



SPEAKERS

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livestream selling  
algorithmic platforms  
digital participation  
cultural representation.

GUESTS

Adam Arvidsson

00:06 MICHAEL DIETER

Welcome to CDI-TV.

00:08 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Welcome to CDI-TV. How do you start the stream?

00:13 MICHAEL DIETER

Well, welcoming people to the show.

00:15 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Welcoming people to the show. Welcoming our global audience, our diverse and global audience from all over the world. Thank you, everybody for tuning in.

00:24 MICHAEL DIETER

We have people here at the Warwick Media Lab, and I think there's a few people tuning in on YouTube

00:27 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Because we are a hybrid event.

00:28 MICHAEL DIETER

We are hybrid.

00:28 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

We are so hybrid.

00:28 MICHAEL DIETER

And if you're online, use the comments. We'll be watching for any questions, any input. So feel free to comment away on our YouTube and Carolina, do you want to..?

00:51 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah, before starting, I want to share with our billions of viewers around the world what I just said to our audience, embodied audience, because we do have also an embodied audience. The fact that I'm realising my childhood dream of being a TV presenter, this is the closest I'm getting, and also my more adult dream of drinking while I am on duty, while I'm doing my job as an Associate Professor at Warwick University. And last but not least, in terms of introduction, we have here, Professor Adam Arvidsson, woo!

01:30 MICHAEL DIETER

Wooo!

01:31 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Applause, cheers]

01:33 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Professor Adam Arvidsson, finally here, all the way from Naples, born and bred in Sweden, travelled the world, worked in Copenhagen, worked in California, did research in Thailand, India, China, to end up finally in Naples. Adam. Why Naples?

01:57 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Well Carolina. It's a long story.

01:59 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Start!

02:01 ADAM ARVIDSSON

It's too long to tell, I think, but let's put it this way. It's an interesting place. It's a bit of a factory of the future, I think.

02:10 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay, it's gonna be difficult if you are that hermetic. Anyhow, Adam has written about brands. He has written about the industrial society, and recently he's working on a new project on the neoplebeian condition, TikTok and the neoplebeian condition. So I know - because I know because you told me, so don't pretend you didn't tell me - that Naples had a role in kind of identifying this new alley of research. So what is it about the city of Naples that inspired this idea of 'the neoplebeian condition'? And also, because, you know, our audience is from everywhere in the world, they might not have been to Naples, so maybe you want to tell us something more. Let's see if formulating like this I will get an answer.

03:06 ADAM ARVIDSSON

[Laughs] Okay, so well, in Italy, Naples exploded on TikTok in the pandemic years. And there was a shift, in a certain sense, from Milan to Naples as the epicentre, the cultural sort of epicentre of the country, and the country started somehow to identify itself much more with Naples than with Milan, right? And, in a certain sense, this represented an epochal shift that was articulated across a whole series of different levels

and events. On the one hand, a shift from a more elitist social media economy centred around Instagram, its more curated aesthetics and its legacy of celebrity culture and self branding etc., to a more popular, or as I call it, *plebeian*, social media economy, which invited a much wider popular participation, but also shift in a wider sense, in a certain sense, I think, on the self representation, or at least at the level of the political unconscious, to use like a norm of the country, from being centred on the dream of sort of middle-class modernity, financial capital, development, real estate, etc., incarnated in Milano, particularly in the after-Expo years, to recognising its truly sort of plebeian nature as a country, en route to perpetual underdevelopment, precarity and underdevelopment, so to say, so that was, in a bit, the shift represented also by that. And why Naples, then? Well, because Naples is a very particular city. It's a city that's often been represented as not fully northern, not fully European, not fully modern, etc. And there's some truth to that because it's a city that has sort of undergone only an incomplete process of industrial modernisation, which has retained a lot of the type of plebeian characteristics which were common to European metropolis in the 17th and 18th century, before the period of industrialisation, and that has sort of remained parts of the city being dominated by a very solid plebeian social block, which has remained, not unaltered of course, but in force, so to say, up until today. And in a certain sense, the arrival of this new social media economy of TikTok, which allows for this much wider participation, has given this type of plebeian economic and cultural practices a new window of expression, and has, in a certain sense, turbo-charged them, both at the local level, but also to the point that Italian popular culture is becoming increasingly dominated by this imaginary of

Neopolitan street sellers on TikTok or or restaurants creating Baroque concoctions of hot dogs with pizza on top, etc.

06:20 MICHAEL DIETER

Can I ask you just a point of clarification, why this term plebeian exactly? I think you offered some explanation now, but when I read the title of your talk, I wondered is this an offensive term? I'm familiar with it as an insult, but it has some history. There's some more going on with the use of this term. Why did you use this one?

06:42 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And being offensive, do you want to be cancelled or not?

