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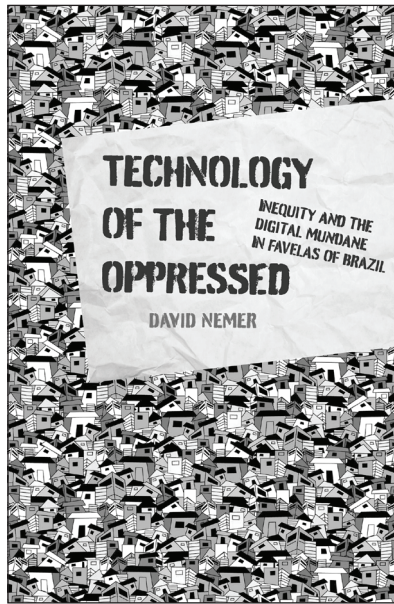
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ANDRE PAGLIARINI

## Review of David Nemer's *Technology of the Oppressed*

“I wish that the technology-enabled, antidemocratic turn in Brazil would have never happened, so I didn’t have to write about it,” David Nemer notes forlornly in *Technology of the Oppressed: Inequity and the Digital Mundane in Favelas of Brazil*. But Nemer’s eclectic new book, drawing on insights from sociology, anthropology, media studies, linguistics, and critical theory, is also hopeful, with stories of individuals overcoming daunting structural challenges to empower themselves and their communities—or at least finding cause to continue believing in the *possibility* of empowerment. Nemer, an assistant professor in the Department of Media Studies at the University of Virginia currently serving as faculty associate at Harvard University’s Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society, provides a rich examination of how digital technologies have reshaped social relations and perceptions of power among poor and working-class Brazilians. At its core, this is a book about Brazil’s landscape of exclusion and the promise and peril of using technology to challenge longstanding social paradigms.

This is obviously an extremely timely work. Brazilians will go to the polls this year to either reelect or remove the far-right extremist president, Jair Bolsonaro, whose victory in 2018 was aided by a coordinated weaponization of social media. Nemer



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recognizes the enduring political stakes of his subject matter. Among other things, he looks closely at “the human infrastructure of fake news,” offering readers without right-wing relatives, friends, or acquaintances on WhatsApp a granular look at how and why an absurd tidal wave of misinformation reached as far as it did in the last election and beyond. “What happened during the 2018 presidential election debunked the idea that WhatsApp is a level playing field,” Nemer asserts. WhatsApp, of course, is the widely used messaging platform owned by

Meta (formerly Facebook) that has lubricated violent social disruptions around the world in recent years, most notably in India and Myanmar. In Brazil’s last election, as Nemer details at length, WhatsApp provided right-wing forces a potent tool to disseminate lies about their political opponents under the guise of spontaneous, friendly communication.

Four years ago, Bolsonaro successfully presented himself as a humble outsider, someone with simple tastes and habits despite serving for decades as a member of Congress. This façade belied a level of calculation that scholars and journalists are still only beginning to understand. Although his support seemed to grow organically over several months, Nemer insists instead that “Bolsonaro’s campaign relied on mis- and disinformation that was

systematically created and spread by a human infrastructure that orchestrated a guided campaign.” In his close examination of how this human chain of information functioned in practice, Nemer adds to the work of journalists like Patrícia Campos Mello and Giuliano da Empoli in fleshing out our understanding of the mechanics of Bolsonarismo.

But this is not merely a survey of technology’s damaging potential. The title of the book is a deliberate reference to Paulo Freire’s landmark 1968 work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which presented a radical, emancipatory approach to education. Freire is among the most cited and lauded of all Brazilian scholars, and his work has influenced generations of academics and activists in myriad fields. As Nemer writes, “Freire’s invitation to others to reinvent his ideas inspired me to develop a framework that seeks to understand why digital technologies can be simultaneously sites of oppression and tools that can be appropriated by the oppressed in their pursuit of freedom.”

Some would argue that oppression is too strong a word to describe the cumulative effects of Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and the like, but Nemer is unequivocal: “Using oppression as an outcome of concern allows us to see complex processes of exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence as centrally driving inequities of the information age.” Identifying these dynamics is the first step in pushing back against the most harmful impacts of digital technology, he argues. The implication is that resistance is possible.

