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Why Import Evgeny Morozov When Tom Franks and Andy Keens are Out of Work??

Kevin Carson

14 February 2013

Evgeny Morozov, in a recent review of Stephen Johnson's "Future Perfect" ("Why Social Movements Should Ignore Social Media," *The New Republic*, February 5), criticizes Johnson for a combination of "cyber-utopianism" and "Internet-centrism":

There are two ways to be wrong about the Internet. One is to embrace cyber-utopianism and treat the Internet as inherently democratizing. ... Another, more insidious way is to succumb to Internet-centrism. ... To fully absorb the lessons of the Internet, urge the Internet-centrists, we need to reshape our political and social institutions in its image."

These are, indeed, two ways to be wrong about the Internet. They're wrong because they share Morozov's own fundamental assumption: That the goal is to reform or compensate for the failings

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Retrieved on 2 February 2024 from c4ss.org/content/17178.

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of existing institutions — not to supersede them. He evaluates network organization on the basis of whether, as a supplement to existing institutions, it can provide the State Department with better information for deciding whether to intervene in Syria. “Many of our political institutions regularly confront problems that are not the result of knowledge deficiencies.” Those of us who see networks as the kernel or basic organizing principle of the successor society could care less about reforming the State Department. Our expectations from the State Department can be summarized by a quote from Auric Goldfinger: “Why, I expect you to die!”

Versus Johnson’s puerile affection for networks, Morozov juxtaposes “the virtues of centralization”:

Without well-organized, centralized, and hierarchical structures to push back against entrenched interests, attempts to make politics more participatory might stall, and further disempower the weak, and coopt members of the opposition into weak and toothless political settings. This was the case before the Internet, and, most likely, it will be the case long after.

Decentralized networks are useless, Morozov says, because they lack the scale for taking over existing institutions. As an example, he points to the German Pirate Party’s model — celebrated by Johnson — of “liquid democracy” (a participatory process with delegation and trading of votes, policy formation via membership plebiscite, etc.). Of course Johnson and Morozov are both wrong. Johnson is wrong to see a horizontalist, leaderless organization as a plausible tool of taking over an institution like the state. Morozov is wrong to evaluate networked organizations in terms of their effectiveness in taking over the state and other hierarchical institutions.

Our goal is not to assume leadership of existing institutions, but rather to render them irrelevant. We don’t want to take over

the state or change its policies. We want to render its laws unenforceable. We don’t want to take over corporations and make them more “socially responsible.” We want to build a counter-economy of open-source information, neighborhood garage manufacturing, Permaculture, encrypted currency and mutual banks, leaving the corporations to die on the vine along with the state.

We do not hope to reform the existing order. We intend to serve as its grave-diggers.