06:45 ADAM ARVIDSSON

[Laughs] Well, there is an offensive term to it, of course, right? But the reason I chose to use it was that I was playing around a lot with attempts to sort of distinguish between popular, bourgeois, middle class, etc., but I found most of these terms are like monikers that don't really have a lot of theoretical content. So I was experimenting with different terms, and then I got fascinated by this term plebeian, because, of course, it's a term that, you're right, it's a term that has a history of being offensive, but it's also term that is very much rooted in the political theory of early modernity, and the plebeian and the plebs was a fundamental problem for political theory, but also for the practice of what Michel Foucault calls governmentality, starting in the 16th century and onwards, and a period also which has a lot of parallels with our times, in the sense of a period being of a transition towards a fairly unexpected future, but also being marked by what a lot of people now refer to as processes of 're-

feudalization'; that is, a strengthening of inequalities and the strengthening of sort of irrational types of political forms, etc.

So I started to study the history of this term a little bit and found it quite fascinating, because apart from sort of referring to a group of people that you could also refer to in terms of popular classes or underclass, or these sorts of things, it also has a very particular meaning, because the plebeian throughout early modern political history, and perhaps culminating with Hegel and Hegel's notion of the Pöbel, etc, has this combination of an outside that is inside society, right? Something that is inside society, but that can never be fully included. For Hegel, the Pöbel is a group that is marked by its fundamental negativity and refusal of the state. And I thought that was interesting, because I think our times are marked very much by a tendency towards the general generalization of these types of new forms of marginality, in the sense that, contrary to the 17th century plebs, the neoplebeian is not a residual from a sort of a pre-modern past, but it's something that's generated by modernity itself, in the sense that a lot of people who have been sucked into modernity and to the promise of wage labor and consumer society and so on are now being, or their children are now being, spit out again in a certain sense, right? And find themselves in conditions of precarity, but also, in a certain sense, in a condition of adversity towards what they understand to be the established notions of contemporary modernity. So I thought maybe the concept was fruitful in that sense and I hope to be able to develop it and see if it works, essentially.

Yeah, I mean when I read it, and as you explain it now, I guess the more official concept would be that it's an intervention in or you're in dialogue with something like class composition. In terms of the history of Naples, you were saying that it's always been a bit of a plebeian kind of condition there for some, but then now you're saying it's turbo-charged, and these platforms have a role. So if we're thinking about it like the class composition, what happens in that transition? I think you said a few things like, okay, there's precarity, you know, but also it goes digital in a way. Can you talk a little bit about the class composition of the *neo*-plebeian? Is it different from Naples previously? Are the practices different, the aesthetics and so on?

11:02 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

And also, I think that, yeah, when you're talking about the neoplebeian condition, you are referring to Naples, but not only to Naples. So perhaps you can tell us something more about the class composition and also the geography, because it seems like Naples is a case study of a condition and of a phenomenon that is wider.

11:29 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Sure, and I'll start with that question. Yeah, I mean, I see Naples in a certain sense as a privileged observatory, so the title of this paper that I sent, 'Sohn-Rethel in Naples' is like a pun on, you know, 'Marx in Detroit' and 'Adam Smith in Beijing' and all these sorts of things.<sup>[1]</sup> Like a bit of a pretentious pun, but nevertheless. So to see this city as a privileged observatory of a lot of tendencies that are now underway globally and are being theorised in terms of the surrounds or under-globalisation, or the South and Global South and all these sorts of things.

There are a number of these types of tendencies that tend to focus on, maybe starting with the Comaroffs in the early 2000s, their work on *Millennial Capitalism* that focuses, in a certain sense, on this type of tendency towards renewed exclusion and ejection in a certain sense of a large mass of people, right? [2] So I want to sort of latch on to that type of tendency, and of course, speak about something that is affirming itself globally, and not just in the Global South. I think if you look at my home country, Sweden, you can see very, very strong tendencies towards the this process of neoplebeisation in the terms of the growth of peripheries, the growth of criminal economies, and the growth of populations that are considered, at least in official discourses, to be sort of irredeemably outside any sort of project of modernity, etc. Another point with the term plebeian is that it's not about class. I mean, the plebe is not class, right? That's the fundamental thing of the way in which plebe has become lumpenproletariat, at least in the Marxist tradition. It's something that, within the Marxist tradition, has been understood to be, in a certain sense, almost antithetical to class, right? Something that is, and that's been - the plebeian is, in a way, that group of people which are hopeless from a political point of view, that cannot recompose themselves, so to say. And in that sense, I think there's some novelty going on because, on the one hand, of course, the neoplebeian is an aggregate of people who are from sort of a traditional underclass background, but their ranks are now being joined by a lot of people who come from both the old working classes and increasingly also the downwardly mobile middle classes, right? So that, of course, opens up the question of can this be understood as a new type of class, and can there be some sort of movement of recomposition going on here? And that, of course, in a

certain sense, is the big question to which I don't really have any answer, but I'm trying a little bit to look for these types of tendencies, right? And I think one of the areas in which this is being articulated right now, at least at the cultural more than the political level, is through the global spread of media and consumer culture.

