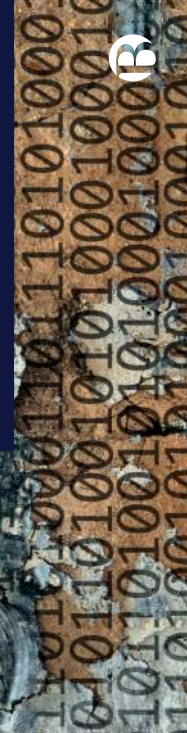




ALGORITHMS AND THE END OF POLITICS

—
HOW TECHNOLOGY
SHAPES 21st-CENTURY
AMERICAN LIFE
—

SCOTT TIMCKE



ALGORITHMS AND THE END OF POLITICS

How Technology Shapes
21st-Century American Life

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Dedicated to Dennis and Diana Timcke

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Acknowledgements

In my 2017 book *Capital, State, Empire* I sought to investigate the ongoing dynamics of capital and constraint that characterize American life. Specifically, I examined the security state's encroachment on digital and civil liberties, giving attention to the security state's historical impulse to weaponize communication technologies to argue that 'digital coercion' helps preserve an oppressive labour regime. This regime has long institutional antecedents in genocide, slavery and dispossession, but now has added mechanisms like dragnet digital surveillance, drone and cyber-warfare, and protracted conflicts abroad. One can see these securitization dynamics inside the United States as well, for instance in the militarized policing of the most vulnerable, data-profiling and automated attempts to subvert dissent. New computational techniques of ideological manipulation are currently being developed to mystify how all these pieces fit together to reproduce American capitalism.

This book expands on some of those themes but also explores new areas like how social inequalities in the late 20th and early 21st centuries have been echoed, amplified or introduced by algorithmic life. My approach to this topic is through the lens of politics, datafication and the social question. As I understand it, datafication is a process which converts human practices into computational artefacts, it transforms human life into quantifiable bits ripe for profit-seeking activities, and ultimately shores up unfreedom and class rule in contemporary American capitalism. As seen in its value struggles, capitalism has a code that constitutes society, shaping the character of its politics. When adhering to this code, datafication replaces the social question with social problems. But whereas social problems presume a degree of reasonable reconciliation through measurement and management, the social question points to the consequences of modernity and commodification involving the understanding of relations, institutions and the history of the current political economic arrangement. This is a question that is set aside in capitalist politics.

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Kempton Park, June 2020

Introduction: The Great Simplification

American politics has recently passed catastrophic equilibrium. On Twitter, Donald Trump performs his authoritarianism by labelling the news media as ‘the enemy of the American people’ (Trump, 2017a). Views like these are not to be lightly dismissed. As Trump proclaims, ‘more than 90% of Fake News Media coverage of me is negative’, and so, for him, ‘Social Media [is] the only way to get the truth out’ (Trump, 2017b). This manoeuvre is but one in a series of coordinated efforts by the Trump administration to routinely delegitimize media organizations like MSNBC and CNN to assert that he is the only valid source of information.

This technique has been very effective. Consider how the *New York Times* published a story based upon an 18-month investigation into Trump’s taxes, which include tax fraud and financial losses throughout the 1980s of \$1.17 billion (Barstow and Buettner, 2018). But while the reporters were later awarded a Pulitzer Prize for their journalism, the story effectively dropped from the news cycle.

Meanwhile the Trump administration is obsessed with national security, defined primarily in narrow terms to target refugees and migrants from Central America. Demonized and dehumanized through indefinite detention in concentration camps along the US southern border by lionized state security forces, these refugees are spoken of as a plague to be necessarily removed if the American nation-state is to prosper again. Yet in stark contradistinction to migrants being denied human rights, white supremacists have been embraced as a core constituency in Trump’s electoral base. These conjoined beliefs now routinely find expression in the state. But it should not be surprising as the officials Trump has appointed are the ideological kith and kin of South African apartheid-era securocrats. Staff appointments of this sort are to be expected, because, in plain terms as Republican Senator Lindsey Graham said of Trump, “He’s a race-baiting, xenophobic, religious bigot” (CNN, 2015).

Having set the stage for the mainstreaming of devastating neo-Confederate politics, sadly, but to no one's surprise, right-wing stochastic terrorism is on the rise in the United States (Anti-Defamation League, 2019; Greenblatt and Selim, 2019). The Department of Homeland Security admits this, describing it as 'one of the most potent forces driving domestic terrorism' (2019, 4). By contrast, Trump has called American Nazis "very fine people" (Gray, 2017). Meanwhile, the silence from members of the Republican Party demonstrates how complicit they are with these developments. This is partly because, 'right-wing terrorism is a more extreme version of Trump's own political style', Jonathan Chait (2019) writes: 'It draws inspiration from his ideas and some measure of protection from his political power'. Sadly, many American conservatives are simply 'working towards' Trump (see Kershaw, 1993). To repurpose a notable phrase, the road Americans are on is 'built by hate but paved with indifference'.

Trump is the quintessential vulgar capitalist of our era; a reality TV star and social media braggart whose wealth was inherited, his businesses consisting of slumlord predation of precarious racialized groups in New York, manipulating financial instruments to limit taxation, and licensing his brand to all takers. Yet good faith pundits and journalists cannot fathom the conditions he personifies. Best seen on display on cable news, but also in the *New York Times* opinion pages, they tend towards superficial lay psychological cataloguing over policy analysis, giving disproportionate attention to throwaway remarks than state actions. Or bemoaning that Trump is not coherent, as if they have an expectation that fascism requires coherency. This kind of analysis offers us nothing in this post-catastrophic equilibrium moment.

Irrespective of the length of his time in office or the millstone of impeachment the significance of Trump is less about him personally. Rather his significance is about the perceptions by and representations to the American public about the white nationalist solution to the social question. And so minimally adequate analysis must go beyond his corruption, compromise or crassness. More generally, putting too much emphasis on the individual failings of politicians, whether Trump or his counterparts, neglects that they operate in a political system structured by capitalist social relations. By this I mean that they administer a capitalist state dependent on private profits and favourable market conditions to survive and fund programmes. Simultaneously they are encouraged to draw upon wealthy patrons to fund their electoral campaigns. Put simply, they represent capitalists' interests. They do so, because as Fred Block (1977) summaries, 'the ruling class does not rule'. One result of this rationalization is a mainstream American

party politics where there are basically no political conflicts. Herein the Republican Party exists purely to indulge the interests of capital, while the Democratic Party triangulates a preservation of the remnants of those interests but in such a way as to help facilitate the next round of exploitation writ large. But it is not only rationalization at play. As I explain in the middle part of the book, a ruling class consciousness exists, and it uses politics ‘for itself’.

My starting point begins with noting how the ‘savage sorting of winners and losers’ (Sassen, 2010) has caused a near decades-long ‘democratic recession’ (Diamond, 2015). Mark Blyth (2016) has termed the blowback to this recession ‘global Trumpism’, signalling the sweeping reactionary contempt for democracy the world over. Nominally dissatisfied with neoliberalism and invoking the rhetorical trappings of democratic nationalism – but certainly not its spirit – this reactionary politics stops well short of extending rights and dignity to the most vulnerable, many of whom are racialized persons. These developments have amplified the strand of authoritarianism that has existed in US politics for quite some time (Parker and Towler, 2019). Betraying how democracy has only been acceptable as a management style for capitalism, rather than a means for political aspiration, Stephen Moore, a senior economic adviser to the Trump campaign, recently remarked that “Capitalism is a lot more important than democracy” (Schwarz, 2016).

My view is the exact opposite. Capitalism generates unacceptable social costs which harm democratic politics. As social inequality worsens in the US, so do its divisions and tensions, rendering democratic life just that much more difficult to conduct. But whereas I see this as a definitive characteristic of capitalism, others see it as a temporary deviation from what goods it ordinarily delivers. However, adopting the latter position requires overlooking much evidence from across the planet and so speaks to an interest aligned with capitalism. And so, I look to document and critique the scholarship, statecraft and ideology propping up this ‘democratic recession’.

Computation and the social question

Ultimately this book is concerned with unfreedom and class rule in contemporary American capitalism as seen in the digital realm. This could otherwise be called computation and the social question. Charting the contours of these issues requires linking a series of diverse phenomena, like the battle over social resources and the looting of industries and sectors by telecommunication companies, as well as

the social impact of computation's unfolding development – like artificial intelligence (AI) – to argue that the ruling class has captured computational resources and are using them to drive their class's agenda. On matters of computation and the social question, Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) and Virginia Euranks (2018) are right to warn that 'algorithms of oppression' will lead to 'automating inequality'. In accordance with this wider project, my book addresses the consequences that are courted when computational reason is flattened to satisfy the requirements of a capitalist ruling class. Given the footprint of the American economy, the effects of this capture are global in nature.

The instrumental distortion of computational reason points to a contradiction in capitalism where, notwithstanding the ever-increasing technological complexity through its 'system of equivalence', capitalism is responsible for the *great simplification of the social world*. Simplification is testament to the 'fatal abstractions' of capitalist rule that begets a line of thinking that there is no alternative, that social life outside of capitalism is characteristically 'short, nasty, and brutish', whereas in capitalism it is incidentally 'short, nasty, and brutish'. Here all other horrors are worse, that the present inequalities could be worse, that the incomplete democratization that barely hides the dictatorship of capital is less barbaric than overt tyranny. The great simplification has also impacted our reasoning, leaving us more vulnerable to lapses in judgement; for instance, perpetuating a political order that permits seemingly profitable carbon extraction that risks destroying almost all life on this planet.

Datafication is a good example of this great simplification, and one the book seeks to connect to class rule and unfreedom. Datafication is a process which converts human practices into computational artefacts. It also involves the advocacy for and implementation of computational reason to oversee human life. As will be elaborated upon later in this introduction, capitalism has a code that constitutes society. When adhering to this code, datafication encompasses a transformation of the grand tapestry of human life to quantifiable bits to then be computed for profit-seeking activities. As an example of this simplification, consider how finance technology allows capital to be deterritorialized, while persons are reterritorialized. Through swift codes, finance is instantly moved from region to region, while credit card data can be used to deny a person's mobility. Simplification can also be found in how capitalist computational reason encodes subordination and stratification. Due to the legacies of racial capitalism, unfortunately racialized persons the world over are especially susceptible to this encoded subordination.

Investing computational reason with automated and substantive decision-making power risks foreclosing politics, let alone activities that seek to shift the political frame. While this kind of foreclosure may not necessarily end debates about the social question, it can limit our ability to materially address the social question in ways that do not align with capitalist first principles. Accordingly, encoded subordination, algorithms of oppression and automated inequality are means by which capitalist social relations become fixed. When this happens, the ‘democratic recession’ that Trump personifies will become a permanent feature of life in the 21st century.

Using Marx’s categories, this project traverses logical, theoretical and historical elements to trace the contours of the systemic nature of digital capitalist regimes and its subroutines. Given this goal, and because this is a short book, I do not intend to extensively review other Marxist contributions to the understanding of digital life. I have in mind here Jodi Dean’s analysis of communicative capitalism, Christian Fuch’s work on digital labour, Nick Srnicek’s work on platform capitalism, Tiziana Terranova’s observation on free labour, Maurizio Lazzarato’s writings on immaterial labour, as well as many other excellent scholars. There is much I respect in these treatments of the current moment and so I will let them speak for themselves. What they do have in common is an assessment that datafication has weakened democracy leading to the US becoming the leading exporter of the machinery of Western fascism. This is a proposition I support and look to build upon over the coming chapters.

The limits of progressive neoliberal social theory

Not every crisis is the final battle. But it is clear that American politics is at a decisive historical juncture. Stalwarts in both the Democratic and the Republican Parties foresee the end of both parties. “I’m worried that I will be the last Republican president”, George W. Bush said as he recoiled at the actions of the Trump administration (Baker, 2017). When reflecting on the significance of his speakership, John Boehner believes it marks “the end of the two-party system” (Alberta, 2017). In the Democratic Party Bernie Sanders (2012) wants to ‘wage a moral and political war against the billionaires’, while Nancy Pelosi forcefully declares “we’re capitalists, that’s just the way it is” (Raskin, 2017).

Reading not only with an eye to ‘incurable structural contradictions’ (Gramsci, 1971, 178) these statements can be juxtaposed with the conspicuous absence of genuine substantive discussion about Jeb Bush and Hillary Clinton being the front runners in the two-year lead-up to

the 2016 election. Not only is this significant given that members of their families have held presidential office, but also because the funds required to run a presidential campaign appear to demarcate electoral politics as the sole domain of select dynasties competing against one another, competition that in turn requires ‘great’ personalities at the helm of these campaigns. For example, the 2016 US electoral cycle cost \$6.5 billion, with the 0.01 per cent contributing \$2.3 billion (Sultan, 2017). It should be no surprise that these testimonies emerge at the crest of massive capital consolidation, where class warfare ‘from above’ has created intense social inequality which has stratified the American social structure, a *revanche* in the wake of the 2008 recession.

Much of the energy for my project comes from reviewing the contemporary analysis offered by progressive neoliberal scholarship on these developments. Despite many generally good efforts from Mark Lilla (2018) and Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018), among others, this social theory is not quite able to make complete sense of American authoritarianism and the social life in which it is situated. Put simply: a fair appraisal of the market is missing.

As an example of this oversight consider that while his recent book *On Tyranny* begins with a useful discussion of anticipatory obedience, instinctual habituation and consent to authority, Timothy Snyder’s (2017) rally to defend democratic institutions turns upon appeals to decency, as opposed to the extension of material provisions. Instead, he focuses on trivialities like reminding people to regularly delete their browser history or apply for a passport and travel internationally. Granted, he does worry about paramilitaries and unwarranted demonization, and he does recommend peaceful protests like marches. But even in progressive neoliberal categories, surely there are better ways to say that robust democratic institutions help mitigate problems caused by hoarding wealth.

Aside from a few sporadic clauses, Snyder offers little about what Franz Neumann called ‘totalitarian monopolistic capitalism’s’ wealth concentration, or reactionary revolts to neoliberalism. Snyder’s recommendation to improve interpersonal conduct by individually financing civic life cannot really target the vital organs Franz Neumann and Robert Paxton respectfully identify in their analyses of the anatomy of authoritarianism. And so, if anything, Snyder underestimates authoritarianism’s affective charge in American politics because his discourse ethics does not directly engage with the relations that stem from the organization of basic socio-economic forms.

These kinds of oversights are similarly present in the analysis of international politics. For instance, by systematically upturning old

alliances, bargains and institutions that comprise ‘collective security’ and ‘free trade’, progressive neoliberals interpret the Trump administration’s contempt for liberal internationalism as a significant destabilization of US hegemony. This destabilization comes precisely when there is a global power shift underway. While China and the South more broadly might not create geopolitical blocs that entirely negate US hegemony, it does mean the liberal international order will be curtailed, returning to being but a global subsystem similar to the situation during most of the 20th century (see Ikenberry, 2011; Acharya, 2014; Colgan and Keohane, 2017; Ikenberry, 2018).

Perhaps the preeminent proponent for ‘the liberal international order’, John Ikenberry, believes that for the US to remain hegemonic the state’s actions must be grounded in normative principles about action and conduct, not narrow concerns that cater to the interests of neoliberal capital. For Ikenberry, liberal internationalism is ‘a way of thinking about and responding to modernity – its opportunities and its dangers’. At the heart of this project was one kind of answer to the social question:

Across these two centuries, the industrial revolution unfolded, capitalism expanded its frontiers, Europeans built far-flung empires, the modern nation-state took root, and along the way the world witnessed what might be called the ‘liberal ascendancy’ – the rise in the size, number, power and wealth of liberal democracies. (Ikenberry, 2018, 11)

The response to the ‘grand forces of modernity’ was to double down on universalism – as seen in the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – backed by military power. Another component of this order was a belief in a natural fraternity among liberal Western states based upon the assumption that similarly shared first-order values would translate into interests that roughly overlap, hence increasing the likelihood of cooperation.

However, Ikenberry writes that ‘the globalization of liberal internationalism put in motion two long-term effects: a crisis of governance and authority, and a crisis of social purpose’ (Ikenberry 2018, 18). What he means is that progressive neoliberalism was too successful. In global ascension, so arose global dissatisfaction. Accordingly, for the liberal order to prosper it must return to New Deal principles, a governmentality that he argues spurred inclusive economic growth and stability, and somewhat tamed the intensity of capitalism. This version would need to ‘cultivate deeper relations with democratic states within

the rising non-western developing world'. But even supposing this was acceptable and successful, how much confidence can one put into these New Deal values if they were not able to generate an adequate defence against the neoliberal *revanche*? And how much stock can one put into these values when the revered liberal rules-based order was built through spilling blood abroad? (see Bevins, 2020).

Lastly, writing in the *New Yorker*, Salman Rushdie (2018) channelled a set of worries that could be considered emblematic of many American progressive neoliberals. His concern is with the triumvirate of asymmetrical political polarization, the intensification of political affects as enabled by technological processes, and fragmented reality that has apparently bifurcated shared conceptions of reality thereby creating 'conflicting and often incompatible narratives'. For him, these affects are on a whole different scale than the strains in the late modern period. Like many others, he endorses the sentiment that reality is fractured and multiple, that truth is an embodied performance interpreted according to culturally mediated conceptual schema. Still, this view seems to leave little room for those who wish to judge that certain conceptions of reality are in fact false and flawed, and indeed tyrannical in that those conceptions serve racism and climate change denialism. The apparent bind is that if one denies the former, as many modernist social projects do, this will lead to tyranny, yet the latter is racial tyranny.

Plainly, Rushdie's suggestion is to continue with Rawlsian procedural liberalism with reasonable doubt and the giving and taking of reasons: 'I don't pretend to have a full answer. I do think that we need to recognize that any society's idea of truth is always the product of an argument, and we need to get better at winning that argument.' Arguably this kind of approach permitted fascism to emerge in the first place, for it failed to address American capitalism, or how the search for profit overdetermines the discourse within public affairs in capitalist societies. For example, it is important to recognize how disruptive post-truth politics has been a staple tactic used by industrial-capitalists and their agents for at least 30 years, if not longer, as they have sought to induce a debate on climate change to stall regulations that threaten the profitability of their enterprises. However, encountering new modalities of propaganda does not licence magic thinking about times when truths were uncontested and universally accepted. Still, there is no space in Rushdie's triumvirate for critical reflection about how a capitalist media system in combination with a 1 per cent campaign financing regime might be undermining the giving and taking of reasons.

What Synder, Ikenberry, Rushie and likeminded progressive neoliberals now refer to as resistance in the Trump era is really basic civic engagement. But civic engagement detached from a full appraisal of American life is not enough to retake the nearly 1,000 seats between Congress, the Senate, and statehouses lost by the Democratic Party during the Obama presidency, let alone recover the Supreme Court (Yglesias, 2017). As Clare Malone (2017) summarized, ‘Barack Obama won the White House, but Democrats lost the Country’.

Despite this down ballot collapse, the Democratic Party seems reluctant to review their policy agenda or politics. The internal ire towards Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and recently elected Justice Democrats is testament to foot-dragging on that front. Instead, Democrat operatives attribute Trump’s electoral victory to racism, as if they forgot that Obama won two landslide victories. Or sexism, as if Hillary Clinton had not received the most votes ever cast in an American election. Or resort to vote shaming those who cast their ballots for the Green Party, as if Democrats believe they are entitled to certain constituencies. From my vantage, these scapegoating premises are always assumed but never demonstrated. And, as an outsider, I am amazed at how incredibly convenient it is that their explanations do not threaten their interests.

Understanding how this down ballot defeat occurred requires many more pages than I have available here, but one important component can be attributed to the development of progressive neoliberal social theory in the 20th century. This political philosophy inherited the concerns of procedural liberalism with secondary instrumentalization. Sparing all but the essentials, this social theory was a response to the emergence of large-scale enterprises with concentrated ownership. As historians like Howard Zinn and others have shown, mass commercial enterprises outgrew decentralized political governance. Preserving some semblance of a democratic society required resolving this imbalance of power. It mostly came through concentrating political power to produce the clout required to effectively regulate big business according to ‘national interests’ as these were put into the custody of a technocratic professional managerial class. Legitimacy for this exercise required the nationalization of politics. The creation of a political community at scale introduced a mass politics, in which communication technologies like radio played a central constitutive role. Michael Sandel (2005, 170) summarizes the process by saying that ‘in the twentieth century, liberalism made its peace with concentrated power’.

But there is another important point worth making. Conditions have never been more favourable for capitalism and more conducive to capital

accumulation. Certainly, the digital revolution in telecommunications helps in that regard. But the naturalization of capitalist values is broader than just novel developments in technology. In addition to a labour regime shaped by the installation of neoliberal politics, intentional wage containment and a decline of union membership there is the ideological triumph of capitalism after the Cold War and little meaningful resistance in the Global South relative to the decolonization movements in the postwar era. Using scholarship, statecraft and ideology, neoliberalism promotes and implements structural adjustment to cater to the imperatives of international capital which pursues different interests in different places. Instead progressive neoliberals continue their concerns with secondary instrumentalization, seeking to better adjust distribution within a capitalist system in line with their professional judgements. This helps explain why we now speak of social problems and not social questions.

These are but a few illustrations about how progressive neoliberals cannot form a critique that rejects the forces that produced the Trump presidency. Indeed, they tacitly accept burdens, suffering and a technique of class rule that came along with a catastrophic equilibrium. Instead they are simply concerned with discursive and performative respectability. That Trump's manner offends their mores tells you about the limits of those mores. Taking offence at the bucking of bureaucratic norms seems out of step when leading economic sectors are lionized for seeking to 'move fast and break things'. Moreover, this kind of offence is sterile for it cannot convert genuine grievances into a broad-based movement that has the potential to dramatically improve social relations, ones conducive to a consolidated establishment of deep and widespread human flourishing. At best, progressive neoliberals simply seek to defeat Trump at the ballot box. But doing so simply returns us to a moment that produced Trump in the first place, all the while with climate change accelerating as our carbon budget is being depleted.

In short, when progressive neoliberals invoke democracy what they mean is their class's way of life. Within this framework hope and change are synonyms for the quiet restorative stability of the status quo where they were once insulated from the effects of that politics, where they have the cognitive comfort of not having to think about politics as it really is, that being the allocation of suffering and decisions over who lives and who dies. American progressive neoliberalism is unable to comprehend the behemoth of capitalism because the inequality it permits fuels authoritarianism, as Synder, Ikenberry and Rushdie's oversights demonstrate. Little wonder then that there is a creeping sense that their resistance to Western

fascism is ineffectual. This is because the issues progressive neoliberals attribute to anomalies can be better understood as contradictions. Contradictions can be managed, but that just renders structural and systemic weakness elsewhere in other forms. Unless there is political realignment, they can never be solved. Outside of Marxism there is little recognition of this basic fact.

As one might anticipate, I am unconvinced about the proposition that the concept of neoliberalism was too elastic, too adaptable, and therefore open to semantic drift implying that the concept is ill-suited for use in concrete analysis. For me, this robust adaptability mirrored capitalism itself, and so it was a virtue. In addition to its ‘travel’ across many disciplines, neoliberalism was an ‘essentially contested concept’, one subject not only to extensive and good faith intellectual debate but also susceptible to obstinate and bad faith politicking. Neither of these approaches justifies jettisoning the concept simply because lay pundits were unwilling to do the work to trace this travelling or to read widely enough to see that the concept refers to the distinctive lionization of capital wherein everything was subjected to a one-dimensional model of economic reasoning.

Granted, understanding neoliberalism is important in tracing global de-democratization, the consequences of a half century of neoliberalism, one strand of which is personified by Trump. But that effort by itself is one critique late. It is attuned to the old foes who are departing the stage. Certainly, our present conjecture emerges out of neoliberalism. But it heralds something different. Datafication ushers in a ‘new political terrain of struggle’ and new political projects seeking new unities. We are at a decisive historical juncture and it will be settled one way or another.

Communication and the end of neoliberal politics

Class struggle is the first and last force shaping developments in communication. Consider how computers are built using commodity chains and a labour process, both organized by the supremacy of a private property rights regime. Subsequently, as data and code are central to almost every facet of contemporary life, capitalist ideology with its conceptions of suitable social relations are reflected in the uses and programming. It is thus appropriate to worry about when, as opposed to whether, automated decision-making algorithms and their ilk will be used by corporations to optimize for profit at the expense of people. As a concrete example, in the US that society’s computational capacities are being invested in technologies of

surveillance, limiting rather than aiding human flourishing. These are revolutionary developments.

Given that scholars have a solid understanding of the social costs and consequences of the Industrial Revolution, the concerns about automation, as but one example, aiding a major reconfiguration of the US labour regime is legitimate. So even while we do not know the next area of life to be colonized and commodified or the next business sector to be looted and restructured, decisions are currently being made about digital technology which will have far-reaching consequences. And much like how the organization of industrial technologies like factories shaped class formation in the 19th century, it is a safe conjecture that digital technologies will play a similar constitutive role going forward. At stake is whether life becomes a laboratory for datafication and the social purpose it is beholden to.

Although the consequences will be long felt, the era of neoliberalism is a good place to trace the initial beginnings of the social purpose of datafication. For me, late neoliberalism consolidated into a prolonged polycentric class project designed to capture the commanding heights of the international political economy to create a regime of accumulation that deliberately and systematically skewed resources to the global ruling class. Accordingly, the neoliberal project rhetorically masqueraded as a self-regulating capitalist market without the need for political intervention, whereas its policy consensus insisted that regulatory interventions were often required to sustain itself. For this reason, it sought to enter state institutions, easily so because neoliberal policy makers were aware of who benefited from the arrangement. For the aforementioned reasons it is a misnomer to treat neoliberalism exclusively as an economic form, rationalization or mode of rule. Rather it includes a public way of life. David Harvey (2018) writes that this ideological project justifies value passing through different forms, conditions and states at different rates as it seeks to expand. This development reflects one of capitalism's many historical tendencies to increase the extraction of surplus value, production and consumption through colonizing ever more areas of life, oftentimes with the tacit consent of a surprising number of people.

As a public way of life, late neoliberalism encourages certain political subjectivities. With brevity in mind Nancy Fraser attributes the rise of 'struggles for the "recognition of difference"' to shared historical circumstances (2000, 107). This common experience helps explain why this kind of politics is practised by a wide array of actors, ranging from ethno-nationalist bigots with their nostalgic yearning for a fictional past to feminists responding to the ongoing marginalization of women

in public and private life. For Fraser this ‘grammar of political claims-making’ is a response to the increasingly aggressive concentration of power with capitalists. She explains that following the defeat of labour politics and as neoliberalism gained momentum, identity politics emerged as a means and venue to make claims on the current mode of distributing power and wealth. This tactic has had a degree of success because it shifted away from broader egalitarian demands to more discrete targets. Fraser is not suggesting that identity politics causes this inequality; rather it is a limited responsive technique given prevailing conditions. As such, the rise of identity politics is indicative of the ever narrow way to undertake politics, permissible mostly because class-based politics have been banished to the wilderness.

This narrowing has two consequences, Fraser says. The first is a problem of displacement insofar as identity politics often does little to enrich wider redistribution politics – rather it seems to push them aside in favour of targeted gains for discrete groups. The second is a problem of reification. As intercultural communication has increased, rather than embracing hybridity and plurality, instead people ‘drastically simplify and reify group identities’. For Fraser, communication in neoliberalism ‘encourage[s] separatism, intolerance and chauvinism, patriarchalism and authoritarianism’.

To push the argument a little, communication in neoliberalism is premised on *misrecognition and social subordination* as those with little civic status are ‘prevented from participating as a peer in social life’ (Fraser, 2000, 113). Misrecognition does not occur through ‘free-floating cultural representations or discourses’ but is rather a material practice that is reproduced by ‘institutionalized patterns’, these being ‘the workings of social institutions that regulate interaction according to parity-impeding cultural norms’. In other words, institutionalized patterns deny some members of society the status of normative full partners in interaction, capable of participating on a par with the rest. Misrecognition can come in many forms, laws, administrative codes, and professional practices. It can also be institutionalized informally through longstanding customs or sedimented social practices of civil society. As I will allude to throughout this book, encoded subordination, simplification and the associated concepts I use point to how misrecognition is a basic constitutive element of unfreedom in digital society.

While on the topic of unfreedom, capitalism is not about ‘markets’ or even private property per se. Rather it is a political order that consolidates decision-making power over the use, circulation and consumption of resources in a wealthy minority in ways that are opaque.

For example, capitalists have used the power of the state to reregulate and relegislate in such a way as to undermine unions and co-opt other means of worker power to stall challenges to that order. Moreover, the problem with capitalism is not just who accumulates wealth and power. Rather, it is that human experiences and social relations are distorted and instrumentally subordinated to a logic that always prioritizes the extraction of surplus value. Such subordination leaves people alienated as they are not free to fully develop their capacities as they see fit.

As communication is a component of class formation it is also inflected by the structural antagonisms and contradictions inherent in capitalist societies. For instance, the wider rollout of AI is heralded by technologists as an exciting moment, albeit with some growing pains. But by my measure it is necessary to plot the social impact of AI by examining how it changes or preserves the existing balance of power between labour and capital. Here one can examine how the ramifications might undermine democracy and solidify stratifications and inequalities, or if used in another political framework, how this technology might alleviate those same issues. Accordingly, the critique of computation cannot be sufficiently radical if premised on the immutability of capitalism and value struggles.

It is hard to summarize Marxism's findings and intricate arguments. The best succinct version I have found comes from Ben Fine. He writes that in Marxian analysis, 'emphasis is placed upon the capitalist economy as organized around the accumulation of capital through the production, circulation, and distribution of (surplus) value as a totality of economic relations, processes, structures, dynamics, and corresponding agents' (Fine, 2013, 48). It is worth focusing on the role of value in this system. David Harvey explains that value in motion is 'the social labour we do for others as organized through commodity exchanges in competitively price fixing markets' (2018, 4). Emphasizing the role of equivalence, he writes that value is 'socially necessary labour time' which although 'immaterial' has a 'subjective force'. He uses a motif of 'valorization, realization, and distribution' to map each of the three volumes of *Capital* to issues of class, status and factionalism respectfully.

To wit, the core attributes of a Marxist critique centrally involve at least one of either the discussion of the historical nature of capitalist political economy; capitalist societies being a 'collection of commodities' whose circulation is shaped by the antagonism between labour and capital; the use of labour markets to extract surplus value; and the alienation that facilitates the operation of each of these processes. A good clear summary of the chief method, historical materialism,

can be found in Marx's 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Here a mode of production is formed through a combination of material forces and the social relations surrounding production. Marx writes that the 'relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness' (1977). He adds that these four items are articulated such that changes in material forces and the conflicts with which they are associated lead to new configurations of modes of production, what could be characterized as a transition or a revolution. In a capitalist society, transitions to any new configuration of the mode of production is hindered by the prevailing private property rights regime.

I follow the Marxist's conception of class as a social relation. As such it is not a social rank, nor a flat socio-economic indicator. Granted, it is one among several central organizing features of contemporary life, like status and party, which make up the classical Durkheimian tripartite analysis or Harvey's broad motifs of *Capital's* thematic arc. Still, in Marxism the mode of production has explanatory priority. Accordingly, Marxist analysis is attuned to class antagonisms not because workers are necessarily the most oppressed or the bulk of the population. They need not be either. Rather it is because in this mode, capitalists, by virtue of their position in society, extract value in the form of profits from the surplus labour workers do; there is an antagonism between those that produce surpluses and those that have the authority to appropriate it. But this dependency also means that workers are especially well-positioned to hold profit hostage, and in doing so can minimize the capitalist's power to the point that other groups can take advantage of the situation to leverage concessions.

Altogether Marx, Fine and Harvey intimate that capital is very much connected with everyday life through the transformation of social relations, and this transformation is not confined to class lines, they include civic ascription, subjective experience and self-fashioning. Accordingly, these realized experiences of capitalism need not be uniform. Even within the US, a white man and a black woman may share a class position, but matters of status through gender, race and sexuality among others give rise to dramatically different lived experiences of the rule of capital. Logically, these differences do not automatically mean these two agents cannot share beliefs and cooperate to advance a capitalist agenda, but it does introduce a politics of distribution as these persons interact. Channelling Gramsci, Stuart Hall noted that capitalist ideology 'articulates into a configuration, different

subjects, different identities, different projects, different aspirations’ from this difference, ‘it constructs a “unity”’ (1988, 166).

Hall was among the first to recognize ‘a new political project on the right’, this being the attempt by the Right to hegemonize the defeat of the Left post-1968. His attention to differences and transformations within conservative politics pointed to the adaptability of capitalism. It meant that ‘those transformations [changed] the political terrain of struggle before our very eyes, we think the differences don’t have any real effect on anything. It still feels more “left-wing” to say the old ruling class politics goes on in the same old way’ (Hall, 1988, 163). Hall was adamant that fighting old foes, old fights, misses the conjunction upon which a ‘new terrain on which a different politics must form up’. Subsequently his agenda was to find the appropriate questions to ask about the dynamics of this new regime, what we now know as neoliberalism. Much like Hall used Gramsci as a guide for this task, Hall can similarly help us. Not as a consoling ‘old prophet’, but to remind us to refuse the ‘easy transfer of generalisations’ from one era to another. Adapting Hall, the point of the present inquiry is to understand how computation is being used to encode subordination, this exercise to help illuminate the ‘constructions of new agendas’ by information robber barons, a new force in American politics, and how they are aiming for a long occupancy of power.

A material consolidation

Although perhaps now more likely to find space in media history courses, at one time it was commonplace to encounter the blind spot debate and its legacies woven throughout the communication curriculum. Rightly the arguments offered by Dallas Smythe, Sut Jhally and Graham Murdock were valuable in reforming the terms investigating communication not only in and under a capitalist regime, but how communication was constitutive of that regime too. Where communication was once thought of as having no commodity form, expressed most commonly through either simply treating it as a means to induce the purchase of commodities or as a means of mystifying capitalist social relations, by tracing the labour process Smythe was able to move critical communication theory out of the cul-de-sacs of vulgar materialism (Baran and Sweezy, 1966) and subjective idealism (Enzenberger, 1974) to find how audiences were produced, commodified and circulated. In doing so, he empirically consolidated the intellectual material offered by Western Marxists among others. This is but one example of how through Frankfurt

School critical theory Marxist ideas have contributed central concepts to communication studies, strengthening the historical scholarship in the discipline perhaps more than any other tradition of inquiry.

For this reason, it is time for another materialist consolidation in the ‘sphere of circulation’. The onset of datafication provides a means to undertake a similar reframing of the associated terrain of argumentation in digital scholarship. In the attempt to conduct an analysis of this conjecture, like Smythe before, I am guided by a commitment to a historical-material analysis above all else. This commitment does not signal fidelity to sectarianism or dogmatism. I have little patience for either. Rather this approach prioritizes comprehending the historically informed parameters of social change, thereby ensuring the development and dissemination of the conceptual tools that allow all persons to undertake a broad kind of analysis of their circumstances. Less important is whether ‘Marx was right’ (Eagleton, 2011) or if ‘Marx is Back’ (Fuchs and Mosco, 2012).

Accordingly, I focus on the results of systems, relationships and structure as they move in history along with the concepts and methods required to achieve that aim. Attention to the ever-changing dynamics of capitalism means adopting a conception of action that is based in dialectics. Indeed, too rigid a conception of historical development ends up privileging some elements over others in ways that are ultimately unhelpful. Finally, to be clear, a Marxist analysis is not editorializing about one’s personal politics. Nor is it prophetic indoctrination. It is an intentional effort to examine the stakes, distribution and rewards of power. As such, I attempt to continue a scholarship anchored to an historical conception of knowledge, striving for a conception and critique of how meanings and value are produced in digital capitalism.

For this reason, I am sympathetic to Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp’s (2016) emphasis on a media-centred approach to communication research. In contrast to media-centric approaches (where the media is a driver of change), a media-centred approach proposes that the media is a key venue where social changes can best be identified. For Couldry and Hepp, this analysis of place arises because of the ‘deep mediatization’ of organizational and social life writ large. As deep mediatization affects conceptions of epistemology, ontology and personhood, the explanatory utility of a media-centred approach is that it points to a political economy of reality. For myself, this requires researchers to ask which classes can disproportionately shape this reality, how they use the media as instruments to this great end, and what might the consequences be for prospects of collective social life.

To compensate for Couldry and Hepp's relative inattention to class relations and capital investment, we can draw from Rick Gruneau's (1996) social theory of media. He argues that communication technologies are not independent or autonomous agents of social change. While any one technology has some inherent properties that predispose it to certain kinds of actions, there is no inherent political meaning. Instead, the production and use of technologies is always the outcome of historical, social and economic forces and contests. Neither are technologies simple reflections of existing social conditions – they help constitute social conditions. For example, the internet is neither inherently democratic nor authoritarian. In short, like other communication systems, platforms are 'not a transparent medium', Gruneau argues, 'rather it is a complex social and cultural production that frames and shapes our perceptions of reality' (1996, 12). The same applies to code, algorithms and databases.

Likewise, Gruneau's theory would not understand digital audiences and platform users as random, arbitrary groups driven by pleasurable sensation. Rather they are formed by their social position, identities and personhood. While audiences and users may be somewhat demographically predictable, identity is fluid as are attachments to genres and narratives. Platform companies grapple with these factors as they themselves seek to produce and commodify audiences and users for advertisers. These dynamics also shape the evaluation and judgement of taste. A politics of aesthetics means that groups have different definitions and means of assessing taste while the positive qualities of a medium and the content are viable conventions. Social dynamics overdetermine technical elements that support aesthetic expression.

