its relation to that historical situation cannot be fully theorized or captured in reflection’ (Williams 2005, 25). Geuss argues with late Wittgenstein and sociological insight: ‘Agents [who] have interests, powers and beliefs. Social life is the action and the results of the action of agents and groups of agents who have various powers, and develop and exercise these powers, through time in the pursuit of their interests, and in accordance with various beliefs they have, including perhaps what we would call “moral” beliefs’ (Geuss 2010, 50). Politics ought to be understood as a “conjunction of different actors making context-specific judgments, taking advantage of unexpected opportunities, and innovating” (Geuss 2010, 51). Bernard Williams also makes clear that political action is only in part influenced by intentions. Human action involves a set of factors influencing its results, and we may add, often the results cannot be isolated from the results of other’s actions. Therefore, human action is not the mastery of the agent although it is often celebrated as such. Williams (2005) calls this, on the basis of Weber, non-sovereign agency.

These are well-known sociological facts for a complex society that do not fit well with Kantian ethics where normative judgements rest on principles. The notion of non-sovereign agency addresses our vulnerability as agents and our dependency on other in completing our actions. Max Weber notes that the political ethics of responsibility account for results as well as possible unintended consequences. The ethics of responsibility stress the importance of the fact that action is always entangled in other events and acts, and that this must be carefully accounted for. Universal principles such as human rights are indispensable but do not necessarily account for political answers to practical problems (Galston 2010, 396). Rights and principles are referred to selectively and pragmatically in politics. Difference and political conflict is ineradicable. The complex tension between disagreement and conflict of interest, and the interest in stabilisation is the enduring duality that characterises politics, and which is strategically used by politics to preserve and legitimate power.

Politics, writes John Dunn, ‘is a combat among teams, of constantly changing membership, profoundly undependable commitment and often blatantly faltering grasp of what is going on’ (Dunn 2000, 192). It is ‘the balance of conflict and cooperation between human purposes on any scale on which you look at it’ (Dunn 2000, 361). Politics is a contest for power (Chantal Mouffe) but it is also about order, which means that the prime challenge for politics is to handle, and contain, and stabilise conflict, often in a modus vivendi, compromise, contracts, bargaining procedures, multi-party systems, division of power procedures, symbolic pol-
itics, etc. In societies where individuals and groups have something to lose, mutual accommodation is generally an acceptable price to pay for stability.

BEYOND POLITICS AS APPLIED MORALITY

In Rawls and Habermas, counterfactual and reconstructive methodologies are essential to build a model by which society can measure and criticise itself. They produce a theory of morality and law, (validity and facticity, fairness and constitution) where constitution and law protect moral reasoning, and reversibly, public moral reasoning ultimately leads to reforms of law. These impressive frameworks are presented as moral theories of politics or rather, of democracy (Rossi 2012, 149). This principle was laid in Enlightenment philosophy from Kant, Rousseau and Locke. Politics is seen as macro-ethics or political ethics. Politics, they argue, must be understood by the general moral theory of justice.

Realism replies to this is that if theory silences or ignores the non-moral dimension of politics, it does not understand the practice of real politics. Rather than seeing politics as a continuation of ethics, politics replaces general ethics; it intervenes at the point of disagreement on the right thing to do. It is an old truth that to invest morality into a political conflict is to ask for even more trouble. Conflicts need to be considered and handled responsibly and politically. One might say with Glen Newey (2001, 169) that politics is the public decision-making mechanism deployed when justification gives out. As Newey (2001, 168) argues, moral commitments, in discussions, are better seen as outputs from discussion, than inputs to it. The use of disagreement and power cannot be decided on morally, before, or outside politics, because they themselves are political matters. If rational discourses work productively, politics may already have done its job.

That politics are some sort of applied ethics means that one begins an analysis of politics with a moral ideal, as if ethics holds a separate analytic position from which one could assess politics. Raymond Geuss argues, ‘The assumption is that one can complete the works of ethics first, attaining an ideal theory of how we should act, and then in a second step apply that ideal theory to the action of political agents’ (Geuss 2008, 8). But no such universal and ahistorical place exists apart from empirical circumstances.

However, ‘values’, moral principles, or ideals, are certainly more than window dressing. Political action is, among other things, inherently moral. There is after all, something we call political responsibility. Max Weber, in his talk and essay on politics as profession, left insights about politics that should serve as a reminder:
To Weber, politics remained the art of the possible, not the art of the impossible as in moral liberalism. Politics involves deciding the place of morality in decisions according to responsibilities and convictions.

Toleration may be seen as another political value. According to John Gray, ‘Liberalism contains two philosophies. In one, toleration is justified as a means to truth. In this view, toleration is an instrument of rational consensus, and a diversity of ways of life is endured in the faith that it is destined to disappear. In the other, toleration is valued as a condition of peace, and divergent ways of living are welcomed as marks of diversity in the good life. The first conception an ideal of ultimate convergence on values, the latter an ideal of modus vivendi’ (Gray 2000, 103). Following Gray, the future of liberalism lies in turning toward the second interpretation of toleration as a circumstantial balance of powers. The way forward for any competent political regime is to accommodate political interests, to negotiate and mediate conflicting values, to facilitate compromises. It cannot defend itself with a theory of justice, because justice is a part of politics. When a regime argues with universal principles like human rights, it also applies well-known conventions as ammunition in a controversy.