14:34 MICHAEL DIETER

Just another context question. Can you talk a little bit about who do you work with on this topic, and how do you do this research? Because when I read the blurb that you sent us, I thought, oh, this is kind of fieldwork that you're doing. But then you did share, I think you just referenced a piece of writing that I guess will be coming out soon, you shared it with Carolina and I, that was in a - and I should say I thoroughly enjoyed reading it - but it was more theoretical kind of contribution. So can you talk a little bit about how you do this research and who you work with?

15:11 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Well, I mean, the idea came out of we've been doing now about a year of fieldwork on the digitalisation of popular economies in Naples, and 'we' meaning we have a research group of almost almost ten people who are working on this, some PhD students and some postdocs, and also some Masters students who are working with us, who've been doing a lot of digital ethnography and a lot of interviews, etc. And we've been focusing a lot on how different sectors are being redefined through the impact of primarily TikTok, but also other platforms of this sort of second generation: Temu and so on. So we've been looking at the tourist economy. We'll also be looking at street vendors. A lot of these street vendors have been able to use TikTok to create brands which makes them locally or even

nationally popular, and then they receive investments, and then they start their own chain stores. And usually it doesn't work very well because this stuff is also very temporary, so it's probably better synced with like a logic of pop-up than brands of longer duration. And we've been looking at the counterfeit economy, which always been very active in the city Naples, together in Marseille and Istanbul, being one of the centres of the global counterfeit, and how this is now locking into 'dupe culture' and street fashion that is being defunded on TikTok, and how TikTok is being used by the sellers of counterfeit merchandise to sell things beyond the markets and nationally or even at the European level. And we've been looking a lot about family business and restaurants and so on, and how they are using this type of thing. So we've been doing a lot of fieldwork, and in a sense, the theoretical paper that I sent you is something that sort of came out of the fieldwork, because that's something that's often happened to me, that you do like a very empirically driven work, and you also, you know, write things about that, which is very data-driven, but then at a certain point you get, like, an idea from that, in a sense. So that's probably how it developed.

17:20 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Staying a bit on the empirical side of it. When you started telling me about this research, and also recently I went to Naples, so I had the chance to talk also to some of Adam's collaborators, PhD[s], postdocs and colleagues like Vincenzo Luise and others, I think one of the most fascinating things about this research is really this gallery of characters. A gallery of characters that we all can meet, indeed, on TikTok and it's a very diverse humanity at stake. So can you introduce us to some of these characters? Who are these people? What are they doing on TikTok?

18:22 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Okay. [Laughs] Well, there's people who are livestreaming stolen Rolex watches, for example...

18:39 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

[Inaudible]

18:39 ADAM ARVIDSSON

...buy something. There's a former employee of a salumeria - sandwich or gastronomy store - who sort of became famous on TikTok by his particular way of making sandwiches, and then sort of quit his job and launched his own brand of sandwich stores, which has now opened up throughout Italy, including Dubai, which was where everybody needs to open up, in Dubai.

19:09 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

This is Antico Vinaio, right?

19:10 ADAM ARVIDSSON

No, Antico Vinaio is from Florence.

19:13 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Yeah.

19:14 ADAM ARVIDSSON

No, this is called Mollica o Senza. And then there's this phenomenon of couples quarreling, which is really, really big,

19:22 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

What is that?

19:23 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Couples quarreling, young couples quarreling, which is really big. [Malesere?] which is my PhD student, Roberto, is working on, and which is quite interesting, because it's this sort of staged performances of very violent intimacy, right? It's people refusing any type of discursivity and then just sort of screaming at each other and also reinforcing old, sort of rooted stereotypes of masculinity and in a certain sense, fairly chauvinist behaviours. Although the women are also quite active, they're not like mere victims in any way. But it's in a certain sense, a sort of- almost like a plebeian counter-narrative about intimacy, right? As if all these feminists have told us that we have to be in a certain way, but we are like this. So there are a lot of these different things.

20:19 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Can you tell the one about the housewives? What are they doing?

20:28 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Well, I mean, these are also activities that are fairly much inscribed within what I, but also Melinda Cooper, calls the industrious family, right? <sup>[3]</sup> So, a sort of a family that is ever more opening up to a diversified

economy of small and often marginal revenue streams, which are also opening up quite a lot to the opportunities given now by TikTok and Temu, etc. So you have all these types of characters that are, I mean, it's a sort of a continuation of the Tupperware party, it's just that it's being mediated in this new way, so you have people who are maybe ordering large amounts of cheap cosmetics from Temu, and then they have these livestreaming on TikTok when they're sort of selling it, speaking dialect, and, you know, maybe dressed up in their house dress and standing in their living room and answering to the comments that are coming out, etc. I guess this is a quite global phenomenon in the sense that I think it's also happening a lot in - there's been some articles about people like this in Indonesia, as well in Thailand, and I think also China. It's a place where - so in a certain sense, TikTok is opening up these types of possibilities for participation in [an] industrious market economy, also for people who don't have a store or don't have the classical qualities of salesmanship, etc, right?

