



# **Democracy and Digitalization**

**Input at the 32nd IAFFE Annual Conference**

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Thanks to the International Association for Feminist Economics (IAFFE) and all their hard work to have us here. I am grateful for the situated analyses from Dorit and Rosanna – because I will zoom out a bit and focus on digitalization as a phenomenon in the international political economy of development.

Feminist movements and feminist scholarship vested huge hope in the 1990s and early 2000s – in the potential of technology as a force of democratization. Fatima Merinissi's work comes to mind. Her writings about the digital Scheherazade were a tribute to women's right to public participation and the right to occupy digital space.

Digital architectures offer emancipatory models – not only for a radical transformation of the public sphere but also for economic pathways rooted in the commons.

Among the new publics that came together in the early days – was the digital commons community (the FOSS community) – which spoke to an important aspect of these technologies. Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) enthusiasts pointed to the possibilities of a different production paradigm – a departure from a Fordist frame to a new materiality – with software tools that would encourage knowledge sharing, decentralized knowledge production, aggregation, and pooling, and a new world economic order that would challenge what scholars called cognitive capitalism.

When people like Yochai Benkler and Michel Bauwens were theorizing about this new paradigm in the 2000s, the creeping power of tech monopolies was already becoming evident. But what this literature on open source did, is place in the public domain the counter-discourse that could challenge the 'move fast, break things, and unleash destruction' ideology of Silicon Valley.

Meanwhile, from the Arab Spring and then to the Arab Winter (which was the loss of the big dream) and later, the Me Too movement, we saw theorization around the Networks of Outrage and Hope and the crucial role of market interests and geo-political power in the games that tech people play.

In the past decade, we have seen a clear crystallization of the outcomes of digitalization in a certain path-dependency; the ways digital technology is shaped by neoliberal ideology in a particular political moment – as financialization, digitalization, corporatization, and market regimes have come together to restructure the economy across geographical scales.

Unfortunately, the idea of the Wealth of Networks – of a decentralized production paradigm did not materialize. An alternative politics of community and solidarity (core to feminist ethics) has been held hostage to an extractive, neocolonial paradigm.

And the macro reality is that markets are in disastrous shape, the public has been hollowed out – with private undersea cables and all – and democracies are being recast in a contagion of sentimentality that makes public reason and public authority seem old-fashioned and pointless.

What we are witness to is the cooption of digitalization by powerful actors in the international political economy as an anti-democratic force, and thus, sadly, we see a decline, a loss of democratic gains. This de-democratization process is rooted in a social consensus that we all need a public sphere chaperoned by the tech corporation and an economy that can work like two-minute noodles through AI, AGI, LLM, DL, ML, NLP, NLG, and other such tools, for public decision-making. The string of acronyms here represents a tragic irony. Basically, institutions are passe and norms of public authority are a waste of time.

All of this speaks to one big reality experienced universally: the reality of loss of ground for feminism. I do not imply at all that feminist movements, feminist practices, and alternative feminist lifeworlds are non-existent. What I mean is that our critique of social power has been accommodated into the means and methods, the structures of algorithmic disciplining, that make different modes of organizing knowledge, economy, society, and our institutions illegitimate and irrelevant.

So, how do we reinvent our politics? I offer three tentative thoughts.

**First is the reassertion of the idea of the ‘people’ into political discourse. The idea of people and popular sovereignty was born between the great 18th-century revolutions and mid-20th-century movements for decolonization with the simple truism that democratic legitimacy requires authorization from the people.**

Modern institutions built on the constitutional theory of **public authority** are rooted in the doctrine of popular sovereignty. The limited government of the constitutional order was theoretically possible owing to the ‘unlimited’ power ascribed to the people.

What has really happened today, in the march of digital capitalism, is the decoupling of ideas of sovereignty from public reason – we are reduced to users and data subjects.

As individuals, we struggle against the right and might of corporations as equal contenders to processes of justice. But we must resist this abominable equivalence. The new morality that emboldens corporate impunity is not feminist.

We, the people, is an assertion of the claims of those in the margins, of the voice of dissent, of the corporeality of oppression, the collective claim to the future and the future of institutions. We have the tools to conceive of a new design for institutional democracy: norms, rules, and practices that privilege people's sovereignty. If and how our political institutions will embrace this opportunity is the real question.

**Second, we need to revitalize gender politics to make the assertion of popular sovereignty genuinely transformative.**

The spectacle of gender politics is everywhere today, but as feminist people, we must defy the Deluzian logic of dividuality we see in the Big AI that dominates us – we are more than the aggregations and dissections of algorithmic existence. We may be queer, migrants, oppressed castes, tribals, and the indigenous, and our intersections defy adaptations as algorithmic personas.

Rebuilding feminist politics is about challenging misrecognition towards a very clear social project for an equal world, which is to restore a sense of space and place, of dignity and belonging to those who are denied these. And this is not possible unless feminism in the digital world can join forces with the commoners.

**Third, therefore, we need to build, use, and propagate very specific artifacts that stand for a new economy of commoning.**

We need to do this not just as resistance politics, but as a societal praxis. The urgency to reclaim society and the planet from the criminal capture of surveillance capitalism cannot be overemphasized. In the ivory towers where policies are discussed today, there is a brazen delegitimization of public finance, of the role of the knowledge commons, of the need for a just international economic regime. This comes with a huge cost.

We see the annihilation of all the small and big things that feminist democratic approaches in governance have achieved, especially in the Global South. The gig is being normalized in the social contract, social policy budgets are going down, and countries locked in debt are unable to tax Big Tech. The corporate-driven economy that feeds on society and its data uses ideologies of flexibility as a tool of exploitation. It seems that cultures of social reproduction in the digital context are simply naturalized as in 15th-century patriarchy.

The digital commons movements are aligned with the ethos of feminism. They provide an answer to tackle the acute maldistribution wrought by the crisis. Platform cooperatives run by women producers, for e.g., go against the grain of digital capitalism. They demonstrate how societies can realign markets gone wrong.

The frame must change, with a legitimation of alternative digitalities that valorize feminist values. We know from the platform commons of the city of Barcelona how civic collectives play a big role in building and nurturing local democracies along with public authorities. Civic groups can co-manage data, enable public innovation, and create the Lego blocks for a new democratic paradigm. The future calls for discovery and practice of the digital commons grounded in a feminist ethos of society and economy.

These paths are not readymade, but they can be constructed through what Mauel Castells calls 'the right to start all over again.' To begin the beginning, after reaching the threshold of self-destruction by our current institutions. To re-learn how to live together.