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Artificial Intelligence

Beyond techno-feudalism: for a critique of digital imperialism

- Features -



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How can we think about the transformations of capitalism under the effect of the rise of digital technologies? Nikos Smyrnaios returns here to the debate around techno-feudalism to put forward another hypothesis, which he calls “digital imperialism”. Here he identifies the main dimensions and underlines the importance of the platformization of the public space, in order to understand the current logics of domination but also of resistance.[*Contretemps***]**

The centre of contemporary capitalism is going through a systemic crisis whose structural tendencies feed on each other. On the economic level, the advanced capitalist countries have been marked since 2008 by a phase of secular stagnation: sluggish growth, persistent weakness in productive investment, modest productivity gains, swelling credit and rising inequality. Paradoxically, this depressive period coincides with intense digital innovation and the rise of new fractions of capital, first and foremost the “new bourgeoisie of Silicon Valley” (Smyrnaios, 2022).

On the political level, liberal democracies are going through a period of profound destabilization, of which the rise of far-right political forces is the most visible expression. From a geopolitical point of view, the world order is fragmenting under the effect of the rise of China, the decline of free trade and the remilitarization of international relations. These dynamics are not independent. They form a whole that the critique of political economy must try to grasp in its entirety and its contradictions.

The techno-feudalist hypothesis claims to offer such a global grasp. It identifies real stylized facts: the rise of rentier logics to the detriment of productive investment, the formation of digital monopolies of unprecedented concentration, the strengthening of the links between economic and political power. But it also has many limitations.

This article proposes an alternative framework: the notion of digital imperialism, understood not as a geopolitical metaphor but as a concept of political economy articulating five dimensions that the approach to techno-feudalism, in its different versions, deals with separately, or does not deal with at all: the monopolistic logic of capital; its oligarchic recomposition; the organic role of the state and the military-digital complex; inter-capitalist rivalries on a global scale; and the platformization of public space as a constitutive dimension of political domination (Smyrnaios, 2025a).

This proposition is part of an intellectual filiation with the political economy of communication as formulated by Herbert Schiller at the end of the 1960s through the concept of cultural imperialism (Schiller, 1969, 1976). Schiller argues that the information and cultural industries are not mere vectors of ideological influence, but the economic core of U.S. imperialism and the instrument par excellence of its global expansion in the post-war period.

The hypothesis of digital imperialism is an attempt to update this analytical framework in a configuration that sees what Schiller describes considerably deepening and complexifying: geopolitical multipolarization; quasi-fusion of the cultural and tech industries; the presence of the digital oligopoly in all strata of the economy and organic integration into the military-industrial complex.

The demonstration proceeds in three stages. I first briefly examine the techno-feudalist hypothesis in its two main versions and point out its limits. I then propose a theoretical framework based on the notion of imperialism, reactivated as a constitutive characteristic of capitalism that undergoes recurrent acute phases rather than as an ultimate stage. Finally, I show that the platformization of the public space constitutes a central dimension of this digital imperialism, and not a secondary effect.

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My argument is that artificial intelligence and digital platforms are now inseparable from imperial power in two respects: on the one hand, as industrial tools, they are inserted into the capitalist mode of production to increase its efficiency (including military) but also its concentration, while recomposing its elites; on the other hand, as technologies of cultural production and intermediation, they restructure the public sphere where social representations circulate and opinions are formed.

In other words, digitization acts simultaneously on the economic basis and on the political and ideological superstructure. It is this overall configuration that justifies attaching the adjective digital to the notion of imperialism in order to grasp its specificities in the current conjuncture.

I. The techno-feudalistic hypothesis and its limits

The notion of techno-feudalism has been remarkably widespread in recent years in debates on the transformations of digital capitalism. It is based on a widely shared diagnosis, but the interpretation it draws from it is highly criticized, which nevertheless underlines its heuristic force. In this effort at theorization, two versions predominate: the widely mediatized version of Yanis Varoufakis (2023), and the more economically rigorous version of Cédric Durand (2020).

Varoufakis' version is based on the idea that capitalism has been replaced by a system of digital fiefdoms where cloud owners extract rents from “digital serfs”. This thesis has raised converging objections. For example, Vrousalis (2025) points out that it superbly ignores the literature on labour and exploitation in the digital context.

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The commodification of attention, while real, does not constitute value-producing activity in the Marxist sense of the term, and “attention theft” cannot be equated with labour theft. For him, the analogy with feudal servitude is also historically unfounded: feudalism was based on the forced extraction of corvée by direct coercion, whereas “cloud capital” exerts no such physical constraint on its users.

