

Thinking, Shallow but Powerful

Book Review: Adrian Daub, What Tech Calls Thinking

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When reading Adrian Daub's masterful dissection of the ideas that inform 'what tech calls thinking', I was reminded of the idea and practice of conceptual history or *Begriffsgeschichte*. Developed in the last third of the 20th century by a number of German historians and philosophers, *Begriffsgeschichte* is an attempt to understand, in Hayden White's formulation, "the invention and development of the fundamental concepts (*Begriffe*) underlying and informing a distinctively historical (*geschichtliche*) manner of being in the world". Conceptual historians were particularly concerned with how fundamental concepts such as constitution, democracy, interest, opposition, or progress changed their meaning during the transition to modernity and therefore how people thought about and acted upon them.

A central tenet of *Begriffsgeschichte* is that words need to be separated from concepts, and that the same words can come to mean very different things - just as the same concepts can be expressed with different words - as they make their way through history. Looked at that way, *What Tech calls Thinking* can be read as a series of conceptual histories of pet phrases that occupy places of honor in Silicon Valley's crooked philosophical edifice: dropping out, content, genius, communication, desire, disruption, and failure. Each of them has a longer history that tech elites woe- or willfully ignore, distort, or misappropriate; they "pretend to be novel but are actually old motifs playing dress-up in a hoodie" (p. 6-7). And each of them is used "by the rich and powerful to make distinctions without difference, and elide differences that are politically important to recognize" (p. 7). They are smoke-screens that distract from the harmful side-effects of digital business models, and building blocks for Potemkin villages that portray a fake reality that is far removed from what is actually going on.

Take the concept of disruption, which made its first appearance in the *Communist Manifesto* when its authors recognized the "constant revolutionising of production" and "uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions" as central features of life under capitalism. Around a century later, Joseph Schumpeter takes up this observation when arguing that creative destruction - the incessant revolution of the economy from within - is in fact what keeps the capitalist engine going. Both Marx and Schumpeter, while very different in political leaning, thought that this dynamic, never-ending instability would lead to political instability and eventually to capitalism's downfall. Disruption contains the seed of capitalism's destruction. The modern, valley-washed version of disruption, however, is utterly devoid either of an optimistic (Marx) or a pessimistic (Schumpeter) outlook. Disruption today no longer suggests

“that the ever-intensifying rapids of creative destruction will eventually lead to the placid waters of a new stability, that hypercapitalism almost inevitably pushes us toward something beyond capitalism. Instead, disruption seems to suggest that the rapids are all there is and can be—we might as well strap in for the ride. Often enough, talk of disruption is a theodicy of hypercapitalism. Disruption is newness for people who are scared of genuine newness. Revolution for people who don’t stand to gain anything from revolution” (p. 124).

Disruption, then, has taken on a strangely uncritical, conservative slate that, not coincidentally, bends it towards the interests of tech companies. On the one hand, disruption itself is being tamed, and in the process stripped of any radicalism. Disruption “acts as though it thoroughly disrespects whatever existed previously, but in truth it often seeks to simply rearrange whatever exists. It is possessed of a deep fealty to whatever is already given. It seeks to make it more efficient, more exciting, more *something*, but it never wants to dispense altogether with what’s out there” (p. 105). Anand Giridharadas has recently documented how elites have co-opted and thereby transformed the notion of social change, channeling it into philanthropic avenues that all but preserve the status quo and obscure their role in causing the problems they later seek to solve. In much the same way, digital capitalists have co-opted the notion of economic disruption, creating a narrative in which they can act like Goliaths and talk like Davids.

On the other hand, tech companies endorse a shallow metaphysics of inefficiency. The world is full of bugs and therefore every disruption is an upgrade. If the status quo is fundamentally flawed, the disruptor becomes something of an anti-establishment hero, even if he (it is usually a he) leads a 100-billion dollar company putting a newspaper with a few dozens employees out of business. The disruptor, in other words, “portrays even the most staid cottage industry as a Death Star against which its plucky rebels have to do battle” (p. 128). Here, we encounter a central argument of Daub’s book, namely that concepts used by tech companies can be powerful tools in shaping how we think about them, and therefore powerful weapons in the regulatory battles that decide over their profit margins or even their existence.

