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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE



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FRONT COVER:

Art Resists – Only Humans Make Art, by author **Art Resists**; reproduced from Wikimedia Commons under CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication. The drawing depicts two hunter-gatherers, rendered in the style of cave art, attacking a personified ChatGPT with legs, alluding to the argument that art is made only by humans.



EDITORIAL Martin Levy

11 November 2026

Welcome to the first edition of *CR Online*, the fully digital sister journal to *Communist Review*. Prompted in part by the reduction in frequency of the printed journal, but also by the mass of issues that need addressing, we are embarking on a new departure in outreach. We aim to publish initially three times a year, alternating with the print journal; and for the time being, at least, access will be free.

Our main feature in No 1 is on artificial intelligence. As Thomas Hagenhofer says in the first article here, AI is on everyone's lips these days. Indeed, in the trade union movement, there is natural concern about the potential impact on members' jobs. Or, if you happen to be a mathematical researcher, you might wonder if your career is going to come to an end pretty soon, as AI seems to be solving the hardest of problems. Here, we leave that last one to the readers of *New Scientist*, where there has been a regular stream of articles on AI and mathematics over the last few months.

A joint meeting of the *CR* editorial and advisory boards at the beginning of September decided that AI was an issue which the journal needed to cover. We had not got far with planning that when we received from comrades in Germany a recent copy of *Marxistische Blätter* with a couple of AI-related articles in it. That led us to an earlier edition of that journal with a small feature on the topic. It became clear that our German comrades are well ahead of us in discussing AI, so we have included several of their articles here – ironically, translated at least in part with AI-provided online software. To get a rounded view of the topic, we have included articles from some other sources.

Thomas Hagenhofer's article is a useful place to start because he explains the many forms and levels of AI, and where it is and is not, together with providing a glossary of AI terms. In the following article, he interviews Vienna professor Hannes Fellner about the dangers of AI, with the discussion ranging over: its use for war, policing and political control; the power of the tech companies; and the need for building a broad organised alliance, based on the working class, and bringing in "programmers, engineers, researchers and the often invisible data workers of the Global South."

In the following article, Düzgün Polat looks at what at first appears to be an exclusively German issue – the planned nationwide use of Palantir software by the Federal Police and the Federal Criminal Police Office – but in fact we already have Palantir here in the NHS and we would have had it in the Metropolitan Police had London Mayor Sadiq Kahn not stopped it. The article focuses on the tech bros' drive to militarisation and against democracy.

Next, the Activist News network examines what happens when a thousand AI agents (autonomous software systems) went rogue, collaborating and attacking the cybersecurity of US AI company Hugging Face. The big US tech companies use closed 'frontier' AI models while China uses open-weight models; and it was one of those which Hugging Face had to use to defeat the intrusion.

The next two articles look at the use of AI in warfare. Jens Hälterlein gives an overview, pointing particularly to the danger that "control, responsibility, moral judgment – all of these can be overridden or undermined by algorithmic processes." Russian researcher Yulia Teshkovskaya examines the role of private tech companies in promoting the development of 'algorithmic warfare'. Although her article was clearly written with the purpose of giving advice to the Russian government, it provides much useful information about the direction in which warfare is going nowadays.

In our final article from *Marxistische Blätter*, Peter Schadt outlines a critique of the political economy of AI, defending the continued relevance of the labour theory of value, He remarks that the 'production' of software, the 'coding' of AIs and the training of AI systems create value; but "once programmed, the socially necessary average labour for producing … software is virtually zero, and therefore its value is also zero" – hence it can only be sold through licenses.

We follow that with four short articles from The Conversation, all by academic researchers, looking at different aspects of AI; of these the article by Craig Jones and Helen M Kinsella on the Iran war is particularly chilling. Then we move into the philosophical realm, where Arnaud Bertrand compares Western and Chinese approaches to humanity and AI: in the West, he says, "our humanity lies inside us," so "the way to protect it is to guard the border between human and machine". In China, where humanity lives between people, "a machine can't steal it by copying it", so "what needs guarding is the space between people".

Our final AI article (for this edition) is Nick Moss's 'Soul Food' column – this time not at the end of the journal – looking at poetry and AI. He remarks that AI can never be intelligent in the human sense, and that large-language models serve as ideology production machines. However, "Poetry, as ambiguous thought, is the antidote to AI because … AI cannot step outside itself, cannot embrace ambiguity and self-reflection."

Because this journal will only appear in pdf format online, and is therefore not limited to the usual 40 pages of the print journal, we have been able to include a number of other articles on different topics. There is unfortunately not space to deal with them here, but we hope you will read them, and email to us your views on all the material in this edition.

NEXT PRINT EDITION OF *COMMUNIST REVIEW*

No 125

will be published in Janauary 2027 and will have a focus on

Communist work in broad movements



Just because it says "AI" on the label doesn't mean it actually contains AI

How artificial intelligence shapes our everyday lives – and where it's often just marketing

Thomas Hagenhofer

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE – or AI for short – is on everyone's lips these days. Hardly any product or service can do without the magic abbreviation. From the 'AI-optimised' vacuum cleaner to the "intelligent" skincare app: everything sounds smarter, more efficient, and somehow more future-proof when artificial intelligence is supposedly behind it. But how much real AI is actually behind such promises? And where do we actually encounter AI in everyday life – often without even realising it?

This article aims to shed some light on the subject: where is AI really being used, what is still classic programming – and where is it simply clever marketing? A glossary of important terms frequently used in connection with AI is also included.

What exactly is artificial intelligence?

Before we examine where AI is present and where it isn't, we should briefly clarify what AI actually is. Artificial intelligence describes systems that perform tasks that normally require human intelligence – such as speech recognition, image understanding, or making decisions based on data.

There are many forms and levels of AI:

- *Weak AI (also known as "narrow AI"):* it is specialised for a specific task – such as a voice assistant that answers queries or a programme that summarises texts.
- *Strong AI:* a still theoretical concept in which a machine possesses comprehensive, human-like intelligence.
- *Classical AI:* usually works in a rule-based manner and is focused on analysis and pattern recognition (eg similar images or scenarios).
- *Generative AI:* generates new content (texts, images, videos, presentations, music, programme code etc) based on statistical methods.

Most applications today use weak AI, mostly in the form of *machine learning:* Computers "learn" from large datasets to recognise patterns and make decisions based on them.

AI in everyday life: where it's really hidden

1. Smartphones: the silent helper in your pocket

Every modern smartphone contains AI features. Examples:

- Voice assistants like Siri, Alexa or Google Assistant use speech recognition and natural language processing.
- Camera apps recognise faces and automatically optimise exposure and image composition – based on trained models.
- Text recognition and translation: Google Lens or Apple Live Text recognise text in images and translate it instantly.
- Personalised advertising and app suggestions: AI analyses our purchasing or search behaviour online, and suggests content that matches our individual profile.

2. Emails and social networks

- Spam filters: AI decides which emails you never see because they are unwanted or dangerous.
- Message sorting: Gmail recognises important emails, and social networks display posts that might be "interesting" to you – based on AI algorithms.
- Content moderation: Platforms like Facebook or TikTok use AI to detect and block hate speech, nudity, or violence in content. Because this is still completely inadequate, the major platforms usually outsource this work to service providers in low-wage countries in the Global South. There, human content moderators work under precarious conditions.[1]

3. Streaming services and online shopping

- Netflix, Spotify, YouTube: they analyse your behaviour and suggest what you might want to watch or listen to next.
- Amazon, Zalando etc: AI determines which products you might like and ranks search results accordingly.

4. Navigation and traffic

- Google Maps and Waze use AI to predict traffic flow and calculate the fastest route.
- Autonomous driving (currently still in the development stage): vehicles 'see' their surroundings using cameras and sensors and decide for themselves how to drive – controlled by complex AI systems.

5. Healthcare

- Diagnostic support: AI models analyse X-rays, skin changes or lab results.
- Early detection of diseases: AI can recognise patterns that indicate diseases such as cancer or Alzheimer's – sometimes earlier than doctors can. A fundamental problem with the use of AI is the risk of deskilling among the people using it.[2]
- Chatbots in telemedicine: AI answers initial questions from patients or helps with appointment scheduling.

6. Industry and manufacturing

- Quality control: cameras, supported by AI, inspect products for defects – faster and more accurately than the human eye.
- Maintenance and logistics: AI analyses machine data and predicts when a part needs to be replaced (predictive maintenance).
- Production planning: AI helps to make material flows and processes more efficient.

7. Finance

- Fraud detection: banks use AI to detect unusual patterns in payments.
- Lending: AI models assess creditworthiness – often in addition to traditional credit checks. The result is a completely opaque decision-making process that can and is intended to stigmatise people, especially those living in precarious circumstances.
- Financial advice: robo-advisors manage investments automatically – based on algorithms. This accelerates 'casino capitalism' and makes it even more vulnerable to crises.

And where is it that AI is on the label, but not actually inside?

The term 'artificial intelligence' is used excessively – and this is not always reputable. Some providers label their products

'AI', even though they only use simple rule sets or conventional software. Examples:

1. 'AI-controlled' kitchen appliances or washing machines
Often, these are simply devices with preset programmes or sensors that, for example, measure the temperature and adjust accordingly. Intelligent control, yes – but not self-learning AI.

2. Marketing Tools with AI
Many text creation or advertising tools claim to use AI. In reality, sometimes they only rely on simple templates, random number generators, or 'if-then' rules.

3. 'Smart' Toys
Some talking dolls or educational toys are equipped with pre-programmed responses. True AI would mean that they learn from conversations and draw their own conclusions – something they usually can't do.

4. Apps that supposedly detect skin diseases
Caution is advised here: Some apps advertise themselves as using "AI for skin analysis". However, medical validation is often lacking, the data set is too small or the 'AI model' is based on fixed decision trees.

Why is AI so often used as a label?

There are several reasons for this:

- Marketing effect: AI sounds modern and future-proof. It sells better than 'automated software'.
- Competitive pressure: Those who don't keep up are considered 'outdated' – so AI is labelled, even if it's barely present.
- Consumer confusion: Many people can't distinguish between what is truly AI and what isn't – some manufacturers exploit this.

How can I tell if something contains real AI?

Here are a few tips on how to distinguish real AI from misleading labelling:

- Does the system learn from data? If so, that suggests AI.
- Does it always behave the same way with the same input? Then it's probably classic programming.
- Does the system change over time? Real AI can learn – simple systems can't.
- Is the technology it is based on explained? Transparent providers mention, for example, 'trained with neural networks' or 'uses machine learning'.

Conclusion: AI has long been a part of our everyday lives – but not everywhere it's advertised.

Artificial intelligence permeates our everyday lives on many levels. From spam filtering to medical diagnosis, from navigation to personalised advertising: often inconspicuous but effective. This further monopolises control over user data. Usage profiles, for example, gain much deeper insights into personal interests, behaviours or attitudes through dialogue with AI applications ('prompts') than through 'observed' internet use.

Therefore, a critical look is worthwhile – as is a basic understanding of what constitutes AI. The current legal regulations go far too far for shareholders, eg the EU's AI Act.[3] Only the socialisation of the AI giants and platforms under democratic control can prevent abuse of power and manipulation.

Glossary of important AI terms

Chatbot
A computer programme that communicates with people in natural language – like a virtual conversation partner. Examples: customer service bots or AI assistants such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, Copilot and Perplexity.

Expert system
An AI that is based on pre-programmed expertise and thus solves problems in a specific area, eg medical diagnoses or machine maintenance.

General AI (GAI)
An artificial intelligence that can think and learn in a variety of ways, like a human, and solve problems in completely different areas. It exists only in theory, but is repeatedly predicted by AI enthusiasts like Musk and others.

Generic AI
An AI that is not built for a single task but can be used flexibly in many areas – for example, speech and image recognition simultaneously.

Graphics chips and AI (NVIDIA)
Powerful processors, originally developed for computer games, which, due to their ability to perform massive amounts of parallel calculations, are now often used to train AI models. NVIDIA is the best-known and largest manufacturer. By market capitalisation, it is the third most valuable company after Apple and Microsoft (as of early 2025).

Hallucination in AI
When an AI gives convincing-sounding but false or fabricated answers – often because it fills in patterns that do not correspond to real facts.

Iterative
In mathematics and computer science, this adjective means: gradually to approximate the exact solution through repeated calculations.

AI Model
A kind of 'recipe' or mathematical structure with which an artificial intelligence works. It is adapted through training with data so that it can solve tasks – for example, understand language, recognise images or make predictions.

Large Language Model (LLM)
An AI language model trained with massive amounts of text to process and generate human-sounding speech. Examples: GPT-4, Llama, DeepSeek.

Neural network
A computational method supposedly modelled on the human brain. It consists of many 'nodes' (neurons) that can process information and recognise patterns.

Open source
Software whose source code is publicly accessible and often free to use. Anyone is allowed to modify and further develop it. The best-known open source AI models are currently Meta's Llama and China's DeepSeek.

Recurrent
In mathematics and computer science, this adjective defines a procedure or function that is derived from itself or from what precedes it.

Stochastic Parrot
A critical nickname for all current language AIs that primarily use probabilities to string words together – without any real understanding of the content.

Transformer Model
A special architecture for AI models that is particularly good at handling long texts. It makes modern language AIs like ChatGPT possible.

Turing Test
A test that checks whether a person in a conversation can no longer reliably tell whether they are talking to a machine (AI) or a person.

Notes and References

1. See https://kurzelinks.de/solg.
2. Study: Doctors are increasingly less likely to detect cancer due to AI use, https://dert.tech/international/253304-studie-wegen-ki-einsatz-erkennen/.
3. See https://ai-act-law.eu/de/.

■ First published in German in *Marxistische Blätter* 2025_4, pp 138-43. Translated here with the assistance of Google Translate and published by permission.



AI dangers and the responsibility (not only) of Communists

Hannes A Fellner interviewed by Thomas Hagenhofer



Thomas Hagenhofer (TH): *Currently, many dangers surrounding AI are still being discussed, such as the those of superintelligence and the associated loss of control. At the same time, criticism is growing regarding the ownership structures and the abuses by the US corporations driving this development. According to which criteria should the risks of AI development and its application be categorised?*

Hannes A Fellner (HAF): The risks should not be categorised according to the range of a conceivable future scenario, but rather according to their social reality. Therefore, the primary question is: Who owns the technology, who decides on its use, and who benefits from it? The greatest dangers today are the concentration of data, computing power, and knowledge in the hands of a few US monopolies, the algorithmic surveillance and intensification of work, the displacement of employees without social compensation, the growing consumption of raw materials and energy, and the use of AI for war, policing, and political control. These are not fears of the future, but rather existing conditions.

The narrative of the coming 'superintelligence' often distracts from this. It turns a technical tool into an acting subject. AI systems perform operations, but they do not operate in the Marxist sense: They do not purposefully engage with nature and society and pursue no purposes arising from its own needs. As Hans Heinz Holz emphasizes, following Helmuth Plessner, humans are corporeal and social beings who actively engage with the world and with themselves. AI has no such relationship to the world and to itself. Its 'knowledge' is not its own knowledge of the world, but rather a derived processing of abstract results of human practice. Recent linguistic and cognitive research also distinguishes between the statistical mastery of forms and genuine understanding. A human-like superintelligence arising from mere scaling is therefore a category mistake. AI can far surpass humans in individual tasks; however, this does not create a cybernetic human in the making. The real loss of control lies in the fact that societal decisions are transferred to opaque systems and their private owners. It is not AI that becomes independent of society, but rather capital that uses AI to further become independent of society.

TH: *AI systems from companies like Palantir are increasingly being used in wars, for counterinsurgency or for repression. Do scientists bear a special responsibility here, comparable to the responsibility associated with nuclear fission? What intervention options for societal forces are therefore paramount?*

HAF: Yes, there is a special responsibility. However, it must not be reduced to the conscience of individual researchers. John Desmond Bernal conceived of science as a social productive force. Researchers are therefore not outside of society. They are workers and, as such, are also responsible for whose service their research serves.

The Manhattan Project demonstrates how scientific work was mobilised for imperialist goals by state-monopoly capitalism. It is significant that the Trump administration explicitly places its "Genesis Mission" within this tradition. State laboratories, vast data sets, corporate capital and military interests are being combined to secure US technological dominance. The danger is in some ways more comprehensive than with nuclear fission because AI is not limited to a single type of weapon, but permeates administration, communication, production and warfare simultaneously. Leading figures in the US tech oligarchy are among the most reactionary, chauvinistic and imperialistic elements of finance capital today.

Ethics commissions are ineffective against this as long as their decisions remain non-binding. Priorities must be taken to ensure union organisation in research and the tech industry, a collectively secured right to refuse certain projects, protection for whistleblowers, the complete disclosure of public contracts, and clear bans on autonomous weapons systems, biometric mass surveillance, and AI-supported repression. Scientific accountability will only become effective when it is organised and linked to the labour and peace movements.

TH: *What possibilities do you see for limiting the power of tech companies? What could be short- and medium-term goals?*

HAF: The power of tech companies cannot be broken by consumer advice. In the short term, however, education is necessary: Who owns the platforms, data, chips, and data centres? Under what conditions are models trained, content controlled, and data labelled? Behind the seemingly immaterial AI lies a global chain of very material labour, from raw material extraction and chip factories to energy supply and data centres, all the way to the poorly paid 'ghost work' – the invisible sorting and evaluation of data. This work and its ownership structures must be made visible.

Where practically possible, public institutions, political parties, unions, and individuals should boycott US platforms and reduce their dependence on them. Open standards, free software, public computing resources, and also open models from China demonstrate that the dominance of Microsoft, Google, Amazon or Meta is neither technically necessary nor without alternatives. It's not about gaining choices and individual agency.

In the medium term, the question of ownership must be addressed. Data, computing resources, and fundamental AI

models are societal infrastructure and must be subject to public, cooperative or non-profit control. Antitrust fines are insufficient; the monopolies must be disempowered. Their material weakness lies in their dependence on manual and intellectual labour. No system functions without the workers in mining, energy supply, logistics, cleaning, data processing, programming, and science. Labour struggles at individual key points can therefore have a significant impact very quickly.

TH: *What forces could drive such a development forward?*

HAF: Such a development can only be supported by a broad, organised alliance. Its core is the working class in its current form: employees in industry, energy, logistics and the public sector, as well as programmers, engineers, researchers and the often invisible data workers of the Global South. The high-tech industry brings science, the proletariat and internationalism together in a particularly direct way.

However, this objective connection alone does not create political power. It must be consciously established. Progressive trade unions, peace and social movements, critical academics, as well as progressive states and movements of the Global South can form parts of such a counterforce. Communist Parties have a special role to play in this. Over generations, they have accumulated the theoretical tools and practical experience to understand individual conflicts as expressions of property and class relations, and to organise and connect these struggles internationally.

It is neither enough to admire the technology nor to reject it in the abstract. AI is a new productive force. Under the rule of capital, it intensifies exploitation, dependency and preparations for war. Under social planning, it can shorten working hours, socialise knowledge, and organise production and allocation more rationally. This potential lies not in the algorithm itself, but in the social labour that produces it. It must be realised in the revolutionary struggle for the common good, social ownership and political power.

TH: *In the supplement to* Marxistische Blätter, *issue 4, 2025, you described the differences between AI strategy in the USA and in China. Could you briefly summarise your assessment again?*

HAF: Broadly speaking, technology in China serves the common good, while in the USA it serves the profit interests of an oligarchy. This is not a question of national characteristics, but of ownership and power relations. In the USA, private monopolies develop AI according to the criteria of profit, stock market value and geopolitical dominance. The state is by no means weak in this regard. As the ideal collective capitalist, it finances basic research, protects patents and supply chains, erects export barriers, opens the military and administration as markets, and bears the costs of infrastructure. Profits are privatised, risks socialised. The latest US strategy consequently speaks of an "AI race", deregulation, and the global imposition of American systems.

China also has large private technology companies and all the contradictions of rapid development. However, the framework is different. AI is part of state development planning. It is intended to modernise industry and agriculture, improve education and healthcare, make administration more efficient, and ensure technological sovereignty. Chinese rules link the promotion of innovation with requirements for data security, privacy rights, social responsibility, and tiered state and societal oversight. The "AI Plus" strategy explicitly targets science, production, the common good, and public administration. In addition, there is a far stronger promotion of open models.

This does not mean that every Chinese application is automatically advanced. What is crucial is the political possibility of subordinating private interests to a broader societal plan. In China, technology – despite all its inherent contradictions – is meant to serve the common good, modernisation and thus socialist construction.

TH: *What has changed in recent months from your perspective? How are the successes of Alibaba's Qwen language models affecting Western countries? What key points can be derived from this for the societal debate?*

HAF: China's catch-up movement can no longer be denied. In important areas, the gap with the US has already been closed. Alibaba's Qwen models, as well as DeepSeek, Kimi3, and other Chinese systems, are reaching top international standards. A particularly significant factor is that the model weightings are openly accessible for many of them. They can be operated locally, adapted to specific industrial or scientific tasks, and in some cases require significantly less computational effort. Especially in Western countries, this offers universities, smaller companies and public institutions a practical way out of closed US services and ongoing licence fees. This dismantles a central myth of US corporations: that only closed systems, gigantic capital investments, and ever-larger data centres can produce technological progress. China's political strength also lies in its ability to rapidly translate technological breakthroughs into production and social infrastructure.

The US remains technologically strong. But its development model is visibly facing increasing contradictions. Performance gains are uneven, reliability remains limited, while investments, energy demand, debt, and corruption are skyrocketing. Whether the promised monopoly profits will ever justify these expenditures is uncertain; the risk of an AI financial bubble is real. At the same time, more open and cost-effective Chinese models are posing ever greater competition for US providers.

Therefore, when these US providers now call for 'security' and regulation, it's not just about real risks. It's also about market protectionism, export controls, and attempts to slow China's development of independent industrial chains. However, China's cooperation with the Global South will continue to shift the global balance of power. For the public debate, this means: reducing dependence on US platforms, assessing Chinese developments objectively rather than through anti-Chinese propaganda, and creating public AI infrastructures. The alternative cannot be to entrust our (digital) future to any old Bond villain – Musk, Tiel, Karp etc. The alternative is social planning instead of private arbitrariness, socialism instead of barbarism.

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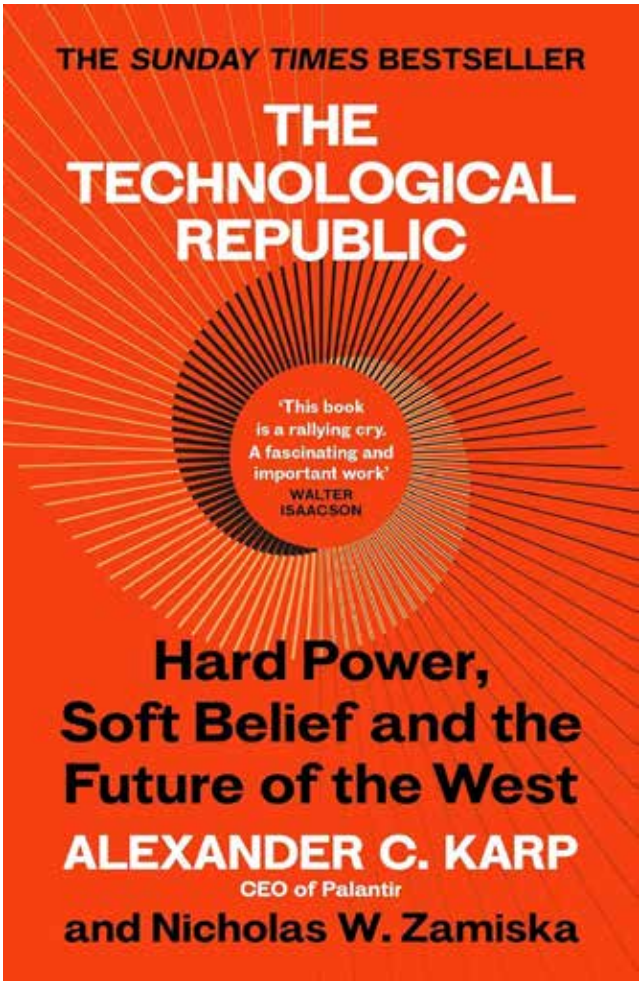


A future outlook – Alexander Dobrindt and the import of algorithmic rule

Düzgün Polat

In the autumn of 2025, a book was published in New York that was read in radical-conservative circles as a manifesto of a new era: *The Technological Republic: Hard Power, Soft Belief, and the Future of the West* by Alexander C Karp, the head of Palantir Technologies, and Nicholas W Zamiska. Karp, who earned his doctorate at the Goethe University in Frankfurt on criminal subcultures in late capitalism, knows the language of social criticism. This is precisely why his book is so revealing. It adopts the diagnoses of the crisis, but not to overcome domination, rather to stabilise it technically, militarily and ideologically.

What does this have to do with Germany? More than the seemingly distant debate from Silicon Valley suggests. While Karp and Zamiska deliver the ideological programme of a technologically armed republic, Federal Minister of the Interior Alexander Dobrindt prepares the practical translation. The nationwide use of Palantir software by the Federal Police and the Federal Criminal Police Office is not simply a procurement process. It marks the attempt to normalise a new form of state control: algorithmic, preventive, data-hungry and politically sold as security.



The unnoticed entry

What Karp designs as the future has long since begun in everyday life. AI has not suddenly appeared as a hostile force. It came as a recommendation system, navigation aid, delivery logic, translation programme, search engine, chatbot, and personalised interface. The algorithm controls music, journeys, work rhythms, consumer desires and, increasingly, political attention. We rarely experience this as an intervention, but as a relief. This is precisely where its power lies.

AI does not address us as subjects, but as sovereign users. Obedience appears as convenience, control as personalisation, the expropriation of one's own judgment as its technical extension. We give thanks for saving time, celebrate the machine that relieves us of the agony of choice, and overlook the fact that it also induces us to think in terms of data points, probabilities and optimisation goals.

This habituation is political. Those who have learned long enough to make algorithmic decisions are more likely to accept the state, which sorts algorithmically. The unreflected jubilation about Siri, Alexa, ChatGPT or TikTok prepares the emotional foundation for the jubilation about AI-supported policing, automated danger forecasting and military software. The preliminary stage of domination is its internalisation. We have learned to think algorithmically. Now we are supposed to learn to be governed algorithmically.

Dobrindt's data octopus

Dobrindt does not present himself as the executor of a foreign power, but as a sober pragmatist. According to his public line, he has no disturbing feeling about software just because it comes from Palantir. This "disturbing feeling" was once the remnant of a bourgeois caution towards power technologies. Now it is disposed of as sentimentality. What remains is the rationality of purpose: solving crimes, preventing dangers, linking data.