Broca (2017) clarifies this point philosophically: when an Internet user performs a search on Google, their goal is to obtain information, not to produce data for the platform. The data emitted is only an unintentional collateral effect of this activity, and the notion of work has implied since Marx a dimension of conscious intentionality that the mere emission of data does not satisfy.

The question of the extent to which the various individual and collective digital uses constitute or do not constitute a form of exploitation, and according to what criteria, therefore remains posed and intensely debated in the context of the digital labour controversy (Casilli, 2019). What is certain, however, is that the feudal framework does not allow it to be thought of correctly, by subsuming under the figure of the “serf” heterogeneous realities that call for distinct analyses.

Durand's version is theoretically more solid and analytically more serious than Varoufakis's. It approaches digital technology as an involution in which economics favours the capture of rents to the detriment of productive ends. But it has not escaped criticism.

Lebayle and Pinsard (2021) refute the systematic assimilation of digital income to land rents: under capitalism, rent is not a direct exploitative relationship as under feudalism, but an income derived from surplus value, the persistence of which requires constant reinvestment to maintain barriers to entry. The idea of a generalized withdrawal of production is contradicted by the activity of the tech giants, who act like traditional capitalists seeking to escape the general equalization of profits.

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Morozov (2022, 2025) reinforces this objection: the massive investments of technology firms in research and development are the antithesis of the logic of a lazy rentier lord. This capital is not simply intended to collect tribute, but to build colossal physical infrastructures and knowledge-based productive forces. Harribey (2025) confirms that the uses of data and generative artificial intelligence increase the efficiency of many sectors, accelerate the movement of goods, and boost overall productivity, confirming that we remain anchored in a logic of capitalist profit.

Durand (2022, 2025) responds to these criticisms by insisting on a qualitative mutation of the relations of production. Faced with Morozov's objection to the vitality of technological investments, he denounces a microeconomic bias. For him, at the macroeconomic level, the Big Tech era is characterized by a collapse in net investment and a continuous decline in labour productivity. The dizzying figures for investments in artificial general intelligence (AGI), for example, are not vectors of global growth but are fuelling predatory forces that undermine the prospects for profit in other sectors.

Durand, unlike Varoufakis, does not claim that techno-feudalism constitutes an entirely new stage of capitalism but rather a new macroeconomic dynamic that brings about a system dominated by the digital oligopoly and is based on dependence and control. This conceptual prudence is to his credit.

The question of the exact nature of the digital rent remains open. Durand proposes to conceive of it as a seigneurial levy or a tribute analogous to a road toll, the data not being traditional commodities but instruments of control. His critics, Lebayle and Pinsard in the lead, reply that these are profits from temporary monopolies requiring constant reinvestment. The debate here focuses on questions of political economy – the nature of the monopoly rent, its conditions of persistence, its relationship to surplus value – the final resolution of which goes beyond the scope of this article.

It can nevertheless be noted that recent empirical data on the scale of investments in AGI, its material needs (energy, water, rare earths and so on), as well as on the productivity gains it generates in sectors such as IT development (Cui et al. 2026), seem to prove the critics right on this particular point.

Even more original is the argument about what Durand calls “regressive socialization.” Drawing on the work of Ernest Mandel, he shows that the increasing socialization of work in the current dynamic, instead of liberating the individual, results in total subsumption. Digital assets and their users become inseparable, creating a new fusion of factors of production that hinders mobility and locks actors into enclosed spaces. This merger would break the classical logic of market competition and direct investment towards intellectual monopolization rather than the development of the productive forces.

This diagnosis of the regressive effects of digital socialization seems intuitively correct, but it is based on two ambiguous arguments.

On the one hand, the digital oligopoly in some situations uses intellectual property to erect barriers to market entry (Apple or Microsoft come to mind here), while in other situations it appropriates open source logics, or even systematically and massively infringes the intellectual property of the cultural industries, for example to train the major language models (Jacobsen, 2025). This results in the implementation of the strategy of asymmetrical intellectual monopolization according to the objectives and interests at stake.

On the other hand, several critics, including Morozov cited above, are right to point out that the very general notion of “user” lacks sociological depth and conceals very real workers: content moderators subjected to psychological trauma for derisory wages, delivery people under permanent algorithmic surveillance, semiconductor factory workers whose conditions of exploitation are fully akin to industrial capitalism.

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On the question of the state, Durand observes a “dislocation of politics” in favour of digital capital. According to him, the incursion of Elon Musk's or Palantir's teams into administrative and military functions would testify to a merger where private power absorbs public planning capacities. The observation is correct, but the interpretation is questionable. It can very well be argued that what is happening is not a subordination of the state to Tech, but an organic integration between the two.

