

The Exploit: A Theory of Networks
by Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker
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Reviewed by Geoff Cox

The Exploit follows in a critical tradition that takes networks to be a key organizational principle for understanding contemporary politics and life in general. Networks are undoubtedly pervasive – for example, from the activities of peer-to-peer file-sharing or swarm intelligence to the operations of economic and financial markets or viruses – but the book is not a further example of technophilic or popular scientific strands but an extension of the critical discourse that has developed around network culture (such as, for example, Rossiter's *Organized Networks* and Terranova's *Network Culture*). Exemplified by its title - a term used by crackers to take advantage of vulnerabilities in networks - the book demonstrates an understanding of how networks operate technically and politically. Suitably, perhaps, it does not follow a conventional academic structure but instead offers a more speculative and experimental approach opening with a short explanatory section on how to take advantage of the book (or perhaps make it vulnerable): the reader is invited to experience the book across the 'prolegomenon' (foreword), its 'nodes' (part I) and 'edges' (part II), and 'coda'; there is the added suggestion to skim the first section by reading italicized sections only (a particularly tempting suggestion for any reviewer). That the reader is informed how to do this in itself says something about the paradoxical subject of the book: in addressing the power relations between sovereignty and networks.

The first section goes into detail on the current 'state of emergency today in the West' in the context of the end of the cold war, the rise of the networked economy and politics after 9/11. The exceptional character of the United States (evoking Schmitt's *Politische Theologie* of 1922, and indeed Agamben's *State of Exception* of 1995) is central to this in relation to an understanding of a system of control that appears to have migrated from decentralized hubs to the 'material fabric of distributed networks'. Rather than take contemporary sovereignty associated with the unilateralist/totalitarian position of the U.S. to lie in opposition to a description of networked informatic control, Galloway and Thacker argue for new understandings of the exceptional character of sovereignty in the age of networks. In this sense, they are following Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (in which power is everywhere and nowhere) but also characterisations of power in the work of Nietzsche, Foucault in which power as plural and decentralised, and others in which power is seen to be ever more mediatised and yet is inadequately identified and named.

As is returned to again and again in the book, network forms of organization actually prescribe power relations and control structures (p. 70). The authors argue that more adequate topologies are required that allow a way to rethink power relations 'diagrammatically' in a manner appropriate to networks and reflecting contemporary political dynamics: 'an approach to understanding networks that takes into account their ontological, technological, and political dimensions' (p. 58).

This position is further and most significantly underpinned by an understanding of biopolitics in the work of Foucault and control in Deleuze, to the concept of the protocol as 'both an apparatus that facilitates networks and a logic that governs how things are done within that apparatus' (p.29). These issues converge around the issue of security in the challenge of managing the networked relations between technologies and biologies – in the curation of viruses (in the sense of caring and curing) and in the management of life itself (referring to Agamben's distinction between bare life and the political subject). Resistance in the context of biopolitics is an active part of dynamic living networks - as 'life-resistance' (p. 78) and as 'multitude' (p. 150). For the argument of the book, discussion hinges on the relations between the human and unhuman that constitutes the network. Networks involve shifts of scale such that action can no longer be attributed to individual agents but to distributed action throughout the network – more in terms of 'edges' than 'nodes' in their terms.

The network has evidently become a manifestation of ideology in itself - and one in which connectivity remains a security threat beyond a purely technical form (in offering a platform for terrorism or counter-terrorism alike). This is the new 'network-network symmetry' of power that follows 'power laws' of variable, uneven and unequal distribution, and that has learned from history to use all varieties of authority and organization at its disposal. The authors even go as far to describe the dynamic as dialectical in as much as control is distributed relatively autonomously in horizontal organizational locales and at the same time into rigid vertical hierarchies or directed commands. This is a socio-technical truism of course, and one that supports the claim that networks and sovereignty are not incompatible. Indeed together they are 'exceptional' and are always related as 'sovereignty-in-networks'. For the authors, this is what makes the American regime so beguiling. Correspondingly, the recommendation to those seeking regime change, or developing oppositional tactics in general, is to take advantage of the vulnerabilities in networks (much like successful computer viruses do) – by exploiting power differentials that exist in the system, thereby uncovering new exploits.