

Shoshana Zuboff 's The Age of Surveillance Capitalism This book, a best seller is essentially in two parts. The first, introductory chapters provide an outline analysis of what Zuboff considers to be a radically, deleterious, new form of accumulation regime in capitalism – surveillance capitalism. The second part is much more discursive and concerned with broader historical trends in western society and culture that have led to the 'Age' designated in the book's title. The first part (which includes in my reading elements of Zuboff's second part) details Surveillance Capitalism's (SC) particular mode of extraction of profit/surplus value. Zuboff call's this (using actual industry terminology but flexing it to analytical purpose) 'data exhaust' arising from individuals' (rarely, in Zuboff's generally psychological understanding of SC, *groups*) online social and overtly e-commercial activity. This exhaust is the digital-form of online behavioural activity, the data trail any user leaves in their wake. This enables SC' concerns, such as Google, Amazon, Facebook and Microsoft to trap, trace, then predict and in turn prompt and manipulate that behaviour in the future. The second part of the book, the Age part, traces influence of the political-economic neo-liberalist Hayekian School economic currents of the period, along with the affinity SC managerial thinking has with Skinnerian behaviourism (due to the behavioural tracing and tracking in data exhaust.)

So Zuboff insists that SC is a dangerous vertiginous development that provides a historical break from traditional market-based capitalism which from the 19th century on up to SC was premised generally by an understanding of consumer demand arising from aggregations of individual preferences and (relatively) autonomous choice in overwhelmingly non-virtual market places. This period was without the massive levels of consumers' behavioural data exhaust now available following expansive virtual online economic and social activity. Traditional capitalism, also, despite the predominance of mass media and relentlessly propagandizing forms of persuasion, did not have the sophisticated feedback mechanisms available under SC.

Zuboff, also, glossing Durkheim's idea of the Division of Labour in Society, sees these trends as a tragic mutation affecting the contemporary state of the 'division of *learning*'. SC puts unprecedented (Zuboff's favourite, pervasive, adjective in describing SC, yet her historical work on its roots suggests, rather, a quantitative change – perhaps *unparalleled* would be the better word – see below on this) control of learning into the hands of SC:

Eventually, Google codified a tactical playbook on the strength of which its SC operations were successfully institutionalized as the dominant form of information capitalism, drawing new competitors [i.e., Facebook] eager to participate in the race for surveillance revenues. (19)

Much of Zuboff's academic research into SC is into the patenting applications of big tech companies, Google, Microsoft and Facebook and Amazon (but *not*, generally Apple which is seen by her as a less 'rogue' form of high-tech SC, at least in terms of individuals' data manipulation and extraction). Zuboff notes in particular Google's 2003 patent *Generating User Information for Use in Targeted Advertising* which bluntly stated that the company had built up sufficient capability from data exhaust to provide it with the material to deploy a honed or individualized focussing of ads sent directly to particular users:

[This] patent is emblematic of the new mutation and the emerging logic of accumulation that would define Google's success. Of even greater interest, it also provides an unusual glimpse into the 'economic orientation' baked deep into the technology cake by reflecting the mindset of Google's distinguished scientists as they harnessed their knowledge to the firms' new aims. 77

In this way, Zuboff's tracing of the *consciously* manipulatively thinking of Big Tech companies serves to counter techno-determinist arguments, what Zuboff calls 'inevitablism' ('SC was initiated by a specific group of human beings in a specific time and place' 85.) The ends of all of this is mass population via individuated manipulation, and SC control and direction of the social division of learning.