Finally, comparing companies and regulatory environments shows that institutional differences matter. These come to shape the content and advertising models present on platforms. Content on a platform is an outcome of complex processes of selection, one which involves the uploaded content, input and feedback of audiences. Still, discussions that are limited to audiences, tastes and identity compromise our ability to analyse platforms' relationship to power and ideology. Platforms play a role in shaping reality through maintaining the ideas and values that support the dominant bloc of social interests. And so it is valuable to remember that the tools we rely upon in digital society are, as Gruneau writes, but a 'socially, culturally, and industrially produced vision of the world' (1996, 12).

Although they have different projects and so resist simple synthesis, what Couldry, Hepp and Gruneau collectively prompt us to focus on are the fundamental forces that contribute towards a general constitution

of social life, ones best able to be identified (but by no means confined to) the politics in and over digital networks. These sentiments and summary lines of analysis express a return to the proverbial ‘big issues of social change’. In that spirit, the current task is to plot sightlines for the current transformation initiated by digital developments to see what kinds of trajectories and transitions are possible, to see what kind of social relations are ‘in motion’.

Summary and outlook

Inarguably, developments in communications have created near unprecedented socio-economic change, ones with global and historical significance. But it is not enough to argue over the empirical accuracy of descriptions about these developments. More important is the raw conceptualization that allows us to generate subsequent empirical statements. This requires analysing the conjunctures in front of us, as yesterday’s assumptions may not hold tomorrow. If we wish to better understand the relationship between unfreedom and class rule a great simplification will not do.

In [Chapter 1](#), I argue that the radical critique of computation and calculation must work from the register of capital. Using the example of the automation of control rights, I link ‘algorithmic regulation’ with mature capitalist logics – where capital dominates the labour-capital antagonism – to show why computation is necessarily a venue for radical political advocacy, an urgent task on the ‘hard road to renewal’. In [Chapter 2](#) I turn to questions about the social life of data. I use the case study of econometrics to look at how datafication disproportionately shapes the comprehension of reality. This is because econometrics is used to produce authoritative facts about the world that come to decide who lives and who dies. Yet, as numbers enjoy a central place in modern reasoning (particularly in government as their presumed objectivity and neutrality assist ‘impartial’ decision making), it is important that they receive scrutiny for their role in encoded subordination.

To the extent that one can, given the constraints of form and publicly available evidence, in [Chapter 3](#) I look at the response of the ruling class to an organic crisis in the US. With an aim to understand the character of the unfreedom and class rule I examine their class struggle ‘from above’. In [Chapter 4](#) I trace how digital media instruments are used by different factions within the capitalist ruling class to capture and maintain the commanding heights of the American social structure. Drawing upon principles presented earlier

in the book [Chapter 5](#) examines the role of data and whiteness in American social life. [Chapter 6](#) extends these themes and applies theoretical insights around misrecognition to better understand the intersection of misinformation and ideology in the US. [Chapter 7](#) traces the evolving intersection of capital, security and technology to examine the broad trajectory of unfreedom. Collectively, these chapters drive at the central stakes of technology in 21st-century American life: whether technology will help codify flat capitalist realism, or if it can help deliver broad-based emancipation.

Algorithms and the Critical Theory of Technology

Despite the volumes written on digital politics, and notwithstanding their depth and scope, quality and clarity of arguments and insights from digital scholarship, there do seem to be some matters that require attention. In this spirit Evelyn Ruppert, Engin Isin and Didier Bigo propose a more subtle, nuanced appraisal of ‘data politics’. They propose that digital networks, or more precisely the data they produce, reconfigures ‘relationships between states and citizens’, thereby generating ‘new forms of power relations and politics at different and interconnected scales’ (2017, 1, 2). They contrast this to the similar, albeit different, forms of calculation that feature in and facilitate modern European state formation. This comparison is apt given that Andrew Feenberg notes that ‘technology is one of the major sources of public power in modern societies’ (2010, 10). The key difference between these sets of literatures, Ruppert, Isin and Bigo argue, is that the digital one has yet to pin down its ‘subjects’. They suggest that this identification effort can best be achieved by employing the post-structuralist tools bequeathed by Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. Ruppert, Isin and Bigo summarize their approach by stating that ‘Data does not happen through unstructured social practices but through structured and structuring fields in and through which various agents and their interests generate forms of expertise, interpretation, concepts, and methods that collectively function as fields of power *and* knowledge’ (Ruppert et al, 2017, 3).

Similarly invoking Foucault, and with an eye on the extensive reach of computations techniques on everyday life, David Beer describes ‘the social power of algorithms’ (Beer, 2017, 1). This power, he suggests, poses several key issues for the prevailing conceptualization of political legitimacy and governance. Much of this comes from ‘the impact and

consequences of code' (Beer, 2017, 3) but also 'the powerful ways in which notions and ideas about the algorithm circulate through the social world' (Beer, 2017, 2). For Beer, the current disciplinary research agenda involves questions of how much agency algorithms have in complex decision-making systems that involve 'sorting, ordering, and prediction' (Beer, 2017, 6), with a priority placed upon how norms are established; *inter alia*, the encoded demarcation of deviance, abnormality and what elements are opaque to whom (Beer, 2017, 3, 2, 6). Ascertaining this impact involves having a better comprehension of the ordering effects of computation, akin, if you will, to a 'thick description of algorithms' to appreciate just how 'authority is increasingly expressed algorithmically', to poach Frank Pasquale's phrase (2015, 8). This is an agenda worthy of wide support. Nevertheless, the two projects do prompt critical data scholars to ask how the purposeful construction of a subject might hide as much as it might illuminate.

One should not lose sight of the fact that there are redeeming elements to these two academic projects. However, there are undue silences about the role of value and capital, surpluses and deficits. As such this means that these projects' search for an analysis of a 'digital subject' is irrecoverably partial because they miss the grounding of this subject in processes of valorization and extraction, accumulation and appropriation. In other words, through silently passing over the connection of value and capital – including their digital expressions – the mode of production disappears from their frameworks. And so the intense focus on the social worlds created by platforms underexplores the deeper currents within the increased mobility of transnational capital flows and the asymmetrical antagonisms in capitalism, issues at the very forefront of our mode of production. The consequence, sadly, is that these theorists cannot specify a venue for any coming subject to participate in 'data politics', nor can they identify principle agents and agendas for revolutionary social change.

In the spirit of sympathetic critique, in this chapter I treat 'data politics', or more precisely digitalization as a signature element within late neoliberalism. By neoliberalism, I nod towards Wendy Brown's (2015) frame of analysis wherein capital is a 'political rationality'. By using this phrase, she refers to the encroachment of financial ways of thinking onto everyday life and how this undermines democratic forms of social interaction, all to cater towards a preferred subjectivity with preferred social relations and norms. As capital dominates the labour–capital antagonism (through undermining labour protections, reducing welfare commitments, or rolling back redistribution) for Brown, the sustained slow weakening of democratic institutions and practices

has created the right kind of climate for a more robust authoritarian turn against the liberal democratic order, one that undoubtedly caters towards the imperatives of capital in late modernity.

In the coming sections I use two case studies involving property rights and differential class power to suggest that there are many good reasons to foreground Marxian-inspired contributions to the aforementioned research agenda. In making this intervention on ongoing work into algorithms, computation and data, I want to contrast existing studies that focus on data's interpellation of subjects as well as the normative regimes deployed for that interpellation, to a research agenda that clearly recognizes the role of global capitalism and its contradictions in the work that data does. From my vantage, the latter is currently underserved.

Before I turn to the themes present in these cases, I should add that I do not intend to survey the huge literature in these very active fields. Such an overview is a subject in and of itself and not my purpose here. This is because I am interested more in method than content. Thereafter, in the subsequent sections I argue that computation provides a venue for radical political advocacy, something urgently required given that the aforementioned issues suggest the possibility of politics being foreclosed. Therefore, the goal of the second half of the chapter is to attempt to specify a venue and criteria for politically meaningful scholarship. As my target is the conceptual ordering of the present state of the discipline, this task requires that we examine the border between history and philosophy. Ultimately, I advocate that the radical critique of computation and calculation must work from the register of capital. The issue is more than just analytical precision. At stake is the continuing relevance of a critical theory of technology that is politically adequate to understand the latest manoeuvre in the always already impulse of value towards the realization of its own totality.

Data, politics and rights

In late 2017 Strava released its Global Heat Map, a data visualization tool that plots activities logged by the app's users. Drew Robb (2017), a data engineer at the company, wrote that the dataset covered two years and represented 700 million activities. Yet while this visualization conveyed the seductive elegance of simple numbers, shortly thereafter security researchers like John Scott-Railton (2018) at CitizenLab were able to identify secret military bases, patrols and logistics routes, often in surprising, mappable detail. All of this could be seen using the app's routine interface. In other words, to employ a common adage, the

interface was ‘used as intended, but not as expected’. As one might expect, an unbounded, multisided scandal unfolded. Accordingly, this scandal provides a good case illustration of the limitations of class opacity, something that I will address at the end of this section.

A ready response is that much of this scandal could be avoided if persons were more attentive to their privacy settings. This is somewhat true, but also a distortion of the main issue. If privacy-conscious persons like US Special Forces operators could not select the appropriate privacy setting then the issue is beyond any one person’s usage of privacy settings because it speaks to larger questions of the design of ‘privacy’ on these kinds of platforms.

Put otherwise, the Strava case well illustrates the need for a socio-technical approach to the study of platforms. One of the best scholars in this regard is Zeynep Tufekci. ‘The Strava debacle underscores a crucial misconception at the heart of the system of privacy protection in the United States’, she writes. ‘[T]he privacy of data cannot be managed person-by-person through a system of individualized informed consent’ (Tufekci, 2018). In this conception, data privacy is less like an individual consumer good, and more like a public good. Accordingly, for Tufekci there ‘must be strict controls and regulations concerning how all the data about us – not just the obviously sensitive bits – is collected, stored and sold’. Effectively, the adage that ‘informed consent cannot function when one cannot be reasonably informed’ readily applies to this situation. The deeper point lies with a highly individuated conception of rights upon which notions of informed consent rest.

Tufekci’s concern is that hoarding data can have opaque legacy effects from which it is impossible to opt out. Let us take a closer look at Facebook to illustrate the general point. Drawing upon its existing database and new data sources, recently the company filed a patent that seeks to categorize ‘class’ (Facebook, 2018). One interpretation is that this sorting and categorization technique will help with advertising preferences for third-party clients. For example, banks could use targeted ads aimed at the working class, which in the US disproportionately includes historically marginalized and racialized persons. Given their credit history, these ads would probably be for high-interest loans to people who are precarious, desperate and susceptible. In effect, the algorithm would be denying them opportunities for fair loans, thus having an adverse impact on this class. To a greater degree, this development continues the disquieting elements in consumer research, but are worse in some respects because Facebook can build profiles based upon user-generated data logged for over a decade. This raises the real prospects of a person being profiled as

susceptible to a high-interest loan because of their parents' credit history. Presently this kind of predictive and presumptive software has several flaws. First, marketing claims overstate the accuracy. In practice these algorithms lack reliable predictive power. Second, because these kinds of software reflect capitalist ideology, poor persons (and in the US that means disproportionately black Americans) are less likely to be treated as fairly as other racial groups. I will return to and develop this point towards the end of the chapter, but for present purposes it is important to note that questionable goals are married with questionable means.

To help think through the ramifications of the archival nature of digitization I want to briefly discuss some of Jenna Burrell's observations. Burrell (2016) draws attention to three kinds of 'opacity', namely an understanding of how one is a recipient of an outcome or decision, especially when the inputs are themselves only partially known. The first kind of opacity stems from corporate propriety and rights to property to maintain their market share and support their accumulation efforts. Appeals to network security are enrolled to help this line of reasoning, so it is unlikely that opacity will be suspended. Nevertheless, it is important to state that claims of propriety-as-opacity are at some level asserting that property rights take priority over regulatory safeguards meant to protect rights that greatly contribute to human flourishing, items like the right to equality or freedom from discrimination.

The second kind of opacity derives from technical illiteracy. The reasoning goes that writing code requires knowledge of a specialized syntax, logic and grammar, which is inaccessible to many people while unpractised for others. I am less convinced that this kind of opacity should be attributed to technical illiteracy alone, for it is downstream from a division of labour. Furthermore, durable, categorical and intersecting inequalities increase the likelihood that certain classes and groups are overrepresented among those who receive programming training. What I mean is that this technical language is not democratic, nor was it designed to be democratic.

The lack of democracy in code links to the third kind of algorithmic opacity that Burrell identifies, one which is a result of what she terms their 'depth of their mathematical design'. Her point is, roughly, that researchers occasionally treat technical apparatuses as overdetermined black boxes situated in the social world, inflected by 'the pressure of profit and shareholder value'. Effectively this black box treatment examines something other than the 'algorithmic logic'. The potential consequence is that this mode of analysis 'may not surface important broader patterns or risks to be found in particular classes of algorithms'

(Burrell, 2016, 3). This opacity and its associated risks resemble that of derivative trading prior to the 2008 recession, a systemic risk only comprehended in hindsight. But again, Burrell might be naturalizing the extent to which capitalists court systemic risks irrespective of which ‘black box’ analysts use to conduct their trading practices.

To counter the aforementioned opacity, Burrell points to the need for code auditors and targeted STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education to help with the substantive inclusion of persons from historically marginalized groups. The general idea is that diverse hiring can lead to ‘AI that’s fair and unbiased’ and so negate prejudices ranging from bigotry and xenophobia to homophobia to ageism. A similar idea is behind a call for greater computational literacy among journalists (see Diakopoulos, 2013); the idea here being that journalists could better mediate technical knowledge to inform the public and civil society more broadly.

While auditing for inclusion and expanding computational literacy programmes does have practical merits and positive effects, it is here that I have a point of departure from Burrell. From my vantage this line of reasoning demonstrates some limitations of this variety of scholarship, which is that it generally gives insufficient attention to how opacity itself is coloured by the commodification impulse that underpins the organization, conduct of and rationalization behind digital platform companies. ‘More diversity’ might fit with optics and the politics of progressive neoliberalism, but it overlooks the fact that it is not the beliefs of persons that drive social marginalization, it is the larger imperatives of the social structures in which they live and work. For example, racism is not simply prejudice, it is prejudice that is empowered by the actions and protocols of institutional life, whether it be governmental or corporate in nature. If the goal is to become ‘less bias’ it can only happen within the broader parameters permitted by capitalist society. For example, it is doubtful whether tech firms seeking to become ‘more diverse’ will implement deconstructive, decolonial or post-capitalist protocols that stem from alternative political frameworks. As such, the tolerance for different logics is limited before conversations about inclusion are even raised; the parameters for alternatives constructions of difference are tethered from the beginning.

One problem with ideas like code auditors and inclusive diversity is that they are for the most part oblivious to class and class relations. And through this obliviousness, these ideas lack the basic structural prerequisites to really understand the material components that undergird people’s lived experience. Consider that despite the existence of ombudsmen, watchdogs and press councils, for the most part poverty

is an underrepresented issue in the press. In the US nearly 50 million people live in poverty, yet primary coverage of this issue makes up 0.2 per cent of news from major news outlets (Froomkin, 2013), meaning that Barbara Ehrenreich (2015) is correct to say that ‘only the rich can afford to write about poverty’. Effectively, Ehrenreich is underscoring the class bias in the production, circulation and consumption of ideas, pointing to how intellectual forces have material consequences. A similar dynamic is at hand for code and computation, especially if we are already willing to acknowledge that computer code is not meant to be democratic.

Here it is appropriate to think about ‘capitalistic opacity’ and class obliviousness as (and really when) machine learning which combines multiple data streams is paired with AI and put in service of corporate policy that uses it to optimize for extracting profits at the expense of people. The degree of accuracy and fairness is less important than the consequences of the profiling while profiling is less important than the mandate that corporations are legally compelled to extract profits. So long as data are legally coded as private property, so these kinds of social questions that the Strava Global Heat Map illustrates will continue unabated. Capitalism means the protection of a private property rights regime above all else. Therefore, if digital sociologists wish to have a full comprehension of informed consent it is imperative to recognize that it is a downstream matter to the basic dynamics of capitalism. Arguments that such an analytical hierarchy simply mistreats objects by making them a ‘black box’ misconstrues how the properties of these objects come to be socially valued, and are put into motion and realized because of their ability to help extract surplus value. As such, I take a contrary view to Tufekci and Burrell: questions of design need to be supplemented with a recognition that platforms and apps take advantage of existing American jurisprudence, itself a reflection of actually existing American capitalism and its necessary commitment to a private property rights regime.

The code of capital

It is helpful to keep the topic of property regimes in mind when reading Andrew Clement and David Lyon’s analysis of how value and wealth is created by platform companies. They write about ‘the hyperactive but hidden world of online-data trafficking with its myriad actors feverishly harvesting, aggregating, packaging, profiling, brokering, targeting, selling and generally monetizing the personal information we generate in rapidly expanding volumes’ (Clement and Lyon, 2018).

As a quick illustration, Facebook has upwards of 2 billion active users, with WhatsApp, Messenger and Instagram with 1.2 billion, 1.2 billion and 700 million users respectively. A market capitalization of \$445 billion makes the company the fifth most valuable in the world. More broadly, in 2017 Silicon Valley contributed \$252 billion to US gross domestic product (GDP) (Hinson et al, 2017). Within this sector, in 2018 Alphabet's (2018) revenues were \$136 billion and its total (unaudited) assets were valued at \$232 billion, with total liabilities of \$55 billion. In addition to commodification practices, exploiting their workers and wage theft, this value has come primarily from two sources: unpaid labour and looting other economic sectors.

Regarding unpaid labour, using rudimentary personalization algorithms for media content distribution and consumption to serve data-capturing purposes, Facebook's revenue model depends on extensive commodification facilitated by intrusive surveillance practices. Nicole Cohen explains that 'extensive commodification refers to the way in which market forces shape and reshape life, entering spaces previously untouched, or mildly touched, by capitalist social relations'. Cohen continues:

Not only is surveillance the method by which Facebook aggregates user information for third-party use and specifically targets demographics for marketing purposes, but surveillance is the main strategy by which the company retains members and keeps them returning to the site. (Cohen, 2008)

As one of the mainstays of digital society, the consent by consumers to engage in the creation of the value of Facebook comes from this digital data work, which has become an increasingly lucrative commodity to extract from a person's everyday labour. Yet, as Facebook is so entrenched in the fabric of everyday life, it is uncommon to find critiques of its commodification practices. There is precedent for this kind of naturalization. As Marx wrote,

the advance of the capitalist mode of production develops a working class, which by education, tradition, habit, looks upon the conditions of that mode of production as self-evident laws of Nature [...] The dull compulsion of economic relations completes the subjection of the labourer to the capitalist. Direct force, outside economic conditions, is of course still used, but only exceptionally. (1977, 899)

Moving on, it is users themselves who are the ones producing and uploading content to the platform, then being the audience and consuming it. A variety of techniques are used to keep users' attention and return them to the platform. Using intimate surveillance, Facebook mines the data that their users produce to provide microtargeting services to advertisers who in turn try to induce manipulation by modifying beliefs, attitudes and affects for the ultimate end of advertisers acquiring and commodifying audiences, practices that often occur below a user's threshold of awareness. The more users who depend upon platforms the more opportunities exist to acquire data and show advertising. The gains in wealth and power derived from data mining far outweigh the agency gained by the average user. Granted, users recognize the obvious utility of these digital services, but the relationship between consumer and platforms is skewed in favour of these corporations.

In short, people have been co-opted into participating in their commodification with only a few recognizing the inequalities. Concurrently, through creating a digital content distribution medium, Facebook shook several other economic sectors, the most notable being the news and advertising sectors. But whether rendered as 'move fast and break things', 'disruption' or 'creative destruction', these programmatic mantras in Silicon Valley are little more than efforts to reframe the raw predatory looting of other businesses, the accumulation by dispossession, and present them as innovative and positive.

An enabling practice in this accumulation of value is quantification and classification. Together Geoffrey Bowker, Susan Leigh Star and David Beer approach data classification as a socio-technical system which leads to particular material configurations and effects when implemented by institutions (Bowker and Star, 2000; Beer, 2016). Beer's work suggests that the dominance of a quantitative mode of thinking which allows metrics to circulate and be empowered to 'maintain, strengthen, or justify new types of inequality, to define value or worth, and to make the selections is central to affording visibility or invisibility' (Beer, 2016, 163–4). He calls this the 'social life of data'. For Bowker and Leigh Star, classification schema represent certain social and technical choices which, notwithstanding the apparently trivial or neutral, have significant ethical and political implications because they are beholden to a political rationality. As Kimberle Crenshaw stipulates, 'the process of categorization is itself an exercise of power' (1991, 1297). As such, these classifications invite consequences which do affect a person's relationships, identities and interactions, even if a person is not fully aware of these effects.

At a greater degree of abstraction, metrics and classifications do shape the trajectory of a society's development. South African apartheid provides a case study of this kind of path determinacy. While initiated in the pre-war segregationist era, formally apartheid racial classification legally consolidated in the late 1940s after the National Party came to power. These classifications determined the racial group to which a person was assigned, in turn overdetermining their position within the civic hierarchy and relative exposure to oppression. These assigned civic ascriptions were linked to the political project of establishing the national identity and legitimacy of the white ruling classes. Ideological naturalization through essentialist conceptions of race sought to conceal the shifting construction of difference and the labour regime it supported, even if people knew how fallacious this 'scientific racism' happened to be. Apartheid too had 'data driven decision making', seen as objective given the political categories in that society, even if edge cases existed (see Breckenridge, 2014). Granted, apartheid South Africa provides a clear means to see oppression facilitated by data registries and an associated classification system. But due to their institutional opacity, arguably the US state–platform nexus presents an unknown threat. Where the logic of South African apartheid decision making was explicit and open, less is known about decisions in a digitally automated system. Crisply capturing this point Iyad Rahwan and Manuel Cebrian (2018) write that 'the internal mechanisms driving these algorithms are opaque to anyone outside of the corporations that own and operate them'.

In contradistinction to the opacity, one branch of critique from progressive neoliberals focuses on the errors that can occur with the input of data, insofar that the data fed into the calculations can be poor, incomplete, poorly designed, outdated, negligent, have oversights or be subject to subjective recording. Some combination of these will imprint themselves on the outputs leading to poor data-driven decisions. For example, when it comes to facial recognition technology, and the difficulties with capturing black faces, progressive neoliberals argue that racially diverse hiring practices and more attention to the selection of data can overcome matters of discrimination. However, this reasoning fails to appreciate just how much ideology is encoded into algorithmic code itself, not just the results these technologies produce. As such, there is a misplaced trust that creates delusions about impartiality. The point is not to train facial recognition technologies to better locate the faces of minorities or to eliminate bias, the point is to remove the impulse to use these technologies for carceral logics. And given that much of this technology is propriety and technology companies

lobby to avoid regulation, until there is genuine substantive democratic oversight there is no grounds to trust technology companies that their efforts at achieving fairness will come about. But there is also another point worth making. Whereas 50 years ago post-structuralist theory started to become translated, and so Anglo-American scholars well understood how ideology, doxa, discourse and so on were encoded into language, much of this knowledge is only slowly being recalled and applied to the realm of computation. At times it appears as if there is an amnesia with theory, forgotten as new technological artefacts are reified through an intense focus on their properties and attributes at the expense of an appreciation of their embeddedness within a social system.

In the face of critiques pointing out exclusion and the embedded discriminatory biases in the design of the technologies, technologists (or perhaps more accurately, the public relations departments of technology companies) have responded with a rhetoric that their practices strive to eliminate bias. It is tempting to offer congratulations, but this may be premature or misplaced given that this apparent solution may be ill-conceived. For example, Joanne McNeil (2018) has a conjecture that much of this rhetoric stems from ‘simplicity’. In her words, ‘addressing “bias” has a concrete aim: to become unbiased. With “bias” as a prompt, the possibility of a solution begins to sound unambiguous, even if the course of action – or its aftereffects – is dubious.’ McNeil suggests that this narrow solution-orientation remedial action is liable to ‘obscure structural and systematic forces’. Like Herbert Marcuse decades before, she is indicating that the limitations of this mode of thinking can be identified in technical systems and are indicative of a society without critique. To be bald, it is not simply the case that programmers have overt prejudices. I am sure they do their best to not produce racist outcomes. But this confuses active bigotry with social relations in a racialized society. Put in plainer terms, the issues are not psychological and personal, but sociological and historical.

Notwithstanding these critiques, technologists readily admit that they do not fully understand AI decisions, how those decisions were arrived at and the reasoning steps involved. Accordingly, it seems unwise to mass deploy this technology in state security when the consequences cannot be precisely predicted. But then again, this unknowability can be understood to be a desirable feature – for when there is sufficient opacity it becomes difficult to assign responsibility. In short, because precise effects are unknown this code makes it convenient to dismiss appeals and otherwise skirt accountability. As such, the lack of transparency erodes the practical tenets of good governance,

transparency and accountability. All in all, currently AI decisions are more likely to weaken democratic life than aid it.

Granted, epistemological issues are entangled with political considerations, but often in ways that transforms the objectives and tasks of inquiry. Certainly, big data science smuggles in a particular philosophy and sociology of science, with internal criteria as to what counts as good, valid science. Yet irrespective of the size of the dataset, when using observational data to infer causal relationships one is susceptible to the fallacy of induction. Therefore no volume of data can substitute for a mechanistic demonstration. Still, there is a much more pressing matter. Much like how C. Wright Mills observed that the bureaucratization of social science in the postwar period changed the discipline of US sociology and approaches to the conceptualization and study of society, there is a similar kind of dynamic unfolding at the moment. The resources required to produce big data population research mean that many in academia are excluded from contributing to this research paradigm. This means that we are courting conditions where a corporately beholden epistemology establishes truths and facts. The result is, to modify Mills' term, that the new digital men of power own and control the vectors of information, maintaining their rule through enforcing information asymmetries and corresponding legitimating ideologies. And given that most scholars are excluded from knowing about this research, let alone partaking in it, they are not well-positioned to undertake informed critiques. Whatever judgements they form, technologists can say these critiques are outdated, besides which there are code auditors who work for the corporations. Yet again one sees the effects of a private property rights regime on the construction of knowledge and reality.

Code as material governance

Calling back to Ruppert, Beer, Tufekci and Burrell, they have strong moral criticisms of the injustices in digitalization and are right to investigate how technology is not just instrumental but shapes a way of life through design choices, side effects and secondary instrumentalization. However, this criticism does not necessarily amount to a philosophical comprehension of the new emerging society. Rather, their analysis tends to suggest a politics where facts are useful as demystification and where experts weigh in on matters of distribution. I am not convinced that one can find a suitable 'subject' for data politics in this line of inquiry because of the oversight regarding the effects of class rule. Given the 'enclosure' of digital public

goods, the prevailing theories of data politics, while helpful, require supplementation. When reviewing the history of technology, one cannot help but be immediately swayed by how prescient Marx was in his conceptualization of machinery – what it was and what it did. Despite its initial formulation in the mid-19th century, the Marxian research tradition remains a vibrant and useful mode of analysis that is more than relevant for studies of the political economy of digital technology. Indeed, in many respects this tradition is superior to the general progressive neoliberal critique of digital technology.

Aside from a small committed set of radical political economists, for many researchers ‘Marx is now an irrelevant advocate of outdated economic theories’. But this is arguably a mistaken view insofar that political economy was the ‘principal domain of technology in his time’ (Feenberg, 2010, 69). Technology is of central importance in Marx, in part because modernity and technology are indissolubly linked. To explain how this body of literature is relevant for data politics, a development that has occurred close to a century after Marx’s death, consider how social media became a technique for surplus value extraction through commodifying user-generated data. This in turn has produced a whole field of politics about, over and for this commodity, but in the main this politics is predominantly capitalist in character.

Despite the mainstream rejection of radical analysis progressive neoliberals do sample from this literature, if in a way that severs the kinds of concepts they adopt from their Marxian heritage. As Christian Fuchs and Nick Dyer-Witheford (2013) argue, ‘Marxian concepts ... have been reflected implicitly or explicitly in Internet Studies’. They identify a long list which includes globalization, the public sphere and ideology critique. Yet through a robust literature review they also demonstrate how these ‘Marxian-inspired’ concepts have been divorced from the overarching political philosophy, sometimes without even acknowledging the linkage. However, when selectively using these concepts, the progressive neoliberal analysis stops well short of comprehending how the totality of social relations in capitalism impacts technological use.

For Fuchs and Dyer-Witheford the result of this divorce is that many digital researchers are ‘superficial in their various approaches discussing capitalism, exploitation and domination’. The absence of a class analysis or an assessment of the feasibility of finite political goals (like workers controlling production) instead leads to an intellectual politics based on the broad acceptance of cultural difference and self-fashioning but little else. Absent a grounding in class, this kind of analysis is an updated restatement of third-way accommodation of the

horrors of late stage capitalism. Granted, progressive neoliberals argue that perhaps the whole world should not be mediated by algorithms. This is a valuable point but it must also be set beside common observations about the behaviour of reformist politics in a capitalist society – when undertaking amelioration of the more acute harms of capitalism, reformation stops well short of addressing the first causes of those acute harms. The result is a position which can accurately be described as capital accommodation.

To me, capital accommodationism is willing to make peace with the ‘comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom’ that Marcuse argued ‘prevails in advanced industrial civilization’. Indeed, such an attitude is deemed ‘a token of technical progress’ (Marcuse, 2002, 3). He adds to these remarks by saying, ‘the more rational, productive, technical, and total the repressive administration of society becomes, the more unimaginable the means and ways by which the administered individuals might break their servitude and seize their own liberation’ (2002, 9). Thinking about these issues requires political engagement of the kind automated public spheres seek to curtail, and which progressive neoliberals tend to construe as intellectually compromising. By contrast, I see capital accommodationism in digital scholarship as hegemony in action and a depletion of the imaginative capacities to use the newly acquired Marxian concepts in a way that can advance human flourishing.

On the topic of Marxian concepts there is a point about hegemony worth noting. Geoff Mann insists that the point of the labour theory of value is to identify how value functions to reproduce capital’s hegemony. As the ‘paradigmatic instrument of hegemony’, he writes, ‘value is the means by which the particular interests of the hegemonic historic bloc (capital) are generalized, so they become understood as the general interest’ (Mann, 2016, 10). In effect, I think there is a *prima facie* case that value’s rationality restructures societies to the imperatives of capitalist accumulation. I am going to explore this tendency to restructure in the remaining portion of this section to argue that it is an important component of data politics.

I think we can see restructuring in how bureaucracies shape the social world. David Graeber has recently written about the process of ‘total bureaucratization’. He refers to the ‘gradual fusion of public and private power into a single entity, rife with rules and regulations whose ultimate purpose is to extract wealth in the form of profits’ (2015, 17). Similar sentiments are commonplace when discussing neoliberal economics, settler colonial logics around dispossession or capitalism’s infiltration of science, rationality and models of technological

innovation. So, if it is not too much of a stretch to label the internal procedures of bureaucracies, public and private alike, as algorithmic – they have protocols that compute actions – then it is not too much of a stretch to label value as a kind of a procedure for ‘sorting, ordering, and predicting’.

The most apparent example of the restarting of rationality is how metrics replace professional judgement (i.e. judgement acquired through wisdom, experience and talent), with numerical indicators of comparative performance based upon standardized data. These metrics are then used for attaching rewards and penalties to measured performance. This kind of performance assessment courts goal displacement. For example, when performance is judged by a few measures, and the stakes are high, like keeping your job, people focus on satisfying those measures often at the expense of other, more important organizational goals that are not measured or measurable. As Graeber (2018) notes, people are ‘obliged to spend increasing proportions of their time pretending to quantify the unquantifiable’. Similarly, short-term goals are advanced at the expense of long-term considerations. This kind of problem is endemic to publicly traded corporations like Facebook and Google. Even so, data cannot make decisions. Even when there is deference to AI, it is just a change from one set of complex symbolic inputs to another set, still conditioned by a social order, with its inequality in power.

The computational reason put into circulation by digitally automated decision-making systems has dramatic social consequences. While I will elaborate upon the matter in [Chapters 5](#) and [6](#), we know that platform and technology companies sell facial recognition software to US governmental agencies and otherwise cater to the general digital militarization of the border. For example, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement has a \$53 million contract with Palantir, while there are rumours that the Department of Homeland Security seeks to mass deploy facial recognition AI (Dellinger, 2018). Platform and technology companies are aware of the optics of enabling the biometric authoritarian tendencies in the state security apparatus. Microsoft, for instance, sought to distance itself from their government contracts when their commercial relationship became publicly known (Bergen and Bass, 2018). In doing so they demonstrate an acute awareness that whether it be oppression, exploitation or alienation, they well know these processes are produced and facilitated by data and the products they make to collect and analyse that data. The underlying action is a kind of devaluation of people that makes dispossession easier to enact. This is perhaps the most important part of the carceral state.

So, the specific efficacy of any one product, or even a range of products, does not really matter. What matters is that biometric tracking provides justifications for state officials to license actions in support of its longstanding racial abjection, national security and border-imperialism projects. In conjunction with other surveillance practices, these technologies compromise basic human rights, like freedom of speech, consciousness and mobility. The result of the state's algorithmic gaze is to render everyone, but especially the most vulnerable, even more exposed to state and market forces. This is because data surveillance firms cater to state security imperatives as well as lobby the state to create markets for their products. By way of illustration, Amazon Rekognition's capabilities form part of a suite of services that Amazon Web Services already provides to US state security forces, while the company has met with state agencies to pitch its services (Rose, 2019; Edmondson, 2019). These are but the most recent developments of the longstanding tendency of the American state to weaponize communication technologies and deploy them against opponents, whether they be citizens or foreign nationals. For example, Customs and Border Protection claims that US citizens are exempted from biometric tracking at the border. But this is a rhetorical sleight of hand because to exempt a person from scrutiny requires that their identity is validated in the first place, meaning that they are subject to some form of biometric screening.¹

Accordingly, it is worth asking to what extent class bias is encoded and enacted in the computational realm, what kinds of social conflicts this risks and what side of the capital-labour antagonism it favours. These kinds of questions are especially pertinent given how people are currently being rendered as particular subjects by automated decisions that use data acquired by breaching established privacy norms to perpetuate social stratifications as well as to intensify intersectional inequalities. And so, it is worth pausing to assess the contributions of machine learning to these displacements, alienations and restructurings.

Computational reason

One can understand capitalism's contradictions, antagonisms and struggles as computations. To better explain what I mean by this, it is instructive to draw upon Andrew Feenberg's critical theory of technology. I do so because while it is commonplace to accept the

1 See Timcke (2017) for a discussion of how the US state uses technology to marginalize political dissents and subordinate the black community.

point that it is a mistake to reify technology as something separate from society, like the commodity form, too often there is a peculiar mystification where, to use Feenberg's turn of phrase, 'the illusion of technique became the dominant ideology' (2010, xx). To this extent, I think there is some benefit to incorporating the 'social critique of reason' (Feenberg, 2010, 160) into the methodology used to understand digital societies. Much as we are suspect about rationality restructuring the social world, so too must we be suspect of technological innovation lest we misunderstand the epistemic regimes that are implicit in data politics. It is also because, rather than conceptualizing data politics as a radical break from modernity, I think that the internet contains the patterns of the 20th century. Let me explain.

Recalling the motifs introduced by Tufekci and Burrell, I want to examine the opacity of code. For Feenberg, technical code is the combination of two ontological registers, these being social demand and technical specifications. There are translations and interactions between these discursive and technical elements, meaning these codes are not technically neutral entities. Rather they have a formal bias in favour of hegemonic social values while being constrained by the limits of existing technical operations. Still, given the nature of Gramscian hegemony wherein prevailing beliefs are not outlined with clear propositions, much of the class struggle elements within technical codes goes unnoticed. 'Goals are "coded" in the sense of ranking items as ethically permitted or forbidden, aesthetically better or worse, more or less socially desirable', Feenberg writes, so 'socially rational activities that appear fair when abstracted from their context but have discriminatory consequences in that context'. The opacity of data politics then is not the relative inattention to Marxist conceptions of technology, but rather as Feenberg suggests, that 'machine design mirrors back the social functions operative in the prevailing rationality' (2010, 68, 69, 17). To the extent that one ignores the material base of a society, it is likely that attempts to understand technical code will stall more often than they will succeed.

This brings up another kind of opacity that Burrell overlooked, one related to modern experience. Via Heidegger, Feenberg offers a 'technological revealing' of the many illusions that structure this experience. He roughly means that when objects and experiences are useful, the human subject appears as a pure decentred rationality, methodically controlling and planning as 'thought extended' to its own world. These modifications relate not to Heidegger's being, but to the consequences of persisting divisions between Marxist classes, what we could otherwise call the enduring inequalities between rulers and

ruled in technologically mediated institutions and modern societies. The goal here is to repurpose Heidegger's concept of enframing, which Feenberg uses to convey that all persons, without exception, have become 'objects of technique, incorporated into the mechanism we have created' (Feenberg, 2010, 7). Beer tends to agree. He relays Heidegger's adage that 'calculation refuses to let anything appear except what is calculable' (Heidegger, cited by Beer, 2016, 58).

Simplifying Heidegger, effectively his proposal is that we adopt new attitudes towards technology, attitudes akin to the way being reveals itself. I am less convinced by this proposal. In fact, my materialist inclinations think it is insufficient. Nevertheless, I do agree to the extent that data, as the by-products of being, when simply interpolated as 'objects of technique' reflect how technology is radically disconnected from the experiences of the people who use it and live with it. This is the general condition of alienation. To reiterate an earlier point, people generally see the utility of platforms, but these platforms exist in their current form primarily to generate profits. This helps explain why platforms are so alienating to their users, even while the users can see potentials in this technology. If an analysis departs from this standpoint, the chief problem is not one of legal rights but also initiative and participation, themselves grounded in the experience and needs of people.