It would then be a reconfiguration of the US military-industrial complex, of which digital capital is now a constitutive component, and not an external actor that colonises it. Indeed, the Pentagon has been massively financing Silicon Valley since its origins in order to set up a technological ecosystem at the service of US imperial interests (Smyrnaios, 2025b). Moreover, taking into account the Chinese paradigm shows that it is not the state that submits: it is the state and the oligopolies that have been built together, in an organic relationship that is precisely what feudal theory makes invisible.

But the deepest limitation of techno-feudalism as far as the proposition of this article is concerned is of a different order. It lies in the absence of the political question and the superstructure in its analytical framework. Techno-feudalism is an economic theory of digital capitalism that has a blind spot to what is perhaps one of its most decisive dimensions: the dialectical relationship between the transformations of the mode of production and the sphere of politics, of which the public sphere is a central component.

And this is precisely where the great contradiction of our time lies. The owners of the digital platforms and AGI define the contours of a new mode of production, while integrating themselves into the military-digital-industrial complex and controlling the infrastructures that underpin the political sphere as a whole – communication, information, education, collective deliberation.

This configuration simultaneously produces systems of production whose logic of accumulation restructures the entire economy, devices of ideological domination of a power unprecedented in the history of the media, and places of resistance for counter-publics who use these same infrastructures to challenge the dominant order.

The platformization of the public space is not an ancillary phenomenon that could be added to the economic analysis once it is completed. On the contrary, it is constitutive of the logic of digital imperialism, which cannot be understood without it. It is this articulation between the political economy, the military-digital complex and the transformation of the public space that the notion of digital imperialism allows us to grasp.

II. The distinctive approach to digital imperialism

Digital imperialism is part of a field of conceptualizations that occupy neighbouring analytical spaces and claim comparable ambitions. It must therefore be situated in relation to them. The notion of “digital colonialism”, proposed by Kwet (2021) in the lineage of theories of dependence, refers to the structural domination that large U.S. companies exert over the countries of the Global South through the control of the three pillars of the digital ecosystem: hardware, software and networks.

This approach has the merit of naming the fundamental asymmetry between Centre and Periphery in the digital economy, and of documenting its extraction mechanisms – exploitation of the work of moderation and annotation in the countries of the South, data capture, stranglehold on submarine cabling infrastructures. But it comes up against a limitation: by focusing the analysis on the North/South relationship, it does not allow us to think about the domination of digital imperialism within the social formations of the Centre, nor that of the South/South scale.

France, Germany and the United Kingdom are not digital colonies as understood by Kwet. However, these countries

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are fully affected by phenomena such as the dependence of their media on the algorithms of U.S. platforms or the increasing delegation of sovereign functions of the state to private U.S. actors. In addition, China's growing influence at the political and economic level is accompanied by digital expansion: groups such as Baidu, Tencent and Ali Baba have a strong presence in Southeast Asia (Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore), Africa (particularly Nigeria and Kenya) and Latin America (such as Brazil and Mexico), where Chinese entertainment and e-commerce platforms are becoming increasingly successful.

In North America and Europe, TikTok, Temu and Shine are widely used while being subject to increased political and regulatory constraints. The takeover of TikTok's American subsidiary by Larry Ellison, an ally of Trump whose group is present in IT and AI (Oracle), but also in the cultural industries and media (CBS, CNN, Paramount, HBO and now Warner Bros and CNN), is an illustration of this. Finally, Chinese players such as DeepSeek are also at the forefront of AGI technologies, which have a fortiori chosen open source models.

Through the notion of “data colonialism”, Couldry and Mejias (2022) attempt to go beyond this geographical limit by extending the notion of colonialism to the appropriation of the whole of human life in the form of data. Their thesis is that “data relations” have replaced labour relations as the central vector of contemporary capitalist domination.

Despite the heuristic force of this proposition, which has been widely taken up and commented on, Yasaei (2025) formulates a critique of it that seems to me to be decisive: by substituting data for work as the substance of exploitation, Couldry and Mejias break with the Marxian foundation of the theory of value, according to which it is labour, and not the commodity-data, that “constitutes the common social substance” of capitalist relations of domination. By excluding work from the heart of the analysis, they make invisible precisely the relations of exploitation they intend to denounce. Yasaei adds that their framework does not propose any periodization of historical capitalism: it describes a present configuration without inscribed it in a dynamic of long accumulation, which deprives it of any predictive value and any strategic anchoring.

