

## Nonnatural Politics *An Interview with Timothy Luke*

By the Editors of Interstitial Journal

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*To begin, you've explored issues of educational innovation and knowledge production, including online learning and academic technocultures. In the digital era, technology is generally viewed as the progenitor of educational advancement. What political discourses have emerged to contextualize the impact of digital technology upon American education systems, especially public universities?*

This is a fascinating and complex question. It raises innumerable issues about the world as it is being continuously remade by digital technology. This technology's impact on American educational systems, and your wording of the question itself, tracks the drift of many ongoing debates in this domain of public policy and social change. You are correct in stating that one widely touted view of information and communication technology (ICT) is that it more rapidly, fairly, and efficiently promotes educational, and therefore social, economic, and maybe cultural advancement. And it is well worth noting that a blatant modernization narrative—more ICT technology always equals broader, faster, and greater progress—drives many appeals in the United States to push the migration of all levels (K-12) and types of education (academic, professional, technical, vocational, etc.) into online environments. According to its advocates, this shift allegedly will make contemporary education in America better and less expensive. That is, its supporters believe it shall make learning more personalized, vocationally focused, flexible, and employment-enabling. These ICT-based approaches to education are imagined to be a cure-all for extracting both students and teachers from antiquated pedagogical styles. Of course, here the rhetorical spin implies that all non-ICT forms of education are trapped in

foolish conventions: face-to-face lectures for the dissemination of knowledge, frivolous forms of learning tied to memorizing esoteric trivia, rigid unproductive rote learning, or even employment-disabling regimens of schooling. With more learning 24/7 in digital environments, these ICT-wielding modernizers believe 'the dead hand of the past' allegedly can be shaken off in the present to seize the most promising vital opportunities available in the present for creating a better future. Hence, if you oppose digital technologies in education, then you are a reactionary opponent to improving everything that will create a better future.

Of course, like many grandiose plans, this utopian outcome might happen. And, in some contexts, especially those where there has been little to no investment in any kind of education, it might even be occurring to some degree. Yet, in many other situations, it seems that ICT-driven education is another expression of neoliberal disinvestment in essential public goods, once accepted as the basis of individual and collective *Bildung*. Here, a more traditional belief in the values of general education, basic science, historical literacy, and cultural cultivation is being blocked by a newfound fundamentalism in reducing learning to training for the market. Thus, the managerial interventions of business leaders, industrial councils, and economic developers fixated upon some immediate 'return on investment' are overlooking vital personal goals for education, like ethical development, vocational service, individual responsibility, and civic preparation. In universities, the changes in collegiate labor forces in the professorial ranks from the 1960s to the 1990s are crucial. Around 1970, trends turned as many positions were tenured or tenure-earning—maybe 70 percent of most institutions' staff—for their occupants' experienced organizational reclassification. Today, most positions are part-time, temporary, or flexible. As the ranks of tenured and tenure-earning staff have fallen to 25 or 30 percent of most institutions' research and teaching staff, the contingent labor force is now 70 to 75 percent of the staff. Faculty governance has declined and more professional administrators run most institutions. Many of them have never taught at all or, at most, maybe taught part-time or full-time decades ago. They do not value the unique experience and insight of tenured faculty. Pushing everyone into the worlds of ICT-based teaching and learning is now easier because contingent workers must comply or face unemployment, as replacements who will comply can be found. Anxiety about stagnant national trends in upward economic mobility, flagging national competitiveness, and rising costs also are pushing many jurisdictions toward the latest fads for gaining economic opportunity, like STEM solutions tied to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics skills. Using ICTs to get there, however, is expensive, and it is not clear that these tactics are increasing the efficacy of schools or lowering their costs. It also is not clear these new super-performative goals for education are being attained or the modernization waves of digital technology are correcting old shortcomings.

