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Translation by the authors.
The German version of the book is
[available](#) at Karl Dietz Verlag Berlin.

Digital Solidarity

On Overcoming Capitalist Technology

Numerous images illustrate the combined destructive power of capitalism and digitalisation: monstrous, water- and energy-guzzling data centres; lonely individuals sitting in front of screens scrolling through feeds that polarise society in a fascist manner; US President Donald Trump surrounded by tech CEOs. We take note of this reality, but we do not accept it. This book is a call to resist these conditions, to overcome them and to bring about alternative, solidarity-based conditions.

For decades, capitalism has been regarded as inevitable and without alternative: many people find it easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.¹ This narrowing of perspective also affects our relationship with technology. For many, social progress has been reduced to the production cycles of new devices and software; a future without so-called artificial intelligence ("AI") is now almost unimaginable. This applies even to people who identify as left-wing and pursue political goals aimed at social transformation. This ingrained apathy threatens to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. For if we can only imagine a single future, we can no longer wish for any other. Yet the future is open. Capitalism – like any man-made system – can be overcome, just as the sacred law of the Church, the King and the nobility, once deemed immutable, was.² This book explores what such an overcoming would mean in concrete terms with regard to digital technologies. It deals with the internet, data, "AI" and data centres, as well as mines, platforms and tech conglomerates. Above all, however, we

¹ Mark Fisher: Capitalist Realism. Is there no alternative?, 2nd ed., Washington D.C. 2022, p. 2.

² Ursula Le Guin: Speech on the occasion of the award of the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Service to American Literature, 19 November 2014, <https://www.ursulaklequin.com/nbf-medal>.

examine the interplay between technology and the social conditions in which people develop and use it.

At the heart of this is solidarity – that is, "that bond of sisterhood amongst those who are unequal and those made unequal, which has always constituted the power to resist the might of the status quo".³ Solidarity takes place in human interaction as the recognition of what connects people and in what they are equal. Solidarity is a political practice designed to orient us towards the needs of those who are worse off, and to dispel the mendacious justifications for inequality. Inequality has many faces: the laughter of tech corporation executives as they pose for the cameras alongside politicians; the weary eyes of precariously employed people (mostly from migrant backgrounds) who fulfil orders from food delivery apps for low wages; and the strained expressions of clickworkers who, while suffering massive psychological harm, process data for "AI". There is a connection between digital technologies and solidarity, because digitalisation is currently contributing massively to inequality and isolation. Nevertheless – so our thesis goes – technology can also be used for purposes of solidarity within the context of new social models.

We explain this thesis in this book in two stages. We begin with an analysis of the foundations of today's capitalist digitalisation in Chapters 1 to 5, followed by our alternative vision of digital solidarity in Chapters 6 to 10. The first part focuses on understanding: What does the increasing proliferation of digital technologies mean? To what extent do they serve as a pillar, a source of legitimacy and a driver of capitalism and authoritarian structures? What misconceptions about the reformability of these technologies and the left's ability to appropriate them stand in the way of a transformative perspective? A perspective that seeks to overcome current social conditions and move towards liberated conditions in which solidarity,

³ Mia Neuhaus/Lucas Mielke/Massimo Perinelli: Solidarität – Eine reale Utopie, in: Mia Neuhaus/Lucas Mielke/Massimo Perinelli (eds.): Solidarität – Eine reale Utopie, Berlin 2025, p. 14.

a focus on needs and the public interest take centre stage. Not every single political action needs to have a transformative effect. Progressive and emancipatory practices serve to fight for spaces free from compulsion and domination, and to expand the horizons of what can be collectively shaped, both conceptually and in practice. The second part of the book explores how this is possible. At its heart lies the act of shaping. What does an alternative vision look like that breaks with the current trend of digitalisation and embeds digital technologies within an emancipatory and solidarity-based vision of the future? How can we reshape capitalist technologies so that they fit into such a vision or even contribute to its realisation? From a progressive perspective, which technologies can we appropriate, and which should we render impossible? Which practices of resistance and prefiguration form part of this path?

It is an ambitious undertaking to combine critiques of capitalism and technology as well as alternative visions in a single book. Yet for us, these aspects are inextricably linked. We need critique to understand where the root causes lie, and critique without the prospect of alternatives leads many into despair. An alternative vision must bring all this together. In Chapter 1, we describe capitalism in general and the role of capitalist digitalisation within it. In Chapter 2, we debunk myths about the progressive nature of digitalisation and its democratic effects, and in particular deconstruct the supposedly transformative character of open source. In Chapter 3, we focus on the concept of privacy, and we describe how privacy underpins inequality and how its inherent logic of ownership has paved the way for the commercialisation of the digital sphere. Chapter 4 builds on this; there, we show why European data protection law is unsuitable for effectively curbing capitalist practices, but instead enables, organises and legitimises them. In Chapter 5, we examine the connection between digital technologies – in particular "AI" – and authoritarian to fascist political projects, as well as the problematic role of digital sovereignty as part of nationalist ideologies.

In the second part, we outline the basic features of an alternative perspective based on digital solidarity. This is grounded in an emancipatory

critique of technology. For this critique, in Chapter 6 we develop criteria for distinguishing which technologies can be appropriated from a left-wing perspective. In Chapter 7, we document contemporary practices of resistance and prefiguration against capitalist technology and classify them according to their transformative potential. In Chapter 8, we describe how socialisation transforms digital power of control into collective control, thereby enabling a restructuring of platforms and infrastructures geared towards the public interest. In Chapter 9, we present models of democratic economic planning and discuss the role that digital technologies can play in organising post-capitalist futures. Finally, in Chapter 10, we summarise the ways in which digital solidarity can serve as a framework for movements fighting for better conditions.

Our perspective is based on years of shared experience. We have worked at, for and with major digital corporations, data protection supervisory authorities, administrative courts, consultancy firms, digital policy think tanks, tech start-ups, academic research projects, organised digital civil society, government departments and various political parties. We have witnessed first-hand how regulatory, competition-policy and participatory efforts have fizzled out when the values they promoted came into conflict with profit-driven interests. Yet also in our work with and within emancipatory movements and left-wing structures, we have observed that digital and social issues are often still dealt with in isolation. We consider this separation to be problematic, as it limits the scope for potential solutions. Left-wing activism aims to tackle anti-fascist, anti-racist and feminist challenges together. Digital technologies exacerbate current power structures to such an extent that we should update familiar insights and areas of debate and link them more closely in solidarity with one another in order to develop our own left-wing and transformative perspective. The future is open, and together we can fight to shape it. We argue that digital issues should be understood as part of these struggles.