

The Neoliberal Road to AI-Powered Serfdom?

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Friedrich Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* served as a key piece of magnet that attracted like-minded capitalists, strategists, politicians and academics into a critical mass in incubating, spreading, and successfully implementing neoliberal policies across the world. Eighty years after the publication of the book, "serfdom" appears to be an increasingly appropriate word for describing the world we live in, for reasons opposite to what Hayek had postulated throughout his career. In *Technofeudalism—What Killed Capitalism*, Yanis Varoufakis explains why capitalism is already dead, and "cloud serfs"—not citizens of sovereign nations—more aptly captures our immediate role in the privatized and inescapably digitized world. Varoufakis' grim diagnosis ignited a debate on whether capitalism is still alive and well or has already given way to (neo)feudalism, with Evgeny Morozov and Henry Snow arguing the former and Mariana Mazzucato, Michael Hudson, and Jodi Dean contending the latter. As this fascinating debate continues on, technological breakthroughs are being made with mind-boggling speed, catapulting the world into a new reality created by systems at least as advanced as GPT-4 and Bard.

Precisely how advanced the technology actually is and will be are not open information; it stays with the handful private companies that own such technology. While the advancement and production of AI technology are already affecting lives of billions of people, the way societies are organized, and the furthering of the planet's health deterioration, with alarm sounded by authors such as Yuval Harari on the future of our civilization, a vast majority of human beings—including those living in democracies—have no say about where AI is going and what it is allowed to do to us. Instead of protesting, the public tend to cheer whoever go on the stage announcing yet another breakthrough as superheroes.

Disarming the alarm that the public of democratic societies used to have against power- and wealth-concentration is a key function of neoliberalism. Under the mantra of supply-side or trickle-down economics, wealth was siphoned off from ordinary people and funneled into a small group of elites. Contrary to its PR slogans such as "free competition," "free market," and "freedom to choose," neoliberalism turned corporations into monopolistic behemoths and transformed liberal democracies into a system characterized by "SCAMD"—State and Corporations Above Market and

Democracy. Public money was—and still is—used to invest in expensive research projects which, when turning profitable, becomes commercialized and privatized, further enriching as well as empowering a very lucky few. The anti-democratic dynamics of decades of neoliberal operation is now reaching a point where Thatcher's infamous claim—"There's no such thing as society"—is becoming true, and using AI to surveil, manage and control the "non-society" is no longer science-fictional.

As AI widens the power gap between those who control the technology and the rest of us on whom the technology is being used, even Varoufakis' "technofeudalism" could be too mild and benevolent a concept in delineating the impact of AI on human relations. Ulises Mejias and Nick Couldry see what Big Tech is doing today as "data colonialism," which continues traditional colonialism but expands the parameter of "raw material" to include *data*, turbocharging colonizers' job of "Four-X's"—exploring, expanding, exploiting, and exterminating. Apart from automating pre-existing discrimination and violence, AI also accelerates mass extinction because the datacenters that train machines to train us have insatiable demand for raw material, water, and energy.

Neoliberalism had a critical role in paving the way for this dystopia, whether understood as "technofeudal" or "data-colonial." Views of above-mentioned authors converge on the urgent need to resist, democratize, and reclaim our commons.

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