21 : 55 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So to kind of retrace a bit the journey that we've done so far, we are talking about this neoplebeian condition. And with plebeian we mean those who have been, as you said, ejected from the main structures of modernity, that haven't had access to talk about the present, to the neoliberal pillars of what is a good life, and that somehow, you are saying, that they are retaking - that the plebeian culture is retaking kind of centre-stage, both in terms of the practices and the economic practices, what you call industriousness, which is also related to your previous book, *Changemakers: The Industrious Future of the Digital Economy*, or something like that. <sup>[4]</sup>

22:56 ADAM ARVIDSSON

[Laughs]

22:57 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

So these are the informal economies, the sort of unstructured forms of entrepreneurship that kind of make things do, or make ends meet, or whatever you say in English, *arrabatarse* [snatch] for our Italian audience. So the trickery, the sort of bricolage economies, and on the other hand, coupled to that, also the culture, the discursive aspect, the aesthetic. So we are talking about an economic phenomenon. We are talking about an aesthetic phenomenon. You've briefly mentioned the style - counterfeit sneakers are very important to the neoplebeian condition and the aesthetic of the industriousness. So if the good old Georg Simmel would be with us, he would surely write a pamphlet on the counterfeit sneakers and their meaning. And we are saying this is kind of *platformized* - I know I said platformized, this should be like the P-word of media scholars - so this has been platformized, remediated by TikTok, so we can see these characters, so we can see this culture, these practices, really getting viral or mainstream on TikTok. And so my question is, why do you think TikTok? What is there in the TikTok aesthetic and affordance that make this possible? Why TikTok and not Instagram, Facebook or, well LinkedIn probably we all know why, but you know, for the sake of rhetoric, let's put LinkedIn into the picture.

24:54 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Well, I mean, there was a little bit on Instagram and Facebook also, I mean, it's more of a continuum, but of course TikTok did change things a lot because the TikTok platform has a number of characteristics - I

didn't say affordances, do you notice that, characteristics? [Laughs]

25:10 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Well done, the A-word.

25:11 ADAM ARVIDSSON

- that lowers the barriers to participation a lot, right? I mean, first of all, the short video format, which developed also in the trajectory of development of TikTok in a Chinese context where there was a need, both economic and political, to platformize a number of sort of predominantly rural but less digitally literate users, and TikTok has been traditionally aimed at minor, like second- and third-tier cities, as it's known, etc, but also political pressure to do that. And secondly also its algorithms, which are different from that of Instagram and Facebook, because they're not based on the social graph logic, they're based on a much wider combination of things. So it means that even though you don't have a large number of followers, you can still 'make it' in a sense, because Instagram is structured in such a way that the winner takes all logic of people who have a large number of followers will be much more easily viral. So there's a number of characteristics of the platform which has made it conducive to wider popular participation and also to the favouring of local and localised content, right? So then TikTok tend[s] to create these sort of bubbles of local economies around it. And at the same time, it also has this very institutionalised insecurity or precarity, everybody we talk to agree[d] on this, that Instagram is a very unstable environment - you don't know when you're going to get cancelled or shut down, and you don't really understand why, etc. So it's, in a

certain sense, it's very despotic, in this sense, right, in terms of its opaque, impenetrable algorithm, etc. But that's, you know, also something that is a bit - it resonates, in a certain sense, with this type of plebeian or neoplebeian structure of feeling where the idea of improbability and insecurity, and also this type of unpredictability of gains, in a certain sense, is quite rooted in everyday life. And of course, what happens is also that you get a social media economy which is only partly platformized in the sense that it's also very rooted in neighbourhood and family and community, etc, and re-embedded in a Polanyian sense, right? So the family and the neighbourhood operates and creates like both economic and perhaps, above all, ideological safeguards against this constant precarity. There is a sort of a moral economy rooted in the family that sort of enables people to endure this type of precarity without experiencing it as much as an existential threat, right? So in a certain sense, it's a type of social media economy where people are not so much 'selling themselves' in the idea of Ilana Gershon and others,<sup>[5]</sup> but selling a performance while their real selves, in a certain sense, are anchored elsewhere, right?

28:17 MICHAEL DIETER

I think I just want to take a minute to see whether there's any comments from online, or questions. If not, I'll just invite anybody tuned in online to feel free to post any comments or questions. But then, for the people here with us in the Media Lab, just open things up - I think at this point now, we've covered, I think, some aspects of your research and raised a number of different topics and angles - whether there's any comments or contributions people would like to make.

28:54 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

That is the awkward moment in which people are there and people from this side are like, is the audience gonna engage or not? And if not, why? Have we sucked that much?

29:09 ADAM ARVIDSSON

[Laughs]

29:11 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

People can wave, do you want to ask a question?

29:14 MICHAEL DIETER

It's an invitation to wave.

