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Big Tech

Techno-feudal lords or oligarchy of data traffickers?

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The authors who have contributed to promoting the concept of “techno-feudalism” agree on the diagnosis, but not necessarily on the conclusions. According to the different versions, ownership and control of land-based production constituted the power of the feudal lords, who demarcated their territories and organised a (variable) form of relationship with the central power, the king. For their part, the peasants depended on these lords, both for their protection and for the possibility of cultivating the land that was ceded to them for this purpose. They worked the land in exchange for rent and by submitting to the absolute power of the lord.

In the same way, these authors argue, techno-feudal lords dominate digital platforms and enable the activity of the new plebeians, providing them with the protection that comes with stable connections. Furthermore, the power of the companies that dominate these markets, the techno-oligarchy, is established without competition. In both cases, these are worlds in which the most humble have no power.

In the most widespread version of this theory of techno-feudalism, that of Varoufakis, the conclusion is disconcerting: it is not a question of capitalism expanding into new forms of creation and sale of goods (such as services) and therefore exploiting workers' labour or time, but rather a new mode of production. Capitalism is over, he concludes. What we have now is a new society, techno-feudalism. Although other authors are more cautious about these civilisational conclusions, the theory has gained ground and become a reference point for criticism of contemporary communication systems.

It is a flawed theory, which leads to confusing conclusions and seems incapable of grasping the extent of the danger posed by new forms of power, describing them as a return to the past and ignoring their innovative characteristics – which are the most dangerous.

Feudalism, Colonisation or addiction?

A metaphor comparable to that of feudalism is that of colonisation. Seen in this way, the new power has settled on new territory and dominated its people. We see this with the omnipresence of social networks in the daily lives of more than half of the world's population. This power:

- imposes a new language, the norms of communication on social networks
- intensively exploits local resources, namely our attention and personal emotions
- organises their submission to the colonisers, the identity of the colonised is defined by and within the social network
- attempts to eliminate the notion of the future, the colony is supposed to be eternal)
- venerates the new legitimacy, algorithmic power is unquestionable.

In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, a conservative dystopia of the 1930s, this mechanism was anticipated by the imposition of a new deity (Henry Ford) and the worship of technology. However, this description, like that of techno-feudalism, depends on the historical context that defines it. What we are currently experiencing is a transformation within the framework of late capitalism, not a return to some past era.

As an alternative, I therefore suggest that we study the comparison between platform capitalism, which includes a large part of the world's population as permanent consumers, and the power of drug trafficking. The comparison highlights that the world of social media is dominated by an oligopoly. Formally, techno-oligarchs cooperate and compete with each other, but there is no real competition. They promote a product that offers immediate emotional

satisfaction and gratification, or gratification that creates addiction. This leads to dependence; consumers suffer deprivation and anxiety when separated from their source of pleasure or recognition. They lose their skills and autonomy. The boundary between reality and fiction becomes blurred, to the point that Zuckerberg has attempted to make this effect the foundation of a new, totally commodified society of emotions and attention, which he has called Metaverse.

Psychological dependence

The existence of psychological dependence, or addiction, has been medically proven in one area of this online activity: gaming. According to Statista data for the beginning of 2025, more than 3 billion people are regular gamers and, in the case of children in the United States, this figure can reach 90%, of whom 3 to 4% are classified as psychiatric patients, given their addiction to gaming. This figure rises to 9.5% in the case of children and young people aged 8 to 18. This 'online gaming disorder' is classified as a disease by the American Psychiatric Association, which publishes a manual of mental illnesses considered to be the benchmark in the profession.

In the case of social networks, whose intensive and compulsive use is not yet classified as a disease, it is worth noting their powerful social impact. They generate fictions in which the consumer is an integral part of their own narrative and lives in escapist fantasies associated with intense emotions, from which they derive satisfaction. In particular by creating a false identity and a false history from scratch. Self-consumption becomes the way of life on the network, establishing a power of control that no company, oligarchy or ruling class has ever achieved before.

The vector of this phenomenon of addiction is the satisfaction obtained from the secretion of dopamine, as in the case of drug use or other experiences of intense psychological gratification. Dopamine was identified as a neurotransmitter in 1957 by Arvid Carlsson of Lund University (who won the Nobel Prize for this discovery) and Kathleen Montagu of the University of London (who did not win the Nobel Prize). It was then understood how it was produced in the context of various pleasant personal experiences and how it contributed to the formation of habits. Twenty years later, it was discovered that this neurotransmitter is the one most closely linked to drug addiction and that it is essential for describing the phases of development, maintenance and withdrawal of a drug addict.

The internet reconstructs the self

Intensive use of social media, more than other forms of internet activity, with the possible exception of gaming, generates behaviours comparable to other forms of drug addiction, such as excessive consumption and psychological or even physical withdrawal. In this case, dopamine is 'a kind of universal currency for measuring the addictive potential of any experience,' as it induces pleasure and pain and determines emotions, conditioning memory and motivation. It stems from an avalanche of images, the dominant form of our perception of what is external to us, but adds a powerful factor, which is the simulacrum of participation. Indeed, narcissism is mobilised to create an illusion of recognition; this is what psychologist Courtwright calls 'limbic capitalism', in reference to the structures of the brain that control emotions, memory and behaviour. Networks provide 'digital dopamine 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to a connected generation', according to his colleague Lembke.

Numerous studies have confirmed this description of the addictive effect of dopamine in social media use. For example, a study on the behaviour of adolescents and young adults in their use of the 'like' button, a form of prosocial behaviour, showed that it is a form of feedback that reinforces learning and self-recognition in a social context. On the other hand, a study of young American students on their degree of immersion in virtual reality concluded that: 'the symptoms of problematic social media use mirror behaviours typical of other psychological

disorders,'

The scientists who led the analysis, under the direction of Meshi, also discovered a direct correlation between intensive social media use and an inability to make decisions. In another case, it was found that 43% of intensive users showed symptoms of difficulty in making decisions. In yet another example, a study of 673 adolescents in China identified the fear of not being recognised as being associated with constant social media use. The satisfaction and suffering that result from its use are comparable to those associated with drug use.

Potential for control

Other studies have been conducted by British psychologist Maryanne Wolf, who argues that messages conveyed by social media are based on emotions rather than interpretations. As a result, the flood of images generated by the rise of TikTok and other similar networks impairs the ability to acquire knowledge, such as prolonged reading, symbol translation and meaning definition. On the other hand, the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which involved manipulating Facebook profiles to influence elections, and other similar experiences, demonstrate that oligarchs are aware of this inductive power of addiction and the potential for control that it represents.

This new form of power continues to rely on the exploitation of labour, but also on the wages earned from that labour, which in turn are extracted through the commodification of emotions and immersion in social networks, games and other forms of metaverse, which absorb the subject into a universe of illusion about commercial satisfaction. The net shapes the self, the network conditions the human being, and this immersion isolates individuals, subjects them to a bombardment of neurological stimuli, simulates or generates pleasure, and controls their time and emotions—it is a form of totalising power that its producers know perfectly well.

Thus, the neurodependence or toxicity of alienation linked to social networks is the most powerful mechanism for creating a world of dependent consumers and, in this way, it develops as an instrument designed to dissolve the organisation and capacity for identification of the subordinate classes in late capitalist society

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