The geopolitics of digital technology, of which Coelho (2023) offers a particularly well-documented version, is interested in the power relations between states and multinationals in the control of global digital infrastructures – submarine cables, data centres, satellites, technical standards. His description of “technical capture” and the growing dependence of public administrations in Europe and elsewhere in the world on private actors in the United States is empirically in line with several aspects of our own argument. But his framework remains geopolitical: he analyses actors and their power relations without articulating the logic of capitalist accumulation that produces them, nor the class relations that underpin it, or the dimension of the public space that is the communication issue. It is a precise picture of the configuration but lacks a theory of its dynamics.

Finally, the notion of “platform imperialism”, mobilized in particular by Dal Yong Jin (2015) in Schiller's lineage, and taken up in a more developed form by Yasaei (2025) from the perspective of cognitive capitalism, is the approach closest to the one I propose. Jin is right in reactivating the imperialist framework at an early stage to analyse the domination of American platforms. But his analysis remains formal, without any real articulation with a class theory, nor with a periodization of capitalism, and without dealing with the dimension of the public space. Yasaei places the idea of platform imperialism in the long history of capitalism, but makes it another form of “highest stage”, reproducing the teleological logic of the Leninist vision, so to speak.

However, imperialism as I conceive it here is thought of not as a terminal stage but as a constitutive characteristic of capitalism, which undergoes recurrent acute phases, articulated with specific crises of accumulation. In this respect, the periodization proposed by Yasaei nevertheless remains useful. The structuring analogy, borrowed from Winseck (2017), is as follows: just as the crisis of 1873 and the long depression that followed constituted the prelude to the imperialist phase of industrial capitalism, with its monopolistic concentration, its bank-industry fusion and its inter-state rivalries, the dot-com crisis of 2000-2001 was the prelude to the imperialist phase of digital capitalism, of

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which the 2008 crisis marks the definitive opening, by propelling the stock market valuations of digital firms to unprecedented heights thanks to the liquidity massively injected by central banks.

A final position is necessary: that concerning the American singularity of the phenomenon. Lehdonvirta (2022) offers a socio-economic analysis of the power of large U.S. technology companies by comparing them to historical empires. He defends the idea that Amazon, Google or Apple exercise a form of domination comparable to that of colonial empires, not through territorial conquest, but through the control of global digital infrastructures.

These “cloud empires” organize and regulate entire economic spaces (e-commerce, applications, data) by controlling infrastructures, access rules and the distribution of value. Bradford (2023), from a liberal-institutional perspective, confirms this reality by noting that the giants of Silicon Valley have become veritable “digital empires” precisely because the American state has made the political choice not to impose constraints on them. This is what Marxist political economy interprets as the organic expression of a structural alliance between digital capital and the imperial state in the neoliberal framework.

However, Mirrlees (2024) shows that China is mobilizing instruments similar to those of the United States to internationalize its communication industries in the Global South with some efficiency as mentioned above – five-year plans, Belt and Road Digital Initiative, state subsidies, trade diplomacy, intellectual property protection.

This confirms that digital imperialism is a structural logic of late capitalism and not a feature of a particular empire. The United States nevertheless remains the dominant imperial and digital power on a global scale, but finds itself in a relationship of deep mutual dependence with China which, paradoxically, results in the accentuation of their confrontation (Bürbaumer, 2024).

III. The constituent dimensions of digital imperialism

The notion of digital imperialism as I construct it differs from all the approaches mentioned above in that it articulates in a coherent framework five constitutive dimensions: the monopolistic logic of capital; the military-digital complex as the core of domination; inter-imperial rivalries as a systemic dynamic; and oligarchic recomposition as a political form. The platformization of the public space, which I will develop in the last part, constitutes the fifth communicational dimension of this whole.

The first “classical” dimension of imperialism is the concentration of capital. In the current phase, this is experiencing a deepening of both qualitative and quantitative conditions unprecedented in history. Louçã and Machado (2026) explicitly place the digital giants in the secular trajectory of concentration and centralization of capital that Marx had identified in the nineteenth century, and whose imperialist form Lenin had theorized at the beginning of the twentieth. As they rightly point out, what Marx foresaw has changed scale.

In the first months of 2026, the combined market capitalization of the major U.S. tech players – Apple, Alphabet (Google), Microsoft, Nvidia, Amazon, Meta, and Tesla – exceeded $20 trillion. This aggregate level of valuation, historically unprecedented for such a small group of companies, is comparable to the world's largest economic masses, sitting close to the gross domestic product of the United States and higher than that of the European Union.

From a financial point of view, this group represents a preponderant share of the major US stock market indices, exceeding 30% of the capitalization of the S&P 500 and about 60% of that of the Nasdaq, which testifies to their structural weight in the capital markets. From a sector point of view, this aggregate valuation exceeds that of several traditional economic sectors taken as a whole, such as the Western listed oil industry or the European banking sector, and is comparable to that of large economic infrastructure packages.

