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# **"SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM" AND THE ANGST OF THE PETIT SOVEREIGN**

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## “Surveillance Capitalism” and the Angst of the Petit Sovereign

Fleur Johns

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

At the end of a big book, one sometimes seems to have arrived on another plane. Like a landscape after rain, everything can seem sharper, enlivened, cast in a new light. One may possess a distinct sense of how things were before that book, and how they are after the experience of reading it. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* is not that kind of book.

Reading Shoshana Zuboff’s masterful tome is more like visiting an old school amusement park. One experiences moments of exhilarating insight, some of terror. There is a quite a bit of traveling in circles and wending one’s way through houses of mirrors. And at the end, one ends up more or less back where one started, only feeling rather more spent and unsteady than when one began.

This might sound as though *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* is not worth reading: that is not my assessment. There is much to be learned from Zuboff’s impressive amassing of detail concerning the rise of the platform economy, and her penetrating analysis of its business logic. Whether Zuboff delivers on her goal of decoding a “new form” of capitalism (p.13) and a “new species of power” (p.8) is, nonetheless, questionable. Likewise, it is far from clear that Zuboff’s romantic lament for the loss of solitude, sanctuary and the “unfettered imagination” (p.267) of the individual offers much by way of a social or political strategy for the “new market cosmos” (p.319) that she sets out to chart.

Zuboff seeks to recover a freedom that is “inward” (p.290), not social. Her aim is less transformation than restoration: the rebuilding of “shared trust” and the “regain[ing] [of] our bearings” (p.524) within capitalism – specifically, within twentieth century capitalism “[s]ymbolized... by Ford’s five dollar day” (p.499). Hers are the frettings of a class accustomed to the “sensation of mastery” and anxious about having “in fact, giv[en] it away” (p. 261). Her worries about surveillance capitalism are, in large part, Arendtian and she shares Arendt’s blindspot about class. Her efforts to rally “indignant young people” around the ideals of “home”, “sanctuary”, and the “social contract” (pp.522-3) seem entirely out of touch with contemporary politics (in which “home” is often the call to arms of the nativist) and inattentive to the precarious lives of so many in the United States, let alone around the world. As a critical guide to the value propositions and social and economic imperatives put forward by the platform economy, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* serves its readers well. As a work of political economy or social theory for the “new frontier of power”, it does not.

If no strategy for this “new frontier” emerges from its hundreds of pages, how, then, does *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* use its readers’ time? The book has four parts. Part I recounts the “origins” of surveillance capitalism with a particular focus on the story of Google from its 1998 founding to around 2016, by which time Google had established a “gargantuan material infrastructure” around the globe and had become the world’s “most aggressive acquirer of AI technology and talent” (pp.188-9). Part II narrates the advance of surveillance capitalism in its “migration” from online dominance to offline ubiquity, through the embedding of remote sensing and data capture technology in innumerable devices, things, and “real world”

environments. Part III seeks to characterize the form of power engendered by this tentacular computational infrastructure, employing the nomenclature of “instrumentarian power”. Finally, a brief, concluding part endeavors to pinpoint exactly how surveillance capitalism breaks with the history of market capitalism, and threatens “Western liberal democracies” (p.21) and the “inclusive economic institutions” and “organic reciprocities” (pp.503-4) that Zuboff identifies with them. It ends with a call to outrage for the petit sovereign, decrying the “tyrann[ical]” usurpation of “sovereignty over one’s own life” (pp.513, 521) and recalling the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Zuboff’s is, in some respects, a commanding, sweeping tale – both panoramic in scope and rich in specifics. At the same time, it is remarkably narrow. More or less nothing – or at least nothing worthy of note – exists outside the United States, Britain and Western Europe in the world of this book. China – or the “China Syndrome” – appears briefly, in caricature, only to be deemed of little relevance for “our story” (p.392). India, South Korea, Eastern Europe (except for East Berlin in 1989) and the emergent tech hubs of Latin America: these make no appearance at all. This is despite the book’s many claims of “the facts of surveillance capitalism hav[ing] been carried into the world” (p.179) and its repeated (and, it must be said, highly problematic) invocations of colonialism as precursor for the twenty-first century conquest of “dark data continents” (pp. 104, 255).