*You've also written about violence on university campuses, particularly with reference to the Virginia Tech shootings. We've seen similar events since then, most recently (as of this writing) at a movie theatre in Aurora, Colorado, Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin,*

*and elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut. What effect does mass mediation of these acts have on their interpretation within the American political imaginary, in your view?*

The episodes of gun violence on university campuses, at religious services, in shopping malls, during movie showings, and a range of other settings is very tragic. Everyone wants it to end, but there is a fascination in the media and with their audiences with its recurrence. Such shootings seem to be an evolving genre of deep dark celebrity for certain individuals who are incapable of adapting to, or are made uneasy by, the systems and structures of contemporary everyday life. Celebrating the bright shallow social superficialities of today's 'winner take all' culture leaves too many shadows where 'the losers get nothing'. Here, one can call it whatever (danger, evil, hazard, pain, terror), but something is unhinged. The media's active appropriation of these mass shooting events as 'acts of senseless violence', 'outbursts of unthinkable evil', or 'episodes of random rage', at least since the Columbine High School incident, is too easy, but it almost now generic. While not the cause, but the elective affinities of brutal senseless violence and passive media consumption are apparent. Today, the biggest entertainment industry is computer games, whose central narrative is rooted in 'first-person shooter' games. Likewise, the horror, splatter, and crime cinema industry churn out scores of products whose appeal turns on commodifying violence. In the real life of American suburbanites, senseless acts of killing, evilly unthinkable outbursts of torture, and random cruelties of rage packaged on cable networks in episodic television series are wildly popular forms of entertainment. One wonders: how much of this trend can be tied to the hollowing out of our public lives, educational aspirations, and civic duties?

Seeing the direct effects of these events on the American political imaginary can be problematic, but it must be noted the degree to which the U.S. remains a state under permanent general mobilization. For decades, national leaders have called upon citizens to fight wars at home on international terror, urban blight, mass poverty, environmental pollution, everyday racism, violent crime, killer cancers, and illegal drugs. Valorizing such belligerence maybe marks how much something is deeply amiss in this nation-state. Communities without the monies for better schools, good jobs, or decent housing usually seem willing to mobilize resources to equip their police with armored cars, military-style SWAT units, and high-tech surveillance. Still, everyone is shocked when weapons used by the weak, unfit, vulnerable, or excluded on the unsuspecting, innocent, or harmless turn out to be the same weapons favored by powerful authorities. The latter, of course, allegedly only commit only acts of measured violence in outbursts of unthinkable good with rational planned calculation. Yet, maybe there are breaks in the clouds of this contradictory chaos that reveal glimpses of the need of those with little to lose to appear to be in total control, if only for a moment, over the routines of those with so much to keep. More often than not, this motif seems to run through all of these incidents. The social contract is cracked, crumbling, and corroded. So anyone with a semi-automatic firearm can create their own brief moments of exception and determine who lives and who dies. More often than not, this narrative of outsider rage thinly emulates the media's

thicker accounts of sovereign force at work in the killing fields of North Africa, the Middle East, South Asia or the Balkans.

This nation fights 'wars of choice' for years, if not decades. Have its own acts of unthinkable violence, at times, in moments of near random rage, created a new national story tied to outbursts of almost senseless ineffectiveness? One must consider how wars at home are not unlike conflicts abroad. Growing up under a strategic regimen of mutually assured destruction, one wonders if this established ethic of rationalized death does not assure an irreparable degradation of some of those it is meant to protect. One cannot easily detect what provokes those who end up pulling the trigger that kills one, scores, or thousands, but has wanton violence become a key part in today's implicit *cultural* disorder to guarantee a modicum of *social* order?