Unfortunately digitization and 'data politics' does not yet appear to be harnessed for actually existing democratic decision making. This is because 'the modern world develops a technology increasingly alienated from everyday experience. This is an effect of capitalism that restricts control of design to a small dominate class and its technical servants'. So when Feenberg argues that 'The new masters of technology are not restrained by the lessons of experience and accelerate change to the point where society is in constant turmoil', he is referring to one of the contradictions in capitalist societies where technological choices are privately made but affect the public. This operational autonomy positions owners as safe from the consequences of their own actions. As Feenberg writes, 'the entire development of modern societies is thus marked by the paradigm of unqualified control over the labour process on which capitalist industrialization rest' (2010, 70). Provided profit seeking is socially desirable, this continues without significant opposition. Nevertheless, we need an urgent replacement of this technology as well as the kind of reasoning it provides. The value of the critical theory of technology is that it interprets the world considering potentialities, insisting that a different world is possible and probable.

We must confront these paradigms that hinder the action and fair consideration of these potentialities.

Feenberg places emphasis on the impact of contextual aspects of technology on design. For him, technology is not just the rational control of nature. Accordingly, we can conceptualize technology in ways that are not simply limited to or predicated upon efficiency as the explanation for technological development, in turn generating possibilities of change usually foreclosed. Yet in Western capitalist societies commercial models of innovation and rationality tend to conflate progress with the multiplication of consumer goods. Neither is technology an extra-political domain. For much of the modern period, good results were celebrated as progress, while the side effects such as pollution and deskilling of industrial work were the price of progress. However, the epistemic focus on precision and control that are the hallmarks of ‘good science’ or ‘good technology’ is rather limited, but also hinders other kinds of collective experimentation. For Feenberg this role is not determining, nor neutral, but rather constitutive. As such, the analysis of technology does not licence us to succumb to the ‘dystopian philosophies of technology’ (Feenberg, 2010, 51). Indeed, like his mentor, Herbert Marcuse, Feenberg insists that we push for ‘technologies of liberation’.

Liberation is not opaque

The recognition that algorithms and AI are becoming a venue for radical politics is gathering momentum, even if it is not always expressed in these terms. To be sure, in a memorable adage Tufekci (2014) reminds us that ‘that happens to #Ferguson effects Ferguson’. This crisp expression demonstrates how digital liberties are civil liberties. Another internet rights activist, the late Aaron Swartz, advocated for ‘the freedom to connect’. The loss of connectivity, he said, would effectively ‘delete’ the US Bill of Rights (Democracy Now, 2013). In light of these sentiments, a suitable analysis of data politics should foreground how democratic opportunities in science and technology have been historically suppressed. These steps must be pursued so that we can better identify when these kinds of actions are occurring. In short, the search for a subject for data politics may in fact miss something if it emphasizes the social complexity and embeddedness of technology, like Tufekci and Burrell, and minimizes the distinctive emphasis on top-down control that accompanies capitalist-led technical rationalization. While it is unlikely that digital scholars whose work

has been covered in this chapter would argue that technology is autonomous, to differing degrees they neglect the totality of socio-historical-material experiences; it reflects an estrangement that forgets that technology, digital varieties included, comes from experience. The key site of investigation is not the technological artefact and its attributes, but rather the social purpose it serves. The core problem is ‘data politics’, where algorithmic-led surplus extraction primarily for capital accumulation has been naturalized to such an extent that it becomes camouflaged and so escapes comment or critique. Effectively, code is a mode of material governance that encloses reasoning thereby limiting radical critique.

The lack of transparency and accountability will take on great importance in the coming years as governments consider whether to implement ‘citizen scores’ based on data produced by sensors and networked computing, a development that will exacerbate inequalities and disparities thereby paving the way for de-democratization and authoritarianism. Already we see how financial credit scores delimit a person’s life chances. Essentially, these issues pose big questions for digital democratic theorists. Yet, much like the state formation literature that Ruppert, Isin and Bigo appeal to that too often views industrialization in a partial manner, so to do they treat digitalization as separate to ‘the social question’. And so, their conception of digitalization can be philosophically richer. By contrast, a Marxist approach can find a ‘subject’ for ‘data politics’ that is constituted by stakes and venues, inequalities and rationalizations that stem from technology in society. This is not to suggest that the traditions of inquiry Ruppert, Isin and Bigo support have nothing to offer – of course they do – but that these traditions require supplementation from other more radically avowed approaches.

Sadly, the progressive neoliberal consensus is ensuring that the algorithms that will dispossess and exploit us are thoroughly ethical and transparent, at least regarding gender, race and capability. Unsurprisingly, class tends to be overlooked in this agenda. This conception of digital society shares a ‘family resemblance’ to the recent promissory narrative that the internet would democratize. From my vantage, the current academic interest in critical data politics is not matched by a commitment to radicalism in the contemporary American political sphere where critiques of both capitalism and imperialism are rare. And so, I lament the narrow ideological conformity in academic analysis which is silent on the central antagonisms in capitalism.

These remarks should not be misconstrued to mean that I advocate for the exclusivity of capital and class in the study of the digital world.

But one cannot have an adequate understanding of the control and distribution of goods and resources by algorithms that encode the forces of social differentiation without it. And so, within the broad study of the politics of algorithms, researchers must be wary of pursuing projects that promote uncritical categories of analysis or obscure class antagonisms. Focusing on a critical political economy rather than a moralizing distributional critique can avert courting frameworks that are analytically weak. This agenda does not help us understand how and why, despite its best efforts, labour often loses.

Finally, it is important to focus upon the sheer contingency of outcomes. I mean here that the platforms we have become so accustomed to could have been otherwise. This contingency requires a ruling ideology to both stabilize and justify this line of investment. The result of this naturalization is, as Brian Wynne notes, ‘complex and usually distributed but highly coordinated modern technologies, [that] once established, lay down both material and imaginative pathways and constraints that themselves effectively delimit what may be seen as possible future developments’ (Wynne in Feenberg, 2010, x). Accordingly, ideology is just as important to capitalism as surplus value generation; ignoring it means there is little traction to understand regimes of technological innovation. Much of this ideology exists to justify the private property rights regime and otherwise hide the way capital structures relations that ultimately form durable stratifications. Promoting this kind of critique can help us develop the means to exit the hegemony of the value form. Pursuing this kind of investigation is important because barriers have been (and are being) created that thwart our participation in our own societies. These are the topics that will matter in the coming decades. And this is even more reason to practice an adequate critical theory. And to the extent that Ruppert, Isin and Bigo help us achieve that goal, I very much welcome their contribution. It is with this that I invite orthodox digital researchers to join in with ‘the ruthless critique of all that exists’.

The One-Dimensionality of Data

Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson are among the leading figures in contemporary American political economics. Their book *Why Nations Fail* (2012) was shortlisted for the 2012 *Financial Times* and Goldman Sachs Business Book of the Year and included in the *Washington Post's* 'ten best books' for the same year. Their previous book, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (2005), was similarly well received, being awarded the 2007 American Political Science Association's Woodrow Wilson Award. Allan Drazen called their book 'truly path-breaking' (2007, 163) and William Easterly described it as 'one of the most important contributions to the literature on the economies of democracy in a very long time' (2007, 173). With this acclaim, it is fair to say that Acemoglu and Robinson represent a predominant and prizewinning branch of political economic analysis conducted in the United States, a kind of political economy especially concerned with macroeconomic growth.

One of their core beliefs is that the US has a high degree of democratization because of its inclusive economic institutions (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012a, 74). In my view this assessment is hard to sustain when considering the differences between the 99 per cent and the 1 per cent. The threshold for household membership to the 1 per cent is a net worth of nearly \$4 million. Together this group owns roughly 36 per cent of all private wealth. For financial wealth, their share is over 40 per cent. For stock, the share increases to 50 per cent; for business equity, over 60 per cent. But even within this cluster, there are significant differences between the 0.01 per cent and the remainder of the 1 per cent. The wealth threshold to be categorized as a member of the 0.01 per cent is \$111 million. The 6,000-odd families that belong to this group average a net worth of \$371 million (Saez and Zucman, 2014; Wolff, 2017). It is worth noting is that Trump's cabinet had more wealth than the bottom third of Americans

combined. Together Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos and Warren Buffett have more wealth than the bottom 50 per cent of the American population, nearly 165 million people (Collins and Hoxie, 2017, 2).

It is not that Acemoglu and Robinson have simply made a forgivable error about the nature of economic inclusivity, but rather that their methodology is liable to generate these kinds of claims in the first place. This is because they do not fully recognize that ‘economics is how modern politics is conducted’ (Timcke, 2017, 2). This vignette seeks to convey some of the characteristics of contemporary American political economy, a field where econometric data have been employed to produce authoritative facts about the world, but which paper over the extraction and transfer of surpluses from exploited regions.

As numbers enjoy a central place in modern reasoning, particularly in government as presumed objective neutrality assists in impartial decisions, it is important that this ‘politics by quantities’ receives scrutiny. Using methodological techniques from Western Marxism – with special attention to Lukács, Adorno and Horkheimer, and Marcuse – I argue that the emergence of econometrics as a mode of mediated knowledge is a reified practice within the broader technical administration of social life, a practice that is not a transparent representation of social phenomena. This is because when econometrics transforms the thing being measured into a statistical indicator it eclipses political disputes with technical disputes, sidestepping good faith democratic deliberation about what goods are worth pursuing. Moreover, there is an inverted relationship between the use of econometric models and Marx’s analysis of the commodity form: one-dimensional thought cannot perceive the origins of items put into circulation. What seems value-free is value-laden. And so, Marx’s insight that bourgeois thought concerns itself with objects that arise either from the process of studying phenomena in isolation, or from the division of labour and specialization in the different disciplines, remains valid. In effect, a ‘politics by quantities’ dissipates the social question.

The goal in this chapter is to demonstrate how econometrics as a mode of knowledge production understands, organizes and controls social life the world over. There are several steps involved in this argument. First, I review how Acemoglu and Robinson, as emblematic of orthodox Anglo-American political economy, conceptualize their symbolic reasoning, and how this quantification comes to mediate social phenomena, thereby determining them as objects. I build upon these observations in the third section through undertaking a selective historical analysis on the role of statistical inquiry during

European state formation as it relates to accomplishing economic growth. The remaining two sections employ Western Marxism's critique of quantification to highlight what is at stake in the symbolic reordering of social life as well as what kinds of mystifications are courted by econometrics.

Acemoglu and Robinson's econometrics

Why Nations Fail uses narrative case studies to distinguish between 'inclusive institutions' and 'extractive institutions'; it is nevertheless written in the tradition of institutional analysis and guided by rational choice theory towards questions about the relative wealth of nations. Even so, it can best be thought of as the simplified companion piece to the econometrically dense *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. The institutional analysis that Acemoglu and Robinson conduct concludes that concentrating power within an elite almost always inhibits a country's economic success, because the elite enrich themselves at the expense of economic growth. By contrast, inclusive institutions tend to be more successful in the long run because they make pro-growth choices which in turn increase prosperity. This is how Acemoglu and Robinson define these key concepts:

Inclusive economic institutions, such as those in South Korea or in the United States, are those that allow and encourage participation by the great mass of people in economic activities that make the best use of their talents and skills, and that enable individuals to make the choices they wish. (2012a, 74)

They add that inclusive economic institutions have a robust private property rights regime backed by rule of law and a state bureaucracy willing and capable to enforce contracts. This system permits capital and labour mobility (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012a, 74). By contrast,

Extractive political institutions concentrate power in the hands of a narrow elite and place few constraints on the exercise of this power. Economic institutions are then often structured by this elite to extract resources from the rest of society. Extractive economic institutions thus naturally accompany extractive political institutions. (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012a, 81)

Keeping these concepts and definitions in mind, in the *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, Acemoglu and Robinson propose that democratization and authoritarianism depend on the relationship between three key variables:

- The cost of revolution, represented by the symbol μ .
- The cost of repression, represented by the symbol κ .
- The inequality of society, represented by the symbol θ .

Additionally, other relationships can be expressed as such:

- Indifference between revolution and non-democracy with commitment: μ^* .
- Indifference between repression and non-democracy with commitment: κ^* .
- Indifference between repression and democracy: κ' .

According to their Proposition 6.3, if $\theta \leq \mu$, then the status quo prevails and ‘elites can stay in power without repressing, redistributing, or democratizing’ (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2005, 199). In plainer terms, if the social costs of inequality are less than or roughly the same as the social costs of a revolution, then elites can retain power without the need for – or sufficient pressure to – implement egalitarian reforms. In other words, for example, elites would not want to face the prospect of higher taxes or other policies they do not want now or in the future. However, if the social costs of inequality are higher than the social costs of a revolution, then a new set of pathways emerges. Acemoglu and Robinson delineate and express these options as:

1. If $\mu \geq \mu^*$ and $\kappa \geq \kappa^*$, repression is relatively costly and so elites redistribute income to avoid revolution.
2. Or if $\mu < \mu^*$ and $\kappa' < \kappa^*$ or $\kappa' \geq \kappa^*$ and the poor prefer strictly revolution to democracy, or if $\mu \geq \mu^*$ and $\kappa < \kappa^*$, then the elites use repression to maintain the status quo.
3. Or if $\mu < \mu^*$, the poor prefer weak democracy to revolution and $\kappa \geq \kappa^*$, then concessions are insufficient to avoid a revolution and repression is relatively costly, then elites opt to democratize. (Paraphrased and simplified from Acemoglu and Robinson, 2005, 199.)

At this point I want to pause and restate the above basic relationship in plainer terms, to make the reasoning more apparent. To begin,

Acemoglu and Robinson argue that when the social costs of inequality are higher than the social costs of a revolution, elites are faced with three basic strategies. First, given high levels of inequality, if the pressing costs of repression to enforce this inequality are higher than the costs of redistribution, then elites can stave off revolts by initiating democratization efforts. This can be in the form of redistributing incomes or offering concessions more favourable to the poor majority. If these concessions are insufficient to stave off revolution, a second strategy is that elites continue to repress the poor, for no concessions will dissuade the poor from revolting. The third strategy is for elites to minimize inequalities to an intermediate level to reduce the prospect of a revolution and then offer credible commitments to reallocating power in the future (see Acemoglu and Robinson, 2005, 26). More recently, Acemoglu and Robinson have called this third strategy ‘the narrow corridor’ (2019).

These statements, Acemoglu and Robinson believe, ‘[feature] all the essential elements of our approach to democratization’ (2005, 181). Based upon these econometric statements and a wide array of inputs from multiple datasets, Acemoglu and Robinson’s policy prescriptions are construed as merely the logical extension of technical deductions. And so, when substituting the definitions and concepts into these econometric expressions, one arrives at their conclusion that ‘democracy emerges as an equilibrium outcome only in societies with intermediate levels of inequality’ (2005, 199). The inclusion that comes from democratization, in the long run, returns higher rates of growth. Therefore, it is in the elite’s best interest, if they prioritize wealth accumulation, to pursue this option. For the poor, on the other hand, revolutions are difficult collective actions and coordination problems to solve, as well as risking the destruction of productive infrastructure and/or existing wealth. Accordingly, it is in their best interest to accept the prospects of reduced inequality and the reorganization of power at a later date, while also benefiting from economic growth arising from inclusion.

Acemoglu and Robinson’s work has two important conclusions. First, when an elite or narrow ruling class has near-unanimous control, they establish extractive institutions that benefit themselves at the expense of other members of society. However, if control is diffused, or there are checks and balances, higher growth will follow. Second, as and when shocks occur, the kind of institution matters a great deal, as they lead to different outcomes. As Acemoglu and Robinson write, ‘different political institutions lead to different outcomes’ (2005, 89). By putting stock into the spectrum of extraction and inclusion, it follows that

collective bargaining power matters and is valuable on its own terms, as well as increasing national economic performance.

Yet, despite these insights, something is amiss. I think we can begin to see the problem when undertaking a methodological comparison. Consistent between both *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* and *Why Nations Fail* is the principle inversion of the Marxist account of institutions. While Acemoglu and Robinson follow some materialist protocols, like the identification of class struggle over distribution (2005, 20–1), they have two principal objections to Marxian analysis. The first is that they disagree with Marx's materialist explanation about the mode of production producing the superstructure – 'it wasn't technology driving the political organization of society, but the political organization and institutions of society determining what technology could be used' (2012b). Second, they regard communism as 'the new absolutism of the twentieth century', calling these regimes 'brutal, repressive, and bloody', predicated upon 'extractive institutions' (2012a, 431). They firmly hold the belief that Marxist economic theory is in favour of looting the state, enriching the new elite, and so on; that it is extraction under the guise of inclusion.

These criticisms reveal the limits of their methods on their own terms, for Acemoglu and Robinson fail to appreciate that it was not the ideological content of these communist institutions that was the problem, but that they were authoritarian. These two characteristics are not identical. Moreover, the USSR itself was an empire, and imperial projects are predicated upon extractive logics. A better approach to the study of states and markets, including communist ones, would be to look at the historically unfolding networks of combined and uneven development that do not privilege the nation-state as the boundary of analysis, a task undertaken superbly by Walter Rodney (1981) in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, or Perry Anderson (1974) in *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, for instance. In this way one can see that polities are not isolated entities or unmoored abstractions, but rather are historically formed through and by material forces that permeate and pass through their formal boundaries. In short, the objects that Acemoglu and Robinson study are decontextualized to bracket out any contingency, while also seeking to standardize the subjects of development. This is because they are wedded to the notion of society-as-an-object, a dynamic that emerges because of their strict adherence to formal quantitative reasoning.

Given that social conditions shape what constitutes trustworthy or sufficient data collection, as well as what constitutes a sound analysis of that data, a critique of econometrics raises epistemological issues about

economic practices, in particular on how technological sophistication backed by institutionally based expertise like that enjoyed by Acemoglu and Robinson produces intelligible explications. In the remaining half of this chapter I outline some ramifications of this kind of mediatization. I shall first review selected contemporary historians, anthropologists and sociologists who critique econometric reasoning, as well as the consensus they reach. While I think these scholars offer considerable insights, I do not think their critiques are radical enough. Accordingly, I then turn to Western Marxism's critique of quantification and leverage it to show how Acemoglu and Robinson's work is a deep depoliticization of social questions.

The politics of quantities

Like most modern sciences, statistics developed concurrently with European state formation, meaning that the history of this disciplinary practice is inflected by the era, notions of progress, conceptions of suitable kinds of things to measure and so on. Beginning in the 17th century the development of central government began to rely upon demographic calculations to govern increasingly complex societies. As William Davies writes, 'Casting an eye over national populations, states became focused upon a range of quantities [including] births, deaths, baptisms, marriages, harvests, imports, exports, rice fluctuations.' Davies sums up the reconfiguration thus: as parish registries became nationally aggregated, 'Statistics would do for populations what cartography did for territory' (2017). Like cartography, statistical governance was tested in African colonies (Tilley, 2011; Breckenridge, 2014). This broader colonial gaze, James Scott notes, was put in place by a diligent 'civil society' to facilitate the 'administrative ordering of nature and society' and institute 'the capacity for large-scale engineering', both deemed desirable elements of a 'high-modernist view' of ideology (1998, 5). By the early 20th century, the familiar categories of analysis had been established, and had been put to service by European states as well as by the bourgeoisie in the market.

To poach from John Thompson's analysis of the development of media, this rise of statistical reasoning was 'a reworking of the symbolic character of social life', which results in 'a reorganization of the ways in which information and symbolic content are produced and exchanged in the social world and a restructuring of the ways in which individuals relate to one another and to themselves' (Thompson, 1995, 11). In summary, by the mid-20th century the entire basic repertoire of economic statistics was under consolidation, the by-product of which

was a new kind of object for government; new ways of manipulation and effects to be registered, all themselves products of modernity.

Channelling the precept that ‘statistical facts are produced by particular actors, in particular contexts, with particular interests’ (2001, 3), Adam Tooze provides an excellent analysis of the postwar transformations of statistical reasoning in economics. First, he identifies a great ‘global standardization of the modern repertoire of macroeconomic statistics’ that included key variables like ‘national income, physical production, employment, balance of payments, and volume of money in circulation, and the aggregate price level’ (2001, 4, 9–10). Consolidated in a ‘new empirical image of the economy’ this interest in statistical techniques related to ‘the production of factual economic knowledge’ (Tooze, 2001, 4, 3).

Second, this standardization rapidly diffused: right after the Second World War, nearly 40 states provided assessments of national income, while a decade later 80 did. ‘The qualitative change in data was dramatic’, Tooze writes (2001, 8), as it effectively rendered social questions (questions of unearned rents and divides between labour and capital) irrelevant. Instead the economic interpretation on national income emphasized productivity and the business cycle. The bifurcation of the economy from social relations can be set in contradistinction to Marx’s interest in contesting share. The point is that numerical representations aided the conceptualization of the economy as growth of national income, a feature that still haunts orthodox economic reasoning, theory and training.

Many of these elements are reflected in John Maynard Keynes’ *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*. This text can be considered as emblematic of modern macroeconomics, one that greatly enhanced a strand of macroeconomic thinking that developed from the 1870s onwards. As Geoff Mann argues, the influence of Keynes can be attributed less to his originality of research on, say, effective demand or liquidity preference, and more to a receptive audience, ideologically primed both for this message about an administratively engineered recovery of capitalist accumulation and for the scientific expertise in which it was delivered (see Mann, 2017). Herein we see all the hallmarks of the high modernism Scott identified in the ‘the development of mathematical techniques for analysing statistical data and testing theory’ (Tooze, 2001, 12).

By the 1990s the expansion of econometrics and quantitative modelling was one of the most significant trends in economics and related disciplines, adopted in turn by think tanks and governments (see Lawrence, 2010). Moving from relatively basic assessments such as

tallying votes or creating districts for representation, to more complex assessments like the monitoring and evaluation of public policy, to assessing equitable public spending in state budgets, econometrics is entangled with calculability and control, bureaucratic operations which draw upon evidence-based public policy, but which really serve the reproduction of hegemonic structures of power and inequality.

Aside from these political issues, epistemologically more pernicious errors occur when inducing correlations using indicators as proxies for other variables, like GDP for development, or Gini coefficients to stand in for elites' instincts for self-preservation or reform. As an example of how method creates explication, consider GDP as an index of economic development. Nominally it is intended to track economic growth in a state. Nevertheless, Thomas Piketty notes that this indicator 'is a reflection of an era when the accumulation of industrial goods was thought to be an end in itself, and to increase in production seen as a solution to everything'. The problem of this indicator is that it does not take account of the 'depreciation of capital that made production possible', nor the 'flow of profits between countries' (2017, 53, 54). These two oversights mean that per capita incomes based on GDP can be inflated, such that there is a systematic underestimation of economic hardships. This is but one illustration of the shortcomings of quantified indices. But the more fundamental objection is that using an indicator like GDP reveals prior assumptions and post hoc rationalizations which unduly simplify a complex array of value judgements, social processes and political contests. What remains is the common sense of the researcher: or, to put it otherwise, their ideology and the reductions it courts.

At the level of research practice, Morten Jerven writes: 'If you ask an economist about the evidence supporting their conclusions, they will direct you to the inferential statistical results and tell you about coefficients of determination, statistical significance and robustness tests.' Conversely, 'if you ask a historian about evidence, he or she will respond by telling you about the quality of the primary observations' (2015, 16). Jerven argues that econometricians commonly lack historical awareness; that they could do with a dose of economic history. But his more important point is that, due to the compromise of the data collection process, datasets bear no resemblance to actually existing social life (Jerven, 2013), and so the subsequent econometric analysis, no matter how technically well executed, is not the mirror of economic activity. What appears precise is anything but. It is for these reasons that Jerven (2016) argues for a 'political ethnography of indicators' that traces 'the line of causality from "data" to "decisions"', and which

can subject the numbers to closer critical scrutiny to understand the conditions of their production and dissemination.

The anthropologist Sally Engle Merry has perhaps one of the best recent examples of this political ethnography of indicators. For her, quantification of social life is a ‘mode of governance’ stemming from ‘the desire for accountability’ (2016, 3). Quantification is a way to gather and represent empirical knowledge, showing objectively how the world ‘really is’, thus legitimating their use for political decision making. All these elements contribute to what she terms the ‘seductions of quantification’, that is, the belief that ‘technocratic knowledge seems more reliable than political perspectives in generating solutions to problems, since it appears pragmatic and instrumental rather than ideological’ (2016, 4). But this not the case. As Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar (1986) demonstrate in *Laboratory Life*, numbers are created through a series of decisions with the aid of mathematical models, their simplicity deflecting their constructed character. Likewise, Alain Desrosières notes that quantified objects become ‘repeated in other assemblages and circulated as such, cut off from their origins – which is after all the fate of numerous products’ (1998, 3): their presumed objectivity and universality implies that they have a degree of transferability across a range of contexts. In effect, numbers construct and mediate the objects they represent. And, as with all mediations, there is the possibility of deception and misperception. What I mean is that numbers create and make visible the objects they measure. It is in this transformation that numbers take on a life on their own; however, their apparent impartial use in administrative processes has far-reaching consequences.

Orthodox political economists are aware of and have somewhat responded to these critiques. For example, Paul Romer has recently taken the discipline to task in his paper, ‘Mathiness in the Theory of Economic Growth’. ‘Mathiness lets academic politics masquerade as science’, he writes. As pretence, ‘mathiness’ allows ‘slippage between statements in natural versus formal language and between statements with theoretical as opposed to empirical content’ (2015a, 89). There is merit to this point. Indeed, Acemoglu and Robinson provide a case in point when they seize upon Marx’s polemic adage, ‘The handmill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist’, to claim that Marxian material analysis is a theoretical cul-de-sac. (If academic politics was the standard, then I could reiterate Marx’s rhetorical barb that ‘Economists have a singular method of procedure’ and claim that as sufficient proof for definitive argumentative victory.) Still, Romer’s solution is to swap academic

politics for ideal science, as it can bring ‘unique clarity and precision in both reasoning and communication’. Indeed, he adds that ‘It would be a serious setback for our discipline if economists lose their commitment to careful mathematical reasoning’ (2015b).

While there are good reasons to have a qualified endorsement of this view, Romer’s proposal is grounded in an inadequate conceptualization of the effects of quantification practices, even in their ideal form. As Mary Morgan notes, ‘adopting a new reasoning style into a science does not come without significant consequences for its content’ (2012, 17). Indeed, econometricians use methodological decisions to devise models that test data to develop economic theories that themselves create explications (Morgan, 1996, 263–4). For her, this act of creation is not simply one of pure logic but also permits ideological encoding to be integrated into the means of inquiry. This is not to diminish the difficulty of econometric model-making, nor to besmirch the skill and craft involved. Rather it is to underscore the social components that also reside in the mode of analysis.

As an example of how the social is encoded in a mode of inquiry, consider Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star’s observation that while ‘ordinarily invisible’, disputes about orthodox statistical classification measures can become ‘fraught with political passion’ because symbolic and material dividends are consequences of categorization (2000, 3, 4). These disputes demonstrate the extent to which statistics have power in public discourse to skew life chances; why else would they be an object of and instrument in struggles? For example, from her study of high financial practices in the early 2000s, the kinds of activities that led to the 2008 subprime mortgage crisis, Saskia Sassen writes that ‘assemblages of complex types of knowledge and technologies – including algorithmic mathematics, law and accounting, and high-level logistics – have generated complex predatory formations (2017, 1). Sassen suggests that complexity hides this predation (becoming ordinary, to use Bowker and Star’s terminology), and instead creates barriers for who can claim to be an authority on economics.

Given the rise of data brokerage as a sizeable economic sector, the democratic critique of opacity, access and diversity in the analysis of data and its role in public life has merit (Pasquale, 2015). But it is also incomplete. When complex social issues are represented and addressed via quantities, the political becomes technical, thus substituting for and discarding the kinds of democratic discussions that Jervens, and Merry, Latour, Woolgar, Desrosières and Sassen, draw our attention to. In other words, the quantification of social phenomena changes the conceptualization of distinction between the realm of the political and

the realm of the technical. This makes the quantification of social affairs even more pernicious as it sublimates inherently political practices to render them as subject to formal logic.

To develop this theme further, as well as to connect it to more foundational relations in capitalist realism, in the next section I turn to Lukács' ontology, which is central to his critique of reification, a concept that figures prominently in the Frankfurt School analysis of late modernity. Reification, I suggest, is at the foundation of the ideological ontology econometrics serves. Thereafter I turn my attention to Marcuse's critique of one-dimensional society to draw links between the underlying 'laws of motion' between 20th-century bureaucracy and 21st-century econometric analysis.

Reification, mystification and alienation

When Jerven writes that 'Freedom House actually does not measure "democracy"; that the Consumer Price Index does not actually measure "inflation"; nor does Transparency International actually measure "corruption." We just pretend "as if" they do' (2016), he is appealing to the concept of reification. Within Western Marxism Georg Lukács is well known for articulating and deploying this concept to sustain a critique of the rational organization of social life, itself being enfolded within capitalism's maturation. He rather famously uses the clock as an explanatory metaphor to discuss the rational control of labour. He says, 'time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable "things"' (Lukács, 1971, 90). To simplify, he suggests that in capitalist industrialization social relations becomes objectified and abstracted away, this process facilitated by conceptual systems wherein the ruling class and their agents see labour time as just another calculable quantity in their ledgers. Here, 'quantification is a reified and reifying cloak over the true essence of the objects and can only be regarded as an objective form' (1971, 166). Through adopting this stance, the ruling class take on the 'attitude of the experimenter' (1971, 131), believing that their positions give them control, and that this control is 'uninterested' in the social quotients of production (1971, 166). In this permutation, reification illustrates the epistemic error where the products of structural forces cannot be treated as an isolated event, but part of a wider social system.

Indeed, Lukács' description of the quantification of human labour time being integral to capitalist production is an insight that can be extended to quantification more broadly and econometrics in

particular. Econometrics is an exemplary methodological practice of the kind of abstract conceptual system which objectifies and neglects social and political processes through the application of duly deemed neutral and practical observation. To elaborate, as a 'reified and reifying cloak', quantification constructs an object ready for technical manipulation and bureaucratic recognition. And, much like reification, quantification has ideological effects that mediate and constitute relationships between subjects and objects in ways that call back to the process of commodity fetishism. What I mean is that the history of the labour process is eclipsed in the same manner that the commodity becomes the dominant social form. In effect, Lukács is adamant that reification emerges out of the kind of complexity where the distinction between the material and the conceptual is obliterated.

Picking up on Lukács' analysis, Horkheimer and Adorno repurpose it to form a critique of rationality. This critique is not concerned with the analytical method per se, but rather with a society that 'equates thought with mathematics' in the 'assumption that the trial is prejudged', condemned to its own measure (2002, 18, 20). Their principal aim in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is to argue that unchecked rationality is unreasonable. I understand them to mean that rationality becomes an 'automatic process' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, 19) when subordinated to positivism's tendency towards reification, in which a bifurcation places rationality in opposition to irrationality, this dichotomy grafted on to a conception of distinct modern and pre-modern modes of understanding. However, this presumption is largely incorrect, as the rationalism of modern societies has ritualistic mythical components, one of which is the deference to calculations and qualification. They put it bluntly: 'Mathematical procedure became a kind of ritual of thought'. These short excerpts illustrate their awareness of how the separation of the subject from the objects of technical practice results in the 'equation of thought with mathematics', a ritualistic process by which subjective human testimony is subordinated to objective concrete numbers. Quantification not only gives the numbers an objective appearance, but also one of procedural neutrality. To call back to econometrics, the remedy is to 'grasp existing things as such, not merely to note their abstract spatial-temporal relationships' (2002, 20). So where political economists like Acemoglu and Robinson see precision, critical scholars like Horkheimer and Adorno see alienation.

When presented in this fashion, it is easy to see how Lukács' notion of reification has informed Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of rational modelling, particularly in their shared concern regarding the

severance of the subject–object dialectic, as seen in the commodity form and in the mathematization of society. This suggests that they all recognize that capitalist social relations have generated an epistemology. Put succinctly, ‘knowledge in class-based societies is class knowledge’, as Christian Fuchs notes; this characterization ‘does not mean that the knowledge of the dominant class is always false and the one of the dominated class always true (the opposite can be the case), but rather that knowledge in class-based society is shaped by struggles about how to and who can define reality’ (Fuchs 2016, 89). To call back to econometric reasoning, while it has institutional status and credence – and these certainly matter – the more fundamental issue is that it is one prevailing means by which mathematization and formal modelling comes to objectify the social world, thereby substituting class knowledge, assumptions and axioms for a more grounded and dialectical comprehension of the social world. It is, in other words, a kind of one-dimensional methodology.

The spector of positivism

As I begin to conclude this chapter, I want first to briefly address Marcuse’s critique of one-dimensional society to show that econometrics helps to regulate capitalist ‘laws of motion’, rather than providing opportunities for reflection and critique. Thereafter, I will return to and elaborate upon the topic of econometrics as a neopositivist method rooted in anti-dialectical thought.

Marcuse’s critique begins with social changes in postwar American life wherein procedural-pluralist liberalism and technocratic administration had gained ascension. Whereas scholars like John Rawls and Robert Dahl saw the foreclosure of struggles over first-order value, Marcuse noted a contradiction where, despite greater wealth, goods and services, the workday had also increased and intensified, meaning that workers could not benefit fully from this wealth, or these goods and services. As opposed to procedural-pluralism, postwar American capitalism, Marcuse proposed, had rather redeveloped mechanisms of rule to contain and defuse revolutionary dissent. It took the form of converting any specific deviance into general compliance; dissent became another means to reproduce the capitalist order. What remained was mild transgressions and defiance, actions alienated from any unconscious revolutionary spirit. The development of ‘repressive desublimation’ effectively removed sources to challenge the wider dominant social structure: actions associated with mild transgressions are neither revolutionary nor emancipatory.

Sparing all but the essentials, in *Eros and Civilization* Marcuse sought to explain repressive desublimation by weaving together Marx's conception of surplus labour – which demonstrates that capitalism rests on the exploitation of the working class – and Freud's argument of modernity as inherently repressive elements which sublimate unconscious erotic desires or instant gratification. This produced the concept of 'surplus repression'. Like surplus labour, surplus repression is over and over what is required for social reproduction; that is, its function is to maintain unyielding capital accumulation by inducing labour deference under demands of high productivity. Here workers psychologically internalize and act in accordance with capital's interests, thereby naturalizing repression at the expense of acknowledging the unequal property relations between themselves and capitalists. As such, surplus repression does little to aid the worker and everything to aid the capitalist to increase their profits. Invoking Friedrich Schiller, for Marcuse the solution was to rehabilitate art, which would allow 'a total revolution in the mode of perception and feeling' (Schiller, quoted in Marcuse, 1966, 189). As the task in this chapter is less an appraisal of his solution, I will leave that kind of extended assessment for another day. Suffice to say that intersubjective harmony is necessary, as is the reconciliation of sense and reason, if the revolutionary path to human fulfilment is to be achieved. One step on that journey requires overcoming the reifications created by capitalist societies.

Having outlined how the quantification within econometric reasoning is a reification that sets the stage for anti-dialectical thought, it is worthwhile viewing a recent incarnation in the long tradition of positivism. Positivism, for Adorno, is a standpoint with 'categories as simply given' that are generally subsumed by class relations (1977, 8). This kind of subjectivism, as Habermas demonstrates in his essay 'The Analytical Theory of Science and Dialectics', is but one standpoint seeking to exclude whole areas of human knowledge that cannot be known through formal methodological rules (1977, 137). In accounting for the development of this complex social phenomenon that posits a rational 'objective' mode of understanding, Marcuse writes that 'Positivism shifts the source of certainty from the subject of thought to the subject of perception. Scientific observation yields certainty here' (1955, 351). All told, positivism is founded on a specific conceptual set of ontological and epistemological stances which presumes that subjects can stand adjacent to ontology and epistemology and that conceptual elements are neutral rather than neutralizing their constitutive objects. This would certainly be a fair assessment of the kind of political economy practised by Acemoglu and Robinson.

To the extent that one can do justice to the topic in the remaining portion of this chapter, it is worth contrasting positivism with Adorno's conception of dialectics, drawing primarily from *Negative Dialectics*. Set in opposition to German idealism, whether Kantian or Hegelian, Adorno's materialism proposes that efforts to separate the subject and object are deeply misguided: even more so when seeking to give priority of the subject. This is because the subject is itself an object constituted by society more broadly that could not exist without society. The task that Adorno sets himself, then, is to break the prevailing deceptive fallacy of 'constitutive subjectivity' and instead promote 'reconciliation' (2004, xx; 6). One part of this larger task involves reopening issues of metaphysics in philosophy; its counterpart is to undertake an offensive against positivism.

This returns us to the important differences between Lukács' and Adorno's respective stances on the conceptualization of knowledge more broadly. As Susan Buck-Morss notes, for Lukács alienation was a result of reification stemming from bourgeois society – a bourgeois society set on destroying culture by making artists unable to create a unity between subject and object. Accordingly, Lukács put considerable stock in the proletariat to create this unity as history unfolded and this class became the agent for restoring a lost totality. Adorno vehemently disagreed. His conception was that knowledge of history was also historical. This give rise to his adage, 'History is in the truth; the truth is not in history' (Adorno, quoted in Buck-Morss, 1977, 46). Indeed, as he indicates, 'dialectics [is] not a standpoint' (Adorno, 2004, 4).