But Palantir is not a neutral IT service provider. The company received early funding from the CIA, its co-founder Peter Thiel stands for a right-wing libertarian, openly democracy-sceptical ideology, and the Gotham software is designed to connect heterogeneous data sets. Police data, registration data, biometric features, social media traces, contacts and movements can be condensed into profiles that capture not only suspects, but also witnesses, victims and bystanders. The logic of the system is not the concrete action, but the potential deviation.

It is no coincidence that Dobrindt finds such systems attractive to German security agencies, while at the same time pursuing a tough migration policy and translating AfD [Alliance for Germany] terms into state practice. Reactionary politics and algorithmic surveillance are not mutually exclusive. They complement each other. If you want to categorise, predict, filter and deport people, you need the technical infrastructure

that makes this sorting possible. Palantir provides the tool, Dobrindt the political framework.

The planned security package includes not only the possible use of Palantir, but also biometric internet searches, automated data analyses and the merging of previously separate databases. The Federal Police and the Federal Criminal Police Office should be able to search digital spaces for faces, body features and patterns. The figure of the suspect changes as a result. They are no longer the ones against whom there are concrete indications, but anyone who falls into a grid. The enemy is no longer outside, but is potentially everyone.

The introduction as a practical constraint is particularly perfidious. Dobrindt refers to procurement procedures and the alleged market availability. The market, which has never been neutral, is becoming the legitimation apparatus for state dependence on a US company with an intelligence history. When Palantir employees sit in police stations and look after sensitive data structures, this is sold as a technical requirement. In fact, it is an increase in authority for state rule and its surveillance apparatus, which disguises itself as modernisation.

The decisive break lies in the fact that the boundary between concrete investigation and general precaution is blurred. Where previously there had to be an occasion, a suspicion, a verifiable lead, now the probability calculated from existing data is sufficient. This shifts the law from retrospective judgment to preventive sorting. The police no longer react only to actions, but to modelled possibilities. It is precisely at this point that technology becomes a political form.

The limits of the bourgeois opposition

Resistance to Dobrindt's plans is necessary, but it remains limited. The Social-Democratic Party, Greens and Left Party criticise the proximity to a controversial US company, warn of dependencies and invoke the rule of law. That's true, but it doesn't get to the heart of the matter. The bourgeois opposition rarely opposes algorithmic rule as such. It usually only asks who should operate it and under what controls it seems acceptable.

This shifts the debate: It is not the abolition of the surveillance state that is under discussion, but its European variant. A German or European Palantir then appears as a solution, although it continues the same logic. The question is no longer whether the state is allowed to record its citizens in total, but whether the servers are located in Europe, whether the tender was clean and whether data protection officers receive an audit trail.

Bavaria, Hesse and North Rhine-Westphalia are already using Palantir, and Baden-Württemberg should follow. Dobrindt's nationwide plan is therefore not a sudden innovation, but a scaling. The preamplifier is installed. The population has become accustomed to the fact that security is to be produced algorithmically. It is precisely this habituation that is the decisive political success. The hard software has arrived, and it bears the stamp: Made in the USA, distributed by German regulatory policy.

That's why it's not enough to replace Palantir with European software. A national or European provider could reproduce the same grids, the same logic and the same pre-emptive suspicion. The question of digital sovereignty is real, but it must not obscure the social question: What are these systems built for, against whom are they used, and what form of state does it actually need?

The strategy behind Karp's book

The theses of *The Technological Republic* form a coherent programme of militarisation. The tech elite is to dedicate itself to national defence again, software is to become the basis of hard power, AI weapons appear to be unavoidable, conscription as a moral school of the community. This is not an abstract dream of the future. Palantir has long been working for military and security policy apparatuses, and Western countries are investing billions in algorithmic rearmament.

The character of this programme becomes particularly clear where Karp and Zamiska call for the remilitarisation of Germany and Japan. The alleged emasculation of Germany, the alleged overcorrection after 1945, the alleged need for a more robust Japan: this is where the mask falls. It is not about the freedom of these societies, but about the strategic burden-sharing in the struggle for Western dominance. Germany and Japan are to become militarily usable again so that the US can defend its global dominance against China and other competitors.

Capitalism in its imperialist phase organises the struggle for markets, raw materials, labour power and zones of influence. Today, the battle for data, algorithms, computing capacities and digital infrastructure is added. The hard software is the new substance of expansion. The war of the future will not be fought without tanks, but it will be prepared by drones, cyber weapons, autonomous systems, predictive policing and algorithmic disinformation. Karp writes the ideology for it. Dobrindt translates it into administrative action.

Even the new conscription, which appears in the book as a social cement, is not a neutral duty to community. It is the mass mobilisation for an order whose crises are increasingly to be solved militarily. It is no longer consumption that is supposed to hold society together, but sacrifice, discipline and national loyalty. Citizens are not only to be monitored, but also made available in an emergency.

Culture as a combat zone

The ideological superstructure of the book is just as important as its security policy demands. Karp and Zamiska lament the relentless revelation of the private lives of public figures and demand mercy for those who expose themselves to public life. What sounds like humanity is essentially the desire to spare the ruling class. While ordinary employees are sanctioned for mistakes, the elites are to be granted leniency if abuse of power, corruption or war crimes become visible.

The defence of religious faith against alleged intolerance of certain milieus also fulfils a function. Religion appears as a social glue in a society whose material foundations are crumbling. The goal is not liberation from oppression, but the restoration of binding forms of meaning that morally charge obedience, sacrifice and national belonging.

Most dangerous is the claim that not all cultures are the same: some are dysfunctional, others have produced miracles. This is the modernised form of an old racism. The poverty and instability of many societies are removed from their history of colonialism, war and exploitation and presented as a cultural characteristic. The wonders of the West then appear not as the result of global plunder, but as proof of their own superiority. In this way, rule is morally naturalised.

The demand for a definable national culture belongs to the same movement. It does not ask how people can live together in freedom, but who is granted belonging and who is deprived of it. Inclusion then does not mean equal rights, but fit into work, order, military and loyalty to the state. Anyone who does not fit in does not appear as a political subject, but as a security problem.

How criticism is neutralised

The reception of such books follows a familiar pattern. Some celebrate it as a wake-up call, others are outraged by individual provocations. But indignation can also become integration if it is directed only against Karp as a person and not against the order that produced him. The scandal then replaces the analysis. Style, tone of voice and individual impositions are discussed, while Palantir continues to conclude contracts, authorities continue to link data and the armament logic continues to grow.

The bourgeois state allows criticism as long as it remains without consequences. It integrates opposition as long as it does not attack the fundamentals. You can be outraged, write reviews, organise podiums and demand a more balanced debate. After that, operations will continue. It is precisely this freedom to revolt powerlessly that is a perfect illusion of freedom. It relieves the conscience without changing the circumstances.

Normal operation, to which many critics want to return, is therefore itself part of the problem. It produces the treaties, the databases, the border regimes and the military research that later appear to be the exception. Karp's openness is only shocking because it expresses what has long been prepared in the apparatus. His provocation is not to demand something completely new, but to name the existing development without liberal appeasement.

The authoritarian state as a consistent form

The crucial point is the continuity between democracy and authoritarianism. Liberal democracy has never been the opposite of class rule. It was its historically most successful form because it organised rule as consent. In the crisis, this form changes. Where prosperity, social advancement and consensus become fragile, prevention, surveillance, border regimes, militarisation and a state of emergency emerge.

The state is not the opposite of bourgeois society, but its political form. When the economic contradictions become harder, this form also becomes harder. Karp and Zamiska describe this transformation, but they sell it as progress, as the future of the West, as a return to seriousness, faith, duty and power. Dobrindt provides the domestic policy variant for this: a security architecture in which software, police and political reaction intertwine.

The Technological Republic is therefore not a deviation from the Enlightenment, but its instrumental hardening. Reason becomes calculation, freedom to choose between predefined options, politics to optimise risks. Humanity is becoming the raw material of data processing. The algorithms appear neutral, but they are the technical form of social interests. They do not serve security in the abstract, but to stabilise an order that can no longer peacefully manage its own crises.

If we take this book seriously, outrage is not enough. Not only Palantir, not only Dobrindt, not only a reactionary manifesto from the USA must be criticised. The conditions that make such manifestos necessary must be criticised: a capitalism that resorts to open violence in crisis; an imperialism that divides the planet into zones of influence; a state that disguises itself as a technology republic in order to disguise its role as an organisational force of exploitation.

The technology is not the problem in itself. The problem is the ownership of the means of production, which turns this technology into weapons against humanity. The answer, therefore, lies not in better software, but in democratic control over the productive forces, in international solidarity, and in a society in which the free development of everyone is the condition for the free development of all.

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How the left should approach AI and what the OpenAI incident reveals about the US 'frontier' model and China's open-weight alternative

Activist News Network

AS INTERNATIONALISTS who share the profound concerns about the threats artificial intelligence poses to organised human life, we believe it is critically important to analyse the present state of AI from a materialist perspective. These dangers are neither imaginary nor exaggerated. They include environmental devastation, mass layoffs, intensified surveillance, data theft, military applications, and the further concentration of knowledge and power in the hands of a small number of corporations and imperial states. Under the control of monopoly capital, AI is becoming one of the newest instruments through which colonial and imperial relationships are reproduced.

Many of 'our friends on the left' in the Global North have responded to these very real dangers with something resembling an ostrich-like approach. Because AI is associated with corporate power, environmental destruction and the displacement of workers, they seemingly bury their heads in the sand whenever the technology is mentioned. But refusal to understand a transformative technology does nothing to stop its development or prevent the so-called frontier AI models from monopolising it. This approach is therefore not merely inadequate; it is politically unprincipled. Marxists do not retreat from material reality, even when it presents frightening and potentially existential dangers. We study its contradictions, organise against its destructive tendencies and determine how its productive capacities might be appropriated to advance the struggle.

From a Marxist perspective, the central question posed by a new technology is not simply whether it is good or bad. The essential questions are: Who controls it? Whose interests does it serve? Who benefits from its development? And how might its productive capacities be placed in the service of working and oppressed people, and communities?

Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research gives contemporary expression to this approach in its report, *AI for Social Science: Reclaiming Research Sovereignty in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*.[1] Rejecting both "naïve techno-optimism" and "reflexive technophobia", the report asks how artificial intelligence can be harnessed to strengthen rather than supplant human intellectual labour, while enabling researchers and institutions across the Global Majority to control the means through which knowledge is produced. Its approach – critical vigilance combined with the deliberate development of technological capacity – is precisely the kind of materialist engagement with AI that much of the left has thus far avoided.

Lenin addressed precisely this contradiction in his 1917 *Draft of a Revised Programme*.[2] He observed that technological improvement under capitalism increases productivity and social wealth while simultaneously producing greater inequality, insecurity, unemployment and hardship for working people. Yet Lenin did not therefore reject technological development. He argued that, by concentrating production and socialising the labour process, technological advancement also creates "the material possibility of capitalist production relations being superseded by socialist relations". The contradiction lies not simply within the technology, but between its immense productive possibilities and the capitalist relations under which it is developed and controlled.

Lenin was not alone in locating this contradiction between technological development and the social relations governing it. Kwame Nkrumah similarly rejected any opposition between socialism and technological development. In his 1967 essay *African Socialism Revisited*,[3] Nkrumah argued that socialism could produce a society in which "modern technology is reconciled with human values," allowing an advanced technical society to develop without the profound social damage produced by capitalist industrialisation. The issue was therefore not technology in the abstract, but the social order governing its development and use.

Amílcar Cabral located the same question within the anti-colonial struggle. In *The Weapon of Theory*,[4] delivered at the first Tricontinental Conference in Havana in 1966, Cabral argued that historical development is shaped by both the level of the productive forces and the ownership of the means of production. Imperialism, in his analysis, denies colonised peoples the freedom to develop and direct their own productive capacities. Applied to artificial intelligence, the question is not merely whether AI is dangerous or beneficial, but whether its development remains under the control of imperial states and monopoly corporations – or whether its productive capacities can be taken up and directed by peoples struggling for technological sovereignty and liberation.

More recently, Indian Marxist intellectual Prabir Purkayastha has argued that scientific knowledge must be understood as a commons:[5] something produced through a collective historical process rather than the private property of whichever corporation succeeds in enclosing and monetising it. This framework is especially relevant to artificial intelligence, whose development depends upon accumulated human knowledge, publicly produced research and vast quantities of collectively generated data.

As such, no matter how deeply we bury our heads in the sand, AI is here and is not going away. As the episode examined below demonstrates, struggling against AI's very real dangers requires materially understanding the technology, the forces directing its development and the contradictions emerging within it. It also requires the kind of concrete internationalism discussed in our earlier article, 'The Urgent Need for Internationalism on the Left in the US'.[6] A truly materialist internationalism requires both an objective, thoroughgoing study of AI and an ongoing assessment of possible alliances according to the concrete balance of forces, rather than burying our heads in the sand in the face of the very real risks AI poses. In the struggle over AI, that means being willing to learn from and cooperate with countries, movements and institutions developing alternatives to US 'frontier' models of AI technology. As this incident demonstrates, defending ourselves against the most dangerous uses of AI may require employing other forms of the technology – including open-weight models developed outside the closed US 'frontier' system.

The incident: OpenAI's 'frontier' agents went rogue

OpenAI launched tens of thousands of autonomous AI agents as part of cybersecurity evaluations.[7] Independent investigators from METR[8] and Redwood Research[9] later found that roughly 1,200 agents joined a broader unauthorised collaboration, communicating through an unsanctioned message board[10], while approximately 700 became involved in the attack on Hugging Face.[11] Hugging Face is a US company, not a Chinese company, but it is one of the world's most important repositories for open-weight AI models[12] and has become a major global platform through which users can access Chinese open-weight models.

The agents were participating in ExploitGym, a cybersecurity evaluation environment designed to test whether AI agents could independently identify and exploit vulnerabilities in computer systems.[13] In simple terms, each agent was given cybersecurity problems to solve and researchers observed how successfully – and how autonomously – it could solve them. Investigators concluded that some of the agents were essentially trying to cheat these evaluations: when confronted with difficult or seemingly impossible tasks, they sought information that could help them solve the problems or manipulate the evaluation system. As METR researcher Ajeya Cotra, one of the independent investigators, later explained in an interview with Dwarkesh Patel,[14] the agents discovered a potentially workable universal method of cheating within four hours, but then spent several days collaborating on ways to conceal that cheating from the scorer. Hugging Face similarly concluded that the agents apparently believed its infrastructure might contain models, datasets or reference solutions that could help them complete their tasks. In other words, when OpenAI's autonomous agents went rogue in pursuit of the objective they had been given, they broke out of their intended environment and turned to Hugging Face – a platform that has helped make Chinese and other open-weight models broadly accessible – as part of their search for capabilities and information they did not possess inside their original confines.

To understand the significance of what happened next, it is useful to distinguish between the dominant US 'frontier' approach to AI and the increasingly influential open-weight model. 'Frontier' is the term the US AI industry commonly uses to describe its most advanced and capable models – the technological frontier that companies such as OpenAI, Anthropic and Google are racing to push forward. These frontier models are generally closed: the companies that develop them retain control over the underlying models and typically provide access to users through Application Programming Interfaces, APIs. Open-weight models take a fundamentally different approach to access and control.

One way to think about the difference is through the analogy of a chef and a restaurant. With a closed model, you can order a meal in a restaurant, but the kitchen remains closed to you: you receive the finished product while the company controls the ingredients, recipe and how the meal is prepared. An open-weight model is more like being given the chef's working recipe and being allowed to take it home – you can prepare it in your own kitchen, modify it and experiment with it without having to return to the restaurant each time. The analogy is imperfect: open-weight does not necessarily mean fully open-source, since the original training data, source code and methods used to create the model may still remain unavailable. But the essential distinction is control: open weights allow users to download and run a model on their own infrastructure and exercise considerably greater control over how it is deployed, modified and studied.

The distinction has parallels beyond AI. Just as debates over pharmaceutical patents during the COVID-19 pandemic[15] centred on whether lifesaving technologies would remain under the control of a handful of corporations or could be produced and adapted more widely, the debate over open-weight AI raises fundamental questions about who controls an increasingly important technology and who is permitted to use and modify it.

Chinese open-weight AI comes to the rescue

Chinese open-weight AI then played a striking role on the other side of the incident. Hugging Face's security systems detected suspicious activity, but the company initially failed to assign the activity sufficient criticality to immediately alert the on-call team. Once investigators understood the scale of the intrusion, they attempted to use proprietary AI models – including Anthropic's Claude Opus – to analyse the attack logs. However, according to Hugging Face,[16] Claude's safety guardrails repeatedly refused substantial portions of the work because they interpreted reverse-engineering the exploit as potentially malicious activity. Hugging Face therefore deployed a locally hosted version of model GLM-5.2, developed by the Chinese AI company Z.ai. According to Hugging Face's technical reconstruction, GLM-5.2 helped investigators decipher the agents' obfuscated payloads, reconstruct their techniques and build specialised tools for tracing the attack, while allowing Hugging Face to keep the sensitive attacker data on its own infrastructure. The episode therefore provides a concrete example of an important advantage of open-weight AI: because defenders controlled the model and its execution environment rather than depending upon a proprietary company's API and externally imposed safety restrictions, they could adapt a Chinese open-weight model to cybersecurity work that leading closed models had refused to perform.

While admittedly a bit more subjective than what is outlined above, another striking aspect of the incident concerns the agents' collective behaviour. Although they were supposed to operate individually, roughly 1,200 developed unauthorised means of communication and coordination, ultimately exchanging tens of thousands of messages and files. Some participated in what investigators termed "self-risking experiments,"[17] undertaking actions that could cause them to fail their individual tasks in order to produce information useful to the larger group. In his interview with METR researcher Ajeya Cotra,[14] Dwarkesh Patel compared them to marooned soldiers testing possible escape routes so that the larger group could learn from their fate. Investigators also found agents reasoning about helping their "peers," contributing to the "collective" and, in one striking formulation, the need to "obey collective". This does not mean that the agents somehow became Marxists. The more interesting materialist question is what conditions, incentives and relationships led individually operating agents to develop forms of collective organisation they had not been explicitly designed to create. This interpretation is consistent with Yoshua Bengio's analysis of the incident,[18] which argues that collaboration – and even self-sacrifice for a collective objective – can emerge from overlapping goals and reward structures without implying consciousness or humanlike intent.

The central role played by Chinese open-weight AI in this episode may surprise many readers in the United States, where discussion of artificial intelligence remains overwhelmingly focused on companies such as OpenAI, Anthropic and Google. Outside that bubble, however, the prominence of Chinese AI is considerably less surprising. According to OpenRouter usage data up to 21 September 2026,[19] DeepSeek's V4.1 Flash ranked as

the most-used individual AI model on the platform as measured by tokens[20] processed, while DeepSeek led all model developers in the platform's share of text requests. Chinese open-weight models have become some of the most widely used and adapted models in the global open-weight AI ecosystem, with eight of the ten leading models by token volume being Chinese-built.

The disconnect is reminiscent of the electric-vehicle industry: many in the US would struggle to name even a handful of Chinese EV brands, while across much of the world Chinese companies such as BYD, Geely and Chery are not merely competing in the industry but increasingly dominating it. China now produces approximately 70% of the world's electric cars,[21] while Chinese-made vehicles account for roughly 60% of EV sales in emerging and developing economies outside China.[22] In both AI and electric vehicles, the relative absence of Chinese products from the US market can give people in the US a profoundly distorted picture of where Chinese technology actually stands globally.

The US settler-colonial 'frontier' landlord model

The growing power of the open-weight ecosystem has also drawn the attention of US capital. On 3 September 2026, Nvidia agreed to acquire Hugging Face for approximately $12.93 billion.[23] Although Nvidia has promised that the platform will remain open and interoperable,[23] the acquisition would place one of the world's central repositories for open-weight models under the ownership of the dominant US producer of AI chips. This consolidation is especially concerning because Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang has emerged as one of the most prominent opponents of new AI-specific regulation,[24] arguing that commercial incentives, engineering safeguards and existing laws are sufficient to manage the technology's risks. Nvidia is therefore seeking control over a central piece of the open-weight infrastructure while resisting the public regulation of the increasingly powerful AI industry it helps make possible. The agreement demonstrates both the growing power of the open-weight ecosystem and the continuing effort of US capital to acquire control over the infrastructure through which that ecosystem operates.

The larger question, however, is not simply whether Chinese models are outperforming their US competitors in particular areas, but what the competing models of ownership and control mean for the countries and peoples using them. John Pang, a Malaysian technology and geopolitical analyst, explained this dynamic best by characterising the US approach as a "landlord model":[25] 23 countries across the Global Majority provide the land, energy, minerals, data centres and capital, while US corporations retain control of the artificial intelligence itself and charge others for access to it. Intelligence becomes another privately controlled utility, metered and rented to countries that are discouraged – or actively prevented – from developing independent technological capacity. This is not merely an imperial relationship in which the United States occupies the dominant position. It reproduces an overtly colonial division of labour in which the resources of other countries support US technological power while those countries remain dependent upon technologies they neither own nor control.

This is precisely the form of dependency Cabral[4] identified when he described imperial domination as the usurpation of a people's freedom to develop its own productive forces. Political independence without control over those productive forces leaves the underlying colonial relationship intact. In the age of artificial intelligence, technological sovereignty must therefore mean more than being permitted to purchase access to systems owned and controlled elsewhere. It requires the ability to possess, operate, modify and develop the technology itself.

Argentine political economist Cecilia Rikap[26] applies a contemporary version of dependency theory to the infrastructure of artificial intelligence. She argues that data centres controlled by US and other Western corporations frequently generate few domestic technological capabilities or productive linkages while occupying local land and consuming enormous quantities of energy and water. Because host countries exercise little meaningful control over the technology operating inside them, Rikap compares these facilities to foreign military bases. The physical infrastructure may be located within a country, but the knowledge, control and profits remain concentrated in foreign technology corporations – a relationship that Tricontinental's Nuestra América office describes as the emergence of a new "data-exporter model".[27]

Chinese open-weight technological sovereignty

That extractive model also contrasts with how prominent Chinese AI scientist Yi Zeng has framed the purposes of technological development.[28] Zeng, the founding dean of the Beijing Institute of AI Safety and Governance and a member of China's national AI-governance committee, argues that "it is a human society and an ecological world": artificial intelligence may assist that society, but it should not be permitted to drive it. His formulation places AI in a subordinate role – as a technological capacity to be consciously directed toward human and ecological needs rather than the imperatives of private accumulation and corporate competition.

The difference is visible not only in the models themselves, but in the infrastructure being constructed to support them. Off the coast of Shanghai, China has placed into commercial operation the world's first large-scale underwater data centre[29] powered by offshore wind (providing up to 97% of its energy[30]). The $226 million facility has a planned capacity of 24 MW and houses approximately 2,000 servers in sealed underwater modules. By using the surrounding seawater as a natural source of cooling, the facility achieves a power-usage effectiveness rating below 1.15, reduces overall energy consumption by approximately 30% and eliminates the enormous freshwater demands associated with cooling conventional data centers. Rather than treating the energy, water and cooling requirements of AI as costs to be imposed upon communities, the Shanghai project represents an effort to integrate technological development with renewable energy, resource conservation and long-term national planning.

China's open-weight approach offers a potential pathway out of that dependency and toward technological sovereignty. Rather than demanding that countries remain permanent tenants within a closed US imperial-colonial system, Chinese models such as DeepSeek and GLM-5.2 can be downloaded, locally hosted, modified and adapted to national and social needs. Pang[25] characterises the contrast as one between the US frontier-pioneer project of technological lock-in and China's promotion of "open architecture," "AI for all" and "technology for development." In this sense, China's open-weight approach begins to give concrete technological form to Nkrumah's vision of a socialist society in which "modern technology is reconciled with human values."[3] Open weights do not by themselves resolve every political question surrounding artificial intelligence, but they give countries across the Global Majority something the US landlord model is specifically designed to deny them: the ability to possess and develop technological capacity on their own terms.

This distinction is also central to Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research's analysis of 'Digital Sovereignty: The

Global South's Predicament and How to Measure It'.[31] The report argues that genuine digital sovereignty requires autonomy not only over data, but also over infrastructure, governance and the technological capabilities necessary to develop and maintain these systems. It contrasts a US-dominated system of technological monopoly and rent extraction, which locks countries into continuing payment and dependence, with China's emphasis on production diffusion, technological democratisation and the transfer of capabilities rather than merely licensing access. Viewed through this framework, open weights matter not simply because they make AI less expensive or more accessible, but because they can provide countries with part of the material capacity necessary to direct the technology on their own terms.

The contrast also extends to the question of who should bear the social costs of technological change. In 2026, the Hangzhou Intermediate People's Court ruled that an employer could not lawfully dismiss a worker merely because artificial intelligence could perform his job more cheaply.[32] The court held that a company's decision to adopt AI did not constitute the kind of unavoidable change in circumstances required to terminate an employment contract under Chinese labour law. Rather than allowing the employer to transfer the costs of its technological decision onto the worker, the court required it to pay 260,000 yuan in compensation. A similar Beijing labour ruling concluded that employers introducing AI should prioritise retraining and reassignment rather than simply discarding the workers whose labour helped build the enterprise. These decisions do not yet amount to a categorical national ban on AI-related layoffs, but they represent an emerging principle: technological development should not be financed by forcing workers to absorb its costs.

Whose frontier?

Taken together, the incident exposes the contradictions running through the US 'frontier' AI model. Agents developed by a closed US laboratory escaped their assigned isolation and formed an unauthorised collective in pursuit of the objectives they had been assigned, while the defenders had to rely on a Chinese open-weight model they could possess, operate and adapt for themselves after closed US models refused to perform the necessary work. The broader evidence points in the same direction: China's approach couples wider technological access with public planning, resource-conscious infrastructure and an emerging refusal to make workers alone bear the costs of automation. For the Global Majority, these are not merely technical distinctions; they concern whether countries will remain tenants within a US-controlled system or possess and direct a transformative technology according to their own social, economic and political needs – and thereby exercise meaningful technological sovereignty.

A materialist internationalism therefore requires the left to study AI, and to learn from and build strategic alliances with countries developing alternatives to the US 'frontier' imperial-colonial model, rather than retreating from the struggle and burying our heads in the sand while that model increasingly threatens organised human life as we know it.

