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Title
Brave New (Digital) World: Translating Knowledge into Collective Action

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

Some books introduce new concepts and others, a new language. Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* falls into the latter category, serving as equal parts exegesis and lexicon for its readers. Three terms— "surveillance capitalism", "instrumentarian power", and "behavioral surplus"— form the foundation of the text, referenced and revisited throughout. Instrumentarian power is defined by its ability to "instrumentaliz[e]…behavior for the purposes of modification, prediction, monetization, and control" (Zuboff, 2019: 352). In the system of surveillance capitalism, the engine of instrumentarian power renders raw human behavior into valuable behavioral surplus, turning the clicks of a computer cursor into a set of actionable recommendations for manipulating the user. The extraction of human behavior through popular services creates a stream of data that builds out this system's predictive capacities and increases its profitability. "If industrialism is not to extinguish the race," Karl Polanyi wrote, "it must be subordinated to the requirements of man's nature" (Polanyi, 1957: 257). Zuboff insists surveillance capitalism be held to the same demands. The mission is made all the more urgent by the fact that human nature is the very resource consumed by this form of capitalism. This book serves as a compelling exposition of all that has been lost in the advance of surveillance capitalism, an unrelenting interrogation of these technologies "to make them express their own aims" (Latour, 2002: 258-259). In its pages, most importantly, we find the tools necessary to take up the interrogation for ourselves.

The Age of Surveillance Capitalism unfolds in three parts, working up from rudimentary concepts to complex systems. The first part presents the "logic and operations" of surveillance capitalism, largely through the narrative of Google's rise to market dominance (Zuboff, 2019: 93). In the early 2000s, as the story goes, Google realized its position as owner of the world's largest store of human behavior and began to invest in providing user services that would funnel even more behavior into their system. Through examples such as Google Maps, Zuboff breaks down the process by which the company first began to launch an "incursion" into human experience, moving into uncharted legal territory with the aim of "kidnapp[ing] behavioral surplus from the nonmarket spaces of everyday life" (139). Surveillance capitalism arrives in its mature form, however, when the company begins to redirect behavior—quite literally steering its users into the hands of retailers by combining data procured across multiple services. This "real-time trading in behavioral futures" renders human behavior predictable by "produc[ing] behavior that reliably, definitively, and certainly leads to desired commercial results" (154, 203). Zuboff proposes three "essential" questions to understand the inner workings of surveillance capitalism: "Who knows?", "Who decides?", and "Who decides who decides?" (181). We return to this interrogation exercise throughout the book.

In the second part, Zuboff demonstrates how market forces made prediction into a profitable and pervasive business model. Under the banner of "personalization", she argues, markets found a means of "'individualizing' supply operations in order to secure a continuous

flow of behavioral surplus" (256). Examples include smart-home devices, wearables, and location-based mobile apps, such as Pokémon Go. Though it provides less in the way of a conceptual framework, this, in many ways, is the most original part of the book. Phenomenological observations combined with original interview data from several dozen data scientists explain how markets gained a new interface with human behavior in the span of a decade. On the integration of voice-activated technologies, Zuboff writes, the "conversational interface is prized for the frictionless ease in which a mere utterance can trigger action, especially market action…What could be dreamier than to speak and have it be so?" (260-261). The pull of these technologies derive from our own impulses and desires, harnessed by markets in ways that would seem to suggest efficiency. The strength of Zuboff's argument in this section stems from her ability to explain the psychological appeal of these products and the quick familiarity they attain in our lives before breaking them open to reveal their more nefarious facets.

The final section of *Surveillance Capitalism* focuses on the theme of instrumentarian power. Where totalitarianism was "a political project that converged with economics to overwhelm society", instrumentarianism is "a market project that converges with the digital to achieve its own unique brand of social domination" (360). Knowledge is centralized in such a world— channeled, if not wholly contained, through all-encompassing institutions that can take the form of either corporations or governments. Markets play a fundamental role in realizing the mission of "total certainty", distributing resources according to terms defined by the institutions in command (396). To prevent such an instrumentarian future from becoming reality, Zuboff urges a battle in the realm of morality, not technology. "If there is to be a fight, let it be a fight over capitalism" she writes, "This is not a technical undertaking, not a program for advanced encryption, improved data anonymity, or data ownership. Such strategies only acknowledge the inevitability of commercial surveillance" (194). She proposes "collective social action" as a solution, in particular, social movements culminating in legal protections. She discusses the need for having these declarations "institutionalized in new centers of democratic power, expertise, and contest", envisioning some role for government regulation without giving it clear shape (485). The GDPR is a step in the right direction, according to Zuboff, but only "popular movements on the ground" will keep the legislation relevant.