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The strategy behind this rapid growth has been documented empirically and accurately for nearly a decade (Smyrnaios, 2017). It is based on a double dynamic: on the one hand, vertical integration allows these firms to control the entire digital value chain, composed of physical infrastructures (data centres, networks), access equipment and essential software layers such as operating systems; on the other hand, horizontal diversification consists of aggregating substitutable services that perform similar functions for the user, such as communication and access to information and content.

For example, in the search engine sector, Google has controlled approximately 90% of the global market for nearly twenty years, with a few notable exceptions such as China or, secondarily, Russia and Iran. In the social networks and instant messaging sector, Meta controls most of the most popular services worldwide. In the cloud, Amazon, the e-commerce champion, alone holds a third of the global market, followed by Microsoft Azure and Google Cloud, so that three companies concentrate two-thirds of this infrastructure that has become critical for the entire world economy. Microsoft and Google, together with Apple, the world's leading equipment seller, occupy more than 90% of the global market for operating systems for smartphones and computers.

The advent of AGI is a powerful accelerator of this concentration. The development of sophisticated language models requires huge investments in computing infrastructure and unlimited access to data repositories. We can then observe the rise of Nvidia, OpenAI, xAI and Anthropic alongside Google, Meta, Amazon, Apple and Microsoft, with which they are establishing selective alliances.

To this strategic sector must be added the space sector, where Jeff Bezos (Blue Origin) and Elon Musk (SpaceX) occupy important positions. The latter's project to merge xAI and SpaceX to build data centres in orbit is valued at more than $1,500 billion. The oligopolistic players of Silicon Valley are expanding their activities into other fields such as health, energy, transport, robotics, defence and so on. The transformation of these companies into infrastructures of the world economy characterized by their indispensability and ubiquity is the culmination of this dynamic of concentration.

The second dimension of digital imperialism is that Big Tech is not simply very large purely economic entities in competition or symbiosis with states. The integration between the big digital companies and the U.S. military-security apparatus is not accidental, cyclical or simply functional – it is organic in the sense that Serfati (2026) uses this term. According to him, Military-Industrial Systems constitute sui generis institutions, positioned at the intersection of politics and economics, of which digital capital has now become an essential component. This is what he refers to as the “totalitarian core” of contemporary capitalism, regenerated by massive investments in AGI.

This integration is not new: it has a long genealogy that Mirrlees (2015) documents in Schiller's lineage. As early as the 1960s, the Military-Industrial-Communication Complex (MICC) articulated U.S. communications companies with the Department of Defense, which subsidized their research and development while providing their productions with a considerable captive market. Mirrlees shows in another work (2017) how the Pentagon functions as a “cultural policy agency” through its conditional support system for Hollywood production, orienting media narratives in favour of the militaristic vision of the world without this support being perceived as propaganda.

According to Broca (2026), the “Pax Silica” is a contemporary configuration of this same logic: the contracts between Amazon and the CIA, between Microsoft and the Pentagon, between Google and the NSA, or the awarding to a consortium of five companies of a cloud contract worth tens of billions of dollars on behalf of seventeen intelligence agencies, are the current manifestations of an interweaving that has always been at the foundation of American digital capitalism. And the doctrine of Alex Karp, CEO of Palantir, brutally states the principles of digital imperialism:

“Silicon Valley's engineering elite has a duty to participate in the defence of the nation (...) For free and democratic societies to prevail, there needs to be more than just an appeal to morality. There needs to be raw power, and in this

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century, that power will be based on software (...) An era of deterrence, the atomic age, is coming to an end, and a new era of deterrence based on artificial intelligence is about to begin” (Karp, Zaminska, 2025).

The war unleashed in February 2026 against Iran is a striking illustration of the organic integration between the digital oligopoly and the US military apparatus. Operation Epic Fury has been described by many observers as the first large-scale military offensive largely assisted by artificial intelligence.

Palantir's Maven Smart System – whose market capitalization reached $360 billion in the first quarter of 2026, driven in part by ongoing conflicts – has made it possible to identify, geolocate and prioritize several hundred targets in a few hours, an unprecedented rate made possible by the massive algorithmic processing of satellite data, surveillance images and human intelligence.

Anthropic's Claude model was integrated into these systems to facilitate strategic analysis and interaction between the different layers of the targeting device. SpaceX's Starshield space communications infrastructure provided real-time data transmission between the autonomous drones, ground-based sensors, and command centres.

