
ARTICLE

Solidarity-driven Media Ironism and the Future Architect-hacker-citizen - A Provocation Piece

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Abstract

This article proposes solidarity-driven media ironism as an approach and a conceptual framework for planning and design in the field of urbanism, architecture, community-work, self-organized projects and commoning. It furthermore unfolds in smaller steps how irony and conflict are related to mentioned contexts, especially the activity of so-called commoning and how media ironism might become productive by elaborating its theoretical assumptions. The article argues, amongst other things, towards the idea that irony allows to deal with conflicts without immediately resolving them. It will begin by addressing the problem with participation, introduce the idea of media ironism, pose its driving questions, then relate irony with commoning, elaborate four modes of irony, link it with conflict and finally propose a provisional chain of actions a future architect-hacker-citizen could work with.

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The problem with participation

In autumn-winter 2019 we¹ have been witnessing several protest movements against neoliberalism, patriarchy, state-induced oppression or discrimination on our planet such as in Chile, France, Hong Kong, Iraq, India and more. In these processes of resistance, struggles and insurrection the participation of the protesters into the decisions made by those in power is obviously lacking and desired. On the other hand, when finally carried out, participation often comes as a hazardous “political currency for those who offer it” as German architect and writer Markus Miessen formulates. According to him, participation in the context of liberal urban neighborhood projects often turns into a means of control by focusing too much on consensus-making and the erasure of conflicts. Such a focus on consensus withdraws the affective basis from which a community of residents or likeminded protesters could actively criticize and question the actions of the decision-makers and representatives, who often are at the same time the initiators of the participation process [1 p.44]. Following Miessen, who refers to Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe, participation basically needs to operate with, not without, conflict as a source of change: “In order to participate in any environment or given situation, one needs to understand the forces of conflict that act upon that environment [1 p.53].”

Media ironism

Understanding the power and forces of conflict in the agencement [2] of urban environments in the technosphere² might get nurtured and fostered by what I call solidarity-driven media ironism. Most importantly ironism is different to cynicism, which is rather a pessimism of intellect. Ironism is an “optimism of the will” [5 p.113]. Media ironism is a conceptual framework addressed towards future architect-hacker-citizens working in the field of participation and co-design [4]. An architect-hacker-citizen is the rare, but as I argue increasingly needed case of persons with backgrounds either or both in architecture or in informatics and who are engaged as citizens in topics such as civil rights, the politics of emancipation and commoning. Media ironism is an idea inspired by German media theorist Wolfgang Ernst, who is renowned for his cold, archaeological approach to the history of media technologies inquiring the discursive rules, technomathematics and algorithms embedded into the technology of storage, transmission and processing under study. Since we are now in the age of total digitization, including our buildings and our urban environments, these technologies gained relevance also for architects. Ernst is convinced that as a media scholar one needs “to be freed by machines from one own’s subjectivity (and desire for story-telling) [6 p.250]”. He is less famous for his take on media irony as a media-reflective mode, where the technological becoming of mediality or “the coming out of media is witnessed [7 p.599].” Irony, here, enables to discuss the situatedness of a situation, thus the mediality of media in media. This contradicts Ernst’s earlier mentioned hope on the liberating power of a neutral, machine-based analysis of reality and that this even could “eliminat[e] the irony of the subjective perspective [7 p.601].” Even more contradictory, then appears a passage a few pages earlier in the very same essay about the “media-epistemological fiction of an unmediated record of the reality of the past [7 p.593].” The unmediated mediation of a non-subjective neutral truth is an illusion and therefore it is not possible to eliminate its irony. This strange conflicting constellation is an ironic synthesis of subjective irony with media irony and a play with the epistemological conditions of the media archaeologists in his case, and similarly for our case of the future architect-hacker-

citizen. Following Michel Foucault, who's work on the archaeology of knowledge has been seminal for Ernst, the construction of subjectivity is always a matter of the *dispositif* and discourse,³ thus it is technologically affected, therefore subjective irony and media irony are strangely and recursively entangled.

