

dependence - cloud fiefs for users to create
WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Indonesian cloudalist firm, is taking over three and a half million *warungs*, digitising their services with a view not only to uploading their multifaceted local markets to the cloud but also to financialising the local communities who depend on them via usurious micro-credits, expensive digital cash transfers and basic banking services. Never too slow to cotton on, Jeff Bezos dispatched Jeff Bezos Expeditions to Indonesia and in 2021 began to invest in a competitor to Bukalapak's.⁴ Peter Thiel, co-founder of PayPal, early investor in Facebook, initiator of Palantir, has done the same with his Valar Ventures. So have Tencent, a leading Chinese Big Tech conglomerate.

From factory owners in America's Midwest to poets struggling to sell their latest anthology, from London Uber drivers to Indonesian street hawkers, all are now dependent on some cloud fief for access to customers. It is progress, of sorts. Gone is the time when, to collect their rent, feudal lords employed thugs to break their vassals' knees or spill their blood. The cloudalists don't need to deploy bailiffs to confiscate or to evict. Instead, every vassal capitalist knows that with the removal of a link from their cloud vassal's site they could lose access to the bulk of their customers. And with the removal of a link or two from Google's search engine or from a couple of e-commerce and social media sites, they could disappear from the online world altogether. A sanitised tech-terror is the bedrock of technofeudalism.

Looked at in totality, it becomes apparent that the world economy is lubricated less and less with profit and increasingly with cloud rent. And so the delightful antinomy of our era comes into focus: capitalist activity is growing within the same process of energetic capital accumulation that degrades capitalist profit and gradually replaces capitalist markets with

cloud fiefs. In short, capitalism is withering as a result of burgeoning capitalist activity. It is through capitalist activity that technofeudalism was born and is now sweeping to power. After all, how could it be any other way?

Capitalism on steroids?

'I am unconvinced,' I hear you say. Feudal lords never invested in anything except intrigue and violence. Your cloudalists, in contrast, invest massively in the highest of high-tech capital. They are the epitome of capitalists, pouring money into research and development in order to produce new and desirable commodities like search results, digital personal assistants and teleconferencing applications. Even if they manage to create something resembling a fiefdom, as Zuckerberg did with Facebook, a competitor emerges before long who syphons off millions of users to their own multibillion-dollar business. Look at the sudden rise of TikTok, for example!

Your cloudalists are the polar opposite of lazy barons and earls and far closer to Thomas Edison, Henry Ford and George Westinghouse than any feudal lord. If anything, Yanis, they are capitalists on steroids – and in the final analysis, even if they feast more and more on what you call cloud rent, what they are doing is still capitalism. Call it rentier capitalism. Or cloud capitalism. Or hyper-capitalism. But technofeudalism? No, I don't see it.

It is true, Dad, that the cloudalists are – or at least were – capitalists-on-steroids. That I would never dispute. Unlike the feudalists, who were invariably born with the power to extract rents, the cloudalists had to create it from scratch. And to do that, you're right, they invested gargantuan sums

in their technology. But the question remains: what exactly did they invest in? And what came of their investments?

You say that the cloudalists invested in the creation of new commodities – but a commodity is a thing or service produced to be sold for profit. Search results are not produced to be sold. Alexa and Siri do not answer our questions for a fee. Like Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, their purpose is entirely different: to capture and modify our attention. And even when Big Tech cloudalists make us pay a fee to gain access to artificial intelligence bots like ChatGPT or sell us physical devices such as Alexa, they aren't selling them as commodities. These gadgets are leased or sold cheaply not for the negligible (often negative) profit they make on them but to gain access to our homes and, via them, to more of our attention. It is this power over our attention that allows them to collect cloud rent from the vassal capitalists who are in the old-fashioned business of selling *their* commodities. Ultimately, the cloudalist's investment is aimed not at competing within a capitalist market but in getting us to *exit* capitalist markets altogether.