29:16 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay, well, while you might find inspiration for a question, I do have one though. So one of the ways in which I relate to this idea of the neoplebeian condition, or in which I understood it kind of immediately, is related to my experience of sitting on the sofa, and my partner looks at TikTok, and I see people cleaning carpets, and people filling sandwiches, and people, you know, cleaning very dirty dishes and doing other things which I don't understand. At some point, there were people in a Japanese canteen cooking like kilos and kilos, an enormous quantity of noodles, and so on the one hand, we've been talking now about the people who do these - who perform these tasks or activities, and who produce these discourses or this aesthetic. What about the audience? What is [it] that we find as an audience in this kind of content that is very different from the content of social networks such as Facebook or Twitter or

former Twitter, rest in peace, and Instagram for sure. So Instagram had this aspirational, I think, aspect, at least in its mainstream content, like: *ah, this is the life that I would like to live; this is the pair of shoes that I would like to wear.* And Facebook had this idea of kind of a pseudo-Habermasian public sphere in which we discuss issues and will deliberate and the best argument will win. Turns out, spoiler: doesn't. And then now we seem to be attracted by very different kind of content, what you call the neoplebeian content, the neoplebeian aesthetic. Why? What is there for the audience who do not necessarily live, would not necessarily have, the embodied experience of the plebeian condition?

31:57 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Well, I mean, first of all, I think TikTok has a very wide variety of different types of content, and not all of it can be sort of subsumed under this term 'the neoplebeian', right? What I mean by that is something quite specific. It's rather the other way around; it's that TikTok has offered a platform for these plebeian actors to participate actively in the production of cultural content, right? A platform that wasn't really there or not to the same extent, at least. I mean, of course, there were some channels, etc, and there were some some aspects that allowed for this, right? So I wouldn't sort of subsume everything on TikTok under this idea, right? I mean, there's also, like, political activism, and there's a whole series of different things. But it has given a significant boost to this type of neoplebeian aesthetic, and it's also made it very attractive. It's made it very attractive. I mean, if you think about the Italian situation then, of course, in a certain sense, the symbolic victory of the neoplebeian is the informal sort of plebiscite victory of Geolier at Sanremo, right, which is sort of a triumph of this new idea of an Italy...

33:18 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

...maybe you should say what is Sanremo?

33:20 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Sanremo is the famous Eurovision Song Contest festival in Italy, which has always been dominated by the idea of Milano and the Milanese aesthetic of modernity and refinement and fashion and design, etc. And last year, the popular vote favoured this Neapolitan rapper who walks around in these type of Adidas track suits and sneakers, which you can then buy high quality fakes of on the street or on livestreams on TikTok, and was very, very inserted into this type of neoplebeian aesthetic and became, you know, a fundamental reference for the self-representation of the country in the sense that also the Neapolitan dialect, for example, has become very influential now even [in] northern Italy, people in the suburbs are trying to use these terms and are being inspired. People are listening to neomelodico, which was a very local type of music, even in Milan's suburbs right now. So it's as if the centre of cultural gravity has moved, in a certain sense, from Milan and...

34:25 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

But why?

34:25 ADAM ARVIDSSON

But why? Well, probably it's a sort of an unconscious recognition of the general direction of the development of the country, right? I think, I mean, this is the way in which the economic and demographic

indicators are all pointing in that direction, and not only for Italy, but I think for most of Europe in general, right? So I think this is... it's got something to do with TikTok, in the sense that TikTok provides a forum for this, but it's also something that I think reflects a general structural and cultural development all across the industrialised north, so to say, right, and not just there.

35:15 MICHAEL DIETER

Oh, yep, we have a question.

35:17 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Shall I bring the microphone? Yes.

35:21 MICHAEL DIETER

Yep.

35:22 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I'm very happy to be able to do this.

35:25 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Thank you so much. Really interesting concept, and I'm curious if there's a relationship between closing public space on the streets and the expansion of this kind of expression on social media. And I'm just wondering about this because of a conversation I had with a young person in the US who said, you know, one of the reasons why we're all on Discord in these other online spaces is we, as young people, cannot be outside anymore. There is no space we're allowed to gather. And I think of Naples as having this

very vibrant street life, and I'm curious whether that has changed and whether there's a dialectical relationship. Thanks.

36:05 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Well, no, I think there's no contradiction here, right? At least for this type of neoplebeian culture, there is no contradiction, really, between the digital spaces and the street life, in a sense. And I think that's also true for... I mean, if you look at a country like Sweden, which also had a very strong sort of process of neoplebeisation, but what you get is new spaces: the spaces that are in the suburbs and the peripheries, right? While you might have a process of securitisation of the more inner-city spaces, that also have higher real estate values, but then you get like these new peripheral spaces which are not really surveilled, and which are linked also to, you know, street markets and underground economies and criminal economies, etc., and creating, and maybe interlinked also, with these new type of media spaces. So I think it's a question of the construction of a different type of spatiality, right? And I don't know enough about the United States, but I would imagine, I mean, there's a really good book called *Hinterland*, which discusses this in relation to, I think it's Seattle, right? <sup>[6]</sup> And the contradiction between, on the one hand, you might have like the inner-city spaces and the middle-class spaces being emptied out and you have all these statistics, right? People showing that they're spending less time with friends, and they're socialising less, and they're more on social media. But then you have like these other spaces of what he calls the hinterlands, like the suburbs, the warehouses, the the places where the French *gilets jaunes* were demonstrating were the roundabouts, which is another type of space which is

coming out. So I think there is probably a reconstruction of spatiality around this, rather than just simple substitution.