Questions

While a critical architect-hacker-citizen surely is aware that not merely their desires, hopes and dreams, but also their epistemology, socio- and biopolitics they⁴ embodies in their situatedness are always already entangled with the projects they hack, design, transform, build, code and program. It is furthermore crucial to ironically admit that there is always a need to hide the situatedness of knowledge production in order to achieve scientific objectivity. This gets further complicated when a critical architect-hacker-citizen within the framework of a solidarity-driven media ironism both produces, designs and programs projects in the field of urban commoning and co-design and at the same time aims to ironically self-reflect their own constructedness, situatedness, biases and politics, especially when additionally the aim is to induce a sort of collectively experienced irony. The article, written as a short provocation piece, therefore will unfold and explain in smaller steps how such a solidarity-driven media ironism might become productive and what kind of theoretical assumptions and arguments it is based upon. Thus, the crucial questions addressed here is: How can we ensure ethically fair, ecologically sustainable and socially inclusive ways of living, building and commoning in today's highly technological and neoliberalized world, which are not always driving towards consensus and which are not fully captured by capitalism, but instead based on conflict? While having no conflicts is implying a better operability of the media technological networks and agencements in urban environments of the planetary technosphere, an approach to commoning using the power of irony and conflict to induce change via participation and the idea of solidarity might offer a way to de-entangle from the technocratic politics of automation, control, order and statistics in the age of neoliberalism and surveillance capitalism.

Irony & commoning

Communities pursuing the self-organized, solidarity-based, non-profit-oriented, sharing, organizing and processing of resources – such as energy, data, machines or goods – are often called commonist, as they are dealing with commons, while their activity is called commoning [9,10,11]. Commoning, especially in urban neighborhoods, is thus a communicative act using media technologies or even computational machinery and at the same time involves acts of negotiation. Commoning is also a form of participation and touches questions of architecture as well. British political sociologist and Marxist Bob Jessop writing about governance, self-organization and their failures argues for a sort of meta-level perspective operating with a trifold approach of reflexivity, variety and, notably, irony. While reflexivity is about reflecting our own subjective entanglement with technologies, discourses or media, and variety is meant as a variety of approaches, solutions and attitudes, irony finally – here the most crucial approach – allows according to Jessop to make things more complicated or irritated, to destroy all dogmas and reveal ambiguities. At the same time, he argues that ironism is different to cynicism, since it is more inclined towards an optimism of the will, than a pessimism of intellect. This seems relevant, especially in the field of commoning and conflict. The commonist ironist needs to

be able to switch between heterogeneous modes of thinking and acting such as creative/ critical, emotional/ rational, subjective/ objective, at the same time, they acts in 'good faith' and finally attempts to involve others into self-organization, still knowing that it might not work out as intended [5 pp.110-114]. Following Jessop, I propose that irony is a crucial constellation we need to strive for while commoning, since it allows to deal with conflicts without immediately resolving them. It would be crucial here to consider modes of shared irony experienced by more than one person.