*Speaking of the processes and effects of information technology, it has become a theoretical truism to say that industrial capitalism in the digital age has been transformed by the speed of global communication networks. How have ideology formation and ethical normalization been changed by modern information practices and virtualization?*

Arguably, everything that I have written for nearly 25 years, from my *Screens of Power*<sup>1</sup> or *Shows of Force*<sup>2</sup> to the *Capitalism, Democracy, and Ecology*<sup>3</sup> or *Museum Politics*<sup>4</sup> books speaks to this question. It would be hard to restate it all in one answer here. There is what some see as 'the hot, flat, and crowded' effect on the U.S. as the world's supposedly sole remaining superpower. The affect of our public culture is one of nagging anxiety in terms of ideological formations and ethical normalization. Yet, I am not sure if the arrow of causality is flying correctly here. Has industrial capitalism in the digital age been transformed by the speed of global communication networks or have the evolving forms of global capitalism—agrarian, commercial, financial, industrial, informatics—accelerated and elaborated the networks of global communication to anchor their own expansion, power, and profitability? I suspect it is as much the latter as it is the former.

*You've coined the term 'ecocritique' to refer to ecological criticism concerned with problems like climate change, species preservation, and capital distribution related to environmental problems.. Is there a genealogy to ecocritique and, similarly, why are certain eco-critical discourses promoted over others?*

Ecocritique is a generic category for conducting genealogical investigations, as well as a set of practices for assaying the origins and operations of contemporary environmental

1 Timothy Luke, *Screens of Power: Ideology, Domination, and Resistance in Informational Society*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press (1989).

2 Timothy Luke, *Shows of Force: Power, Politics, and Ideology in art Exhibitions*, Durham: Duke University Press (1992).

3 Timothy Luke, *Capitalism, Democracy, and Ecology: Departing from Marx*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press (1999).

4 Timothy Luke, *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (2002).

concerns. Clearly, these concerns are pervading discussions of everything from capital investment to energy production. And the criticism of their conduct, as well as the consequences of conducting this conduct, can be given many ecological orientations, groundings, and distinctions. The concept of 'Nature' in critical environmental politics that ecocritiques develop, of course, is as ambivalent as it is important. It is no shock that one can find ecology without nature, or cybernetic environments, or industrial ecologies. In too many ways, most environmental movements have identified 'Society' as the evil nemesis of 'Ecology' the virtuous. Whether one looks at deep ecology, ecofeminism, or wilderness defense, these groups usually argue that the abolition or abridgment of modern technical reason as such would allow Nature to once again live in harmony with humans. On the other hand, cradle-to-cradle design, ecosocialism, and social ecology claim technology *per se* does not endanger Nature; just as often, it enslaves humans first by dominating Nature. How technology is used, what scale it adopts, or who controls its workings is a central question for ecocritique. Where to draw the lines between the forces in play is hard, as well as the most exciting part of the process.

*Very often, environmental concerns are expressed in binary oppositional terms, such as man versus animal or nature versus civilization. How does an emphasis on ecological power/knowledge formations blur, and in some cases break with, dogmatic 'green' boundaries?*

Concerned environmentalists often are the last good sources to consult about today's environmental concerns because they typically trade in these mystifying binary oppositions. Man vs. animal, nature vs. civilization, economy vs. ecology? The binary divisions are mystifications that falsely interpose questionable divisions in the workings of life on Earth. Humans are animals, even though not all animals are humans. Human settlements under some conditions are cities and human community settlements are part and parcel of their natural development. Economies are embedded in ecologies and ecologies have their economies. These conceptual artifices are, at times, markers for dividing some humans from other humans by placing them at 'the crown of creation' over some humans, all animals, and nature in general. At other times, these rhetorical devices are used to stigmatize perceived otherness—whether it is nature or civilization—to protect a perceived sameness for those seeking allies in a coming struggle. Dogmatic 'greens' attack civilization as hard, or harder than, dogmatic 'browns' attack nature. These categories, as I have suggested for many years, fail us much of the time, but it is hard to depart too far from them in most debates about the environment without losing focus on the politics at hand. It is frustrating and yet we seem trapped in these patterns. The question is interesting because it exposes the rhetoric of deflection, which typically builds the binary to highlight one pole and darken the other in pursuing answers to questions that simply are asked in confused, contradictory, or conflicted terms. Yet, the debate almost demands such foggy thinking, since the cultural ground under contention is so ideologically and politically boggy, once one sees how this struggle continues to recycle, reduce, and reuse the same old concepts over and over again.