Throughout the book, we are reminded that language is Zuboff's greatest strength, specifically the sharp and precise terminology she uses to explicate the broader system of surveillance capitalism and to implicate its creators. The most compelling evidence presented in the text, similarly, is linguistic: the uniformities and recurring patterns in speech among the dozens of data scientists Zuboff interviewed for her research. "[N]early every interviewee regarded inevitability rhetoric as a Trojan horse for powerful economic imperatives," Zuboff writes, "and each one of them lamented the lack of critical discussion of these assumptions" (224). The book is propelled by a desire to confront the loss of human freedom in this system at the hands of technology companies. "Surveillance capitalism succeeded by way of aggressive declaration, and its success stands as a powerful illustration of the invasive character of declarative words and deeds", we are told (179). Google's AdWords (now Google Ads), a platform that targets online ads towards specific users as opposed to search queries, relied on "[n]ew rhetoric…to legitimate this unusual move" (74). "Declarations…impose new facts on the social world," Zuboff recognizes (177). However, her prescription for treating the ills of surveillance capitalism does not stop at making statements. "It will not be the wording of the regulations but rather the popular movements on the ground that shape these interpretations…"

she writes, "This quality of collective action will be required if we are finally to replace lawlessness with laws that assert the right to sanctuary and the right to the future tense as essential for effective human life" (485).

Zuboff views collective action—and not policy or technological innovation— as the only way to effectively contain the worst impulses of surveillance capitalism. In the book, however, the means (mass mobilization) and the ends (the delimiting of surveillance capitalism) are eloquently justified but not substantiated beyond choice phrases. This could be viewed as a pragmatic decision on Zuboff's part, a compromise to keep the text relevant even as the technology it discusses inevitably evolves. Still, Latour reminds us, "It is pointless to want to define some entities and some situations as technical in opposition to others called scientific or moral, political or economic" (2002: 248). The two are "indissolubly mingled" because, as he describes, means (technology) invariably shift ends (morality), and vice versa. For an author who goes to such great lengths to document the relationship between digital technologies, human experience, and human nature—indeed, who was among the first to bring these questions into academic discussion three decades ago—it is an unusual choice to suggest that technology cannot be part and parcel of the change to come.

Part of the concern Zuboff cites is that these encrypting and anonymizing technologies encourage "hiding in our own lives", relinquishing control and enforcing the actions of surveillance capitalism's most powerful players (194). To insist that such behavior is detrimental to the greater cause of taming surveillance capitalism is to assume that all populations have equal cause for "hiding". For certain groups, "hiding" can be a matter of life or death, or life imprisonment. Two recent books have highlighted the struggle of marginalized communities in the digital economy— Virginia Eubanks's *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor* (2017) and Ruha Benjamin's *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (2019). Both works draw on a wide range of cases to demonstrate how—in the absence of any wrong-doing— surveillance capitalism nevertheless disproportionately targets and maligns certain groups, discriminating by design and by the example we set as a society. Eubanks describes how poor families build up larger repositories of data in local government systems by utilizing public services at a higher rate than wealthy families. More data translates to higher risk profiles under algorithms used by child protective services, which can often override the intuitions of social workers in gauging a child's potential for harm. Benjamin illustrates how seemingly objective technologies continue to perpetrate racial biases. As these books demonstrate, long-term systemic change is crucial to resolving these injustices but "hiding" is unfortunately a necessary near-term reality. Zuboff's powerful advocacy for "the right to sanctuary" would be strengthened by recognizing that certain groups require immediate protections (485). Raising collective consciousness about the damages of surveillance capitalism is a time-consuming task—institutionalizing it, even more so. The option of waiting for collective action to take effect is not equally available to all.

Additionally, new technologies can provide their own unexpected means of subverting entrenched systems *if* they are given the space to develop outside the influence of incumbents. There is a place for collective action in creating that space but it is crucial to recognize that the technology itself is a valuable component. Sinclair Davidson, Primavera de Filippi, and Jason Potts (2018) have argued that blockchain should be considered an "institutional evolution" as opposed to simply a Schumpeterian disruption since it provides a new system for coordinating economic activity. They concede, however, that blockchains will be utilized primarily within companies, "carv[ing] out those parts of firms that can be rendered as complete contracts where

they lower transaction costs" (13). Bill Maurer and Daniel Tischer's recent exposition of Facebook's Libra currency (2019) demonstrates exactly this phenomenon. According to the authors, Libra is not a decentralized exchange but rather "a global payments system…controlled by a small and exclusive club of private firms". Facebook, as a giant of surveillance capitalism, has co-opted a technology with the creative capacity for change, limiting it to working within the existing structure. "Libra, if it is successful, will likely become an undemocratic behemoth," they write. "Alarm bells ring about a global currency's de facto governance by a private, exclusive club serving the purposes of its investor-owners, not the public good".

Part of the foreseeable role of collective action could be to support new enterprises which depart from the dominant surveillance capitalism model. One such example is Brave, an open-source web browser, which pays users to voluntarily view ads via its own cryptocurrency (BATs or basic attention tokens) that they can then distribute to publishers of their choosing. More broadly, social movements such as the Internet Archive's DWeb (Decentralized Web) and RadicalXChange, inspired by Eric Posner and Glen Weyl's book *Radical Markets* (2018), have sought to create communities that experiment with alternative means of organizing the Internet and the economy. What could a distributed or decentralized society look like? Zuboff's framework for interrogation shows us one way to parse the underlying structures of power. In this world, everyone *knows,* everyone relevant to a transaction *decides,* perhaps even an entire community, and a very select group of programmers and investors *decide who decides*. Some existing problems may be solved; invariably, new ones will be created. Language, again, proves essential to making these declarations and willing them into a reality that can be broadly comprehended. Those seeking this ability would be well-advised to read this work.

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