38:20 MICHAEL DIETER

Another question.

38:20 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Another question, wow! One sec.

38:25 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Hi, you make a distinction between Instagram and TikTok in terms of digital spaces now, as opposed to physical spaces, and I see a lot of the same content on - that Carolina was describing as TikTok, like the, you know, the smashing bottles and red hot ball experiments and extremely satisfying cleaning - on Instagram reels as well. So they kind of blur together a little bit. Maybe this is too much about my personal viewing history. But do you think that there is something different about the way that those two platforms operate in terms of algorithms? Because you've argued, I think that Instagram is more self-branding, is more celebrity, is more individuals, and TikTok is more ephemeral, random content and people who are posting are having to kind of go with the flow and jump on whatever's trendy at the moment rather than trying to build some consistent self-brand. Is that in the algorithms? Does that mean TikTok tends to push you towards content rather than towards people?

39:35 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Well, I should say Instagram was because Instagram started out as being more centered on self-branding

and celebrity culture, and these types of social graph-based algorithms. But of course, also as a response to the popularity of TikTok, Instagram has incorporated a lot of features, both things like Reels and aesthetic features, but also it's tweaked its algorithm to make it work more like TikTok. So I think there's a convergence now. So what you could say is, maybe you can think about a shift in hegemony in the social media economy, from the Instagram model to the TikTok model, meaning that Instagram is also becoming more like TikTok in a sense, right?

40:17 MICHAEL DIETER

Yeah, I have a question about what happens to money in these peoplebeian conditions? Because, you know, we live in...

40:27 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

What happens to money in general, I would say. If you have [inaudible] you can, let me know!

40:32 MICHAEL DIETER

...well, I think like money, you know, we understand it as media. It's been thoroughly digitised. There's so many new ways to engage in transaction. There's so many new kinds of value produced from these platforms, not just crypto, of course, but all of these other new platforms. The plebeian condition, I suppose, always had its informal economies, but now they're transformed, I assume, through these platforms. In some situations, in some conditions, this is sort of described as a formalisation of informal economies. That's how I've read about it being analysed and thought about in India, for example, or in China. In your research, though, what do you see happening to the way money is exchanged, [the] way value is produced? What kind of platforms are relevant? Is this a

formalisation of that informal economy, or are there new kinds of things emerging that are also kind of informal, unruly?

41:45 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Well, I mean, there's definitely a growth of these, let's call them plebeian economies. Like economies that are rooted in neighbourhoods, and that are sort of living at the margin between the formal and the informal in a certain sense. And they're also very much linked to family economies, in the sense that these types of TikTok practices are often understood as a 'side hustle' that contributes to the family as the place where income streams are pooled, etc. There's a definite boost of these economies in terms of the turnover, but also the geographical reach, in the sense that they're able to sell a lot of things that are not just at the local level, but also on the national, region, European level. And that's probably most relevant for the downright illegal economies, like the counterfeit trade, for example. It's linked, of course, to tourism as well, because at the same time as TikTok and this thing has come, then Naples also has had an enormous boost in the tourism presence, going from 3 to 12 million tourists a year, from 2019 until now.

So, of course, there's a lot more money going around and a lot more possibilities of accumulating. And it's interesting to see, I think it will be interesting to see the types of sort of capital accumulation that are emerging with this, right? To which extent these type of popular economies will translate into investments in the tourist sector, and who is doing these investments, and if there's going to be a consolidation of large actors in that, right? And there's already a very strong presence of organised crime in the tourist sector, because that's a way of laundering money, etc. And it seems to be now that there are some investments

from global chains, like Starbucks has been opening up, for example.

But I don't know if they're going to be a turnover to sort of corporate valuations of this type of plebeian mass creativity or not. Whether it's a matter of formalisation or not? I don't think so, because I don't think there is much of an... I mean, there's never been much of an effort on the part of the authorities in the Neapolitan context to bring these type of plebeian economies into the formal sector, because they're also understood to be, in a certain sense, there's a sort of sustenance for people who don't have a job, in a sense. Like, for example, the smuggled cigarette sectors, which has been active ever since the Second World War, has never really been seriously repressed by the authorities, because they understood that if they did that, they would get a popular revolt on their hands. There's also sort of a feature of the neoplebeian in the certain sense is that they riot, right, in also many very violent ways, in a sense, so you don't have a- and I think the same thing here. I don't think there is much of an interest in going in and sort of see if these housewives that are drop-shipping are actually paying taxes on what they're doing or not, right? I think that's not on the agenda so much at all. So, hm.

