

# **The Politics of Digital Capitalism**

[Seminar held in summer term 2021 at the Free University Berlin]

Recent years have seen a growing interest in the 'digitalisation' of the global economy. On one level, digitalisation refers to the growing power and influence of big tech companies, such as Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon. How do these companies make profits? How do they influence governments? How do they threaten to disrupt other industries? On another level, it refers to the growing dependence of our daily lives on digital technologies. We use Google Maps to navigate cities, we use WhatsApp to stay in touch with friends, we buy gifts on Amazon, and we use Tinder to find a date. What are the political implications of these daily dependencies? Who benefits from them? Should they be resisted, or changed? The disciplinary research tradition of International Political Economy (IPE) offers a comprehensive set of social scientific approaches to study these questions, ranging from systemic approaches, such as liberalism, realism, or Marxism, to more situated approaches, such as feminist, post-colonial, and cultural IPE. This course encourages students to engage these approaches to develop a theoretically nuanced and empirically sound understanding of the digital economy.

## ***Course plan***

1. Introduction
2. Are big tech companies more powerful than states?
3. Where do the profits of digital capitalism come from?
4. Is digitalisation by men for men?
5. Does digital capitalism perpetuate colonial legacies?
6. [Reading Week]
7. How to critique digital capitalism?
8. Why is there an app for everything?
9. Can digital tech companies solve the climate crisis?
10. Should we regulate, resist, or repurpose digital capitalism?
11. Summary and Conclusion

## ***Assessment and Course Requirements***

The requirements for a *Teilnahmeschein* are:

- Formal login on Blackboard & Campus Management
- Reading of two key texts per session
- Regular attendance of online sessions

The requirements for a *Leistungsschein* are:

- Formal login on Blackboard & Campus Management
- Reading of two key texts per session
- Regular attendance of online sessions
- Submission of a final paper (ca. 4000 words) by the end of the semester

## **Week One – Introduction**

### ***Housekeeping:***

- Blackboard (Materials, etc.)
- Campus Management (Changing courses, etc.)
- Personal contact: r.kremers@fu-berlin.de
  
- Netiquette (Camera, breakout groups etc.)
- Seminar is based on readings. So, do them!

### ***Objectives for today's class:***

- To get to know each other
- To introduce the themes of the course
- To start talking about digital capitalism

### ***Task 1: Welcome groups***

Form small groups of four. Introduce yourselves to each other. What's your background? What are your study interests? What made you choose the course? Is there a session you are particularly looking forward to? And if so, why? Further (optional) topics: Have you studied related themes before? What other seminars are you doing? Have you chosen a university course in English before? What are the do's and don'ts of online seminars?

### ***Task 2: Quick introduction to the course***

This course introduces a number of different starting points to the study of digital capitalism. Each session provides you with a broad political economic dilemma and a set of texts that indicate how scholars of International Political Economy (IPE) have dealt with it. The aim of the course is not to teach you one particular perspective or theory of digital capitalism but to provide you with an overview of ongoing social scientific debates. In this sense, the course does not provide you with answers but invites you to engage in political economic debates, to test the strength and plausibility of specific arguments, and to consider their limitations.

The first four sessions of the course will do some theoretical heavy lifting. They will approach digital capitalism from the vantage point of several well-established theoretical traditions in IPE – namely, Realism, Liberalism, Marxism, Feminist- and Post-colonial IPE, each linked to specific concerns about the role of states, the role of capital, the role of gender, and the role of colonialism/race in the digital economy. Each of these concerns can provide powerful counterpoints to the seemingly unbound optimism of tech enthusiasts and unpick the political and economic ramifications of digitalisation in critical-analytical terms. The following sessions will focus on specific empirical issues, i.e. surveillance, climate change, apps, platforms, solidarity, and resistance.