A depoliticization of the social question

At the risk of broad generalization, in the 18th and 19th centuries political economy was predominantly a verbal science, its subsequent Marxian critique very much marginalized from the academy. By the late 20th and early 21st century it became mathematized, with the bounded formal modelling of financial transactions, decisions within firms and national economies becoming standard practice. Granted, there are many varieties of political economy being practised today, ranging from constitutionalism, social choice and public economics, to macroeconomics, historical developmental and international political economy (see Weingast and Wittman, 2006); nevertheless, complex statistical modelling is central to effective governance, a vital component of technical administration and control. This holds even in democratic governance. This development has given rise to a technocratic elite with its own languages of expression and ways of reasoning that form

an epistemic genre. This connection is made via the application of calculability, using mathematics to present what appears to be a formal logic. Yet the excise of Marxian critiques has been very much to the detriment of making political economy a critical social science.

Econometrics is but one of the more recent examples in the history of quantification practices. Herein social affairs are treated as objects ripe for impartial – and thus authoritative – technical manipulation, thereby mystifying the social realm. The shorthand expression of this is to say that econometrics is a positivist rendering of the social structure, seeking to rearrange the material world in its own image by pursuing a mathematical characterization of social life. It is, as I have suggested, a depoliticization of the social question rendered through the dominance of anti-dialectical thought. This weakness is papered over by mathematical sophistication, institutional clout and ideology, all on display in the reception of Acemoglu and Robinson's analysis and method.

To be clear, this is not to say that these numbers cannot at times be useful or have practical utility. As the progress towards the Millennium Development Goals illustrates, technical operations using quantities can help to promote human flourishing. Rather it is to say that numbers can function as a form of class knowledge, which in turn shapes reality. In late capitalism the reasonable bounds of quantification have been unreasonably extended to all areas of human life, seeking to capture and reduce senses and experiences. Quantification, with its aura of objectivity and neutrality, is just the most recent incarnation of an influential intellectual lineage within modernity seeking to construct and administer objects in a technical manner. Motivating this extension is the spectre of positivism, so naturalized that it is almost unperceivable, but still very much present.

In this chapter I have argued that the anti-dialectical standpoint provides good reasons to be suspect of ritualistic quantification and mathematical modelling in econometrics. Being a mode of analysis severed from questions about the origin of its production, the reason for its circulation and its class character, it is important to pay attention to the kinds of objects that econometrics produces, as there are sociological consequences of a social world structured by this symbolical mediatization. For while econometrics appears to demonstrate the apparent object authority of data, the skilful manipulation of data demonstrates expertise that allows one to control the administration of political subjects. This technical operation does not fully permit a discussion about human values through a framework where there is little prospect of reconciliation. I am hopeful that this will change,

but change has to tackle the fetish in the wider computational turn currently under way in the social sciences, a turn where modelling and quantification comes at the expense of studying the history of social processes. The primary task ahead is to find the opportunity and means to insert dialectical thought into the wider discussion about data analysis for social justice, or to assess if this task is even possible.

Reactionary Tendencies in the Ruling Class

The Trump administration resembles Gramsci's description of a Caesarian response to an 'organic crisis', a protracted event which comes about when 'the forces in conflict balance each other in a catastrophic manner', leaving space for a third party to intervene (Gramsci, 1971, 219). As this chapter and Chapter 4 demonstrate, certainly there is an intense class war in the United States. Still, the prospect of a 'winner-takes-all' economy has created the conditions for the escalation of intra-elite class competition in the American ruling class. By this I mean an internal Gramscian 'war of position' as factions are slowly, but viciously, competing to attain or retain command of the US political economy; these factions are testing and trying to restore or reconstruct a world that better caters to their particular capital accumulation strategies, seeking to gain hegemony. Again, this slow violence of intra-class struggle should not be surprising. As Marx outlined, capitalists must accumulate or be accumulated.

Concepts like hegemony and the integral state are particularly useful aids in the analysis of the current organic crisis. By hegemony – in other words, the ways in which a class or faction comes to gain the power to lead a social structure and how this power is expanded then reproduced – Gramsci proposed that cultural practices and institutions generate and induce the consent of subordinate classes. The advantage of an analysis that begins with hegemony is that it is sensitive to class warfare directed both downwards and laterally, and is in turn attentive to the formation of alliances and other kinds of pacts. Peter Thomas provides a tidy summary of the integral state as 'the image of "political society" as a "container" of civil society, surrounding or enmeshing and fundamentally reshaping it' (2009, 189). This conceptualization offers an expanded understanding of how capitalist societies reproduce, which

Gramsci notes is a ‘complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules’ (1971, 244).

Using the term ‘organic crisis’, Gramsci described a conjecture where a prolonged crisis hinders the relatively effective management of contradictions, while concurrently the maturation of these contradictions makes it exceedingly difficult to defend them (1971, 178). By ‘war of position’, Gramsci conceived the concept as ‘the whole organizational and industrial system of the territory which lies to the back of the army in the field’ (1971, 234). I interpret this to mean the organizational infrastructure that supports political field operations seeking to constitute the political ideologies that take hold in popular culture. The value of this approach is that some factionalism in the ruling class is to be expected simply because they are also competitive market actors undertaking different capital accumulation strategies. Still, in moments of an organic crisis these factions ramp up their contests to a degree that I suggest could be considered an escalation of intra-elite competition.

This crisis involves a struggle for hegemony under conditions of extreme social inequality, and moreover one can identify that media systems are a key element in intra-elite competition, both as *a site of struggle and as an instrument of that struggle*. Keeping these precepts in mind, I examine several interlinked events to trace some of the front lines in the escalation of intra-elite competition. These case studies involve efforts to stave off class struggle ‘from below’. As the ruling class’s influence traverses all aspects of American society, the consequences of escalating intra-elite competition can be seen in most places. However, in this chapter I focus on the linkages between finance and formal contestations of power. In doing so, I argue that some analysts simplify the primary lines of division in contemporary class warfare.

Finally, there are two points worth relaying. First, there is little methodological to be gained by pathologizing members of the ruling class. Doing so sets in motion a too convenient, too easy dismissal of their politics which muddies a more materially grounded understanding of their motives and interests. Instead it is better to be extraordinarily attuned to the politics along the inter-class coalitions, the fault lines in their alliances and pacts, as well as how the capitalist state manages these inter-class conflicts. Second, permitting a rhetoric that dismisses writing about the ruling class as conspiratorial, but then framing their actions as not worthy of focused scholarly attention when they are revealed because it is deemed obvious, is not particularly helpful. This

talking point is a common deflationary tactic, which was clear to see before, during and after Edward Snowden revealed of the technical capabilities of several National Security Agency (NSA) espionage tools. Discussions of the instruments used by the ruling class require being open to how these same tools are used to curtail that very discussion.

Finance and class struggle

In 1960, prior to neoliberal era, 6 per cent of Harvard Business School graduates entered careers in finance. Currently over 30 per cent now make that career choice. Given these figures it is fair to say that financiers have considerable clout in the American ruling class. Most of these financiers have acquired their wealth through techniques that raised stock values. Still, much of this valuation has come about without a corresponding increase in earnings or investment in productive assets. Using a variety of metrics and quantification, and helped by management consultants, they have sought to optimize business practices for stock prices. This has led to outsourcing production to the South, or directing investments away from asset-intensive industries, the kind that produce access to secure and stable working-class lives.

Nevertheless, these financiers see themselves as the new rulers best able and positioned to guide society. Take for example remarks by Seth Klarman, a billionaire hedge fund manager. He has said that ‘with an overly narrow focus on the near-term maximization of corporate profits and share price, business leaders leave themselves vulnerable to criticism and harsh regulation’. Klarman advises that capitalists adjust their practices lest ‘capitalism’s benefits are discounted and its flaws exaggerated’ (Long, 2019). Elsewhere, Tom Steyer, another billionaire, has said ‘corporate money has corrupted our democracy and stripped Americans of our ability to determine our own future’ (Halper and Finnegan, 2019). Indeed, Steyer’s self-belief led him to enter the 2020 Democratic presidential primary to promote his vision of a just society. Michael Bloomberg, a billionaire whose wealth came from financial technology and financial media also entered the Democratic primary. As a party donor, he had lost confidence in the party’s ability to field, to his mind, a viable candidate. Eventually spending \$500 million on the campaign, Bloomberg’s central messaging foregrounded moral capability backed by previous philanthropic investments (Bloomberg Philanthropies, 2020).

This accession has now seen billionaires view themselves as governors and rulers in American society. Sam Long writes, ‘It seems that these elites are not content to simply rationalize their self-interest; they also

demand veneration as exemplars of moral virtue.’ Indeed, ‘Rather than consider the structural economic reforms that will be required to actually address the causes of populism, they obfuscate with moralistic rhetoric about democratic norms’ (Long, 2019).

From a Marxian perspective, financialization is not just how worker’s structurally constrained wages are further gouged by banking services, neither is it an indication of how their lives are controlled by debt instruments, nor just the fiscal looting and expropriation of the working class’s wealth. Usury and consumer indebtedness are bad things and it is right that activists seek to curtail these activities. That said, financialization encompasses more fundamental issues about how finance is colonizing ever more areas of social life, and in turn meaning that social reproduction is articulated through the logic of the financial system. This process is important to the reproduction of capital and its associated stratifications that Marx called financialization ‘secondary exploitation’. As such, financialization is not about optimization or efficiency, nor is it a concept ‘ready at hand’ to describe market practices. Rather it refers to the critical analysis of those market practices and the subsequent distributional effects. Accordingly, Ben Fine notes how the one consequence of financialization is that class relations have been displaced from ‘the sphere of production into the sphere of exchange’ (2010, 100). While this displacement has certainly altered the terms and techniques of class struggle, it has also made encoded subordination, class decomposition through indebtedness and automated inequality central venues of politics.

Michael Lind factors many of these financial development into his analysis of class warfare ‘from above’. He writes that ‘a transatlantic class war has broken out simultaneously in many countries between elites based in the corporate, financial, and professional sectors and working-class populists’. Still, he dismisses Marxian analysis as ‘deluded’ because of ‘its secularized, providential theory of history and its view of industrial workers as the cosmopolitan agents of global revolution’ (Lind, 2017). Instead he opts for a theory of elite conflict to explain the current conjuncture.

As background, Michael Lind has a central place in American politics. He began his career as a political appointee in George Bush’s state department during the Gulf War. During Bill Clinton’s administration, Lind became editor of the *National Interest* while writing for *Harper’s*, the *New Republic* and the *New Yorker*. Throughout his career he has been an extremely influential neoconservative gatekeeper, operative and man of letters. Granted, one could review the neoconservative thought of Richard Haas, Robert Kaplan or John Bolton, but Lind

deserves unique consideration because of his role in founding the New America Foundation, arguably the most important think tank in the US at the moment. There is a second consideration: as far as I can discern, Lind has not had a Damascus experience and become a Democrat; rather his role in the New America Foundation illustrates the rightward drift in the Democratic Party over the past few decades, the kind of observation that has caused Adolph Reed, Cornell West and other black radical American scholars to be shunned and sidelined from the party.

Altogether, these two points mean that we can use Lind's social and political thought as an admittedly rough and incomplete barometer for insider US policy concerns about social inequality, that is, the ideology of actually existing capitalism, as opposed to critical empirical assessments of the consequences of capitalist social relations, a task I seek to undertake in this chapter and Chapter 4.

Downplaying class differentiation

Despite the merits of Gramscian analysis, class differentiation and subordination tend to be downplayed in self-proclaimed 'democracies' like the US. This is partly because, in this polity, nominally formal authority is decided by contests between political parties themselves comprising legally free and equal citizens undertaking voluntary actions. This nominal status allows legal equality to eclipse and circumvent discussions detailing how social inequalities aid the various machinations of the ruling class. To some extent, Lind echoes this view. He writes that

None of the dominant political ideologies of the West can explain the new class war because all of them pretend that persisting social classes no longer exist in the West. Neoliberalism – the hegemonic ideology of the transatlantic elite – pretends that class has disappeared in societies that are purely meritocratic, except for barriers to individual upward mobility that still exist because of racism, misogyny, and homophobia. Unable to acknowledge the existence of social class, much less to candidly discuss class conflicts, neoliberals can only attribute populism to bigotry or irrationality. (Lind, 2017)

Still, in Lind's account of intra-elite competition in and among classes, the 'managerial elite' is the key agent of domination. These managers are 'private and public bureaucrats who run large national and global

corporations'. Comprising about 10–15 per cent of the US population as measured by advanced higher education degrees, Lind proposes that these managers are prone to 'Orwellian groupthink' which can have negative consequences given that they 'exercise disproportionate influence in politics and society'. Finally, these managers may be 'independently wealthy, but most are salaried employees or fee-earning professionals. Most of today's billionaires were born into this upper-middle class' (Lind, 2017). As such, this class provides the base for high-achieving members to attain control of the commanding heights of American society.

Following this identification and demarcation, Lind's account of class war begins with the post-1945 social pact between technocratic managers and national labour, an apparent concession to safeguard against communism. The outcome of this pact was a 'golden age of capitalism from the 1940s to the 1970s, combining high growth with a more equal distribution of its rewards than has ever existed before or since'. However, along with social protections, workers' bargaining power was eroded after the Cold War as the ideological threat of communism receded. Opportunistically, managers used their dominant positions to enrich themselves, hoarding wealth at labour's expense. The techniques for appropriation included the use of multinational corporations to coordinate mergers and corporate consolidation, the creation of transnational supply chains, favourable trade treaties and increased use of tax havens. Because of these accumulation strategies, 'large elements of the native working classes in Western democracies have turned to charismatic tribunes of anti-system populism in electoral rebellions against the selfishness and arrogance of managerial elites'. Moreover, 'suppressing wages and thus throttling mass consumption', Lind suspects, will likely limit growth, in turn causing the onset of 'a kind of high-tech rentier feudalism'. The by-product of this, Lind proposes, may be a destructive politics that oscillates between oligarchs and populists.

Within this larger turn, Sam Long discusses the corresponding rise of shareholder primacy theory in US law. This is the view that businesses should be strictly and solely concerned with the maximization of profit. Milton Friedman thought that any efforts at 'social responsibility' was 'preaching pure and unadulterated socialism'. Through pinpointing key academic articles, Long provides an account of the consequences of this line of thinking which led to restructuring firms as well as enrolling the share price as a simple metric of a firm's performance. The pursuit of this metric led to 'cost-cutting initiatives, divestitures, and debt recapitalizations, and justify their behaviour by explaining

that they were merely “unlocking” shareholder value that had hitherto been squandered’. Shareholder primacy theory also became a means to create stock options for managers. Here ‘corporate performance could be improved by using stock options to compensate CEOs and further align their interests with those of shareholders’. It was also a means to recast managers as shareholders, getting them to formally enter an alliance at the expense of the interests of labour (Long, 2019).

There is merit to Lind’s and Long’s remarks. The top 20 per cent do own nearly 90 per cent of all privately held assets (Wolff, 2017). And I generally agree with their reading of history. However, when one examines other discrete categories this reading becomes partial. Just because managers do the bidding of capitalists, they no more share the same class than do workers who do the bidding of capitalists. Moreover, there are quantitative and qualitative differences in wealth distribution between the 1 per cent and their agents. But even within this cluster, there are significant differences between the 0.01 per cent and the remainder of the 1 per cent.

When examined at this level of granularity, the central problem of Lind’s argument is that it permits the broad distribution of blame. By not identifying capitalists directly as such, Lind’s argument inadvertently deflects and diffuses acute criticism of the economic regime by including their principle agents and other professionals. One implication of this line of reasoning is that the top 20 per cent are enrolled to admit disproportionate complicity to shield their employers. In effect, they must do this additional emotional labour of confessing harm to earn their loyalty rents. By contrast, a narrower view can identify the factions within the ruling class to see the socially devastating ramifications of their various accumulation strategies.

In the coming sections I focus on how digital platforms and media become instruments used by capitalists to gain influence over the commanding heights of the American social structure. Given the age of ‘deep mediatization’, I provide the example of how Silicon Valley’s ‘information robber barons’ use their platforms to forge an ‘infrastructure for reactionary populism’. As such, the coming case corresponds to elements within Gramscian hegemony; that being how factions gain, consolidate and then reproduce power.

Information robber barons

Despite notable unionization efforts (see Greenhouse, 2019) the last few years have been notoriously tough for digital news workers. For example, in 2018 a quarter of all newspapers with circulations above

50,000 copies undertook layoffs (Grieco, 2019). Indeed, the two processes are related. Publications like *Gothamist* and *DNA Info* were closed by Joe Ricketts, their billionaire owner, after the staff voted to unionize (Newman and Leland, 2017; Wamsley, 2017). Similarly *Gawker*, owned by Nick Denton, had the year before announced bankruptcy due to litigation costs. Elsewhere, Sheldon Adelson bought the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* prompting key staff to leave (Ember, 2016). Viewed from the vantage of class struggle, these events are manoeuvres by the ruling class to curtail the power of independent media. Two big events are testament to this development. Late in 2017, the media company Meredith bought Time, Inc for \$2.8 billion. \$650 million of this financing came from Koch Equity Development, a fund run by the Koch brothers. Stephen Lacy, Meredith's CEO, indicates that the company is 'creating a premier media company serving nearly 200 million American consumers across industry-leading digital, television, print, video, mobile, and social platforms positioned for growth' (Meredith, 2017). This amounts to about 60 per cent of American citizens.

These events are not disconnected from one another. Rather they form part of a coordinated attempt to capture the means of production, circulation and consumption of information to limit the power of challenge. Let me explain using *Gawker's* closure. For several years Peter Thiel funded third-party litigation cases against *Gawker*, one of which resulted in the bankruptcy of the site in 2016. Thiel admits that his actions against *Gawker* are "less about revenge and more about specific deterrence" (Sorkin, 2016; also see Thiel, 2016). Indeed, he has been associated with this tactic before. For example, Palantir, whose largest stakeholder is Thiel, planned to smear Glenn Greenwald because of his coverage of the company's military sales (Lipton and Savage, 2011). As a co-founder of PayPal and investor in LinkedIn, Lyft, Spotify, Reddit, Airbnb and SpaceX, Thiel is a core figure in data politics, one who famously stated that 'I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible' (Thiel, 2009). That digital venture capitalists like Vinod Khosla, Chris Sacca and Jessica Livingston applauded Thiel's litigation speak to how the digital elite are perceived as preferring to avoid public scrutiny of Silicon Valley, which was the kind of reporting that *Gawker* undertook (Streitfeld and Isaac, 2016).

Thiel has a history of leveraging his influence over the media to advance his interests. When attending Stanford University, he co-founded *The Stanford Review*. As editor-in-chief he described the mission of the *Review* to 'present alternative views on a wide range of current issues in the Stanford community' (Granato, 2017). As

per Andrew Granato's reporting, the *Review's* early issues focused on providing conservative commentary. Michael New writes that the *Review* could build 'reliable networks of alumni donors early in their history'. He adds,

of course, the fact that *Review* founder Peter Thiel went on to found PayPal has certainly helped the paper's financial condition. However, the success of Thiel and other undergraduates at developing a solid fundraising base placed *The Review* on solid financial footing well before the dotcom boom of the late 1990s. (New, 2012)

But beyond being a venue for campus libertarianism, the *Review* (where Thiel remains on the board of directors) functions as a kind of proving house for undergraduates interested in joining one of Thiel's many ventures. Granato's (2017) research shows that around 100 *Review* alumni have 'been roommates, invested in each other's companies, and collaborated on political activities'. Thiel's patronage can be seen elsewhere. He wrote an endorsement for Milo Yiannopoulos' book, *Dangerous*, made a \$1.25 million denotation to Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign (Streitfeld, 2016) and was a member of the transition team for the Trump administration (Woolf and Wong, 2016).

These vignettes illustrate the potential for any billionaire or member of the ruling class to unilaterally destroy almost any media outlet by secretly funding multiple legal suits regardless of merit and regardless of whether they lose. As litigation costs are prohibitively expensive for most media outlets, and as only in rarest cases does the court order a losing party to pay the other side's costs, so billionaires can destroy media outlets even if the suits do not prevail. Given that most US media outlets are struggling financially, they are particularly vulnerable to this tactic. To elaborate, Elizabeth Grieco's (2020) collection of figures shows that in 2018 US newspaper circulation was the lowest since 1940, revenues had decreased 'from \$37.8 billion in 2008 to \$14.3 billion in 2018', while in that same period employment nearly halved, 'from 71,000 workers to 38,000'. Together this vulnerability weakens the constant realization of freedom of expression as a political right, but also reduces the tools needed to help undertake class struggle 'from below'.

Lest one suspect that these kinds of actions are the sole preserve of reactionaries, progressive neoliberals have also been experimenting with digital new media. Approached by Donald Graham, Jeff Bezos bought the *Washington Post* in 2013 for \$250 million. "I didn't know

anything about the newspaper business”, he admitted, “but I did know something about the Internet [...] That, combined with the financial runway that I can provide, is the reason why I bought The Post” (Issac, 2014). Under his ownership there was restructuring, a reduction of staff and the introduction of an app for Amazon’s Kindle. More recently, Bezos has been critical of Trump’s efforts to ‘freeze or chill the media that are examining him’ (Benner and Wingfield, 2016). In a similar fashion, Pierre Omidyar, the founder of eBay, set up *First Look* in 2013, while Chris Hughes, an early investor in Facebook and organizer for Obama’s first campaign, purchased the *New Republic* in 2012, seeking to use its platform and prestige to build a vertically integrated digital media company. In Hughes’ case this change of direction led to a mass exodus of staff (Calderone, 2014), eventually prompting Hughes to sell the company in 2016 (Byers, 2016). So while the presumption that the nexus of corporate finance, news media and digital entrepreneurs may rehabilitate profitability in the news sector by introducing technical expertise and capital, at the moment it appears as if philanthropy remains the prevailing model for many American media companies.

The difficulty of this kind of patronage is that it is conditional. For example, since 1999 Eric Schmidt, members of his family and Google have given upwards of \$21 million to the New America Foundation. Based in Washington, DC and currently employing over 200 people, the foundation is a prominent, if not the preeminent, Democratic think tank. In 2016 Schmidt became the chairperson of New America. In June of that year the New America Foundation retracted a blog post which drew critical attention to Google’s European antitrust practices (see New America, 2017a). The post came from the Open Markets section, whose mandate was to review the market dominance of major American technology and communication companies like Google, Amazon and Facebook. Barry Lynn, who headed up Open Markets, as well as ten other researchers in the section, were subsequently fired (Rushe, 2017). Due to their work on platform monopolies, Lynn and his team had previously been warned by Anne-Marie Slaughter, the president and CEO of New America, in correspondence to them saying: ‘We are in the process of trying to expand our relationship with Google on some absolutely key points [...] just THINK about how you are imperiling [*sic*] funding for others’ (New America, 2017b).

Whereas conservative media entities like *Fox News* or *Breitbart News* tend to be unapologetic about their political agendas, platforms like Google and Facebook deploy a rhetoric which positions them as infrastructure companies rather than as media content companies. Part of this positioning is to avoid the responsibility for, and thus

regulation of, the content circulated and consumed on their platforms. This rhetoric is supported by political lobbying. For example, halfway through 2017, Google's donor footprint was nearly \$10 million on direct lobbying while also disclosing that it funded 170 non-profit groups, many of which are oriented towards public policy (Vogel, 2017). Open Secrets' (2020a) database lists Alphabet as employing 102 lobbyists for 24 different issue sets and 52 bills that year. Facebook is similarly active. To complement corporate lobbying efforts in Washington, in September 2011 Facebook formed a political action committee (PAC) to channel election donations. Between January 2019 and 31 May 2020, this corporate PAC spent more than \$380,000 in individual contributions, supporting the campaigns of Senate Republicans, Democratic members of Congress and other PACS (US Federal Elections Commission, 2020). More broadly that any one company, in 2013 several well-known technologists and financiers like Bill Gates, Drew Houston and Mark Zuckerberg helped create a non-profit organization that cooperates with Republicans and Democrats to ensure an open labour market for Silicon Valley (Sengupta and Lipton, 2013; see Fwd.U.s, 2020). The discrete exercise of political rights by lobbying groups stands in sharp contradistinction to how many firms in Silicon Valley breach the privacy rights of their users.

Together the ordinariness of litigation and patronage aid the supremacy of digital platforms. They also create conditions where citizens are interpolated as consenting users, in turn becoming tokens to be fought with and over by the various blocs, whether they be directed by Thiel or Zuckerberg, each seeking to gain hegemony. And so, by using their capital and control of platforms, the 'new digital men of power' can support or hinder the consumption of content of digital news outlets; in effect, controlling the means of mental production.

Infrastructures for reactionary politics

As Piketty (2014) has demonstrated, rents return more than growth. This is one explanation why Charles and the late David Koch's combined fortune grew from \$28 billion in 2009 to nearly \$100 billion a decade later (Mayer, 2016; Cain and Rogers, 2019). Well-known Republican donors in Obama's first term, of late they have been joined by the Mercer family as emblematic symbols of plutocratic wealth (for the definitive studies of the influence and impact of Koch political funding see Skocpol and Williamson, 2013; Mayer, 2016). Robert Mercer made his fortune in hedge fund management. As one of the main protagonists behind financialization, he used his skills as

a computer programmer to apply trading algorithms to high-volume, high-frequency trading at Renaissance Technologies.

As a member of the Council for National Policy, for nearly a decade the Mercer Foundation funded right-wing infrastructure (Mayer, 2017). Known highlights of the political patronage includes giving the Citizens United Foundation \$3.6 million of funding (Levine, 2017). In roughly the same period they gave \$11 million to the Media Research Center (Kutner, 2016). The Media Research Center's (2017) aim is to 'neutralize the propaganda arm of the Left: the national news media'. These funds allowed a variety of political operations: a truncated list at the national level includes anti-Obama messaging campaigns and the targeting of key federal agencies like the Securities and Exchange Commission or the Department of Justice. During election cycles, they funded far-right rivals to more moderate Republican members of Congress like John McCain. The foundation single-handedly created the 'Ground Zero Mosque' media event.

The Mercers' political spending was enabled by the 2010 Citizens United ruling. This ruling lifted limits on corporate and non-profit organization spending during elections, precipitated a change in how political parties organized themselves. While never realized in its ideal form, prior to the judgement a party's platforms were somewhat organic expressions of the collective agenda of its membership. However, following Citizens United, the 0.01 per cent, the mega donors, have greater sway in the formation of a party's hidden manifesto. Indeed, the Citizens United era more easily permits members of the ruling class to alter politics and public policy, often without much awareness of the direct causal connections between specific donations and specific policy formation. What I mean is that people are aware in general of the sway, but due to the opacity of government bureaucracy have difficulty in pointing to particular instances of undue influence.

Following the Citizens United ruling, the Kochs championed a strategy where donors would pool funds to amplify political operatives for the 2012 presidential election. As per Jane Mayer's (2017) research, the Mercers contributed \$25 million to this project. Mayer describes how after being soundly disappointed by Obama's landslide victory, Rebekah Mercer spearheaded a reorientation towards a data-centric approach that optimized social media platforms to drive broadcast media narratives. As K. Sabeel Rahman and Hollie Gilman note in their work on contemporary civic power in the US, 'in addition to short-term campaign funding, the Mercers similar to the Koch brothers, have invested in long-term infrastructure on the right' which included investing '\$10 million in *Breitbart News* in 2011' (2019, 77). These funds

converted *Breitbart* from a collection of blogs into a fully functioning media organization, a supposed counterweight to Arianna Huffington's *Huffington Post*. Andrew Breitbart died during this professionalization, but emerging writers like Milo Yiannopoulos and Ben Shapiro became proficient at creating viral content. This viral content gave donors like the Mercers considerable 'civic power' in promoting the Tea Party, a faction in the Republican Party. Perhaps the most notable victory in this larger contest was David Brat's unseating of Eric Cantor in 2014.

Learning from the media ecology of *Breitbart's* experience on Facebook, plus 'having revolutionized the use of data on Wall Street, [Robert Mercer] was eager to accomplish the same feat in the political realm' (Mayer, 2017). As Mayer explains, the Mercers invested \$5 million in Cambridge Analytica in the hope of using data analytics to 'micro-target' voters during elections. Turning to the 2016 US election, initially supporting Ted Cruz in the Republican primary (with an \$11 million donation to a PAC run by Kellyanne Conway), the Mercers pivoted to Trump as his momentum built. After Trump's electoral victory, Rebekah Mercer was involved in the Executive Committee of Trump's transition team. Other Mercer operatives like Steve Bannon and Conway also took up important positions in the Trump administration. As Bannon has said, 'the Mercers laid the groundwork for the Trump revolution. Irrefutably, when you look at donors during the past four years, they have had the single biggest impact of anybody, including the Kochs' (Mayer, 2017). The Mercers' political patronage has not come without some costs. Sleeping Giants petitioned stockholders of Renaissance, like Michigan State University who has \$50 million invested, to abandon Robert Mercer as the co-chief executive officer. In November 2017, Mercer indicated he would resign as co-CEO of Renaissance Technologies at the end of the year (Goldstein et al, 2017; Mider, 2017). Still, these costs hardly offset the gains.

Ruling class solidarity

The Cambridge Analytica scandal, with Mercer and Thiel as central characters, is a good demonstration that capital is destabilizing precisely because it allows plutocrats to interfere in international politics without much, if any, oversight. We might never know if Cambridge Analytica did successfully influence the 2016 US presidential election, but that they tried to do so is significant enough to raise questions about how factions within the American ruling class are looking for every possible advantage to gain hegemony. Still, it is worth remembering

that the financiers of political operations almost all belong to the ruling class; and while in competition in the market, they cooperate to preserve a capitalist political economy. As a good illustration of class solidarity, consider RenTech, a company with assets estimated to be near \$100 billion. RenTech's former co-CEO, Robert Mercer, donated considerable amounts to reactionary political causes and worked for many years with James Simons. Worth \$18 billion, Simons is RenTech's founder and chairman, and a leading Democratic donor. This stylized fact is emblematic of how members of the American ruling class can have common and divergent interests. To end, in an ongoing war of position, billionaires are using digital media to forge an infrastructure for reactionary populism. By deploying finance to assembling audience power and platform analytics, the chief tactics have been to use media enterprises to target progressive neoliberals or more moderate conservatives, causing unexpected electoral upsets and weakening representative democracy.

Platforms of Power

Thomas Piketty (2020) argues that the nature of the current conjuncture is shaped by a clash between an educated cosmopolitan professional class and shareholders committed to maximizing capital accumulation. He calls these respective groups ‘the Brahmin Left’ and ‘the Merchant Right’. As for workers, they are adjunctive to politics. Like Lind’s analysis in Chapter 3, there are certain elements of this analysis that hold up, especially when one considers intra-class struggle where one must accumulate or be accumulated. Indeed, some of the sections in this chapter examine cases where different capitalists pursue different strategies, form different alliances and viciously compete against one another.

However, like Lind, Piketty has oversights. In his case it is discounting the role of the working class as well as the development of the terrain in which contemporary class struggle occurs. For example, consider how at precisely the moment when conditions are so favourable for capitalism, in a country where for a century it was said to be impossible (see Foner, 1984), there was a country-wide organized socialist movement that credibly contended for the American presidency. And while it is not yet the case for national politics, in many American cities democratic socialists are within the ‘margin of manoeuvre’, meaning that determinants of success and failure include the moves campaigns make rather than the power of neoliberal politics automatically carrying the day. The coming sections examine how progressive neoliberals responded to this challenge in the 2016 and 2020 Democratic primaries and how party officials sought to thwart class struggle ‘from below’. I end by examining how capturing the judiciary can encode a ‘passive revolution’.

Staving off class struggle ‘from below’

In reflecting upon ‘the indispensability of continued American leadership in service of a just and liberal order’, and ‘America’s bipartisan commitment to protecting and expanding a community of nations devoted to freedom, market economies and cooperation’, Hillary Clinton (2014) believes there is ‘really no viable alternative’. Reminiscent of George W. Bush’s remarks in the National Security Strategy, what she means is that there is no other social structure suitably amenable for a capitalist ruling class: no other option but uneven development and dispossession will be permitted. Conditional concessions will likely occur, yes, but not at the expense of perpetuating the ability to profit.

Where once Clinton’s assumptions might have been widely shared, among the generation whose coming of age coincided with the maturation of neoliberalism, the perpetual war on terror, the great recession, the militarization of domestic security forces and visible effects of climate change becoming even more apparent, there are enough people who insist, indeed demand, that ‘another world is possible’. More importantly, they have made themselves into a bloc and in doing so have crafted a socialist politics.

The 2016 Democratic primary provides a good recent example of the tolerable limits for alternatives and of the clash between progressive neoliberalism and democratic socialism over the agenda for American politics in this century. Consider that initial predictions gave Bernie Sanders no more than two state victories. Yet, through raising over \$228 million with nearly 60 per cent coming from small donations of less than \$200 (Open Secrets, 2018b), he more than exceeded those expectations. Come the Democratic Convention, Sanders had received around 43 per cent of the total vote and won 23 states with several others being virtual ties or near misses. These wins came despite Hillary Clinton having every structural advantage that America’s foremost political dynasty could offer, and some allegations – although little compelling evidence – of vote-tampering through state-level procedural discretion.

What was anticipated to be an easy path to victory for progressive neoliberals was nearly upset by Sanders’ articulation of the connection between social inequality and capitalism, an effective message because most Americans’ lived experience features no economic recovery from the great recession, but instead is characterized by pauperization and class decomposition. Working within the confines of American electoral politics, where form drives substance, Sanders followed a

simple but effective strategy of making excessively reasonable moral demands that reform would not provide, thus showing the limitations of the present social structure.

Faced with a genuine threat, Clinton's campaign trivialized Sanders and framed him as sexist. Within this narrative, his refusal to concede early, despite accumulating state victories, was thwarting women's political aspirations. However, this neglects Sanders' efforts to consolidate the advantage he had acquired in the party to advance his goals to contest the soul of the Democratic Party, especially on down ballot races with candidates who were his supporters, many of whom were women. Indeed, young women disproportionately lent their support to Sanders, not only because his policies were arguably more favourable for women, but because the dividends of class politics offered the best prospects for material improvements in their lives. Put simply, Sanders offered to complement representation with redistribution. For some on the radical Left – the Left informed by labour and political economy – the rally behind Sanders was a plausible path to wielding some sort of meaningful power. It would not have ended capitalist accumulation, but even temporary alleviation could have had a significant impact on the quality of people's lives.

In a related manoeuvre, it was repeated that Sanders' success should not be celebrated because it was driven by 'Bernie Bros', a group of disaffected men who sought to halt a woman-headed presidency. For example, when Sanders complained about electoral violations in the Democratic primary, Joan Walsh said he ought to change his behaviour lest he become 'the messiah of an angry, heavily white, and male cult'. She then asserts that Sanders's coalition was 'dominated by white men, trying to overturn the will of black, brown, and female voters or somehow deem it fraudulent' (Walsh, 2016). This kind of framing was so common that in his post-primary review of Sanders' campaign, Adolph Reed noted how the trope of "brocialist" men who threatened feminists with rape or other violence for their reluctance to subordinate feminist concerns to a male-centred class-reductionist socialism' became one tactic to try undermine and circumvent Sanders's popular support (Reed and Zamora, 2016).

Seizing on remarks by Robinson Meyer (2016) the trope emerged from a seeded public relations campaign which suggested that these men were undertaking an organized campaign to bully and intimidate Hillary Clinton's supporters. Of course, cyber-bullying, criminal harassment, everyday sexism and digital rape culture are online problems. Certainly, this does much harm to women and many others. All of this is true. Nevertheless, citing a lack of evidence of

sexism being an inherently condoned feature of Sanders' campaign – and considering how this rhetoric erases millions of Sanders' women supporters – Glenn Greenwald's (2016) investigation of the public relations ecosystem concluded that this 'cheap campaign tactic' was perpetuated by a willing and compliant media.

This is not to say there were no Sanders supporters who were toxic and said awful things in his name (Wilz, 2016; Albrecht, 2017), but rather to suggest that the amorphous term 'Bernie Bros' came to encompass both real and imagined abuses. However, at the same time the term was used to suggest an intensity and scope of harassment constituting a core feature of Sanders' campaign operations, but this did not reflect reality. For example, a year after the Democratic primary, notable Clinton surrogate Jill Filipovic (2017) admits that this toxicity was not Sanders' fault, *but* she maintains that his 'attacks on the Democratic Party helped set the stage for this thoroughly dysfunctional, and ultimately destructive discourse'. This statement reveals the kinds of politics at play. To be clear, much like Reagan's 'welfare queens' or the ways in which contemporary conservative discourses on immigration use the part to stand for the whole, there are manufactured mythical figures in US politics that inflate real experiences until they become ideology writ large. And so the point here is to ask what work the term 'Bernie Bros' does for political aims, and how rhetoric is marshalled in the public sphere to negate alternative political programmes before they gain traction.

Granted, smears are common in American politics, but Hillary Clinton's were in a separate category because she had more than 700 campaign staff, nearly unlimited funds and an untold number of employees in allied Super PACs (see Vogel and Arnsdorf, 2016 for a basic outline of the organization). In 2016 alone, Priorities USA Action raised and spent close to \$192 million, with \$127 million targeting Republicans (Open Secrets, 2018c). In the case of Correct the Record they allocate funds 'to push back against attackers on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and Instagram'. They write,

Lessons learned from online engagement with 'Bernie Bros' during the Democratic Primary will be applied to the rest of the primary season and general election – responding quickly and forcefully to negative attacks and false narratives. (Correct the Record, 2016)

'False narratives' here equate to inconvenient facts like Clinton's support for the Iraq War, however much hedges about procedural platitudes are retroactively introduced.