Cloudalists like Steve Jobs, Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, Sergei Brin do, I admit, have some things in common with Edison, Ford and Westinghouse: big egos, oversized companies, and a readiness to break things, including existing markets and state institutions, in order to shore up their dominance. But those captains of early-twentieth-century Big Business were all focused squarely on achieving profit by monopolising markets and deploying the capital of factories and production lines. They would be the first to see that the cloudalists are now becoming fabulously wealthy without needing to organise the production of *any* commodity. Not only that, they are free from the pressure of a market to

cloudalists aim to exit capitalism
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produce cheaper, better commodities or indeed the constant fear that a competitor might come up with a product that steals their market share altogether.

'But your cloudalists do live in such fear, I hear you object. Look at how TikTok drained Facebook's users and revenues. Or at the existential threat to Netflix that is Disney Plus. Or at how Walmart's ecommerce site has been taking market share from Amazon. Isn't this exactly the market competition that Ford, Edison and Westinghouse faced?'

Well, Dad, despite the similarities, no, it's not.

Battles and rivalries like these, leading to the rise and fall of fiefs, were part and parcel of feudalism. At times, it took considerable effort to keep fiefs from falling into decline or conquest, especially after 1350 when the Black Death created acute labour shortages and serfs were able to leave one fief and migrate to another. But we should not confuse rivalry between fiefs with market-based competition.

TikTok's success at stealing the attention of users away from other social media sites is not due to the lower prices it offers or higher quality of the 'friendships' or associations it enables. TikTok created a new cloud fief for cloud serfs in search of a different online experience to migrate to. Disney Plus did not offer audiences the movies and series on Netflix at lower prices or in higher definition formats – it offered movies and series not available on Netflix. Walmart did not undercut Amazon's prices or improve on the quality of its commodities – it used its own database to lure more users to its newly established cloud fief. As for Apple, the pioneer of cloud-fief construction, it deploys what it calls 'privacy rules' (e.g. it prevents competitors, like Facebook and Google, from gleaning iPhone owners' data) that are carefully tailored to prevent other cloudalists from modifying the

feudal rivalry over cloud serfs
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behaviour of any users that they share, causing Mark Zuckerberg to accuse it of charging 'monopoly rents' and 'stifling innovation'.

Like Ford, Edison and Westinghouse, the cloudalists of Amazon, Tencent, Alibaba, Facebook, Apple and Google also invest in research and development, in politics, marketing, union-busting and cartel tactics, but again they do so not to sell commodities at maximum profit, but in order to extract maximum rents from the capitalists who do.

The Great Transformation, from feudalism to capitalism, was predicated on the usurpation of rent by profit as the driving force of our socio-economic system. That was the word *capitalism* proved so much more useful and insightful than a term like market feudalism. It is this fundamental fact – that we have entered a socio-economic system powered not by profit but by rent – that demands we use a new term to describe it. To think of it as hyper-capitalism or rentier capitalism would be to miss this essential, defining principle. And to reflect the return of rent to its central role, I can think of no better name than technofeudalism.

More importantly, having defined and labelled it properly, I believe we are now better equipped to grasp the meaning and importance of this systemic transformation – and what is at stake for us all.

The technofeudal method to Elon Musk's Twitter madness

If I had to choose one person to illustrate the need for technofeudalism, both word and concept, in order to understand our collective predicament, it would be Elon Musk. Brilliant and flawed, combining rare engineering talents

with ridiculous public displays of ostentation, Musk is our era's Thomas Edison – the man who, you may recall, electrocuted an elephant in order to discredit a rival. Having revolutionised industries that are normally the graveyard of startups, from car manufacturing to space travel and even brain-computer interfaces, Musk proceeded to spend tens of billions of dollars on buying Twitter, risking in the process everything he had achieved as a manufacturer and engineer. Many commentators opined that Musk was just another rich brat looking for an even more impressive toy than the ones he had already. But there was a logic to his purchase of Twitter: a technofeudal logic that elucidates much more than Musk's mindset.