This massive and ultra-sophisticated technological deployment has not prevented the death of thousands of civilian victims, killed in the US and Israeli bombings. However, it is part of a sequence opened by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, then by the destruction of Gaza by the Israeli army. This shows that, from now on, digital companies no longer serve the war effort from the outside but constitute its nervous system in its most immediate operational dimension.

The framework of digital imperialism incorporates a third dimension: the dynamics of rivalries between capitalist powers for control of the resources and markets of the digital economy. Louçã and Machado (2026) point out that the fall in profitability accentuates inter-imperialist rivalries and that the tariffs imposed by the Trump administration – despite its convolutions – symbolize the end of the neoliberal globalization regime inaugurated in the 1990s. Following Bürbaumer (2024), this reading of the international situation makes it possible to grasp the Sino-American trade and technological conflict not as a bump in the road in a globalization that would resume its course, but as the expression of a structural contradiction between capitalist blocs.

The war over semiconductors between the United States and China, the conflicts over rare earths, the restrictions on Huawei within the EU, the forced sale of TikTok's US subsidiary, the competition for human resources in artificial intelligence and the training data of large language models are all manifestations of this inter-imperial rivalry in the digital field.

Bradford (2023) proposes an analytical mapping from a liberal perspective that converges on the facts with Marxist readings, distinguishing three models of digital governance: the “market-driven” American model, the “state-driven” Chinese model, and the “rights-driven” European model, which are in reality three distinct configurations of the same digital capitalism, competing to define the norms, standards and rules of the game of the world economy.

Mirrlees (2024) is a useful reminder that China's rise to power in this area must be analysed as the emergence of its own digital and media imperialism – using instruments analogous to those of the United States – and not as an alternative to the imperial logic itself. The emerging multipolar world is not a post-imperial world, but a world of increased inter-imperial rivalries.

The fourth dimension of digital imperialism is the one that most directly articulates economic transformations with political forms. Louçã and Machado (2026) identify the emergence of a “two-headed oligarchy”—institutional asset managers, and techno-oligarchs—as the main novelty of the post-2008 class structure.

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These two fractions of the bourgeoisie, born in distinct sectors but united by their common dependence on the exceptional returns that only monopoly positions allow, converge on systemic tendencies:

– rentierism, understood as the generalization of monopoly positions throughout the economy;
– commodity totalization, i.e. the extension of market logics to spheres of human existence previously removed from capitalist valorisation;
– oligarchisation, i.e. the constitution of political apparatuses directly linked to oligarchic interests;
– and war, as a mode of external resolution of the contradictions of accumulation.

Fuchs (2026) theorizes this configuration as “authoritarian digital capitalism,” whose border with fascism is porous and increasingly crossed, according to him. The distinction between the facets of digital fascism that he identifies – from authoritarian personality to nationalism, from propaganda to digital militias – makes it possible to grasp the political shift of the digital oligarchy not as a conjunctural accident but as a structural characteristic: the economic model based on unlimited access to personal data collides objectively with the principles of freedom of expression, privacy and democratic sovereignty that constitute the formal foundation of liberal democracies. The gradual liquidation of these principles is not a side effect of digital domination; it is the condition of long-term possibility that is articulated with the contemporary transformation of the public sphere.

IV. The platformization of the public space

In political philosophy, the public space is defined as a sphere of communication and mediation between the state and society, and between a multitude of groups and organizations within society itself (Habermas, 1978). One of the major components of the public space is the cultural and media industries, where a wide variety of public discourses are expressed by a swarm of actors. This is done with the aim of making oneself visible and influential to the public. The concrete functioning of the public space thus weighs on the formation of opinions, on institutionalized deliberative processes such as elections and, more fundamentally, on social representations.

From a materialist point of view, there is a dialectical relationship between political economy and the changes in the symbolic and material space in which discourses, ideas and opinions circulate throughout history (Negt, 2007). For the public space of modernity is consubstantial with capitalism and therefore overdetermined by its logics. As a result, it is subject to political struggles and antagonistic class relations. The power to influence the dominant vision of the world that unfolds there is unequally distributed among the social groups that demand it according to the balance of power they establish among themselves.

However, for the political economy of communication, the information and cultural industries are not mere vectors of ideological influence, but are part of the economic core of imperialism. Schiller does not simply say that the media “serves” U.S. imperialism or propagates its ideology. For him, it is one of its economic engines, and its global commercial expansion is a form of imperial expansion.

As a result, the doctrine of the free flow of information, presented as a universal ideal of communicative freedom during the Cold War, is in fact the ideological vector of this expansion, functionally analogous to nineteenth-century British free trade (Schiller, 1978). This is a theory of domination which, from a communicative point of view, does not separate the economic from the ideological, but articulates them in the same structural logic.