John Horton too suggests that the old idea of modus vivendi (including compromise, bargaining, persuasion and more) is a more convincing way of thinking about political stability both theoretically and realistically, than compliance and other terms that indicate moral consensus. To count as a modus vivendi, an arrangement has to be broadly ‘acceptable’ or ‘agreeable’ to those who are party to it, even if reluctantly and for diverse reasons. It is a practical settlement that instead of relying on general justification is simply accepted by drawing on resources of various kinds.

**THE POLITICAL DOMAIN**

Closely related to the question of morality is the realist assumption that the political constitutes an autonomous domain. Similar to Max Weber, Bernard Williams is among those who stress the specifically political as for instance in contrast to the democratic. Political agreement comes as a result of employment of political power in shaping society in modern ways. Williams argues that consensus is an ‘artefact’ of politics and cannot exist prior to the political, but is created through political intervention.

Similarly, Philp (2010, 475) has argued for extracting what he calls political virtue as distinct from moral virtue. Politics requires its actors to act in ways that are
not always in accord with general moral values (lying, duplicity, declaring war). And conversely, some moral values are hardly political ones, such as modesty and generosity. While moral virtues are essential to all, political virtues belong to the domain of politics and the particular roles and relations of the political kind. Philp talks of political virtues rather than simply political skills and capacities, because of their potential deep impact on other’s lives. Political virtues deal with political activity as an agency of a particular kind and embedded in a particular moral and rhetorical context. Machiavelli and Weber have given us places to begin. It therefore makes sense to see how they reconstitute politics as an ethically and communicatively self-enclosed domain. The autonomy of politics can be delimited through the business of political coordination according to explicitly political norms. Another way is to point out that its ascribed task is to solve problems under the conditions of conflict, or where political capital is played out. Politics requires an explicitly political communication that is not just a derivative of judicial, economic or moral, religious or scientific forms.

Political sociology also operates with an analytical space for the distinct political. It needs to acknowledge politics as an autonomous domain that to a large extent dictates its own ways and laws. The concept of the political needs to be more specific and at the same time wider than in conventional liberal political theory: (1), narrower, in that it acknowledges the political to be where decision-making takes place (parties, advisors, administration, elected assemblies); (2), wider, in that it sees the need for extending the area of strategic political influence discussion to factors that influence politics at a given time, such as multinationals, the education system, lobbying, the media and public opinion. Conversely and just as importantly, it is essential to understand how politics acts out in these institutional domains in order to influence what is political, and how politics self-legitimises itself in the public sphere, through a wide variety of techniques and mechanisms addressed by sociology and media studies.

The important distinction between (in a narrow sense) politics and public opinion surrounding politics makes it easier to see how politics develops strategies for acquiring legitimacy. Since the birth of the modern nation state, and along with the development of procedures for making political decisions, mechanisms of justification have emerged as an internal dimension of the political domain. Efficiency and legitimacy became the two central features of politics. With the dramatic expansion of public bureaucracy and specialist knowledge, politicians were gradually relieved of the administrative dimension strongly connected to efficiency. Today, generating legitimacy in public opinion is the chief task of any leading politician. As they no doubt would affirm in moral terms without hesitation: It is
a duty and responsibility for any leading politician to do what she can to gather support for her policies, party, government and constitution.

POLITICAL IDEALISM AS IDEOLOGY

In spite of their very different styles and routes, Rawls and Habermas both describe an ordered and pleasant landscape that could have been possible, and, according to both theories, still is possible to reach or at least to approach considerably. In contrast, realism holds that there is no reason to believe that political reality and liberalist utopias will ever meet. Therefore, it is a danger that the theories may function as what Raymond Geuss calls ideological interventions (2008, 94). Political philosophy can either play a critical role in unmasking ideological illusions, or it may itself play an ideological role in that it in various ways supports certain ideological illusions. In the latter case, it diverts attention by presenting marginal issues as if they are central and essential.

For instance, Geuss criticises Rawls for delivering an idealised notion of politics that begins with an abstract analysis of a conception of political virtue or rationality, and then making it into a theory of a society where the rationality or virtue is fully realised. In Geuss’ words: liberal moralists try to ‘‘blank out history, sociology, and the particularities that constitute the substance of any recognisable form of human life’’ (Geuss 2008, 59–60). The absence of a discussion of power, and in fact the drawing away of attention from power makes the theory appear ideological: ‘In real politics, theories like that of Rawls are nonstarters, except of course as potential ideological interventions. A theoretical approach with no place for a theory of power is not merely deeply deficient but actively pernicious, because mystifying’ (Geuss 2008, 94). This, writes Geuss, is a critique not of particular aspects of his theory, but of ‘‘his whole way of approaching the subject of political philosophy’’ (Geuss 2008, 94).

Theories of deliberative democracy tend to describe political reality, according to its vocabulary, as liberal, rational and ordered – imperfect, but nevertheless deliberative and democratic. It presents actual politics as public, rational and deliberative procedurally-based politics. Their contributions have tended to slide from the theoretically normative to the actual descriptive. In the words of the Weberian scholar Wilhelm Hennis: ‘It always goes the same boring way. First it is a metaphor, then an analogy, and then finally it is reified and taken for the thing itself. And that becomes simply stupid and very often dangerous…’ (Hennis 2009, 119–20). By basing their relative mainstream descriptions of democracy on ideal
assumptions, these assumptions may be taken for actuality, or close to what exists. There is nothing wrong with utopias in themselves, Raymond Geuss argues. The problem is that they become ideologies; they naturalise and even idealise a condition that politics and society can never achieve.