Four modes of irony

Feminist theorist and English literature scholar Claire M. Colebrook more systematically determines four modes of irony: The Socratic, cosmic, dramatic and romantic mode of irony. Generally, irony is a play with words in daily life, on stage, in literature, philosophy and here it is also a play with different ways of information storage, transmission and processing. It is etymologically based on *eirōneía* Ancient Greek for deception or faked ignorance. The intended meaning of an action, a word, term or metaphor is the opposite of its literal meaning. "We know a word is being used ironically when it seems out of place or unconventional. Recognizing irony, therefore, foregrounds the social, conventional and political aspects of language: that language is not just a logical system but relies on assumed norms and values." [12 p.15] Irony, therefore, is about playing with rules, revealing them and putting them on the stage of scrutiny. At the same time irony might also communicate a sort of exclusivity [12 p.19], which we surely want to avoid for the context of commoning and participation, if not for every context. Socratic irony however is inclusive and is used in so-called Socratic conversations. It does not merely negate a concept, but also pedagogically reveals the intended ironic meaning and the way the original concept is misused [12 pp.6,26,28]. Cosmic irony again is one of the situations or of existence. Cosmic irony shows the discrepancy between what we desire and what is decided beyond our powers. We often cannot foresee the effects and outcomes of our actions. Cosmic irony is therefore also called irony of fate [12 p.13]. Dramatic irony, furthermore, is similar, but the audience or reader of a drama already knows the outcome, while the conflicting and contrasting ironic situation unfolds between the intentions of a figure in the story and the contrary outcomes. And lastly in romantic irony, the human condition or even all life is subject to ironic situations. "[L]ife is not just ongoing activity (praxis) directed to some functional end; it also creates products that become disengaged or split from any conscious intent (poiesis). Speech is not just the purposeful expression of our intentions; it also contains an unthought [...] element that is not intended [12 p.52]." Romantic irony, here is very close to the Ernstian media irony briefly described earlier, since it implies autonomous media operations, which operate beyond human intentions. Once triggered, the machinery of technology often creates unintended effects, which might turn out to be the opposite of those, which were initially planned by the designers of the machinery. And such ironic situations in everyday life are, then also those, which reveal the inner workings of a machinery. Extending romantic irony, we could speculate whether even machines, animals, plants or other entities not merely humans could become subjects of an ironic situation.

Irony & critique

Not only present situations are subject of ironic interpretations, but also past constellations. Therefore, historians such as Hayden White argued that the very notion of modern history is ironic [13 p. 375]. A historian takes the past not at its word, but always looks for hidden

meanings and discourses not directly apparent by just looking at chronological data. “Reading ironically means, in complex ways, not taking things at their word; it means looking beyond standard use and exchange to what this or that might really mean [12 p.3].” This mode of historical or archaeological analysis is not only addressed at the far past but can be an approach for all situations or matters of oppression. For Italian Marxist philosopher Franco Bifo Berardi irony therefore is “the ethical form of the excessive power of language, is the infinite game that words play to create and to skip and to shuffle meanings. Poetry and irony are tools for semiotic insolvency, for the disentanglement of language from limits of symbolic debt [14 p.32].” Irony is the only possible line of escape from suffocation by capitalist powers as he also argues [14 p.10]. Colebrook refers to Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* determining ironism in her work despite the fact that she never used the terms ironic or irony as theoretical frameworks [12 p.125f.]. Butler rather focuses on the power of parody, more concretely the “parodic recontextualization” of hegemonic and misogynist gender meanings, which allows to denaturalize and mobilize them by revealing them as being “subject to a set of imitative practices which [...] construct the illusion of [a] gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction [15 p.138].” These parodic and ironic gestures are liberating and empowering, when it comes to question, criticize and transform hardened, established roles not only of gender, sexuality and biopolitics, but also other forms of oppression, which might appear in situations of commoning.

Irony, conflict & commoning

While irony usually enables to criticize and address the underlying socio-technological rules of the agencement or the constellation under study and while this is useful as an approach for understanding certain, sometimes even oppressive and unjust situations in commoning, re-introducing the idea of conflict shifts the focus to the contrast, discrepancy and tensions between the underlying (infra)structures and the ‘surface’. A situation while commoning might be called ironic, when the tensions between the understood and its hidden, unrevealed meaning are playful and poetic, but when the tensions are too strongly contrasting or even opposing each other, then there is also a conflict present. Etymological conflict has roots to Latin *fligere*, which means to hit, bash, punch or strike. *Con*, then, means against each other, therefore conflict etymologically is about punching each other. Oppression is one-sided, but conflict is two-sided. There is a conflict, when the weak is able to strike back. Referring again to Mouffe, she argues to “acknowledg[e] the political in its antagonistic dimension and abandoning the dream of a reconciled world that would have overcome power, sovereignty and hegemony [16].” Irony therefore forms a gateway for conflict and ideally shows the situatedness of a situation while commoning and the opposing powers and interests forming it. Irony is a notion that can get shared together, inclusively, poly-semantically and adaptively.