45:08 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Oh, wow.

45:09 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

I don't know if I can go in the frame, somehow. There was a tangent question from the chat, which probably it comes from some connection sparkling from your talk, which is, if you ever seen

the movie *La classe operaia va in Paradiso*, which would be an Elio Petri movie from the 70s, roughly translated into like 'The Working Class Goes to Heaven,' which is like a brutal and beautiful depiction of the working class, Italian working class of the 70s, and what do you think about that?

45:42 ADAM ARVIDSSON

What I think about that movie? Well, I think Gian Maria Volonté is probably one of the greatest actors of the 20th century, and he makes a great role performance in that, and it's a great film. What do I think about the Italian working class in the 70s is that the question, or...? [Laughs]

45:43 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

Yeah, in the chat, they were asking about your opinion on this movie. [It] will remain a mystery, so you are free to give your own take on this.

46:02 ADAM ARVIDSSON

[Laughs]

46:03 CECILIA GHIDOTTI

A bit of anarchy in the livestream.

46:12 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I know there's another question from the audience, so I'm coming there. But maybe one way of looking at this question is, is there a continuity between the Italian working class of the

70s and neoplebeian? And this actually leads to a question that I had, so I'm sort of jumping on the viewer question, but can we talk of an ideology of the neoplebeian? And with ideology, I mean a kind of political system of idea. So if the working class had been like politicised and associated to leftwing politics, workerism, and so on. Can we think along analogous lines for the neoplebeian? A more down-to-earth way of putting the question would be, is the neoplebeian from the left or the right, or something else?

47:27 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Yeah, that's a really interesting question, right? I mean, on the one hand, of course there is a sort of an anti-ideological attachment. In the sense that there is a certain embrace of immediacy, right? In a certain sense, the neoplebeian condition is also a condition without the future. It's the condition of the present, in a sense. I remember when we had our undergraduate students reading Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*, then they said, well, what's strange with this? <sup>[7]</sup> That's how it's always been, right? Because, I mean, the idea that you would somehow, that your activities would somehow be pointing towards an ideologically envisioned future is just not the case in these circumstances, right? It's always been like, it's a matter of sort of making do and surviving and going on for another.

But of course, there is presently a political articulation, in a sense, I think, of the neoplebeian, which tends to be very much linked to what we probably would call 'the right,' even though those distinctions maybe matter less than what we think. But I mean, of course, if you take something like Trumpism or a lot of the *gilets jaunes* or also some of the movements against COVID restrictions, etc., that happened a couple of years ago, they probably wouldn't frame themselves

to be at the right all of the time, but most people do call them that. But what they do have, I think usually, and I've been looking at that a little bit, and what they seem to have is like a combination of, on the one hand, a sometimes very astute capacity to understand how things work on the basis of facts, combined with the most absurd interpretations at the level of overall analysis, right? So you can have these people who are completely competent in detailing the roles of the armaments industry in prolonging the war in Ukraine, but at the same time claim that aliens are governing the United States. So you can have the combination of, like, two levels of analysis.

And I don't really know why that is. I mean, I can guess why it is. It's probably because, on the one hand, there's been very little attempt at genuine Gramscian approaches on the part of people at the left. People on the left just don't want to talk to these people usually, right? I mean, the United States now you have an enormous cleavage between the two and there's very little in terms of reaching out. Secondly, I think that there's also sort of nostalgia. I mean, one of the political ontologies that you often meet when you talk to people who I would describe as neoplebeian in the sense, is the overall presence of a conspiracy, right? Everything is a conspiracy. There's always someone who has been doing- you know, global warming is not global warming. It's they, they're doing geo-engineering or something like that. And I think the conspiracy is, it's a nostalgic theory of power, right? Because it's, in a certain sense, as if things worked as they used to work in the family firm. The Illuminati tells Bill Gates what to do, and he tells someone else, and it's sort of power goes down the line, and it's sort of, it's reassuring, in a sense, but then at the same time, the conspiracy is also a certain degree-zero of politics,

right? It's something that always pops up in periods when there are no other types of solutions. I mean, if you also see the period of, if you go back to the 17th century, the transition to modernity, is also a period of conspiracies, of witch trials, of the presence of Satan everywhere. So there is a certain way it's almost as if it was a lack of an overall politics, in a sense, and I don't really know if that, how that can be transformed, or if it can be built on, or if it [can] have a progressive potential or not. I really have no idea.

51:31 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Okay, we'll stay tuned to understand if the neoplebeian can sort of articulate a new political scenario beyond aliens governing the UK. Although, you know, sometimes when I talk to people that agree with conspiracy theories - it happens to me recently in Naples, but also elsewhere, like everywhere in the world - sometimes I get this feeling and I think, what if they're right? What if aliens are governing the UK? Because, you're right, there is this... the US. Oh, yeah, that was an interesting lapsus. Well, I wouldn't necessarily exclude that aliens are governing also the UK, but we have a question from the audience, but you already have a microphone, so.