We should not be surprised if Musk was indeed feeling unfulfilled. For all his success as manufacturer, and despite attaining richest-man-in-the-world status, neither his achievements nor his wealth granted him entry into the new ruling class. His Tesla car company uses the cloud cleverly to turn its cars into nodes on a digital network that generates Big Data and ties drivers to Musk's systems. His SpaceX rocket company, and the flock of satellites it pollutes our planet's low orbit periphery with, contributes significantly to the development of other moguls' cloud capital. But Musk? Frustratingly for the business world's *enfant terrible*, he has lacked a gateway to the gigantic rents that cloud capital can furnish. Twitter could be that missing gateway.

Immediately after taking over Twitter, Musk spoke of his commitment to safeguarding Twitter as the 'public square' where we debate anything and everything. It was a bit of propaganda which successfully diverted the public's attention towards an endless global debate about whether the world should trust its foremost short-form debating forum

every app as gateway to better profits.
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to a mogul with a history of playing fast and loose with the truth on that same forum. While the liberal commentariat was fretting over Donald Trump's reinstatement, decent people admonished the terrible treatment of Twitter's employees, and the left agonised over the rise of a tech-savvy version of Rupert Murdoch, Musk was keeping his eye on the ball. In a revealing tweet, he admitted his ambition to turn Twitter into an 'everything app'.

What did he mean by an 'everything app'? He meant nothing less than a gateway to technofeudalism, one that would allow him to attract users' attention, modify their consumer behaviour, extract free labour from them as cloud serfs and, last but not least, charge vendors cloud rent for selling them their wares. Unlike the owners of Amazon, Google, Alibaba, Facebook, Tik-Tok and Tencent, Musk did not own anything capable of evolving into an 'everything app' and had no way of creating one from scratch. Only one such interface belonged to no other mogul or hyper-corporation and was, therefore, available for purchase: Twitter.

As a private fief, Twitter could never be the world's public square. The pertinent question is whether Musk can use it to build a prominent cloud fief and, thus, gain membership of the new technofeudal ruling class: the cloudalists. That will depend on whether he can successfully enhance Twitter's cloud capital, perhaps by hooking it up to his existing Big Data network that is constantly being enriched by his cars and satellites. Succeed or fail, Musk's Twitter escapade shows how technofeudalism and the perspective it affords help us better to understand what is actually going on in our world.

That is one particular example, whose outcome will be relatively limited. But technofeudalism also unlocks a more pervasive and pressing problem, in which we are all implicated.

The technofeudal underpinnings of the Great Inflation

Every great transformation brings with it a new type of crisis. When we invented agriculture, we amassed plants and animals within our communities and, unwittingly, bred noxious germs that caused hideous epidemics. The arrival of capitalism begat economic crises such as the Great Depression. Today, technofeudalism is deepening pre-existing sources of instability and turning them into new existential threats. Specifically, the Great Inflation and cost-of-living crisis that have followed the recent pandemic cannot be properly understood outside the context of technofeudalism.

In the last chapter, I recounted how for twelve long years after the crash of 2008, central banks printed trillions to replace the bankers' losses. We saw how socialism for bankers and austerity for the rest of us dampened investment, blunted Western capitalism's dynamic and pushed it into a state of gilded stagnation. The only serious investment of the central banks' poisoned money during this time went into the accumulation of cloud capital. By 2020, cloud rents accruing to cloud capital accounted for much of the developed world's aggregate net income. That in brief is how cloud rent gained the upper hand and profit retreated.

One does not need to be left-leaning to know that rent's stunning comeback could only mean deeper and more toxic stagnation.⁵ Wages get spent by the many struggling to make ends meet. Profits get invested in capital goods to maintain the capitalists' capacity to profit. But rent is stashed away in property (mansions, yachts, art, cryptocurrencies, etc.) and stubbornly refuses to enter circulation, stimulate investment into useful things, and revive flaccid capitalist societies. And

rent -> stagnation

Card wealth took

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so a vicious cycle begins: deeper stagnation ensues, causing central banks to print more money, enabling more extraction and less investment, and so on.