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Another of the, many, strengths of this study is its historical and conceptual defining of SC. Continually Zuboff makes the point that this form of capitalism is qualitative new, 'unprecedented'. She presents the reader with a refined vocabulary in which to name, reveal and categorize SC – much of the terminology drawn from the actual language 'out there' feeding the mindset of the data tech minions in SC computer labs and managerial meeting rooms. 'Data exhaust', for example is seen to be common parlance in this (2014) statement of Microsoft's CEO Satya Nadella:

The opportunity we have in this new world is to find a way of catalyzing this data exhaust from ubiquitous computing and converting it into fuel of ambient intelligence. 162)

Sometimes Zuboff re-embodies terms which seem innocent, pervasive and common, but have developed in SC in sinister ways, such as 'search' which, seemingly so innocent, was key to the propulsion of Google's 'supply chains' of behavioural data (128):

I tell them [young people] that the word 'search' has meant a daring existential journey, not a finger tap to already existing answers; that 'friend' is an embodied mystery that can be

*forged only face-to-face and heart-to-heart; and that
'recognition is the glimmer of homecoming we experience in
our beloved's face, not 'facial recognition'. 521*

Such points, perhaps romantic (can friends never be digitally initiated, conveyed and sustained by means of digital media?) are made to 'replenish' the politics of western democracy in the face of SC's form of Newspeak, regain the meaning of words so that we might counter SC's undermining of democratic politics.

Zuboff is often a catastrophist in the second part of her book, but she is also utopianist in that she wants to remind us of alternative hopes, and possible directions of digital/information capitalism. In catastrophist terms she talks of the present organization of human nature and social experience in SC's domination of the social division of learning as the '7th Extraction' (in distinction to the disastrous ecological consequences of the 6th extraction of industrial mass production capitalism) (516). She always nudges us, reminds us, about the political and economic alternatives, such as 'exchange-based advocacy-oriented market form[s]':

*Mass production was aimed at new sources of demand in the
early 20th century's first mass consumers....supply and
demand were linked effects of the new 'conditions of
existence' that defined the lives of my great-grandparents
Sophie and Max and other travelers in the first modernity.
Ford's invention deepened the reciprocities between
capitalism and these populations. In contrast Google's
inventions destroyed the reciprocities of its original social
contract with users. The role of the behavioral value
reinvestment cycle that had once aligned Google with its
users changed dramatically. 88*

The catastrophist element of this book's second part is reminiscent of the popular 1970s' sociological writing of Alvin Toffler or Vance Packard's 1950s hit *The Hidden Persuaders*. Admittedly, such studies were much less theoretically and empirically astute in comparison with Zuboff's book. However, Zuboff is herself is prone to an over-reliance on metaphor and hyperbole. In particular, this can be seen in her insistence on the 'unprecedented' nature of SC, a word she uses so heavily it becomes somewhat irritating in its iniquitousness. It as a consequence increasingly becomes emptied of impact and it is obvious that to say something is unprecedented doesn't mean it is necessarily *bad* in the singular connotation Zuboff gives the word. Also, when Zuboff refers to previous 'ages' which had similar rogue forms of 'robber baron' capitalism, such as marked the Gilded Age (105), her argument about the unprecedentedness of SC is undermined. As noted at the start, this book is a best

seller (perhaps this is marked by the fact that it's voice-book form is actually cheaper than its paperback edition – indicating its accessibility) and there is nothing wrong with popularity and accessibility. But it is telling that Zuboff regularly falls into over-elaborated metaphorical language. At one point she talks about SC as 'more Mad Max than Red Cross, more Black Sails than Carnival Cruise. The wizards behind their steering wheels...' 193. She regularly uses mixed metaphorical language ('the human hive', 'just like the self-driving cars and the policy-worshipping jackhammers'. 414). Popularity and accessibility is perhaps also the explanation for the, surprising for an academic, use of misleading metaphors such as evolutionary similes ('These contests are the stage upon which SC made its debut and rose to stardom as the author of a new chapter in the long saga of capitalism's evolution' 17.)

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Zuboff stresses that it is capitalism, in its 2nd Modernity manifestation, that is crucial and core to her analysis of surveillance society. Capitalism is in the driving seat of surveillance technology, it drives high tech digital information technology today simply in the pursuit of profit. She sometimes examines military drivers, the appearance and control of surveillance by state capitalist China, for example. But it is the profit driver which she stresses as key, particularly as a result of neo-liberalism's rhetoric of free markets, freedom of the individual entrepreneur, the limiting of the state. This is the 'Big Other' that marks out SC, the data gathering instrumentalism of world dominating digital tech media concerns like Google from the 'Big Brother' of totalitarianism. She therefore sees the 'gainers' of these conditions as being the managerial elites of Microsoft, Google, Facebook and, of course, their shareholders and banking backers.