*Some prominent ecocritical perspectives extol the totalizing interrelatedness of all beings, human and nonhuman. When problematizing human domination of the material world, what status and context should be given to nonhuman entities? Furthermore, does a reconsideration of the politicality of nonhuman being invite new explorations of aesthetics, space, and the connection between the two?*

This question is fascinating inasmuch as many ecocritical stances appear to be derived from either a weak or strong anthropocentrism in the name of sublating anthropocentric thinking and acting. The question is: is the human/nonhuman, its quanta of humanity, being rejiggered in ways that affirm 'we have never been human, but always cyborgs' or that actuate a delegation of humanity to objects, animals, or sites in the polis behind 'politicality'? Increasingly, I wonder if a 'cyborgological' analysis should be the basis of anthropology. This is a very big question, and a source of endless debate.

*Finally, we're seeing theoretical gestures, today, against traditional critical theory, which is said to be insufficient to produce material political change. Do you think critical theory, especially trajectories inspired by the Frankfurt School of thought, is still relevant for today's political problems? In what ways might critical theory be augmented to strengthen its applicability beyond its original ideological focus, if at all?*

This question is very interesting to the extent that too many theorists appear to repeat, or even extol, fuzzy thinking, lazy history, or social amnesia. Is traditional critical theory—somewhat oxymoronic in Horkheimer's terms—Marxism, neo-Marxism, the Frankfurt School, New Left Thought, socialist feminism, critical race theory, postmodern leftism, or born-again communism à la Badiou, Rancière, or Žižek? Gesturing, or jesting, theorists too often make theoretical gestures, but traditional critical theory going back to Marx misplaces concreteness in saying philosophy either understands or changes the world. It often misunderstands and reifies the world; believing that people thinking in this way or that manner are the only barriers against making material political change is mistaken. Thinking critically, rightly, effectively does not assure political change will be what was intended or anticipated. Action is what changes the world and it is not frequently guided by the formulae of theorists at the time that it happens. Afterward, scholars and scribes reassess events, and they typically find parallels, sense remote signs, or link unrelated causes and effects into a bigger picture that makes intellectuals the driving force of all social, political, and cultural change. It is a comfort to those who think for a living that they are at the center of the action, but the centers of action rarely are so attentive to the works of intellectuals—public or private—since many acts of radical transformation begin in the realm of affect, habit, or tradition. The thoughts of intellectuals have criss-crossed this realm, but it is presumptuous to believe they rule there.

As for today's political problems, some of them are unprecedented and some of them are recurring challenges. No one theoretical tradition has 'the answers' needed for today, just

as socialist, liberal, conservative, or religious thinking did not have the essential resources for addressing prior crises. The problems of today must be reflected upon without the distortions, as C. Wright Mills would argue, introduced by abstracted empiricism or grand theory. Depending upon how 'critical theory' is posed by insightful thinking, and the degree to which the archive, Frankfurt style, is relevant or applicable, one can find answers that augment its capacities by looking at today's key points of friction, like the environment in its unbuilt, built, and yet-to-be built forms or the economy in its open, semi-legal, underground, and shadow domains, where the challenge at hand is to simply see actually what is happening. This set of pre-categorical events usually exceeds all existing categorical frameworks of interpretation, critique, or analysis. Yet, the way out of these challenges is to grasp the richness and the rottenness of 'what is actually happening'. This feat is difficult enough. And it must be done with any resource that good theoretical training has given to us. To construct the best possible critique to reduce the raw rotten qualities of existence, it is crucial to be political: who, whom? Who wins, who loses; who controls, who is controlled; who pays; who benefits? These basic bottom line realities contain answers for discovering what plagues the realization of a good life, as well as what can enable fuller sharing of the richness at hand for as much as one can attain and for as long as it is possible without infringing upon the prospects of those to come to meet their own challenges.