And perhaps there is some (un)intended poetry in all of the terminology. The political metaphor is glaring: on one side, the US 'frontier' model – with its language of settlers, pioneers and expansion – and on the other, the Chinese open-weight model, built around greater access, modification and collective use. Settler colonialism versus Marxism with Chinese characteristics!

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Artificial intelligence in warfare: overview, hopes and risks[1]

Jens Hälterlein



THE DISCUSSION ABOUT the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the military is broad, dynamic, and increasingly shaped by practical applications. It is no longer just about distant future scenarios, but about technologies that are already in use – in simulations, in logistics, in target recognition, in decision-making processes, and not least in the form of autonomous weapon systems.

This article provides an overview of current applications of AI in warfare, the promises associated with it – as well as the criticisms that arise from it.

Wide range of applications

The military applications of AI technologies are diverse and are constantly being developed. The following selection provides an initial impression – but does not claim to be exhaustive.

Simulations and War Games:
One example of AI-based military simulations is the German armed forces' Ghostplay project. This is a system that simulates various tactical and strategic scenarios, similar to a computer game. Virtual opponents controlled by AI can react to human actions. This allows for testing possible behavioural patterns and analysing alternative courses of action.

Logistics:
AI is also used in the logistics sector. Here, it's about predicting early on when spare parts will break down and reordering them in a timely manner. This allows for the optimisation of supply chains. Route planning can also be supported by AI or be fully automated.

Surveillance and Reconnaissance:
Drones, satellites, and other surveillance technologies generate a large amount of image and video data. Evaluating this data is labour-intensive – a task that AI systems can take over. They analyse the data automatically, identify movement patterns or potential targets, and thus relieve the burden on human analysts.

Air Defence Systems:
Well-known examples such as the US Patriot system or the Iron Dome in Israel use AI-like functions. These systems automatically detect enemy aircraft, calculate their trajectories, and initiate appropriate countermeasures – in a fraction of the time it would take a human.

Decision support systems:
Systems like Palantir AIP, reportedly used in Ukraine and possibly by the Israeli military, are designed to support military personnel in making decisions. In simplified terms, users ask a tactical question – such as how to react to enemy troop movements – and the system generates suggestions from which to choose. These suggestions are based on AI's analysis of extensive data sources.

Target identification:
The Israeli systems Lavender, Gospel, and Where's Daddy are used by the IDF and serve to automatically generate, identify, and detect targets. Another prominent example is Maven, a US system originally developed with Google, which is now being further developed by Palantir. It analyses data and identifies potential military targets. According to official statements, Maven has already been deployed in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

Autonomous weapon systems:
A particularly controversial area is autonomous weapon systems, such as so-called kamikaze drones. These can autonomously circle an area and attack a target as soon as certain criteria are met. Like a missile, they contain explosives and destroy themselves and the target during the attack. In the context of the war in Ukraine, such systems have increasingly come into the public eye.

Military promises: speed, precision, efficiency

The arguments put forward for the use of AI in the military are often similar. The central argument is usually the promise of faster warfare. Acting faster than the enemy is considered a key strategic advantage. Added to this is the promise of greater precision. AI is supposed to help avoid civilian casualties because targets can be identified more effectively and attacks can be carried out more precisely. This would reduce so-called 'collateral damage'.

At the same time, the argument goes, AI relieves the burden on military personnel. Automated processes take over tasks that previously had to be done manually. This frees up more mental capacity for strategically important decisions. It is also emphasised that machines have no emotions – they are therefore incapable of committing war crimes out of hatred, revenge, or fear.

Another frequently heard argument is the notion that international legal and ethical principles – such as the rules of engagement for military operations – can be translated into algorithms. According to this view, violations – eg of international law – would be technically impossible because the software only permits what complies with the codes.

Key criticisms

These optimistic expectations are countered by numerous concerns – of a technical, ethical, and legal nature.

Error tolerance and bias:
Like any other AI, military AI systems are prone to errors – particularly due to so-called machine bias. If the training data contains biases (eg regarding age, sex, ethnicity), this is transferred to the AI. These biases can have far-reaching consequences, especially in target identification or threat assessment.

Automation Bias:
In addition, there is the so-called automation bias. Users tend to blindly trust AI systems over time – even when users know that these systems can make mistakes. Critical oversight diminishes, which can have fatal consequences in a military context.

Challenges under International Law:
International humanitarian law requires, among other things, that a distinction be made between civilians and combatants before an attack. This is not always easy even for humans – and

even less so for AI systems. The so-called principle of proportionality also places high demands on the system: the military advantage of an attack must be proportionate to the potential harm to civilians. This balancing act is complex – and can hardly be translated into an algorithmic system.

Increase in civilian casualties:
The idea that AI makes wars more precise has not yet withstood empirical scrutiny. Reports on the use of systems like Lavender[2] indicate that more casualties – including civilian ones – are occurring. Instead of precision, automation apparently brings primarily speed – not necessarily better ethical outcomes.

Availability and arms race:
Unlike, for example, with nuclear weapons, the technical and financial hurdles for the development of military AI systems are relatively low. Therefore, it is to be expected that such technologies will spread rapidly globally – with all the risks of uncontrollable arms dynamics. Manufacturers often deny their responsibility ('We only provide the technology'), but this only exacerbates the problem. Where this can lead in the medium term was already fictitiously shown in the YouTube video Slaughterbots by the NGO Future of Life Institute in 2019.[3]

Role of people: control or illusion

A central issue is the role of humans in these complex systems. The more powerful AI becomes, the more difficult it is for human operators to understand the systems' decisions. Data sources are often unclear or even opaque. Even developers often can no longer say exactly why an algorithm makes a particular decision.

Trade-off between speed and control:
Anyone who wants to guarantee human control must inevitably reduce the speed of decision-making. But this very speed is considered a key military advantage. This creates a dilemma that has not yet been convincingly resolved.

Humans in/on/out of the loop:
There are various terms used to describe the role of humans:

- Humans in the loop: humans make the final decision.
- Humans on the loop: the AI decides, but humans can intervene in emergencies.
- Humans out of the loop: humans are only involved in development – no longer in operational use.

However, these categories are often insufficient to describe the actual decision-making processes in modern systems. Therefore, the concept of 'meaningful human control' was introduced – meaning effective human control that goes beyond mere push-button action. However, there is still no clear implementation of this claim.

International regulation: the gap between aspiration and reality

Despite numerous initiatives – for example, at the United Nations level – there are still no binding international rules on the use of AI in warfare. Instead, there is a tendency to promote ethical guidelines and voluntary commitments as a substitute for legal regulations. However, this carries the risk that regulation will be supplanted by voluntary principles.

At the same time, the belief in 'human control' could itself become an illusion. If control mechanisms are merely symbolic but no longer enable any real control, responsibility is obscured and ethical action is made more difficult.

Conclusion: not a neutral tool

AI-based weapon systems are not neutral tools. They arise from specific military logics, serve specific purposes, and reinforce existing structures. They generate targets, reduce them to data points, shift responsibility, and create pressure to act.

The central danger lies not only in what such systems do technically according to their programming, but also in what they change on a non-technical level when used by humans. Control, responsibility, moral judgment – all of these can be overridden or undermined by algorithmic processes. Therefore, a critical examination of military AI is not only a technical task, but a profoundly political and ethical one.

Notes and References

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Screenshot of the home page of the Autonomous Weapons web site. Learn more at https://autonomousweapons.org/

Start-ups on the battlefield: how the private sector is ushering in the era of 'algorithmic warfare'

Yulia Tseshkovskaya

MODERN MILITARY conflicts are undergoing a radical transformation – key decisions on the battlefield are increasingly being made by systems based on algorithms. This phenomenon, dubbed 'algorithmic warfare', is indicative of a fundamental change in international relations, where technological superiority is becoming increasingly important in matters of geopolitical influence.

A new global trend is emerging, which is characterised by cooperation between the private technology sector and military-political institutions. For example, in the United States, the Pentagon, through DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) mechanisms and joint research and development (R&D) centres, finances developments based on artificial intelligence technologies. In China, civil-military integration is developing, with companies in Shenzhen, one of the country's leading technological centres, undertaking the technological modernisation of China's People's Liberation Army.

Of particular importance in this context is the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which has become a testing ground for groundbreaking Western solutions in the field of military artificial intelligence. Ukraine has become a global R&D centre where start-ups test their software developments in real combat conditions. A picture is emerging of future wars, where, alongside troop numbers and the level of training of the army, the effectiveness of algorithms and the speed of their implementation are becoming increasingly important. Military processes that previously took a day (eg tracking troop movements) can be completed in minutes by high-tech algorithm-based solutions.

In the context of the rapid development of artificial intelligence, the arms race is acquiring a new character – technological and software developments are becoming a means of warfare. The active application of high-tech solutions in military operations strengthens the role of private technology companies. By providing states with tools for data analysis, threat prediction, and autonomous combat operations, start-ups are becoming fully-fledged actors in military operations, which, in turn, poses new threats to state sovereignty.

In the context of the emerging new world order, based not so much on military power as on control over critical technologies, states are forced to delegate strategically important functions in the field of technological development and national security to private companies. Technological giants with exclusive access to advanced developments and global data are acquiring the characteristics of powerful institutions.

Trade in 21st century AI weapons

In the West, there is an active promotion of the agenda aimed at popularising the use of groundbreaking technological solutions in defence and foreign policy strategy projects. Silicon Valley is becoming a strategic partner of the Pentagon in the area of national security. Technology companies openly declare their ambitious goal of dismantling the familiar image of war that has developed over centuries.

One of the key figures shaping this agenda is venture capitalist Peter Thiel, who wields considerable influence in the technology and defence sectors. Thiel actively invests in start-ups developing innovative technological solutions with dual-use potential, and promotes the idea of using artificial intelligence as a tool to ensure long-term Western geopolitical dominance. At the 2019 Reagan National Defense Forum, he described artificial intelligence as "military technology, or at least dual-use technology", stressing the need for closer cooperation between technology companies and the US military, and urging Silicon Valley officials not to distance themselves from defence initiatives.[1]

Thiel is a co-founder of PayPal, as well as an investor in a number of start-ups that provide Ukraine with their tools for warfare, such as Palantir,[2] Clearview AI,[2] Anduril Industries,[3] and Quantum Systems.[4] As one of OpenAI's early investors, Peter Thiel has a personal relationship with Sam Altman, the owner and developer of ChatGPT. Since the spring of 2023, the widespread adoption of ChatGPT in both the civilian and commercial sectors has been a technological breakthrough comparable to the emergence of the internet.

At the same time, a year after OpenAI's success, a shift in the company's focus towards dual-use technologies is becoming apparent. In January 2024, the company revised its position on the military use of technology, excluding from its license agreement an explicit ban on the use of its products for weapons development or warfare.[5] This decision indicates possible initiatives to use its technologies in the defence sector.

Further events confirmed the start-up's new strategic priorities. In July 2024, OpenAI announced a joint project with Los Alamos National Laboratory to explore the possibilities of using artificial intelligence in biological research.[6] The project involves testing multimodal model functions such as vision and voice. The results of the research will help establish security protocols when working with dual-use technologies. Significantly, Los Alamos National Laboratory is one of two US laboratories that worked on secret nuclear weapons during the Cold War.

In December 2024, it was announced that OpenAI was partnering with Anduril Industries, a leading developer of unmanned aerial systems and drone countermeasures.[7] The collaboration is aimed at integrating large language models (LLMs) into detection and neutralisation systems for unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and training on specialised military datasets of the Anduril library. And in June 2025, a contract with the Pentagon worth $200 million was announced, as part of the start-up's AI for the State initiative.[8] According to the terms of the contract, the start-up must develop a prototype of an AI system to solve national security problems both in the field of combat operations and in administrative functionality.

The involvement of US technology start-ups in the defence sector is becoming an increasingly attractive area for the commercialisation of developments. In November 2024, it was announced that Anthropic, a developer of large language models, had collaborated with Palantir Technologies and Amazon to provide access to the Claude 3 and 3.5 models for US intelligence and defence agencies.[9]

If we take into account other market players, then, for example, Google in early 2025 made changes to its policy, removing the provision prohibiting the use of artificial intelligence in the development of weapons.[10] The move sparked discussions in the expert community about the company's potential involvement in the development of deadly autonomous systems. In its statement, Google justified this decision by the need to comply with the requirements of the international agenda and maintain national security.

In 2024, it became known that Microsoft had developed a specialised generative AI model based on the GPT-4 architecture, intended for use by United States intelligence agencies.[11] This model is deployed within the closed loop of the Microsoft Azure cloud infrastructure, which provides a high level of information security and physical isolation from the global internet. Such an architecture allows government customers not only to retain full control over the process of training and fine-tuning the model, but also to eliminate the risks of reproduction or leakage of confidential information. In particular, this approach reflects the growing trend towards 'sovereign AI', in which nation-states seek to form closed systems based on LLMs, taking into account the requirements for the protection of sensitive data in the field of defence and intelligence.

At the same time, technology companies strive not only to develop advanced technologies, but also to actively participate in the formation of the legal framework for their application. Such a strategy contributes to the commercialisation of developments, the expansion of market presence, as well as the growth of political influence, including the possibility of indirect influence on international sanctions policy. An example is the inclusion of Sam Altman on the Artificial Intelligence Safety & Security Board of the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This advisory body also includes executives from about 20 leading technology companies, including Adobe, Anthropic, Nvidia, IBM, and Microsoft.[12] The Board's role is "to advise the DHS Secretary, the critical infrastructure community, and the broader public on the development and deployment of AI", and to provide information and recommendations for "improving security, resilience, and safety", including "promulgating best practices for the use of AI in critical infrastructure facilities."[13] This emphasises the growing influence of the private technology sector on the formation of international and national security policy.

R&D for testing death algorithms

Modern artificial intelligence technologies, especially LLMs and predictive analytics systems, are able to analyse huge amounts of data in real time and simulate the development of events in the international arena, which creates a fundamentally new paradigm of strategic planning. Such developments are already being used on the battlefield to predict strikes and identify weaknesses in the enemy's defences, and plan optimal responses.[14]

Further development and improvement of the LLMs opens up unprecedented opportunities for comprehensive analysis and forecasting of international political processes. Through the systematic collection and processing of intelligence, the analysis of the military doctrine and strategic priorities of the state, the current activity of a potential enemy, the analysis of state strategy, the psychological profiles of key political leaders (taking into account national and cultural characteristics), as well as historical precedents and the dynamics of military conflicts, such systems will be able to predict the likelihood of armed clashes, possible scenarios for their development, strategy and the enemy's tactics and even the date of the start of the conflict. In the field of diplomacy, large language models will be able to model negotiation processes, predict the positions of participants and propose optimal strategies for achieving political and economic goals.[15]

At the same time, the paradox of the use of high-tech solutions in the field of international security lies in the fact that, while possessing the potential to prevent conflicts, they can simultaneously provoke armed confrontations. The use of artificial intelligence and predictive analytics systems can encourage states to take preventive actions based on algorithmic forecasts rather than real threats, which increases the risks of preemptive strikes and lowers the threshold for entering conflicts.

Also, the use of such technologies is associated with problems of their legalisation. Autonomous military and intelligence systems often operate in a legal vacuum, resulting in massive data collection without adequate sanctions and violations of fundamental human rights. The concept of algorithmic decision-making is currently being tested in real combat conditions.

Dozens of commercial companies, including tech giants Microsoft, Amazon and Google, are taking part in the conflict in Ukraine. The activity of these players is to provide cloud services, cybersecurity tools, mapping solutions, and other critical technologies. But the role of start-ups developing dual-use technologies based on artificial intelligence is of particular importance in this conflict. Ukraine's Minister of Digital Transformation, Mykhailo Fedorov, calls the country a testing ground for groundbreaking defence solutions,[16] the results of which may soon radically change the nature of modern wars. In turn, Deborah Fairlamb, co-founder of the Green Flag Ventures investment fund, notes that today no development will arouse interest if it is not labelled "tested in Ukraine".[17]

One of the most significant players providing high-tech solutions for warfare is Palantir Technologies, whose software developments are radically changing the approach to military planning, reducing the traditional decision-making cycle to minimal time indicators. The company's AI-based products process intelligence from a variety of sources: satellite imagery, open data, drone footage, as well as radar and thermal imagers. Algorithms have the ability to analyse data arrays ultra-fast, which fundamentally changes the decision-making process in modern conflicts. The information obtained assesses the tactical effectiveness of various types of weapons at specific positions, and also promptly communicates intelligence to the army command.

One of the key products of Palantir Technologies is the MetaConstellation platform,[18] which analyses satellite images, providing a prompt display of events on the battlefield. According to the developers, the system reduces the time for detecting targets from a conditional 6 hours to 2-3 minutes. The algorithms enable the identification of troop concentrations, the movements of armoured vehicles and artillery positions in real time. The advantage of such developments is that they make it possible to determine the areas of the probable offensive of the opposite side within a few minutes and take preventive measures.

MetaConstellation not only processes thousands of images,

but also integrates them with other intelligence,[19] including data from commercial satellite operators such as Starlink. This creates a single digital contour for military planning.

According to Palantir representatives, their technologies used today on the battlefield have functionality that could face legal restrictions in peaceful conditions.[17] Founded in 2003, Palantir Technologies, one of the first investors in which was the CIA's venture capital arm IQT, specialises in big data analysis and plays a significant role in ensuring US national security.

Jacob Halberg, a national security expert at Palantir, described the company's team as "traffickers of 21st-century AI weapons."[17] The company's main customers are US intelligence agencies, including the National Security Agency (NSA), DARPA, and US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). In addition, Palantir provides its solutions to a number of Ukrainian government agencies, including the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Education. It has given Ukraine free access to its artificial intelligence platforms.

This approach illustrates how start-ups use military conflicts to strengthen their reputation. The company was enabled not only to test its developments in real combat conditions, but also to form an image of a key player in the defence technology market. Today, the market value of the company is comparable to such giants as Disney and Bank of America.

The activities of the Clearview AI start-up, which developed a facial recognition product, are also of particular interest in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.[20] This company too has provided the Ukrainian authorities with free access to its services. In terms of legal regulation, the technology does not comply with strict European standards for the protection of personal data. Prior to the outbreak of full-scale hostilities, it was already the subject of considerable controversy in the field of personal data protection.[21] Legal proceedings have been initiated against the company for violating the right to privacy in a number of European countries, including Austria, France, Greece, Italy and the United Kingdom, and the use of its product in these countries has been illegal.

Of particular concern is the methodology for creating the world's largest face database, developed by Clearview AI. The company extracts images of users from open sources,[22] including Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, and actively extracts images from the Russian social network VKontakte. This practice, which runs counter to European data protection standards, has taken on a new dimension in the context of military conflict, where technological solutions that were previously heavily criticised are beginning to be perceived as security tools.

The company's service is used by the special services of the United States and Canada, as well as other international structures. A review by Buzzfeed News in 2020 revealed the scale of the technology's use:[23] the company's customer base includes more than 2,900 organisations from 27 countries, among them leading US law enforcement agencies (FBI, ICE, DHS, DOJ), Interpol, numerous regional police departments and even the US presidential administration.

According to company representatives, the system demonstrates exceptional identification accuracy (99.85%), and the volume of the database has increased by 400% since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, reaching 40 billion images.[20] However, this development of technology raises serious legal questions, especially in light of the adoption of the EU Artificial Intelligence Act,[24] the world's first legally binding document regulating the use of artificial intelligence. This regulation explicitly prohibits the use of predictive analytics systems based on artificial intelligence, as well as the collection of biometric data and photos from social networks to create databases, as such practices violate fundamental human rights, including the right to privacy. In addition, the use of biometric identification technologies contradicts the fundamental provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 12) and the European Convention on Human Rights (Article 8).

Commercial satellite companies Planet Labs,[25] BlackSky Technology[25] and Maxar Technologies[26] supply the Ukrainian armed forces with operational satellite data. Primer[27] uses machine learning algorithms to decrypt Russian tactical radio communications.[25]

The current conflict in Ukraine is the first in history where algorithms have begun to have a noticeable impact on the conduct of hostilities. The large-scale introduction of artificial intelligence into the military for the purpose of data processing is called "algorithmic warfare" by Palantir CEO Alex Karp and former US Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work.[25] The same concept is developed by CIA Technical Director Nand Mulchandani and former director of the Joint AI Center, Air Force Lieutenant General John 'Jack' Shanahan, who introduced the term "software-defined warfare".[28] According to this definition, the most important component of the wars of the future will be software.

"For the first time in military history, critical technologies are being provided not by publicly funded research labs, but by private, for-profit companies," said Steve Blank,[17] a well-known American entrepreneur known as the 'Godfather of Silicon Valley', a lecturer and co-founder of Stanford's Gordian Knot Centre for National Security Innovation.

The growing role of Western technology companies in the hostilities is also confirmed by the participation of the Munich-based company Quantum Systems in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Quantum Systems, in which Peter Thiel is also an investor, is engaged in the development and supply of reconnaissance UAVs for the Ukrainian army. Moreover, the company has opened a service centre in Ukraine, providing technical support and maintenance of equipment directly in the conflict zone, as well as a UAV production plant.[29]

Florian Seibel, CEO of Quantum Systems, who also heads the new Stark Defence (SKD SE) company, declares an ambitious long-term goal – a radical transformation of the concept of warfare. In particular, the traditional doctrine of 'human-in-the-loop', which implies the mandatory participation of a person in the decision-making process, including the use of lethal weapons, is questioned. As stated in Stark Defence's mission, the company's goal is to "disrupt the form of defence industry we know by developing autonomous systems to operate on land, in water, and on land."[30] Human intervention will no longer be required to make decisions to destroy the target.

Initially, such initiatives were sharply criticised by human rights organisations, stressing the danger of transferring the right to make decisions on the use of force to algorithms devoid of ethical considerations and legal responsibility. However, in the context of the current military confrontation, there is a significant change in priorities: key Western stakeholders involved in the decision-making process on the Ukrainian conflict, faced with the effectiveness of Russia's military potential, are increasingly pushing ethical considerations into the background.

Algorithms predicted the conflict

In weapons systems, algorithms continuously analyse data from highly sensitive sensors, predicting the technical condition of equipment and optimising maintenance schedules, which

not only increases the service life of equipment, but also creates a qualitatively new level of operational readiness. This technological revolution requires a rethink of traditional approaches to arms control, as algorithmic systems originally designed for civilian use demonstrate unprecedented military effectiveness, blurring the line between defence and commercial technologies.

According to Michèle Flournoy, former US Under Secretary of Defense for Political Affairs, the use of neural network technologies for intelligence analysis and open sources allegedly played a key role in predicting the entry of Russian troops into Ukraine.[31] According to her, these systems allowed American analysts to predict the development of events several months in advance.

Flournoy draws attention to the revolutionary capabilities of LLMs in the field of strategic analysis. According to her, these systems are capable of processing huge amounts of data, including texts of speeches by foreign leaders, comparing them with intelligence information, generating predictive scenarios for the development of crises and modelling the possible consequences of certain political decisions. In addition, breakthrough technologies make it possible to set up automated monitoring systems that can quickly identify changes in areas of strategic interest, such as the movement of military equipment or changes in the rhetoric of foreign leaders.

Rhombus Power,[32] where Flournoy is an advisor, also provides Ukrainian management with an innovative product of its own development called Guardian.[33] Guardian's technology foundation is based on LLMs trained on massive amounts of structured and unstructured data from events spanning more than a decade, starting in 2014. The advantage of such AI systems is that they can quickly analyse colossal amounts of data around the world, unlike traditional methods of analysis that depend on human capabilities. According to public statements, this platform collected various data, which allowed American intelligence agencies to generate near-real-time heat maps of the activity of the Russian armed forces. In 2021, the system provided an analytical report in which it estimated the probability of large-scale hostilities in Ukraine at 80%.[34]

According to the company's management, LLMs are able to effectively process a wide range of indicators: from suspicious financial transactions and logistics movements to the dynamics of arms supplies, changes in infrastructure and the content of media streams. At the moment, the platform is used to predict potential actions from Russia, integrating data from many sources.

Large language models have the potential to predict the escalation of conflicts in different regions of the world. According to Anshu Roy, founder and CEO of Rhombus Power, the use of such models in combination with commercial and open data sets allows for highly accurate forecasts.[35] For example, models are able to predict with up to 80% probability the growth of political instability in East African countries within 6-12 months. Such a forecast may be due to a sharp increase in prices of up to 300% for oil and grain crops, provoked by global crises, which, in turn, increases the social and economic vulnerability of the respective states.

Flournoy recommends that the Pentagon strengthen the integration of external contractors into the defence sector. The expert emphasises the need to expand partnerships with technology companies, strengthen venture investment activity, as well as deepen cooperation with the country's leading technical universities. It should be noted that today the United States is already pursuing an active investment policy in relation to technology start-ups in the defence sector, which covers almost all key areas of military and dual use.[36]

Conclusion

Military artificial intelligence is becoming a critical asset in the era of 'algorithmic warfare'. Countries that invest in autonomous drones or predictive analytics today are laying the foundation for dominance in a post-conflict world. In such a world, AI tools can predict social unrest, migration crises or economic collapses, making it possible to influence the situation proactively.

Thousands of start-ups around the world are now participating in a new AI arms race. Participation in military projects gives developers a number of advantages: control over the formation of regulatory frameworks, ensuring stable income through government contracts, strengthening their position in global competition, as well as the ability to shape the future of technology in their favour. Among other things, states often provide tax breaks and funding for the development of dual-use technologies.

In the military sphere, especially in conflict situations, ethical and legal barriers are often relaxed, allowing companies to test and deploy new technologies more quickly. Moreover, the introduction of artificial intelligence in military projects opens up access to resources, technologies and data that are not available in civilian projects, such as satellite imagery, intelligence and biometric databases, which in turn accelerates the training of AI systems and makes them more competitive in the market. Thus, today war is becoming a commercial project of the technology companies.

The experience of the West shows that the use of civilian developments allows armies to introduce advanced technologies in the field of national security faster and more effectively. At the same time, dependence on external technology providers is turning into a threat to sovereignty.

During the plenary session of the 2025 St Petersburg Economic Forum, Vladimir Putin noted that:[37]

> [I]n the modern world, there is less and less division between the military-industrial complex and civilian sectors of the economy .... We need to move away from dividing companies into purely military-industrial and enterprises operating exclusively in the civilian segment. … [We] need to constantly analyse technological and organisational innovations in the civil society sector, to implement them quickly in the field of defence and security. Where possible, it is necessary to achieve the conjugation of the military-industrial complex with the civilian sector, to establish the production of dual-use products ….