An ‘appropriate narrative’ can be seen in a major interview-based profile by Rebecca Traister (2016) in *New York Magazine*. The piece does not mention Clinton’s vote to support the Iraq War, nor her involvement in welfare reform. Notwithstanding the constraints of journalistic conventions, Traister nevertheless does relay Clinton’s thoughts on yoga, television and popular culture. This humanization precedes a tame list of several orthodox Democratic domestic policies that are meant to indicate Clinton’s pragmatic stamina for boardroom politics while positioning critics as having to resort to sexist political hounding because all other avenues of rebuke are insubstantial. The point here is not to castigate Traister. Nor is it to deny that Clinton has faced entrenched categorical inequality because of her gender. But it does illustrate how selective media access can incentivize pliability. Similar narrative management is evident in the paperback version of *Hard Choices*, Clinton’s memoir. Released in time for the campaign, about 100 pages are abridged, conveniently skirting difficult topics like her role in the coup in Honduras.

Returning to Correct the Record, the phrase ‘the task force currently combats online political harassment’ is revealing for how it construes dissent and contention using empirical facts as sexist. Involved in this reconfiguration is the deliberate malleability of the term ‘harassment’. What I mean is that there is a strategic misuse of the term when deployed in online political and social discourse to stall and silence due but unwanted criticism. In this respect, there is cause to re-evaluate how stigmatizing disagreement and appeals to civility allow the ruling class to introduce mechanisms to limit dissent, whether through technical interventions, legal frameworks or cultural norms. All of this aims to limit unwanted participation in politics, thereby ensuring that ‘the party still decides’ (see Cohen et al, 2008). Indeed, in the Citizens United era, the Democratic Party’s strategy was to ‘purchase’ an electorate by marshalling audience power through an unrelenting barrage of political broadcast advertisements tuned by the best campaign intelligence and data analysis.

The embrace and justification of Super PACs is demonstrative of drift in the Democratic Party. Where once it was a tenet in the party that corporate money corrupts politics, Clinton and her supporters deny this. Instead, they subscribe to the Citizens United ruling that money is not inherently corrupting. (There is an aura of melancholy about this, as Citizens United used *Hillary: The Movie*, a slanderous propaganda film, as the vehicle for their Supreme Court case.) Democrats, in efforts to defend Clinton, have occupied positions they once so strongly advocated against.

This drift reveals a contradiction in Clinton's politics during the Democratic primary: the usage of intersectionality selectively ignores class and fails to undertake a power analysis, let alone raising questions about Clinton's endorsement of America's 'forever wars' or being a key member of an administration that further entrenched governance through criminalization that devastated young poor black men and women (Stockman, 2016). In being solely preoccupied with gender representation, this vulgar intersectionality overlooks a basic feminist observation that women, as much as men, can reproduce and uphold a racist, patriarchal variety of capitalism. Indeed, given the broader class protest carrying Sanders' long run, Clinton's support of free trade and opposition to a \$15 minimum wage is indicative of her affiliation with the ruling class's interests and thus the need to obfuscate her policy positions. It is for this reason that the campaign focused so much on civility and decorum; her staffers knew that their policy case was weak. In sum, the campaign adopted the language of intersectionality, but not the practice.¹

In repressing class politics 'from below', it is important to register what conception of identity was mobilized for political purposes. Consider how Hillary Clinton's rhetoric was predicated upon slogans and hashtags like 'I'm with Her'. The inference is that Clinton's election could be a symbolic victory over the underrepresentation of women in politics; but also a substantial one because she is a highly accomplished and extremely capable public servant. Yet despite her lengthy qualifications, a good portion of her support was begrudging, and this was particularly acute among women under the age of 35. That Clinton is not seen in a favourable light is often attributed to everyday sexism, but this 'enthusiasm gap' argument becomes more difficult to sustain when attempting to account for the lack of support from younger women. In this case the gap is attributed to their inexperience in politics. Explicitly directed at young women, Madeleine Albright remarked at a Clinton campaign rally that "There's a special place in hell for women who don't help each other", while the day before Gloria Steinem attributed young female support for Sanders to infatuation with men. "When you're young, you're thinking: 'Where

1 Accordingly, there is a view that because the term intersectionality has been co-opted by progressive neoliberals who have reduced it to a cliché and hence depleted it of its power to intervene, the concept is intellectually compromised. While I have a degree of sympathy for this reasoning it unnecessarily concedes the intellectual terrain. Instead, what is required is a reclamation through thorough and detailed analysis in the spirit and power of the black feminist tradition from which it was born.

are the boys?” Steinem said. “The boys are with Bernie” (Rappeport, 2016). Notwithstanding the presumption that Clinton has a right to support from this segment of voters, the ‘enthusiasm gap’ among already-committed Clinton supporters is informed by knowledge of her hawkish foreign policy positions and incarceration of the truly disadvantaged. The electorate was wary of reproducing systems of violence but had few other genuine options in a rigid social structure that seeks to ensure that there is ‘really no viable alternative’.

The aforementioned foreclosure points to another contradiction in Clintonian politics: the obsession with narrow white neoliberal ruling class feminism closes categories required to partake in politics, effectively forestalling the kinds of interactions required to create alternative social structures wherein oppression based upon subjective social categories is not as prevalent nor as damaging. While one can be critical of identity politics, this does not imply that whiteness is the natural centre of study, or that a decentring cannot have positive effects. Therefore, it is valuable to assess if the dismissal of identity politics is a pre-emptive effort to keep whiteness as the standard for political appraisal. That said, the intended practice of intersectional analysis is to identify the links between oppressions. Positioning them against one another, as done by Hillary Clinton’s staff and surrogates, aims to divide and rule, revealing a calculation to shield the powerful from criticism by the powerless. The heralding of this kind of calculated politics and manipulation to divide populations by exploiting social problems emanating from the very same social structure that American electoral politics seeks to safeguard and preserve is foreboding. Indeed, it does little to aid introspection into this kind of politics.

Following Clinton’s loss in the 2016 election, the Democratic Party began (and continues) a long, conflict-ridden process to analyse its platform and regroup its strategy. During this process Donna Brazile published her memoir. According to her, Debbie Wasserman Schultz had de-emphasized fundraising and, as a Clinton surrogate, had the Hillary Clinton campaign headquarters direct the Democratic Party. Factoring into this was that Obama had apparently left the Democratic Party in debt, up to \$24 million. In 2015, Hillary Clinton’s campaign secured the debt in exchange for oversight of the Democratic Party. The Joint Fund-Raising Agreement, Brazile says,

specified that in exchange for raising money and investing in the DNC [Democratic National Committee], Hillary would control the party’s finances, strategy, and all the money raised. Her campaign had the right of refusal of

who would be the party communications director, and it would make final decisions on all the other staff. The DNC also was required to consult with the campaign about all other staffing, budgeting, data, analytics, and mailings. (Brazile, 2017)

To be clear, the agreement Brazile refers to applied to the primary process, not just the general election. Arguably, Wasserman Schultz's inattention to fundraising consolidated Clinton's control over the Democratic Party. Concurrently, the DNC had hired many Clinton and Obama consultants in 'make-work patronage' to prepare for the 2016 election, notwithstanding Clinton's public promise that she would rebuild "the party from the ground up." "When our state parties are strong", she added, "we win. That's what will happen" (Brazile, 2017).

However, the agreement between the DNC, the Hillary Victory Fund and Hillary for America outlined how the DNC could be used as a vehicle to route funds to the Clinton campaign, skirting the \$2,700 set by the Federal Election Commission as the maximum contribution to presidential campaigns (the limits for a political party's state and national committee are higher). The state parties and DNC then routed these funds, close to \$350,000 per donor, to the Hillary Victory Fund. With funds concentrated in the presidential campaign, there was little remaining to support down ballot races. Clinton surrogates effectively controlled the process. Clinton cannibalized the state parties to focus on the presidential campaign. In the final tally, Clinton and her supporters spent nearly \$800 million on the 2016 presidential campaign (Open Secret, 2018a).

Upon publishing these revelations, Brazile was scolded and scorned by Clinton surrogates in the media. These surrogates suggested that Bernie Sanders had signed a similar document. But examination of that agreement reveals one noticeable absence: any discussion about the DNC's finances or strategy. As Greenwald (2017) wrote, it had no 'control provisions'. While Clinton's campaign staff scoffed at the suggestion of rigging (Ferguson, 2017) this grandstanding was undercut by new DNC chairman Tom Perez's (2017) public statement that the 2020 primary must be 'unquestionably fair and transparent' as 'the perception of [...] an unfair advantage undermines our ability to win'. Advancing this point, Ryan Cooper argues that the practical consequences of this funding arrangement demonstrate how the Democratic Party is tied to graft and patronage, indicating that it will be hard to achieve the fairness and transparency Perez seeks. Cooper (2017) concludes: 'Right now, there is a trade-off between political success

and setting up a patronage machine that caters to the top 1 percent. It's time for the party to take stances that will make it loathed by the country's economic elite.'

Ultimately, this funding model caters to donors, thereby dulling the impulse for the DNC to tackle the growing social inequality and disparities discussed in the previous section. The failure to address the root causes of social inequality means that in the end, progressive neoliberals externalize fault to other social actors, for example attributing Clinton's 2016 loss to fake news or the Russian state. [Chapters 5](#) and [6](#) pick up and develop these points further.

Democratic socialism was the compromise

Prior to discussing the 2020 Democratic Party presidential primary it is valuable to briefly examine the internal party politics in the intervening years. Due to his strong showing in 2016, Sanders' movement was able to push the party 'to review the entire nominating process' while also 'ensuring the process is accessible, transparent and inclusive' (Democratic National Convention, [2016](#), 1). Included in this review was the creation of the Unity Reform Commission, with its mandate to expand voter participation in the presidential primaries while also identifying means to broaden the party to make it competitive and capable of 'winning elections at all levels' (Democratic National Convention, [2016](#), 2). An additional goal was discussion about how to expand the party's donor base, which from the socialist perspective sought to curtail the influence of dark money in candidate selection, whereas for progressive neoliberals identifying new funding sources was imperative given their expectation that elections would likely become more expensive in the years ahead. Still, the formation of the commission can be understood as a rebuke of the Obama era where the Democratic Party had lost considerable electoral ground to the Republican Party.

The composition of the 21-member commission was equally split between Sanders, Clinton and Perez nominees. Sparing the minutia, interests and egos of the commission (Report of the Unity Reform Commission, [2017](#)), their final report was an entente between the democratic socialists and progressive neoliberals. Specific proposals included the reduction of the role of unpledged delegates in the presidential nominating process, the encouragement of primaries over caucuses, requiring caucuses to have absentee voting, efforts to build an intellectually inclusive organizational culture and the disclosure of the leadership of vendors. While some of these recommendations

would not be fully implemented for the 2020 primary, the report did provide the democratic socialists with documentation they could use to advance their politics.

Following from Sanders becoming a national political figure in 2016 – for 11 consecutive quarters he had the highest approval rating of any senator (Yokley, 2019) – the 2018 midterm elections saw more democratic socialist candidates gain entrance to the House of Representatives, joining progressive figures like Ro Khanna and Pramila Jayapal. The forecasts were for a Democratic wave (Bafumi et al, 2018), and indeed the party won 41 seats in the House of Representatives giving them the majority and positioning them to conduct oversight of the Trump administration if they wished (see [Chapter 6](#) for a brief discussion of Trump’s impeachment).

Nevertheless, the wave should not diminish the fact that democratic socialist candidates still had to do the work as primary challenges inside the party, like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez defeating Joe Crowley, a ten-term incumbent and then chair of the Democratic Caucus. Subsequently, democratic socialists gained considerable media attention, with Ayanna Pressley, Rashida Tlaib, Ilhan Omar and Ocasio-Cortez becoming the face of democratic socialism and diversity within the party. Progressive neoliberals certainly leveraged the optics of diversity, but aggressively sought to rebuke progressive neoliberal politics. As a result, on several occasions Nancy Pelosi publicly chided the democratic socialists. Speaking to the theme of staving off class struggle ‘from below’, vocal socialism made it that much more difficult for progressive neoliberals to follow through on their project of trading ‘blue-collar Democrats’ for ‘college-educated Republicans’, as Chuck Schumer articulated his faction’s electoral plan for the Trump era (Balz and Rucker, 2016).

Essentially the Democratic Party entered their 2020 presidential primary a house divided, but also considerably different from 2016. On the one hand, 16 senators had co-signed Medicare for All, Sanders’ (2017) signature legislation. This included all his major competitors like Cory Booker, Kirsten Gillibrand, Kamala Harris and Elizabeth Warren. Notwithstanding their corporatist inclinations, these senators knew co-sponsorship was good politics. This speaks to how Sanders and democratic socialists more broadly had shifted the party. On the other hand, Trump’s politics had somewhat disrupted the Republican Party, and there were advocates arguing that this was an opportune moment for Democrats to pick up disaffected Republicans even if it meant compromising longstanding constituents. In practice these proved to be mutually exclusive electoral strategies.

Lastly, the momentum Sanders took into the 2020 presidential primary caused great alarm in the capitalist ruling class. Indeed, when they perceived and anticipated that Sanders' competitors were not up to the task of defeating him, billionaires like Howard Schultz, Tom Steyer and Michael Bloomberg declared their candidacy to challenge Sanders themselves. Additionally, there was an effective media blackout of the Sanders campaign, with what media coverage he did get being subject to considerable negative framing (Da Costa, 2020). Additionally his campaign was subject to repeat tactics from 2016, claiming that his supporters were unruly 'Bernie bros', and that Sanders had a 'gender problem' and a 'race problem', all charges that never bore out in empirical analysis. Ironically, the very people who were vocal about fake news in the Trump era were loath to adjust their analysis in light of empirical data. However, as Seth Ackerman (2020) noted, 'what [made] Bernie Sanders so threatening to the Democratic establishment is that he stands for what millions of Democrats thought their party stood for all along'.

Initially Bernie Sanders took an early delegate lead, winning major victories in Utah and Nevada. Heading into the last week of February 2020, Joe Biden, Pete Buttigieg, Amy Klobuchar and Elizabeth Warren's campaigns were low on financial reserves (Stevens, 2020). For example, Warren's campaign had \$2.3 million on hand, but also took out a \$400,000 loan. The lack of funding effectively limited these campaigns' ability to contest Super Tuesday, scheduled for 3 March 2020. If Sanders had succeeded here, there was a high likelihood of him becoming the presumptive Democratic nominee. But it was not to be. Supposedly through Barack Obama's intervention, Klobuchar and Buttigieg jointly exited the primary and endorsed Biden. Concurrently, Open Secrets' data show that Persist PAC, a Super PAC incorporated in mid-February, spent \$14.8 million (Evers-Hillstrom, 2020) to have Warren act as a spoiler on Super Tuesday.² Lastly, aided by a favourable media bombardment, Biden's campaign was able to make the case that his victory in South Carolina meant he was the 'safe choice' against Trump. Then in early March 2020, Obama called Sanders several times appealing for Sanders to abandon the primary (see Thrush, 2020 for details).

2 Being incorporated in February meant that the PAC would only have to disclose its donors to the Federal Election Commission until late March. When these filings were released it showed that \$14.6 million of Persist PAC came from Karla Jurvetson (Thompson, 2020). This was lamentable as Warren's political career had until this point been predicated upon the argument that dark money was de-democratizing (see Fang, 2020).

Ultimately, the explanation for Sanders' loss has less to do with the lack of sufficient appeals to American iconography and more to the plain fact that his movement took on entrenched interests in a capitalist party: it threatened financial interests. Capitalists adopted a counter-revolutionary politics, possibly even to the extent that this politics could well hinder the Democratic Party performance in the November 2020 election cycle. There are other credible subsidiary explanations, but these 'consist of a series of footnotes' to the primary contest around political economy. Subsequently, Biden became the presumptive Democratic nominee. It may be some time until there is a full accounting of the backroom dealing, if any, but Biden's nomination does affirm that 'the party decided' against inclusive political economic reform.

In retrospect, by targeting capitalism directly the Sanders campaign inserted class analysis into mainstream electoral politics and thereby headed 'the greatest wave of social-democratic energy and socialist imagination in the United States for about a century', according to Jedediah Britton-Purdy (2020). To give a sense of the scale of this rise of the socialist imagination, following the Occupy Wall Street Movement in 2012 the Democratic Socialists of America had 6,500 members, many veterans of the New Left. Currently the organization has over 60,000 members, with approximately 80 per cent under the age of 40 (Heyward, 2017; Schwartz, 2017). As Tomasky (2020) writes, Sanders 'gave this movement a figurehead' who also had the skill to acquit himself well as a primary contender.

Completed before Sanders ended his 2020 primary run, Meagan Day and Micah Uetricht begin their analysis of this moment with the observation that 'Bernie Sanders has redefined what's possible in American politics' (2020, vii). With the help of many others, between the 2016 and 2020 Democrat Party primaries Sanders' campaigns were able to seed a mass movement of socialism, make the language and public analysis commonplace. While a figure in Washington, in 2016 Sanders erupted into American life as an organic response to American structural problems and generated a mass politics that many professional organizers had not anticipated. But material conditions were ripe for this kind of political expression, for an ideology other than capitalist realism. Indeed, Day and Uetricht discuss the spillover effects, the national wave of teacher strikes in 2018 and 2019 being but one example. I fully agree with their view that Sanders' appeal comes from rhetorically foregrounding the centrality of class struggle predicated upon a vernacular Marxian critique of capitalism, a

framework of analysis with the end goal of democratic, cooperative workplaces controlled by labour.

As Day and Uetrict's remarks illustrate, the Democratic Party is divided. Indeed Michael Tomasky (2020) believes that the party is more fractured than in 1972 when it was split over issues like the Vietnam War and the New Left. This divide concerns three interrelated issues. The first is the nature of capitalism itself, with various factions arguing either for the corporate status quo with inclusive demographic reform, or wholesale revolutionary rejection of this polity. The second is over the administrative control of the party itself, as the Unity Reform Commission illustrates, for this bureaucracy has sway in advancing or hindering particular groups. The third is how to fund the party, whether wealthy donors and Super PACs are welcomed, or whether these sources of funds binds the party to a corporate agenda. Nominally these intermural debates are about governance and electoral strategy, but more fundamentally they involve basic questions of political economy. In some senses, the matter is one of party identity, with democratic socialists aiming to advance the economic rights in the New Deal while progressive neoliberals wish to continue the third way that the party embarked upon following Walter Mondale's defeat in 1984.

Biden's political career began during the transition away from the Great Society programmes and the general acquiesce to the neoliberal *revanche*. His politics and decisions are indelibly marked by the 'hard choices' that came at the expense of the most vulnerable (see Marcetic, 2020). Yet whether as an architect of mass incarceration or decades of catering to financial interests, Biden's senatorial voting record offers little to the working class or to key constituents like black voters. For the latter group Biden arguably embodies the way progressive neoliberals practice a kind of racial essentialism. Briahna Joy Gray (2020) explains this as 'a presumption that political allegiances are a part of one's racial identity'. This 'predetermination' neglects the fact that racial experience is but one of the means informing a person's politics. Geography, class, gender, religion and many other factors play a constitutive role in one's politics, and none of these factors are overdetermined by race. Indeed, Gray insinuates, dismissing these competing interests and priorities reveals a kind of racial reductionism born from prejudice that is not interested in engaging with 'the whole person'.

Gray continues, arguing that practices of racial essentialism explain why Democratic operatives and media analysts could not comprehend or acknowledge that the Sanders movement was the 'least-white, most female coalition in the race', and instead resorted to lamenting that

voters were too conditioned by whiteness to vote for anyone else other than ‘another white guy’. But these pundits failed to adequately ask why black, brown and women voters overwhelmingly chose either Joe Biden or Bernie Sanders, or how they might have voted strategically or weighted several competing interests, agendas and goals. For Gray (2020), racial essentialism is consistent with the broader character of progressive neoliberal Democrats which neglects ‘voters’ actual needs and concerns’. Such neglect, she concludes, is a by-product of Biden simply aiming to use black support to launder his record on race relations.

On the topic of laundering legislative records, Biden’s selection of Kamala Harris as his running mate could be interpreted as bittersweet. This is because Biden has long been a just target of feminist critique, whether from his stance on abortion or his treatment of Anita Hill. Considering Tara Reade’s sexual assault allegations against Biden, as Traister (2020) explains, ‘this story will leave [a female running mate] vulnerable to being held responsible for the misdeeds of the mediocre man to whom they will now be publicly bound’. In effect women – many of whom sought to stop Biden from becoming the Democratic nominee and who also sought to curtail the patriarchal practices he embodies – are being requested to defend Biden under the guise that if Trump were to win a second presidential term, the subsequent misery would disproportionately fall onto women. Traister (2020) concludes that the only way out of this bind is for Biden to select ‘a milquetoast woman who has never distinguished herself as a feminist or progressive advocate and who, therefore, dispiritingly, cannot be called out for hypocrisy’. Yet, this is a subpar victory for American feminism. It is a stark reminder about the barriers, stakes and moral costs of feminist praxis in the US.

The retreat from basic descriptions

Gary Jacobson summarized the 2018 midterm election as ‘reinforcing party differences along the dimensions of sex, age, education, and ethnicity, it sharpened differences based on political geography. The Democrats, already overwhelmingly dominant in urban areas, gained strength in the suburbs, and blue or purple states became bluer’ (Jacobson, G., 2019, 34). But it would be a mistake to attribute this polarization solely to attitudes and behaviours without considering historical materialist explanations too.

Notwithstanding massive urbanization and economic concentration in a few cities in the second half of the 20th century the US Senate

currently gives disproportionate power to states with dramatically fewer residents. This in turn affects the distribution of power in the Senate as well as the electoral college for the presidency, meaning that there is a basic formal inequity in the exercise of power. This inequity is further compounded by gerrymandering of congressional districts and racially based targeted voter disenfranchisement. To put it plainly, Republicans can attain and retain power through electoral minorities. Recall that in 2016 Clinton won the popular vote by 3 million votes. That same election Democrats won 11 million cast for the Senate, but the result reflected a 52–48 majority for the Republican Party (see Faris, 2018 for more examples). Conceivably, the Democratic Party could win the popular vote for the House, Senate and presidency and not win these branches of power. This in turn has downstream effects for judicial court appointees and the broad parameters of the experience in everyday life as the former shapes the latter.

This institutional development has resulted in the Democratic and Republican parties facing different incentives, challenges and paths to power. To gain power let alone undertake routine maintenance of the political system, Democrats must win large majorities. These majorities could come in two ways. First, as Sanders sought to do, one can build a coalition by using working-class politics to cater to the 45 per cent of eligible voters who do not cast ballots and otherwise opt-out of formal electoral politics. The second option, as Chuck Schumer described, is to appeal to centre-right Republicans. The difficulty is that the centre-right often receives better economic appeals from the Republicans. As such, Democrats have begun to counter by offering a muscular foreign policy and other items that are begrudgingly accepted by the centre and centre-left members of their coalition. Due to their coalitions needing to have such a considerable span, the Democratic Party faces a rationalization of capitalist interests.

Conversely, as Republicans do not have to win outright majorities they do not face the full taming mechanisms of mass democratic appeal. The lack of these constraints permits them to adopt more ideologically charged positions and otherwise cater to the idiosyncratic agenda of a narrow band of mega donors. As a result, they can turn against democracy itself; dark money can mobilize a minority of aggrieved populations around perceived slights and grievances to stall politics. A good example is the 2013 government shutdown. Recall that the Republican Party pursued an agenda of obstruction for its own sake, choking democratic governance simply to claim an affective symbolic victory for their base, all which could be done without much of a worry about the consequences at the ballot box. In short, the current

character of American politics has been set by the broad parameters that have arisen due to material developments meeting institutions that do not respond in kind. Effectively American politics could be understood as ‘determination in the first instance’.

These dynamics are exacerbated by a media system that is unwilling to undertake basic descriptions of politics. For example, while the Republican Party initiated the 2013 government shutdown, in the mainstream media and press it was presented as if each party equally contributed to the shutdown (see Nyhan, 2013). Conceptualized as presenting ‘both sides’ of a story (see Allsop, 2019) this vulgar value neutrality is less an organic vocational practical ethics and more a business strategy imposed on co-opted media professionals.

This is not to suggest that media professionals themselves did not play an active role. Jay Rosen (2007) has long remarked that because they are prohibited from openly adhering to a political standpoint, elite American political journalists responded by producing a vocational ethics that revolves around them being ‘savvy’. By this Rosen means that the members of the press are ‘shrewd, practical, well-informed, perceptive, ironic’, with the prioritization of these values meaning that ‘they believe, it’s better to be savvy than it is to be honest or correct on the facts. It’s better to be savvy than it is to be just, good, fair, decent, strictly lawful, civilized, sincere or humane.’ While Rosen’s analysis preceded the rise of social media platforms (where ‘clicks drive revenue’) savviness has become a staple in contemporary online discourse. In a follow-up documentation exercise, Rosen (2018) shows how these elite journalists repeatedly claim that the Trump administration’s fascistic statements were the mere appearance to the reality of orthodox Republican government.

Rather than provide a basic description, the successful savvy journalist aims to produce content that is engaging to audiences. These effects are especially pernicious as political reporting in the 2018 midterm turned on the ‘personalities of polarization’ instead of undertaking a basic description of the developments which have brought polarization about. What is deemed reality is nothing but appearance. Effectively savviness, as a means to support profit seeking, allows reactionary politics to openly engage in de-democratization drives almost unopposed. How shrewd is that?

Courting disaster

One explanation for the intense media operations discussed in the previous sections is that the US is not a lawless country. Rather,

neoliberalism requires the rule of law to justify and legitimate its intense concentration of power (see Pistor, 2019). Moreover, to employ some Gramscian descriptors, it is the law that will permit a Caesarian passive revolution to consolidate hegemony. To elaborate: in the US, ‘the federal courts have become a critical policymaking institution’, Keith Whittington writes, ‘and as a result both parties have been pushed to treat judicial appointments as an important political battleground’. Courts are not outside of politics; they offer an opportunity to ‘reshape the political landscape’, but, if anything, Whittington (2017) says, they are a ‘lagging indicator of political success’.

Historically the US Supreme Court has tended to defer to the executive. For example, up until the 1980s the court ruled in its favour approximately 80 per cent of the time. As Isaac Unah and Ryan Williams explain,

This presidential dominance perspective is based on the Court’s historical tendency to allow a wide berth, greater flexibility, and discretion for executive authority when interpreting the meaning of federal statutes and their manner of enforcement. (Unah and Williams, 2019, 152)

However, since the 1980s this deference has decreased and justices are more assertive in reviewing administration and legislation, and this tends to hold irrespective of party. The assertion of judicial power coincides with the rise of the imperial presidency and so sets up a conflict between these two branches of government. Granted there are other factors at play too, like the impact of legal realism and the decline of so-called value-free judgements, plus the global trend in the expansion of judicial power. Still, this clash underscores Whittington’s insight about how if courts are becoming more assertive, it is imperative to have power to appoint lower court judges to create a judiciary more likely to rule in one’s favour.

In this light, the last half century has seen political stalemate as each party was unable to decisively win the courts, at least relative to Republican reorganization during Reconstruction, or Democratic reorganization during the New Deal. Minimal success and partisan rotation resulted in relative gridlock at the Supreme Court. This limbo meant that federal circuit court appointments have increasingly become targets for Senate politics, often taking the form of obstructionism to slow the pace of confirmation, for example with Bill Clinton’s administration after the 1994 midterm elections, or in George W. Bush’s first term. Growing ideological distance has exacerbated

the gridlock on judicial appointments, making collecting 60 votes increasingly difficult. Moreover, it appears that judicial spoiling does not cost electoral votes, so there are few disincentives to continuing this practice. For these reasons, substantive judicial appointments effectively require a party to control the presidency, the Senate and the House. When those circumstances do not exist, vacancies can accumulate, sometimes for years.

While these conditions did exist for the first two years of Barack Obama's first presidential term, the 2008 great recession meant that the 111th US Congress was more focused on passing legislation like the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 than on court reform, even if reform was one of the administration's key agenda items (see Obama, 2017, 812). While having more opportunities than the Bush administration, the Obama administration was stymied by Republican obstructionism, arguably because there were more opportunities. For example, while the 113th Congress had rates of confirmation over 80 per cent, in the 114th Congress the percentage of lower court nominees fell to below 30 per cent, part of which can be explained because initial selections were 40 per cent women and 30 per cent black. On that note, successes do include the nomination and confirmation of Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan to the Supreme Court.

When Justice Antonin Scalia died unexpectedly in early 2016, Republicans were faced with the prospect of a third Obama Supreme Court appointee, as well as Hillary Clinton's impending campaign, which if successful would perhaps fill the seats then occupied by Ruth Bader Ginsberg and Anthony Kennedy, the oldest members of the court, thus decisively swaying the court system to progressive neoliberals. "One of my proudest moments", Mitch McConnell claims, "was then I looked Obama in the eye and said, 'You will not fill the Supreme Court vacancy'" (KET, 2016).

Granted, the Republican National Committee did not know who would emerge from their presidential primary process, but stalling the Obama administration was the best option, given that they did not want the balance of the court to change. To this end, the Judicial Crisis Network, a Washington, DC-based conservative non-profit, received \$17.9 million from a single unknown donor. Drawing upon this fund, the group launched a \$7 million campaign to stall Merrick Garland's confirmation hearing (Sessa-Hawkins and Perez, 2017). Arguably, refusing hearings on Garland gave evangelical voters (another conceivable reason to vote for Trump. As American presidential elections are complex multifaceted events no one item determines

the outcome, but it is worth keeping track of the various elements that shape the constitution of political blocs and give it motivation.

After Trump's 2016 presidential victory, the Judicial Crisis Network subsequently spent \$10 million on advertising to support Neil Gorsuch's Supreme Court seat (see Massoglia, 2018). As a 501(c)(4) legal entity, the organization does not have to publicly disclose its donors; however, previously the network has received \$23 million in funding from the Wellspring Committee, a known dark money organization (Bannon et al, 2017, 30; also see Massoglia, 2020). Gorsuch's appointment maintained the status quo, but it did permit Trump to move the balance of power if Ginsberg's or Kennedy's seats became vacant during his presidency.

In June 2018, Kennedy decided that he would move to 'senior status', effectively retiring from the US Supreme Court. The subsequent nomination of Brett Kavanaugh by the Trump administration was surrounded by questions about his legal opinions on the expansion of executive power (Kirby, 2018). Other concerns about perjury were also voiced, although with good reason only really when allegations of sexual assault by Kavanaugh as a high school and university student mounted was there sustained public inquiry about his suitability for the court. In turn Kavanaugh declared on *Fox News* that "I'm not going to let false accusations drive us out of this process." His defiance mirrors that of the Republican Party, who were urgently trying to confirm his appointment prior to the 2018 midterm elections where Republicans risked losing their congressional majority.

Following Christine Blasey Ford's credible testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee about Kavanaugh's actions, Senator Jeff Flake endorsed forwarding Kavanaugh's nomination provided there was a limited investigation from the FBI. These events crown a career in which, according to Brett Golshan (2018), 'Kavanaugh's truthfulness has repeatedly come into question'. It is for this reason that, by 4 October 2018, more than 2,400 law professors declared that 'he [Kavanaugh] did not display the impartiality and judicial temperament requisite to sit on the highest court of our land' (Aaronson et al, 2018). The statement follows sustained protests by Yale law students against Kavanaugh, who graduated from the university in 1990 (Naham, 2018). Subsequently, retired US Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens, a lifelong Republican, even offered commentary that Brett Kavanaugh's performance at his Senate confirmation hearing "demonstrated a potential bias involving enough potential litigants before the (high) court that he would not be able to perform his full responsibilities" (Reuters, 2018b). Despite the sexual assault

allegations, in early October 2018 Kavanaugh was appointed to the Supreme Court.

Of late it has been fashionable for pundits to lament that the Supreme Court has become more politicized, thus reflecting the asymmetrical ideological polarization that has occurred in the US more broadly and in the media more specifically (for a review of pertinent literature on the latter topic see Prior, 2013). Sadly, the notion that the court was (and remains) above the political fray is a remnant of Cold War ideological dogma and propaganda where the court was said to be emblematic of democratic reason and hence gave legitimacy to the American system of government. But this is not the case, for it is a trivially easy task to point out the extent to which the Supreme Court has typically been partisan, often arresting rights with each court in the postwar era tending – apart from the Warren Court – to be ever more conservative compared to the one preceding it. The 2018 term arguably demonstrates that the court is a de-democratizing force in the US. Key rulings like *Janus v. AFSCME*, *National Institute of Family and Life Advocates v. Becerra*, and *Husted v. Randolph Institute* underscore that the court consistently permits social inequities to greatly shape the lives of the vulnerable for the worse.³ As such, efforts to expand democratic life require an open assessment about the extent to which this unelected institution hinders that project, and which bodies like the Electoral College and the Senate need to be abolished.

By contrast, progressive neoliberals tend to put faith in the courts and the constitution. For example, in February 2017 when Judge James Robart issued a nationally binding temporary restraining order on the Trump administration's Muslim travel ban, Trump's subsequent tweets castigated the separation of powers, undermined judicial authority and pitted unreasonable security concerns against the rule of law. These reactions at judicial blocks have watered down a once predominant lay view that Trump's administration would be restrained by the American

3 Details about the individual rulings can be at Cornell Law School's Legal Information Centre, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/>. In summary, *Janus v. AFSCME SCOTUS* ruled that government workers who do not join unions do not need to pay for collective bargaining. The consequence is that government unions will lose a considerable source of their income thereby reducing their ability to resist authoritarian workplaces. The ruling for *National Institute of Family and Life Advocates v. Becerra* concerns free speech rights trumping abortion rights insofar as religious crisis pregnancy centres in California do not need to provide information about abortions. Finally, *Husted v. Randolph Institute* concerns voter engagement and participation, with the court ruling that the state of Ohio can remove voters from the voters list.

constitution, the judiciary and other state legal apparatuses like the Department of Justice. The line of thinking was that these institutions could constrain the demands of reactionary populism. I think this view is misguided. Consider that as of mid-July 2017, Trump had appointed 27 lower court judges (three times more than Obama) and nine judges to the Courts of Appeal. On average, these judges are younger than Obama's appointees, meaning that they will, as Ronald Klain argues, decide 'the scope of our civil liberties and the shape of civil rights laws in the year 2050 – and beyond' (Klain, 2017). These judicial appointments will ensure that Trump's legacy will prevail. Far from limiting the Trump administration, the courts and the constitution will be a crucial source of Caesarism's long-term power and effects. If anything, they reveal how plutocratic factions in the American ruling class have an opportunity to implement a passive revolution.

The purpose of the conservative legal movement is to coordinate a reregulation of environmental, labour and financial regulation, objectives that are more difficult to do via legislation. In other words, the US conservative ideological project can only proceed by entrenching counter-majoritarian procedural advantages rather than popular support from the people themselves. It remains to be seen whether these actions will work, or whether they are delegitimizing the Supreme Court right when it is seeking to consolidate durable power.

Meanwhile, notwithstanding the Gorsuch and Kavanaugh appointments, Republican donors were frustrated at a stalled Trump agenda, given his administration's flat-footed nature for the majority of 2017. "Donors are furious", Senator Cory Gardner said in September 2017. "We haven't kept our promise" (Hulse, 2017). Donor dissatisfaction meant that, by October 2017, funds to the Republican National Committee were less than half that of the January 2017 fundraising tally. Russ Choma (2017) reported that in late November, days before the US Senate Tax Reform vote, Republican donors were increasingly frustrated that the Republican Party had not made gains in reducing taxes, given that they controlled the presidency, House and Senate.

Speaking openly about this frustration, Senator Lindsey Graham simply stated that if this course of action was not taken, "the financial contributions will stop" (Thompson, 2017). Drawing the proverbial purse strings tight, donors were probably seeking to galvanize Republican politicians into action prior to the 2018 midterms, where because of Trump's poor polling they thought they might lose the 'trifecta'. Accordingly, the plutocrats pushed the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017. This law permitted the widespread looting of the US

state, allowing the ruling class to appropriate an estimated \$1.5 trillion over the coming decade. The consequences of this action are well understood: it will increase the ruling class's ability and opportunity to use the market to structure relationships with workers, meaning rentiers have more power to extract wealth. Nevertheless, the question is: which faction among the ruling class will receive the bulk of this appropriation and which political trajectory will they set?

Institutionalizing hierarchy

At the beginning of 2020, Trump had appointed 187 federal judges, approximately one in every four judges on the circuit courts. Regardless of the outcome of the scheduled November 2020 election, Colby Itkowitz (2019) notes that 'Trump has remade the federal judiciary ensuring a conservative tilt for decades and cementing his legacy'. These court appointments illustrate how McConnell and Trump are politically bound to one another. Their legacy will represent the joint wings of the reactionary pact: the use of grievances and racism to institutionalize hierarchy (see [Chapter 5](#) for a discussion of this pact). While American Caesarism castigates the separation of powers, undermining judicial authority, and pits unreasonable security concerns against the rule of law, in the end it is these same courts that will codify Caesarism into American jurisprudence, meaning that the template for the politics of Caesarism will remain, even if any one particular ruler exits the scene.