This articulation remains relevant today. It allows us to understand why the domination of U.S. digital platforms on the global information space is not reduced to a market phenomenon but is inseparable from the political hegemony and state support that underpins it. Mirrlees (2015) shows that the structures identified by Schiller (the dominance of the United States in global media markets, the organic alliance between the communication industries and the

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Department of Defense, the use of international trade policy to impose norms favourable to U.S. companies) persist and have been consolidated in the post-2008 period, despite the considerable transformations of the media ecosystem.

But Schiller conceived of the public space as a pre-existing terrain that the American cultural industries sought to occupy, influence, and shape ideologically by disseminating content that conveyed values and the “American way of life”. It is a theory of domination in the public space, not a theory of the domination of the public space itself. However, what characterizes the current phase of digital imperialism is precisely that the major platforms are no longer content to disseminate content through a pre-existing public space such as the media, they constitute its very infrastructure, according to a logic of capitalist accumulation that profoundly restructures the conditions of democratic deliberation. This shift from the control of content to the control of the infrastructure of its circulation is both profound and qualitative. It thus calls for a distinct concept.

The notion of the platformization of the public space (Smyrnaios, Baisnée, 2023) refers to the process by which the infrastructures, economic mechanisms and management logics specific to oligopolistic digital actors penetrate and restructure the sphere of social mediation where opinions are formed, collective representations are constructed and political agendas are defined. It is not an influence of the media on politics in the classic sense of the agenda-setting theory but the control of the very architecture through which politics is constituted and circulates.

On the economic level, oligopolistic digital players have restructured the media system as a whole by imposing targeted advertising based on the behavioural monitoring of users as the dominant framework for the production and circulation of news content. This restructuring is not neutral: it creates a financial dependence of the media on the platforms, which control the main distribution interfaces of their content and capture most of the advertising revenues.

The media thus find themselves in an asymmetrical relationship with the platforms: they produce the content that feeds the platforms' audience, while the latter extract the associated advertising value without paying producers more than a marginal fraction. This relationship is constitutive of a form of digital imperialism that is exercised within developed economies themselves, independently of any North/South relationship.

On the political level, Google, Instagram, TikTok or ChatGPT do not necessarily broadcast a specifically oriented message. On the other hand, they produce an architecture of attention. Their business model is based on maximizing user engagement time, which directs their recommendation algorithms towards the content that elicits the most intense reactions – indignation, fear, polarization – regardless of its veracity or relevance to democratic deliberation.

In addition, the giants of Silicon Valley establish privileged relationships with certain powerful media groups, which integrate their logic or have great political influence, to the detriment of others who have a minority or anti-hegemonic editorial positioning. This generates an internal asymmetry in the media field and harms pluralism.

Thus, it is not the domination of a particular content or political line that is at issue, it is the domination of a cultural form, of a logic of circulation, which produces systemic ideological effects without any propagandist needing to directly steer the process. As Fuchs (2026) shows, behavioural surveillance, the exploitation of cognitive biases, the constitution of echo chambers and the viral circulation of racist content are not dysfunctions of the system but its structural features, linked to the very logic of optimizing engagement.

This cultural form is in line with the reactionary turn of the digital oligarchy. Democratic regulation, the protection of personal data, workers' rights, and antitrust rules are all objective obstacles to the unlimited expansion of companies whose valuation is based on unlimited and unregulated access to data, behaviour, and communication infrastructures.

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It is the political manifestation of a structural contradiction: the model of accumulation and domination of digital imperialism is incompatible with the liberal democratic institutions it claims to defend. To put it as Peter Thiel, co-founder of Palantir, puts it, freedom and democracy are no longer compatible. These observations converge on what the notion of the platformization of the public sphere allows us to analyse: a systemic transformation of the conditions of democratic deliberation, operated not only by mechanisms of censorship or direct propaganda, but also and above all by the restructuring of the infrastructures through which political life unfolds.

Thus, the notion of the platformization of the public space is part of an intellectual filiation with Schiller and the political economy of classical communication, but goes beyond them on at least two points. The first overcoming concerns the military-industrial integration mentioned above. Schiller had identified the alliance between the communication industries and the U.S. military apparatus, but he still thought of them as two distinct spheres maintaining relations of mutual support.

The contemporary configuration is qualitatively different. Military-Industrial Systems now constitute integrated institutions where the boundary between civilian and military production, between commercial and state surveillance, between war propaganda and brand communication, is structurally porous. Digital platforms no longer “serve” military imperialism, they are organic components of it, whose data processing infrastructures, behavioural modelling algorithms and information distribution networks are indiscriminately mobilized for commercial, political and military uses. It is in this way that digital imperialism represents a qualitative radicalization of Schillerian cultural imperialism, and not simply its technological updating.