The pandemic exacerbated the same trend. The only significant difference from the pre-pandemic period was that, this time, and for the first time since 2008, some of the fresh trillions printed by central banks were spent by governments on the population, to keep their citizens alive while locked down. Nonetheless, most of the new monies ended up bolstering the share price of Big Tech corporations. This explains the report of Swiss bank UBS, published in October 2020, which found that billionaires had increased their wealth by more than a quarter (27.5 per cent) between April and July of that year, just as millions of people around the world lost their jobs or were struggling to get by on government schemes.⁶

Meanwhile, lockdowns closed ports, roads and airports, throttling the supply of goods in economies where, for many years, underinvestment had already depleted the capacity to produce locally. What happens when supply suddenly dries? Especially during times when the locked-down masses get some income support from the central banks' money tree? The price of groceries, exercise bikes, bread makers, natural gas, petrol, housing and a host of other goods goes through the roof and, following a dozen years of subdued prices, a Great Inflation sets in.

Many hoped that the inflation resulting from blockages in the supply chain would be mild. The expectation that inflation would be 'transitory' had a logic to it: workers' bargaining power in the 2020s was a shadow of its former self, when in the 1970s mighty trades unions could push for wage rises above the inflation rate. It followed that with only limp wage rises to support them once government furlough schemes and income

inflation becomes power game

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support came to an end, the purchasing power of the masses would simply be depleted by rising prices, demand for goods would ebb and prices would fall. It hasn't panned out that way. Inflation is never just a monetary phenomenon – just as money is never just a token of exchange value. When, for whatever reason, prices surge across the board, a social power game is afoot in which everyone attempts to suss out their bargaining power. Business managers try to work out how far they can raise prices – if not to profit then, at least, to recoup their own rising costs. Rentiers, both traditional and cloudblist, test the water with rent hikes. Workers assess the extent to which they can push for a pay rise – at least to compensate for the higher bills they must meet. Governments play the game too: do they intervene by using the greater income and VAT tax receipts flowing from the rising prices to assist weaker citizens being crushed by inflation? Or do they subsidise Big Business as it is squeezed by high energy prices? Or do they do nothing much? Until these questions get answered, inflation continues to roll.

In a power game like this, it is power that matters above all. If capital dominates labour, inflation ends when workers accept a permanent reduction in their wage share of total income. If government dominates capital, as for example in China, inflation dissipates when capitalists and rentiers acquiesce to a chunk of their loot being used to pay off a portion of the state's deficits, debts or expenditures. The question, for us, then becomes: what happens in societies where cloud capital dominates terrestrial capital and labour is at the bottom of the pecking order?

Two things happen – one obvious and one far less so. On the surface, supermarkets, energy companies and any other conglomerate that is able to inflate prices above its costs will

take in superprofits.⁷ However, the less obvious but more interesting repercussion of the Great Inflation, in a world going through its early technofeudalist phase, is subtler and woven into society's productive fabric: traditional capital is further displaced by new cloud capital, hastening and strengthening technofeudalism's super-arching reach. Here are two examples of how it goes.

The case of German cars and green energy

German car makers were dealt a double blow by the Great Inflation: rising fuel prices not only put their customers off but elevated the energy cost of making cars. The German press went so far as to agonise over the country's possible de-industrialisation. While their angst was justified, their analysis missed the point.

German car makers will probably continue to produce as many cars in the future as they did in the past for the simple reason that they have been relatively swift to invest in the transition from manufacturing the petrol-powered automobiles of the past to the electric vehicles of our future. You might think, then, that the hastening of the shift to electric cars, caused by energy price inflation, would work in their favour. Not so much.

The kernel of German capital's power and success is high-precision mechanical and electrical engineering. German car makers, in particular, have profited by building high-quality internal combustion engines and all the parts that are necessary to convey motion from such engines to a car's wheels: the gearboxes, axles, differentials and so on. Electric vehicles are mechanically much simpler to engineer. Most of their

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surplus value – and the profit they afford – derives from the software that runs them and connects the car to the cloud and the data that derives in turn from that. The Great Inflation, in other words, is forcing German industry to produce goods that rely a lot more on cloud capital than traditional capital.

