

Book Review:

## Inhuman Power: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Capitalism

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*Inhuman Power: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Capitalism* by Nick Dyer-Witheford, Atle Mikkola Kjøsén, & James Steinhoff, 2019, Pluto Press.

The main axis over which the central argument of *Inhuman Power: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Capitalism* by Nick Dyer-Witheford, Atle Mikkola Kjøsén, and James Steinhoff unravels is anxiousness over the possibility that machines could revolutionise the human condition empowered by the latest stages of capitalism and its accompanying processes of transformations to labour, production and social reproduction. Here and there throughout the book, we are reminded that the factual knowledge on the topic is fallacious, and we read an overview of the state of the art regarding the potential directions the capitalist expansion might adopt via abstracting itself independently of humans by ‘means of cognition’ such as machine learning (ML) and artificial intelligence (AI). The main topic of the alleged dominance of the question of artificial intelligence (AI) in debates on the future of capitalism has been approached mostly by summarising and at certain points pushing arguments about the possible consequences of AI and labour automation fundamentally altering the basis of contemporary capitalism (p.1).

The summary of the three existing polemics and positioning them within the given argument helps the authors to place themselves within existing scholarship on capitalism, Marxist and post-Marxist stances on technology, and its role in human development. The general critique of AI as an instrument of capital as given in Marxist scholarship is followed by two opposing leftist approaches. One is the so-called ‘minimalist’ leftist position, which dismisses the current discussion on AI as “hype and hucksterism” (p. 4), while the other is the ‘maximalist’ leftist position according to which technological advancement has the potential to fundamentally transform the conditions of production while its capacities are seen as a possible “stepping stone to socialism” (p. 6). The argument emerging from the examinations given in *Inhuman Power* suggests that the first line of thought is the default, and that AI is the personification of market forces driving towards the maximization of profit. On the other hand, the authors reject a dismissal of automation as a profoundly ahistorical state. Therefore, the epistemological space around which *Inhuman Power* mostly operates is the modification of certain lines of the latest Marxist polemics incorporating some elements of transhumanism also known as Marxist accelerationism and theses on the Fourth Industrial Revolution and unstoppable forces of computation as given in the reconfiguration debate. Some of the other directions of thought within this line of argumentation are also post-capitalism (Mason) and luxury automated communism (Bastani).

Departing from the idea of Marxist accelerationism, the authors do not believe that AI could easily be detached from capitalism and used for a different goal than maximizing profit; therefore, there is no space for underestimating but also neither for overestimating the powers of AI. Frankly admitting they are not experts in the matter, the contribution the authors of *Inhuman Power* are making is twofold: on the one hand, they contribute to a better definition and explanation of what AI is; for example, because of popular representation, many imagine AI as some kind of robot. On the contrary, AI is not a physical object but rather software capable of making generalisations based on limited data, and most existing AI is narrow and limited to very few functions. The broader super versions of AI expected to be developed in the future are expected to be almost as capable as humans or even able to outperform humans, but they are still more a product of human fantasy than anything close to being expected in reality any time soon. The bottom line in terms of the difference between humans and machines are the elements of human agency, consciousness, and the ability to create value which is understood as distinctively human along with the ability to make innovative conclusions based on limited data.

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Machines need much more data than humans do to be able to perform complex functions. On the crucial topic of the book, the question of whether humanity can replicate itself artificially, it turns out that the authors themselves have no unambiguous position.

This is where the first point of criticism might be raised. It would be of much greater benefit to the reader if more incisive evidence, arguments and conclusions on the question of the real possibility of AI replacing humans were presented in the book, rather than just balancing between the two poles of the popular speculative prediction. On the one hand, we remain in the clouds between the impossibility of thinking of a future outside of capitalism, while on the other, it seems the empirical and logical evidence for this fear of replacement is overestimated, but still remains empowered. The different arguments presented in *Inhuman Power* are a bit simplistic, starting from the admission that the preparation for writing the book was watching sci-fi movies (p. 24). It has been rightly pointed out that sci-fi fantasies are far from reality, but there seems to be much more to say about this than whether machines will take all the jobs from humans or not. Even if a machine could outperform human capabilities, we are not talking only about labour, nor is human existence limited to it the discussion of the transformations from the impact of new technologies. For more than two decades, certain forms of AI have been with us in widespread usage, and their impact appears to be in every sense quite limited for any kind of escalating transformation of humanity and capitalism.

The second point of criticism to be raised is considering the democratization of AI defined as the 'means of cognition' of AI capitalism and some of its forms, such as smart cities and the Internet of Things (IoT). Therefore, it seems that more than fearing that humans will be replaced and outperformed by machines and software, it is more reasonable to consider the most advanced economies having used AI tools as a competitive advantage for a while already in specific businesses and by very few companies with a global monopoly, thus having possible disadvantageous effects on developing economies. Besides the US, Russia and China, only a handful of other countries have strategic research and development plans for AI, but again, the revenues do not seem to be guaranteed and the business seems too risky. We have recently witnessed Facebook announcing that it is going through serious financial troubles. Therefore, it seems that investing in AI development is highly risky and not necessarily profitable for the producers, since the revenues seem less secure and direct than in any previous stage of capitalism. Furthermore, compared to the infrastructure for a widespread ML technology and the actual speed of progress in this field, it is obvious that both governments and private companies are still rather reluctant to go in this direction. The hardware needed to run AI is quite expensive, and therefore it could be assumed that both the production and consumption of this technology and its implementation with the potential to lead to a state of general conditions of production or of 'actually existing AI-capitalism' and further 'cybernetic capitalism' are quite minimal and limited (p. 42, 50).

The undeniable innovation introduced by the book is terminology, since it introduces some terms which in the future might be helpful for scholars working in the field, among which is the term 'inhuman power'. In general, it could be said that this book is aimed rather at a popular audience passionately obsessing over the topic of new technologies and debating scenarios as if they were a TV show than providing any distinctive novel approach and argumentation on the topic or enclosing specific information for high profile experts. In addition, the book makes a much greater contribution regarding the Marxist understanding of technological progress and the future of capitalism, since it provides a systematisation and overview of the state of the art in this approach, including future policy ideas which would evolve around inserting transhumanist ideas into Marxist thought in the form of ideas, such as the universal basic income (UBI) and a focus on the ecological issues surrounding the intensification of capitalism by AI. Therefore, the sensational novelty in this over artificial capitalism is yet to happen, if ever, while in between, it seems advisable for scholars working in the field to focus on specific approaches and empirical facts rather than on theoretical generalisations about the future.

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