The second overcoming concerns the contradiction that stems from the participatory and agonistic dimension of the digital public space. Schiller conceived of mass communication as an essentially top-down flow – from American centres of cultural production to more or less passive peripheral audiences. This representation was already insufficient in its time, and it is radically inadequate in the age of social networks, where the production of content is massively distributed and where social movements can be formed and disseminated over temporalities without equivalent in the history of the media.

The *Gilets jaunes*, #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and climate mobilizations have used the infrastructure of platforms to build counter-publics and impose issues on the public agenda that the traditional media would have ignored or marginalized. The platformized public space thus appears as simultaneously a terrain of domination and a terrain of struggle for hegemony in the Gramscian sense, traversed by contradictions and resistance, and not only a device of manipulation.

This recognition takes into account sociological contributions, particularly from Cultural Studies, which have shown that media do not constitute a space of total and unidirectional domination: they are permeated by diverted uses that go beyond the logic of accumulation. What platforms define is not the content of political struggles, but the conditions of their visibility, circulation and institutionalization. They decide which content is amplified or suppressed, which mobilizations are monetizable and which are not, at what pace controversies are replaced by others, according to which logics political communities are segmented. This complexification of the conditions for the deployment of politics is subtler and deeper than censorship or direct propaganda, and can also, under certain conditions, constitute a resource for the social movement.

Conclusion: digital imperialism and the end of the U.S. order – a hypothesis

The theoretical itinerary taken leads to an overall proposal. Techno-feudalism, despite the relevance of its partial diagnoses of rentierization and monopolization, comes up against important political limits. The notion of digital imperialism as I propose it responds to these by articulating five dimensions that competing approaches deal with separately:

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– firstly, the monopolistic logic of capital, in its post-2008 phase, constitutes the economic basis of Big Tech's domination;
– secondly, the military-digital complex is not a conjunctural alliance between distinct spheres, but an organic integration between the digital oligopoly, the state apparatus and the military-industrial complex whose genealogy goes back to the very origins of Silicon Valley;
– thirdly, inter-imperial rivalries constitute the systemic dynamic: a multipolar world in the making, crossed by growing contradictions between capitalist blocs competing for the strategic resources of the digital economy;
– fourth, oligarchic recomposition constitutes the political form whose authoritarian turn stems structurally from the collision between its model of accumulation and liberal democratic institutions.
– fifthly, the platformization of the public space, designating the process by which the infrastructures of digital platforms are no longer content to disseminate content through a pre-existing public space, but constitute its very architecture as well as the conditions of visibility, circulation and legitimisation of politics.

At the end of this theoretical construction, it seems possible to formulate a conclusive hypothesis that the most recent events invite us to take seriously, without pretending to predict its outcome. The war against Iran, and the resulting energy and geopolitical crisis, constitutes an event that reveals and accelerates contradictions that the framework of digital imperialism precisely allows us to grasp.

By unleashing a major conflict that is causing a global energy disruption comparable to the shocks of the 1970s, the United States is simultaneously mobilizing the classic instruments of fossil imperialism – securing oil routes, maintaining order in the Gulf – and the tools of digital imperialism – information warfare, cybernetic operations, military use of artificial intelligence. The two complexes converge in this operation.

But the resulting crisis reveals a profound contradiction within US hegemony itself: by weakening the petrodollar architecture, by tying its foreign policy even more strongly to Israel's objectives under Netanyahu, and by distancing itself from its main allies such as European states, the United States is posing a structural risk to its own hegemony that its adversaries alone could not have inflicted. This is reinforced by Iran's resilience due to the technological, political and military backing of China, Russia and middle powers such as Pakistan.

The hypothesis we formulate is then the following: the war in Iran and the oil crisis, coupled with a potential regime crisis within the United States itself – caused by the excesses of Trumpism, whose policies contradict the priorities of the establishment, such as support for NATO – could signal the entry into the terminal phase of the American order as it has been constituted since the collapse of the Communist bloc. Not the end of imperialism as the structural logic of capitalism, but the end of the hegemony of a singular empire without rival. If this hypothesis is confirmed, the resulting world would not be post-imperial but multi-imperial, crossed by increased rivalries in which the digital public space would simultaneously be the stake and the main battleground.

It is in this context that the analysis of the platformization of the public space takes on its full strategic dimension. It presupposes attacking the logic of profit-making property that organizes platforms, rebuilding spaces of deliberation whose infrastructure is not subject to capitalist accumulation, and thinking of communication as a common resource rather than a market. It is on this condition that the critique of digital imperialism can lead to something other than well-informed pessimism.

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