Future architect-hacker-citizen?

In order to put solidarity-driven media ironism for the future architect-hacker-citizen into action I suggest here the following chain of actions or a sort of algorithm for the oppressed: Firstly, there is an analysis, a reading or an interpretation of a given socio-politico-technical situation, where commoning, media technology and the urban intersect.⁵ Secondly, this might reveal and create an ironic contrast between what has been intended, desired and planned with a certain design, (infra-)structure or socio-technology and its real effect on

its users, agents, its (media)environment or content. And then thirdly, in case it is possible to interpret the mere contrast of the ironic situation as a conflict, thus, when the ironic situation is one of injustice or of oppression and in case there is additionally a potential, even a very weak one, to turn a hopeless situation of oppression into one with more hope, then this finally would offer us a gateway, a chance to ease suffering and to induce change. The power of conflict, as argued by Mouffe, is that it is affective, passionate, but not hostile, violent or harmful. Punching as a fair sport like boxing not as war. A pluralist democracy should not pursue antagonism, but agonism, not a struggle between enemies, but between adversaries. The “others” still have the unquestioned right to defend their ideas [21]. The difference between a “we”, even an inclusive and the “others” are dynamic, indeed intersectional and complicated, but still critical. There are lines to draw, but they are erasable or shiftable. This form of commoning about a conflict is based on rules, it is algorithmic, often even based on laws, and as such, again under the scrutiny of irony. Irony unfolds the chance to balance out the oppression first into a conflict, where one side is still too strong, but then would even allow to create situations of a temporally limited balance, a sort of meta-stability, between the forces and powers. But again, also this idea needs to be read ironically, since commoning needs to be everchanging. Commoning is never done, it has a so-called halting problem, which is actually a benefit.

Architecture and media practice already partially converged with computation on the side of tools such as computer-aided-design (CAD), building-information-modeling (BIM) and similar cases, but also conceptually in more speculative realms via graphic design, sculpture or early forms of media art by groups such as *Ant Farm*, *Superstudio*, *Archigram*, *Haus Rucker und Co* beginning in the 1960s and 70s. Architecture and extended spatial practices oriented towards questions of solidarity have always been an urgent matter most prominently since modernism (Hannes Meyer) and pursued more recently groups such as *raumlabor berlin*, *Forensic Architecture*, *Assemble* and many more. Still, the massive emergence of persons and groups with the trifold structure of firstly solidarity-oriented, inclusive, anti-authoritative attitudes, secondly proficiency in digitality, computation, networking and machine learning and finally expertise in spatial practices including the design of buildings, shelters, infrastructures and meeting spaces has not reached a critical point. Architect-hacker-citizens are yet too rare cases and we need more of them. Here, I proposed – together with some imaginary allies – a sort of theory and algorithm that offers ways to de-entangle from the technocratic politics of neoliberalism and surveillance capitalism. How can we make sure that the transformative rules, temporal-spatial processes and designs are less exploitative than those we want to oppose? Here again ironism not cynicism comes to the rescue. What we need is hope. Hope that we will always find the irony of our situations and are able to cope with them or even change them. The most convenient situations are ironically those, where we are sure everything is perfect, but where other entities, materials, artifacts, devices, machines, plants, animals, workers, comrades, citizens, friends and family members are suffering. Media-ironism is the gateway to ease our suffering in the so-called Capitalocene. And we need to practice it all together now!

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ENDNOTES

1. Here “we” is meant as an inclusive we.
2. Technosphere is a term probably coined by earth systems scientist Peter K. Haff in 2012 and has been extensively discussed in context of the “Technosphere 2015-19” project at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. See [3].
3. “My objective, instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects. My work has dealt with [...] modes of objectification which transform human beings into subjects (p.777) [8].”
4. They here is meant as a gender-neutral, singular they.
5. Promising analytical approaches are amongst others rhythmanalysis [17], schizoanalysis (p.61) [18] synthesized with more non-patriarchal approaches such as Donna Haraway’s social-feminism [19]. See also algorithmics as described in [20].