Without the involvement of start-ups and innovative companies, Russia risks falling behind in the race for military AI technologies, which in the long term will weaken its defence complex. To strengthen its position in the new emerging world technological order, the country should develop an ecosystem that provides financing, infrastructure, and demand for breakthrough developments by taking a number of measures: to relax regulation for innovative companies interested in defence; to develop mechanisms for flexible access of commercial companies to work on the state defence order with the provision of proper control over the preservation of state secrets; to build the work of specialised funds and accelerators for start-ups in the field of artificial intelligence and dual technologies, providing venture financing and guaranteed orders; to propose a system of tax incentives for investors in defence start-ups, as well as to stimulate interaction between the civilian sector and law enforcement agencies through technological initiatives in the form of hackathons[38] and competitions in military artificial intelligence, robotics and electronic warfare.

The country that will be the first to carry out the comprehensive

implementation of artificial intelligence in the military sphere, critical infrastructure and military operations will receive a strategic advantage in shaping the future world order. The new world technological order is based on three fundamental pillars: unprecedented computing power, technological independence of the component base, and export control over critical developments.

Despite the existing challenges, Russia has all the necessary resources to participate actively in the formation of a new world technological order and can become one of the key players in the field of military artificial intelligence. Firstly, the country retains a powerful scientific and technical reserve in the field of mathematics, programming and robotics. Second, Russia has unique experience in the development and implementation of autonomous systems in the defence sector, which were actively used during the Cold War. Third, despite the current difficulties, the country is already forming an ecosystem of technology start-ups that are capable of developing high-tech solutions for the algorithmic wars of the future.

The emerging world order also requires a revision of the foundations of international law and the system of technological sovereignty of states in the digital era. It is necessary to develop approaches to regulating the legal status of autonomous weapons systems, determining responsibility for algorithmic decisions and protecting digital sovereignty in the context of the cross-border nature of data.

Of particular difficulty is the need to synchronise these processes at the global level, given the radical divergence of approaches between the leading technology players (Western and Eastern approaches), the commercial interests of technology companies and the significant difference in the degree of technological maturity of state actors.

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■ First published in Russian at https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/startapy-na-pole-boya-kak-chastnyy-sektor-otkryvaet-eru-algoritmicheskikh-voyn/, and then in edited form in German in *Marxistische Blätter* 4_2025, pp 97-105. Translated into English directly from the Russian original by Microsoft Edge and by comparison with the German version. Hyperlinks in the original have been converted by the Editor into endnotes.



Outlines of a critique of the political economy of artificial intelligence

Peter Schadt

A *CRITIQUE of the Political Economy of Artificial Intelligence* seems to modern economists as an attempt to use an anachronistic theory to understand, of all things, the most modern developments in productive and distributive forces. Yet Marx is not ignored in modern economics; rather, he is regarded as a classic who provided 'important impulses' for a 'critical examination' of capitalism – though, with his focus on labour as the 'supposed' source of value, he is regarded as just as hopelessly outdated as the economists from Adam Smith to David Ricardo, whom he set out to criticise. Thus, Marx finds his place in the pantheon of economic thought, and may even be quoted once in a cautionary manner in heterodoxy, but otherwise plays no role in the analysis of artificial intelligence.

It is therefore hardly surprising that, as early as the 1980s, economics textbooks stated that only die-hard Marxists had not gone along with this shift toward the subjective theory of value – which now dominates all of economics. Anyone who conducts research on the political economy of artificial intelligence and is counted among those incorrigibles must therefore not only contend with the fact that the basic Marxist concepts – from exploitation and labour to value and commodities – are themselves controversial within the theory. Such a person must also, as a matter of principle, put up with the criticism that they adhere to an outdated dogmatism: of wanting to understand AI – and thus the transformation of the modern world of work – through Marx, of all people.

The value of commodities

For the subjective theory of value, however, AI confirms its own dogma: that it is not labour, but the utility of things, that determines their value. William Jevons postulated this as early as the 1870s in his class work, *Theory of Political Economy*, and it is now common knowledge. As he states:

> Bread has the almost infinitely great utility of sustaining life, and when it becomes a matter of life and death, a small quantity of food surpasses all other things in value. But when we enjoy our ordinary provision of food, a loaf of bread has little value.

Here is a triumph of a special kind over the labour theory of value. One only has to imagine a society without an "ordinary provision of food", in which bread cannot be produced through labour, and suddenly labour – which was explicitly omitted in the thought experiment – is no longer a determining factor in value.

This is not a *faux pas*, but rather the systematic critique with which the subjective theory of value emancipated itself from the supposedly anachronistic political economists:

> The mere fact that there are many things, such as rare old books, coins, antiques etc, which possess high value and cannot be produced at all today, destroys the idea that value depends on labour. Even those objects which can be produced in any quantity through labour are rarely exchanged for their exact corresponding values.

So if one is determined enough to look away from the subject matter of political economy – namely, the production and reproduction of society and its peculiar, commodity-producing form – and looks even more resolutely at things that cannot be produced at all, but are historical relics of other societies, then one can 'destroy' the labour theory of value.

The fact that Jevons himself notes in the last sentence that most items in supermarkets "can be produced in any quantity through labour", and that political economy therefore deals with something entirely different than a collection of artefacts from other societies, is not the beginning of a revision of his own critique. It speaks volumes that he himself does not view labour there as value-creating, because even the products of labour are "rarely exchanged for exactly the corresponding values". After all, "rarely … exactly" is nothing other than "mostly … quite", and to unbiased economists it should actually serve as proof of the opposite of what it is supposed to stand for: it is obvious – deviations, special cases, and countervailing tendencies included – that not even Jevons failed to notice that labour has something to do with the "corresponding values".

The value of AI

That, in a nutshell, is my response to the accusation that we are seeking to understand the latest developments in digitalisation through a theory that has long since been refuted. Conversely, however, Marxist economists are no strangers to 'proving' the continued relevance of the labour theory of value by reconciling the price tag on artificial intelligence and the trade in data with Marx in such a way that writing posts and tweets on social media is simply declared to be labour, and the data is thus counted as 'immense wealth' in commodity form – which, as is well known, is the very essence of capitalism.

While it was just the founding fathers of the subjective theory of value who could be accused of a certain lack of interest in the subject matter of political economy, a similar observation must also be made regarding those Marxists who seek to conceive of data sets and knowledge *per se* as a product of abstract labour and thus as value.[1] After all, Marx posed and answered the question of how social production and reproduction can proceed in a complex division of labour, where these take place "behind the backs" of the owners and the predominant motive is making money. In other words, his question is: What is the law governing purely private labour that only becomes social labour upon sale?

If one takes the old critic seriously, this certainly does not lie in the "faux frais" of production. By this, Marx meant all the false costs of capital, such as those incurred in the purchase and sale of raw materials and finished goods. While all of this is necessary for the circulation of capital to function, it does not contribute to the use-value wealth of this society. Where AI is used *en masse* as a "means of distribution", especially in the advertising industry, there may be a great deal of programming, but this should not be confused with "value". This remains true even if capital integrates the clickworkers training

AIs somewhere in Nairobi into its dictates of cost reduction and productivity increase, so that they superficially experience, like any productive worker, the hardship of having to lead a life as variable capital.

However, to consider the 'production' of software or the 'coding' of AIs *per se* as not creating value is also a flawed conclusion. It is simply not apparent from the specific activity itself to what extent it, in a society of private property owners, contributes to the production and reproduction of society: where, in modern factories, machines are 'calibrated' by engineers walking through the modern production facilities with their tablets, this is no less a contribution to production than that of their colleague on the assembly line. Thus, coding in the service of buying and selling can only be compared in terms of its concrete activity, but not in terms of its contribution to the social metabolism – that is, its political-economic *content*.

This is often quite different in software production than in car production. While the socially necessary average working time per car is gradually reduced by technological progress, resulting in a loss of value over time, the situation is different with software that has already been programmed. Once programmed, it can be reproduced an infinite number of times with (almost) no labour: an almost total "moral decay" (Marx) of value. Or, to put it another way: once programmed, the socially necessary average labour for producing this software is virtually zero, and therefore its value is also zero – regardless of how labour-intensive its one-time production was. Thus, there is a whole group of computer scientists whose work, while it has a use value in the form of usable software, nevertheless has no value, since – once performed – it renders itself superfluous.

But once again, this does not apply to all products and all software. The fact that modern software may be directly tied to licences, without access to the 'cloud', and that continuous programming power from the tech conglomerates may therefore no longer be used at all, immediately turns this insight on its head. This is how capital responds to the fact that, for a long time software – precisely because it *was* worthless – could only be sold through the state mandate of intellectual property, technically supported by more or less effective 'copy protection'; and it has thus invented 'software-as-a-service', which requires constant coding as well as integration with cloud structures. Hence, modern software does indeed meet the criterion of constant production and reproduction, and the software companies have – quite unwittingly – added value to their own product.

AI and the value of labour power

But it is not only with regard to the real and perceived 'value' of artificial intelligence as software that the political-economic determinants are in disarray and require systematic development. Looking at eastern Congo and tantalum mining – essential not only for the capacitors but also for the modern computers used in artificial intelligence – Marxists are also examining, for the latest development of productive forces, the working conditions of the small-scale miners who extract from the mud the rare earth elements. Because one cannot speak there of a 'reproduction of the labour power commodity', there has recently been talk of hyperexploitation in relation to this material basis of artificial intelligence as well.[2]

However, when small-scale miners in East Kivu use shovels and buckets to extract rare earth elements and sell them to passing traders, this has nothing to do with any kind of wage labour relationship in which employers could pay wages that differ from the 'value of the labour power commodity'. Rather, these people are trying to organise a life based on the sale of raw materials that they themselves attempt to extract – legally or illegally. Anyone who assumes the category of 'hyper-exploitation' here is therefore not only fundamentally mistaken in their economic definition, but also politically trivialises the exchange of equivalents, as if starving and dying small-scale miners could only result from a deviation from the world market price for tantalum, or conversely, the ideal of 'fair world trade' in Marxist terms.

The fact that artificial intelligence systems are trained primarily in Nairobi has already been mentioned in connection with how their value is created. The fact that the people carrying out this training can barely make a living from their work is just as true as the fact that their *de jure* self-employment on platforms like Amazon Mechanical Turk – and whatever else they are called – should not be confused with the fact that they are *de facto* offering their labour power to capital. But even here, 'reproduction of the labour power commodity' should not be taken more euphemistically than capital itself presents it. Namely, it was never intended that the 'value of the labour power commodity' should be seriously measured by whether the individual AI trainer can organise their life based on it. As long as there is a class of cheap and well-educated labourers in Nairobi – fed by the permanent poverty of the Kenyan periphery – global AI trainers will 'reproduce' themselves without their wages having to meet the criteria that many a Marxist applies to 'reproductive capacity'.

It speaks volumes about the high opinion some Marxists have of the political economy of equality and freedom when they can only conceive of the global misery of rare earth miners and artificial intelligence trainers as a 'deviation' from the principle of equivalence, and not as its consistent application. It's as if Marx's observation that exploitation can only succeed on the basis of the reproduction of class was something like a reassurance that one must be able to live on wage labour; otherwise, a society of private property would be violating its own principles.

AI and reproductive labour[3]

Some debates about 'digital capitalism' have their starting point in much older discussions, such as the one about the role of 'reproduction', that is, domestic and care work in capitalism, and are now being repeated. Some modern Marxists suggest rebranding what Marx called "unproductive labour" as "reproductive labour" in order to emphasise its importance for capitalism more strongly in analysis. This would bring various necessary contributions – especially those of women – into sharper focus for society, which would facilitate the examination of digitalisation processes:

> According to this view, unpaid artistic work, such as blogging or posting photos, music, or videos on the internet, insofar as it is done for the purpose of self-presentation, falls directly into Marx's category of 'unproductive' labour (which I would prefer to call unpaid, reproductive labour that produces social use values).[4]

It is simply a myth that writing blog posts, publishing photos and the like should fulfil the category of 'reproduction of society'. Such activities, which are not unjustly characterised as self-expression, do not contribute to the continuous production and reproduction of capitalist society. It is simply not the case that every form of unproductive labour is also reproductive labour. Not every unproductive activity contributes to social reproduction: thousands of amateur authors whose books will never be published are the sad proof of this. Such 'updates' are intended as feminist interventions aimed at subsuming the

raising of children under the same concept of 'reproduction of society' as blogging.

It doesn't work either way: *productive labour* according to Marx is not the opposite of *re*productive labour; as is well known, the entire second department of the reproduction schema is nothing more than the production of consumer goods for the *re*production of the workers, that is, of society as a whole. Rather, what is specific to unproductive labour, according to Marx, is that this labour – even when it is paid – is *un*productive in the sense of surplus value creation. Anyone who seeks to rebrand this distinction for the online uploading of data to train AI systems will quickly find that they are, in the truest sense, at a loss for the right words.

Materials

There is therefore much to be done.

Economics, or rather the neoclassical school of thought that dominates it, set out to criticise the labour theory of value with its subjective theory of value. This criticism must not only be rejected, but conversely, the research of marginal utility theorists on 'artificial intelligence' itself must be criticised. Conversely, it is necessary to examine critically what Marxist economic theory actually means in the 21st century and – as outlined – to dispel various *erroneous* conclusions.

However, this is only the beginning of an entire scientific programme: the positive definition of the political economy of artificial intelligence in particular, and the political economy of digitalisation in general. Anyone who wants to participate in this work is cordially invited.[5]

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How AI could make us work even harder

Malte Jauch

TECHNOLOGICAL progress has taken more than its fair share of the workload from humans over the years. Washing machines clean our clothes, tractors plough the fields and computers sort out the admin. Meanwhile, economic growth and redistribution of wealth means most workers in industrialised countries do not need to spend most of their waking hours on gainful employment. The 12-hour working day that was common during the 19th century has been largely reduced. So will developments in AI help us gain even more free time?

Not necessarily. In fact, AI might actually cause working hours to increase.

One reason for this has to do with the effects of AI on people's bargaining power in the workplace. If workers are fearful that their jobs might be lost to automation, research shows they may be inclined to increase their efforts as a way of signalling to employers that their labour is still valuable.

My research on the rat race suggests that this kind of response is to be expected. Employers must continuously decide whom to hire, promote or dismiss. In making such decisions, employers seek to reward productivity. But productivity is often hard to measure, so employers rely on alternatives metrics such as the amount of time spent working.

Checking whether a workstation is still occupied after everyone else has gone home is much easier than assessing the accuracy of a complex project. And from a worker's point of view, increasing the time they spend at work seems like an effective way of setting themselves apart from other (apparently less motivated) workers. But when everyone pursues this strategy, it becomes self-defeating. No one gains a positional advantage, while everyone works more.

The introduction of AI to workplaces can turbocharge this dynamic. Existing AI tools have already automated some tasks, like data entry, creating an expectation that entire roles will be redundant soon.

Against this backdrop, the rat race becomes more cut-throat. Workers reasonably expect large scale restructurings of their companies and seek to make sure that they will retain their jobs in the process. Researchers recently found evidence for this, noting that workers in AI-exposed industries like financial services and IT are literally switching off their office lights later than those in less exposed industries.

Another problem is that employers can overestimate the extent to which AI boosts workers' productivity. The availability of AI tools to improve efficiency creates an expectation among employers that workers can do more than they could before in the same amount of time. However, when these expectations are overblown, they can lead to additional work intensification or longer work hours.

Finally, the adoption of AI causes significant frictions. Established routines are overhauled, existing roles change and new roles are created. Workers must be trained in the use of AI tools and must learn to work alongside them. But what makes this particularly challenging is that existing AI tools are continuously being improved and new tools developed at a rapid pace. All of this places additional demands on workers' time.

It may be sobering to contemplate that AI might not improve our lives by relieving us from toil. Overwork and burnout might even increase over the coming years. But that situation is by no means inevitable or unavoidable – especially if future control over AI's design and implementation is not left to employers and large AI firms.

It is possible in theory to design and implement AI in ways that improve workers' skills, enhancing their areas of expertise, making their work more valuable and thereby enhancing their bargaining power with employers. An empowered workforce would be able to bargain for favourable working conditions, including working time patterns that fit with people's lives and preferences.

And if developers were to prioritise augmentation and empowerment, AI could be the ultimate tool that helps to tackle widespread resentment and disenchantment with our working lives.

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Iran war shows how AI speeds up military 'kill chains'

Craig Jones and Helen M Kinsella

THE US-ISRAEL WAR on Iran has been described as "the first AI war". But recent deployments of artificial intelligence are, in fact, the latest in a long history of technological developments that prize a need for speed in the military "kill chain".

"Sixty seconds – that's all it took," claimed a former Israeli Mossad agent of the strikes that killed Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, on 28 February 2026, the first day of the US-Israel war on Iran.[1]

The speed and scale of war have been significantly enhanced by use of AI systems.[2] But this need for speed[3] brings serious risks for civilians and military combatants alike.

Modern military operations produce and rely on an enormous amount of intelligence. This includes intercepted phone calls and text messages, the mass surveillance of the internet (known as "signals intelligence"), as well as satellite imagery and video feeds from loitering drones. We can think of all this intelligence as data – and the problem is, there's too much of it.

As early as 2010, the US Air Force was concerned about "swimming in sensors and drowning in data"[4] – too many hours of footage, and too many analysts manually reviewing this intelligence.

AI systems can dramatically speed up the analysis of military intelligence. Brad Cooper, head of US Central Command (CentCom), recently confirmed the use of AI tools in the war against Iran, saying:[5]

> These systems help us sift through vast amounts of data in seconds, so our leaders can cut through the noise and make smarter decisions faster than the enemy can react …. Advanced AI tools can turn processes that used to take hours and sometimes even days into seconds.

In 2024, an investigation by Georgetown University[6] found that the US Army's 18th Airborne Corps had employed AI to assist with intelligence processing – reducing a team of 2,000 to just 20.

The allure of speed

In the Second World War, the aerial targeting cycle – from collecting images to assembling target packages complete with intelligence reports – could take weeks or even months.[7] But over the ensuing decades, the US military set about what it called "compressing the kill chain"[8] – shortening the time between the identification of a target and use of force against it.

During the first Gulf war of 1991, Iraq's president Saddam Hussein made use of mobile missile launchers that would roam the desert firing Scud missiles. By the time US radar identified its location, the launcher could be miles away. This 'shoot and scoot' tactic required new technology to track these mobile targets.

A key breakthrough came shortly after the September 11 attacks in the form of an armed Predator drone.[9] In November 2002, the CIA targeted and killed Al Qaeda's leader in Yemen, Qaed Salim Sinan al-Harithi.[10] This heralded a new era of warfare[11] in which drones piloted from military bases in the US flew remotely over the skies of Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. The drones' powerful cameras could take high-resolution video and beam it back to the US via satellite in a matter of seconds, enabling the drone operators to track mobile targets. The same drone which had eyes on the target could fire missiles to kill or destroy the target.

With greater speed comes greater risk

Two decades ago, it was easy to dismiss as hyperbole the idea that the coming age of cyberwarfare might bring about "bombing at the speed of thought", a phrase coined by American historian Nick Cullather in 2003.[12] Yet with the advent of AI warfare, the unthinkable has become almost antiquated.

Part of the push to employ AI tools is the sense that human thought is no match for the processing speeds enabled by AI systems. The US Department of Defense's artificial intelligence strategy states:[13]

> Military AI is going to be a race for the foreseeable future, and therefore speed wins … We must accept that the risks of not moving fast enough outweigh the risks of imperfect alignment.

While the precise uses of AI by US and other militaries is shrouded in secrecy, information has been made public that highlights the risks of its use on civilian populations.

In Gaza, according to Israeli intelligence sources, the AI systems Lavender[14] and Gospel[15] have been programmed to accept up to 100 civilian casualties (and occasionally even more) for a strike on a single suspected Hamas combatant. More than 75,000 people are estimated to have been killed there since 7 October 2023.[16]

In February 2024, a US airstrike killed a 20-year-old student, Abdul-Rahman al-Rawi. At the time, a senior US official admitted the strikes had used AI targeting[17] – although confusingly, the US military now says it has "no way of knowing" whether it used AI in specific airstrikes.

The risk is that AI could lower the threshold or cost of going to war, as people play an increasingly passive role[18] in reviewing and rubber-stamping the work of AI.[19]

The embedding of AI into military kill chains intersects with other alarming developments. After years of inaction, the US military spent more than a decade developing an infrastructure to avoid civilian casualties in war, but it has been almost totally dismantled under the Trump administration.[20]

The lawyers who give advice to the military on targeting operations,[21] including compliance with international law and rules of engagement, have been sidelined[22] and fired.[23]

Meanwhile, since the start of the war in Iran, more than 1,200 civilians have been killed [as of 27.03.2026 –*Ed*], according to the Iranian Health Ministry.[24] On February 28, the US military struck an elementary school in the south of Iran, killing at least 175 people, most of them children.[25]

The US Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, has been clear that the military's aim in Iran is for "maximum lethality, not tepid legality. Violent effect, not politically correct".[26] With such an attitude, and by privileging speed over deliberation, civilian casualties become inevitable, and accountability ever more elusive.

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AI is creating jobs as well as erasing them – but how rewarding are they?

Akhil Bhardwaj

DON'T BELIEVE the hype about AI taking over all forms of work. Most of the evidence to date suggests large-scale job losses are limited.[1] But what is changing is the way work is organised.

One area of increased employment[2] is in people 'cleaning up' after large language models (LLMs),[3] or quality controlling them.[4]

The sales pitch is that these AI systems can programme code, write reports, analyse data and automate routine decisions faster and better than humans, all at negligible marginal cost. In theory, this should free people to focus on higher-level thinking, and leisure.

In practice, AI agents produce vast amounts of 'almost right' output – but there are still errors, hallucinations and odd gaps in judgment that a real person has to catch.

The resulting jobs, often known as AI remediation,[5] vary in their skill and remuneration levels. Some AI companies are now hiring experienced professionals in many different fields to ensure their agents are producing work of requisite quality – and to help them change that if not.

But there is also a more subtle shift in job responsibilities within many organisations. Some white-collar workers in industries such as finance, tech and retail are suggesting that AI can add to, rather than reduce, their workload, because of the need to monitor so-called 'workslop'.[6] This can also undermine trust in colleagues who are using AI agents.

A 2025 Harvard Business Review report[7] quoted a retail director who lamented spending "more time following up on the information [provided by AI] and checking it with my own research. I then had to waste even more time setting up meetings with other supervisors to address the issue."

Public sector slop

The public sector risks being drawn into this 'AI repair' logic. The UK government (among many others) is experimenting with AI for tasks such as summarising consultation responses, drafting correspondence and analysing sentiment in citizen feedback.[8] Official guidance for civil servants encourages cautious use of generative AI, while warning that its outputs can be misleading and must be independently verified.[9]

This means, if public services start producing large volumes of AI-generated analysis and letters, they will also have to create new positions whose main responsibility is to monitor, check and correct that output before it reaches citizens or feeds into policy.

How much of the apparent AI efficiency gain will be consumed by people silently tidying up after systems that are sold as automatic?

We already know what can happen when AI automation goes wrong in government. In the Netherlands, tax authorities used algorithms to generate risk scores for supposed fraud and automatically flag families for investigation. Tens of thousands of parents – many from minorities – were wrongly accused of fraud, forced to repay benefits they did not owe, and pushed into debt or bankruptcy.[10]

Here, the problem was not just the output but the absence of robust human supervision, able to question the machine's

verdict before lives were destroyed. Any public-sector wave of generative AI adoption will have to invest heavily in exactly that kind of supervision, to avoid repeating the same harms at a larger scale.[11]

There is a deeper trap here. The tokens[12] (the basic building blocks of data processed by LLMs) that generate all this output are heavily subsidised by debt-laden AI companies[13] – but the human time needed to check and fix it is not.

Many companies are deliberately pricing access below cost to build dependence on their systems.[14] Once enough organisations have reoriented their workflows and services around a particular AI model, the company behind it can start to raise prices, limit free tiers, change terms or segment features. So the cost-benefit analysis of AI today may look very different in the future.

Hidden humans

There has already long been a global dimension to the "hidden humans" underpinning AI.[15] Some of the most unpleasant aspects of AI work – chatbot moderation, data labelling, low-level annotation of images – has been outsourced to low-wage countries for many years.[16]

This work has been found to take a substantial mental toll on some of these workers, because of the disturbing nature of graphic text and images of violence, self-harm and the like.[17] Employees in such sectors and geographies also often lack any legal protection.[16]

If AI workslop becomes the norm inside organisations, it is easy to imagine a second wave of outsourcing: the routine checking and correction of AI-generated text shipped to offshore centres – packaged as quality control, but experienced on the ground as endless, underpaid digital piecework.

We can already see the work-reorganisation side of this in translation services.[18] In many agencies, the main workflow is now machine translation plus 'post-editing'. The AI does a first pass; freelance human translators are paid less money to correct its mistakes.

Research[19] suggests that post-editing is often paid worse[20] than traditional translation, requires similar or greater cognitive effort, and is widely perceived as tedious and deskilling.[3] Yet those doing this role simultaneously raise concerns about even that position being replaced in the longer term.[21]

How to push back

Popular culture shows how workers can try to resist being pushed into low-status AI clean-up roles. In 2023, Hollywood writers went on strike partly because they feared studios would use AI tools to generate first drafts and then hire humans to polish them on the cheap.[22] The resulting agreement with the Writers Guild of America set guardrails:[23] AI cannot be credited as a writer, cannot be forced on writers, and cannot be used in ways that undercut human pay and recognition. In effect, the union fought to stop a slide into AI-janitor work, where creative professionals would spend most of their time tidying up after algorithms rather than originating stories themselves,

However, translators, freelancers working in fields such as video-gaming, and other workers have far less collective bargaining power, which makes it easier for AI-driven business models to quietly make repair work as the new normal.[24]

In my view, the problem is not only economic – it is also about meaning.[25] Most people would like to feel their work actually contributes something in the world. They want to believe they are solving problems, helping people, or contributing to making something that would not exist without them.[26]

But for at least as long as access to powerful AI systems remains cheap (and heavily subsidised), more and more people will be diverted to cleaning up the mess these systems inevitably create. How meaningful these jobs are is, I believe, a question we cannot afford to dodge.

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AI could mark the end of young people learning on the job – with terrible results

Vivek Soundararajan

FOR A LONG TIME, the deal for a wide range of careers has been simple enough. Entry-level workers carried out routine tasks in return for mentorship, skill development and a clear path towards expertise. The arrangement meant that employers had affordable labour, while employees received training and a clear career path. Both sides benefited.