As Chapter 3 and this chapter demonstrate, altogether events in the last five years illustrate how established influence, dark money and media attention seek to stave off class struggle 'from below' by using class struggle 'from above'. To modify a phrase, the elective affinities of the ruling class reflect a kind of 'politics determined in the first and last instance'. From the beginning socialist politics are not provided with equal hospitality in a capitalist polity, and while capitalist parties may well begrudgingly entertain socialist members, entrenched progressive neoliberals will find the means to preserve their control of the agenda. Nevertheless, taking the broader view, if Biden, Trump and Sanders embody the three grand tendencies in 20th-century American politics – liberalism, fascism and socialism – then only one is facing the twilight with any degree of coherence.

The Whiteness of Communication Studies

Despite Adolph Reed's accurate remarks that 'the race/class debate has vexed American intellectual life [...] for more than a century' (2002, 265), the relationship between race, class and modernity tends to be relatively neglected in American communication theory. This neglect persists despite the consolidation of critical race theory in the 1980s and its subsequent impact in the wider academy. Race does not emerge as a topic in James Carey's *Communication as Culture*. In *Speaking Into the Air*, John Durham Peters includes a chapter about communication with animals, but nothing on race. Nor does it appear in Robert Craig's well-cited disciplinary-defining essay, 'Communication Theory As a Field'.

From the critical wing of the discipline, in *One Dimensional Man* Herbert Marcuse puts considerable emphasis on the emerging New Left as an agent of social change. But in retrospect he misses the significance of the civil rights movement, the most powerful postwar American social movement. It would be a mistake to attribute this oversight to the movement's pragmatic reformist tendencies eclipsing its more radical elements, a compromise that saw Malcolm X and the black Panthers break cause, but this revisionist concession masks a broader politics intending to domesticate the radical impulse found within the movement. Herbert Schiller does better. His *Mass Communications and American Empire* covers racial disparities, primarily through the lens of third-world marginalization.

But these kinds of topics have disappeared from Dan Schiller's *Digital Capitalism*, published when racial disparities in computer ownership and use presented a 15 percentage point gap in the US, a divide that remains the same nearly 20 years later in 2015 (Fairlie, 2017). Racial hierarchy is implicit in Christian Fuchs' analysis of commodity chains and the international division of digital labour. Here he connects

slave work in mineral extraction in Africa, electronic manufacturing in China and socially reproductive software labour in India with work undertaken in Silicon Valley (Fuchs, 2014). That said, when he and Nick Dyer-Witheford isolated 11 core concepts Marxists had contributed to communication studies none specifically related to race (Fuchs and Dyer-Witheford, 2013). Elsewhere, Claire Alexander observes how Stuart Hall's evocative phrases – identities 'without guarantees', the 'end of innocence', 'the process of becoming' – 'have become banal, even platitudinous, through repetition and dislocation from the wider texts and the broader context of Hall's work, politics and ethics' (2009, 473).

Lest one attribute these lamentable oversights and distortions to apparently justifiable narrow disciplinary constraints, Jeff Pooley reminds us that 'the communication theory domain is expansive' (2016, 3). From surveying the discipline, he found that 'the line dividing influence from indifference, in other words, has remained strikingly arbitrary. The organization of media scholarship has always, if unevenly, reflected the media landscape itself.' Pooley raises a good point, but it can be strengthened by noting how the Western media landscape is constructed around racial exclusion and exploitation (see González and Torres, 2011). So Pooley is right to note that 'our field's story of its past is notably unreflective – built atop invented traditions and pleasing illusions' (2005, 200).

One by-product of these 'pleasing illusions' is the general neglect of the systematic construction of civic ascription around race that emerged to suit the needs of a proto-capitalist political economy, which in turn was reinforced by science and law to supplement armed commercial expansion. As Charles Mills writes, 'The political economy of racial domination required a corresponding cognitive economy that would systematically darken the light of factual and normative inquiry.' 'White Ignorance', he writes 'plays itself out in the complex interaction of Eurocentric perception and categorization, white normativity, social memory and social amnesia, the derogation of non-white testimony, racial group interests, and motivated irrationality' (Mills, 2015, 217).

This ignorance can (and does) present itself in scholarship, in what Gurinder Bhambra (2017) terms 'methodological whiteness'. This methodological fallacy downplays the role of race as a structuring force while simultaneously viewing whiteness as a neutral and natural normative frame of analysis, as the parameter within which knowledge is constructed and legitimated. Bhambra adds that because of this fallacy, progressive neoliberals tend to misconstrue class analysis as

exclusively concerned with white experiences. This is especially pernicious because by refusing to see the multiple lived experiences of class, progressive neoliberals undermine the analysis of black social life thus leaving whiteness as an unstated norm.

Accordingly, a goal in this chapter is to critique the ‘cognitive economy of racial domination’ as it manifests in this broad area of scholarship. Conceptualizing the reverberations and continuations of this domination requires temporarily setting aside the general canonical literature in communication theory. Instead I directly and indirectly build upon those who have also critiqued previous iterations of this racial domination. This includes Stuart Hall, who theorized identity as indeterminate, laden with multiplicities that are always in a process of becoming, Paul Gilroy, who did much to show how identity was connected to the development of circuits of accumulation during the course of modernity, and Sut Jhally, whose longstanding analysis of race in American media culture is the benchmark for any meaningful critique of contemporary life. Still, these insights mean very little if it amounts to simply inviting these insights into pre-existing and unchanged spaces. The proper barometer is whether those included have a say and the resources to shape the structure of and relations in that space.

It is worth mentioning that Hall, Gilroy, Jhally and other likeminded scholars inspired a generation of academics, often in and from the minority but not exclusively, to explore the experience of marginalized communities, to find ways for these communities to carve out theoretical and empirical space for their academic projects. In the last two decades demographic shifts and hiring trends in the US and UK academic systems have, albeit far from being ideal and with much work to be done on these fronts, taken some of the sharpness from the whiteness of communication theory. However, this does not mean that marginalization does not continue. So yes, curriculums and faculty compliments do change, but they do under the long shadow of an Anglo-American colonial present where concurrently amnesia of and nostalgia for Pax Britannica justifies Pax Americana.

Lastly, issues of ‘ignorance’ are only one component of American life as so it would be ill-advised to discuss these without also undertaking a study of the considerable amount of violence required to maintain racial hierarchies, both in the United States and elsewhere in the world. So while this chapter addresses issues like misrecognition and ideology, Chapter 7 turns to the more kinetic means to subordinate bodies.

The conception of progress

To illustrate the ramifications of methodological whiteness and the colonial present, I want to contrast two recently published books that address the legacies of modernity. These are Steven Pinker's *Enlightenment Now* and Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*.

Continuing some of the themes put forward in *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, in *Enlightenment Now* Pinker (2018) argues that contrary to the views offered by radical social critics, by most metrics global living conditions are improving. Life expectancy has greatly increased due to a massive reduction in poverty and improved healthcare; supposedly both are by-products of economic growth, science and technology. Pinker attributes these developments to the worldview inherited from the Enlightenment. In short, he says, 'The Enlightenment has worked' (2018, 19). To his mind, the greatest impediments to improving the quality of human life are religion and superstitious cultural practices, plus the intellectuals that treat the Enlightenment ideals 'with indifference, scepticism, and sometimes contempt' (2018, 19). Although he does not mention them, by his reasoning he would be talking about black radicals like C. L. R. James who do not treat Enlightenment ideals with contempt but do show how these were unevenly lived. To counter these supposed harms to progress, Pinker believes that the goal should be for scientific experts to rule through discrete nudging here and there, as they can best distribute and allocate public goods. In plain terms, he says, 'to make public discourse more rational issues should be depoliticized as much as is feasible' (2018, 407). Pinker's conception of progress has an unshaken faith that reasonable, evidence-based deliberation inevitably leads to a democratic rights culture, one fully attendant to tolerance and fairness. The only difference is that this iteration proceeds with data.

However, in Pinker's telling there is no space in the grand narrative for socio-material struggles. Contentious social movements never receive a mention in *Enlightenment Now* nor how industrial strikes for workplace protections and increased wages raised living standards. Similarly, the problems of rising wealth inequality are subordinated to poverty alleviation, as if the (lack of) distribution of basic provisions and comforts can be disconnected from wealth concentration. Also absent is even the suspicion that minor poverty alleviation is a technique to stall working-class rebellions, the very things that brought about the improvements in living standards that Pinker otherwise attributes to technological invention. He forgets that someone must build these things.

‘A very great deal of good, undoubtedly, was done’, is how Isaiah Berlin concludes his introduction in *The Age of Enlightenment*. ‘Suffering mitigated, injustice avoided or prevented, ignorance exposed by the conscientious attempt to apply scientific methods to the regulation of human affairs’ (2017, 17). On quick viewing, it might seem as if the weight of Berlin’s scholarship supports Pinker’s interpretation. But such a claim misses that just a few pages earlier in the text, Berlin is clear that Enlightenment thought was a response to the mathematization of philosophy:

The unprecedented success of the mathematical method in the seventeenth century left a mark on philosophy, not merely because mathematics had not been discriminated from philosophy at the time, but because mathematical techniques – deduction from ‘self-evident’ axioms according to fixed rules, tests of internal consistency, a priori methods, standards of clarity and rigour proper to mathematics – were applied to philosophy also; with the result that this particular model dominates the philosophy as well as the natural science of the period. (2017, 3–4)

But in a passage worth separating for emphasis, Berlin adds: ‘This led to notable successes and equally notable failures, as the over-enthusiastic and fanatical application of technique rich in one, when mechanically applied to another, not necessarily similar to the first, commonalty does’ (2017, 3–4). While certainly some of this ‘mood persists into the eighteenth century’ through the debates between rationalism and empiricism, the mood was superseded by Kant’s ‘great break’ (2017, 4, 13).

Berlin’s synopsis of this movement of thought culminates in Kant’s attention to the difference between judgement and truth. As Berlin (2017) explains, showing a doubter of Pythagorean geometry more right-angle triangles does little to convince them that suitable evidence exists. Reiterating that the problem with the early portion of 18th-century thought is the ‘identification of philosophy with science’, Berlin describes it as ‘the major fallacy which vitiates it’. Still, Berlin notes, mature Enlightenment thought reached another conclusion, this being that ‘the central dream, the demonstration that everything in the world moved by mechanical means, that all evils could be cured by technological steps, that there could exist engineers both of human souls and of human bodies, proved delusive’ (Berlin, 2017, 15, 17).

With Berlin's remarks in mind, effectively Pinker's conception of the Enlightenment commits all the errors Berlin warns about. It is predicated upon gross simplifications and technocratic prescriptions that betray a complete failure to understand intellectual politics and material history in and of the various strands of European modernity. Pinker's views are closer to those 'notable failures' that came from rigorous axiomatic reasoning that mature Enlightenment thought sought to rebuke and overturn. Moreover, his disregard of social movements betrays a robust endorsement of technocratic progressive neoliberalism enthralled with free markets, while his insistence on the one-dimensional view of the Enlightenment is dogma in another form. Indeed, this endorsement of bureaucracy over democracy is an odd summary conception of the Enlightenment, as Berlin outlines. Contrary to the complexity of the Enlightenment, Pinker's view of the project is flat and false, a whispered vestige of a mythological rendering so unlike the inheritance he claims.

Perhaps Pinker's account, while erroneous, will be quickly forgotten. Many books are. But given the prevalence of 'white ignorance', Pinker's account is probably closer to lay accounts than the revisionist material produced by scholars in the 'imperial turn' over the last two decades, books far more deserving of being reviewed in the *New York Times*. These scholars warn against reductionist accounts like those offered by Pinker. Indeed, they argue that there is no single, monolithic Enlightenment. Indeed, generalizations about these processes are only undertaken with great caution and with many caveats. In short, scholarship emanating from the imperial turn well demonstrates that the 'universal rights culture' that emerged from the Enlightenment is one component of the encumbered contradictions that came along with colonial practices. While others have also made the point well, altogether I find Susan Buck-Morss has the single best paragraph on the topic:

By the Eighteenth Century, slavery had become the root metaphor of Western political philosophy, connoting everything that was evil about power relations. Freedom, its conceptual antithesis, was considered by Enlightenment thinkers as the highest and universal political value. Yet this political metaphor began to take root at precisely the time that the economic enslavement of *non*-Europeans as a labor force in the colonies – was increasing quantitatively and intensifying qualitatively to the point that by the mid-eighteenth century it came to underwrite the global

spread of the very Enlightenment ideals that were in such fundamental contradiction to it. (Buck-Morss, 2009, 21)

The disjuncture between universal rights but massive exclusion from those rights is the reason that Charles Mills says that the Enlightenment was ‘compromised from the start’ (2015, 217). While Mills’ conclusion has much merit, it is equally important to note that anti-racism developed out of this history too, with its accompanying claim to universal freedom rejecting that ‘the measure of mankind was the European’, as Cedric Robinson wrote (2000, 99; also see Gopal, 2019). Of course, far better to not to have had racial subordination to oppose in the first place.

Race in America

As an example of the role and consequences of bonded labour in capitalist modernity (and to counter Pinker’s improvised understanding of the Enlightenment) I want to discuss Ta-Nehisi Coates’ theorization of race in America. He offers an especially strong account of the enduring inequalities of ongoing accumulation by dispossession, exploitation and hierarchical civic status, all preserved by state-sanctioned violence. He couples this with various ‘moves of innocence’ that permit an historical amnesia about how the right to take black life has been systematically embedded and remains a core component of capitalism in the Americas.

Coates’ argument unfolds as an immanent critique of American exceptionalism, contrasting prevailing divine and ideological beliefs with the standpoint and lived experience of urban social life. This argument is also historical insofar that Coates frames the American people as a ‘modern invention’, arising at the same time as American democracy, these two things being intimately connected with the violence of the state formation process. He explains:

The process of washing desperate tribes white, the elevation of the belief in being white, was not achieved through wine tasting and ice cream socials, but rather through the pillaging of life liberty labor and land; through the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents; the destruction of family; the rape of mothers; the sale of children; and various other acts meant, first and foremost, to deny you and me the right to secure and govern our own bodies. (Coates, 2015, 8)

He correctly identifies and especially well describes how through claiming the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence the US state uses that monopoly to subordinate and exclude blacks from the demos, thus marking black as persons who do not warrant state services.

In short, blacks are produced by state-sanctioned violence, recent versions being stand-your-ground laws and militarized police enforcing expansive drugs laws. It is a contradiction insofar as blacks are moral agents, yet these full rights are denied to them. One of the consequences of this contradiction is that the police and other state agencies have a licence to destroy black bodies without the perpetrators being held accountable for their violence. 'It does not matter if the destruction is the result of an unfortunate overreaction. It does not matter if it originated in a misunderstanding. It does not matter if the destruction springs from a foolish policy' (Coates, 2015, 7, 8, 9). The police serve the people. And blacks are not 'the people'. Marked by birth, they are excluded from this right. This systematic misrecognition leads to social death and physical death.

To elaborate, Coates suggests that the concepts Americans use to talk about race can sometimes 'obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscles, extract organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth' (Coates, 2015, 10). Racism is materially rooted, ideologically embedded and bodily experienced. Similarly, he dislikes the impoverished version of black history where it chronicles firsts as if it is little more than answers to Trivial Pursuit questions. Or removes the violence and oppression in Africa prior to European colonialism. Still, as a social construct race has less to do with shared histories, cultures or beliefs directly, and more to do with subordination based upon position and identification. Certainly, as Sidney Mintz and Richard Price (1976) document in *The Birth of African American Culture*, there are remarkable differences in language and diet, lifestyle and family structure in black communities in the Americas. Even so, black culture is a useful term that reflects how during modernity these bodies were positioned relative to white supremacy. In line with Mintz and Price, Coates concludes that 'there was nothing holy or particular in my skin; I was black because of history and heritage. There was no nobility in falling, in being bound in living oppressed, and there was no inherent meaning in black blood. Black blood wasn't black; black skin wasn't even black' (Coates, 2015, 43, 55, 98).

Less interested in accumulated disadvantage, Coates' theorization is predicated upon how violence positions and subjugates the black body. Through eloquently rejecting a biological or essentialist understanding

of race, he shows how legal contestation, political entrepreneurship and even scholarly intellectual production intersect to set the parameters of racial dynamics. In contrast with Pinker, Coates offers a comparative historical sociological analysis of how stratification and inequality are maintained and thus come to shape social organization, great tranches of lived experience, and therefore social identities. Granted, American racial taxonomies themselves are not universal either, but historical and sociological inquiry has produced a body of theory such that Coates and others are well able to describe and analyse this moment.

Through focusing on intergenerational violence, interpersonal violence and pre-emptive violence as mechanisms capitalism uses to enforce blackness, Coates maps how these processes come to shape the lived experience of African Americans. 'Either I can beat him, or the police', a refrain from his father, and a reoccurring motif Coates uses to discuss how black families attempt to keep children safe from state violence. As a result, 'we were afraid of those who loved us most'. These processes also have a public component. To take the case of masculinity, there is a price and dilemma that involves institutions and norms too. 'Fail to comprehend the street and you gave up your body now. But fail to comprehend the schools and you gave up your body later', Coates conveys. Young black men risk being beaten for not being tough while they are also at risk of being beaten for being threatening. Describing these as bleak choices does not convey how little choice is really involved, for each route results in a blackness marked by anxiety over their bodily integrity being wounded on all sides. Accordingly, 'the lesson a black child learns early is that their bodies are in constant jeopardy'. Attributing this fear to the pathologies of blackness absconds from undertaking an analysis into the longstanding policies and politics that were set in motion during the American experience of modernity.

The social grammar of blackness Coates describes traverses class positions. While some class positions may reduce exposure to violence, it does not mitigate it entirely. He relays a story of a young man within his social group who had the manner, achievements and social attributes associated with promise but who, during a routine traffic stop, was nevertheless killed by the police. Coates reasons that if a young black man who exceeded the criteria set up by white American social life could be indiscriminately killed without cause then all others were greatly susceptible to state violence. All black men risk being 'killed in the streets America made' (Coates, 2015, 16, 17, 25, 82).

For Pinker, soon these streets will be made 'with data'.

Misrecognition and modernity

Through Pinker's inattention to the salient issue of race and colonial formations his white ignorance is indicative of spectres that haunt certain scholarly tracks. It is also an example of how simplified thinking limits our ability to see the various mechanisms of class rule in action. For example, in contradistinction to Pinker's flawed invocation of the Enlightenment, when Coates argues that the 'American people' are white what he means is that the boundaries of American democracy are congruent with the boundaries of whiteness to which it is set to serve.

To elaborate, forming throughout the 16th to 19th centuries, race is a modern civic ascription. It has several other premises, for example the socially acceptable stigma and licenced prejudice to those that do not conform to 'white universalism'. A construction of differences – which while shifting assemblages and articulations seeks to mute pluralities – are claimed to be embodied, all the while being 'fixed' by 'common sense'. These shifting constructions of difference are enrolled to naturalize social hierarchy. And as Coates relays, state- and market-sanctioned violence is used to proactively preserve the hierarchy.

All of these features are present in Reed's account of race and class. He points to American plantations in the 19th century when whites petitioned for improved living conditions lest they become degraded to the status of blacks, or where they lobbied for racial exclusions to the franchise. Reed writes that 'Planters' commitment to black subordination, though certainly buttressed by beliefs in black inferiority, stemmed from their more practical concerns to compose a labor regime that would approximate as nearly as possible a restoration of slavery' (2002, 267). Planters and their allies fought reconstruction efforts, labour protections and redistribution to undermine the 'possibility that blacks and non-elite whites would form a durable alliance that could effectively challenge for power or disrupt, and perhaps radically alter, prevailing economic and class relations' (2002, 268). This civic ascription became encoded into the American legal regime. For example, the US Naturalization Act of 1790 granted citizenship to 'free White persons of good character'. This code was maintained in subsequent laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Asiatic Barred Zone of 1917 which barred Chinese workers and most Asians from acquiring citizenship. It is for this reason that Michael Omi and Howard Winant write that 'race establishes the identity of human subjects, it structures social conflict and social cohesion, and it is deeply woven into other aspects of existence' (1986, 56). Elsewhere they add that 'every state institution is a racial institution' (Omi and

Winant, 1986, 78; also see Ignatin and Allen, 1976). Effectively, in the US, state formation is racial formation.

It is from this vantage that resurgent discussions of the political experience of race, class, and communication can best be understood. At its most basic level there is a debate over whether race is essential to the reproduction of American capitalism, or merely a prominent but incidental feature. Upfront, Adolf Reed notes that ‘few people are prepared now, on either intellectual or moral grounds, to characterize racial injustice as a simple by-product, or “epiphenomenon”, of capitalist class relations’ (Reed, 2002, 265). So almost all participants in the debate agree with the conceptualization of race as a non-reductive, contradictory and political manner. Consolidating critical scholarship on the topic, Omi and Winant note that race is ‘an unstable and “de-centred” complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle’ (1986, 68). This ‘autonomous field of social conflict’ is maintained at through social relations and social structures, with floating signifiers used to mark identity (Omi and Winant, 1986, 52). In line with Hall, Gilroy and Jhally, this conception of race acknowledges it as a separate axis of domination and inequality.

Still – and his choice of words show how his point of entry into this debate is related to his longstanding disagreements with William Wilson’s work – Reed writes that there remain questions about ‘whether race has declined in significance as a factor in shaping life-chances, particularly among black Americans’ (2002, 265). To this end, Reed suggests that ‘reformulation of the debate has both subtly disconnected it from its radical roots in structural critique of American capitalism and established it on a polysemous foundation that gives it broader resonance, though at the price of lack of clarity’ (2002, 265). For him, the problem is that the ‘familiar juxtaposition’ between these concepts led to these things being ‘fundamentally distinguishable’. From his perspective this is a misstep. Rather, Reed proposes that ‘both are more effectively, and more accurately, seen as equivalent and overlapping elements within a singular system of social power and stratification rooted in capitalist labor relations’ (Reed, 2002, 266). This last sentence is telling. To use David Harvey’s terminology, for Reed race and class relations are different means to realize the extraction of surplus value.

Through appealing to the American historical record, Reed suggests that ‘hierarchies of civic status mediate and manage this stratification system by defining populations and assigning them ascriptively to what come to be understood as appropriate niches of civic worth and entitlement’. And so ‘race appears as a social category’, becoming

and denoting an ‘especially durable kind of ascriptive civic status in the context of American capitalism and the political and ideological structures through which it is reproduced as a social order’. This ‘confluence of race and class’ is enacted by laws, norms, instructions, habits and bias which then come to create ‘absolute, unbreachable distinctions’ (2002, 266) between races, even while whites and blacks work in the same fields and factories (2002, 266).

By contrast, Ellen Meiksins Wood’s political Marxism foregrounds the value struggles within wage labour regimes, which are set in motion through the separation of people from means of independent subsistence to complete the commodification of labour power thereby aiding the accumulation of abstract wealth. Herein, race is ‘a major “extra-economic” mechanism of class reproduction in US capitalism’ (Wood, 2002, 276). She means that capital is opportunistic and selective in using race and other kinds of civil hierarchies to divide the workforce, a view shared by W. E. B. Du Bois and Noel Ignatiev among others. Accordingly, for Wood the relative presence or absence of racism turns upon whether in that moment it serves the capitalist ruling class’s interests. From this vantage racial formations are modulated by capitalist class relations and strategies of accumulation. She adds that even if racial injustice evaporated, capitalism would persist. Put concisely, Wood argues that ‘capitalism is conceivable without racial divisions, but not, by definition, without class’ (2002, 276). Du Bois’ analysis of the ‘psychological wage’ proletariat whites receive is a good example of the kind of techniques of racial division used to prop up capital accumulation that Wood has in mind. This ‘wage’ is a civic ascription that gives white people relatively more status than black people. This ‘wage’ could be redescribed as a ‘loyalty rent’, one benefit of which is ‘white privilege’. As Theodore Allen (1994) used the term, white privilege refers to the relative credence given to the claims made by members of a racially segmented class-stratified society. These enduring and predictable stratifications are legitimated by ideologies that appeal to ascriptive essentialism. Yet, the relative privilege that white workers may gain still costs less to capitalists than the costs if all workers stood in solidarity and organized for higher wages for all.

According to David Roediger, Wood’s interpretation ‘remains broadly the dominant interpretation’ in the academy (Roediger, 2017, 25). Perhaps Roediger’s testimony comes from his experience of having worked within the American academic system and his encounters with the kind of methodological whiteness I have already described in this chapter. Nevertheless, Roediger relays how civic hierarchies facilitate the fragmentation of solidarity in the working class, allowing much

of the social reproduction of that class to be pushed on to designated populations who in turn are not well placed in the political structure to fight against it. These themes traverse Roediger's academic project, from *How Race Survived US History* where he argues that race is a key organizing principle of American capitalism, to *The Production of Difference* where he and Elizabeth Esch note that difference facilitates the extraction of surplus value; indeed, distinction-making is essential to a capitalist labour regime as shifting the construction of difference allow for the parameters for ruling class affiliations to be reset as needed. In sum, his stance is that a historical materialist method is predicated upon inquiry into these 'extra-economic' mechanisms that are at play in capitalist 'laws of motion'. Effectively, he intimates that Wood has not applied Marxist methods to the totality of capitalist social relations.

Returning to the main point, Reed proposes that the reason his empirical view is not widely shared – why there is even a debate about the relationship between race and class in the first place – is because progressive analysts are overly invested in formal definitions, they 'proceed from a notion of capitalism as an ideal-typical system defined by generic economic categories' (2002, 266). This formalism cannot fully account for actually existing capitalisms, each one an historically encumbered polity. To reframe the argument, capitalism does not strictly *need* racism in the same way that it does not strictly *need* railways or computers. These are contingent extra-economic historical developments, but they have all become readily enrolled as core elements in economically compelled exploitative relations to the point where in actually existing capitalism accumulation is less efficient without them. For Reed, the label 'capitalism' is little more than a summary of the outcomes by individuals and groups 'pursu[ing] concrete material interests' using 'improvis[ed] institutional frameworks' (2002, 268). While he grants that theoretical models can have 'heuristic value', this is only to the extent to which they do not hinder an analysis of the pursuit of concrete and specific material developments. Anything else is simply to reify capitalism, succumbing to the same kinds of epistemic errors capitalist ideology encourages.

Capitalism's extra-economic dimensions

While playing out through stances on the utility of definitions of capitalism and empirical developments, the debate about race turns upon the extra-economic dimensions of capitalism, for example the role of the state's force to back civic ascriptive categories that help markets reproduce themselves in ways that heavily favour capitalist

accumulation. Reed and Roediger suggest that capitalism is more than a sphere of production and exchange, that markets are formed by legal regimes and cultures. Moreover, markets do not have distinctive boundaries; the labour process of the social reproduction of workers shows this. So markets very much depend upon the state, cultures and other kinds of extra-economic forces, like racism and sexism, to reproduce themselves. As capitalist social relations were instituted by the state, so prejudice and bigotry was co-opted in the form of civic hierarchies and enhanced to create racial formations that very much suited the prevailing interest in ruthlessly accumulating value. It is plainly true that capitalism is a system of rule which has economic and extra-economic 'rules of reproduction'. As such, class intersects with the shifting construction of racial, religious and gendered differences to create a variety of conditions in which the logic of capital can be reproduced, a process primarily undertaken through commodity markets. In summary, capital structures social relations, which is the main point.

In this respect, whiteness is a ruling class social control formation; one which uses shifting implicit and explicit explanations to govern, deploying ideological justifications for discrimination based on ontological claims about the existence of those distinctively (in)capable of self-government. Recalling the passage from Susan Buck-Morss, whiteness advocates for unmarked universalism but is bundled with overt racist assertions of the innate superiority of the ruling class and the innate inferiority of others. So while white supremacy may well appeal to 'biological characteristics' it is ultimately about socio-economic relations and the control of capital that matters most. It is because of these differences that American whites get a social safety net and have ancestral wealth at their disposal, whereas, as Coates describes, blacks have criminal justice and penal warehousing. Indeed, a capitalist polity is absolutely and necessarily committed to sexism and racism because the system must mystify, externalize and justify the innate contradictions in its social relations. In short, whiteness and blackness are born from modernity. While both are social constructs – and so are malleable and contingent – they signify a relationship to authority, and by implication to capital. For this reason it would be helpful for more communication and technology scholars to study the 'cognitive economy of racial domination'.

Misinformation and Ideology

The general orthodox explanation for misinformation in American politics stalls because it fails to fully appreciate history and ideology. The prime example is ‘Russia-gate’, a state-sponsored event where Russian ‘active measures’ sought to interfere in the 2016 US elections through seeking to limit Hillary Clinton’s campaign, boost Donald Trump’s campaign, and otherwise enflame existing social discord in that country. Russia-gate subsequently became a prolonged media event with several looping effects that reveal many of the deep cleavages in American society. While considerable attention is given to online protocols to safeguard against misinformation (e.g. Claesson, 2019), as the foundations for these cleavages do not lie in the event itself it is doubtful whether these protocols will be successful, even on their own terms.

My goal in this chapter is to argue that misinformation practices are products of modernity. By this I mean that American modernity is characterized by contradictions between its basic social forms. By forms I have in mind some of the entities Marx refers to, like the money form, the commodity form, and so on. The contradictions create a bind for rulers. On the one hand, these contradictions mean that their rule is never stable. On the other hand, acknowledging the contradictions risks courting redress that also threatens their minority rule. Due to the imperative to mystify these contradictions, social problems are subsequently treated as anomalies or otherwise externalized; they can never be features of the capitalist political economy itself. Misinformation is a common by-product of this externalization as the capitalist ruling class uses it to weld together pacts and alliances that preserve the social hierarchy.

To begin, I will outline the broad argumentation offered by securocrats, reactionaries and technologists on Russia-gate. Here I look at the proof put forward, the ethical reasoning invoked and the

emotive appeals employed. I will also look at why these explanations fall short. In developing this point, my aim is tangential to weighing in on the actual, presumed and symbolic threat presented by authoritarian regimes in the international system as they use digital tools to pursue their agendas. Neither am I interested in assessing the technological efficacy or foreign policy utility of ‘active measures’, nor the lapses in media ethics as American cable news organizations happily partook in perpetuating unevidenced plots involving ‘active measures’, with those spreading falsehoods achieving professional success (see Taibbi, 2019). I will leave those critique to others more steeped in the specifics of those debates.

Popular rhetorics of misinformation

Although they have somewhat abated following the release of the Mueller Report and Trump’s impeachment hearings in March 2019 and February 2020 respectively, American national security analysts’ popular writings on Russia-gate are replete with astonishment and dire emotive warnings about authoritarians upending democratic life (e.g. Wittes and Hennessey, 2017; Rosenberger, 2019; Boot and Bergmann, 2019).¹ Here misinformation is a tactic in the theatre of information warfare, itself set within geopolitical contests (see Theohary, 2018; Maréchal, 2017).² Even the *New York Times* wades into this territory in their *Operation InfeKtion* documentary series (Ellick and Westbrook, 2018). In this genre, elected representatives tend to be framed as woefully technologically illiterate thus lessening the effectiveness of their oversight abilities. Conversely, the US national security establishment is depicted as morally and factually correct on longstanding Russian aggression. An associated trope is reliance upon nameless intelligence professionals whose judgement is impeccable and above reproach, and who serve a higher purpose on the front lines of a global information war to preserve democracy. Hereunto theirs has been a rearguard defence; although now, the aesthetics of the genre suggest, these security forces must be permitted to actively

1 By Russia I mean to signal the state as opposed to the country in general or its citizens in general.

2 From Catherine Theohary’s perspective, synonyms for ‘information warfare include active measures, hybrid warfare, and gray zone warfare’, while ‘the types of information used in [Information Operations] include propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation’ (2018, i).

intervene to prevent an intrusion of unwanted foreigners into American domestic politics.

Similarly, on enough occasions to become a broad pattern, there is an insinuation that Trump's erratic political behaviour stems from him being a Russian intelligence asset, beholden to debts accrued over 40 years of real estate financing and money laundering (e.g. Chait, 2018). In the same vein, members of Trump's base are framed as 'deplorable' partly due to their bigotry and partly due to their continued support of Trump despite his geopolitical concessions to Russia which are said to jeopardize American economic and political predominance the world over. Herein misinformation is understood as a weapon of the weak deployed against the US by its geopolitical adversaries. From the orthodox standpoint, the traction of misinformation is explained as certain Americans lacking patriotism, resilience, media literacy and as otherwise being psychologically predisposed to manipulation.³

Unable to admit to Russian meddling as Trump believes it would undermine his electoral victory, from another vantage he and his base construe that the leadership of American intelligence agencies repeatedly sought to undermine his administration, even before it took office. Among other happenings, this metanarrative has been mythologized in two events. The first was supposedly started in June 2016 by intelligence agencies seeking to marginalize the Trump campaign by suggesting it was a beneficiary of Russian state assistance and cyber-sabotage. In this narrative Obama apparently pushed the agenda, forcing Paul Ryan, Nancy Pelosi, Mitch McConnell and Harry Reid to write a public letter in September wherein they stated that 'the states face the challenge of malefactors that are seeking to use cyber attacks to disrupt the administration of our elections' (2016, 1). Similar statements came from the Obama administration in October and December of that same year (see Sanger and Savage, 2016; Obama, 2016). The second event is the 6 January 2017 meeting between Trump and Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, FBI Director James Comey, CIA Director John Brennan and NSA Director Admiral Mike Rogers, where they briefed Trump on the Steele Dossier and Russian 'active measures' (see Perez et al, 2017). Again, as per the narrative, in this meeting these officials sought to convey that Trump was beholden to their dossiers on him, an invention of the ordinary

3 For a critical genealogy of the roots of this anxiety, see Jeffrey Whyte (2018) on the emergence of the American security institutions' concern with psychological warfare through news and information, and the vulnerability of US citizens to these practices in the lead up to the Second World War.

Russia-gate *kompromat* story. Herein, the subsequent firing of James Comey, as but one example, is read as Trump asserting his formal legitimacy that derives from electoral victory over Clinton, a candidate perceived to be preferred by those ‘inside the beltway’. In just over a year all four officials were replaced.⁴

For Trump, Russia-gate is a clarifying divisive issue, an encumbered narrative with villains who hinder democratic will. His demonization of Democrats, government officials and the press undertaken to galvanize his base, these being white socially conservative working-class people, underscore that he is the only person who can address the perceived deficiencies in American life. As he conducts his politics on platforms, his base revels in how institutional struggles, once behind closed doors, play out in public. In addition to a theatrical component, to his constituents this performance gives credence to Trump’s otherwise dubious remarks that “there has never been, ever before, an administration that’s been so open and transparent” (White House, 2019; also see Jacobson, L., 2019). For them, misinformation arises from elite corporate media and holdover Obama government appointees like Preet Bharara and Sally Yates who seek to thwart their due democratic will.

Lastly, another set of interrelated concerns involve how it is not in the business interests of platform companies like Facebook to curb the spread of misinformation. Doing so would acknowledge that they view themselves as responsible for third-party content and thereby alter their status under Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, a subcomponent of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. This means platforms would lose immunity from liability from the effects of the content third-party users post. This is primarily why Mark Zuckerberg argues that “Facebook shouldn’t be the arbiter of truth of everything that people say online” (Halon, 2020). But platforms do already have rules for truth on a variety of content.

As a result, platform companies are publicly raked over the coals (see House Financial Services Committee, 2019). Ritualistically, like it has for a decade now, Facebook offers apologies for privacy violations (Yglesias, 2018) and donates funds to the elected representatives charged with oversight (Open Secrets, 2020b). In the meantime, the company steadfastly refuses to ban microtargeted untruthful political advertising (Ortutay and Anderson, 2020), proposing instead a system of fact

4 Clapper and Brennan retired on 20 January 2017, the same day as Trump’s inauguration. To public alarm Comey was fired by Trump within a month, on 9 May 2017, and Rogers retired in May 2018.

checkers. But even setting aside thorny first-order normative questions about moral facts, truthfulness and democratic theory, the fact-checking partners have limited resources. Besides which, under corporate policy claims by politicians and political parties are exempt from this evaluation. Facebook defends this position by invoking commitment to core American values, like ‘free expression’ and a ‘respect for the democratic process’, even while legislators remain unconvinced.⁵

Yet altogether these partisan rhetorics about, and struggle over, political description, like misinformation, can be greatly improved through a discussion of ideology. *Capital* is a good starting point for a theory of ideology, namely the comprehension of subjective experience as it relates to the tacit acceptance for the reproduction of the mode of production. In the opening pages, Marx proposes that understanding capitalism requires moving beyond the ‘immense accumulation of commodities’ (1976, 125). With brevity in mind, a commodity has both a use value and exchange value, but the fetishism of the latter and the neglect of the former demonstrates how the market comes to structure conceptualizations of society, which in turn factors into how social relations are legitimated and naturalized. Instead the market, as an appearance, is the manifestation of production, the ‘hidden abode’ (Marx, 1976, 279) as it were. As an example, supposedly workers are nominally free to sell their labour power, but as a commodity labour power ‘becomes a mere form, which is alien to the content of the transaction itself, and merely mystifies it’ (Marx, 1976, 729–30).

Labour is not the only ‘mere form’. There are many appearances in capitalism. They arise because of the wider contradictions between the basic forms in capitalist society. Consider how the US economy requires extensive cross-sector cooperation, but as the means of production are privately held it creates a suboptimal economic configuration, the parts of which frequently work at cross purposes from one another. Moreover, despite this extensive cooperation between many people, the benefits of production are returned to a few people in the form of private profit. Additionally, commodity fetishism comes to shape the parameters of these social relations. Fetishism has two consequences.

