Review of: "The Moorings of the Intangible: Technology and Social Control"

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The article touches on a critical societal issue: the use of technology. Itdiscusses how modern technology, rooted in historical liberalism, enhances **social control** and **productivity** while potentially diminishing liberties and rights. It highlights the blurred lines between **leisure and work** in the digital age, where activities on social networks and e-commerce platforms often translate into unpaid labor. The benefits and drawbacks of **connectivity** are examined, emphasizing people's trust in the Internet despite privacy concerns and the control exerted by companies and governments. This is my understanding of the article.

Allow me to make some related comments that might help augment the debate the author has initiated.

The modernist project that emerged with the Enlightenment marked the rupture between a past in which traditions and religion played the most significant part in societal control and involution for centuries. The promise of the modern era was that reason would lead to better and more informed decisions by humans and, therefore, a continuous state of progression and happiness in society. The events and technologies developed and deployed during the First and Second World Wars showed evidence that technologies can be very destructive to humans. In addition, the economic and financial international system that emerged after the Second World War, represented by the Bretton Woods institutions (the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and the World Trade Organization), brought a development system based on technologies and systems that led the world to a state of emergency in terms of inequality and environmental crisis.

These two examples demonstrate the complexity of the issues related to the deployment of technology in modern society and how it shapes social control by either public or private actors. It is important to note that the finality of the access and control of data is related in the first case to the national interest, a fluid concept that varies from time to time depending on internal expectations and external threats, while the second is profit-oriented (the security dimension here is associated with the protection of business secrets and building trust for continuous access and interaction with the system).

As the first methodological step to address such complexities, we must recruit a broad range of philosophical interpretations of technology and its consequences on society, economy, and human existence. To that end, breaking down the analysis under ontological, economic, and critical viewpoints is essential to exposing technology's complex and dynamic character. Under an ontological perspective, technology can be seen as a "logos of technique," or an extension of nature, suggesting that it enhances rather than opposes the natural world and contributes to progress (Bogatov et al.,

2023). The economic development perspective, especially after Schumpeter, emphasizes the role of public policies in promoting technical innovation, connecting it to economic growth and development (Mejía, 2017). Finally, a critical approach characterizes technology as a symbolic manifestation that influences both the production and utilization of materials, emphasizing its two-fold essence in the process of manufacture and practical implementation (Camolezi, 2021).

As we look at technology through these philosophical lenses, especially the economic and critical ones, we notice that the challenges and crises we face today regarding the deployment of new technologies have a culprit: capitalism. In this sense, the author gives the impression that he is talking about capitalism when presenting the technological order by using concepts such as productivity, corporate profits, class struggle, and Third World submission to exploitation; however, he never mentions the name. I ask myself the reason for omitting it, as capitalist ontology and epistemology are at the core of technological expansion and the increment of social control over society (Hollingshead, 1941). Capitalism is at the core of technological advances, as technology helps capitalism resolve its internal contradictions, such as growth limitation, which is a barrier to endless accumulation. The need for new technology in both hardware and software is essential for capital ventures. At the same time, as technology becomes a necessity that we cannot live without, social control becomes entrenched in technology under private and public dimensions via, for instance, data collection and flow.

With that in mind, the Westphalian sovereignty model that emerged in 1648 with the end of the Thirty Years' War has become obsolete to a certain extent vis-à-vis the power acquired by transnational corporations connected to technology. Nations try to cope with technological advances and fringe situations posed by this dominance as they infringe on the fundamental rights of people; however, in some cases, the countries become consumers by delegating public services to these corporations, which acquire an even larger amount of data that in this case is mandatory for the constituent to have access to the public service. For being a trap, the focus should be on the social control by transnational corporations.

To that end, I would like to propose a theoretical framework composed of capitalist realism and technofeudalism to analyze the social control exerted by technology, which can be confirmed by the cases of Amazon’s marketplace that limits interactions between seller and buyer, Google and Facebook’s monopoly on information flow, **Uber and the erosion of workers’ rights, Apple’s walled garden and consumer dependency, and** Google’s role in government surveillance.

Capitalist realism is a term coined by British theorist Mark Fisher in his 2009 book*Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* It refers to the widespread sense that capitalism is not only the dominant socioeconomic system but also the only viable one, arguing that capitalism has embedded itself so deeply into contemporary society (as technology) that people struggle to imagine any credible alternatives to it. This mindset leads to the belief that despite its flaws, capitalism is the only system that can govern economic, social, and political life.

The notion of capitalist realism is closely related to the work of Beck (2015), who discusses how modern societies, particularly under capitalism, are increasingly preoccupied with managing risks and uncertainties produced by industrialization, technology, and modernization. This aligns with capitalist realism in the sense that it frames capitalism as a system that not only generates these risks (environmental, financial, social) but also convinces society that it is the only

system capable of managing them. Thus, capitalist realism perpetuates the view that while capitalism creates problems, it has the capacity to generate the appropriate responses and solutions. The perversity of the argument is that it is embedded with the need to continue the imperial mode of living (consumerism), so the endless accumulation of capital continues, at the same time that it tries to tranquilize society with the mantra: do not worry, technology will help us! However, within this mermaid's song, both nations and corporations promote algorithmic management to shape behavior, surveillance, and control of information flow.