Political theory as ideology is a dimension of the legitimacy of politics that political sociology can address, as a feature of the current political self-identity and a mechanism of its self-legitimation. In other words, Rawls and Habermas serve as expressions of the Western liberal self-conception, as crucial legitimating resources for society (Thornhill 2011, 155). A non-normative or a differently normative approach may examine just how modern societies account for, and legitimise their political functions in normative ways, by ways of political theory, precisely what Habermas did in the Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit.

Political realism may on the other hand seem as an Anti-illusionist, disenchanted tradition – it attempts to move between moralism and cynicism, close to a common-sense understanding of political leadership and statesmanship. It is deeply concerned about how moral integrity can survive in the political arena, and it has no profound or fundamental answer to such questions. Realism argues quite strongly that politics is proactive: Political institutions participate in forming the public opinion in a wide range of ways. As Roberto Michels, Max Weber and many since have demonstrated, political institutions like political parties and public bureaucracies develop according to an inner logic by way of instrumental and symbolic features that assist in the self-legitimation of politics. Institutions also contain political conflict by forcing people and groups of very different views to cooperate under the recognition that the second best is better than chaos.

A normative concept of justice of the kind I have criticised cannot serve as the test of legitimacy of a policy, a regime or a constitution. Rather political theory needs to take a step back and ask how legitimacy is constituted, how politics publicly cultivates itself. Its reading of classical theory as well as current political reality is that legitimacy may not be about justice and there may not be a question of true justification involved. Rather, politics initiates overt and covert influence on the public and forms the process of self-legitimation as an inherent dimension of developing forming and presenting politics.

PUBLIC SPACE ACCORDING TO POLITICAL REALISM

Two rival perspectives see politics very differently: The idealist public use of reason, versus ‘the political’, and its use of public communication. The first perspec-
tive has Kantian roots, while the second has Machiavellian and Hobbesian roots. The second one, I have argued, is a closer relative of sociology than the first. Political realist theory and political philosophy address historical-political variability, political context and its limited rationality. It tries to understand the lifeworld of decision-makers. Political sociology moves closer to the events, and transforms them into cases for empirical examination. Realist political theory and political sociology both observe politics and its morality from outside. In the public space, politics is made public, and so is the response of the individuals who are organised into the constellation we call a public sphere. It remains with the first analysis of the public sphere by Jürgen Habermas but develops it in another, and less idealistic direction than Habermas himself did. Then public reason remains an idea, which serves the self-legitimation of politics as a moral procedure, which sociology needs to see through. Pierre Bourdieu (2014, 61) once noted in a lecture on politics in 1990 that the modern notion of public opinion conceals a latent meaning, ‘that public opinion is the opinion of those who deserve to have an opinion. There is a kind of qualified definition of public opinion as enlightened opinion, as opinion that deserves the name.’ Too many scholars think that this fundamentally changes with the introduction of the Internet, web and social media, just as democracy was seen as energised by opinion polls after the Second World War. However, mediatisation goes both ways. Public opinion or public spheres are also about constituting constellations of conformity or structured disagreements with the assistance of rhetoric, signs, figures, stories and imaginations that may shape the understanding of an (often given) set of problems and topics. Did the extraordinarily extensive catalogue of such techniques of manufacturing opinion slip away as a consequence of our one-eyed interest in reason and argumentation?

PUBLIC COMMUNICATION AS TOPICS

There is a preference for conflict in both politics and the media. Several possibilities for agreement may never be discovered by public opinion. But at the same time, these conflicts are contained in the relationship between political position and opposition, and the plurality of stable party organisations. Through the styles and agenda-setting of journalism, conflicts are made public and stable. Politics and journalism do not simply attract conflict; they attract certain conflicts, clarify the issue, and order the opinions along axes of conflict. Long-term conflict-oriented themes structure politics and bring a certain foreseeability to it. This, in Luhmannian terms ‘selective variability’, provides legitimacy by allowing for
criticism and protest under conditions that are acceptable for political stability. This improves the ability of politics to handle conflicts through binding decisions or individual innovative efforts on the part of political talents. We do not need a moral theory of politics to understand this.

Public opinion also, particularly with the help of journalism, applies schemas or scripts. It constitutes a common memory and consequently is a place for forgetting. The connection to democracy lies not in the construction of reasoned dialogues, but in making way for a controlled but open future ready for new distinctions and decisions with new limitations and possibilities. Public opinion points out politically relevant problems, open for new possibilities and solutions, and builds opinion. It encourages a culture of opposition, which enables the democratic and peaceful exchange between government and opposition. Public opinion never decides what opinions are true or just. It forms meanings that are temporary. Its critical questions hold validity only for a period of time before new questions take their place. This ability to constantly renew its critical potential reproduces topics and contributions to on-going debates. It relies, as does news journalism, on actuality, which constantly opens for new topics, views, problems and solutions.

From the point of view of sociology and media studies, the concept of public opinion refers to the constitution, circulation and fragmentation, in other words, the acceptance of topics (Luhmann 2007, 12–15). Topics are communication that refers to what are then accepted as problems and solutions in a relatively concentrated or fixed fashion. They substantiate and name social phenomena in order to attach opinions to them and otherwise communicate about them. And conversely, communication produces substantiation.

Topics or issues produce attention, expressions and publication, and temporary reproduction of themselves before they differentiate or evaporate. Opinion converges or diverges around topics according to the rhetorical and other forms of power applied by the individual and institutional participants, as well as by the technological features of the media. Issues and agendas are the structure of public communication and enable interaction, possibly a sense of solidarity.