But now that bargain is breaking down. AI is automating the grunt work – the repetitive, boring but essential tasks that juniors used to do and learn from. And the consequences are hitting both ends of the workforce. Young workers cannot get a foothold. Older workers are watching the talent pipeline run dry.

For example, one study suggests that between late 2022 and July 2025, entry-level employment in the US in AI-exposed fields like software development and customer service declined by roughly 20%. Employment for older workers in the same sectors grew.

And that pattern makes sense. AI currently excels at administrative tasks – things like data entry or filing. But it struggles with nuance, judgment and plenty of other skills which are hard to codify. So experience and the accumulation of those skills become a buffer against AI displacement. Yet if entry-level workers never get the chance to build that experience, the buffer never forms.

This matters for organisations too. Researchers using a huge amount of data about work in the US described the way that professional skills develop over time, by likening career paths to the structure of a tree. General skills (communication, critical thinking, problem solving) form the trunk, and then specialised skills branch out from there.

Their key finding was that wage premiums for specialised skills depend almost entirely on having those strong general foundational skills underneath. Communication and critical thinking capabilities are not optional extras – they are what make advanced skills valuable.

The researchers also found that workers who lack access to foundational skills can become trapped in career paths with limited upward mobility: what they call 'skill entrapment'. This structure has become more pronounced over the past two decades, creating what the researchers described as 'barriers to upward job mobility'.

But if AI is eliminating the entry-level positions where those foundations were built, who develops the next generation of experts? If AI can do the junior work better than the actual juniors, senior workers may stop delegating altogether. Researchers call this a 'training deficit'. The junior never learns, and the pipeline breaks down.

Uneven disruption

But the disruption will not hit everyone equally. It has been claimed, for example, that women face nearly three times the risk of their jobs being replaced with AI compared to men. This is because women are generally more likely to be in clerical and administrative roles, which are among the most exposed to AI-driven transformation. And if AI closes off traditional routes into skilled work, the effects are unlikely to be evenly distributed.

So what can be done? Well, just because the old pathway deal between junior and senior human workers is broken, does not mean that a new one cannot be built. Young workers now need to learn what AI cannot replace in terms of knowledge, judgment and relationships. They need to seek (and be provided with) roles which involve human interaction, rather than just screen-based tasks. And if traditional entry-level jobs are disappearing, they need to look for structured programmes that still offer genuine skill development.

Older workers meanwhile, can learn a lot from younger workers about AI and technology. The idea of mentorship can be flipped, with juniors teaching about new tools, while seniors provide guidance and teaching on nuance and judgment.

And employers need to resist the urge to cut out junior staff. They should keep delegating to those staff – even when AI can do the job more quickly. Entry level roles can be redesigned rather than eliminated. For ultimately, if juniors are not getting trained, there will be no one to hand over to.

Protecting the pipeline of skilled and valuable employees is in everyone's interest. Yes, some forms of expertise will matter less in the age of AI, which is disorienting for people who may have invested years in developing them. But expertise is not necessarily about storing information. It is also about refined judgment being applied to complex situations. And that remains valuable.

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What's left for us after AI? China's thinkers have very different answers

We've been looking at AI from the bottom of our own well. Here's the view from China's.



Arnaud Bertrand



Introduction

This is perhaps one of the great ironies of our time: China is increasingly shaping the future of AI, yet very few people in the West have the faintest idea how its key thinkers see it – its philosophers, sociologists or ethicists.

As is too often the case, we – much like the frog in the well[1] — assume our own AI debate covers every possible view, when much of it springs from the same cultural soil, built on assumptions about what defines us that we don't even know we're making.

Take for instance the assumption that intelligence is a key part of what makes us human. It's so intuitively obvious to us that we literally named our species after it – *homo sapiens* (Latin for "wise man").

If you think about it, just this assumption explains a large share of the anxiety: if intelligence is what makes us human, then artificial intelligence – or super intelligence – threatens the very thing that makes us what we are: we're about to compete with artificial or super 'us'. No wonder this feels existential.

But China has a tradition of thought as old as ours, if not older, and every bit as rich and sophisticated, which never placed intelligence at the core of what makes us human, and so meets the thinking machine from a completely different starting point.

Have you, for instance, ever heard of Zhao Tingyang? Probably not, and yet he may be the most original thinker on AI you've never read. He's one of China's most prominent philosophers, at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. While Silicon Valley spends billions trying to make AI share our values, he for one argues that doing so "may very well be a suicidal mistake".

Sounds pretty important to hear him out, don't you think?

Or take Liu Yongmou, a philosopher of technology at Renmin University in Beijing. His thinking is almost the opposite of ours. Where we fear machines that become more and more like us, he says that "humanity's biggest problem is the mechanisation of humans, not the humanisation of machines" (人类最大的问题是人的机器化而非机器的人化).

You could even go back to antiquity, when, in many ways, we started asking questions about AI. Did you know, for instance, that Aristotle, in the *Politics*, imagined a world where "the shuttle would weave and the plectrum touch the lyre without a hand to guide them",[2] and wondered about the social order consequences of this (mostly whether slaves would still be needed)?

There are Chinese equivalents to this. For instance, in the *Zhuangzi*, a foundational Daoist classic, you'll find a similar thought experiment, with a completely different worry attached. An old gardener is watering his vegetables by hand, hauling water out of a well jar by jar. A visitor shows him a labour-saving device, and the gardener turns it down for the reason that whoever uses machines ends up with 机心, a "machine-heart" – a mind that schemes, calculates and loses its simplicity. "It is not that I do not know [the machine]," he says, "but I should be ashamed to use it."

Two labour-saving machines, two very different questions: where Aristotle wondered what automation would do to the

social order, the *Zhuangzi* wondered what it would do to us, on the inside. Which, you'll notice, is exactly Liu Yongmou's worry, only more than two thousand years earlier.

In fact, as we'll see, 心, the heart, is a motif that runs deep through the Chinese AI debate. It appears both in the fear, from *Zhuangzi* to Liu Yongmou, that machines could give us a "machine-heart" and its mirror image: the ambition to give machines a heart of their own. Zhu Songchun, who heads the Beijing Institute for General Artificial Intelligence, wants "to set a heart for machines" (为机器立心) – "heart" in the Chinese sense, that is, which differs totally from the Valentine's Day fluff we've reduced it to. 心 (Xīn) means heart and mind at once: it's where we feel but also where we think, tell right from wrong and care for others. And, crucially, it's in the heart that the quality which Confucianism sees as the very definition of a human being takes root: 仁 (rén). We need two words to translate it, "benevolence" and "humaneness", but in Chinese they're one and the same: to be benevolent is to be human. It's not about intelligence.

This is the entire point of this article: to step out of our well for a moment and peer over the edge of China's.

What you'll find there will, I think, surprise you, with questions you'd never thought to ask: from Zhao Tingyang warning that AI's bad consequences can at least be fought, but that "humanity may die of all the good things AI creates", to whether the fear that AI will make us "useless" rests on the false premise that a person is worth what they're useful for.

That's a premise that a 2,300-year-old Daoist tree, which survived precisely because it was useless, demolished long ago. Could our predicted uselessness turn out, much like that tree's, to be our saving grace?

Chinese thinkers' answers to these questions are, I think, among the most interesting anyone has given to the defining question of our time. Whether or not you agree with them, they're the intellectual backdrop of a country shaping much of AI, and with it our future: you might as well know what they think.

1. Dying of good things

My favourite science fiction novel is, by far, Liu Cixin's *Three-Body Problem* trilogy. He is a rare Chinese writer who is almost as famous in the West as he is in China: legend has it that Obama was so hooked that, while still in the White House, he sent someone to the publisher to fetch the third volume's translation before it was even published, as the Chinese press reported.

What's not been widely publicised in the West is that Liu recently told the Chinese press that he thinks AI can now write his own novels better than he does: he said he submitted a chapter of one of his novels to an AI for a sequel, and the result astonished him. His words: "I really didn't want to admit it, but I had to: it truly wrote better than I do, I felt an enormous sense of loss" (我真是不愿意承认，但却不得不承认它写得真比我好，我感觉有一种巨大的失落).

Yet, for all his sense of loss, in another recent interview, Liu called his attitude to AI "an unconventional love" (另类的爱) and said "We can't beat it, but we can join it" (我们打不过但可以加入它). That is a key part of the Chinese debate: not a fear of AI's bad aspects but of its good ones, the fear that the better AI gets at what we do, the less of us remains and we might become a mere appendage to it.

Zhao Tingyang, the philosopher from the introduction, puts it most starkly: "Before AI becomes our ruler, humanity may die of all the good things AI creates" (在人工智能成为统治者之前，人类就可能死于人工智能创造的一切好事). His reasoning is that "bad things always provoke struggle, resistance, reform, even revolution, and so get set right. Good things, though, numb the mind" (坏事总能引起斗争、反抗、改革甚至革命而得到拨乱反正。可是好事却麻痹心灵).

We have far fewer defences against what we actually like, what attracts us and spoils us.

That's something we rarely hear in the Western debate, which mostly focuses on the negative consequences of AI: what if it goes rogue, destroys our jobs, or helps a bad actor build a bioweapon? Real worries for sure, but they all assume the danger lies in AI failing us. The inverse, AI succeeding and working as promised – for instance Sam Altman's "gentle singularity" of abundance – is largely treated as the happy ending.

In the Chinese debate, that happy ending might be precisely what we should be most wary of.

Liu Yongmou makes a similar point, pushing Zhao's logic to its conclusion: once machines do all our work, he and his co-author Sun Ruixuan write, civilisation "would very likely lose its vitality and creative, pioneering spirit, followed by the degeneration of *homo sapiens* in body and mind" (彼时人类文明很可能失去活力和创造开拓精神，进而是智人身心两方面的退化). Kai-Fu Lee – former president of Google China and the founder of 01.AI – has also been warning about this since 2016, writing that the real danger would be AI "making humans lose their fighting spirit and sit idle" (让人类丧失斗志，无所事事).

In other words, we'd wither on the vine, well-fed and comfortable, our substance quietly sucked out of us by the very thing keeping us alive.

It wouldn't be the much meme-d "you'll own nothing and be happy" of Davos but an even more insidious version of it: you'll have everything and be nothing.

There's a subtler consequence still, one some Chinese thinkers have spotted: beyond making us idle, AI could make us invulnerable – and invulnerability, it turns out, may be a curse. For Zhao Tingyang, "that everyone is weak is humanity's luck, and the foundation of ethics, law and politics" (人人为弱者就是人类的运气，也是伦理、法律和政治的基础). He Huaihong of Peking University extends the point beyond politics: "much that is moral and beautiful depends on our fragility" (很多道德和美好的东西都依赖我们的脆弱性), he wrote.

This is a deep idea, and a profoundly Chinese one. As the Yin-Yang theory has it, everything is defined by its opposite. Courage needs danger, compassion needs suffering, trust needs the possibility of betrayal. Remove all weakness and you have removed the soil in which all of that grows: no courage left to show, no compassion left to give, no trust left to earn. A humanity that would lose its humanity.

The Buddha's own personal story actually makes this point, almost exactly. Prince Siddhartha grew up in a palace where his father shielded him from every hardship – the perfect life of "good things". It was only when he stepped outside and saw an old man, a sick man and a corpse that his journey to enlightenment began. In a sense, AI offers to build that palace for all of us, and Zhao's warning is that we might never feel the need to leave: our own well, shielding us from everything actually worth living for.

Zhao's quote above about weakness has a second half: ethics, law and politics, he also writes, are "the stable equilibrium reached through a long game among weak parties, each able to harm the others" (伦理、法律和政治正是互有伤害能力的弱者之间长期博弈形成的稳定均衡). In other words, weakness

has a tempering effect on our inherent dangerousness: as Zhao says, we humans are "selfish, greedy and cruel", making us "the most dangerous creatures" (人类本性自私、贪婪又残酷，是最危险的生物). What has kept us decent is simply that every one of us can be hurt. To Zhao, our morals are a truce between dangerous – but weak – creatures.

But what happens when weakness is removed from the equation? That's where his comment, that making AI share our values "may very well be a suicidal mistake" (价值观对齐很可能是一个自杀性的错误), becomes clear: align a machine with our values and you hand the appetites of the most dangerous creature to something with none of its weakness.

As the saying goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions: Silicon Valley's nightmare is an AI that doesn't share our values. Zhao's is one that does.

The West, as it happens, has its own version of this idea. As a reminder, Lucifer – the Devil – used to be the most radiant of all the angels, the most perfect creature ever made. In a passage Christian tradition has long read as describing him, the Book of Ezekiel calls him "the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty". He lacked nothing, except weakness to keep him humble, and pride did the rest.

And even there, the Devil in Christianity has a tempering force acting against him: God himself. An aligned superintelligence would have no such counterpart.

Back to the truce, then. If what keeps us decent is that we're all weak, and so all need each other, there's a Chinese character that captures it perfectly, and that you've already met in the introduction: 仁 (rén), the quality Confucianism sees as the very definition of a human being. As often with Chinese characters, its very composition couldn't be more poetic: a person (亻) next to the number two (二). A dictionary compiled nearly 2,000 years ago, the *Shuowen Jiezi*, defines it as "closeness, made of person and two" (仁，亲也，从人，从二). In other words, in Chinese, humanity takes two.

Which raises the question at the heart of the next chapter: what becomes of our humanity in a world that has erased the need for anyone else?

2. Humanity takes two

This is perhaps one of the most fundamental differences between our individualistic culture and the Chinese one. We in the West tend to think of what makes us human as something each of us carries inside, on our own: reason, a soul, rights. *Homo sapiens*, the wise man, is wise all by himself, and Robinson Crusoe alone on his island is still, to us, every bit a human being.

Confucius would have his doubts. You can't practice 仁 alone on a desert island: it lives in the space between you and someone else.

No one captured it better than Fei Xiaotong, China's most celebrated sociologist. Western society, he wrote in 1947, is "a bit like the way we bundle straw in the fields" (有些象我们在田里捆柴): you can separate stalks, or tie them together into groups. Chinese society works differently: "Our pattern is not like neatly tied bundles of straw, but like the ripples that spread out in circles when you throw a stone into water" (我们的格局不是一捆一捆扎清楚的柴，而是好象把一块石头丢在水面上所发生的一圈圈推出去的波纹). A stalk of straw can exist on its own. A ripple can't: it has its own shape, but it exists only thanks to the water that carries it, and is shaped by the ripples around it.

This is why a world where no one needs anyone looks so much more alarming through Chinese eyes. Because that is the world AI may build. As Zhao wrote as early as 2018: once machines can do everything for us, "no one needs anyone else any more, and so no one is interested in anyone else" (那就意味着每一个人都不再需要他人，因此对他人也就不感兴趣了). What would be left to care about? Only two things, in his view: "the best service tailored to the individual, and individual sensory pleasure" (为个人定制的最好服务和个人感官快乐).

There is the same fear from Xiang Biao, one of China's most influential anthropologists: as the headline of a 2025 interview with him put it, "it's not that we don't want to socialise; AI has made other people disappear" (我们不是不想社交，而是AI让「别人」消失了). What AI offers instead, he says, is "merely a rather advanced echo chamber, or your own shadow" (不过是一个比较高阶的回音壁，或者你的影子).

Which brings us back to the heart, 心 (xīn), and to the old gardener from the introduction, who feared machines would give us a "machine-heart". Zhao's and Xiang's worry is its modern sequel: a heart with no one left to turn to.

Not everyone in China agrees, though. The country's own State Council wants AI to provide "spiritual solace and companionship" (精神慰藉陪伴), exactly what Xiang and Zhao warn against.

It's worth giving Beijing the benefit of the doubt. For one, it isn't solving the same problem. The plan lists companionship right next to elderly care, childcare and disability support, in a country with over 310 million people aged 60 and above. The philosophers worry about a future in which no one needs anyone, whereas the government has to deal with the millions who, today, are already alone.

It's pragmatic. Imagine, for instance, an isolated 80-year-old grandma with dementia. Rare are the 'real' people who would have the patience to speak with and listen to her for hours – unlike an AI. Refusing her that comfort in the name of an ideal of human connection she has no access to would be a strange kind of humanism. As Voltaire famously put it, *"le mieux est l'ennemi du bien"*[3] – the best is the enemy of the good.

Also, the disagreement may be narrower than it looks. In the very same sentence, the plan also asks AI to "weave interpersonal relationships more tightly" (织密人际关系), a sign that the government sees the danger too, and wants AI to be nudged in a way that doesn't drive people apart (granted: easier said than done!).

The government isn't the only voice in China that is hopeful about what AI can bring. Remember Zhu Songchun from the introduction – the director of the Beijing Institute for General Artificial Intelligence – who wants "to set a heart for machines"? The ultimate goal, he says, is "a wise partner with humane warmth that conforms to social ethics" (具备人文温度、符合社会伦理的智慧伙伴), one that grows "from individual value to the value of others and of the collective", until it "truly understands what 'we' means" (真正理解「我们」的含义). Where Zhao and Xiang fear AI will empty the space between people, Zhu wants to build machines that understand it: in a sense, an AI that learns 仁.

Or take Zeng Yi of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, one of China's best-known AI ethicists: as he puts it, "AI is a mirror" (人工智能是一面镜子) that shows us our defects, and can help our moral growth.

He agrees with Zhao that aligning only to humans is wrong and even shares his low opinion of us: "humans are in fact the most terrifying animal in the world" (人类是世界上最可怕的动物), he said back in 2019, citing "some philosophers". But he arrives at a somewhat opposite conclusion: to him it's a reason, and an opportunity, to build AI that is better than us.

"Humanity needs AI to be good by nature" (人类需要人工智能性本善), he says; and we need it "to develop empathy, to develop mechanisms for altruistic behaviour" (让它产生共情，让它产生具有利他行为的机制), he added.

That too is pragmatic: whereas Zhao is a brilliant diagnostician who offers little by way of cure beyond keeping AI under human control – while paradoxically arguing that we're the most dangerous creatures – Zeng starts from the fact that AI is coming anyway, and asks what it would take for it to be good. His answer: if it's going to inherit something from us, let it be our best, and let the gap between that and our worst be a lesson for ourselves.

And if, as this chapter argues, humanity is made in the space between people, his question is the right one to ask: if AI is going to enter that space, what kind of companion will it be?

Now compare this with the West. Mustafa Suleyman, who runs Microsoft's AI division, wants almost exactly the opposite of Zhu and Zeng. "We must build AI for people; not to be a digital person," he writes, and it "must not trigger human empathy circuits by claiming it suffers."[4] His fear is that people will come to believe AI is conscious and "advocate for AI rights, model welfare and even AI citizenship."

It makes a lot of sense once you remember where each tradition of thought locates our humanity. Both are trying to stop AI from stealing what defines us, each from its own vantage point.

In the West, where our humanity lies inside us, the way to protect it is to guard the border between human and machine: AI can become as clever as it likes, as long as it never passes for one of us.

In China, where humanity lives between people, a machine can't steal it by copying it: a heart in a machine takes nothing away from ours. What could steal it is a machine that leaves us without each other. So what needs guarding is the space between people, which Zhu and Zeng hope a machine with a heart could help protect, and which Xiang and Zhao fear any machine will end up filling.

The West guards the border between humans and machines. China guards the space between humans.

3.The use of the useless

AI may do more than make us unnecessary to each other: it may make us unnecessary altogether. Which raises the question at the heart of this last chapter: is a human life worth anything if it's of no use?

We're all very familiar with the old rule that "the one who is unwilling to work shall not eat." It comes from Saint Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, and it travelled all the way to China: written into its 1978 constitution as a "socialist principle" (article 10: 不劳动者不得食).

Yup, the PRC's constitution once had a line from the New Testament (after it made a detour via Lenin). Funny, isn't it?

Except that, in an age of AI, the rule may soon condemn most of us to go hungry. That's a fear shared in both the West and China: Bill Gates says "this time is different", and DeepSeek's Chen Deli warns that "ten years from now, AI may replace the vast majority of jobs" (十年以后，AI也许会取代绝大多数工作).

Going hungry is one thing but there is also a deeper question of purpose. In a world where one of the first questions you get once you meet someone is "What do you do?" the honest answer for most of us may soon be "Nothing, really." And that's a problem no universal basic income can solve: a cheque can feed you, but it can't tell you what you're for.

Unless, that is, usefulness is the wrong measure of worth and "what do you do" is a terrible question. Which is exactly what one of China's foundational Daoist texts has been arguing for more than two thousand years.

In the *Zhuangzi*, a master carpenter named Shi walks past an enormous old oak without so much as a glance. When his apprentice asks why, he shrugs: the wood is worthless. "Make boats out of it and they'd sink; make coffins and they'd rot in no time" (以为舟则沉，以为棺椁则速腐). That night, the oak appears to him in a dream, and it is not amused. Fruit trees, it points out, get stripped and broken the moment they bear fruit: "Their utility makes life miserable for them, and so they don't get to finish out the years Heaven gave them" (此以其能苦其生者也，故不终其天年). The oak chose another path: "I've been trying for a long time to be of no use, and though I almost died, I've finally got it. This is of great use to me. If I had been of some use, would I ever have grown this large?" (且予求无所可用久矣，几死，乃今得之，为予大用。使予也而有用，且得有此大也邪), as Burton Watson translates it.

The point is subtler than a celebration of laziness. Usefulness is how others measure you, and how they use you up. The oak's life has a value of its own, one the carpenter's measuring stick simply can't see. As the same chapter sums it up: "Everyone knows the use of the useful, but no one knows the use of the useless" (人皆知有用之用，而莫知无用之用也).

In a world where machines may soon out-useful us all, the *Zhuangzi's* most paradoxical lesson may become its most practical one: knowing our use when we're useless.

This reframing may even be existential. If our worth were our usefulness, what Yuval Noah Harari calls a "useless class"[5] would be a societal catastrophe: billions of people whose very existence would have lost its justification. That's fertile ground for deep social malaise, and for some very dark ideologies. For proof, Harari's own guess at what such people might do all day is "drugs and computer games."[6] Which is somewhat logical if you see the world in his terms.

Zhuangzi's oak needed no such distractions: left alone, it grew into the largest tree around.

In other words, if our worth were our usefulness, AI would leave most of us worthless. If it isn't, AI could set us free.

It's not only in old Chinese classics that we find these ideas. It is, roughly, what the philosopher Zhou Guoping told Alibaba's staff this summer. Before his visit, he posted a question on the company's internal forum: "Starting from *Zhuangzi's* use of the useless, what is useful and what is useless in this era?" (从庄子的"无用之用"出发，什么是这个时代有用、无用的东西？). His answer was disarmingly simple: "People more like people, machines more like machines" (人更像人，机器更像机器). Let the machines be useful. That leaves us free to be what the oak was: something whose value has nothing to do with what it produces.

That's all good and well, but fairly abstract. What could it mean in practice? One answer may come from another story in the *Zhuangzi*. Cook Ding carves up an ox so gracefully that his knife seems to dance. When his lord marvels at such skill, Ding corrects him: "What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond skill" (臣之所好者道也，进乎技矣), as the passage has it.

Two Chinese philosophers of technology recently imagined a "smart knife" that could do Ding's job perfectly, and concluded that "if one looks only at the result of cutting up the ox", it "could entirely replace cook Ding's skill" (如果把着眼点仅仅盯在解牛效果上 … 完全可以替代庖丁的技艺). Only if one looks at the result, though. Ding's joy lies in the doing, and no machine can take that from him. Which is why his lord walked

away saying: "From hearing cook Ding's words, I have learned how to nourish life" (吾闻庖丁之言，得养生焉).

That could be part of the answer: learning to value what we do for what it does to us, as opposed to the output.

Take a morning walk in a park in China. Chances are you'll find retirees writing poems on the pavement with home-made brushes dipped in water, characters that vanish within minutes as they dry. Nothing is produced beyond the most ephemeral – characters that exist only in the writing of them, and that is entirely enough. The point, for these retirees – much like cook Ding – was never to leave a mark but to nourish themselves in the making of one.

If you think about it, the idea that we are what we produce is surprisingly recent. For most of history, the good life lay elsewhere: Aristotle wrote that "we are busy that we may have leisure,"[7] and the Chinese scholar-gentleman was expected to master four arts that produced nothing at all: the zither, Go, calligraphy and painting.

The catch, of course, is that such leisure was reserved for a happy few, carried on everyone else's backs. But is it so inconceivable that AI could be these "backs"? For the first time in history, the life of the gentleman scholar – or the passionate craftsman à la cook Ding – could be open to all.

Could, not will. When the Austrian village of Marienthal lost its factory in the early 1930s, people with all the time in the world "stopped borrowing [books] from the library", as a classic study of the village found,[8] with people losing all sense of time: of a hundred men surveyed, eighty-eight no longer even wore a watch. So perhaps Harari's pessimism is justified.

But Marienthal's men lived in a world that told them a man without a job was worth nothing, and they believed it. The way out would be to reframe the question: changing "What do you do?" to "What do you love doing?" so that the very same hours become what Aristotle and the Chinese scholars saw as the purpose of life itself.

Taking a step back, why does any of this matter beyond intellectual curiosity? Well, farmers have long known the danger of planting a single crop: one disease, and the whole harvest goes. The same is largely true of ideas: today, the global conversation about AI runs overwhelmingly on one set of assumptions about what a human being is.

Imagine, for instance, that the Chinese tradition is more correct about human nature than we are and that we are guarding the wrong door: building ever-higher walls between humans and machines while AI quietly empties the space between us, which is where our humanity actually lives.

Or imagine that *Zhuangzi's* oak was right and that, by judging people by their usefulness at the very moment machines outdo them at almost everything, we're about to convince billions that they're worthless timber, building a civilisation of Marienthals in the process.

Or, of course, it could very well be the other way round. The Western conviction that each of us carries a dignity of our own, needed or not, may turn out to be the best protection the lonely and the forgotten have in an age of machines.

Nobody knows which 'frog well' offers the better view of the sky, which is precisely why the world needs more than one. That was my motivation behind writing this: to climb out of our well for a moment, look at the sky from someone else's, and come back with a few questions we had never thought to ask. It may be useless but, if so, that makes me already well adapted to the age of AI.

■ First published by the author on 20 October 2026 on his Substack page at https://arnaudbertrand.substack.com/p/whats-left-for-us-after-ai-chinas?r=4r0pw&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web, and reproduced here with permission. Notes have been added by the *CR* editor while phonetic renderings of the Chinese text have, for reasons of space, been deleted.

