Not Just a Matter of the Internet

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Review of:
Mark Poster, *What's the Matter with the Internet?*.
Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001.

1.

There is surely a double entendre at work in the title of Mark Poster's book, *What's the Matter with the Internet?.* In this matter, it is not just a question of what might have gone wrong, what danger lurks behind the Internet's promise. We're also asked to consider the ways in which the Internet and related technologies bear upon matter itself, upon the very real and material conditions of human culture.

2.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, the photograph reproduced in the front matter of the book makes a strong statement. The caption adequately conveys the immediate sense of the picture:

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in a new configuration of the virtual,
an orthodox Jew at the sacred site of
the Wailing Wall holds a cell phone so
that a distant friend can pray.
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Here we are offered a jarring image of what for some is an unholy alliance between the old and the new. If the sacred can still be said to exist in our modern world, it does not merely exist alongside new technologies, but has, as this photograph attests, become inseparable from them.

3.

This is an extreme example, but it captures a

common theme shared by the essays collected in this volume. If the early context of critical theory was capitalism, Poster argues, today it is surely the mode of information. Information has assumed the form of a commodity, silently and invisibly working to reconfigure what we call "culture," upsetting the bounds of tradition, redefining who we are, and troubling political terminologies and identities. Poster suggests that such a politics is outmoded: "culture has lost its boundary" (2). And this most certainly ushers in a crisis of identity and meaning no less than it opens up hitherto unavailable possibilities for subjects, citizens, races, classes, and genders to be configured anew. What are the possibilities for loosening rigid notions of ontogeny, epistemology, and identity in a recombinant world of 0/1/0/1...? And how desirable would this be? While Poster's critics have often been quick to seize on the more utopian aspects of his analyses, they usually overlook the material import of his work, inadequately acknowledging the subtleties at play and the risks at stake.

4.

Several of the essays collected in *What's the Matter with the Internet?* have appeared elsewhere, but at the heart of these and especially in his new work, Poster is at his best. In the last two decades, Poster has earned a well-deserved reputation not least for translating and interpreting Baudrillard, but also for rendering the difficult theory of members of the Frankfurt School and of more recent thinkers such as Foucault, Habermas, Derrida, and Lyotard accessible to North American academic audiences. This book continues the tradition of lucid exegesis while at the same time firmly establishing Poster as an original thinker in his own right; in these pages he has really come into his own, and his voice is one worth listening to. Even more than in *The Second Media Age* (1995), these essays are theoretically rich and risk original analyses by adapting a political economy critique to the new media.

5.

For instance, in chapter two, "The Being of Technologies," Poster resituates the insights of Heidegger's famous essay on technology for our current digital context.[1] He argues: "The terms of the debate over technology must be reconceived in relation to the emergence of qualitatively new kinds of machines" (23). These new machines pose significant challenges. The traditional view of technology went only so far as conceiving machinery materially, as that which is of and which affects matter. Today, however, "the matter" with the Internet and related techno-machines is that their effects are profoundly symbolic, and therefore bear on society, culture, and politics in new and complex ways. Today's techno-machines must be conceived as engaging in technical and rational activities; consequently, technology enjoys a kind of "agency"--a power traditionally preserved for human subjects. Poster continues to challenge us to think the ways in which the boundaries between human subjects and machines have become blurred, from both sides. He has recently dramatized this alliance by the awkward locution "network digital information *humachines*."[2]

6.

Not so long ago, the human alone was celebrated as *the* unique alloy, as a symbolizing and material entity, both spiritual and corporeal. Aquinas tells us how even the angels envy man for this! And since the humanism of the Enlightenment, man[3] has been the measure of all things, the source of truth and justice, the locus of value, and the bearer of rights. But intelligent machines, made in our image, effectively challenge human supremacy, bringing to light the conceits of liberal humanism. As Poster points out, "the failure to distinguish between machines that act upon matter and those that act upon symbols mars the humanist critique" (23). Of course, these machines do not aspire to be gods, but they do seriously rattle the foundations of Enlightenment reason, truth, and justice-- including their material effects in social, cultural, and political contexts.