With the Internet, the ability to construct topics from everyday problems and problems from the social periphery has rapidly increased. In contrast to the national mass media, no problem is too small to constitute an issue. With the Internet, the public opinion has approached the lifeworlds of ordinary individuals and their roles as patients, clients, consumers and students. From this communicative undergrowth of the Internet, the mass media may select and elaborate topics – from which politics in its turn makes its selections, in its ways. Conversely, polit-
Political candidates apply mass media as well as the Internet to induce their issues and opinions as effectively as possible into public opinion.

Circulations of topics are occasionally, particularly in accord with the theory of deliberative democracy, described as purification and moralisation of topics, leading to an increasingly decent reasoning. This is how the concept of the public sphere is put into action in order to solve the democratic paradox that Rousseau was the first to struggle with, the people that rules itself. Again, this is a misplaced attempt to minimise the difference between reality and Enlightenment ideas. It is to confuse politics with democracy. The point of topics is not to generate reason but to generate attention. There is no contradiction between communication and strategy.

**SELF-REFERENTIALITY**

Action-oriented approaches of both deliberative and contestation-oriented kinds may have problems in grasping the self-referentiality of public opinion. The contestation approach will tend to explain participation and communication in terms of action, personal ambition, will to power and motivation. Beyond the micro-level however, this approach tends to lose track of the complexity involved. The language of action and motivation, etc. needs to be supplemented by a focus on social structure; on selections of communication.

Less and less is politics able to provide necessary decisions by itself, and turns to the national or international legal system, or must consult public opinion in the search for political themes. With the emerging public opinion in the eighteenth century, politics achieved a greater degree of freedom to relate rationally to expectations in its political environment. As Luhmann formulates the current situation: ‘Politics must dance on the screen of political opinion’ (Luhmann 2013, 115). Politics turns to each citizen during general elections, but normally to public opinion. Public opinion is the replacement for the people, its functional substitute, for which politics arranges itself in a good manner. Politicians and their advisors observe how political issues are, and ought to be, observed by the public. Political rationality is the ability to account for aspects in the environment (Luhmann 2013, 136).

The response on the part of the audience is the modern, critical attitude, in part known from science, which is half believing to quote Bernard Williams: ‘It would not be right to say that when one takes the view of these people that is offered in the media, one does not believe in them. One believes in them as one believes in characters in a soap: one accepts the invitation to half believe in them’ (Williams 2005, 163). Similarly, Niklas Luhmann, in his book on the mass media, quotes
Horatio in Shakespeare’s Hamlet: ‘So have I heard and do in part believe it.’ This indicates that neither politics nor the media stand above one another with regard to status and authority.

A moral theory of the public sphere has the unrealistic ambition of formulating moral ideas for all domains or sectors of social life. It makes more sense to address politics as historical products of particular modern (Russia and China: non-modern) constellations, and to focus on consistency, institutional practices and their effects, the political development and use of morality, ways to formulate and see things, the application of power, responsibility, etc. The guiding question is: What is going on? How has what is considered reasonable or natural come to be seen as such? And as sociology often does, we may construct our types and concepts from actual practices we see unfolding. Critique is perfectly possible without a normative ideal as a beacon or standard.

The philosopher Michael Walzer once pointed out that fundamental moral dilemmas in political ethics cannot be dissolved, but they can be rendered legitimate by democratising the responsibility for their consequences. Political ethics is the process in which responsibility for negative consequences is distributed among all. That is probably what international politics is doing with the global climate problem. It uses its own specific political ethics to make the problem into a universal ethical one, which leaves the responsibility to all who have the right to vote and respond to legitimacy demands.

A theory that considers political mechanisms as applied morality stands in the danger of displacing itself from the map of the politically possible. Morality plays its role, but it cannot play out at the centre of a theory of politics, without blinding itself to a series of real-political elements of politics. To think politically, in Bernard Williams’s scheme, involves viewing arguments as historically conditioned, not as autonomous products of moral reason. (Williams 2005 13) What counts as acceptable, credible arguments changes continuously. And political convictions may have different (unintended and unrecognised) effects according to the circumstances.

In a non-normative or in a different normative sense, the public space is concerned with the maintenance and regulation of authority in Weber’s sense. The public space or opinion is the locus of legitimacy and legitimation in order to secure the stability of the political regime or system, for the purpose of preserving stability. Rather than demonstrating empirically in what ways civil society and the public sphere live up to, (or rather fail to live up to) its critical, normative obligations, a realist theory of legitimacy accounts for how politics endemically seeks to generate what Weber called **Legitimitäts-Glaube** by intervening in the public sphere.
There is no place for impartiality and universality, and the notion of a public sphere needs to be revised. We cannot envision a neutral process of public discourse filtering out the best argument if we recognise that the public sphere consists of public and semi-public, reasonable and semi-reasonable positions in struggle with one another, constantly mobilising the whole range of rhetorical figures. The agenda is ‘up for grabs’ and stimulates many sorts of rhetorical and language-games. This is not to say that consensus is impossible, but rather that contingency and power rule, and that consensus may appear as a side effect. What I call the principle of ‘the force of the best arrangement’ means that there is no more force of the best argument as there is no force of the worst. Democratic conflicts are more or less successful constellations of power – and luck.