5 While it is not a mainstream view, in part because their views are *verboden* on cable news, democratic socialists are wary of the state, party and market. They judge Russia-gate to be a face-saving exercise pushed by Democratic Party operatives considering Clinton’s defeat by Trump, an electoral race these operatives believed they would win with ease. Moreover, given the debacle around the pretext of using weapons of mass destruction to invade Iraq in 2003, to give a recent example, democratic socialists do not automatically give credence to US intelligence agencies (see Marcetic, 2019).

The first ‘makes the actual relation invisible’, while the second establishes the parameters by which ‘all the notions of justice [are] held by both worker and capitalist’ (Marx, 1976, 680), namely that, notwithstanding cooperation in the production process, it is deemed fair that profits exist and go to just a few people.

Effectively, Marx’s analysis surrounding commodity fetishism is less about the manipulation of persons to act against their interests, and more an illustration about the character of subjective experience when social life is only understood through the lens of the exchange value which guides material reproduction. In short, ideology is a factor in the formation of the subject as well as how subjects come to comprehend experience. From these insights, in the late 20th century there were several projects to expand upon how communication and culture was related to subjective experience. Stuart Hall’s (1988) articulation is one of the most notable efforts to establish the boundaries and capabilities communication has for reinforcing or altering existing social relations, in addition to reinforcing or altering how societies and persons come to understand the meaning of these social relations. He has another point worth relaying, which is that race and class relations are not autonomous from one another, and that indeed what is treated as robust concepts are but the ossified by-products of weak distinctions (Hall et al, 2019; see Chapter 5) As such, Hall concludes that subjects are always in the process of forming. Accordingly, it is vital that we look at subjects in the totality of the social process and its history, with media environment aiding in that ongoing formation.

Ideology and politics

With these points in mind, I now turn to the issues involving ideology and politics within capitalist societies. To begin, in formal American electoral politics the two parties are both committed to a programme which prioritizes the protection of capitalist interests. Still, Noam Chomsky describes the Republican Party as a candidate for the ‘the most dangerous organization in human history’ (Goodman and Chomsky, 2016, 1), while Kevin Phillips (1990) understands ‘the Democrats as history’s second-most enthusiastic capitalist party’. Chomsky means that Republicans’ unrestrained enthusiasm for capital accumulation enables war-capitalism and petro-capitalism that has and will kill millions of people in the 21st century alone. Phillips means that Democrats collude with this imperative, raising narrow questions to temper revolts from the working class when that imperative is

questioned. Due to this loyalty to capital, W. E. B. Du Bois was adamant that ‘there is but one evil party with two names’ (1956).

The shared agenda between the Republican and Democratic parties is longstanding. For example, in the Gilded Age, Grover Cleveland had close connections to big financiers (see Welch, 1988) while Democratic presidential nominees in the 1920s – James Cox, John Davis and Alfred Smith – followed the same pattern. Smith even opposed Roosevelt’s New Deal (Anon., 1936). These joint ventures arise because under capitalism government becomes an apparatus for capitalists to protect their ability to continue exploiting labour and appropriating the surplus value of labour as profit. This involves ‘the creation of “order”’. The imperative of this order is to mediate the legalization, perpetuation and moderation of class conflict, while adopting a rhetoric in which it is the mechanism for the alleviation and reconciliation of class conflict (see Lenin, 1999).

Due to this project, loyal parties of capital are limited by how much they can provide sustained and permanent relief to the social issues that arise from subordination in a stratified class system. Instead they must contrive divisive political issues to motivate their voters. Ignoring the role of capitalism, these contrivances paper over and distract from the fact that both parties are generally prohibited from doing anything substantive about the main forms of oppression, the stratified economic system, the forms that enable it and the resultant maldistribution.

Put simply, American political parties must distract citizens from the primary causes of oppression and alienation. Subsequently, matters that are apolitical, even technical, become venues for politics, proxy sites for contest between the parties, like the various culture wars that have been waged in the neoliberal era (see Hartman, 2019). While the intensity of these proxy wars may wax and wane, polarization is nevertheless a key component in the differentiation required for electoral success. As a result of differentiation, certain practices and beliefs become coded as either the province of the Democratic or Republican Party, even if this signification ostensibly has little to nothing to do with those parties’ politics or platforms.

As this template applies to Russia-gate, irrespective of the degree and kind of Russian espionage, from the beginning Trump framed the issue as a last-ditch effort by Democratic-aligned elites to delegitimize his presidential victory thereby hindering his legislative agenda. It does not matter that in practice the Democratic Party has for the most part endorsed his agenda. What matters is the appearance of conflict. Through uncritically parroting this narrative, the right-wing media

benefits by continuing to position itself as counter-elite programming, which relies on contrarianism to sell advertising to conservative audiences. Accordingly, this information fits with those audience members' beliefs. Explaining how these beliefs have been made requires turning to selected issues in American modernity in the next section.

Reactionary racial agendas

Poor whites have been active and passive participants in their own oppression. It is not surprising that 'one of the finest historians ever developed in the United States' (Robinson, 2000, 185), Du Bois, provides the preeminent analysis of that subject, tracing the alliances that consolidated during the 19th century, a set of implicit bargains the consequences of which still reverberate in the early 21st century. Initially, 'the opportunity for real and new democracy was broad' for the masses of European migrants fleeing European autocratic states before and after the revolution (Du Bois, 2013, 14). In America, these migrants found power loosely associated with landholding, while the needs of an economic form generated an adaptable workforce able to acquire wealth and the ability to change station more easily than in Europe, Du Bois noted. This subjective experience was only possible because of the spatial fix whereby Indigenous genocide and colonial dispossession on the frontier created 'free land' that underwrote the suspension of capital's contradictions for the first century of the 'American experiment in self-government'. This meant that white workers 'were not willing to ... regard itself as a permanent labouring class' (Du Bois, 2013, 14). This was the material foundation upon which white workers began to affiliate with the class interests and practices of capital.

Over several decades these subjective ideals increasingly clashed with free black urbanization which among other things reduced wages for whites, thus threatening social mobility. Fighting over scraps, race riots were a common occurrence throughout Northern cities between the 1820s and 1840s, with new white migrants blaming black labour for the prevailing misery. In the decade prior to the US Civil War, notable labour organizations like the Congress for Trade Unions tended to 'ignore the Negro' and explicitly emphasize race over class, thus leading to skilled labour establishing closed shops that had racial boundaries (Du Bois, 2013, 19). 'They wanted a chance to become capitalists', Du Bois writes, 'and they found that chance threatened by the competition of a working class whose status at the bottom of the economic structure seemed permanent and inescapable' (2013, 15).

The Southern experience was slightly different. Du Bois argues that Southern planters were driven primarily by desires to consume, to keep themselves in the habits resembling the *ancien régime*, with little interest in productive innovation, leaving that to Northern industrialists. ‘The planter wanted results without effort. He wanted large income without corresponding investment’, is how Du Bois describes the circumstances (2013, 32). There is another factor. In the corresponding struggles with Northern industrial finance and its attempts to create a national competitive economy, because Southern planters held their capital as the enslaved, they aggressively resisted any and all economic changes that threatened to devalue their wealth and holdings. At the same time, through items like the Three Fifths compromise, the enslaved were one means to inflate Southern congressional representation to somewhat match Northern representation. Yet this balance of power was weakening. With the rise of industrialism, bonded labour was being replaced by contract labour. Indeed, Steven Hahn summarizes how Southern planters well understood that ‘amid a deepening crisis of colonial and monarchical regimes, the bonds of servility were steadily weakened, while the contours of political authority were refashioned’ (1990, 75). When the Confederacy was formed, only Cuba, Brazil and Puerto Rico maintained systems of slavery in the western hemisphere.

Concurrently, Du Bois relays how in 1860 5 million Southern whites held no slaves. Certainly 2 million did, but ownership was largely concentrated among 8,000 slaveowners (2013, 22). This in no way excuses these 5 million persons, and they certainly benefited from the enslavement of other people. Rather it is to point out that there were class tensions between Southern whites, and that these differences help explain why class relations deteriorated during the Civil War. For example, the Confederacy conscripted poor whites using the Second Conscription Act of 1862, while that same act provided an exemption for slaveholders who owned more than 20 slaves. With the Union permitting a \$300 commutation fee, there is a degree of truth to the adage that the conflict was ‘a rich man’s war, a poor man’s fight’ (see Martin, 2003). Still, while some of these whites were ‘united in interest with slave owners’, the ‘mass of poor whites’, Du Bois explains, ‘were economic outcasts’ (2013, 28).

In the lead-up to the Civil War, as a way for planters to shore up support for their otherwise tenuous position, they sought to justify racial hierarchy through the church, school system and periodicals. ‘In order to maintain its income without sacrifice or exertion, the South fell back on to a doctrine of racial difference’, and these beliefs

were ‘primarily because of economic motives and the inter-connected political urge necessary to support slave industry’ (Du Bois, 2013, 34). Through affective, motivational and cognitive elements, the project of whiteness cashed out in giving poor whites higher status offsetting their low economic wage. This civic ascription served as a recruiting device for a cross-class political alliance between rich and poor whites, while also positioning them as antagonistic against blacks (also see Roediger, 1999).

During Reconstruction, Civil War planters were institutionally marginalized as the Union oversaw the formation of new state governments. As one means of their power was curtailed, planters also feared the rise of cross-racial labour unity which could oppose their interests. To stall this type of consolidation, planters sought to intensify racial prejudice. It did not matter if there was black political representation in Washington, in state legislatures or even in new constitutions. What mattered was relationships on the plantation, on the farm and in town. Planters used divisive tactics to stoke racial resentment in the wake of abolition to try and preserve their place in the economic order and fragment any nascent class solidarity. In effect, class solidarity was replaced by racial solidarity. Poor whites took up this invitation and became important enforcers of the pact. John Calhoun understood this very well, saying that ‘With us the two great divisions of society are not the rich and poor, but white and black; and all the former, the poor as well as the rich, belong to the upper class, and are respected and treated as equals’ (quote in Robin, 2018, 54). The result is that the Reconstruction Era further institutionalizes an American racial order predicated upon an alliance between poor white workers and capitalists.

It is imperative to appreciate the power dynamics in the construction of this racist pact. Southern capitalists had resources to mobilize and strategically deployed their wealth to divide the working class. Born before the Civil War and to planters, Ben Tillman’s political career in South Carolina exemplifies the decades-long project to form a cross-class consistency united by white supremacy, a project that involved terrorism and massacres of blacks by Red Shirts throughout Reconstruction (see Kantrowitz, 2000). As Elaine Frantz Parsons notes:

White Southerners still had immense advantages over their black neighbours: they owned the vast majority of land and other capital; as a group they were considerably more literate and numerate; they had experience controlling and working within institutional structures such as local government, the

military, and other voluntary organizations; and they had important allies. (2015, 1)

Considerable effort and propaganda by Redeemers went into undercutting poor workers from forming a political movement. Notwithstanding their more secure positions, ‘white southerners shared a widespread fear that their former slaves would rapidly overtake them’ (Parsons, 2015, 1). By contrast, despite good efforts, due to poverty, their place in the social order and having been recently enslaved, blacks had fewer resources to counter the planters’ project. This project was helped, in the broader context, by tensions with the Republican Party. Conservative Republicans balked at the Radicals’ aim to remake the South as well as pursue a Great Reconstruction that included the West. Liberal Republicans, on the other hand, had a more limited agenda which prioritized restoring the Union over making sure freed people could practice their rights. It also did not help that ‘many Radicals and most Republicans were racist’, Richard White writes. ‘It would have been astonishing had they not been’ (2017, 61).

These are enduring, categorical inequalities. In short, the intensification of prejudice made cross-racial working-class organizing more difficult, if not impossible. But it also ensured that poor whites perpetuated their general conditions of exploitation, oppression and domination through an acceptance of racial othering. Du Bois spoke to this point when he wrote that ‘race was supplemented by a carefully planned and slowly evolved method, which drove such a wedge between the white and black workers’ (2013, 626). Likewise, he adds that ‘there probably are not today in the world two groups of workers with practically identical interests who hate and fear each other so deeply and persistently and who are kept so far apart that neither sees anything of common interest’ ((2013, 626). And so strategically Ignatiev is programmatically correct to note that ‘the fight against white supremacy becomes the central immediate task of the entire working class’ (Ignatin and Allen, 1976, 28).

These episodes from Reconstruction are emblematic of reactionary politics which directly target what Corey Robin calls ‘the emancipation of the lower orders’ (2018, xi). For Robin, conservatism is ‘a meditation on – and theoretical rendition of – the felt experience of having power, seeing it threatened, and trying to win it back’ (2018, xi). Herein contemporary rhetorical tenets, like refrains for limited government and the like, are by-products of an ‘animating purpose’ that ‘has favored liberty for the higher orders and constraint for the lower orders’ (2018, 16, 8). For example, in Robin’s reading, Burke’s objection to the French

Revolution has less to do with its gratuitous violence and more to do with the overhaul of established deference and command. Indeed, conservatism claims that unequal relationships need to be preserved, as they are necessary for the advancement of civilization. Thus, a politics that even tangentially threatens these hierarchies is said to be a threat to civilization itself, a signal of grand decline. While conservatism may have intellectual elements, the primary desire is to keep the relationship between the subordinated and the superior intact. So, a good portion of these intellectual elements are post hoc justification for predetermined ends.

Externalization

During modernity, conservatives came to understand that preserving minority rule in mass industrial society required fostering alliances with segments of the masses. Selected subordinated groups could be co-opted through borrowing from the Left's repertoire of contention, asserting agency, duty, redress and rights as it suited their purpose. But they could also be petitioned through an array of rhetorics of perversity, of futility and of jeopardy, while identifying scapegoats that have caused immanent loss (see Hirschman, 1991). Here reactionaries insist that they, and only they, are the political force that can restore any number of things lost, whether that be dignity, standing or safety. This is very much evident in rhetoric used during the 20th-century 'Red Scares' and against the civil rights movement.

To comprehend the politics informing the Red Scares, it is important to note how during the 20th century capitalism became synonymous with 'the American way of life' in the popular social imaginary; by extension this support became a prerequisite of patriotism and civic mindedness in general. It also cloaked an economic system predicated upon the exploitation of wage labour. In combined operation with the naturalization of a private property rights regime for the means of production, social inequality was intensified. To account for the evident structural failures, American ideology made the virtues or vice of the individual person the primary explanation for social success or failure. As such, this conflation meant that in one way or another all the primary values in American life came to justify and enable exploitation.

By contrast, socialism was coded as a foreign threat to the American way of life. Therefore, American citizens who advocated for socialism were deemed treasonous, as in the first and second Red Scares. Indeed, anything that threatened relentless exploitation – or sought to upend hereunto naturalized orders and hierarchies – was labelled as socialist

even if it ostensibly had little to do with that political philosophy. As such, the Red Scares are not moments of irrationality in the history of American political life. Rather, they were purposeful attempts by conservatives to marginalize advocates for redistributive politics by associating them with Soviet espionage for instance (see Storrs, 2013). Accordingly, as Marxism provides an alternative explanation for the development of American social life, by its presence alone it is deemed a threat. Marxism is therefore not something to be debated, but something to be defeated. Again: if socialism is a threat, then capitalism must be protected.

In graphing capitalist social relations on to American cultural values, and marginalizing other kinds of sociological accounts, American capitalist ideology sought to reinforce the idea that national identity trumped class solidarity. And as Coates argued, in this context national identity is a white identity. As it manifested on the shop floor, the ideological message to workers was that foreign socialists were the problem, not those that exploited them. Like in Reconstruction, this project sought to stall a cross-racial working-class solidarity while also obscuring class interests through inducing affiliation between workers and their oppressors. In effect, cultural projects became useful protections of the exercise of power in the public space, so that these could later protect power in the private realm.

Conservatism has two expressions according to Robin. First, as a ploy to gain power reactionaries indict the existing rulers for permitting egalitarian groups to form and organize, gain public traction and claim rights. Second, reactionaries are very willing to repurpose the motifs of revolutionary politics, as well as mobilize the associated grievances to push for power. For example, in 1968 and 1972 Republicans expanded their constituents by emphasizing national themes and downplaying commercial interests. There were popularist rhetorical attacks on inflation and big government, civil rights and the liberal establishment. Through embracing outside politics and an anti-elite stance it used these issues to intensify exploitation and the concentration of wealth, in doing so ending the radicalism and unrest from the 1960s and kicking off the neoliberal era.

Like in the Gilded Age, the Roaring Twenties and the Reagan-Bush years before, these techniques were on display in Trump's 2016 election. He famously indicted Republican Party leaders during the 2016 Republican primary, arguing that these elites had bargained away standing and privileges. He also mobilized rhetorical attacks on neoliberalism, pointing to Democratic and Republican elites' positions on trade deals, foreign wars and economic inequality. In

the three years since the 2016 US election, the Trump administration has hardly followed through on any of these projects; this should not be surprising because the point is to use grievances to attain power. This is what, in Robin's view, makes Trump the 'most successful practitioner of the mass politics of privilege in contemporary America' (2018, xi). Trump's skill has been to harness an affective charge by mobilizing slights then connecting them to a reactionary agenda. In that way Trump is a conventional figure in the conservative tradition. His racism, his authoritarianism, his inconsistencies and his behaviours are quintessentially counter-revolutionary.

As this applies to the contests over power and Russia-gate, Trump's supporters believe that they are defending the American way of life, a system that is actively oppressing them. They are poor and miserable because at a general level poverty and misery are the inevitable outcomes of relentless accumulation. Capitalists and their political agents must rationalize and redirect criticism away from fundamental social relations and otherwise obfuscate the harm capitalism causes. They do so by providing scapegoats for misery because it can never be the inherent fault of capitalism. Tactically, it repeats the dynamics in Reconstruction and the Red Scare. It can only be these scapegoats who are hindering the extension of market relations and the rigid hierarchies required to reproduce these relations. Yet by not being able to mention any of these dynamics, the loyal parties of capital turn to polarizing issues as strategy – because of this, the comprehension of public issues are partial, based upon appearances, and are not tamed by good faith efforts at discursive engagement. As a result, misinformation is the status quo.

It is not a coincidence that there is more of an appetite by progressive neoliberals to attribute Trump's electoral success to fake news than efforts to delve deeper into the politics of race and gender, the nature of the public or the efficacy of institutions among other items on a rather long list. Similarly, media workers can advance their own lay pet theories about the dynamics of their industry rather than consult the research into these more difficult and complex topics, topics that if given the treatment they deserve may well lead to diminished viewers or readers as audiences themselves confront the longstanding ramifications of their horrible politics. Essentially, attributing current politics to fake news allows these groups to avoid confronting how endemic and institutional racism is perpetuated in American politics. It is much easier to suggest that social media manipulation is destroying democracy than to acknowledge the horrors of neoliberalism. Arguably the disproportionate emphasis on the role of fake news as an explanation

reveals some of the broad contours of American discourse, a discourse that aggressively seeks to abstract itself from material politics.

As such, ‘fake news’ is an easy explanation for progressive neoliberals. It explains Trump’s appeal without asking them to undertake introspection about their complicity in the alienating effects of at least 25 years of mature aggressive neoliberalism, an agenda that to a greater degree they have endorsed and facilitated the implementation thereof. So while there is something to the adage that ‘*Fox News* invented fake news’, I do not think this is a sufficient explanation for the rise of American authoritarianism. Nor do I think one needs complicated studies to understand that people share fake news not because of supposed truthfulness and believability but because it fits discursive partisan frames thereby signalling affiliation and identity.

I endorse Robin’s argument that reactionary politics seeks to define a new era in a political system through decisive action just as the current settlement is crumbling. This involves the application of various forms of violence – physical, slow and symbolic – to restrain emancipatory politics and counter specific social movements located in specific places and times with specific agendas. Misinformation then is a slow, symbolic and methodical set of manoeuvres used to legitimate subordination to the market; it conveys the naturalism of capitalist social relations. Accordingly, anxieties about American citizens’ susceptibility to Russian ‘active measures’ arises because these same citizens have been conditioned by misinformation for several centuries. Despite all the stress on technologically novel forms of misinformation, the role and meaning of misinformation in a capitalist society are not matters of technology, but of politics.

Let me bring my argument into focus. Due to the various contradictions between the basic forms in capitalist society, ideology shapes the parameters of social relations and identity. The larger point of the episodes I have described – Reconstruction, the Red Scares and the neoliberal *revanches* – is to illustrate the role of white ideology in the formation of subjective identity and the comprehension of subjective experience. Each episode involves a politics of misinformation whereby class solidarity is fragmented by obfuscating the first causes of harm in a capitalist society. While the capitalist polity tends towards frequent revolutions in the means of production, it has a reactionary character insofar that it seeks to preserve the hierarchy of bosses over workers. But whereas these groups do not share strategic interests or goals, misinformation is deployed by rulers and their agents to form the requisite alliances needed to preserve this basic inequality. Misinformation, then, is certainly promoted by communication

technology, as it is in commodities, politics and other forms. To put it as plainly as I can, misinformation is not an engineering problem. It is not even a social problem. It stems from an active avoidance of the social question. Granted, the explanation I have advanced for misinformation may very well not fit 'the interested prejudices of the ruling classes' (Marx, 1977), but that is to be expected.

Testbeds for Authoritarianism

The drive to weaponize software has seen Russia and China invest in AI, anticipating that it may be an equalizer where they are otherwise grossly outspent by the United States. As part of the larger investment into the research and deployment of cyber-weapons, supposedly the prospect of using AI to add automated rapid decision-making self-defence and response capabilities to a defence grid can act as a deterrent as well as help states advance their interests. When it comes to security concerns, former US Defense Secretary James Mattis (2018) said that AI is ‘fundamentally different’. The most obvious way is the extent to which American hegemony is being challenged by the Chinese state (and to a lesser extent the Russian state too) as these entities each seek to maintain or secure the commanding heights of the international political economy – so much so that ‘geopolitical rivalries have stormed back to centre stage’ (Mead, 2014, 69). For this reason, Jeremy Straub (2018) calls AI ‘the weapon of the next Cold War’.

Other researchers echo Mead and Straub, suggesting that efforts to weaponize AI herald the return of great power conflicts as each of these states offers a different template for economic success and capital accumulation. ‘Just as competition between liberal democratic, fascist, and communist social systems defined much of the twentieth century’, Nicholas Wright suggests, ‘so the struggle between liberal democracy and digital authoritarianism is set to define the twenty-first’. Importantly, he adds that AI ‘offers a plausible way for big, economically advanced countries to make their citizens rich while maintaining control over them’ (Wright, 2018).

Wright’s argument is indicative of an emerging line of analysis in contemporary Anglo-American economic thought where orthodox assumptions are being revised by the looming impact of new technologies, and specifically AI seemingly allows repressive regimes to avoid the growth stagnation traps that bedevil these kinds

of politics (see [Chapter 2](#) for Acemoglu and Robinson’s work on the relationship between repression and growth stagnation). With AI allegedly revolutionizing the international political economy, great power conflicts are said to be genuine threats primarily because in the long run repressive regimes with algorithmically planned economies could match the growth rates of more democratic regimes and thus keep up with military investments.

What is telling about these lines of analysis is how the language partly reflects a rather deterministic conception of technology, one isolated from the larger social setting in which that technology is deployed. It also reflects a view where, as Rosa Brooks (2017) observes, ‘everything becomes war’. As such, simple investment and procurement is deemed enough for hegemony: ‘More investment, more procurement’ brings ‘greater lethality, greater deterrence’. But I think such a view is mistaken because ‘totalizing technological determinist’ arguments tend to neglect the politics of adoption or even fail to appreciate the socially constructed nature of technological change, which is how technologies relate to bureaucracies and legal regimes. This applies more generally (see [Chapter 1](#)) as well as for military technology specifically (Posen, 1984; Rosen, 1994; Lieber, 2005). As for military practice, H. R. McMaster cautions against determinist arguments, writing that ‘this fallacy confuses targeting enemy organizations with strategy’ (2015, 13).

Accordingly, my goal in this chapter is to revisit some assumptions of ‘totalizing technological determinism’ as they conceptualize the manufacturing, acquisition and deployment of digital arms. I do this to critique the Mead–Straub–Wright analysis of great power competition. I examine deterministic thinking through several case studies in which digital arms manufacturing are oriented towards security objectives. The case studies involve the US *as conceptualized by* analysts and researchers who participate in the wider American academic-knowledge system. I do this to assess how these analysts do or do not anticipate how AI and its implementation will be incorporated into existing organizations and politics.

Alongside the conceptual vocabulary and protocols offered by Andrew Feenberg’s critical theory of technology (see [Chapter 1](#)), this agenda necessarily addresses hegemony and the state security apparatus. Security is not just about military threats and the development of weapons systems – although these are important too – but about the binding of domestic matters through the everyday routines and language that make civil society and other common ways of life. These are core elements of Gramsci’s conceptualization of hegemony, which he takes to be how less powerful social groups in society give their

spontaneous consent ‘to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group’ (1971, 12). Herein, the specific kinds and types of AI capacities are relatively less important than an examination of general tendencies, if only because it is too soon to be precise given the many uncertainties about the future development of this kind of technology and its various applications. As such, there is value in thinking about how surveillance cultures combine elements of hegemony (consent) and domination (coercion) to shape digital society.

Upfront, I must admit that I am rather ambivalent about the term AI. Although technicians tend to be clear about the meaning of the term – like Stuart Russel and Peter Norvig’s view of AI as the construction of systems that follow the ‘general principles of rational agents’ where ‘the standard of rationality is mathematically well defined and completely general’ (2010, 5) – in everyday politics the term is routinely used imprecisely, akin to a floating signifier or rhetorical trapping to service an argument. Furthermore, there can be confusion between AI, machine learning, deep learning and neural networks. To some degree, everyday usage blurs the distinctions between all three. In my understanding, most matters labelled as AI technologies lack sentience or decisions that have not involved a human labour process from conception, design or selection data inputs for instance. Similarly, ongoing research in neural networks is still within the parameters of experimentation of simulated models on computers wherein the results from any neural network depend upon its configuration, structure and functions. Relative to neural networks, the human brain is orders of magnitude more complicated, with several hundred times more links than per neuron than neural networks. My view is also coloured by how much the rhetoric about AI seeks to normalize performance, with these outsized claims acting as a placeholder until the technology can match them.

The reconceptualization of war

To gain a better grasp of how key US state agencies conceptualize digital weapons systems it is helpful to review some recent military theorizing. To much acclaim, Jens Bartelson has argued that the character of modern warfare was an anomaly, and that contemporary conflicts illustrate how war has become ‘unhampered by any moral or legal constraints’. The virtue of his analysis is it suggests current modes of warfare are by-products of larger historical processes within modernity, ones that are still unfolding. Focusing on the historical nature of conflict, Bartelson’s reconceptualization of war rests on three

observations. These are: the collapse of belief in any universal binding normative framework that requires reasons for war; observations that war can be productive; and war becoming the means to define membership of a polity. As such, ‘war has the power to transform political reality in profound ways that extend far beyond it’s immediate effects’. In summary, Bartelson calls this an ‘ontogenic process’, with one ‘looping effect’ being the general licensing of more protracted small wars abroad (2017, 12, 22, 21). Thomas Wright (2017) comes to similar conclusions, albeit for different reasons, suggesting that unprecedented interdependence means states will seek to resolve conflicts through ‘all measures short of war’.

Bartelson’s analysis has implications for evaluating the role of digital military armaments in shaping the ‘character of war’. To briefly explain the latter term, Michael Horowitz says,

The ‘character of warfare’ in a period can be defined as the dominant way to fight and win conflicts given existing technologies, organizations, and polities. The character of warfare changes in concert with the tools that become available and how they influence the ways militaries organize themselves to fight wars. (Horowitz, 2018, 46–47)

Horowitz elaborates that ‘AI seems much more akin to the internal combustion engine or electricity than a weapon. It is an enabler, a general-purpose technology with a multitude of applications. That makes AI different from, and broader than, a missile, a submarine, or a tank’. He adds that ‘narrow AI is likely to have an impact that extends beyond specific questions of military superiority to influence economic power and societies around the world’ (Horowitz, 2018, 39, 54, 39). Horowitz also emphasizes how hard it is to make the ‘bureaucratic case for change when a military perceives itself as already leading’ (2018, 39). I generally concur with this analysis even if I think Horowitz overlooks the role of global capital in the development of these weapon systems.

Returning to the main point, given this relationship between tools and conflict there are *prima facie* grounds to believe that AI applications can change how militaries fight. An abbreviated list of these changes includes increasing the pace of operations, battle management coordination through analysis of data produced by sensors, simplifying decisions through reducing the ‘noise’ in combat operations by focusing on vulnerable points, and better coordination of logistics. Furthermore, through substituting capital for labour, AI may create new forms of combat operations that do not rely upon much, if any, direct military

labour. Augmentations like this could plausibly maintain operational superiority or increase lethality. But as it stands there is little certainty about how digital armaments like weaponized AI will practically generate military power, which ultimately is the foundational criteria by which weapons systems are judged.

Newer military doctrine emerging from the US Department of Defense seems to support Bartelson's observations about the changing character of warfare. For example, the US Army Training and Doctrine Command's (hereafter TRADOC) ideation about combined arms conflicts on the near horizon (2025–40) conceives of operations that occur below the threshold of armed conflict or traditional conceptions of war (US Army, 2017). A good recent example of this 'blended warfare' is Russian operations in the Ukraine or US operations in Niger. TRADOC submits that this shift will come about as the relative cost of technology decreases, meaning that technological advantages decrease too. A second reason is urbanization. Given that by 2030 about 60 per cent of people will live in urban environments, combat operations may take place in megacities where US military strengths are minimized. In response to these factors, TRADOC argues that small versatile units will draw upon networked technologies, social media feeds and sensor data for combat operations in urban areas generally neglected by mainstream news media, while also deploying general disinformation to support their missions.

If Bartelson and TRADOC's analysts are generally correct about the reconceptualization of war, then we might be able to detect shifts in procurement practices, processes and products. Although it is not always the case that new modes of warfare bring about new ways of acquiring technology, there are some indications that some such shifts are deemed desirable, at least for the US. Following congressional directives in mid-2018, the Pentagon restructured some of the offices responsible for weapon systems procurement (US Department of Defense, 2017). This change was intended to better identify needs and uses for emerging technologies that include quantum computing, hypersonics, machine learning and AI. This structure is also intended to provide technical risk assessments to the Secretary of Defense. More importantly, at least for my line of inquiry, is that the new Office of Acquisition and Sustainment is specifically tasked with assessing China's technological capacities:

In support of [National Defense Strategy] objectives, conducting geo-economic analysis and assessments to inform the development of industrial policies to maximize

U.S. competitive advantage in an era of great power competition and counter strategies from competitor nations such as China. (Mehta 2018)

The concern with the military capability gap between the US and China is also a central issue for the National Defense Strategy Commission. The commission has dramatically concluded that the US military is not sufficiently prepared to ‘defeat a major-power adversary while deterring other enemies simultaneously’. They argue that ‘the U.S. military could suffer unacceptably high casualties and loss of major capital assets in its next conflict. It might struggle to win, or perhaps lose, a war against China or Russia’ (National Defense Strategy Commission, 2018). Among the general recommendations, the commission suggests that the US Department of Defense be allocated more funding, modernize the US nuclear arsenal, develop additional missile defences and overhaul the technology acquisition process to let pilot projects facilitate breakthroughs to ensure that America retains its military dominance. It is these kinds of thoughts about competition in the international system that shape the conception and acquisition of digital armaments, but also the very need to test them in operational conditions.

That said, there are several reasons to rethink the sino-alarmism in the commission’s report. First, as Lawrence Korb (2018) notes, ‘the military would not be satisfied even if it was allowed to spend the entire federal budget’. He also identifies other problems in the report that place democratic politics as impediments to greater defence, this without the commission acknowledging that all policy involves assessments of risk and the consideration of a constellation of values. By contrast, Andrea Gilli and Mauro Gilli (2019) adopt a different line of argumentation that also happens to contradict TRADOC’s assessment about blended warfare. On issues of procurement and technological development, they suggest that the ever-increasing complexity of weapons systems mean the ‘advantage of backwardness’ is decreasing, meaning that military capability gaps are less easily and quickly bridged by imitation. Where this might continue to apply is dual-use communication components, but purpose-built complex systems negate the technology-diffusing effects of globalization and economic integration between the US and China. As such, blended warfare conducted with off-the-shelf dual-use components might be vulnerable to interruption and thus be avoided.

One looping effect from new forms of warfare is that there may not be a single ‘character of warfare’ but several, at least insofar as there is not one dominant template to strictly emulate. The implication is

that there are several kinds of possible combinations of existing and purpose-built technologies to fit with organizations that are conflict-specific, perhaps even specific to polities. If so, this speaks to Wright's claim that the 21st century will be characterized by conflict between liberal democracy and digital authoritarianism, although as I show in the remainder of this chapter there are other reasons to be sceptical of the conclusions Wright draws. Keeping these points in mind, in the next section I want to shift the discussion to US combat operations in the Middle East to look at the operational deployment of AI as well as the looping effects these operations invite. After this I will review the central lessons from these case studies, at least as they support or reject Bartelson's and Wright's respective theorizing.

Experimentation on new frontiers

One of the most striking things about American involvement in the Syrian Civil War is the extent to which there are no easily observable interests or goals, let alone a strategic vision about the desired end state. Nor does there seem to be widespread support for these operations – about 60 per cent of US citizens do not view the civil war as a US national security threat, and more than 90 per cent oppose a US invasion, even if weapons of mass destruction were used (Reuters, 2017; 2018a). Accordingly, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt write that, 'for the first time in recent memory, large numbers of Americans are openly questioning their country's grand strategy' (2016, 70). There are strategic and operational ramifications that account for 'public war fatigue', like 'waging war in the shadows with a light footprint and if possible limited public scrutiny'. This opacity is designed, because the US has used proxies to undertake regime change in the Middle East region. This process of 'externalizing the strategic and operational burden of war to human and technological surrogates' is reminiscent of Bartelson's conjectures about conflict occurring below the threshold of media attention (Krieg, 2016, 97, 96).

Still, opaque political objectives do not mean that combat operations themselves are subpar, nor that selected new weapons systems are not being battle tested. For example, when the US Air Forces Central Command commander, Lt. Gen. Jeffrey Harrigian, spoke of Syrian operations he indicated that his forces 'are being very aggressive about monitoring what's happening in social media and then leveraging that from a reporting perspective or do some analysis about what's going on with the enemy'. Harrigian was referring to the actions coordinated at Udeid Air Base in Qatar, where open-source information was

collected then relayed to pilots and ground troops to identify, track and strike targets. Harrigian called this a ‘dynamic targeting tool’, and it was developed by the experimental Defense Innovation Unit. ‘We had a recent success in coordinating the lethal effects of our special operations and air components with highly targeted and effective cyber operations’, Gen. Joseph Votel, the commander of US Central Command, said:

This model for success is being replicated for planning in future operations and will be used to maintain pressure on these enemy networks, be they located in Iraq, or Syria, or on servers around the world. With time and effort, we hope to expand the duration of impacts on adversarial capabilities. (Tucker, 2017)

These technologies aim to rapidly and accurately combine multiple streams of information, drone footage included, to increase the pace of operations. One way of thinking of these operations is to see them as laboratories for warfare, testing new forms of lethality. However, this testing does not really challenge high-status military occupations or how the military generally operates, and so the experimentation is confined to technical as opposed to organizational matters.

On the technical front, American technology companies are routinely involved in this military experimentation. The most recent and well-known example of the research and development arm of the military-technology complex is Google’s involvement in the US military’s Algorithmic Warfare Cross-Functional Team. After competing against IBM, Amazon and Microsoft, Google was awarded the Project Maven contract in September 2017. In public relations materials, Google’s management emphasized ‘faster identification’: ‘The scale and magic of GCP [Google Cloud Platform], the power of Google ML [machine learning], and the wisdom and strength of our people will bring about multi-order-of-magnitude improvements in safety and security for the world’ (Conger, 2018).

Developing machine learning algorithms for use in battlefields, by for example the real-time identification of targets from drone video footage and other interoperable cloud data, endangers the possibility of a flying panopticon. Granted, given Silicon Valley’s infamous hype it is sometimes hard to parse rhetoric from reality; nevertheless, these statements are indicative of Google’s involvement in Project Maven, which was an attempt to audition prior to the Pentagon releasing a tender for the Joint Enterprise Defense Infrastructure project, a contract

worth \$10 billion for cloud-computing services. One necessary step in that direction was bureaucratic. In March 2018, Google announced that the US government had granted the company FedRAMP authorization (Krishnan, 2018). FedRAMP (2018) is a designation that a firm meets the technical and security compliance to supply a cloud-computing services framework. In March 2018, the Trump administration increased the funding for Project Maven to \$131 million. While Project Maven is among the first well-known efforts to undertake algorithmic warfare by the US military, there is still an existing gap between conceptualization and operational deployment, especially when it comes to organizational efforts.

As Google becomes more involved in producing AI-coordinated combined arms weapons, senior engineers and managers anticipated employee dissent and a public outcry and so proactively sought to limit opportunities for backlash. ‘Avoid at ALL COSTS any mention or implication of AI’, one manager wrote, ‘Weaponized AI is probably one of the most sensitized topics of AI – if not THE most. This is red meat to the media to find all ways to damage Google’. However, these internal emails did not reassure some workers. For example, about 4,000 Google employees signed a petition that opened with the statement: ‘We believe that Google should not be in the business of war.’ These workers requested that a policy be developed that ‘Google nor its contractors will ever build warfare technology’ (Shane et al, 2018; also see Shane and Wakabayashi, 2018). As such, these events speak to the division between tech capitalists and their employees, where the latter do not share the ideology and interests of the ruling class. As one labour organizer at Google pointed out, “Organizing around Project Maven helped people realize that no matter how good their job is – and generally speaking, Google jobs are good – they’re still workers, not owners” (Tarnoff, 2018). Following the internal backlash, Google Cloud CEO Diane Greene announced in late May 2018 that the company would not continue with Maven beyond the initial contract which was set to end in March 2019.