The problem, then, is this: compared to their American and Chinese counterparts, German capitalists failed to realise soon enough the benefits of investing in cloud capital – of becoming cloudalists – and lag far behind in this new game. In practical terms, they are manufacturing themselves out of a competitive position. Unable to collect sufficient cloud rents, German surpluses will suffer and so will the economy of a European Union – and its citizenry – reliant on German surpluses.

A similar story can be told about the energy sector. Once the pandemic receded and energy prices surged, Big Oil and Gas made a fortune. The fossil fuel industry has had a second wind, similar to that enjoyed by landowners during the Napoleonic Wars, due to the disruption of corn imports into Britain. But second winds do not last long. Just as capitalist profit overcame the short-term revival of feudal lords' fortunes as the memory of the Napoleonic Wars receded, so the Great Inflation is already expanding cloud capital's reach into the energy sector.

The fossil fuel industry is an unholy alliance of feudal-style contracts and terrestrial capital: it relies on licences to drill on particular patches of land or ocean bed, for which governments and private landlords receive old-fashioned ground rent. It also relies on old-fashioned capital goods, including oil rigs, tankers and pipelines, to feed fossil fuels into large, highly concentrated, vertically integrated power stations which, both

decentralised version

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aesthetically and economically, are not so dissimilar from a 'dark satanic mill' of the nineteenth century.

Renewables, in contrast, are best deployed in a decentralised fashion, with solar panels, wind turbines, heat pumps, geothermal units and wave-powered devices all horizontally integrated as part of a network. With little need for licences that incur ground rent, their productivity depends instead on digital infrastructure running on sophisticated software utilising artificial intelligence. In short, green energy is cloud-capital-intensive, much like the electric car industry.

The need to switch from fossil fuels to green energy could not be more urgent. The rise in energy costs that is an integral part of the Great Inflation would seem to have taken us away from that goal, offering a windfall to the fossil fuel industry. But this will not last long. Advances in green energy are pushing down fast the costs of green electricity generation. Even though the life cycle of fossil fuels has been extended, ruinously for the planet, cloud-based green energy is growing—and, with it, so is the relative power of cloudalists.

Technofeudalism has an inbuilt tendency to dampen price inflation, as it is in its nature to squeeze wages, prices and profits. But how exactly the Great Inflation will unfold in the short term is impossible to predict accurately because, as we have seen already, inflation is always a symptom of a flare-up of the ongoing class war; its trajectory will be determined primarily by politics and power. And what is certain is that by enhancing the scope of cloud capital, the Great Inflation will ultimately be bad for labour's political power, as it turns more of us into cloud proles.

Still, a large question mark hangs over the future of technofeudalism: now that the Great Inflation has forced central banks to stop their money-printing, causing the cloudalists'

Cloudalists will benefit for the greater part
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Great Inflation - technofeudalism

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share prices to tank and tens of thousands of Big Tech employees to lose their jobs; and now that oil companies and supermarkets are enjoying some fabulous profits, won't the technofeudal bubble burst? Has it not burst already?

Back to your question: is capitalism not back on track?

Your original question was whether the internet would make capitalism invincible or prove its undoing – and by now you know my answer. But given the economic tumult in the post-pandemic years, it would be reasonable to wonder whether the trends and principles I have identified still hold. Hasn't the Great Inflation revived capitalism?

Mainstream economic commentators found the Great Inflation rather unmysterious, and certainly not the sign of some underlying historic transformation – technofeudalist or otherwise. To them, inflation was the natural consequence of central bankers printing too much money, and of governments overspending it during the pandemic. As red-faced central bankers were forced to raise interest rates throughout 2022 in order to choke off demand and put a lid on rising prices, normally solemn commentators were hardly able to contain their pleasure at the apparent admission of their mistake.⁸ The Great Inflation of 2022 was to them what the Stuart Restoration of 1660 had been to British royalists: a return to agreeably familiar patterns of authority.

