

Book Review

Greg Goldberg. *Antisocial Media: Anxious Labor in the Digital Economy*. New York: New York University Press, 2018.

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In contemporary discourse, critics can appear adamant that the transnational, digital ecosystem is a threat to workers. It atomizes, divides, and alienates the individual subject, while exploiting labour through covert and unfair processes of remuneration. While these arguments do carry weight, there is a further anxiety that undergirds the tensions that surround economic upheaval: the collapse of the social or, more specifically, the collapse of normative sociality and relationality. This is Greg Goldberg's argument in his rigorous and astute monograph *Antisocial Media: Anxious Labor in the Digital Economy* (2018).

Goldberg's book is a refreshing intervention amid discourse on the negative effects of digital culture and the digital economy. While "effects theories" in media studies are taught to students as a relic of the past, this line of argument continues in many popular academic books, particularly within the public intellectual circuit. Goldberg sits in opposition to these "effects hermeneutics," while articulating his ideas with a complexity that is elegantly buttressed with clarity. I do not hesitate to make the bold claim that Goldberg has the calibre of a public intellectual without forgoing nuance. The *Antisocial* of the title can evoke the spirit of a polemical text, but the provocation of this term coincides well with a book whose arguments and evidence are elaborated with precision and acuity.

It was also restorative to read a book that does not carelessly and superficially use notions of "queering" as an interpretive category. Instead, the particular modes of queer theory that Goldberg relies upon are identified and articulated before being mobilized. A maneuver like this can be unusual amid the panicked attempts by authors to make a text "feminist," "queer," or "decolonized," for it often backfires as a paranoid mechanism to prevent critiques that the text is too heteronormative.¹ The modes that Goldberg hones-in on do not conform to the neoliberal, identity politic moves to white, cis-gender, heterosexual, settler innocence, unfortunately produced in a postmodern, late capitalist milieu where writers and academics are short on time and kept in line by academia's predatory managerial class. Goldberg's methodological strategies make use of both the pessimist and optimist schools of queer thought. On the pessimistic side, he reckons with the works of Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman, and Sara Ahmed. A word of caution on my use of the word pessimist is necessary here: I use pessimist not to mean fatalistic theoretical devices, but those theories that embody an initial rousing, negative orientation in order to rupture a toxic, infected hegemony, akin to the French existentialists and nihilists who claimed that a lack of existential meaning can encourage more diverse forms of freedom.

The utopian school of queer thought is also present in the intellectual spirit of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, whose work sought to encourage coalitions rather than divisions within queer theory until her untimely death in 2009.

Paranoid reading practices, as laid out in detail in Sedgwick's work, have arguably infected the ways in which cultural interpreters select their intellectual engagements, whether these cultural interpreters are op-ed writers or researchers in the humanities. In radical, activist circles that are driven by affect—academic or non-academic—the distinct dread of critiquing the conditions of one's own precarious location introduces obstacles to intellectual advancement. But Goldberg is elegant in critiquing a milieu in which he is evidently part of—as a self-identifying queer man with leftist beliefs.

His first chapter, "Anxiety and the Anti-social," a crucial examination of the shift from symptomatic reading to paranoid reading provides a context for the insidious epistemic displacement which has relied on selective affect at the expense of rigour. Goldberg reminds us of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's critique of the aforementioned "paranoid reading," the mode of interpretation which finds its legacy in symptomatic reading. A historicization of anxiety follows, illustrating how anxiety has been pathologized and subsequently medicalized. Drawing from Foucault, Goldberg highlights the uses of diagnosing anxiety through mechanisms that administer techniques of discipline, punishment, surveillance, and control. An important contention that guides the book is Goldberg's description of anxiety as a mechanism to "police the solitary pervert." Rather than enjoying and embodying solitude, the subject must embrace the normative grid of collective and communal responsibility. A deviation from this matrix is in violation of deep-seated yet typically unspoken behavioral codes.