Zuboff’s vision is similarly constricted when it comes to the economic and legal conditions under which Alphabet/Google, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft and their ilk have thrived. She writes, briefly, of the prepared ground afforded by a “neoliberal habitat” (p.37), and various “interdependencies between [US] intelligence agencies... and the Silicon Valley firms” (pp. 118, 321). She identifies some key regulatory opportunities missed by the European Commission (p.103) and the US’s Federal Communications Commission (p.170). However, the overall cast she gives to the surrounding environment is one of “lawlessness” (pp. 231, 252, 281). Little attention is paid in the book to the constitutive, enabling role of law in the developments that Zuboff describes. Her tale of Silicon Valley’s invention of the “uncontract” – an instrument of “unilateral execution” (p.221) – disregards a century’s work of legal scholarly analysis of, and judicial allowance for, “contracts of adhesion” and standardized contracting. She makes no mention of the importance of financialization in shaping the Silicon Valley business model, in everything from executive and employee remuneration and labor force “flexibilization” to contract manufacturing and mergers and acquisition activity. Nor does Zuboff acknowledge the vital role played by laws, legal institutions and accounting standards – including developments in corporate law, securities law, commercial codes, the regulation of derivatives, intellectual property and property law, fair value accounting and so on – in fueling financialization and, ultimately, much of what she aggregates as “surveillance capitalism”.

Zuboff’s preferred methodology – of conducting interviews, and poring over corporate marketing materials and corporate filings, collecting creepy anecdotes – seems to limit her ability to register many of the crucial byways and forks in the road that might connect Fordism (remembered a little too uncritically in this book) and the reign of Google’s Chief Economist, Hal Varian, and his fellow “surveillance capitalists”. For this and other reasons, Zuboff’s attempt to unveil a new form of capitalism ultimately falls well short of its mark. As Eugeny Morozov has discussed in a brilliant review of the book in *The Baffler*, Zuboff’s attempt to differentiate “surveillance capitalism” from capitalism of yesteryear “miss[es] how power, under capitalism, has been operating for several centuries”. Rather than trace the

many embattled distributions and redistributions of power that she purports to summarize, Zuboff's preference is to encase the power of "surveillance capitalism" in a singular, spectral Lacanian figure: the "Big Other" that is "the ubiquitous digital apparatus" that "is the sensate, computational, connected puppet that renders, monitors, computes, and modifies human behavior" (p.376).

Omissions, elisions, romantic fantasies and psychoanalytic tropes notwithstanding, there is much of value in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. Of particular value – as a teaching tool, for instance – are the pithy diagrams that appear in Part I of the book. These lucidly sketch how value is derived in the platform economy from "behavioral surplus" – the name that Zuboff gives to what is otherwise often known as "data exhaust" (that is, all the algorithmically analyzable by-products of digitally mediated human-nonhuman interactions). Even so, Zuboff's argument for the distinctiveness of "instrumentarian power" in eliciting and making use of this surplus – that is, the "instrumentalization of behavior for the purposes of modification, prediction, monetization, and control" (p.352) – would have benefited from being routed through, and taking account of, the notion of biopower: one Arendtian-Foucauldian bequest that she does not, rather surprisingly, take up in this book at all.

One should not, perhaps, criticize Zuboff for having left key terms and concepts off the table when she has delivered a book of such vaulting ambition. She has already bitten off a great deal and digested and delivered it in ways that prove elucidating and instructive. Nonetheless, Zuboff's jeremiad is, in summary, rather too attuned to the "rendition" of the bodies of transatlantic consumers (that is, their "claim[ing] as raw material for datafication and all that follows" (p.234)). All the while it remains strangely indifferent to the predicament of those who actually labor, all over the world, on the assembly lines from which the devices to which she refers emerge, and in cleaning and labeling the data on which the "prediction products" (p.338) of Google and others depend. The reach and resonance of Zuboff's appeal for people to declare "No more!" in the face of platform power is foreshortened as a consequence. One is left with an overriding sense that the "collective effort" that she has in mind (p.525) is intended to embrace a very particular kind of "collective": one comprised of those for whom "the will to will oneself into first-person voice and action" is the "most transcendent ideal" (p.439). This is the ideal of the one, not the many. As such, it is ill-suited to "collective effort" towards remaking "the fabric of our social relations" (p.347) that Zuboff shows to have been knotted, bundled, and torn by the economic transformations of the past half century. Zuboff certainly has a fight in her, but it is far from clear that the analytical and political weapons that she would have readers take up are up to the task of struggling "at the new frontier of power".