Not only that, with money becoming more expensive to borrow and to hold, the mad years when money's price languished around zero had ended. Sanity had been restored. There was a price to pay, of course; the familiar hangover after the party ended. With interest rates rising, financiers

relying on borrowed money to play the stock exchanges were forced to exit the market and, unsurprisingly, share prices declined even faster than interest rates had risen. And since the higher the rise the harder the fall, it was the cloudalist conglomerates – whose stock exchange value had taken off during the pandemic – that fell the most under the Great Inflation. During 2022, the total share value of US Big Tech cloudalist companies shrank by a remarkable \$4 trillion – though more remarkable still, perhaps, was the fact that their stock exchange valuation remained, on average, above its pre-pandemic level. Meanwhile, lockdown winners like Peloton, Zoom and Carvana all plummeted. So did 'meme stocks' like AMC and GameStop, so-called SPACs and NFTs – not to mention Bitcoin, Dogecoin, and other crypto false promises. The commentariat was almost relieved: technofeudalism, even if it had been taking hold for a brief period, was just another burst bubble.

From their point of view, our focus for concern as we navigate persistent inflation should be the connection between energy and food prices and the war in Ukraine, US sanctions on various countries, relocalisation of production due to the prospects of a New Cold War between America and China, ageing populations, stricter immigration controls. In other words, it's back to business as usual. And many left-wingers have found similar solace in the Great Inflation. They may abhor the hardships that inflation inflicts on the poor but welcome the feeling that the world makes sense to them again. With the price of money rising well above zero once more, and the market value of companies like Meta, Tesla and Amazon crashing down to Earth, the old capitalist order they know well how to despise is back. I sense that you too, Dad, might be harbouring similar thoughts.

Well, I'm sorry to say, there will be no return to the good old bad old days.

First, those torrents of central bank money have already built cloud capital up to critical mass. It is here to stay – and to dominate – because its immense structural power, to extract vast cloud rents from every society on Earth, remains completely undiminished. This would not be the first time a bubble has built up capital that endures after the bubble's bursting. America owes its railways to precisely this pattern: that bubble burst in the nineteenth century but not before tracks were laid down that are still in place, from Boston and New York to Los Angeles and San Diego. More recently, when the dot.com bubble burst in 2001, bankrupting early internet-based companies whose stock market valuations had reached ridiculous levels, it left behind the network of fibre optic cables and servers which provided the infrastructure underpinning Internet Two and Big Tech.

Second, the central bank money has not actually run dry. It is still flowing, albeit at a slower pace which nonetheless suffices to keep technofeudalism buoyant. Central banks can't afford to stem their flow completely, even if this is what they must do to defeat the Great Inflation. Recent bank failures in California and Switzerland reminded America's and Europe's central banks that, if they dare withdraw the trillions they have pumped into the North Atlantic economies, a vortex of volatility is ready to hit the \$24 trillion market for the United States' public debt – the very bedrock of international banking and finance.⁹ The European Central Bank knows that it risks pushing every German bank plus the state of Italy into a deep bankruptcy, and in so doing blowing up the euro. The Bank of Japan, the first central bank to practise energetic money-printing back in the 1990s, refuses even

central bank may be culture work of capitalism project
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to imagine ending the practice. As for the Bank of England, on 28 September 2022, after formally announcing the end of its pound-printing, it had to beat an ignominious retreat, printing an extra £65 billion to pacify the market for the UK's public debt.¹⁰ In short, central bank money is here to stay and will continue to play the systemic role once held by capitalist profits.