The employee backlash at Google brings up questions regarding the structure and design of the defence industrial sector. The US military wants more capabilities and has established several advisory boards to help close the gap between government procurement and private development. Yet according to Rachel Olney, American digital start-ups are reluctant to contract with the Department of Defense (Olney, 2019). She outlines several reasons, which include minor barriers like smaller start-ups having difficulties navigating the Department of Defense bureaucracy. She attributes this to the department’s complex

purchasing structure and classification systems. As such, the tender, procurement and acquisition documents are unfamiliar to technologists. This contracting is vastly different from working with general users who do not give the same level of scrutiny to the contracts.

The other barrier is that high-tech start-ups do not want the risk of working with the Department of Defense because profits may take years to come. Olney suggests that the addition of customization required by the department is particularly onerous given that these costs come up front and are magnified when factoring in the opportunity costs for other commercial enterprises, conditions which are beyond the permitted scope of venture capitalists who support start-ups and whose goal is to generate revenue within the first two years of operation. Compounding these factors, sales cycles are low-probability events meaning that any single attempt to get revenue is low. Altogether, these factors disincentivize smaller start-ups from catering to military sales. There is something else to add though. Olney's remarks imply that start-ups are more comfortable being in the driver's seat of economic exchange, and so when they encounter an organization with more power than an ordinary user base they are in an unfamiliar position. Effectively, the norms and expectations surrounding the return on investment in the digital technology sector is vastly different from the norms and expectations that surround the American military-industrial sector.

These barriers to entry have led companies like Booz Allen Hamilton to petition the US government to adopt a digital armaments procurement policy to address the issues raised in the previous paragraph (e.g. Carter et al, 2018). Yet while outsourcing and dual development partnerships all present viable models for the creation of digital armaments, Horowitz (2018) notes that the US, as a mature and aggressively militaristic capitalist society, is caught in a bind when it comes to procurement policy. The impulse to use the market to develop digital armaments may mean a delay in acquiring and deploying these technologies. He suggests that central planning which models purpose-built research and development might be more suitable to meeting the demands of the military. These difficulties become more acute when one considers how, due to higher salaries, the technology sector generally attracts better skilled labour.

Yet, if market solutions are pursued, this opens the possibility of an increased rate of diffusion of these technologies as these companies seek to make profits from them in other markets, or encounter mimicry by other companies in other markets or corporate espionage. This means that the US would have difficulties maintaining their 'first-mover

advantage' as the relative advantages of being first diminish. Horowitz provides the example of Google's TensorFlow, an open-source AI engine. Partnering with academics means they might publish the research, making it easier for others to increase their build processes. However, purpose-built AI is more difficult to mimic or copy. This is because complexity can be difficult and costly to emulate, especially when dealing with materials that are classified. Moreover, simply emulating and integrating a technology does not mean that it will be deployed in a creative or useful fashion, nor necessarily shift the balance of power (Horowitz, 2018). For example, the US Central Command testing of AI in Syria was limited to a technical, not administrative purview.

Much like the Syrian campaign, North Africa has also been a test bed for military technology. In this manner it mirrors its status as a longstanding field site for experimentation with economic governance. This experimentation includes colonial and neocolonial relations, while more recently, from the Berg Report onwards, Africa has been a test bed for the strand of neoliberalism that permeated through development economics. This political ideology involved structural adjustment to roll back and weaken the state. Concurrently, foreign direct investment was concentrated in resource extraction countries like Angola, Nigeria and South Africa; Africa's share of world exports dropped from 6 per cent in 1962 to 2 per cent in 2000; while aid nearly halved, falling from \$18.7 billion to \$10 billion.

The ramifications were felt most acutely in African cities, where economic contractions confronted sustained population growth thus giving rise to African slums. Displacement, middle class decomposition, privatization of public service delivery and austerity contributed to the rise of Islamism and Pentecostalism. Compounding all these factors was the HIV/AIDS pandemic. As social inequality increased so life expectancy decreased (see World Bank, 2018). Subsequently, the state lost legitimacy, capacity and capability. The collapse of democratic infrastructure led to rural rebellions and land struggles. In the wake of neoliberalization, African postcolonial states were described as pathological, with rich descriptions of patrimonialism, and predation contributing to essentialist renderings of state structures. However, the 'pathological' trope stops well short of acknowledging the role of neoliberal reforms in wrecking the continent.

It is against this background that Niger provides a good case study of the rural poor's land struggles and American military expeditions. As background, the French colonial experience was vicious, with military violence regularly used to pacify the country, a trend that

continued following independence in 1960 as French military forces suppressed opposition. More recently, 85 per cent of government revenue (90 per cent of the country's foreign trade) came from French uranium mines operating in the country. Most Nigeriens are subsistence farmers or nomadic herders who are currently at risk of having their land dispossessed by European and Chinese corporations undertaking mineral exploration. The country is susceptible to frequent drought and severe food shortages, conditions which have been exacerbated by climate change. As of 2004, 9 per cent of Niger's population (about 870,000 people) were enslaved. As there are few formal means for politics or avenues for dispute resolution, altogether conditions are ripe for rural rebellions.

As of writing, Niger is the only West African country to permit a permanent US military base. Since at least 2015, there have been construction plans for a military base at Agadez, adjacent to the Niger Armed Force's Base Aérienne 201. The US base has an airfield suitable for drones like the MQ-9 Reapers, and large military cargo planes like the C-17. For US officials, Agadez 'presents an attractive option from which to base ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) assets given its proximity to the threats in the region and the complexity of operating with the vast distance of African geography' (Turse, 2016). The proximate threats include operations in Chad and support of France's 4,000 troops stationed in the region. Officially US forces do not have a direct combat mission in Niger, but their ISR role does mean they support local troops undertaking counter-terrorism operations against Boko Haram and similar groups. The US military's Joint Staff Director, Lieutenant General Kenneth McKenzie, characterized the operations as being 'a pretty broad mission with the government of Niger in order to increase their capability to stand alone and to prosecute violent extremists' (Lewis and Bavier, 2017).

The military investment is indicative of a wider American engagement with West Africa, one that began in the early part of the 21st century. Initial efforts included counterterrorism projects like the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, a military aid package that cost \$250 million between 2009 and 2013. In November 2017, there were more troops deployed in Niger (800) than in Syria (503). Wary of optics, these figures reflect the Obama administration's desire to limit 'boots on the ground'; meaning that forces that are 'temporarily deployed' are excluded from the count. The same practice occurs in Afghanistan where there are approximately 3,500 more troops than the Trump administration admits. These troops 'slip in and out of theater' (Lubold and Youssef, 2017).

In West Africa ‘the recent trajectory of sites and money suggests that Niger is becoming, after Djibouti’, Adam Moore and James Walker (2016) write, ‘the second most important country for U.S. military counterterrorism operations on the continent’. According to US Air Force officials, the air force base at Agadez will reportedly cost \$110 million, making it among the largest military construction projects of its kind (Petesch, 2018).

There has been resistance to the American presence in Niger. Perhaps the most well-known event occurred in October 2017 when a skirmish between US and Nigerien security forces and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara resulted in the deaths of four US troops and at least four Nigeriens (Lewis and Bavier, 2017; Cohen, 2017). Given the US tactical defeat and its location, a place many Americans did not know troops were deployed too, this event came to dominate the American news cycle. Then Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Joseph Dunford indicated that US Special Forces responded to a local raid by Dondou Chefou’s Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, but were ambushed on their return to base from the pursuit. Following that skirmish, in early 2018, the US armed their drones in Niger. Samantha Reho, a spokeswoman for US Africa Command, said:

In coordination with the Government of Niger, U.S. Africa Command has armed intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) aircraft already in Niger to improve our combined ability to respond to threats and other security issues in the region. Armed ISR aircraft began flying in early 2018. (Petesch, 2018)

This strike capacity is also on call for use against insurgents and rebel groups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Nigeria. It is likely that similar types of AI weapons that are used in Syria are used in Niger, tested on rural revolts.

There are several tentative conclusions to draw from these case studies of the looping effects of the development, procurement and deployment of AI weapons. The first is that American capital will likely selectively support purpose-built AI, perhaps only to the extent to which doing so has spillover effects that might help their corporations perform better in international markets or otherwise avoids blowback that threatens existing revenue streams.

Second, the US military’s experimentation with AI seems confined to weapon systems, not the existing command and control elements in their organizational structures. While this limited experimentation may

be an independent variable in the general analysis of the performance of AI weapons systems (or even conceived of as a stabilizing element), it also means that officials in the Department of Defense, TRADOC and the like are undertaking a ‘reconceptualization of war’ that does not yet extend to the military structures that will command the associated kinds of conflicts and actions.

Third, the US military is developing and testing AI technologies in battlefields across the Middle East and North Africa, places further removed from media scrutiny and general oversight. Arguably, these places are conducive to *strategic non-oversight* insofar that they are places designated for testing the operationalization of AI weapons. In the case of Niger, there seems to be a disconnect between the weapons systems deployed and the kinds of strategic means required to stave off the drivers of conflict. In other words, the weapons system deployed seem to indicate that pursuing peace is not a core objective. This underscores how Niger is a test bed for weapons systems.

Fourth, while Google might have withdrawn from Project Maven, other companies like Microsoft and Amazon remain active participants in the military-technology complex. Through using cloud-computing, automated big data analysis and the like, AI has been tasked with assisting in drone and air strikes among other things. Still, technologists have difficulty comprehending AI’s decision making, raising questions about how systems failures or even fundamental corruption from deep-implicit bias or hacking could modify how decisions are reached. Ultimately, this testing comes at the expense of civilians in those regions. With transparency about military actions lacking, even apparently non-lethal AI systems puts considerable risk on civilians because there are no well-understood safeguards.

Lastly, most American media companies do not provide any information on how various administrations’ policies significantly contributed to the atrocities and devastation in Niger. When Niger did receive news coverage, it was a whitewashing exercise that discussed the war in an abstract sense where all the rebels, not Western forces, are responsible for being bombed and thus the inevitable civilian casualties, if they even happen to be acknowledged at all. This media concealment is complicit in another foreign policy blunder, and more importantly, a humanitarian nightmare.

Blended information warfare

Another good example of the blended character of war Bartelson suggests is on the near horizon is what is known as ‘information

warfare'. Conducted through platforms and by bots, Peter Singer and Emerson Brooking write that 'a new kind of communication became a new kind of war', characterized by a 'global spanning information conflict' with its own 'weapons and tactics'. Their central claim is that information warfare can be conducted not only by switching a network off, but by disrupting the information on it. Accordingly, the 'dynamics of conflict' have changed, leading to new battle spaces without regard for clear distinctions between active combatants and passive bystanders (Singer and Brooking, 2018, 4, 11, 21–3). In the case of Russian information warfare, these operations sought to aid reactionary groups across the West to distort domestic politics to weaken the Western alliance that consolidated in the second half of the 20th century.

As an example of this information warfare, consider how AI could be used to manipulate political perception with realistic computer-generated video manipulation tools like FakeApp, which was built using open-source software produced by Google. Already political operatives have few qualms about editing to misrepresent reality, so there are few barriers to taking the next step. With good reason, Henry Farrell and Rick Perlstein (2018) ask what happens 'when fake news becomes fake video?' While these technologies present legal questions around standards of evidence for military assessment, they also return us to social questions about how a platform's algorithms can unwitting amplify harm through inducing affective states of disbelief. The proliferation of these systems to individuals and small groups prompts us to ask questions around the possibility of miscalculation or the ramifications of misapplication.

With the forthcoming capabilities of AI in mind, Singer and Brooking present a tempting analysis about the changing character of war; however, an adequate understanding of Russian information warfare needs to be supplemented with a broader contextualization of the tensions that preceded the rise of digital platforms. While on the topic, the concept 'information warfare' is perhaps a misnomer, for the inclusion of 'warfare' in the term seeks to amplify what is otherwise a kind of mildly aggressive, albeit banal and common practice in international relations that takes place well below the threshold of armed conflict. Like espionage, these kinds of operations should not be the reason to even begin contemplating conflict of any sort.

Among other items, US–Russian tensions are a result of NATO expansion in 1999 and 2004, as well as the US missile defence programme. Still, there were efforts to reduce these tensions. Against a background of several identifiable rapprochement efforts initiated by

both parties, the Obama administration sought to ‘reset’ US–Russian relations in 2009, hoping that, as Angela Stent wrote, ‘new faces in the White House and the Kremlin’ would help matters. She summarizes the complexity of this trajectory:

From the Russian point of view, the Obama reset was an American course correction, an admission that the American side was responsible for the deterioration in bilateral ties. Reset involved the United States changing its policy towards Russia more than Russia changing its policy toward the United States, a fact that supporters and critics in both countries recognized. (Stent, 2014, 212)

Initial successes included New START, coordination on Iranian sanctions and some counter-terrorism initiatives.

Yet rapprochement faded by 2012. This was partly due to the widespread protests of election manipulation to favour the United Party during Russia’s 2011 parliamentary elections while social media usage amplified the perception of electoral fraud (Reuter and Szakonyi, 2013; for an estimate of electoral fraud see Enikolopov et al, 2012). Putin’s administration believed that the US instigated these protests to support regime change while the Magnitsky Act in 2012 was further evidence of that assessment (Osno et al, 2017). Framed as targeted sanctions towards those ‘responsible for extrajudicial killings, torture, or other human rights violations committed against individuals seeking to promote human rights or to expose illegal activity carried out by officials of the government of the Russian Federation’, in practice the Magnitsky Act sought to weaken Putin’s support by holding Russian oligarchies’ wealth hostage in Western banks while minimizing the negative effects on post-recession European economies. It was hoped that these oligarchs would turn on Putin.

Portions of Stent’s explanation are congruent with the public reasoning advanced by Putin in an opinion piece published in the *New York Times* on 11 September 2013. Putin argued that ‘military intervention in internal conflicts in foreign countries has become commonplace for the United States’, cautioning that pursuing a similar strategy in Syria would likely produce more terrorism and jeopardize efforts to address Iran’s uranium enrichment, plus exacerbate the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Following ‘international law’, Putin (2013) wrote, ‘is one of the few ways to keep international relations from sliding into chaos’. This position was soon put to the test as the Ukrainian crisis unfolded in late 2013 when mass protests broke out

over the Yanukovich government's decision to suspend alignment with the EU. Russia believed these revolts were organized by the West as it sought to encroach on the Russian sphere of influence. John Mearsheimer concurs. He argues that 'the United States and European allies share the most responsibly for the crisis'. In this account, their efforts to expand NATO, promote democracy and expand the EU triggered 'security fears' in Russia (Mearsheimer, 2014a 77; also see Mearsheimer, 2014b). For Mearsheimer, Russia was rational to act on these fears, and thus annex Crimea lest it become a NATO naval base, plus continue to destabilize Ukraine to encourage it to abandon efforts to join the EU. In response, the G8 expelled Russia and the US and EU implemented sanctions on the Russian ruling class coupled with a plethora of other symbolic punishments like closer scrutiny by the World Anti-Doping Agency on Russian athletes.

The Russian response was to develop strategies to weaken political cohesion in the US and EU, with one line of operation targeting those states' elections. As it pertains to the 2016 US election, Russian security services undertook several parallel active measures. Most notably, the use of cyber-operations units, some internal to the Federal Security Service and others outsourced to groups like the Internet Research Agency,¹ to hack the Democratic National Committee, steal documents, then used intermediaries like WikiLeaks to launder these files to the American public to provoke scandals. Complementary efforts included using digital advertising to target voters in key states like Michigan and Wisconsin or the use of troll farms to leverage filter bubbles seeking to effect electoral outcomes or even trust in the electoral process. Concurrently, the Russian state courted American conservative movements, like the National Rifle Association (Office of Sen. Dianne Feinstein, 2018; US Department of Justice 2018b), the evangelical community and the alt-right² to 'temper The Republican Party's stance on Russia, accumulating goodwill', while 'perpetuating Putin's new image as a defender of conservative ideals' (see Lamond, 2018).

- 1 The Internet Research Agency is a company funded by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian oligarch and Putin loyalist. The organization began hiring senior staff a month after the Obama administration put in place sanctions. Research on US online culture followed and then led to fake social media accounts being created from May 2014 onwards. These actions lead the Mueller investigation to indict persons associated with the organization (US Department of Justice, 2018a, 3).
- 2 Content from *The Daily Stormer*, a neo-Nazi publication, was promoted by Russian agents through bots retweeting or reposting content from astroturf and sock puppet accounts.

American public commentators and think tank analysts have given ‘information warfare’ much attention. For example, Michelle Goldberg (2018) said these efforts ‘changed the direction of American history’, while James Lamond (2018) summarizes that these ‘robust and coordinated’ lines of effort ‘had the combined goal of sowing chaos, undermining the reputation of democracy, and even shifting American policy toward Russia’. David Rothkopf (2018) described these operations as a ‘sweeping, multi-layered, high-level conspiracy led by Vladimir Putin and the Russian intelligence community’. Rothkopf suggests Trump had ‘active cooperation and complicity’. This is ‘the biggest scandal in the history of the American presidency and there is not another that is close to it’. As social media platforms were used to inject this propaganda into US politics, Max Boot (2017) observed that, ‘All of the leading social media platforms – Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Reddit, Google – are American inventions. Yet the Russians weaponized them to wage political war.’ For Boot, Facebook’s and other social media platforms’ ‘lack of accountability can no longer be tolerated’. Although purposefully selected, these remarks nevertheless aid in the creation of a rhetoric that exaggerates Russian interference, the purpose of which permits the US state to capitalize upon the event and set the stage for a rollout of cyber-security spending.

Between convictions and public testimony, elements of the Russian state sought to interfere in the 2016 US election, and this interference included collaboration with members of the Trump campaign and manifested on digital platforms. However, the kinds of responses outlined earlier by Goldberg and Lamond, Rothkopf and Boot, are hyperbolic and disproportionate to the research findings that have emerged to date. This academic research concludes that Russian lines of operation had *little measurable impact*. (Sides et al, 2018). To reiterate, the Internet Research Agency’s spending was minimal and mostly directed to poorly executed digital marketing, like clickbait and memes (Howard et al, 2018). Google claims \$60,000, Facebook \$100,000 and Twitter \$270,000 in ad spending. By mid-2018 it was estimated that at least 10 million Americans saw one of 3,000 political ads on Facebook paid for by Russian agents. Granted, it is worth bearing in mind that it is in these companies’ interest to underestimate these figures lest they prompt greater public scrutiny and regulation. These Russian clickbait articles and memes reside in what could be termed a ‘cultural uncanny valley’. What I mean here is that these digital artefacts have a resemblance to items circulating in American digital culture, but without the knowledge of insider codes, values and readings, hence

the degree of affective unease is produced upon reception. Something about them just does not seem ‘right’.

In line with the known academic research on the topic, Robert Mueller’s Special Counsel investigation into the Russian interference in the 2016 US election found little compelling evidence of a conspiracy between the Trump campaign and the Russian state. That said, the Special Council investigation did identify 11 instances where Trump engaged in obstruction of justice into the investigation (Mueller Report, 2019). Deferring to an existing opinion by the Office of Legal Counsel that criminal charges laid against a sitting US president would undermine governance, Mueller declined to make a judgement about whether Trump’s actions were criminal, but did stipulate that Congress could initiate the impeachment process (Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019). As the Democratic Party had gained a majority in the House of Representatives in the 2018 midterm elections, they had the means to draft articles of impeachment. While there were internal discussions among Democrats about the strategic merits of this course of action, in August 2019 it emerged that Trump had used state instruments to leverage Ukraine and China to use their domestic policy to intervene in the 2020 election, either in the form of investigations of political rivals like Joe Biden, or commodities purchases and favourable trade agreements. Following hearings by the House Intelligence Committee and the House Judiciary Committee, formal articles of impeachment on charges of abuse of power and obstruction of Congress were drafted in December 2019. Later that month Trump was impeached in the House of Representatives along party lines (House Judiciary Committee, 2019). Trump faced a trial in the Senate in early 2020, but was acquitted, again mostly on party lines.

Corruption of officials, abuses of power and acting with impunity do degrade democratic life, and so even while due to the current pattern of politics securing a conviction against Trump was unlikely it was an appropriate course of action for those keen on supporting democratization. At the same time – counter-intuitively perhaps – exaggerated claims about the projection and capabilities of Russian information warfare tend to worsen democratic life rather than safeguard it. This is primarily because de-democratization is attributed to external events rather than processes that have emanated from inherent, structural problems and harmful social relations currently operating in the US (see [Chapter 5](#)). So, even if the Russian state had not interfered in the election, salient issues like massive social inequality, a concretizing plutocracy and racism would still exist in the US. While on the topic, arguably the Trump–Putin affinity is a core

component of the global white supremacist movement, and it is also true that Russia demonization is an expedient means to weaken Trump, but one that often deflects focus from the systemic barriers to full and equal democratic participation in the American political structure. Unfortunately, this point of emphasis is not about the need to protect the basic equipment of democratic culture, making it less vulnerable to influence operations of all kinds. If this were the point, then one would expect consistency with aggressive efforts to legislate against the Citizens United ruling. This is a good reminder that whenever a ruling class insists that external agents are manipulating politics it is worth analysing how, why and if this rhetoric problematizes and poses a solution which advances their agenda.

The salient issues I mentioned provide a good opportunity to return to a previous point that I want to complete. Putin has sought to position his regime as a polity willing to and capable of defending whiteness, especially when there has been massive migration and refugees flowing from the Middle East and North Africa region into Europe. In the wake of the 2016 US election, Russian agents have taken advantage of existing political polarization to stoke controversies, especially around issues of race and power. This has occurred through spreading misinformation and mischaracterization about racial groups in the US through hashtags and memes associated with #TakeaKnee and #BoycottNFL. The proliferation of social media platforms makes these effective tactics to influence audiences to reduce US social cohesion by entrenching polarization and inflaming existing divisions and fissures. But this intensification does not mean the Russian state necessarily changed beliefs among the American public, but rather helped create a communicative climate where people could be more vocal about those beliefs. It is hard to use messaging, targeted or otherwise, to change people's minds on politics.

With the looping effects of information warfare, given the possibility of courting sanctions and other blowback, especially since these lines of operation were traceable, why did Russia turn to information warfare? One explanation is that the brazenness was due to the Obama administration's relative inaction over Russia's invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea. But this explanation is selective insofar that it does not treat the threat of escalation seriously. The simpler explanation is that Russian information operations are relatively cheaper to conduct. Less costly actions using computer scripts and bots on digital platforms or releasing documents to the internet is important given that the Russian state's expenditure is 14 times smaller than the US.

As such, ‘brazenness’ could equally be interpreted as a sloppy execution of a broader effort to muddy an expected Hillary Clinton victory. Such tactics can be summarized as ‘dismiss the critic, distort the facts, distract from the main issue, dismay the audience’. Boot (2017) argues that the Trump presidency, with its ‘chaos and ineptitude’, works towards the disruption of what Americans call the ‘liberal order’, thus giving elbow room for the Russian state to manoeuvre to advance its interests. Still, one could take the position, as Lamond does, that US actions like the Magnitsky Act were forceful enough to trigger retaliation and other looping effects. Actions like these were vital for Putin lest the Russian oligarchy rebelled and replaced him. In effect, one can view these cyber-operations as a regime-preserving response. On their own terms, the US and EU were politically savvy in attempting to weaken Putin’s regime, but they did not have the security in domestic platforms to safeguard against responses. And so, we can echo and apply Bartelson’s remarks about shaping ‘political reality’ in ways that extend far beyond ‘immediate effects’.

Technology as the so-called solution to the social question

There are a couple of general points to take from this chapter. If Bartelson is correct that war in the 21st century is about membership and political reality, then it is worth looking not only at the technologies that may shape the reality and criteria for belonging, but also the ontogenic process that permits rulers to suggest these technologies as solutions to social problems. Further, it is worth noting that there is a widely shared assumption in the international political economy of communication that the globalization of markets and extensive supply chains exacerbated inequalities and asymmetries between and within regions and deepened interdependence, and that this in turn created new conditions and opportunities for capital to realize and pursue its goals.

By contrast, Nicholas Wright’s analysis suggests that while it is an opportunity for new forms of state power, AI will allow new avenues for capturing the commanding heights of the international system. There is some value in thinking through Wright’s conjecture, although in the end his argument can be characterized as a recent variety of ‘totalizing technological deterministic’ arguments, where technology just sweeps away other contextual factors, like other market forces, organizational cultures and issues of implementation. While I too have

sought to discuss the violence and global disorder that has resulted from the maturation of global capitalism – that is, the connection between power, technology and markets – my analysis foregrounds issues of uncertainty, opacity and transnational connections in the development of security-grade AI programmes. Given that Wright does not raise these issues, his conjecture is incomplete. It is also faulty insofar as his latent methodological nationalism pits states against one another as opposed to tracing how capitalists and firms compete and cooperate in a global system undergirded by capitalism.

In summary, there are limitations to human knowledge regarding how AI systems make decisions, and if they are making decisions quicker than we can comprehend then targets could shift without full human oversight. Given this opacity, there is the possibility that security analysts themselves will not be able to detect miscalculation. It is likely that this will increase as more and more items in the security realm are handed over to AI. That capital seeks to deploy these weapons systems before there is clear and comprehensive understanding of how they work reveals, yet again, that human life receives relatively less concern on its list of ranked priorities.

As a restatement of some of portions of my argument, AI may well reconfigure established patterns of deterrence and dominance to unintended consequences due to the unstable new technology and the belief that initial advantages must be utilized before they recede. But while the applications might be different, the underlying exercise – the rapid analysis for identification and forecasting to safeguard capital's interests – remains the same. Attention to how global capital both cooperates and competes makes the analytical frame of 'the return of great power struggles' seem a little ill-conceived. For similar reasons, while Bartelson's reconceptualization of war has some intellectual merit, insofar as new technologies present opportunities for concurrent changes to organizations, we should nevertheless not confuse the realization of capital through AI and the world system in which it resides with claims about the ontogeny of new political forces. Perhaps to modify Singer and Brooking's adage, we can write that 'a new kind of communication preserves an old kind of polity'. As such, an analysis that foregrounds the dynamics of capital and other regularly associated concepts offers much explanatory power of the dynamics in the present conjecture.

In sum, the algorithmic gaze and the associated technologies that are being mass deployed are a kind of 'predatory formation' predicated upon a simplification of social life. As a result, complex social process, structures and relations are reduced to artefacts for analysis. In a world

where code is material governance, the ramifications may not be able to be precisely and locally specified, but they are generally known and understood. The primary damage is to further entrench the forces that bring widespread de-democratization. In no way excusing US state imperatives, it is fair to say that Silicon Valley is providing the technological backbone for atrocities spanning the borders to the hinterlands of the world. There is little doubt about it: capitalist algorithms are becoming the dynamos of empire.

Conclusion: The Fatal Abstractions of Capitalist Rule

Platforms have distributed propaganda that cultivated bigotry, all the while being prone to security breaches. When coupled with the looting of economic sectors like journalism, plus the installation of mass surveillance infrastructure which collaborates with state and corporate entities, the emerging image is of firms whose routine operations are wholly adjacent to broad-based democratic imperatives. Moreover, the centrality of privately owned platforms to American culture is indicative of the extent to which capital has gained control of public discourse. This algorithmic public sphere presents a general impediment to democratization in the US and elsewhere. But this is only the departure point for an analysis of class rule and unfreedom in American life.

More broadly, conditions for capital accumulation have never been more favourable. But the efficiency of this social logic is necessarily bound together with the dramatic acceleration of global social inequality and thus the beginnings of revolutionary demands from the many who have been excluded and for whom it has come at their expense. One looping effect of this deprivation and the contradictions upon which it rests is that an organic crisis emerged in the US. One 'fix' to this crisis has been to embrace Caesarism, to redirect grievances and curtail some means of democratic redress. The political terrain is shifting so it would be foolish to offer declarative forecasts about these developments as there is much struggle ahead. But the ruling class has the advantage of incumbency. Presently they are using it to shore up their positions. For example, between the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act of 2020, the US has seen the largest upward transfer of wealth in the country's history, with a projected tax revenue shortfall of \$195 billion over ten years (Whitehouse and Doggett, 2020). All of this reveals the deep cruelty of the American ruling class. But it also generally vindicates American democratic socialists' analysis of the structural

problems in the country's political economy as well as the agenda that can directly address the causes and the 'fixes'.

Still, due to the ruling class's entrenchment, the socialist agenda will not be on the November 2020 ballot, an election presented as a selection between either democracy or authoritarianism. But while party platforms and politics are important, they are delimited by the interplay between pre-existing basic social forms. In their current practice, elections are but a means to exclude, co-opt or fragment a dissatisfied working class. Aside from the democratic socialists, there is little recognition of these material foundations of American life. Besides which, a society that has democratic equipment but cannot enact democratic change cannot rightly be described as a democracy. Democracy requires the constraint of rulers and a robust human rights culture. The US has neither. This is indicative of a society where freedoms are deemed important but subsidiary to the pursuit of wealth.

These concerns frame the broader themes that traverse this book. I have sought to understand how 21st-century American life has come to shape, and be shaped by, communication technology. Using materialist class analysis, this has been through examining the ramifications of 'datafication' on the social question. I have argued that 'datafication' is indicative of 'the great simplification' occurring in the US. By this I mean that social questions are repeatedly flattened into ostensibly depoliticized issues while concurrently reproducing the uneven social relations that underwrite the current moment of late capitalism. This unevenness can be found in the class and race relations that characterize American imperialism.

The first portion of the book examined the fatal abstractions of capitalist rule, that being how established social relations are reproduced by nominally 'objective' and 'information-based' digital tools. I sought to engage issues around 'data politics' while also challenging the conventional literature that dominates the current discussion of the political economy of algorithmic life. Here my central concern was how datafication promotes both invisible and opaque planned economies thereby foreclosing politics. Thereafter, I examined how the one-dimensionality of data makes the subjective objective. Through an examination of the various social properties of actors and the social forces engaged in the production, circulation and authorization of knowledge, I showed how compelled participation in a particular mode of evaluation produces a narrow criterion of economic inclusion. The result has been to transform complex and diverse social processes into homogenous, standardized objects ripe for technical manipulation suitable for AI computing for the efficient extraction of surplus value.

In this way, I have sought to illustrate some of the ways in which ‘datafication’ expands and deepens capitalist social relations behind a veil of technocratic ‘neoliberal progressive’ ideology. It is as if formally rational decision-making tools have been captured by capitalism. These two chapters provide the historical-material basis for observations in the subsequent chapters.

Moving on, I looked at how Silicon Valley’s shareholders control the inescapable foundation of the contemporary economy – cell phones, social networks, cloud-computing, retail, logistics and the like. Increasingly platforms provide the means and mechanisms by which all public affairs and private business is conducted. These control rights give shareholders the power to shape politics and public discourse; their wealth gives them clout few other people have. So part of plotting the possible trajectories of the political economy of this century requires understanding the nexus between ‘big finance’, ‘big tech’ and ‘big politics’. But there should be caution here. Critiques that centre on Wall Street, Silicon Valley and Washington can lose sight of the mode of production in which these entities reside and relate to one another. Altogether this means that capitalism does not require a class-conscious ruling class, rather that the structured (antagonistic) relations between capitalists, state managers and workers preserves the reproduction of capitalist social relations. Without dictates or strictures this explains the general maintenance of a system that has the most to do with oppression writ large. That said, due to the escalation and stakes of intra-elite competition, as well as the need to cooperate for a common defence against the many due to conditions of extreme social inequality, a ruling class consciousness has formed. This ruling class consciousness can be observed in aggressive class struggle ‘from above’.

Granted, the ruling class is not a monolithic entity. Different capitalists pursue different strategies, form different alliances and have different visions of capitalism, as in the proverbial ‘big finance’, ‘big tech’ and ‘big politics’. And so fraternal competition is to be expected as well as a degree of intra-class conflict. Still, because the stakes are so high, and because they are under organized siege, this ruling class consciousness is well aware of the consequences of losing control of the commanding heights of the political economy. To help preserve their rule, they use digital media companies to promote their agenda, use platforms to distribute their messages and enrol the American cultural superstructure to codify their rule. As such, the locus of politics is less about presenting appalling agendas and ‘expanding the basket of goods’, and more about regulating who can vote and the relative weight of those votes, all facilitated by a willing judiciary.

The last portion of the book examined the externalization of the harms caused by this political economy. Due to their rising consciousness, the American ruling class are aware of the contradictions between the basic social forms that have given rise to an organic crisis and subsequently Caesarism. This creates a bind. Acknowledging the first causes of the organic crisis risks their minority rule, yet failure to address these causes makes their rule less stable. Accordingly, Caesarism is part of a strategy to stall a general revisiting of the social question by the working class. Here social questions are reframed as technical problems to be managed, their causes external to the American capitalist polity. In the interim, new technologies of authoritarianism are being tested on populations the world over in case they need to be enrolled domestically.

Mystification, rationalization, externalization

My argument is less about scaremongering over the oppressive capacities of new technological forms, but rather the attempt to identify how the social logics behind technology have become beholden to capital accumulation. This has been aided by a long decline in union membership and bargaining power, the retreat of basic labour standards and their enforcement, and a fiscal policy that prioritizes inflation targeting over employment. These lost protections also require that we discuss accumulated disadvantage as well as the institutional structures created to sustain its potency. As a result, the rich are much better positioned to direct the investments that shape the rollout of digital technologies in finance, insurance and real estate. The disproportionate clout of their ideas, class expectations and desires means that from the beginning, democratic life in digital societies is on the back foot. These issues are not just confined to the Global North. It also continues longstanding marginalization in the Global South from equitable participation in the design and implementation decisions about these technologies.

If the current path trajectory remains unaltered, soon all existing social relations may be encoded, meaning that social inequality will be programmed into the social infrastructure. Using Frank Pasquale's (2015) turn of phrase, it will be as if we will come to live in a 'black box society', meaning that as persons become increasingly visible, the data infrastructure which organizes their lives becoming increasingly invisible, known only to insiders. And sometimes even the technologists are still unsure about AI's reasoning. As states and corporations seek to use metrics to understand, predict and control the behaviour of

individuals, so what is consolidating is the automated surveillance of the quantified self. Algorithms are created by persons, so in the production process, ideology and notions of value are encoded into technological artefacts. But they are presented as neutral and natural. Regardless of whether we recognize them or not, the code of capital will produce and maintain inequalities of all sorts. Class rule and unfreedom will become enforced through code and databases that always already present themselves before the person.

Computation alters the distribution and use of power in social settings, which in turn affects the distribution of resources in ways that can be uneven and often unfair. But it is also important to underscore that computation does not automatically make social life more uneven and more unfair. Rather, through altering or replacing the existing institutional frameworks, algorithmic life could foster broad-based human flourishing. There is no sociological law that stipulates that algorithmic life must be inherently discriminatory. We should not be indifferent or fatalistic to these upheavals. I think there is much heart to be taken from resurgent broad-based socialist politics in the US. When democratization does come, it will emerge from this venue.

Digital society requires significant restructuring if it is to facilitate greater democratization. But unless it is achieved via a path where workers' democracy is entrenched, then whatever social provisions and degree of democracy happens to be attained through concessions, it will always be susceptible to erosion as capitalists reassert themselves at a later date. This is the lesson to take from the neoliberal *revanche*: that the very best of postwar social liberalism was not strong enough to protect people from this creeping threat. As such, an emancipatory political project must go beyond simply being satisfied with better wages or racial and gender diversity in the ruling class.

Granted, American imperialism is simultaneously formidable and violently vindictive, meaning that there are social costs to critique. This can partly explain why there is a tendency in digital scholarship to treat heterodox consumptive patterns and self-fashioning as politically subversive. These become the thin edge of possibility for something more. Yet it is precisely because of this vindictiveness that we must resist the tendency to take comfort in small acts. It is hardly an acceptable substitute for the mass participatory action required to keep politics as an open human activity. The uncompromising totality of radical critique is an essential organizing framework for the intellectual work required to support this project. Anything less makes it that much harder to build broad-based movements that can gain ground for a politics committed to greater democratization in all aspects of human life.

The interrelation of begrudging consent and market coercion permit the capitalist polity to prioritize capitalist social relations. By examining the role of the high-technology sector my core interest has been with the historical dimension of unfreedom and class rule in contemporary American capitalism as seen in the digital realm. In doing so, I hope to have showed the continuing importance of the Marxist tradition for understanding the digital political economic landscape.

In many different registers, widespread digital communication is revolutionary. Within four decades the internet expanded from niche military, government and scientific institutions to being integral to all parts of social life. In providing access to many goods and facilitating the creation of others, it has become a public good in and of itself. This fact has often been construed as a key episode within a triumphant narrative found in the cheerleading technology press as well as large-circulation newspapers about the potency for greater communication to yield opportunities for commerce and emancipation. In one way or another, digital utopians have argued that the internet is, or can be, a great leveller. But the promise of egalitarian liberation is far from materializing. Instead, power has radically concentrated with the ruling class, those that own the means of production. This development should be foremost in any analysis of contemporary social life. Accordingly, the key question should be how does the development, acquisition and deployment of technology reshape the balance of power between governors and the governed. Put simply, what kind of society do we want?

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