My main criticism here is that this over stresses capitalism, it is a reductive argument. One might think about the pioneering analyses of surveillance society, like Lyon's, where the state is seen as a key driver, alongside markets and capitalistic extraction of surplus value. One might think, also, about the academic field, institutions like MIT, in moulding and supplying the types of highly-educated individuals, like Zuckerberg and his ranks of staffers or 'tuners' (505) who inhabit the material spaces of these concerns and reap the rewards (which may not be just financial.) Then there is the whole complex of manufacturers of digital hardware, computers, networking software, cables infrastructure, wireless technologists, who also extract more traditional forms of surplus value from high tech capitalism.

Zuboff needs a much more fully formulated analytical understanding of the forms of power which are distinct from market and (to a much lesser extent) state sources. There are many forms of power, many types of interests that are driving the SC profit-driven 'fraction' of surveillance society. Related to this is the fact that this book cries out for a better sociology of SC. It is not enough to examine the rise of 'tuners' and 'priests' (466) and tech executives alone in the formation of SC. Often Zuboff talks of powerful 'networks' (341) but is actually hazy about the *who* of these

networks. When Zuboff uses the word 'capitalism' she tends to use it in an adjectival sense as descriptive rather than its noun-form which might help us to define the much larger social groups and classes benefiting from SC. Thus, in a section entitled 'How did they get away with it?' it is not clear who 'they' are, it is rather that 'surveillance capitalism represents an unprecedented [that word again] logic of accumulation defined by new economic imperatives...' (337)

Finally, I am not sure about Zuboff's analysis of SC in terms of its application of searching out in it the tenets of Skinner's behavioural psychology:

Skinner imagined technologies that would pervasively institutionalize the viewpoint of the Other-One as they observed, computed, analyzed, and automatically reinforced behavior to accomplish the 'vast changes' that he believed were necessary. In this way the laws of human action would finally be illuminated so that behavior could be effectively predicted and shaped...(369)

Zuboff's underlying romantic view is of the individual's autonomy and volition, if given a free public sphere and open media, to make rational decisions in their social and market place activities. The Skinnerian behaviourism is her countering stalking horse to that position. But a social phenomenon like SC needs to be equally, at least, referred to in terms of surveillance *society* if we are to have any adequate understanding of *who benefits* as much as the *why*. We must delineate which social groups, classes, have the contemporary historical relationship to SC that bears equivalence to the groups of agrarian bourgeoisie, urban bourgeoisie, who benefited from industrial and 1st Modernity capitalism. Behaviourist theory is inherently reductive, universalistic in its conception of human motivation and the nature of the mind, and therefore limited in providing a theory of large scale historical socio-economic phenomenon like SC.

Along with the use of highly metaphorical language, what also contributes to this book's popularity is its quoting of statements given by tech SC' CEOs and other executives: they are really jaw-dropping. But these direct professions of policy can only tell us so much – essentially that of the consciously manipulative behaviour and thought, of SC. The shock value of these quotes can deflect attention from the 'unspoken', structural social, political and economic forces driving SC. For this we need to turn to a range of thinkers of second modernity, like Giddens, Beck, Harvey, Piketty, Krugman and others who pursue and depict its landscape by differentiating sources of power and assessing their particular contribution to any particular mix like SC. At one point Zuboff talks about the power of 'naming', the performative power of words in changing the world and in effecting domination (177). But, as Bourdieu pointed out in *Language and Symbolic Power*, the performative needs to be understood in the context of the 'perforce' of the social conditions that make any word performative. It is not enough to simply show the words spoken, the conscious

policy statements of Austrian school neo liberal thinkers, academic behavioural psychologists, and tech CEOs in relation to SC alone: we must have a much more complex conceptualisation of the mix of sources of power that effects the performativity of their words.