Third, cloud capital is now so well entrenched that it is bolstered and augmented not just by central bank money and its own capacity to amass cloud rent but from every new development as it arises: from the need for more renewables and self-driving cars to the demands for cheap online degree programmes for youngsters who can't afford more student debt, cloud capital expands its domain exponentially. Paradoxically, as we have seen in the case of electric cars and green energy, this even includes the Great Inflation itself, which is doing much of the heavy lifting in the great rebalancing of power away from terrestrial capital and towards cloud capital – in a word, from capitalism to technofeudalism.

My aim in this chapter has been to convince you that the word technofeudalism can, in the words of Simone Weil, 'help us to grasp some concrete reality or concrete objective, or method of activity' in a way that no variant on capitalism can. Technofeudalism, I claimed, is qualitatively distinct from capitalism and, thus, as a word, it illuminates crucial aspects of the real world in ways that rentier capitalism or platform capitalism or hyper-capitalism cannot. It is time now to unleash its explanatory power further, for I believe it helps us understand not only our socio-economic condition but also the titanic power struggle that may well define this century: the New Cold War between the United States and China.

included some of debt etc

Huawei v Google cloud fight [4 areas]

6. Technofeudalism's Global Impact: the New Cold War

On 15 May 2019, President Donald Trump issued a decree which, in effect, banned Google from allowing use of its Android operating system on smartphones made by Huawei, the Chinese telecommunications conglomerate. Trump was effectively evicting Huawei from Google's global cloud fief. Washington also told European governments to suspend their plan to involve Huawei in the roll-out of 5G mobile networks across Europe. It was much more than Trumpist folly. When Joe Biden moved into the White House, the New Cold War with China that Trump had kick-started moved up a gear – especially in October 2022 when, according to the *New York Times*, 'The White House issued sweeping restrictions on selling semiconductors and chip-making equipment to China, an attempt to curb the country's access to critical technologies.' In essence, Biden told Beijing: the United States will crush your dreams of building a technologically advanced economy!

What happened there? To explain their decisions, both Trump and Biden cited national security concerns and played up long-standing tensions with China over Taiwan and the South China Sea. But neither China's communist regime nor its stance on Taiwan were new, urgent or unexpected. Moreover, there were these 'concerns' when Apple, and many other American conglomerates, were setting up camp across communist China's coastline from the mid-2000s onwards? Or when Washington was moving heaven and earth to let

relationship between humans and their technologies, and the same contradictions that had inspired Hesiod.

Afterwards, I remember thinking about your question: was the internet capitalism's friend or foe? Was Movatar part of the answer? And what did it mean for the human condition? Back then, I hadn't a clue. But today, I see it clearly: Stelarc's Movatar prophesied what was to happen to us when traditional capital evolved into cloud capital, from a 'produced means of production' into a produced means of *behaviour modification*. Stelarc was merely experimenting with the idea of the post-human, but his Movatar captured the essence of humanity's future reality. As I see it now, Movatar was a creature at the mercy of hyper-connected, algorithmically driven, cloud-based capital. Another name for it would be *Homo technofendalis*.

The death of the liberal individual

To this day, I envy the way you lived, Dad. You were the epitome of the liberal individual. Sure, to make a living, you had reluctantly to lease yourself to your boss at the steel plant in Eleusis. But during your lunch break you wandered blissfully in the open-air backyard of the Eleusis Archaeological Museum, where you luxuriated in the discovery of ancient steles full of clues that antiquity's technologists were more advanced than previously thought. And following your return home, at just after five every afternoon, and a late siesta, you emerged ready to share in our family life and, on some nights, when we weren't messing about with various metals by our fireplace, to write your books and papers. Your life at the factory was, in short, neatly ring-fenced from your personal life.

It reflected a time when we thought that, if nothing else, capitalism had granted us sovereignty over our selves, albeit within certain limited parameters. However hard one had to work, you could at least fence off a portion of your life, however small, and within that fence remain autonomous, self-determining, free. Leftists, like us, knew that only the rich were truly free to choose, that the poor were mostly free to lose, and that the worst slavery was that of those who had learned to love their chains.² Still, even we, capitalism's harshest critics, appreciated the limited self-ownership it granted us.