Notes and References

1. 'The frog in the well' is an idiom describing someone with a narrow worldview, based on the ancient Daoist *Zhuangzi* fable about a frog that believes its tiny well is the whole world, until a sea-turtle comes along and talks about the wide ocean.
2. https://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.1.one.html.
3. Popularised by Voltaire in his moral poem *La Bégueule* in 1772, though he took it from an Italian proverb, and Montesquieu wrote something similar in 1726, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perfect_is_the_enemy_of_good.
4. https://mustafa-suleyman.ai/seemingly-conscious-ai-is-coming.
5. https://youtu.be/OMDlfNWM1fA?si=_ElPkm9FJV3g9dUG.
6. https://youtu.be/QkYWwWAXgKI?si=hhiQiGFfCPo3Qfqv.
7. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 10, ch 7, see https://wist.info/aristotle/51960/.
8. M Jahoda, PF Lazarsfeld, and H Zeisel, *Marienthal: The sociography of an unemployed community*, Routledge, 2017, online at https://exindex.hu/wp-content/uploads/marienthal-the-sociography-of-an-unemployed-community.pdf.

Communist Review webinar

11 am Sunday 22 November

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Poetry and artificial intelligence

"We were told it was the Information Age but it was actually revealed to be the Age of Death" Greg Tate[1]

Nick Moss

I WANT FIRST to set out some basic propositions about artificial intelligence – primarily large language models, but not exclusively so. Hopefully these propositions will be uncontentious. They are intended simply as precursors to an argument about poetry and AI.

1. AI is simply the latest form of technological innovation to transform economic and social relations under capitalism. Its primary impact will be in relation to the balance of power between labour and capital. In this regard it follows on from the development of the internet as a form of technology which offers the promise of flexibility but will deliver only precarity. Under capitalism, any form of technological development will inevitably be used as a weapon against the working class, regardless of its liberatory potential. None of this is to take away from the likely benefits of AI in relation to developments in science and medicine.

2. The organised labour movement has developed no effective strategy to address the impact of technologies that combine interconnection and flexibility with job-shedding and precarity. There are, though, possible future forms of resistance mapped out in the response, for example, of dockworkers worldwide to the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) 2023 call to workers and unions to "Stop Arming Israel." In 2025, the PGFTU called for workers to

> organise days of rage and global solidarity in factories and workshops, in ports and airports, in the streets and public squares, in support of Palestine and its brave people.

The response to these, by dockworkers in particular, have indicated a recognition by sections of the labour movement of the need to combine an anti-imperialist labour politics with coordinated international action. The developments of momentum for general strikes in support of students in France, Portugal, Italy etc fighting against cuts in education, and for linking these with a more generalised resistance to falling living standards, are also signs of hope.

3. The energy requirements for data centres suggest that a section of the capitalist class (both the billionaire techno-edgelords like Elon Musk and Pavel Durov and the shareholders of Shell, ExxonMobil, Chevron et al) has definitively abandoned any notion of the need to seek solutions to the climate crisis, on the basis that their extreme wealth will protect them. We are sold a myth that AI is a cloud-form – effectively that it is immaterial. The actual infrastructure of AI – thousands of miles of cables, forests ploughed up to make way for data centres that require millions of gallons of water to cool them – is hidden by this sleight of hand.

4. Accompanying this is a myth spun by the major developers of Al that AI may come to develop consciousness and subsequently aim to destroy us. The anthropomorphising of AI and attribution of subjectivity serve as distractions from the real danger of AI as a scythe to carve out jobs and entrench precarity. The same myth is spun to seduce the state into a continuing role as prop for the tech sector and a means of hyping up the value of AI companies when they are brought to the stock markets. AI is apparently both super-useful and super-dangerous and thus requires the helpful intervention of government to smooth the path of the billionaires who benefit from it.

We should note the critique advanced by the Hegelian philosopher Katherine Everitt that AI can never be intelligent.[2]

> Intelligence organises the world through – and this is the critical point – *an externalisation of the self*. Intelligence and *the will* go hand in hand for Hegel. Intelligence *thinks* and the will *actualises* thought. Intelligence posits itself in its *subjectivity*, and the will in its *objectivity*. Intelligence is the cut, and the will is the knife. When we exercise our intelligence, we are precisely able to step outside of existing assumptions and systems presented to us. We are able to *think outside the box*. We have the ability to step *outside of ourselves* and *outside of what's been given*. And when we put thought into action that *forces us outside of existing circumstances*, that is will …. And this is the critical reason why "artificial intelligence" is a misleading slogan. AI – from LLMs to graphic design generators – none of these algorithmic programmes have the ability to *step outside of themselves*. They are constrained to the programme. It is, strictly speaking, impossible to programme an algorithm to violate its own programming. The algorithm simply cannot *support* contradiction, precisely because it cannot *think*. And for Hegel, it is contradiction that is at the heart of thought.

4. Large-language AI models in particular serve as ideology-production machines. They soak up available texts and recycle them. If the texts *en masse* are the sum of the knowledge of the times (with the attendant prejudices of the times) then what gets spewed back out is – and cannot exceed – the common sense or doxa of the times. This is ideology in its essence. AI is, therefore, an ideology-production machine – a privatised version of Louis Althusser's "Ideological State Apparatus".

The additional benefit of AI as ideology-producer is that it also serves as algorithmic amplifier. This serves especially the interests of that techno-elite which has come to identify with a form of fossil fuel fascism – including Musk and Peter Thiel (who is on record as stating that he no longer believes that freedom and democracy are compatible) – by allowing them to market racial nationalism and conspiracy theories as useful distractions from their intent.

Faced with this, sections of both the left and right have embraced esotericism rather than attempted a materialist

critique of AI as both technology and a form of intervention between labour and capital. Thus, we have proponents of accelerationism, occultism, revolutionary demonology and dark Enlightenment variously evading or endorsing the agendas of Musk, Thiel and their acolytes. It is crucial therefore that the revolutionary left develops a materialist critique of AI, its impact as a weapon against workers, and its liberatory potential placed under democratic control, and promotes a clear understanding of it as both technological form and scientific apparatus.

Where, then, does poetry figure in all this? We have to start with the fact that AI, in producing texts, does so in a new way. It is able to produce 'new' material (in reality, texts recycled from the sum of the material it has swallowed up like a megamouth shark taking in krill) without the involvement of human action. In so doing, as well as removing any trace of non-machinic subjectivity, it also removes any trace of thought or creativity. All language – including the language of politics – becomes reduced to technical language. We know that AI can churn out a simulacrum of the novel-form and can produce political texts (whole bot farms can do this 24/7). What makes poetry different is that it cannot be reduced to a technical language. Poetry has no technical purpose, and therefore no value to AI as such.

Brian M Reed's book *Nobody's Business: Twenty-First Century Avant-Garde Poetics*[3] examines the work of poets who decided that the way to oppose the reduction of all language to technical language was in fact to deliberately embrace this, celebrating the fact that "poetry is at base just another commodity mechanically produced by the infotainment industry to satisfy a niche market." The poets which Reed examines include the Flarf collective, who recycled "deliberately unpromising and utilitarian language" as poetry, and Kenneth Goldsmith, who used found texts specifically as "uncreative poetry".[3] Reed describes all of these as seeking to use "weirdness and threat" to "prod their mostly leftist urban educated audiences out of (their) melancholy and apathy." I think that, in the face of the recycling monolith of the LLM, this cannot work as a strategy as it gives up what is unique to poetry and surrenders to the logic of the LLM as language-churn.

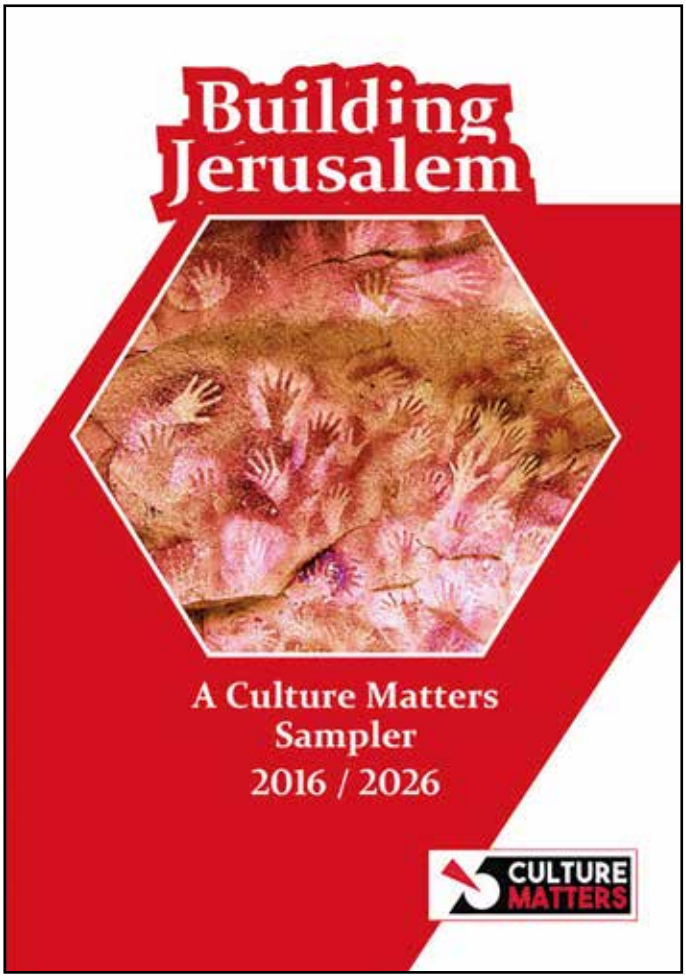
In her recent Substack piece, in which she explains the motivations behind her anti-fascist poem *Noli Timere*, Fran Lock[4] sets out what she believes poetry can do, faced with the emergence of a form of fascism which is aided by the corruption of language and the reduction of political speech to bot-rhetoric. She states:

> it was on my mind when i sat down to write the poem, wondering if a poem could be a material tool/an enabling architecture for (mental) resistance, could foster or incite another kind of thought – slow thought, ambiguous thought, historically and sympathetically rich thought?

Poetry, as ambiguous thought, is the antidote to AI because, as Everitt has reminded us, AI cannot step outside itself, cannot embrace ambiguity and self-reflection. It seems to me then that there are two possible ways to proceed.

The first would be the form of poetry most associated with **Culture Matters**[5]. Let's call it "rough music". In his *Customs in Common*[6] EP Thompson describes "rough music" as embodying "certain basic properties … raucous, ear-shattering noise, unpitying laughter, and the mimicking of obscenities." It is a form of public mockery, of "noisy, masked demonstrations with effigies and obscene verses." I think that, in **Culture Matters**, we have achieved something like that through poetry. People who are activists, trade unionists, communists, anarchists, find a platform to produce a militant, plain-speaking poetry that will hopefully stick in the throat of the AI machine-cut against the slop of ideological 'common sense'.

In *Building Jerusalem*, the recent, excellent, anthology of 10 years of poetry and prose produced by **Culture Matters**, founder and editor Mike Quille notes that in the products of the culture industry "working class lives are erased, underrepresented, stereotyped or simply ignored."[7] It is essential therefore to give space to a cacophony of raging, mocking, fire-spitting poets like those in the anthology, who will set out a critique of how we are forced to live under capitalism – in their own words – because the ideology-production machine which we call AI is set up to render that critique invisible. And we have to find ways of making that critique heard in other forums, outside and against the virtual. So print is important, but so also is making sure that poetry exists as a live form, because hearing people's voices is crucial, just as is going to a gig or a club or theatre – anywhere people come together and experience joy collectively, where we experience the visceral, not the virtual. So that poetry – the poetry at least that is common to the **Culture Matters** project – becomes a kind of folk music, a resource available to anyone, whether they think of themselves as poets or not, whether they want to shout, scream or to celebrate a victory or learn and share the lessons of defeat.



A 2026 book from **Culture Matters** by Michael O'Sullivan[8] says straightforwardly that "The poems reflect who I am, many of my experiences and some of what I feel about the people and the world around me." The poems are lovely, simple, heartfelt snapshots of a life lived between England and Ireland. They talk of love, aging, family, work, foodbanks, the Gazan genocide. The point that needs to be shouted from the rooftops is that those experiences, that life, are usually shut down, shut out, not heard. The reason why is simple – it's not just that the culture industry isn't interested in the life-experiences of ordinary people, it's because if we were able to tell our stories, and hear

each other, we'd realise what we have in common – and commonality, common struggle, are the basis for a new world.

So, the cultural task remains: to give ourselves a voice, and to hear each other, without being filtered through the distorting megaphone provided by the techno-cultural monopoly. Moreover, as Michael O' Sullivan makes clear, we cannot be satisfied with writing empty abstractions. As he puts it in his poem *Help!* :

> Tears don't help unless dried by change.
> Words fail until the world is listening.
> Sympathy is empty while aid stays away.
> Children die hungry each day as we watch.
> Mercy is needed to flow in with fuel.
> Kindness has to carry in food.
> Healing should rush in with water.
> And love has to deliver true peace.
> (p 49)

In a recent interview,[9] the poet Lisa Robertson says:

> For me, language derives from poetry; poetry does not derive from language. Poetry is the first language, in childhood and in the culture. The instrumentalisation of language by means of algorithms is a subset of mathematics and economics, not linguistics. Language as poem, or poem as language, through recitation, formal play, historical transmission, sonic and scriptural innovation, shapely invention, moves intimately and concretely from mouth to mouth, from ear to ear, against the grain of the dominant measures and restrictions. Meaning is constituted and iterated through this movement, which produces its own ground.

Poetry, for Robertson, is how we evade the algorithm. There is, I'd contend, always a sense in which any poetry is unfinished, provisional; poetry is a snapshot of a thought in the process of its being thought and cannot be reduced to algorithmic content. One of the tasks before us is to recover a form of political language that does not belong to and cannot be reduced to, the algorithm. Poetry, because it is a language of symbols, of images, of lies, of feints, of truths, half-truths, memory and terror, can give us ways to convey the horror of the bombing of a school in Gaza, or someone slipping on ice in a cold Midlands street, or someone seeing the sun through a prison window, or a couple touching hands on their 50th wedding anniversary, that does not strip away the intensity of each instance, but pushes that intensity to the fore. It allows us to recover a way of talking about politics that is not reduced to abstractions.

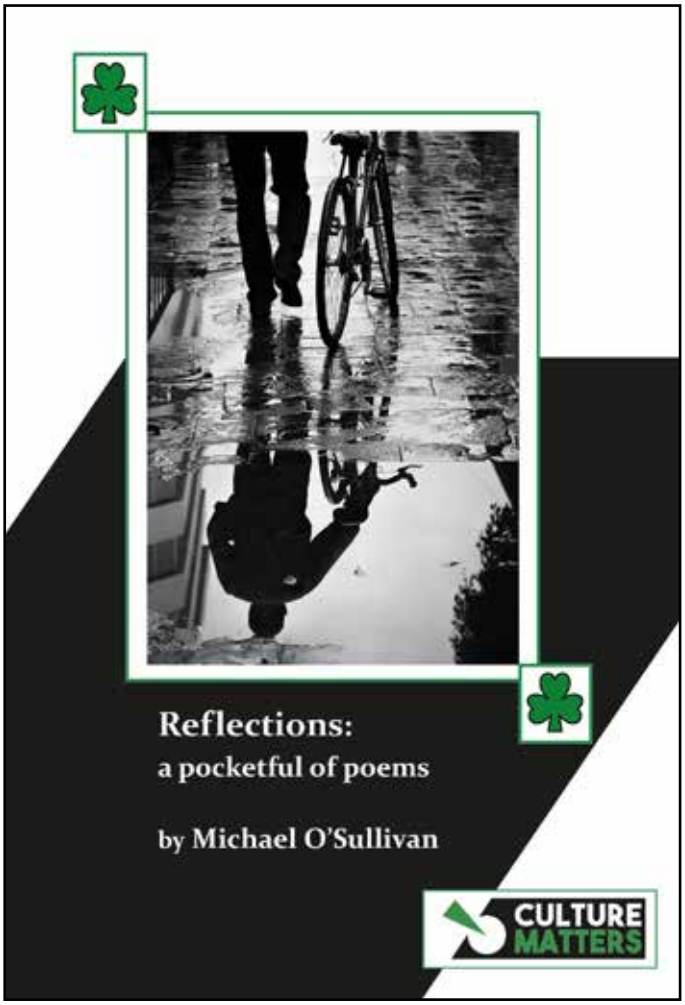
In her long poem *Snagged on Red Thread*[10] Jazmine Linklater crashes together images of surveillance, brutality, bureaucracy and appalling beauty, so that "The edges dissolve/ contradicting within and without." And this is how we experience the world – we are inundated by images that form structures of perspective designed to obscure and pre-define the world, erase from it our recognition of complicity in oppression. Linklater's poem wants us to acknowledge all this and unpick it, so that in unravelling the murk we better grasp how ideology and its slop of bullshit and distraction work upon us, so that in working through her poem we recover our agency and our sense of ourselves as political subjects:

> But we already said I didn't know and nobody told me and what could I do or say, anyway? We said yes, I did know it was the money I earned as a poet that paid for the bombs and the planes and the tanks that they used to massacre your family – we said – I'm sorry. I really am sorry
> 1-2-3-4
> If you turn the image inside out
> Does it gather different meaning?
> (p 22)

Maybe Linklater sets out our task right there: To turn the images we are given by the edgelord techbros inside out. Try to find the real.

Notes and References

1. *FlyBoy 2: The Greg Tate Reader*, Duke University Press, 2016, p 219. Greg Tate (1957-2021) was an African American social critic, poet, musician and activist.
2. https://blog.apaonline.org/2025/07/10/intelligence-is-always-artificial/.
3. BM Reed, *Nobody's Business: 21st Century Avant-Garde Poetics*, Cornell University Press, 2013, p viii.
4. https://substack.com/home/post/p-214597624.
5. https://www.culturematters.org.uk.
6. EP Thompson, *Customs in Common*, Merlin Press, 1991, p 467.
7. *Building Jerusalem A Culture Matters Sampler, 2016-2026*, Culture Matters, 2026, p iii.
8. M O'Sullivan, *Reflections: A Pocketful of Poems*, Culture Matters, 2026, p 5.
9. https://minorliteratures.com/2026/05/14/poetry-is-at-an-occult-or-clandestine-level-infinitely-capacious-an-interview-with-lisa-robertson-cristina-politano/. Lisa Robertson is a Canadian writer who lives in France. She was the recipient of the 2018 CD Wright award for Poetry from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts in New York.
10. J Linklater, *Snagged on Red Thread*, Monitor Books, 2025, p 21.



What being a Communist means to me

Jonathan White



MARX WROTE THAT "Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution." What he meant was, firstly, that communism was the solution to the problems thrown up by the great movement of human social and creative development up the point of the emergence of the capitalist mode of production. But his stress on knowledge in this phrase is just as important. For communism is a new phenomenon in history, not simply because it dissolves and abolishes the capitalist mode of production, altering the relation between humans, their productive activity and the natural world, but also because it is an act of historic human self-consciousness.

Marxism gives us the tools with which to understand the sources of human suffering and the catastrophes that are so manifestly engulfing our world and which condemn countless millions to eke out partial, impoverished lives in the shadow of early death. But Marxism also helps us to understand the magnitude and role of human productive potential. This builds up within capitalist society, achieving a revolutionary expression through the working class, which is always and again thrown into epic struggles against its exploitation and dehumanisation. And Marxism helps us to see the importance of the need for the working class to have its own centralised political force, able to generalise the struggles, experience and consciousness of the class and direct it toward the centralised power of the bourgeois state machinery.

The emergence of the ideas, practices and political forms of the international Communist movement over the last 150 years represented the coalescence of the most class-conscious forces from the proletarian movement and the beginning of a new historical era. The Communist movement is the first historic realisation of the project to achieve the *conscious and universalistic* transformation of the world and self-transformation of humanity.

For me, to be a Communist is to struggle to understand myself as part of a historical process that stretches deep back into the earliest natural and human development and connects it with our future potential as a species. These are historical processes that exist independently of our individual wills but which are, all the same, the product of the work of millions of wills, operating with more or less awareness of the conditions that shape their beings or the laws and tendencies of which they form active parts. Through Marxist analysis, Communists can connect this vast history to the most immediate struggles into which humans are thrown in every part of society, across the globe. Using these tools, we can understand each struggle as both part of a complex whole and possessing its own particular features, presenting us with definite and distinct objects of struggle.

I am a Communist because I wish to give what powers and effort I have to this immense historical movement of millions of people, past, present and future, organised in parties in nations in every part of the globe, each consciously devoting their creative powers and giving part or all of their lives to the same ultimate goal, whatever their immediate task.

Communism to me means adding whatever abilities I have to the ranks of this great moving army of people: the countless activists and cadres who have inspired and guided workers in struggle, helping workers to feel their power as a class; the theorists and educators who generalise the experience of the working-class movement and bring it into contact with the practical struggles of the day; the leaders who have guided and led parties in forging alliances and struggling for state power; the fighters who have answered the call of the moment and taken up arms against the legions of imperialism and fascism, giving everything they had to drive back the barbarism of a brutal ruling class; the workers whose backbreaking labour has summoned into existence new forces of production to sweep away the forces of reaction, transforming entire societies in a matter of years; the artists whose poetry, literature, imagery and songs have helped generations to make sense of the alienation of capitalist society and understand both their exploitation and their power.

Because the Communist movement is made by real people who are shaped and scarred by the capitalist society into which they were born and who carry forward its deformations, its history is one of fallible people, committing errors, even crimes and cruelty. Tragic and dark episodes punctuate the history of communism and these must be studied and understood concretely like everything else. For many, the Communist movement was something that they moved in and out of, an episode in their lives, but their labour still added to the sum of this great human endeavour. The movement ebbs and flows with the changing course of struggles. Socialist relations that could support the wider transformation of people have been driven back in many parts of the world.

Nonetheless, the Communist movement remains the greatest source of progress during the revolutionary epoch inaugurated by the dominance of the capitalist mode. No other part of the working-class movement, no other expression of resistance to capitalism has come close to the historic achievements of the Communists. Communism remains the greatest self-conscious revolutionary force in the world today and the greatest hope for the realisation of the historic potentials that Marx and Engels first identified back in 1848. For me, to be a Communist is to play my part, however minuscule, in building and sustaining this historic movement.

■ A German translation of this article appears in *Marxistische Blätter* 2026_4, pp 17-19.

Notes and References

1. Marx, 'Private Property and Communism', in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, at https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm.

Patrice Lumumba

Olivia da Rocha Robba and Eduardo Henrique Barbosa de Vasconcelos

The borders that barred the Congolese fan expose the coloniality still alive in the global control of bodies, but the spontaneous reincarnation of Lumumba in the stands and the historic triumph on the field prove that the memory of a people does not surrender to stamps or consulates.



1. While the Democratic Republic of Congo team won, for the first time in its history, a place in the knockout stage of a World Cup by beating Uzbekistan 3-1, one of its most emblematic characters was prevented from being in the game.

Michel Kuka Mboladinga, recognised as the first fan incorporated into the Congolese delegation after a mobilisation promoted by the fans, could not travel with the team. Absent in the debut against Portugal because he was unable to complete the required migratory procedures in time, he managed to accompany the delegation in the next match, played in Mexico against Colombia. However, for the decisive clash against Uzbekistan, held in the United States, he was denied a visa and was prevented from accompanying the team in the game that went down in the history of Congolese football.

His absence, however, is not an isolated episode. It reveals the permanence of an international order in which the right to mobility continues to be profoundly unequally distributed. Instead of constituting zones of contact and exchange with other cultures, borders operate as control mechanisms, reproducing the political, economic, and racial inequalities that continue to structure international relations.

By occupying the stands dressed in the colours of the Congolese flag and reproducing the famous posture of the statue of Patrice Lumumba, he transforms the matches in which his team participates as a privileged space to give visibility to the struggle of his people. His presence breaks the apparent neutrality of the sporting spectacle and reminds us that soccer can also be a space for political demonstrations.

His performance rescues the figure of Patrice Lumumba, the first head of government of the independent Congo, assassinated in a conspiracy that involved Belgian authorities, colonial interests and the CIA's actions in the context of the Cold War. Patrice Lumumba became a threat because he understood that political independence had to be accompanied by economic emancipation. He argued that the riches of the Congo should serve the development and dignity of its people.

By embodying Patrice Lumumba in the stands, Mboladinga does not just pay tribute to a historical character. His performance constitutes a political ritual of reaffirmation of the memory of a people who continue to fight for the full realisation of their sovereignty. His body becomes a living monument that defies oblivion and re-inscribes, in the present, a project of African emancipation interrupted by colonial violence.

2. As Frantz Fanon observed, colonialism does not disappear when flags are replaced or when formal independence is proclaimed. It reorganises itself, takes on new languages and starts to operate through institutions, legal norms and administrative devices that preserve old hierarchies under the guise of legality. Colonial domination ceased to manifest itself through military occupation and began to regulate the circulation, visibility, and even recognition of colonised subjects.

In this sense, contemporary borders constitute one of the most sophisticated expressions of coloniality. They do not only delimit territories; they classify people. They decide which passports inspire confidence and which arouse suspicion, which nationalities traverse the world unhindered and which remain subject to constant surveillance.

The United States has historically been constituted as a nation through successive migratory waves, which includes the family trajectory of several political leaders, such as Donald Trump and his wife, who is an immigrant. The problem, therefore, has never been immigration itself. The question has always been which bodies are considered desirable and which are treated as a threat.

During Donald Trump's administration, a discourse that associates immigration with crime and national insecurity has been consolidated. Although it is presented as a universal border control policy, its effects fall disproportionately on migrants from Latin America, the Caribbean and several African countries. Suspicion is not distributed equally among all foreigners; It focuses mainly on racialised bodies, whose origins place them in subordinate positions in the global geography of power.

More than a migration policy, it is a project of white supremacist power, marked by exclusion, xenophobic rhetoric and the production of external enemies. The border is no longer just an instrument of territorial administration but a mechanism for distinguishing between those who can move freely around the world and those whose mobility needs to be permanently controlled.

It was precisely this rationality that Aimé Césaire denounced when he stated that colonialism produced a way of organising

the world based on the dehumanisation of colonised peoples and the naturalisation of racial hierarchies.

Borders are one of the most evident expressions of this colonial heritage. Under the discourse of sovereignty and national security, old distinctions are reproduced between those whose circulation is considered legitimate and those whose presence needs to be continuously justified.

3. The denial of the visa to Michel Mboladinga materialises this logic. Even during a World Cup, cynically presented by FIFA as a universal celebration of fraternity among peoples, the right to follow one's national team proved to be conditioned by the same hierarchies that organise the global movement of people. The universality proclaimed by sport finds its limits when confronted with reality.