An example for how the “limits of our thinking very quickly become the limits of our politics” (p. 5-6) is another concept that could well be included in the pantheon of fraught tech terms: the platform. The notion of a platform, as Tarleton Gillespie has pointed out long ago, suggests an egalitarian arrangement that supports those who stand on it, obscuring the control regime and dependency relationship that is at the heart of most platforms. As Maha Atal has recently argued, the notion of being a platform has allowed tech companies “to straddle the very categories that we use to organize our understanding of the political and economic world, [which places them] in the institutional cracks of the regulatory system [which they] consciously exploit (...) to thwart challenges to their power.” This matters a great deal since tech companies are not only economic but also regulatory entrepreneurs whose business models is based on ignoring, bending, or changing the product and labor market regulations they and their competitors face. As I show in this paper, companies like Uber are very aware of this and actively (and succesfully) use empowering narratives and clever framing to manage their ‘non-market environment’, that is, how policymakers and the public perceive them.

What Tech calls Thinking is a powerful conceptual history of some of the most prominent ideas that tech elites use in these discursive battles. But are these concepts mere tools that tech elites use to, in

Franklin Foer's phrase, reconfigure our ideals in order to justify their business models (p. 1-2)? Or is there more to them? Daub's hints at as much when he argues that these concepts may also help "avoid cognitive dissonance" when tech elites need to square their rebellious, do-gooder self-image with the power they have and the problems they cause - the drop-out narrative, the genius aesthetic and the celebration of failure certainly help in this regard. What I missed in Daub's account is a more systematic discussion of the role that these ideas play for the course and character of digital capitalism itself. Do these ideas only justify capitalism externally, vis a vis the public and policymakers, or also internally, vis a vis employees? How does that work? And do they merely sooth the torn conscience of tech elites or also shape their decisions in ways that are not straightforwardly instrumental? Are these ideas just bullshit, or are tech elites also bullshitting, in Harry Frankfurt's sense of being entirely insincere about them? (Oliver Nachtwey and I think about these questions more deeply in our paper on 'The Solutionist Ethic and the Spirit of Digital Capitalism'.)

The book is a short one, and there would have certainly been space for a synoptic conclusion that reflects more on this question. One could have also wished for a more far-ranging discussion of some of the concepts themselves. For example, while Daub brilliantly reconstructs the twisted history and hypocritical nature of the Valley's discourse on failure, he remains silent about how our forgetfulness of the ubiquitous failures of technology protect the standing and dynamism of the tech sector - and argument recently explored in Arjun Appadurai and Neta Alexander's *Failure*, which I reviewed here. But Daub more than makes up for this with his incredibly crisp and insightful short conceptual histories, which effortlessly walk us through the arguments of McLuhan, Girard, Ayn Rand, and many more, and weave them together with observations about the Damore memo, the movie *Ratatouille*, the Theranos scandal, and the culture of trolling. If this were not inevitably interpreted as a backhanded compliment, I would even say that, in this regard, Daub reminded me of Slavoj Žižek during his better days.

The flip side of Daub's wit is a sometimes somewhat condescending tone, for example when he describes reading 25 books of the Western canon as "sort of respectable" (p. 27) or, with the learned and somewhat smug habitus of the Stanford professor of Comparative Literature, scorns those that only have a superficial grasp of the concepts they ventilate at TED talks. I understand that this is part of the point, and it is not that the victims of Daub's academic sneers deserve our pity - but I, for one, was put off by it at times. This notwithstanding, *What Tech calls Thinking* is a great (and short) book that should be essential reading for everyone trying to understand the ideology of Silicon Valley and what makes its inhabitants tick. In addition, as others have already pointed out, is full of memorable aperçus, such as when Daub describes Elon Musk's tunnel-boring projects as technological entrepreneurship approaching "performance art" (p. 70), and his bold plans to single-handedly save a group of boys in a cave in Thailand as the "seemingly impossible trick of giving compassion a Randroid hue" (p. 64). But the book is more than a collection of witty lines. There is this worn-out phrase that one often hears in and around tech, that the best way to predict the future is to build it. What Daub shows us is that to understand the future, we need to pay close attention to the history of the ideas that inform those that set out to build it.