The second chapter, "Playing," Goldberg maps the ways in which one's contemporary work is figured as a "symbolic object" in which the right forms of sociality are constructed. This construction is formulated through discourse, be it academic, journalistic, political, or conveyed

through statements from the multinational corporations who operate on the logics of a sharing economy or platform capitalism. It is in this chapter that Goldberg takes aim at dominant readings on playbour (play + labour)—that the difference between work and play has become increasingly unclear. The critique of an inability to discern work and play exposes an uneasiness towards what Goldberg aptly labels "antisocial hedonism."

A discussion on the apprehension surrounding technology that replaces human labour is the subject of the third chapter, "Automation." Here, Goldberg convincingly argues that the worries encircling technological unemployment are not concerns motivated solely by the loss of income for workers. Rather, concerns towards automation are also motivated by the disruption of social bonds and communal ties. Again, the discursive origins for these anxieties are multiple; they originate not solely from workers, but from various agents.

In his fourth chapter, Goldberg addresses the discourse on the "sharing economy," where he adds an endnote stating that the term "sharing economy" is regularly substituted by the terms "gig economy" or "platform capitalism." An assessment of literature in various settings—journalistic, trade, op-ed/think piece, and academic publications—demonstrates that many critics lean on arguments of worker exploitation by technological advances. Critics of the sharing economy argue that it provides the conditions for corporations to undervalue the labour of its workers. What lurks beneath these assumptions, however, is a perceived attack on communal relationality, or a collapse of social bonds.

Goldberg's body of scholarship is fascinating, and it diverges from the unproductive, paranoid readings that persist in queer studies and media studies. In his 2017 essay, "Through the Looking Glass: The Queer Narcissism of Selfies," Goldberg also draws upon the antisocial thesis in queer theory to problematize psychological diagnoses of the perceived social problem of the selfie's popularity, or, of subjects taking what is considered to be too many photos of themselves. Like anxiety, narcissism has an inverted

orientation to the self and bears a compulsion to scrutinize. In place of a paranoid hermeneutic, Goldberg chooses the reparative strategy in dismantling diagnoses of narcissism, and elects a reparative approach again in *Antisocial Media*, by scaling the parameters that make anxiety an attractive diagnosis for the maintenance of a normative social realm.

As I read the book, I wondered where taste politics and taste hierarchies could figure in the normative rejection of “antisocial” forms of relationality. This is not to say that a lack of attention to taste is a glaring omission but rather it is, in my eyes, a next step that could be a vital addition to his body of scholarship. Goldberg does briefly mention some denigrated forms of play, such as reading celebrity gossip blogs and looking at online pornography, but I am left with my appetite whet for more on taste formations. I would be delighted to read about how certain “antisocial” activities are hierarchized in Goldberg’s future work.

It is evident that Goldberg is a superb teacher—when ideas are posited, Goldberg concisely explains their origin and the stakes. Not only is this useful for building interdisciplinary coalitions, but it reads as a work that would be useful for students—at both the undergraduate and graduate level—who would benefit from contextualization in order to advance in the fields with which Goldberg is in conversation: media studies, affect studies, and queer theory, among others. Moreover, it is a book I would recommend to friends and acquaintances who have inquiring minds but bemoan what they consider to be impenetrable academic writing. *Antisocial Media* is not impenetrable, but rather, creates fissures in what is not immediately apparent among the increasingly urgent narratives, ideology, and discourse relating to our contemporary digital economy.

Notes

1. I am certain that these critiques exist in a formal text, but the text I frequently think of that relates to the frivolous use of a politically charged term is Eve Tuck and K.

Wayne Yang’s essay, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” where the authors state: “The metaphorization of decolonization makes possible a set of evasions, or ‘settler moves to innocence’, that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity” (Tuck and Yang, 2012, 1).

References

- Goldberg, Greg. 2017. “Through the Looking Glass: The Queer Narcissism of Selfies.” *Social Media + Society* 3, no. 1 (January–March).doi:10.1177/2056305117698494.
- Goldberg, Greg. 2019. *Antisocial Media: Anxious Labor in the Digital Economy*. New York, NY: NYU Press.
- Tuck, Eve and K. Wayne Yang. 2012. “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1 (1): 1-40.