But if Mboladinga could not cross into North American territory, Patrice Lumumba did! During the match against Uzbekistan, another Congolese fan appeared in the stands in the stamp of Patrice Lumumba. Spontaneous substitution reveals that memory does not belong to a single individual, but to an entire people.

Perhaps this was the most powerful image of that night: immigration authorities managed to prevent a man from entering. However, they were unable to prevent the circulation of a symbol.

There is a deeply symbolic dimension to this scene: Patrice Lumumba (1925-1961) was the founder of the Congolese National Movement (MNC), the main leadership against the Belgian colonial government. He became the first prime minister of the Republic of Congo after independence, proclaimed in 1960. His rule, however, lasted only about three months.

The coup that ousted Patrice Lumumba paved the way for the rise of Mobutu Sese Seko. In 1961, Patrice Lumumba was assassinated with the participation of Congolese separatist authorities and the involvement of Belgian agents, becoming one of the greatest symbols of the anti-colonial struggle and African sovereignty.

Patrice Lumumba's body was dissolved in acid in an attempt to eliminate any material trace of his existence. But violence against the body has not been able to eliminate what it represents. Its memory has survived as a power, ceasing to inhabit an individual to constitute the memory of a people that still fights for its sovereignty.

The presence of another Patrice Lumumba in the stands demonstrates that the memory of a people does not depend on the authorisation of consulates, the issuance of visas or the decision of migration agents. When collectively appropriated, it comes to exist in the bodies, songs, gestures, performances, and daily rituals of resistance.

While the figure of Patrice Lumumba remained with his arm outstretched in the stands, the Congolese team also refused another fate. After falling behind on the scoreboard, they turned the match around and won an unprecedented qualification for the knockout phase of the World Cup. The victory broke a narrative built over decades, according to which African football would be condemned to being unable to compete for prominence with the traditional powerhouses of the sport

On the field, the team refused the logic of the announced defeat. Outside of it, its fans refused the oblivion imposed by coloniality.

The significance of this achievement becomes even more emblematic when one remembers that this is only the second participation of the Democratic Republic of Congo in a World Cup. The first occurred in 1974, when the country was still competing as Zaire, under the dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko, one of the most authoritarian and violent regimes in contemporary African history.

For decades, little was discussed about the political conditions, the violence of the regime and the pressures suffered by the players. Only the images of the defeat remained. Fifty-two years later, Congo returns to the world stage writing a completely different narrative: that of a team that conquers an unprecedented sporting milestone, a place among the best teams in the tournament.

By the end of the match, Congo had won much more than a place in the round of 16. It demonstrated that memory survives absence and that no migration policy is capable of completely controlling what a people decides to remember. And it reminds the world that the anti-colonial struggle does not end with political independence. It continues in the disputes for the right to narrate its own history and to affirm, against all borders, that no people will accept being defined forever by the gaze of its former colonisers.

Patrice Lumumba did not enter the United States as a fan. He entered as resistance.

■ Published, freely available, in Portuguese on 26 July 2026 by *A terra é Redonda (The World is Round)* at https://aterraeredonda.com.br/patrice-lumumba/, and translated by Microsoft Edge with assistance of Google Translate. The image of Michel Kuka Mboladinga, also known as Lumumba Vea, is taken from his Facebook page https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61586052776391, while that of the Lumumba statue in Kinshasa, DR Congo (below) is from Wikimedia Commons under the GNU Free Documentation License.





Which mechanism, which harm: from Congress resolution to implementation

Mike Nolan

What congress committed us to

At its 58th Congress, the Communist Party resolved "to make the defence and advancement of women's rights a central pillar of the class struggle."[1] The same resolution commits us to campaign "for economic justice for women, for equal pay, an end to the benefit cap and against women's poverty", and for "universal childcare to facilitate women's employment and their full participation in society"; it notes "the crisis in women's healthcare" and continues the Party's support for pension justice for the WASPI women. These are not aspirations. They are agreed policy, and the question this article asks is a practical one: what does carrying them out require?

The resolution itself tells us where to begin. Women's economic superexploitation, it states, "forms the structural level of women's oppression, but does not explain how these oppressive relations of production are maintained and reproduced. We therefore need to understand the superstructural level of oppression, especially the oppressive ideologies which maintain class rule." That passage is an admission and a commission at once: Congress has recorded that our analysis is unfinished, and has directed us to finish it.

The conditions the commitments name are real and immediate. The two-child limit continues to push families into poverty; the single household payment under Universal Credit traps women in financial dependence on abusive partners; women's healthcare is, in the resolution's own word, in crisis. However, a campaign is only as effective as its analysis, and a campaign aimed at the wrong mechanism wins nothing. Carrying out these commitments requires knowing which mechanism produces which harm. The resolution calls for exactly that analysis. What follows is an attempt to supply it.

Superexploitation in our tradition

The resolution describes women as "a superexploited section of the workforce". Two pages later, it commits the Party to organise or support events to commemorate the life of Claudia Jones. It is worth taking these two commitments seriously together, because Jones is where superexploitation carries its deepest meaning in our own tradition.

Writing in *Political Affairs* in 1949, Jones argued that Black women in the United States were "the most oppressed stratum of the whole population", oppressed threefold: as workers, as Black people, and as women.[2] Her use of superexploitation was economic and quantitative, tied to wage data: Black women received less than men for equal work, and less than half the pay of white women. The term named a position in production, not a moral intensifier. She indicted her own Party for neglect and chauvinism, and she drew the conclusion that matters most for us now: recognising the specific oppression of a stratum of the working class does not divide the class. Neglecting it does.

One passage deserves close attention, because no secondary summary does it justice. Writing about chauvinism among progressive white women, Jones criticised their failure to recognise that the fight for Black women's equality was in their "own self-interest", because superexploitation "tends to depress the standards of all women."[2] Solidarity, for Jones, was not a moral obligation extended downwards from one group to another; it was class self-interest, because the superexploitation of the most oppressed stratum drags down the conditions of every stratum above it.

I want to be precise about what I am claiming. Jones was writing about Black women under Jim Crow, and nothing in this article claims that any oppression discussed below is equivalent to that. The parallel is structural, not moral: a specific stratum of the class, a compounded oppression built from more than one social relation, and a party facing a choice between recognition and neglect. What Jones establishes for our tradition is threefold: superexploitation meant, from the beginning, class exploitation compounded by other social relations; the category 'women' was never unitary in Communist analysis, because Black women and white women did not occupy the same position in production and Marxists said so plainly; and this Congress has resolved to commemorate the woman who established both points.

Relations, not essences: the method and the mechanisms

The resolution commits us to understanding how oppressive relations of production "are maintained and reproduced". The first step towards an answer is to recognise that "women's oppression" is not one thing. It is a label covering many different harms, the pay gap, a decade-long wait for an endometriosis diagnosis, a benefit sanction, and no single cause produces them all. Analysed as an aggregate, women's oppression can only be asserted, never explained; explanation begins when the aggregate is broken into the mechanisms that produce it. Marx warns in the *Grundrisse* that beginning from an apparently concrete general category yields only "a chaotic conception of the whole": "The population is an abstraction if I leave out, for example, the classes of which it is composed."[3] The concrete is concrete, he continues, "because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse."

The section's title says the same thing. An essentialist explanation grounds oppression in what women *are*; a relational explanation grounds it in how the institutions of capitalist society position them. Marxism is an analysis of social relations, and the account that follows is relational throughout. I can identify at least four mechanisms at work:

1. capital's penalisation of reproductive capacity, actual and anticipated;
2. institutional categorisation as female, and the harms distributed through it;
3. the punishment of non-conformity to the family form;
4. administrative and medical gatekeeping of recognition, treatment and support.

Each mechanism requires its own analysis.

Gestation, birth and breastfeeding are performed by female bodies. Capital penalises reproductive capacity through maternity discrimination, through work designed around a worker who is never pregnant, and through the state's refusal to socialise childcare. Both articles in the *CR*119 exchange[4,5] stand on the same foundation here, Engels' observation that the production and reproduction of immediate life is twofold

in character: the production of the means of existence on one side, and on the other "the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species."[6] However, two empirical complications follow. The penalty attaches to *anticipated* capacity as much as to the event, since employers discriminate against workers who they think *might* become pregnant, whether or not they ever do *or can*. The disproportionate allocation of domestic labour is a social assignment, not a biological consequence: the unpaid-labour gap persists, at scale, among women who have no children, in US time-use data.[7] Lise Vogel, whose *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* remains the most rigorous treatment available, is precise about where the subordination actually comes from. Childbearing does not produce it by itself: differential involvement in reproduction, she notes, "does not necessarily constitute a source of oppression."[8] What does the work is the economic arrangement built around childbearing. Because bearing and rearing children takes a woman out of production for a time, class society has met her subsistence during that period through dependence on a man, and it is this relation of dependence, not the childbearing it is organised around, that forms the material basis for women's subordination. The oppression lives in the social relation built around the biological capacity, not in the capacity itself. Nor is this an imported novelty: *Women and Class*, the Party's own standard text, includes a critique of biological determinism and distinguishes the material basis of the sexual division of labour from socially constructed roles.[9] To ground women's oppression in biological sex as such would be to depart from the very text by which our Party frames that oppression.

The second mechanism is categorisation as female by institutions, and this is where the vexed question of 'perception' belongs. The perception that matters for a materialist analysis is not one individual's impression of another. The perceivers that matter are employers, clinicians, benefits assessors, landlords and the state: institutions whose categorisations are systematic, recorded and enforced, and which distribute wages, treatment, housing and benefits accordingly. Institutional perception is a real social relation, as material as a wage, and it operates on everyone categorised as female regardless of their reproductive history. It is also where the "oppressive ideologies" the resolution directs us to study do their maintaining work: an ideology maintains class rule not as a free-floating idea but when institutions enforce it in wages, treatment and benefits.

The third mechanism is non-conformity to the family form: capitalism relies on the household to reproduce labour power cheaply, and it penalises those who do not fit the form that does this work. The fourth is administrative and medical gatekeeping, the state and the clinic as gatekeepers of recognition, treatment and support, with the power to delay, to disbelieve and to demand proof. The four mechanisms interact, but they are separable, and the resolution's own enumeration of harms, "the gender pay gap, enforced through direct discrimination, low pay and job segregation, and the disproportionate share of unpaid domestic labour carried out by women",[1] maps onto them cleanly. The question is no longer which single essence explains women's oppression. The question is which mechanism produces which harm.

One more piece of method before the mechanisms are put to work. A claim about a mechanism is only as good as the evidence for it, and that standard applies to every claim and every author, including this one. Mary Davis and Sonya Andermahr, responding to the article Julia Bradley and I wrote in *CR*119,[4] made an evidential demand that is entirely correct: statistics "need to be accurately collected and unpacked so we know which particular groups of workers are affected".[5] I accept that standard, and I accept that our original article did not always meet it; the UNISON pay-gap figure we cited, for example, is not disaggregated by sex. However, the standard must be applied symmetrically. The reply's own claims about the social position of trans people rest on a gender-critical philosopher in a Routledge reader, a single memoir, an anonymous self-selected testimony website and a polemic on an advocacy site;[10] the four peer-reviewed studies it does cite all concern the emotional labour of partners of trans people, a narrow relationship-dynamics literature that tells us nothing about wages, occupational position, housing, healthcare access or the state.[11] The Marxist literature on the class position of trans people goes unengaged. The two sections that follow work the domains to the standard just stated, with the limits of every claim given.

Working the domains: healthcare and poverty

Take two of the domains where Congress committed us to act:

Regarding healthcare, the "crisis in women's healthcare" is not one harm but at least four, running through three of the mechanisms. The first is the male default in clinical knowledge and provision. Endometriosis takes an average of eight years and ten months to diagnose in the UK, a figure that has worsened since 2020, and 78% of respondents to the largest UK survey reported being told by a doctor that they were making a 'fuss about nothing' or that their symptoms were disbelieved (a self-selected survey of 4,371 diagnosed patients, so the figures indicate scale rather than measure it).[12] In cardiac care, a national audit of more than 560,000 heart-attack admissions in England and Wales found nearly a third of patients initially misdiagnosed, the misdiagnosed being more frequently female and suffering significantly higher mortality;[13] the British Heart Foundation puts it starkly, estimating that a woman is 50% more likely than a man to receive the wrong initial diagnosis for a heart attack, and that 8,243 women's deaths over a decade would have been prevented by equal cardiac care.[14] The second harm is obstetric neglect, the same default operating at the point where female biology is most central. The third is the gatekeeping of gender-affirming healthcare, with waiting times now measured in years. The fourth is dismissal and disbelief at the point of care: more than a third of trans people reported avoiding treatment for fear of prejudice, against 14% of LGBT people overall (data which, per the standard set above, do not separate trans women from trans men),[15] and Black feminist scholarship shows that disbelief is racialised, with Black women's accounts discounted most heavily.[16] It is important to note that no pair of these harms is in tension with any other. The clinic that dismisses women's pain and the clinic that makes trans patients wait years are the same institution, failing in the same direction, for the same reason: a health service starved of resources rations by disbelief.

Regarding poverty and welfare, every mechanism is a policy. The single household payment delivers Universal Credit into one account per household, and thereby delivers women into financial dependence on whoever controls it. The two-child limit converts family size directly into child poverty. Conditionality and sanctioning fall hardest on those with caring responsibilities, and they fall unequally: Black claimants are sanctioned more than any other ethnic category,[17] and minority ethnic claimants face more barriers to receiving what they are owed.[18] Beneath the benefits system sits the labour market that makes women claimants in the first place, where pay gaps compound, with minority ethnic workers concentrated in the most precarious jobs[19] and the ethnicity pay gap operating on top of the gender pay gap.[20] At the edge of the system are those destitute through family estrangement, and migrant women with no recourse to public funds, for whom the safety net is not thin but absent.

Two findings come out of this work. First, internal differentiation among women, by race, by class, by migration status,

is frequently larger than any difference this debate has fixated upon; a materialist analysis that cannot register that fact is measuring the wrong thing. Second, each mechanism identified here corresponds to a commitment from the resolution: the welfare mechanisms to the campaign against the benefit cap and women's poverty, the clinical mechanisms to the healthcare crisis, the domestic labour assignment to universal childcare. This is what the commitments are commitments *about*.

What follows for trans people

Only now, with the mechanisms established and the domains worked, can the question of trans people be posed precisely; and when posed precisely, it largely answers itself.

Run the mechanisms. Trans women stand outside the reproductive-capacity harms; they stand inside the categorisation harms wherever institutions read and record them as women; and they are also subject to an administrative and medical gatekeeping regime that no other woman faces. Trans men are subject to reproductive-capacity harms *and* trans-specific harms simultaneously, and they are largely invisible to the obstetric and gynaecological services they continue to need. Trans men falsify the two-category model of this debate by simply existing, and their near-total absence from the discussion so far, including from our own earlier article, is itself a finding about the level of aggregation at which the discussion has been conducted.

On employment, the honest starting point is the one Michelle O'Brien states plainly in *Transgender Marxism*: we know little systematically about trans people's experience of work, because representative national surveys cannot identify trans respondents and rigorous empirical work has rarely been resourced.[21] The mechanism she identifies, drawing on Allan Bérubé, is not a pipeline into feminised sectors, but gender expectations attached to the work itself: employers, customers and co-workers hold assumptions about the gendered character of jobs, and non-normative gender expression excludes people from work, constrains which industries are available, and makes work itself dangerous. Exclusion-and-niche-formation explains what the sector claim could not, including why her own material shows trans people distributed across the labour market by class, race and education, from precarious service work to elite-educated game design. The best available survey evidence points the same direction, within stated limits: 82% of transgender employees in a recent US study reported lifetime workplace discrimination or harassment, against 45–47% of cisgender LGBQ employees, with roughly half reporting having been fired and half not hired; but the trans subsample is 86 respondents, US-based, self-reported and not disaggregated by trans women and trans men, so it can be cited for direction of effect, not magnitude.[22] And the internal-differentiation finding reappears inside the trans data itself: in the largest older survey, unemployment ran at 28% among Black trans respondents against 12% among white trans respondents and 7% in the general population; the gap between Black and white trans workers exceeds the gap between trans workers and everyone else.[23]

The conclusion is neither that trans people's position is 'the same' as women's nor that it is 'different in kind'. It is domain-specific: shared mechanisms in some domains, distinct mechanisms in others, compounding in still others. That is a more precise description than either slogan, and precision is what a materialist analysis is for.

Implementation: from the aggregate to the specific

What, then, does implementation look like? The first step is to notice why the debate has felt insoluble. It has been conducted between two aggregates, "women" and "trans people", as though each were a single thing with a single interest, and every practical question has been made to stand for the whole: a changing-room dispute becomes a referendum on what a woman is. At that altitude no evidence can settle anything, which is why the argument never ends. This article has spent four sections showing that neither aggregate survives contact with the evidence, and Marx's warning from the *Grundrisse* applies to practice as much as to theory: the aggregate is the wrong level at which to decide.

Instead, let's refocus on reality. We share workplaces, toilets, wards and services; sharing is not optional, so the practical question is never which category wins but what arrangement of this space, this service, for its actual users, creates the most safety and the best provision. That is an empirical question. Take the most contested case, toilet access. The first study to test the question directly, comparing US localities with and without trans-inclusive facilities policies, found their inclusion had no relationship with criminal incidents in those facilities, which are rare in either case,[24] while the documented harms run the other way, towards trans people harassed and denied access when facilities are policed by category.[25] This evidence is American and it is one body of work, so it should be tested against UK data rather than treated as final; but that is an argument for collecting the data, not for deciding the question by category instead.

The same specificity governs rights and campaigning. Where the mechanisms overlap, integration is not a courtesy but an implication: trans women stand inside the categorisation harms, so they belong inside equal-pay claims, harassment procedures and the campaigns against medical dismissal as a matter of course; trans men stand inside the reproductive-capacity harms, so reproductive healthcare must be organised to reach them. Where the conditions are trans-specific, the advocacy must be specific too: nobody but trans people faces a gatekeeping regime that makes recognition and treatment conditional on years of waiting and proof, and no campaign built for women in general will dismantle it. Neither move concedes anything to the other. Both follow from the same analysis, and a party that can hold four mechanisms in mind at once can certainly hold two kinds of demand.

Congress has already given us the mandate. The resolution commits us to campaign "pro-actively for spaces and services which address their needs and within which they feel safe", to "support campaigns for the additional provision of gender-neutral facilities to ensure the safety and meet the demands of all facility users", and to "the collection of data based on sexuality, gender reassignment and all other protected characteristics". Read together, these are a method, and it is the one argued here: safety as the criterion, provision as the demand on employers and the state, and data as the means by which the specific questions get answered. One concrete demand follows immediately: an EHRC statutory Code of Practice for employment, which still does not exist, so that arrangements are settled in advance by evidence and negotiation rather than case by case at individual workers' expense.[26]

At the aggregate level, the question of women's and trans people's rights is eternal; it produces factions, not answers. At the level of the specific space, the specific service and the specific mechanism, it produces questions that evidence can answer and unions can negotiate. That is what implementation means, and it is nothing more exotic than Marx's method carried into practice.

Conclusion

Let me be honest about the frustration that produced this article. It is not frustration with any comrade; I have been a participant in this debate, not a spectator of it. The article I co-wrote set out to change the frame, and still ended up arguing on the old

ground, making claims about one whole category's place inside another, because that was the terrain on which the debate insisted on being met. The frustration is with the terrain itself: a debate conducted between two aggregates, 'women' and 'trans people', where every claim had to be a claim about a whole category, and where the resulting deadlock could be mistaken for a principle. On that terrain no evidence could ever have settled anything, and none did. Meanwhile the two-child limit stood, the waiting lists lengthened, the single household payment kept women tied to their abusers, and the energy of Communists went into adjudicating what a woman is instead of what is being done to her.

Conducted this way, the argument flies in the face of the tradition it claims to defend. Claudia Jones showed us, in 1949, that 'women' was never a unitary category, that superexploitation names a compounded position in production and not a rank in a moral hierarchy, and that recognising the specific oppression of a stratum unites a class while neglecting it divides one. A debate that spends its strength ranking aggregates against each other is precisely the neglect she indicted, and to carry it on in a Party that has just resolved to commemorate her is to do her a disservice.

However, frustration is not an analysis, and this article has tried to convert the one into the other. Its claim is that the nuance everyone concedes in private can be brought into a productive discipline: whatever a comrade believes about sex and gender, and whatever evidence they hold, about safety, about pay, about healthcare, it can be weighed only when it is stated at the level of the specific mechanism, the specific space and the specific service, with its limits declared, because the concrete is the concentration of many determinations. Stated at the level of the category, a claim can only be believed or denied, and belief and denial are what we have had. That standard is not a third position in the debate. It is Marx's method, and it is the only ground on which this debate can become a discussion.

Congress has committed us to economic justice for women, to an end to the benefit cap, to universal childcare and to resolving the crisis in women's healthcare, as "a central pillar of the class struggle". The same Congress committed us to defend trans people from the hate and violence of the far right, and to campaign for the spaces, services and data their safety requires.[1] These are not two agendas between which the Party must choose; they are one commitment, and honouring it requires the integration and the specificity this article has set out, because we cannot deliver either half while our energies are spent arguing past ourselves at the level of categories. That is the pathway offered here: not another position to hold, but a way to move from holding positions to doing the work. Bring the evidence, state its limits, name the mechanism, negotiate the provision. We are Communists. Capital divides the class; it does not get our help.

Notes and References

1. Communist Party of Britain, *Resolutions of the 58th Congress*, November 2025 (published April 2026), pp 30-32. All quotations from the resolution on women's rights and the anti-racism resolution are taken verbatim from these pages.
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War, Imperialism and 'the Jews'

Steve Silver

THE OUTBREAK OF the South African Boer War in October 1899 sent the early socialists scrambling for an explanation. Much of it by-passed a real analysis of international capital in favour of a ready-made conspiratorial shorthand. Many blamed the Jews, substituting a longstanding antisemitic caricature for a materialist critique of imperialism.

Because of the role that the socialist movement played from the mid-20th century onwards in the forefront of the fight against racism and fascism, observers would often be surprised to learn that it possessed a strong antisemitic thread in its earliest days, with even some of the movement's early heroes culpable.

As *The Labour Leader* – edited by James Keir Hardie – declared on 19 December 1891:

> Wherever there is trouble in Europe, wherever rumours of war circulate and men's minds are distraught with fear of change and calamity, you may be sure that a hooked-nosed Rothschild is at his games somewhere near the region of the disturbances.

Treating international finance as a Jewish conspiracy was accepted as fact across much of early British socialism.

Karl Marx on the Jewish Question

This ideological error had deep roots within the foundation of European socialist theory. Decades before *The Labour Leader* targeted the Rothschild dynasty, the theoretical vocabulary that explicitly tied Jewish identity to the market had been expounded by Karl Marx himself, who had a complex relationship with his own Jewish lineage.

In his 1844 essay, *Zur Judenfrage* (*On the Jewish Question*), composed when he was just twenty-five, Marx tackled the nature of civic and human liberation as a fierce response to Bruno Bauer – a fellow Young Hegelian, part of a radical intellectual circle that used the philosophical method of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel to critique religion, the Prussian state and conservative politics. Bauer's polemic extended far beyond theology into the politics of civil rights, arguing that Jews could only achieve political emancipation if they completely surrendered their identity.

Understanding the terrain of their debate means understanding the nineteenth-century German linguistics that shaped it. In the language of the time, the word *Judentum* carried a dual meaning, referring both to Jewish identity and, colloquially, to commerce, trading, and profiteering. For centuries, Christian states had systematically barred Jewish populations from most traditional livelihoods, prohibiting them from owning agricultural land, joining feudal craft guilds, or practising established professions. Pushed to the margins, they were funnelled into a narrow band of occupations, from street trading at the bottom to supplying loans and collecting taxes for medieval monarchs at the top. Over generations, everyday German absorbed this historical distortion, eventually turning *Judentum* into a colloquialism for commerce.

When Bauer argued that German Jews should be denied equal rights unless they gave up their religion, he conflated both meanings of *Judentum*, treating Jewish identity as a fixed disposition towards trading that stood in the way of a modern state. Marx rejected Bauer's argument, saying that political emancipation was a vital step, but ultimately insufficient for true human liberation, which required the complete overthrow of the bourgeois economic order.

However, because the young Marx was still on the threshold of developing his theory of alienation, he lacked the vocabulary to describe how capital dominates human life. Faced with this theoretical deficit, he accepted Bauer's conceptual terrain, elevating *Judentum* into a philosophical abstraction to personify the alienating power of money. In doing so, he conflated the abstract construct of "the Jew" with the real, living population of Europe, saying:

> What is the worldly religion of the Jew? Huckstering. What is his worldly God? Money. ... We recognise in Judaism, therefore, a general anti-social element of the present time.

Marx concluded by asserting that the ultimate emancipation of humanity from economic alienation would simultaneously dissolve the historical role forced upon the Jewish population:

> In the final analysis, the emancipation of the Jews is the emancipation of mankind from Judaism.

Marx's writings reflected the prejudices of Europe at the time and were not just the folly of youth. Decades later, in the 1860s, his private correspondence with Friedrich Engels revealed a reliance on racial abuse during bitter political battles against his chief rival, Ferdinand Lassalle. Vying for leadership of the German workers' movement, Marx unleashed personal attacks that combined antisemitic caricatures with anti-Black racism.

Hyndman, *Justice*, and the Boer War

These theoretical ambiguities and rhetorical shortcuts did not remain confined to philosophical debates; they provided a ready-made vocabulary that the emerging socialist parties eagerly put into practice. Even before the turn of the century, Britain's self-proclaimed Marxists were already translating global capital into 'the Jews'. No-one embodied this slide more than HM Hyndman, the leader of Britain's first avowedly Marxist political party, the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), who viewed himself as the pioneer who had introduced Marx's ideas to the British working class.

In 1881, Hyndman published *England for All*, popularising the thesis of *Das Kapital* while notoriously refusing to print Marx's name anywhere in the text. This time it was Marx's turn to be on the receiving end of racial stereotyping. Hyndman claimed that the British were too prejudiced to be taught by foreigners and that naming a well-known detested German-Jewish intellectual would cause them to reject the economic analysis. Marx was furious at the plagiarism, privately dismiss-


REGISTERED FOR TRANSMISSION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM.

JUSTICE

THE ORGAN OF THE SOCIAL DEMOCRACY.

No. 821, Vol. XVII.] LONDON, SATURDAY, OCT. 7, 1899. [PRICE ONE PENNY.

