

Book Review

Zuboff, Shoshana (2019) *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, New York: Public Affairs.

Shoshana Zuboff has written a mind-blowing, thought-provoking, and in depth researched great narrative about how Google, Facebook and other tech-giants deliberately exploit our personal experiences, and turn them into money, power and knowledge. This new technocratic empire uses artificial intelligence to rub us of our innermost private thoughts and feelings, converting them into predictions about our future behaviour. These are then employed to monitor and nudge us to ‘voluntarily’ contribute to our continuing exploitation, thus undermining our own individual rights and practices of freedom. The tech-giants generate an image of us as free to express ourselves while in reality enslaving us as a means to fulfil their own aims. As Zuboff defines it on the opening page before she begins to unfold her complex story, “Sur-veil-lance cap-i-tal-ism, n” [is]:

“A new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales;

1. A parasitic economic logic in which the production of goods and services is subordinated to a new global architecture of behavioral modification;
2. A rogue mutation of capitalism marked by concentrations of wealth, knowledge, and power unprecedented in human history;
3. The foundational framework of a surveillance economy;
4. As significant a threat to human nature in the twenty-first century as industrial capitalism was to the natural world in the nineteenth and twentieth;
5. The origin of a new instrumentarian power that asserts dominance over society and presents startling challenges to market democracy;
6. A movement that aims to impose a new collective order based on total certainty;
7. An expropriation of critical human rights that is best understood as a coup from above: an overthrow of the people’s sovereignty (Kindle location 69).”

Zuboff’s critical analysis is very much inspired by Hannah Arendt’s study of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and inscribes itself in the Critical Theory’s ongoing critique of technocracy from Adorno over Marcuse to Habermas. Her book represents an ‘inverse’ (Hardt & Negri, 2000) so to speak in which ‘the Empire’ itself becomes ‘the terrorist’ that undermines democratic morality and law and robs ‘the people’ of their equal freedom and self-determination.

Google led the way for the new corporate empire in 2002 by discovering a way to translate its non-market interactions with users searching for information, infotainment and adventures on the internet into surplus raw material for the fabrication of products aimed at genuine market transactions with its real customers: advertisers: “The translation of behavioral surplus from outside to inside the market finally enabled Google to convert investment into revenue. The corporation thus created out of thin air and at zero marginal cost an asset class of vital raw materials derived from users’ nonmarket online behavior” (Kindle, location 1709–1724). This was accomplished by machine intelligence processing behavioral surplus into prediction products. Prediction products could then be sold off as a new kind of

behavioral future markets. Google's fortune rests on such behavioral surveillance assets as the critical raw materials for creating surveillance revenues and translate them into surveillance capital: "The entire logic of this capital accumulation is most accurately understood as surveillance capitalism, which is the foundational framework for a surveillance-based economic order: a surveillance economy. The big pattern here is one of subordination and hierarchy, in which earlier reciprocities between the firm and its users are subordinated to the derivative project of our behavioral surplus captured for others' aims. We are no longer the subjects of value realization" (Kindle location 1718–1724).

Thus, Google made us into objects from which raw materials are extracted and expropriated for its prediction factories: "Machine intelligence processes behavioral surplus into *prediction products* designed to forecast what we will feel, think, and do: now, soon, and later" (location 1756). Zuboff summarizes Google's mantra as follows (Kindle location 3291–3298):

- We claim human experience as raw material free for the taking.
- On the basis of this claim, we can ignore considerations of individuals' rights, interests, awareness, or comprehension.
- We can also assert the right to take an individual's experience for translation into behavioral data.
- Our right to take, based on our claim of free raw material, confers the right to own the behavioral data derived from human experience.
- Our rights to take and to own confer the right to know what the data disclose.
- Our rights to take, to own, and to know confer the right to decide how we use our knowledge.
- Our rights to take, to own, to know, and to decide confer our rights to the conditions that preserve our rights to take, to own, to know, and to decide.

Zuboff's story about the foundations of surveillance capitalism (Part I), its spread and advances (Part II), and its instrumentarian power (Part III) is highly discomfoting reading for democrats of all kinds. It rings an alarm bell for acting immediately to salvage democracy by thoroughly reforming and innovating it. However, Zuboff's identification of Google with 'the Evil Force' which must be annihilated to rescue people-democracy is too simplistic and not entirely convincing. It fails to address how the new, Google-led corporate empire manifests the ideology of globalist neoliberalism and its takeover of liberal democracy. It also underestimates the creative capacities of associated individuals to continuously and spontaneously problematize, and resist the ways expert systems try to colonize their lifeworlds by technocratic and bureaucratic means.

Public decision-making in liberal democracy is presupposed to take time. It should be properly considered, discussed, deliberated and negotiated before agreement and compromise can be reached. The rise of globalist neoliberalism is very much based on the claim that there is no such 'slow time' available in a 'high' or 'late' modern world characterized by rapidly increasing globalization, individualization, professionalization, digitalization and mediatization. As Gary S. Becker, one of neoliberalism's founding fathers argued already in the 1960s, 'slow' statism and collectivism hamper 'fast' economic competition and growth which rely much more on: "activities that influence future real income through the imbedding of resources in people" (Becker, 1962: 9). Accumulation of human capital is the way forward, understood as: "a set of skills and capabilities that is modified by all that affects me and all that I effect" (Feher, 2009: 26).