52:24 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Yes, I have to apologise, my question may be a little bit long, and my explanation may not be good, so maybe it's wasting your time. But I'm Leah from China, and this is where TikTok was born, so I observed some interesting phenomena that I want to share with you, and know your opinion of it. Firstly, is that I see that social media on the internet during these years has undertaken some very interesting changes. Firstly, a long time ago, it was forums [where] everyone had an equal chance to share their opinion, and they had an equal chance to be seen. But all

these things, like opinions to be shared, are in text, and this is why I think they have a smaller audience. Less use of these forums is not only because we don't have these digital devices, but also text has high barriers, especially long text, has high barriers for the audience to understand what the author wants to express. But then we have all digital devices. Everyone has smartphones, personal computers. We have Facebook, we have Instagram, that we can use images. We use pictures to share our feelings, to share our opinions, so that we have a lot more users, and now we have TikTok. TikTok is for showing videos. Maybe someone may think taking a video is more difficult than taking pictures, but I don't think so, because to share something in a short, but not that high requirement for your technical skills, is lowering the barrier for people, for all these people who do not have high skills to be seen by their production of content. These kinds of apps may create more chances for people to share their own feelings. So at least that's why I think TikTok may become very popular these years, because we have a lot of people that are not professionals sharing their own feelings. And this is my feeling to these apps, and maybe this can answer your question, gentlemen.

But this caused another question, another issue is like a lot of people, especially who are not familiar with these kinds of sharing pattern, a lot of their contents of TikTok are vulgar, are of low taste, but I have an experience in a training section which tells people how to sell their products on TikTok, especially on livestream, livestream selling. The teacher told us that you don't have to create things that are meaningful. You just have to attract others' attention, especially those who are not that familiar with those high quality contents. This is what I found very interesting on TikTok. And you talked about the livestream selling, and this is very popular in China nowadays. And [what] I want to talk about is that this kind of pattern is

always blamed for the low quality, for the loud streaming, for the not very good products. They are blamed for that. But they have very high sales, and they create a lot of job opportunities for the people who jump into this industry. And this is a very interesting phenomenon, I think. So I want to know your opinion about this. And one last thing I want to talk about is the comments on TikTok.

56:59 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

You have a lot to say now!

57:02 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

Yeah, because I am very familiar with TikTok. It's the comments on TikTok. Maybe you can observe that everyone can see different comments on the same shots of TikTok because the app will present the thing that you want to see, not only the video, but also the comments only on it. The comments on it are the things that you are interested in. So that I think this is kind of echo chamber. And do you think it is a good thing for all of us to see the thing that I we want to see, or do you think we should see the thing that is not, what always we want to see, but it has more diversity. Okay?

57:59 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

[Italian]

58:02 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Yeah, no, I mean it's obvious that you know much more [about] TikTok than we do. So I'm sure we can develop this further. I mean, I don't think I have much to add. I mean, I think one of the things that we tend to forget, is that, you know, there've been these periods of

different types of enthusiasm for the digital media, or the Internet, as we used to call it in the 1990s, but in the 1990s a lot of people thought that digital media could revitalise the public sphere in a sense, but we have to remember that in the 1990s the Internet was populated by 50 million intellectuals, right? There were mostly people in universities that were on the Internet.

58:45 MICHAEL DIETER

Those were the days(!)

58:46 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

[Laughs]

58:47 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Now it's 5 billion people from all types of different structures, right?

58:51 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Much better now.

58:52 ADAM ARVIDSSON

So is that good or bad? I have no idea, but I'm sure we can talk more about it in the break afterwards. So thank you very much for your comments. It was very insightful.

59:04 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

I think it's six, so it's time to give our guests a glass.

59:10 EMBODIED AUDIENCE

[Applause]

59:14 MICHAEL DIETER

Thank you so much. Thank you so much for joining us on this stream. And for anybody who's tuned in, thank you for tuning in, and everybody that came to the Media Lab for the session today. We'll have another stream in one month. So pay attention to...

59:32 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Do you remember the exact date?

59:34 MICHAEL DIETER

I think it's December 4th.

59:36 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

December 4th exactly.

59:37 MICHAEL DIETER

On the Wednesday as well, and it will be Craig Gent, and he'll be discussing his new book with Verso, called Cyberboss, about algorithmic management. So yeah, keep an eye out for that. And yeah, thanks again.

59:52 ADAM ARVIDSSON

Thank you!

59:54 CAROLINA BANDINELLI

Good night and good luck.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Published as Adam Arvidsson, Vincenzo Luise and Luca Recano, 'Sohn-Rethel in Naples. On Plebeian Creativity,' *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, May 2, 2025, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/13675494251336604> †
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