DIFFERENTIATED LEGITIMACY

The public sphere is not the only site for production of political legitimacy. It may not even be the most central one. Two other central producers of legitimacy, in addition to general elections, are the courts and public administration. Pierre Rosanvallon (2011) illustrates the differentiation of legitimacy in advanced societies that relieves the public sphere from the burden of producing legitimacy. He addresses three forms of legitimacy; the legitimacy of impartiality, of reflexivity and of proximity that complement one another. They all take part in the decentring of democracy, or we could say, in the internal differentiation of the political system. Needless to say, the Internet would be involved in these forms of legitimacy as well.

Legitimacy, argues Rosanvallon, cuts through the distinction between legitimating policies (from above) and legitimacy (from below). Legitimacy refers to a host of relationships between government and society that makes coercion unnecessary: Rosanvallon argues that ‘Democratic legitimacy exists when citizens believe in their own government, which cannot happen unless they have a sense of empowerment. The efficacy of public action depends on legitimacy, and the sense of legitimacy affects the way in which citizens judge the quality of their country’s democracy. In these respects, legitimacy is an “invisible institution” as well as a “sensitive indicator” of the society’s political expectations and the response to those expectations’ (Rosanvallon 2011, 9). What Rosanvallon calls the revolution of democratic legitimacy, has roots in the breakdown of Fordist mass society for the consumer as well as for the voter. It emerges on the background of the need for independent choice under conditions of relative autonomy. Social bonds and identities rest more and more on temporary, cultural, specific
features related to identity, career and education, profession, income, type of workplace, age, neighbourhood, etc.

The legitimacy of impartiality stems from independent oversight and regulatory authorities, efficacy, output legitimacy. It is a democratic ideal: equality, open access, so that impartiality can be supervised and monitored by institutions and the media. Corruption and discrimination could in principle be eliminated. Often such public institutions are given independent positions to secure them from temporary political priorities and negative images of public bureaucracy. Politics of impartiality is necessary to select options and to make choices under conditions of risk uncertainty and conflict. The majority cannot decide everything, nor can it be left to partisan politics; much must be left to procedure and expertise.

The legitimacy of reflexivity is produced by constitutional courts, and parliamentary assemblies are compensatory authorities for the impossibility of equating elections with the general will. This is also the case of public opinion, the constant debates that despite disagreement and confrontation, simulate a neighbourhood of unity as it is confirmed in general elections. The advancement (or could we say simulation) of public reason is important for democratic success where particularities are generalised. I think we could say on the basis of Rosanvallon's considerations on reflexive legitimacy, that reflexivity in a wide variety of shapes is central in public opinion, not necessarily in reason and consensus. Institutions of reflexivity nevertheless provide oversight.

Finally the legitimacy of proximity derives from the quality of government emphasising participation. Rosanvallon argues that this form of legitimacy is not associated with any particular form of institution, but one could argue that this is generated by the nature of modern media, and public opinion (Rosanvallon 2011, 11). It generally refers to the rising expectation among the citizenry to be seen and recognised, and to a citizenry that must accept the procedure preceding the decision in order to accept it as legitimate. Therefore, public service institutions and political leaders spend vast resources, not on decisions themselves but on the processes behind them. In a hectic media society and demands for transparency, legitimacy processes are less controllable. As the self-esteem of the electorate rises, political leadership with reputational capital is needed (Rosanvallon 2011, 177).

The philosophical debate on recognition (Hegel, Taylor, Honneth, Fraser) reflects how particularity has become essential for both economy and society (Rosanvallon 2011, 179) Power is now ‘recognised as legitimate if it is attentive to individual situations and makes the language of recognition its own’ (Rosanvallon 2011, 179). Thus particularity has given rise to general ‘expectations and demands for fairness, proximity and recognition. Citizens have therefore begun to
think of democracy as a form of government.' The generality of politics is about to be based on concrete social facts and a determination to master the diversity of needs in society. Politics is now left to address the specificity of social conditions, their practical effects. This gives rise to what Rosanvallon calls politics of presence, a political behaviour that applies the language of empathy and closeness. Politics addresses the singular individual as victims or groups with needs. Political leaders place themselves among the ones with demands, in their situation.

People can be addressed as individuals, as public opinion, as members of social and cultural groups (religions, regions, identities), or as an abstract principle (the general will) related to talk about rights and democracy. Versions of the people are constituted when they are referred to with opinion polls and elections, with addressing terrorism or when discussing changes in the constitution. These versions belong to different temporalities: the immediately constructed opinion, the more long-term temporalities of the good society and as principle. Unlike long-term media like magazines, journals, books and films, most Internet media favours immediacy, the intuitive and often impulsive public opinion that cannot in itself constitute a base for sound political decisions.

THE POLITICS OF THE INTERNET

I have indicated that it makes little sense to place the Internet into a general theory of political deliberation. First of all the theory rests on shaky grounds already in its reference to actual reality. Nor does it present a credible (achievable) ideal. The problem begins right at the understanding of democracy. While the Enlightenment understanding underlines democracy as a way by which the people governs itself, the contemporary concept of democracy must rather mean to express the paradoxical distance between the rulers and the ruled, a distance that historically and functionally only in part has been compensated for by mechanisms like general elections and public opinion. Thus public opinion is not the voice of the people as such, nor is it the voice of the ruler. Rather it ought to be seen as an intermediate phenomenon – as a ‘medium’ that has been conceptualised in order for political theory to fixate on the problem of distance, and a phenomenon that can only be understood through its emergence from early modern times, to its operations in contemporary advanced societies. The construction of the public sphere is also used to explain and legitimise the relationship between democracy and the media.