The notion of human capital underlies neoliberalism's shift of political conception from the centralized but minimalist state to decentered global governance dedicated to the management of human capital and individual freedom in fast time (Foucault, 2008; Peck & Theodore, 2015). This shift reveals how liberal democracy has gradually been replaced by a New Public Management relying for its effectiveness on efficient behavioral monitoring and control of individual conduct. Thus, public discourse and dialogue in

state and civil society have increasingly receded into the background. Zuboff's new technocratic 'empire' is a prolongation and further development of this global technocratic meritocracy for nudging individuals to accumulate human capital to climb the ladder of instrumentarian success, hereby contributing to global competition and growth. The result of this shift to behavioral prediction and control as the basis of capital accumulation and good governance is the immense equality gap between the overly rich 0.9 percent and poorest 64 percent (Credit Suisse Global Wealth Databook, 2018). This equality gap results from neoliberalism's takeover of 'slow' liberal democracy to adjust individuals and institutions to conducting efficient, and effective management of themselves, and their relevant environments in fast time. As Zuboff argues (Kindle location 855):

“Individualization has sent each one of us on the prowl for the resources we need to ensure effective life, but at each turn we are forced to do battle with an economics and politics from whose vantage point we are but ciphers. We live in the knowledge that our lives have unique value, but we are treated as invisible.”

However, it is not Google but the neoliberal ideology which is making us invisible to politicians except as objects of behavioral modification. The core problem is, as Habermas put it 30 years ago, that managers of systems are inclined to believe that: “the more complex social systems become, the more provincial life-worlds become” (Habermas, 1989, location 3962). They fail to see that since complexity comes from differentiation the more differentiated the lifeworld becomes, the more complex the system must become. Neoliberalism's new public managers seem deaf and blind to this duality and reciprocity due to their: “colonization of the lifeworld by system imperatives that drive moral-practical elements out of private and political-public spheres of life” (Habermas, 1989, location 7181). They tune individuals behaviorally by nudging them to believe that only by climbing the ladders of success in the global knowledge economy will they be able to join ‘the good life’. Zuboff does sense this shift from bureaucracy to technocracy as the motor of system colonization. As she concludes:

“The convergence of freedom and knowledge transforms surveillance capitalists into society's self-appointed masters. From their high perch in the division of learning, a privileged priesthood of “tuners” rules the connected hive, cultivating it as a source of continuous raw-material supply [...] [These] priests practice the applied arts of radical indifference, a fundamentally asocial mode of knowledge [concealing] the obvious fact that its profoundly dissimilar meanings originate in distinct human situations.” (Kindle location 9108–9115).

However, the current crisis of democracy is not generated by Google and the other ‘evil’ tech giants but by globalist neoliberalism's technocratic meritocracy. This has made most mainstream politicians along the left/right scale believe that behavioral modification is the most reliable way forward to success in national elections. Politicians seem to prefer ‘the nudge’ to agonistic political discussion. This is probably why they seem increasingly unwilling to reply to critical questions about serious identity conflicts and wicked issues – such as islamophobia and critical climate change threats. The new populism's onward march to political power in the nation-state owes much to laypeople's increasing frustrations over politicians' non-decisions and refraining. Laypeople are growing increasingly angry that they are not taken seriously by ‘the system’ and of being treated as ‘anti-system’, if they critique or try to avoid ‘the nudge’ to which they are being subjected from cradle to grave. As President Donald Trump declared in his nomination acceptance speech in 2016:¹

¹<https://www.politico.com/story/2016/07/full-transcript-donald-trump-nomination-acceptance-speech-at-rnc-225974> 11/12/20 11/12/19.

The most important difference between our plan and that of our opponents, is that our plan will put America First. Americanism, not globalism, will be our credo. As long as we are led by politicians who will not put America First, then we can be assured that other nations will not treat America with respect. This will all change in 2017.

Thus, globalism v nationalism is pushing left v right into the background as the dominant cleavage and conflict in society. Like in the 1930s the rhetoric of ‘the world elite’ and ‘the world elite conspiracy’ is today haunting democracy once again. As Trump promised in his speech: *The American People will come first once again [in particular] the forgotten men and women of our country. People who work hard but no longer have a voice. I AM YOUR VOICE.*

Zuboff’s analyses reveal a touch of this populism especially in the way she describes Google as a ‘dark force’. Somewhat paradoxically she in this way comes to contribute to neoliberalism’s and populism’s common understanding of ‘the crowd’ as consisting of people who do not possess the generalized ability to define and realize themselves autonomously. However, the image of democracy as the domain of successful ‘professionals’ and ‘strongmen’ in the system neglects the lifeworld, and hereby “considerably restricts the possibilities for spontaneous opinion formation and discursive will-formation” (Habermas, 1989, location 805). Laypeople are political subjects who in, and through, their spontaneous protests and meaning-expressions online and offline show where the shoe is pinching and what needs be done right here and now to deal with an unidentified or unresolved social conflict or policy risk. Without them there simply could be no genuine people-democracy. I call them Everyday Makers (Bang, 2009), because they can, will and understand how to make a difference; on their own terms; on and off, when they find it necessary, have time for it, or feel like it. If the system disconnects from them, or try to colonize their everyday life, they will disconnect from the system, ignore it and find other ways to engage. As Habermas has always insisted (2002, location 5081).

“[People-democracy is] dependent on the resources of the lifeworld – on a free and open political culture and an enlightened political socialization, and above all on the initiatives of opinion-shaping associations. These resources emerge and regenerate themselves spontaneously for the most part – at any rate, they can only with difficulty be subjected to political control.”

Indeed, Zuboff’s dark narrative should be read by every humanely and politically engaged person. But do not despair! It is possible for contemporary democracy to innovate itself and reconnect system and lifeworld in terms of reciprocities of power, knowledge, respect, responsibility, and trust.

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