A fascinating dimension of Nemer’s study is his examination of how virtual communities map onto physical spaces. Private LAN houses, shopping malls, and Community Technology Centers figure prominently as sites where the empowering potential of digital tools—not to mention their limits—is made manifest. Whether it’s an individual making use of an affordable internet connection and printer to apply for a job or a group gathering to highlight the exclusionary racism of high-end retail spaces, Nemer discusses big and small ways that technology exposes structural inequalities and, in some cases, offers people hope

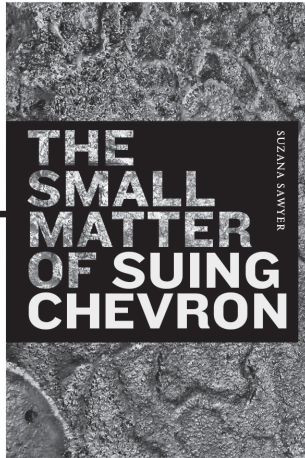
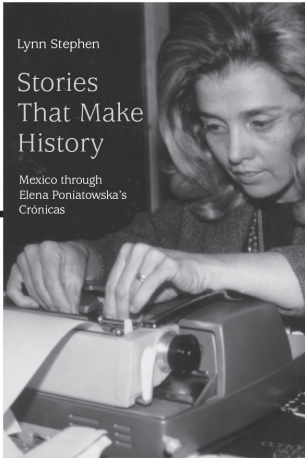
that these can be overcome. In other cases, however, as Nemer documents, social activism rooted in technological connection simply reinforces the frustrations of those long excluded from privileged spaces in Brazilian society. “What is the point of knowing how to create digital content?” asks one of Nemer’s young male interlocutors. “What is the point of all this if people will still look down on me simply because I’m Black?” This is a structural question to which social media has no convincing answer.

It is worth noting the timeline of Nemer’s fieldwork. Carrying out research between 2012 and 2013 across four favelas in the city of Vitória, the capital of Espírito Santo, a coastal state situated between Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, and Bahia, Nemer was in Brazil before and during the massive demonstrations that rocked the country in June 2013. The causes and consequences of those demonstrations will be long debated by scholars of many disciplines. Then-president Dilma Rousseff remained relatively popular as she entered her third year in office, and her administration’s approval rating peaked at 65 percent in March 2013. Three months later, those numbers had plummeted to a mere 30 percent. What happened?

Had Rousseff’s support really been so robust if it could fall apart so quickly? For the favela residents Nemer worked with, the seismic energy of the 2013 demonstrations represented an opportunity. He documents how local organizers sought to direct popular attention to their issues. “Yet,” he observes, “the final demands that were associated with the protests and passed on to government officials were defined by members of the upper classes.” This is a key takeaway of Nemer’s analysis. Digital technologies are a potent tool of contestation and exposure. In the absence of substantive material political reforms, however, they are likely to be most effectively deployed by those who already hold the lion’s share of power. ■

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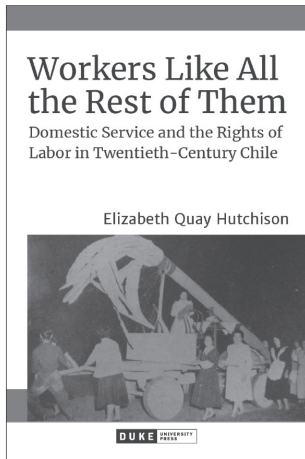
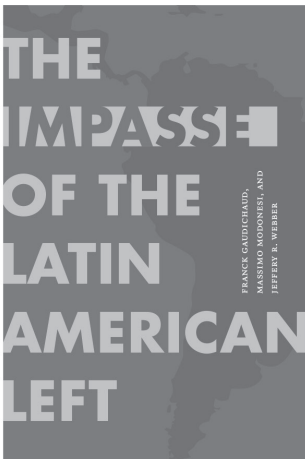
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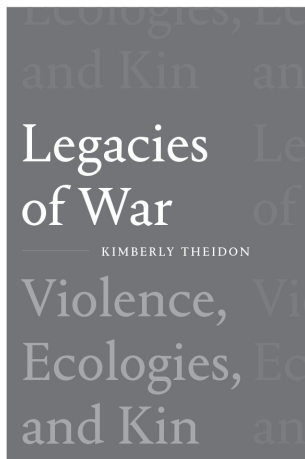
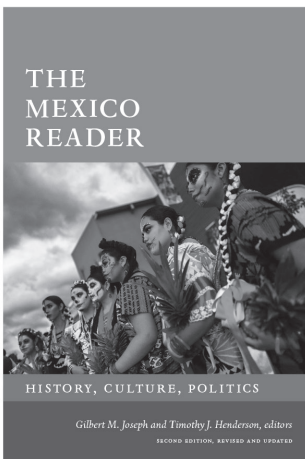


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