Trendy Internet-literature, particularly from the US, has stressed the inherent democratic potential of the Internet (Rheingold, Benkler). Its open and decentral-
ised structure, its low threshold for participation and its minimalistic and informal way of organisation has been seen as a model of a preferred society, but also as an engine that would drive society towards growing transparency. As metaphor and technology, the Internet implies revolutionary change of the kind that general left liberal or libertarian political philosophies would endorse. As a template and key, it would press dictatorships towards democracy and democracy towards even more democracy. One could, in other words learn from the Internet how politics and the public sphere ought to operate, and, with the exploding use of the Internet media in all kinds of political participation, we are on the way. Popular writers like Steven Johnson, Jonathan Zittrain, Clay Shirky and Steven Levy all seem to be convinced that the Internet plays a distinct political role in their liberal and democratic understanding of politics.

To be sure, not all scholars adhere to this overly optimistic view that rests on a flawed understanding of both the Internet and society. Mathew Hindman (2009), Evgeny Morozov (2014), Christian Fuchs (2014) and José van Dijck (2013) are important opponents of the moral majority of the Internet. However, the all too common misunderstanding about the Internet is that while openness is seen as a driver towards democracy, “openness” really means vulnerability towards existing powers, and thus an instrument for the most powerful organisations in society. The absence of rules (and the possibility for huge profits) in an open network-structure like the Internet opens the door to the strongest players. In the absence of regulation, the Internet has increasingly been taken over by multinational business. Worldwide companies – like Google, Facebook and Apple are doing what they do, not for the purpose of democracy. Rather they support and make use of democratic values as long as they underpin or at least do not contradict business. In the Silicon Valley world of ideas, democracy tends to be seen as a happy side effect of technological innovation and economic liberalism. The invisible hand of digital capital, they seem to think, also promotes democracy.

At a certain stage, Internet businesses were involved in breaking boundaries and getting access to information, in new ways. Terms like openness, transparency and participation have surely indicated a de facto lower threshold for taking part in political and social movements, but they have also played the role of company slogans. The Internet is many things and in totalitarian as well as democratic countries, it is an instrument for surveillance and control as well as for opposition and protest. It is what the state, civil society and the economy make it to be. Quite correctly, the Internet or any other important infrastructure cannot be seen as politically neutral, but it nevertheless serves the social, political and economic powers that constitute its environment. The Internet should not be seen as an end in itself,
and it has no inherent potential in either democratic or anti-democratic directions. What is negative for the Internet according to Internet libertarians who principally oppose regulation, may nevertheless be good for society. Pervasive surveillance à la NSA should be opposed but not primarily for the sake of the Internet. Information may ‘want’ to be free, but it may also ‘want’ to be controlled.

As I have demonstrated elsewhere, the story of the Internet is a story of a series of interconnected conflicts among techno-cultures (Rasmussen 2007). Historical narratives about innovation, revolutions, open source and free software, have been mobilised against the powers of strict copyright regimes, the telecoms, Microsoft, and authoritarian governments. In the period 1960–1995 this turbulent history could with a fair degree of reasonability be staged normatively, as the ‘good’ (the Internet geeks) against the bad (public bureaucracies, backward businesses, etc.) With the commercialisation and politisation of the Internet and the (algorithmic) privatisation of the digital public sphere, however, this narrative structure no longer held. The Internet and open source movement won many battles but lost the war. In our century, the Internet is society. The controversies continue but only empirically based analysis can clarify the positions. The Internet is no answer in itself. Openness and transparency are values that business and public administration applies selectively when suitable. As the writer Evgeny Morozow notes, even transparency can be politics with other means, and the leading transparency-guru, Lawrence Lessig, has eventually reached a similar conclusion (Morozov 2013, 81; Lessig, 2009) De facto transparency always exists within a social and political framework and may serve populist impulses that eventually disfavour politics as a necessary way of sorting conflict in society. Questions concerning Internet regulation have turned out to be just as complicated as the regulation of any other business.

In other words, there is no inherent Internet (ir)rationality. What may appear as such derives from the traditions and cultures of Silicon Valley. The openness and the democratic features of the Internet should be understood historically and empirically, not normatively, in that it is highly accessible for users and producers of information and media. That it is a level playing field implies that the more power an organisation has in society, the more power it will have on, and over, the Internet. What we have seen since the turn of the century is that the Internet has been up for grabs. With Wikipedia as an important exception, commercial near-monopolies like Apple, Facebook, Google, Amazon are public companies that must pursue the policies that maximise the value for shareholders. In this regard, they are in no different a position than the ‘old’, despised monopolies like AT&T, IBM, and Microsoft. They would like their actions to be understood in light of lib-
eral political thought, but it would be a grave error to see them as anything else than market strategies following the nature of contemporary capitalism.

An unintended consequence of the semantics of self-governance of an open cyberspace in the 1990s by such organisations as EFF, was that it diverted the most progressive Internet-communities from the dangers of various forms of cybercrime, such as malware, worms, viruses, destructive hacks, and takeovers, trading and free distribution of illicit products, etc. Such illegal activity make use of the open and distributed design and ‘generativity’ of the Internet that was constructed in the 1970s and that worked well among scientists and dedicated users. With the advent of the web and widespread use to all parts of the world this changed. Cyber-crime has become a serious problem for the Internet, a problem that also transforms it. The semantics and the protests against public regulation from the libertarian cyberspace community, it is argued by Jeanette Hoffman (2010), was not helpful to project the real challenges that faced the Internet in the 1990s. Key terms are implementation of firewalls, algorithmic surveillance and an explosion in security software.