7.

Thus the "challenge" that comes from techno-machines is much more radical than the kind of "challenging forth" [*Herausfordern*] that Heidegger envisaged. Heidegger's view of technology is instrumentalist; for him, machines "challenge forth" the environment in a particular way, "enframing" [*gestellen*] nature as an object at the behest of a machinic will to power. Ultimately, not only nature but humanity itself gets configured as an available resource or "standing reserve" [*Bestand*]. Despite himself, however, Heidegger remains ensconced in a humanist frame insofar as he believes that we can be saved from technological dangers without altogether destroying technology and returning to some bucolic past. According to Heidegger, our "saving power" lies in our very human capacity to philosophize. Poster points out the limitations of Heidegger's instrumentalist view of technology, offering an approach more in keeping with the information age. Poster remarks: "there is a being of technology and [...] it varies depending upon the material constraints of the technology" (35). In Poster's view, technology generates its own autonomous constraints, free from the constraints we would place on a subject who acts, and free from humanist conceits: "the machine itself inscribes meaning, enunciates, but it does so within its own register, not as a human subject would" (36). This is perhaps more sinister than Heidegger could have imagined, for it not only acknowledges that techno-machines signify in hitherto unimaginable ways, but that a shoring up of humanism's liberal subject is both anachronistic and futile if our project is to reassert supremacy.

8.

Because the human subject appears to be irreversibly situated within a worldwide technological web, the traditional Cartesian notion of subjectivity is no longer relevant. As we saw with the photograph mentioned above, even human sacred practices are now imbricated

within ever-expanding technologies. Poster writes:

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the network has become more and more
complex as dimension has been overlaid
upon dimension, progressing to the
point that Cartesian configurations of
space/time, body/mind, subject/object--
patterns that are essential components
of [Heideggerian] enframing--are each
reconstituted in new, even
unrepresentable forms. (37)
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And the matter at hand is not merely that complexity has rendered these patterns epistemologically "unrepresentable," somehow unknowable or outside of logic; rather, they have also undergone an ontological shift. The metaphysics of presence must now be rewritten. It is no longer sensible to theorize a subject who would possess or otherwise represent and know an object. If there is a "subject" (and the term itself must be debated), this "subject," along with its "consciousness" and "agency," must be theorized as part of the diffuse and decentralized network in which it is taken up.

9.

Thus, even the subjectivity of the author must be reconceived in light of digital networks. Drawing on Foucault's discussion of authorship and what he calls the "author function," Poster spends two chapters reframing this discussion in light of current technologies and the subjectivities they foster. We must first overthrow the cultural assumptions based on the paradigm of print media. He distinguishes between what he calls an "analogue author" and a "digital author." The central difference between these two is the relation each has to his or her work; for the analogue author, written work is seen as participating in a kind of material contiguity reminiscent of analogue technologies, whereas for the digital author, written work is further displaced from any "source" in symbolic ways akin to digitized products. In Poster's words, analogue authors assume and "configure a strong bond between the text and the self of the writer, a narcissistic, mirroring relation" (69), whereas digital

authorship is a relation of "greater alterity" (69), "a rearticulation of the author from the center of the text to its margins, from the source of meaning to an offering" (91).

10.