The notion of inevitability in capitalist realism leads us to the concept of technofeudalism, which is associated with the increasing participation of transnational companies in the technological field. This is not much different from what happened in the 1500s when the great navigations started along with imperialism and colonialism. Technofeudalism is the notion that modern capitalism, namely in its digital and technological manifestations, is transforming into a governance structure resembling feudalism. Within this paradigm, there is a growing consolidation of power and wealth within a few influential technology companies, sometimes referred to as "lords" such as Amazon, Google, Facebook, and Apple. Meanwhile, most individuals, known as "serfs," depend on these platforms for their means of living, service provision, and social engagements.

In technofeudalism, analogous to the reliance of peasants on their lords for security and land in feudal societies, individuals and enterprises progressively rely on digital platforms for labor, communication, and economic activities, generating an interdependence that results in a power asymmetry where the "users" retain minimal influence over the regulations and conditions enforced by the "owners" of the platform. It highlights the significance of surveillance capitalism, in which the systematic gathering and monitoring of data by technology corporations establish novel means of exerting control over individuals. These firms engage in the surveillance of user activity to optimize financial gains, steer customer decisions, and exert influence on political procedures, compared to the feudal lords' administration of their serfs, who had restricted liberty and decision-making authority. In addition, technofeudalism has a direct impact on the precarization of labor (gig economy), the erosion of public goods as companies replace governments in some segments, and the limitation on social mobility due to the creation of rigid class structures where only a small number can enjoy the technology (Varoufakis, 2023).

As such, under the technofeudalism approach, social control (with the blessing or regulation by the “king,” the government) is exerted through platform dominance and monopoly of the means of production concentrated in the hands of just a few in the world, which creates a deep dependency leading to the dysfunctions cited by the author (that creates other types of dependency such as platforms specialized in on-line therapy), generating the perpetuation of the status quo as the “new normal,” and the alienation and dehumanization. In the process of this alienation, the companies or renters promote surveillance and data generation exploitation, or in other words, getting the best of two worlds in terms of profit maximization. In addition, in technofeudalism, the liberal rule of a free market is eliminated as the companies collect monies (rents) from users and producers of goods, making it impossible for buyers and sellers to meet freely to negotiate.

Therefore, as I understand it, the article centers the argument on the vigilance aspect, which is essential to be seen as

part of the imperial mode of living imposed by capitalism and of the technofeudalism framework to keep society in check (according to the dominant class). In this regard, the author could incorporate capitalist realism and technofeudalism into the debate about social control by exploring how technology implicates consumerism under the surveillance of the companies, how labor and automation are integrated to create new social relations, and how the monetization of the collected data from people benefits just a few lords in the tech industry that deepen the economic realities in the off-line world.

A case study or a comparative approach could help the author integrate these concepts to shed some light on the subtle forms of control and manipulation exerted by tech companies and their implications for societies. Among the forms of exerting control, the manipulation and shaping of behaviors are the most common and frequent, affecting both the public and private spheres of citizens. For instance, in addition to market control and exploitation, technological social control under both *capitalist realism* and *technofeudalism* erodes democratic participation by concentrating power in the hands of a few tech giants and controlling public discourse, thus leading systems to limit citizens' ability to organize, resist, or even imagine alternatives to the status quo. Take, for instance, the prohibition and shutdown of X in Brazil due to disobedience to comply with judicial orders to suspend accounts connected to attempts to *coup d'etat* orchestrated by Jair Bolsonaro and his acolytes.

This control over information, behavior, and economics undermines the collective ability to create democratic alternatives or resistances.

Therefore, I think the author might reinforce the argument by repositioning the analysis under the suggested framework, which will resolve the apparent disconnection between sections II and III and sections V and VI. In this regard, the omission of capitalism as the underlying cause for the dysfunctions and problems brought about by technology needs to be corrected.

The author has included Amazon's case, which, to my understanding, is a representative case of the application of capitalist realism and technofeudalism. All of the cases cited in this review provide ample evidence to uncover how subtle ways of social control are exerted without perception and with the permission (long adhesion contracts drafted in technical and legal lexicon specifically designed to frustrate the reader or hide the true content) of the users but with full knowledge of the implications and losses.

In addition to the dimensions of technofeudalism that I presented before, incorporating the concept of *capitalist realism* highlights how technology reinforces the belief that capitalism is the only viable economic system by emphasizing that major corporations contribute to maintaining the status quo and suppressing alternative systems or ways of organizing society through the normalization of capitalist ideals (efficiency, individualism, and consumerism) and cultural/ideological control. The posture of corporations in this regard generates a kind of technological determinism that, without consent, people engage in.

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