The left needs to get radical on big tech – moderate solutions won't cut it

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Evgeny Morozov   February 27, 2019

To note that the "techlash" – our rude and abrupt awakening to the mammoth powers of technology companies – is gaining force by the month is to state the obvious. Amazon's sudden departure from New York City, where it was planning to open a second headquarters, attests to the rapidly changing political climate. The New Yorkers, apparently, have no desire to spend nearly $3bn in subsidies in order to lure Amazon – a company that, on making $11.2bn in profits in 2018, has paid no tax and even managed to book $129m in tax rebates.

> Ignored in most accounts of the growing anti-Silicon Valley sentiment is the incongruence of the political and ideological forces behind the techlash. To paraphrase a Russian classic: while all the happy apologists of big tech are alike, all its critics are unhappy in their own way. These critics, united by their hatred of the digital giants, do make short-term tactical alliances; such arrangements, however, cannot hold in the long term.

One can distinguish three camps in today's anti-tech landscape. They cover almost the entire political spectrum, from the pro-market neoliberal right to the pro-solidarity socialist left, even if the most prominent faces of the latter are still to take an explicit position on these issues.

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The two better-known currents of the techlash represent what we might call "economism" and "technocracy". Adherents of the former insist that the users of digital platforms are systematically shortchanged for their data and need to be compensated in some way. Such ideas are also rapidly gaining relevance in the policy world. In a major speech in mid-February, Gavin Newsom, California's new governor, called on the tech giants to embrace the idea of a "data dividend". "California's consumers," he said, "should also be able to share in the wealth that is created from their data."

Why dub this "economism"? Well, in part because this perspective does not easily admit non-economic critiques of today's big tech; the only power relationship it detects and scrutinizes is that between firms and consumers. There are no citizens – let alone social and public institutions – in this political universe.

This is bound to yield perverse results. By linking the size and profitability

of tech companies to the handouts received by their users, this approach might even entrench the political power of big tech. As for consumers, they might welcome their expansion: the bigger the technology companies, the larger the data dividend. However disruptive it might seem, this is an extremely conservative approach, leaving everything as it is, but now, also, shuffling some money to consumers while giving the tech companies carte blanche to take over the rest of society.

Treating data as a commodity would also make non-market solutions infeasible and costly. Imagine a resource-starved city hall aspiring to build an algorithmic system for coordinating mobility services. On discovering that it now needs to pay for the data of the residents, it might never proceed with the plan. Deep-pocketed firms like Uber do not face such hurdles.

The "technocrats" of the second camp often define themselves in opposition to those preaching "economism". And yet, they hardly represent a very radical departure, for they, too, believe in the virtues of free and competitive markets. They merely contend that we will never get there without strong antitrust policies, which assume far greater importance in today's digital economy with its ubiquitous network effects.

The technocrats, thus, look to the toolkit of antitrust law to limit the power of big tech and, if necessary, make it smaller – by breaking up the tech giants. Such thinking is increasingly in vogue in Washington, where renegade thinktanks like the Open Markets Institute seek to reverse the regime of light and very selective enforcement of antitrust laws of the past 40 years. Brussels is also quite receptive to such considerations, with the European Commission, under the guidance of Margrethe Vestager, spearheading even more ambitious antitrust efforts. The recent ruling by the German cartel office, which prohibits from pooling the data of third-party apps without explicit user consent, is inspired by a similar vision.

Such technocratic solutions, however radical in their objectives – breaking up Facebook or Google is no small feat – stop short of charting an appealing, post-technocratic and political vision for a world rich in data. Instead, they seek solace in a centralized, rigid and heavily bureaucratic model invented and originally deployed a hundred years ago. It's probably true that 10 smaller Facebooks would be less damaging than the Facebook of today. This, however, is no political program.

Demanding to break up tech giants is fine, but what kind of non-commercial institutions and arrangements should exist in a just digital society where neither Facebook nor Google play the dominant role? Lacking a convincing answer, the technocratic agenda reveals itself to be mere economism in anti-establishment rhetorical disguise: the fundamental question of what awaits us in a world beyond big tech is to be answered by market competition itself.

What, then, of the third – and, for the moment, least visible – current in the techlash debate? Its adherents, currently to be found in a smattering of radical municipal movements, some of them in power across Europe, preach neither markets nor technocracy but, rather, radical democratic transformation. They do not start by assuming that market competition is always the right answer. Instead, they revise the question itself, moving away from redressing the ills of big tech and towards asking what sort of arrangements and institutions might underwrite a more progressive digital future.

How could digital technologies help redesign core political institutions, including representative democracy and its bureaucratic apparatus, and make them more decentralized and participatory? Proponents of this view imagine citizens not as sophisticated and emancipated consumers - merely to be served by more ethical digital capitalists of the future - but, rather, as active, political and, occasionally, entrepreneurial subjects.

Once given unmitigated access to the most advanced technologies of the day and a modicum of resources, these citizens are trusted to find effective solutions to the very problems that currently baffle remote planners and bureaucrats. They might even invent new services, of both commercial and non-commercial variety, that are currently hard to imagine because access to the key resources of the digital economy – data, identity, artificial intelligence – is tightly controlled.

Unlike economism and technocracy, this third approach does not aim to create more efficient markets, either by extending the paradigm of private property to data or by breaking up tech monopolies. Rather, it questions the adequacy of treating data and artificial intelligence as commodities rather than as collectively produced and socially useful resources. In doing so, it seeks to empower those that have been excluded from the leading roles in the digital economy and bureaucracy alike.

Faced with a resurgent rightwing populism that questions, not always incorrectly, the virtues of the unreformed administrative state, a progressive movement would not get very far by promising a mere return to the technocratic apparatus of the New Deal or of the original welfare state. Likewise, those advocating "economism" have a steep road ahead, as they are preaching the deepening of the neoliberal agenda at a time of growing pushback against globalization, financialization and tax avoidance.

The choice for the undecided movements on the left is simple: if they truly want to depart from the neoliberal dogma, with its insistence on competition as the overarching political and social device of modernity, they should resist rhetorical and ideological temptations of "economism" and "technocracy" and rally behind the option of the radical democratic transformation.

It might be the most ambitious - and most ambiguous - of the three techlash currents. However, for all its utopianism, it's the only option that allows progressive forces to stop merely defending the past, and, for a change, articulate a just, fair and egalitarian vision for the digital future. If they fail, the rhetorical space would not rest empty forever: the rightwing populists would get there fast, minus, of course, all the justice and egalitarianism.

Evgeny Morozov is the author of the Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom and a Guardian US columnist