   The being of the network not only bears upon the authorial subject, but it impacts those domains in which subjects locate themselves, claim identities and affiliations, and demand political recognition, often as a form of representation. In addition to the radical challenge to a metaphysics of representation, Poster develops a critique of the subject and its sociocultural contexts through a sustained reflection on nationhood and identity in the age of global technology. What, for instance, is the fate of the nation-state in the digital age? From a digital perspective, information can in theory be perfectly, infinitely, and extremely inexpensively reproduced. Thus, the presence and authority of any so-called original is displaced along with its "author." In Benjamin's terms, it has lost its "aura." "Once digitized," Poster remarks, "the original cultural object loses its privilege, its ability to control copies of itself, escaping the laws that would manage it" (104). As far as national(ist) institutions are concerned, this might well result in a declining ability to control or govern ways in which particular cultural products or discourses are consumed and circulated as the norm. Although we may register this change in form as a loss of and even as a threat to traditional subject-positions, with a shift in perspective we shall see that the field has opened up for various and multiple discourses: less centralized, less normative, and allowing for individual empowerment through more local and grass-roots activism. Of course, this is an ideal, and a distant one; Poster cites compelling examples and he is hopeful, but cautiously so.

11.

   Today more than ever we live in a state of what Poster calls "postnational anxiety."

Although this book was published in 2001, before the events of 9/11, it eerily anticipates our culture of terror and the extreme governmental response designed to resignify "America" as part of its effort to safeguard her "homeland" and its interests from would-be enemies, both domestic and foreign. Poster cites Timothy McVeigh as a patriot whose acts were motivated by "postnational anxiety"--in McVeigh's case, specifically the fear of a multiracial society. Interestingly, Poster states that the efforts of the U.S. government, "while apparently in opposition, are in fact responding to the same conditions of postnationalism" (106). His critical point is that neither McVeigh nor the U.S. government knows how to respond to the ongoing process of globalization:

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The U.S. government's very effort to
secure its borders from "terrorism"
(one might see terrorism as an aspect
of globalization) is similar to the
fantasy on the part of the bomber in
Oklahoma of an America secure from the
"contamination" of foreign bodies.
(106)
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Thus, a shoring up of national borders, a "return" to American "family values," and the like, is a reaction that seeks to bolster traditional forms of subjectivity with a corresponding nationalism and political identity; however, in all likelihood this incommensurate response will prove ineffective against the diffuse, global, and decentralized terrorist networks that constitute a numinous "enemy." It is therefore not surprising that official state rhetoric would assign evil a name and a face: without Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein as subjective counterparts to the just and piously crusading subject/nation-state, there would be no enemy and no war. As this troubling example illustrates, while the Internet and related technologies might suggest new possibilities for postnational forms of political authority and authorship--for "CyberDemocracy," as Poster says--these possibilities are as yet without a navigable roadmap. Poster does, however, provide a thoughtful analysis of some of the paradigm shifts that must occur if we are to meet the

political challenges raised by global(izing) technologies.

12.

The network operates behind the scenes, as it were. This is a Marxian insight regarding capitalism, brought to bear here on the mode of information. We hear everywhere that we have entered a "digital" or "new" economy where intellectual property and information itself are commodified. In a chapter titled "Capitalism's Linguistic Turn," Poster discusses new ways in which commodities are produced, distributed, and consumed. He is critical of the received wisdom. For instance, he is wary of those who claim that in industrialized countries, machines replace physical labor while human beings "manipulate data in computers and monitor computers, which in turn monitor and control machines" (42). Such a model would in theory allow for a more lateral and less hierarchical--rather than top-down--management style, although this is rarely met in practice, and even more rarely outside of first-world industrial centers. Instead, capitalism's market principles represent a faith and a hope, rewriting geopolitics by replacing the state in the allocation of scarce resources--capitalism over communism, three cheers.

13.

While the market was quick to seize the opportunities of the Internet to turn a quick buck, this is not a unilateral victory because with digital technologies greater power has also been placed in the hands of the consumer, namely, for each individual, "the capacity to become a producer of cultural objects" (47). The division between production and consumption has become blurred, argues Poster, but we shall have to wait to see the long-term implications of these changes. While we remain wedded to the markets, there are signs that age-old structures are under threat, if the reactions of the music industry to online music trading are any indication. Legal claims aside, these

corporations have had a great deal of control wrested from them by ordinary citizens and even children. The culture industry itself is under threat, and the promise of placing culture in the hands of a greater number of people has geopolitical implications:

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with its decentralized structure, the
Internet enables non-Western culture to
have presence on an equal footing with
the West. It establishes for the first
time the possibility of a meeting and
exchange of cultures that is global in
scope, albeit favoring the wealthy and
educated everywhere. (49)
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This "equal footing" is still a dream, but it seems slightly more possible than ever before, at least in some venues. And while the wealthy and educated are "favored," it is still uncertain whether in the long term the Internet will help realize a postcapitalist economy or, on the contrary, a kind of hypercapitalism. (It will probably be both.) In any case, the new experience of being a producer-consumer is bound to have a vast and continuing effect on what it means to be a subject and a global citizen.

14.

If we understand that both subjects and nations are historical formations, discursively produced, we may feel less anxiety about their disappearance and even embrace our postnationalism. This insight--again, owed to Foucault--is also extended to various discussions on ethnicity, gender, and capitalism vis-à-vis digital networks. Poster is respectfully critical of both Foucault and what he calls "the postmodern position" because, he claims, they are "limited to an insistence on the constructedness of identity" (174). As for postmodernists, he has Lyotard and Jameson in mind:

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In both instances postmodernity
registered not an institutional
transformation or alteration of
practices so much as a new figure of
the self [...]. For Lyotard the self
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was disengaged from historicity and for
Jameson in addition it was fragmented,
dispersed, low in affect, and one-
dimensional. (9)
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Poster's critique of this position--at least insofar as he's characterized it here--is that while it works well to deconstruct entrenched notions of identity, it remains limited in its ability "to define a new political direction" (174). He therefore sees his work as going beyond these theorists in important practical--and material--ways. For this purpose, the reader need not agree wholeheartedly with Poster's characterization of the nature or scope of Foucault's, Lyotard's, or Jameson's interventions. Suffice it to say that Poster makes an intervention of his own, independent of these theorists. Poster is, after all, an intellectual historian who works to identify historical structures in present modes of being and to read in these structures new possibilities for the future. In this regard, I see his recent work as remarkably faithful to Foucault's later ethical project, from the last years of his life in the 1980s. Poster takes up the spirit of Foucault's ethics to ask how, at the advent of the digital age, we might reconceive those possibilities available to us to understand the self as a social, cultural, and political being, and from these, how we might begin to *be* otherwise.

15.

What's the Matter with the Internet? poses a rhetorical question that is deceptive in its simplicity. At stake is the yet-unanswered question of what will matter, why, and to whom; worse, what matters is a historical reality, and as such, it is always in flux. What, after all, *is* the Internet? Before retorting that the Internet represents a victory of the virtual over the real, or even of mind over matter, Poster reminds us that the Internet affects the very real and material conditions of human lives, on a planetary scale. "The Internet" thus stands in a synecdochic relation to an unfolding, vast and complex technical and technological network; this network is a reality imbricated with the gamut of human existence, from our most sacred

acts to our most mundane functions. This includes Orthodox Jews praying through cell phones at the Wailing Wall and teenaged Indonesian girls working in factories of multinational corporations. In brief, "the Internet" is a synecdoche that matters here because it stands in for a reality that has taken on "new, even unrepresentable forms" (37). It is true that some reactionary critics claim that the significance of work such as Poster's is overblown; they are fond of stating as evidence that the vast majority of human beings haven't even made a phone call, let alone used the Internet. But this would be to miss Poster's point: the implications are vast and not overblown because, given the very material effects of this unrepresentable global-technological mode of being that "the Internet" here signifies, few human lives are materially free from its web.

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Notes

1. See Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays,* trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

2. See my interview with Mark Poster, "Network Digital Information Humachines: A Conversation with Mark Poster," *Qui Parle* 14.1

(forthcoming, Fall/Winter 2003).

3. I say "man" here in the generic sense as *anthropos*, but also catachrestically, to underscore the sexist historical fact that the male, and not the female, was--and arguably continues to be--the paradigm for the species.