USER-GENERATED INNOVATION

Theories of open innovation similarly seem to assume the revolutionary power of the Internet (von Hippel 2005; Chesbrough et al. 2008). Since the Internet cannot be seen as neutral, they seem to assume that it supports a distinct political philosophy. As was the case for the printing press, that political philosophy is based on Enlightenment values. In fact, the tone and perspective resembles those of Youchai Benkler on the field of information and knowledge. Benkler discusses what he calls commons-based peer production in relation to new and highly successful media, mentioning Wikipedia, Slashdot and GNU/Linux as examples of large-scale peer production projects. These sites have overcome the tragedy of the commons problem in that a sufficient number of people choose not to be free riders in the system. Even if profit can be appropriated without investing time in such media, millions of people participate actively. What is the secret? In the literature on the escalation of Web 2.0 media, the following explanatory elements occur:

(1) Size matters: Large numbers of users make the system more efficient in that more bugs are traced in software (GNU/Linux) or more articles are sent to the collective blog or wiki, which implies a larger number of novel and competent articles (Slashdot, Wikipedia). (2) Critical mass: Having reached a certain number of users, a change occurs – the system becomes significantly more useful for current
and potential users. A number of elements play a role here (iterated play, sanctions, conventions (as in games with others), and coordination norms. Mechanisms for indirect appropriation of the benefits of participation: Monetary, hedonic (pleasure of creation ‘hedonic gain’ and social-psychological (a function of the cultural meaning) rewards, reputation, low transaction costs, low threshold). (3) Non-rival goods: Information is reproduced (copied) and distributed at very low marginal cost. (4) Large network-externalities: the value of information grows with the number of users, even if they are passive or ‘free riders’.

Rather than concluding that these aspects are precisely the dynamics behind monopolisation and commercialisation, Benkler and Eric von Hippel argue for the rationality of sharing, participation and openness. The new liberal, commons-oriented perspective on economic production, they both argue, ensures the growth of social welfare. Not surprisingly, von Hippel’s book is dedicated ‘… to all who are building the information commons.’ (von Hippel 2005)

Von Hippel puts forward a number of assertions that should not be taken for granted, for instance that there is a shift of innovation from producers to users. Studies (many conducted for other purposes) indicate that between 10 to nearly 40 per cent of users engage in modifying their products. There are generally three ways to involve manufactures in user innovation: (1) Manufacturers may produce user-developed innovations for general commercial sale or offer custom manufacturing service to specific users. (2) Manufacturers may sell kits of product-design tools for specific product platforms to ease users’ innovation-related tasks (but also to link innovators to their specific platform). Integrated tool-kits enable users to create and test designs for custom products or services. Cases in point are Harley-Davidson, Microsoft/Excel and iPhone. (3) Manufactures may sell products or services that are complementary to user-developed innovations (Red Hat).

Von Hippel concludes that users are constantly doing product modification and product development in many fields. However, is this really the case if we are talking about user innovation that counts? We all customise things we purchase: We add or remove things on our bikes, cars, coats, bags, training gear, etc. While some of these changes may be of significance, others are not. Is customisation the same as user innovation, or a step towards it? Also most of them are memes: we copy other people’s changes. And they rarely function as feedback to the manufacturer. One of the most important ways to engage in product innovation for users these days is to enter Facebook groups to campaign for, or against changes of products. This is at most about influencing manufacturers as consumers, not as co-innovators. We may call it ‘grass roots lobbying’ and it has nothing to do with product innovation as such.
More importantly, von Hippel advocates outsourcing, the compensation being the opportunity to communicate with others. *Outsourcing* is generally viewed as involving the contracting out of a business operation that previously took place in-house. The external provider would typically be another business, often overseas where labour power is less expensive. The rationale behind outsourcing is of course that it lowers the overall cost of production because it reduces a number of in-house indirect processes like structuring, negotiating, pricing, introducing technologies and its maintenance, etc. Economic theory recommends that a business concentrate on core business and outsource other operations like IT, support, marketing or production of modular parts of the main product. In this way, the fixed costs of the business are reduced and transformed into variable costs and makes these variable costs more predictable. This may also increase the quality of the product, since external specialists with access to talent and expertise compete to take responsibility over a part of the production. In this way these partners, because they keep themselves updated on their activity, become important providers of innovation and new ideas. And outsourced production, when logistically successful, reduces time to market and leaves more of the problems followed by ups and downs in the market to the contractors. It could be argued that von Hippel is precisely delivering new arguments for outsourcing to contractors, in his case to groups that do not expect to get paid. The prospects for businesses would be even greater.

Since there is no compensation – could we talk of exploitation? To discuss this we may look to the new world of Web 2.0 and social media. Baym and Burnett (2008) for instance note that music fans spend time and effort to promote and support their music in various independent ways. This is unpaid ‘immaterial labour’ with as much value as professionally produced content. This has been seen as exploitation in that the Net is used to outsource labour to users, labour that actually contributes to the profit making of corporations. That this kind of activity is not experienced as repetitive but rather as enjoyable, does not change this structural fact. However, the activity used on for-profit sites (or state agencies like NASA) cannot be distinguished from not-for-profit sites like Wikipedia since in both cases, it is a matter of voluntary work. The users are not forced to sell or give away their labour-power. Also, we should remember from Marx’s analysis that the proletariat consisted of ‘free’ labourers; they are free to sell their labour power for a wage to survive. That they did not get paid for the surplus value of the products does not change this fact. Therefore, only a shallow reading of Marx supports the argument that this is a case of capitalist exploitation. Also, if one insists in using the term, it rather resembles a *premodern* kind of exploitation. Contemporary
user-generated activity, however, depends on complete individual independence and freedom of the user, allowing for him and her to enter into rewarding activities, often favourable for social status and future careers.