For young people in today's world, even this small mercy has been taken away. Curating an identity online is not optional, and so their personal lives have become some of the most important work they do. From the moment they take their first steps online, they suffer like Movatar from two perplexingly contradictory demands: they are taught implicitly to see themselves as a brand, yet one that will be judged according to its perceived authenticity. (And that includes potential employers: 'No one will offer me a job,' a graduate told me once, 'until I have discovered my true self.') And so before posting any image, uploading any video, reviewing any movie, sharing any photograph or message, they must be mindful of who their choice will please or alienate. They must somehow work out which of their potential 'true selves' will be found most attractive, continually testing their own opinions against their notion of what the average opinion among online opinion makers might be.³ Every experience can be captured and shared, and so they are continually consumed by the question of whether to do so. And even if no opportunity actually exists for sharing the experience, that opportunity can readily be imagined, and will be. Every

choice, witnessed or otherwise, becomes an act in the cur-
 ation of an identity.

One need not be a radical critic of our society to see that the
 right to a bit of time each day when one is not for sale has all
 but vanished. The irony is that the liberal individual was snuffed
 out neither by fascist Brownshirts nor by Stalinist guards. It
 was killed off when a new form of capital began to instruct
 youngsters to do that most liberal of things: be yourself! (And
 cloud capital has engineered and monetised, this one is surely
 its overarching and crowning achievement.)

Possessive individualism has always been detrimental to
 mental health. Technofeudalism made things infinitely worse
 when it demolished the fence that used to provide the liberal
 individual with a refuge from the market. Cloud capital has
 shattered the individual into fragments of data, an identity
 comprised of choices as expressed by clicks, which its algo-
 rithms are able to manipulate. It has produced individuals
 who are not so much possessive as *possessed*, or rather persons
 incapable of being self-possessed. It has diminished our cap-
 acity to focus by co-opting our attention. We have not become
 weak-willed. No, our focus has been stolen.⁴ And because
 technofeudalism's algorithms are known to reinforce patri-
 archy, stereotypes and pre-existing oppressions, those who
 are most vulnerable – girls, the mentally ill, the marginalised
 and, yes, the poor – suffer the outcome most.

If fascism taught us anything, it is our susceptibility to
 demonising stereotypes and the ugly attraction of emotions
 like righteousness, fear, envy and loathing that they arouse in
 us. In our technofeudal world, the internet brings the feared
 and loathed 'other' closer, right in your face. And because
 online violence seems bloodless and anodyne, we are more

stolen focus

likely to respond to this 'other' online with taunting, inhuman
 language and bile. Bigotry is technofeudalism's emotional
 compensation for the frustrations and anxieties we experience
 in relation to identity and focus. Comment moderators and
 hate-speech regulation can't stop this because it is intrinsic to
 cloud capital, whose algorithms optimise for cloud rents,
 which flow more copiously from hatred and discontent.

You once told me that finding something timelessly beau-
 tiful to focus on, as you did by choosing to lose yourself
 among the relics of ancient Greece, is our only defence from
 the demons circling our soul. I have tried to practise this over
 the years in my own way. But in the face of technofeudalism,
 acting alone, isolated, as liberal individuals will not get us
 very far. Cutting ourselves off from the internet, switching
 off our phones, using cash instead of plastic may help for a
 while but they are no solution. Unless we band together, we
 shall never civilise or socialise cloud capital, and so we shall
 never reclaim our own minds from its grip.

And herein lies the greatest contradiction: to rescue that
 foundational liberal idea – of liberty as self-ownership – will
 therefore require a comprehensive reconfiguration of prop-
 erty rights over the increasingly cloud-based instruments of
 production, distribution, collaboration and communication.
 To resuscitate the liberal individual, we need to do some-
 thing that liberals detest: plan a new revolution.

identifying with
 The impossibility of social democracy
 rights to some like
 individual

Why can't technofeudalism be tamed by politics in the same
 way capitalism was restrained, at least for a while, by social
 democratic governments?