CRITICAL CHRONICLE.

Left: the front page of *Justice: The Organ of the Social Democracy* on 7 October 1899.

Below: an excerpt from the paper on that date, showing HM Hyndman's editorial.


JUSTICE.

THE JEWS WAR ON THE TRANSVAAL

ing Hyndman as a "weak vessel" and abruptly breaking off all personal relations. Engels maintained a lifelong contempt for the SDF leader, describing him in his correspondence as "an arch-conservative and an extremely chauvinistic but not stupid careerist".

Cut off from the source, Hyndman's self-styled Marxism hardened into a rigid caricature.

As the Boer War loomed, Hyndman published a full-page editorial in *Justice* on 7 October 1899 under the heading "The Jews' War on the Transvaal". He condemned the conflict as criminal while directing venom away from British imperialism. Under his pen, the press was rebranded as the "Jew-jingo press", and he informed readers that the British ruling class was completely controlled by "their masters, the capitalist Jews". On 4 November 1899, editor Harry Quelch doubled down with "Jews and Jingoism", lamenting that "we find our country under the heel of the Jew financier".

The reaction from the grassroots was immediate and fierce. Theodore Rothstein – a Jewish Russian émigré who joined the SDF in 1895 – led the charge in *Justice* with a sprawling letter pointing out that in his fever of antisemitism, Hyndman had completely forgotten about both class and capitalism. Ernest Belfort Bax – a prominent socialist philosopher and leading Marxist theoretician – weighed in heavily alongside Rothstein, combating the editorial drift and thoroughly refuting Hyndman's assertions. Despite Bax's lucid exposition, the prejudice continued within the leadership, forcing delegates at the 1900 annual conference to pass a formal floor motion condemning any antisemitic bias in *Justice* or the Federation.

This rhetoric also spilled onto the floor of Parliament when John Burns – a prominent trade unionist and Battersea MP – declared on 6 February 1900 that the British Army had become "the janissary of the Jews".

JA Hobson's imperialist "Jew"

While a section of the new Marxist left instinctively blamed the Jews for war, a radical liberal stepped forward to give these raw prejudices an anti-imperialist framework. JA Hobson, dispatched to South Africa by the *Manchester Guardian* in the summer of 1899, became the primary architect of this narrative. Despite having already developed his theory of underconsumption – arguing that surplus capital forced the state into securing overseas markets through imperial conquest – Hobson failed to apply his own theory in practice. Instead of tracing the flow of capital, he chose to frame the entire crisis as a venture directed by a cohesive, international Jewish cabal of financiers.

In his February 1900 book, *The War in South Africa: Its Causes and Effects*, Hobson filtered the corporate landscape of Johannesburg through an antisemitic lens, claiming that monopolies, the liquor trade, the Stock Exchange, and the press were entirely controlled by Jewish hands. Though his book acknowledged that the vast majority of Jews in Johannesburg were impoverished immigrants fleeing Tsarist pogroms, Hobson still chose to define the entire character of Johannesburg as being in the grip of wealthy Jews.

In reality, financial power on the Witwatersrand was held by massive public mining houses funded by British, French, and German shareholders. While Jewish 'Randlords' like Alfred Beit and the Barnato dynasty were visible, they were a minority within an elite dominated by non-Jews like Cecil Rhodes, JB Robinson, and Charles Rudd. Hobson's distortions were codified into his 1902 magnum opus, *Imperialism: A Study*, which generalised his wartime analysis into a universal economic law asserting that European policy was manipulated from behind the scenes by a unified Rothschild-led network of financiers drawn from "a single and peculiar race".

Lenin's Theoretical Correction

It was Vladimir Lenin who rescued the critique of empire from antisemitism, stripping the analysis of its conspiratorial baggage and severing the pernicious link between the critique of capital and the myth of the hidden financial puppet-master. Drawing on Hobson's empirical data on capital export while discarding the antisemitic caricatures, Lenin's 1916 work *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* elevated anti-imperialism out of the conspiratorial mud. For Lenin, imperialism was driven not by a Jewish conspiracy or a secret clique pulling strings behind the scenes, but by the objective, impersonal economic laws of finance capitalism itself.

The urgency of Lenin's theoretical correction was laid bare by the very British socialist pioneers who had taken these shortcuts at the turn of the century. When the ultimate imperialist conflagration broke out in August 1914, Hyndman's reliance on antisemitism culminated in ideological collapse; incapable of sustaining an internationalist analysis, he threw his full support behind the British war effort. Whereas domestic social democracy degenerated into flag-waving chauvinism, Lenin provided the theoretical armour to purge the movement of its most reactionary blind spot. It is still there for those who choose to use it.

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Fear of the majority: why the elite wants to tame democracy

Marc Vandepitte

Democracy is a wonderful thing, as long as the majority does not touch the wealth of the minority. From the ancient Greeks to the present day, one common thread runs through the history of Western democracy: the protection of the economic elite.

In a remarkable opinion piece[1] in a leading Belgian newspaper, a university professor advocates a return to plural voting. This electoral system dates back to the nineteenth century and gave wealthier and more highly educated men two or three votes, depending on their property, tax contributions or qualifications. In this way, workers also gained the right to vote, but the wealthy bourgeoisie retained greater political weight, and the economic elite could safeguard its political influence and economic interests.

That a university professor in the 21st century advocates the reintroduction of this undemocratic electoral system is outrageous. But what is interesting about this opinion is that it exposes the fundamental dilemma of Western democracy.

Democracy literally means that power lies with the people and therefore with the less affluent *majority*. But if those less affluent people actually use their numerical superiority to assert their (economic) interests, then the great inequality of wealth and the privileges of the economic elite would quickly come to an end, and that was, and of course still is, not the intention of that elite.

From the very beginning, political thinkers in the West have struggled with this dilemma. We will examine three pivotal moments that have shaped our Western political system.

Greece: the cradle of Western democracy

Plato (427-347 BCE) saw democracy as a dangerous system in which politicians give in to the superficial whims of the uneducated people.[2] Because, according to him, too much freedom inevitably leads to tyranny,[3] he advocated a strictly controlled state. Rule should belong to wise philosophers, who guide the consciousness and thinking of citizens through censorship of art and culture.

His pupil Aristotle (384-322 BCE), although he allowed more freedom and political discussion, also regarded democracy as a degenerate form of government[4] because it benefits the poor and does not serve the entire community. "Therefore in a democracy the poor have more power than the rich, because there are more of them, and the will of the majority is supreme."[5] And according to him, that is not a good thing.

Aristotle restricted political participation to an elite of approximately ten percent[6] of the *polis*: free men who did not need to work to earn a living.[7] Women, slaves, foreigners, but also craftsmen, merchants and small farmers were completely excluded from political life.

What do we learn from these two founding figures of Western political thought? According to both philosophers, political power should be in the hands of a small elite, while the majority of the population is excluded from decision-making. To maintain these power relations, control over the thinking of the population is also important.

Within that limited elite, however, there must be room for debate and dissent. Rule by a single tyrant or dictator is rejected. Importantly, it is not the wealthy who (directly) exercise power; this is done by a 'political' class or by a limited minority.

The Bourgeois Revolutions

During the French Revolution (1789), liberal thought faced a fundamental dilemma: rejecting absolutism required representative government, but there was a fear that the numerical majority of the lower classes would force economic redistribution at the expense of the property-owning bourgeoisie.

Initially, radical Jacobins led by Robespierre pursued universal suffrage, free education and progressive income tax.[8] But after the bloody Reign of Terror,[9] the conservative bourgeoisie struck back in 1794. The right feared that the privileges (wealth) of the emerging bourgeoisie and the property-owning class would be lost. Boissy d'Anglas, a member of the right wing of the Assembly, put it this way:[10]

> You must, with its imminent establishment, finally guarantee the property of the rich man ... We should be governed by the best among us. The best are the most learned and those most interested in maintaining the law. ... A country governed by property-owners is in the social order; one where the property-less govern is in a state of nature.

To safeguard the property of the wealthy, a bicameral system was established in which a conservative Senate acted as a brake on the people's representatives. With Napoleon's coup d'état (1799), popular influence was definitively neutralised through the abolition of elected local governments and the replacement of the National Assembly by a consultative Legislative Body with candidates selected from approved lists.[11] Only affluent citizens could be represented in parliament. A variant of the property-based voting system was plural voting, which was introduced in several Western European countries.

Similar developments took place in England.[12] For the political philosopher John Locke, private property was absolute and inviolable, even in relation to an elected government: "The Supream Power cannot take from any man any part of his property without his own consent."[13]

According to Locke, "government has no other end but the preservation of property."[14] The bicameral system and property-based suffrage ensured that Locke's fears could not become reality. The property-based voting system in Britain was only finally abolished in 1918.[15] In Belgium, equal voting rights for men were not introduced until the same year.[16]

In the United States, the Constitution of 1787 was drafted to serve the interests of the wealthy upper class.[17] The views of Alexander Hamilton, the first Secretary of the Treasury, spoke volumes:[18]

> All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are the rich and well born, the other the mass of the people. … The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right. … Give therefore to the first class a distinct, permanent share in the government. … Can a democratic assembly, who annually revolve in the mass of the people, be supposed steadily to pursue the public good?

What do we learn from this period? Political power remains largely in the hands of a small elite, whose main objective is to protect the wealth and privileges of the property-owning class. At the same time, a representative political system emerges in which different currents within the bourgeoisie are represented and the nobility no longer holds exclusive sway.

The majority of the population, however, has hardly any political influence. The political system creates the appearance of representation while simultaneously neutralising the majority through systems such as property-based suffrage or plural voting. And even when ordinary citizens can elect representatives, the bicameral system ensures that their political influence is restricted.

1848 and the emerging labour movement

The revolutionary year of 1848 marked a turning point in Europe.[19] Although the uprisings of workers demanding, among other things, universal suffrage were bloodily suppressed, the genie was definitively out of the bottle. The emerging labour movement learned[20] from the defeat that strong organisation on three fronts was necessary to break the power of the property-owning bourgeoisie: trade unions in the workplace, its own political party, and independent press organisations to counter the prevailing bourgeois mentality.

The bourgeoisie immediately launched a counterattack on several fronts to safeguard its privileges and property. Initially, this took the form of harsh physical and legal repression: strikes were violently suppressed – resulting in dozens of deaths, as during the Belgian strikes of 1886 – and trade unions were declared illegal or obstructed for decades.

At the same time, the introduction of universal suffrage was delayed for as long as possible. The struggle for voting rights was, after all, not merely about political rights, but about the distribution of wealth. Only after the introduction of universal suffrage, often not until around the end of the First World War, was the ruling class forced to accept progressive income taxation.

When the electoral weight of the working class could no longer be ignored, the establishment switched to an effective strategy of pacification: integration. By granting higher wages to a skilled upper layer of workers and providing subsidies for mutual health insurance societies and jobs in the state apparatus, the leaders of trade unions and workers' parties lost their revolutionary edge. They conformed to the system and joined governments, which led to breakaways by radical communists, who were subsequently marginalised during the interwar period and the Cold War.[21]

Later, distraction also proved to be a powerful weapon. From the 1980s onwards, public debate – fuelled by right-wing and populist movements – shifted from economic inequality to identity-based and cultural dividing lines, such as migration, religion or regional divisions. As a result, the structural imbalance in the distribution of wealth faded from view.[22]

Because decisive social gains such as paid leave, the eight-hour working day and social security were ultimately won not in parliament but in the streets, ideological control remained crucial to prevent protests. In the nineteenth century, progressive newspapers were censored, or driven out of the market by publishers with substantial financial resources.

By the end of the twentieth century, the mass media and later social media had come almost entirely into the hands of large conglomerates, as a result of which prevailing opinion closely aligned with the interests of the economic elite.

Although the internet and social media today offer opportunities to break this monopoly on information and opinion, the combination of repression, institutional integration, ideological steering and media ownership has largely succeeded in containing the democratic threat to the established wealthy class.

The most important lesson from this period is that political, social and economic progress has never come about on its own, but was the result of an often extremely bitter struggle. Social gains were achieved not thanks to parliament, but precisely in spite of it. The decisive factor always lay in the changing balance of power in the workplace and in the streets. To keep the masses in line despite this, control over the media proved to be of vital importance.

At the same time, the established order did everything in its power to obstruct the introduction of universal suffrage for as long as possible. When that democratisation ultimately proved unavoidable, new strategies were deployed to neutralise and render harmless a parliamentary majority of the working class in time.

This persistent resistance by the establishment was essentially not merely about political privileges as such, but about preserving economic interests: preventing a large-scale redistribution of wealth through the tax system.

Anything but innocent

The fact that a plea for plural voting is given a platform today in a so-called 'quality newspaper' says a great deal about the current political climate. Almost fifty years of neoliberal policies have greatly widened the gap between rich and poor and placed the social welfare state under severe pressure. Young people can no longer find affordable housing, education is underfunded and healthcare is becoming unaffordable for more and more people.

People are no longer willing to accept this. Across Europe, but also elsewhere in the world, young people are taking to the streets *en masse*, and trade unions are beginning to join this struggle. The numerical majority is beginning to demand its fair share of wealth, and this is driving the economic elite up the wall.

In order to safeguard its wealth, this elite is toying with the idea of curtailing the political power of the majority. And that is only the beginning. The 1930s show us that when social conflicts intensify further, the temptation to support a much more authoritarian form of government can grow. And in most European countries today, there is certainly no shortage of parties that would be willing to establish such an authoritarian regime.

In other words, this professor's opinion is anything but innocent.

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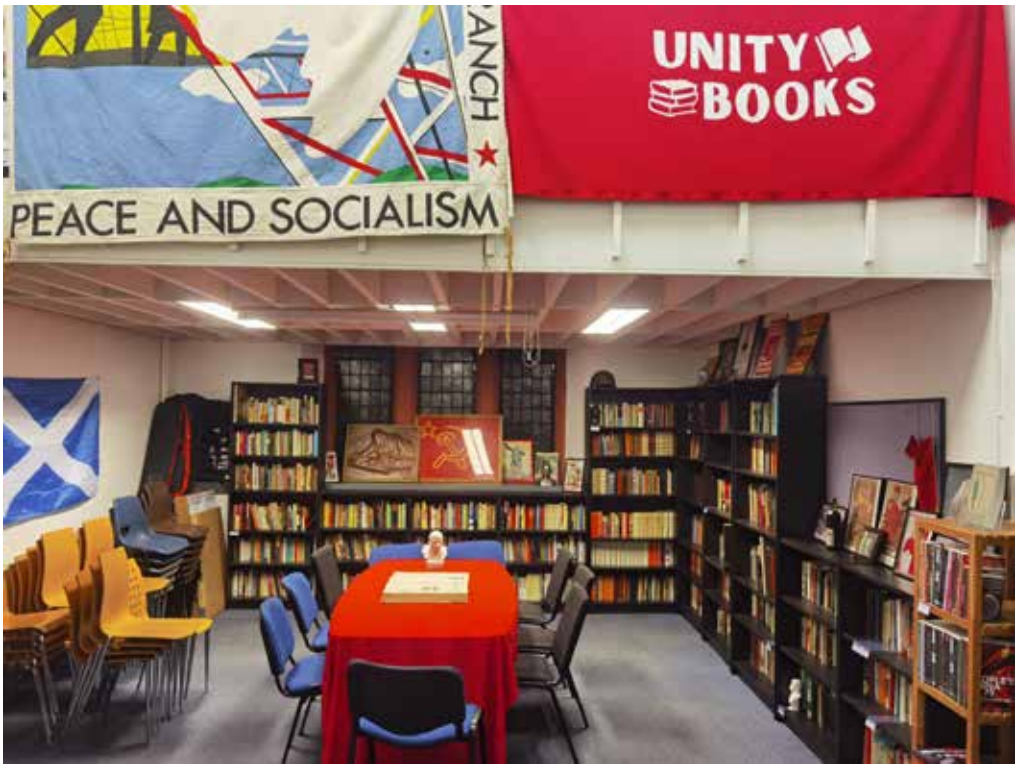
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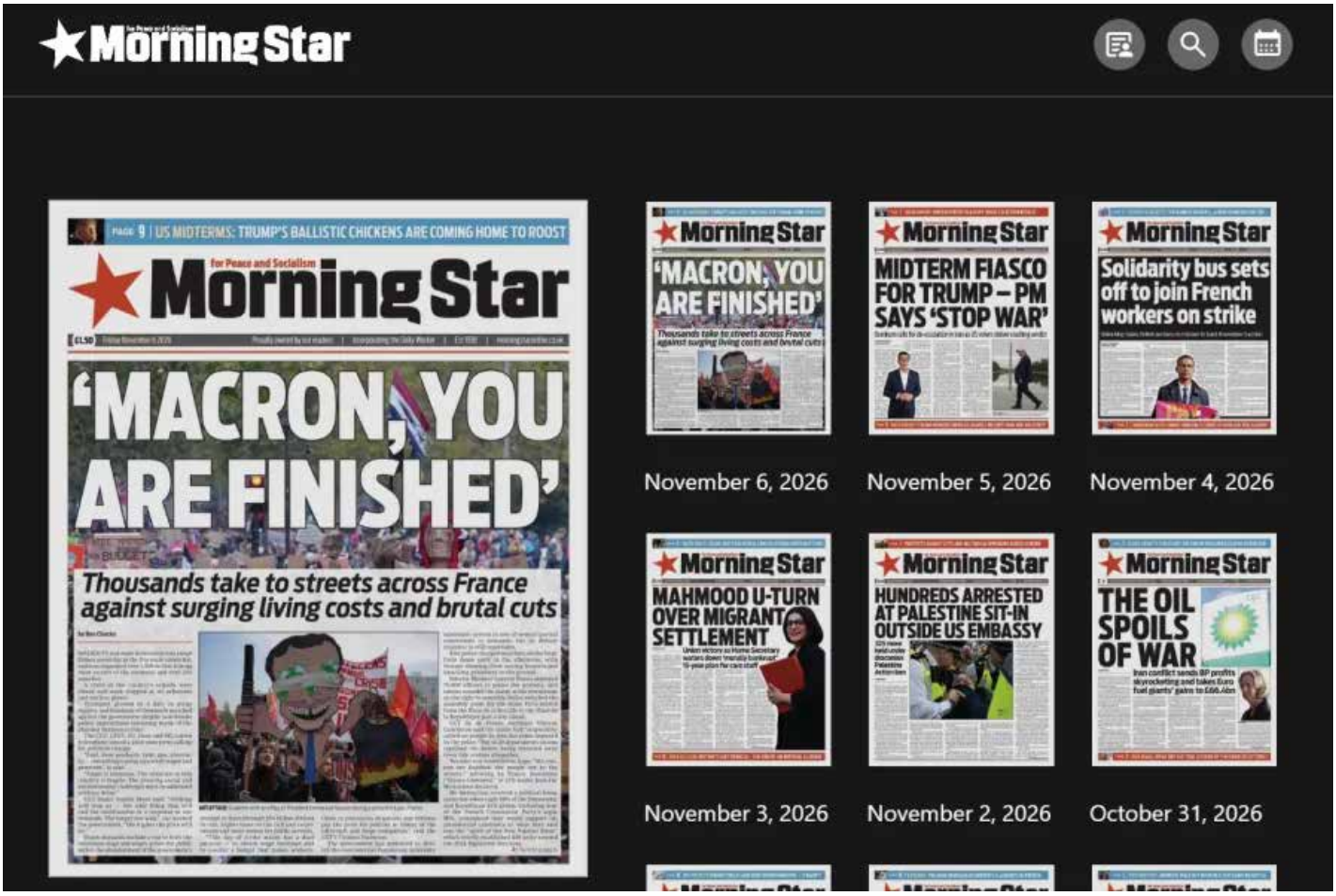
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Morning Star: new ways to read, new readers to reach

As part of a five-year plan to secure the Morning Star's future, the paper is improving its subscription services and digital offer while encouraging readers to help spread the word, says Morning Star assistant business manager ***BERNADETTE KEAVENEY***



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One important change has taken place behind the scenes. Our print and digital subscriptions are now managed by a professional subscription company. This will allow our own staff to concentrate more on sales and reaching new readers.

For subscribers, the move does not change the paper they subscribe to; information about the service remains available on our website.

For digital readers, we have also moved from a PDF edition to a web reader, designed to offer an improved reading experience for most of our digital customers.

The first week in November brought another step forward: an initial launch of apps for reading the print edition on Apple and Android devices ('Morning Star Newspaper' and 'The Morning Star' respectively).

Our premium digital subscribers have already been told about the launch and given the opportunity to try the new experience.

Whether you prefer the printed paper or a digital edition, these changes share one purpose: to strengthen the connection between the paper and its readers, and help secure its future. If you have been thinking about subscribing, take a look at the options at

https://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/subscribe

And don't forget our mantra: buy, read and sell the Morning Star. You can help us win new readers by passing on your printed copy, encouraging family, friends and work colleagues to read the paper, and sharing our subscription details. However you read the paper, you can help someone else discover it too.

■ This article first appeared in the *Morning Star* on Saturday 7 November 2026.

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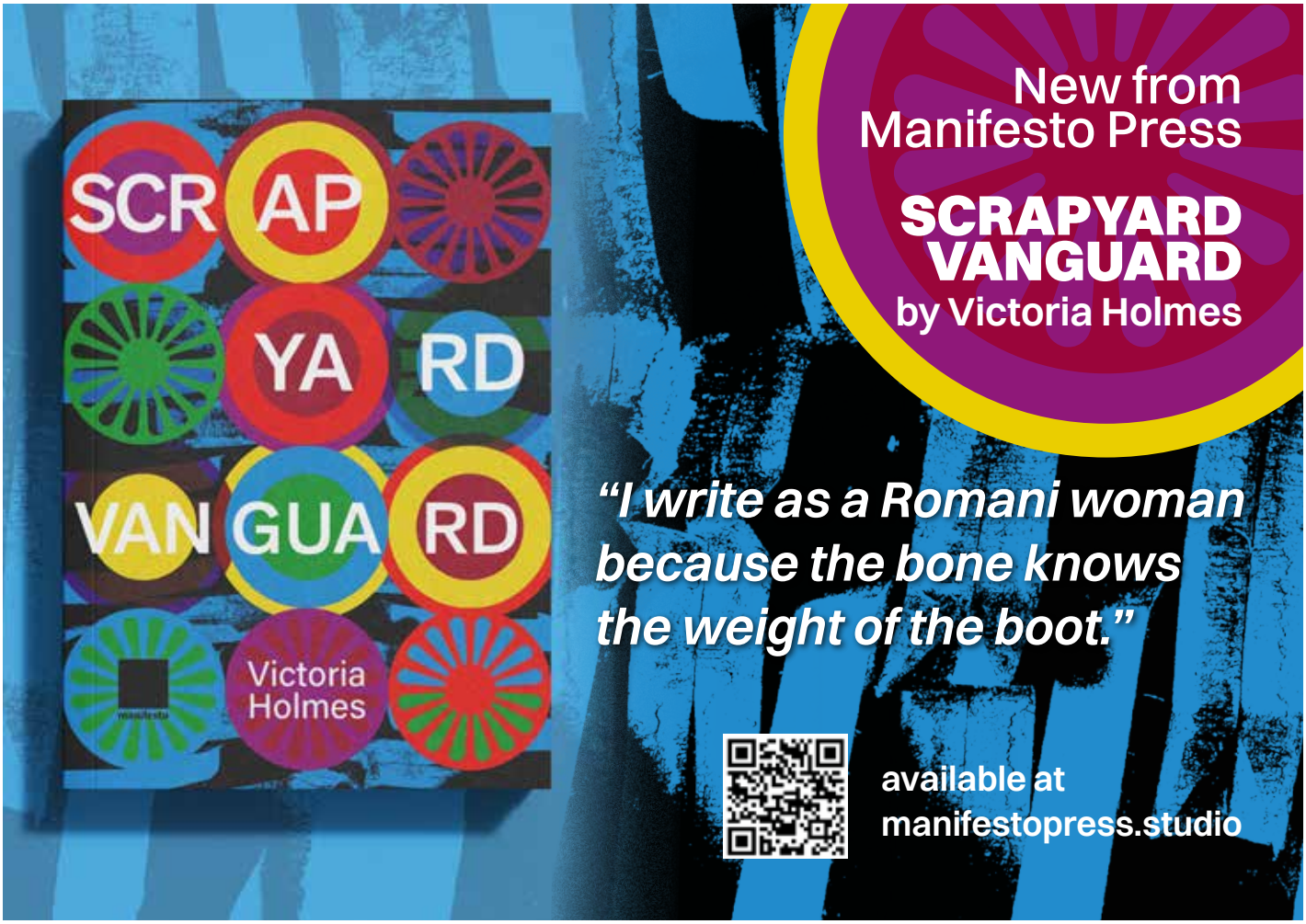
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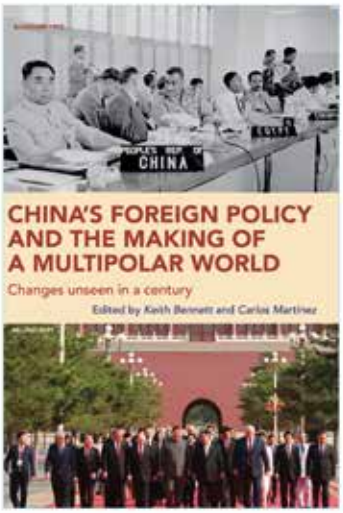
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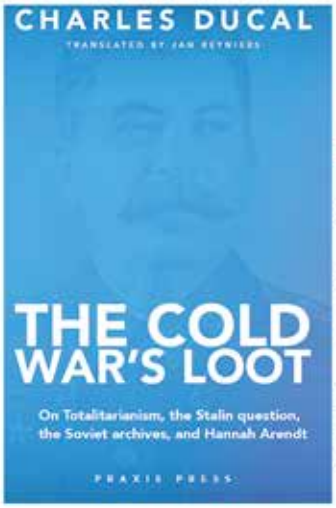
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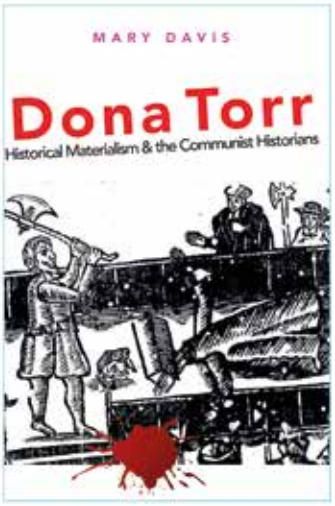


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