To keep within the Marxist framework: In mass media and on the Web, the use-value of attention is transformed into exchange-value. In Web 2.0, use-value of social interaction is transformed into exchange value of segmented attention. In this sense, both kinds of media are machines that extract exchange value out of use value, mainly through the aid of targeted advertising. In Web 2.0, both the level of activity and the techniques of tracing have reached a more advanced level (log-files, cookies, tags...). Through internal systems of advanced, fast and visual statistics on all aspects of use, social interaction is transformed to audience activity and sold to advertisers. In this commoditising, social interaction does not disappear. Activity in social media thus operates in a dual manner, as meaningful interaction in private and public spheres, and as a commoditised product. Some have called this peculiar user-role ‘pro-sumers’. (Bruns 2008)

The analysis needs to account for the dual situation of meaningful sociality among users that at the same time is productive labour producing surplus value. This peculiar situation emerged with advertising as a main income source for the press and commercial broadcasting. Then, the work involved consisted in directing our time and attention to media output in a regular habitual manner. Although one usually says that the audience produces meaning in a hermeneutical sense, they produce it for themselves and their lifeworld. No such meaning reaches the producers as goods of exchange value. With Internet-based fora and media this changes in that users actually add information of some marketable value.

Commercial mass media involves the transformation of people into audiences, and, for the majority of them, the subsequent selling of audience attention to advertisers. The construction and selling of attention constitute the crux of people’s paradoxical involvement in media economics. Cubitt calls this the ‘proletarianization of consumption’, a phenomenon based upon audiencing: ‘Audiencing – the work that audiences do when they use media – takes place in a large-scale and complex industry involving content providers, service providers, account managers, media buyers, the marketing of media to agencies and of agencies to clients, all premised on the founding instance that audiences can be delivered to end-users.’ (Cubitt 2005, 81)

Attention is further differentiated according to demographics and values in order to maximise its value. In commercial broadcasting and advertisement-funded print media, the role of the consumer is specialised and grouped into a segmented concept of audience in the environment of the media system. Audiences
receive entertainment, news and information in exchange for attention, which can be sold or ‘hired’. As long as the media organisation keeps costs of producing/purchasing media content lower than the value of its audience value, the business is viable.

Put differently: The value of what viewers receive in exchange for their attention, must be lower than the value of the attention they supply; attention value must be higher than the media output value. The time and attention that users spend on advertisements and in producing content is the surplus labour of production, creating surplus value. In this sense, the audience is systematically ‘under-paid’ for this production, or else there would be no profit (Fuchs 2008, 191). As mentioned however, since the audiences are not free to sell their attention in the same sense that workers are ‘free’ to sell their labour power, we cannot speak of exploitation in a Marxist sense.

To what extent alienation (Marx) and deskilling (Braverman) are at play here are not simply empirical questions. To what extent the reward is of sufficient affective and social value for the user, can only be determined by the users themselves, and it seems that structural analysis from this normative perspective is a dead end. This of course, does not imply that structural analysis of Web 2.0 communities must be exchanged for phenomenological analysis. Fandom and other kinds of intensive user activity could be seen as either free labour or as participation because it is both. Tim O’Reilly (2005) illustrates this well by arguing that users are participating without thinking that they participate. That’s where the power comes. In other words, the social fact of social media is an unintended product of millions of individual entries, but also technical infrastructure, constitution and application of rules and statutes (for example to expel users) is highly centralised and motivated by profit.

User-generated content in Web 2.0 constitutes information commodities produced by users through their comments, videos, music, texts, chats, etc. From a Marxist point of view, exploitation is more dramatic than in the case of advertising-based mass media, which relies on meaning-production that rarely reaches the producing institution as anything else than abstract ratings. Web 2.0 therefore, may be looked at as democratisation of media, but also as a further commodification of human interaction. Although Marx’s theory of value is sophisticated in explaining the connection between labour and profit rate, this new situation cannot be explained only in this way because Web 2.0 exists only partly within the realm of the labour market – it also mediates communication in the private and civil spheres. A differentiation of democratisation and commodification takes place, involving processes of trust, creativity and learning. This is also the case
with the mass media. User-generated participation may generate social change and increase circulation and profit rate. Von Hippel’s prime examples are only profit-seeking companies, and his view thus ignores important aspects of the processes of production that he is studying.

User-generated products of social media (stories, photos, games, maps, even software) are products of social participation and strategic maximising of profit. As Christian Fuchs (2012) notes, the aim of social media platforms is not to empower users but to commodify their personal data in increasingly sophisticated ways, and the same is argued by Jennis et al. (2014). I think the increasing social participation and social interaction should be seen as a recognised side effect of commodification. The very common view that social media enhances individual and collective action because of its participatory potential, is unbalanced. The opposite view, that social media are only sites of exploitation obfuscates the important difference between the industrial worker who is forced to sell his labour power and the user of social media. In other words, products and social activity in social media are situated in a terrain vague that is far from understood.