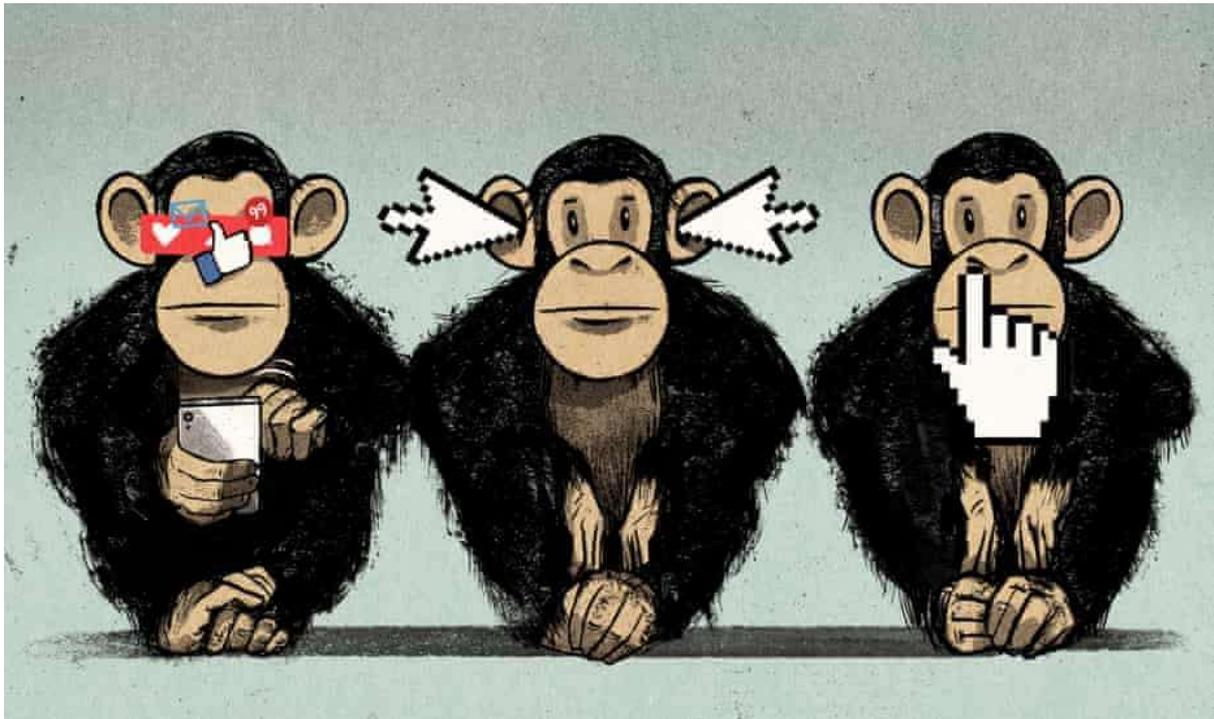
My role in the course is to point you to current debates, to contextualise them, and to support you in reading, understanding, and analysing the core texts. But the seminar is primarily a space for discussion, where we jointly explore the texts, arguments, and disagreements that persist over the politics of digital capitalism.

### **Task 3: The dangers of digital solutionism**

In a 2020 opinion piece Evgeny Morozov argued that the global health crisis triggered by the outbreak of COVID-19 had revealed the deep-seated technological solutionism of contemporary societies.<sup>1</sup> No matter the challenge, he argued, decision makers looked towards 'technology' to solve the problem.

*3.1. Morozov identifies two different kinds of solutionism – 'progressive' and 'punitive'. How are they different? Why does Morozov find them problematic? Do you agree with him?*

*3.2. Morozov argues that the common focus on privacy distracts the public debate from 'non-market', 'solidarity-based' uses of digital technology, which makes it hard to imagine a world without privately owned digital tech companies. Are you aware of any non-market, or solidarity-based technologies? Are you concerned about your privacy? Do you find it hard to imagine a world without digital tech giants?*



'We are all solutionists now.' Illustration: Ben Jennings/The Guardian Wed 15 Apr 2020

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<sup>1</sup>Morozov, E. (2020) The tech 'solutions' for coronavirus take the surveillance state to the next level. The Guardian, 15 Apr: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/15/tech-coronavirus-surveillance-state-digital-disrupt> (Accessed 8 April).

## Week Two – Are big tech companies more powerful than states?

International Political Economy (IPE) as a disciplinary research tradition has long been marked out by an interest in how technological changes affect the power of states. For founding figures of the discipline, such as Robert Keohane, Joseph Nye, or Susan Strange, the rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) underlined their previous claims that global business had become a decisive factor in international diplomacy – an observation they found too-often neglected by International Relations (IR) scholars who remained overly concerned with military power and nuclear deterrence at the time.<sup>2</sup> While IPE has come a long way in establishing as a research concern the 'complex interdependencies' between states and markets, politics and economics, public and private authority, the recent rise of the digital tech sector has brought the role of the tech sector in promoting and challenging state power back into focus. Do big tech companies pose a challenge to state power, or do they expand it? Who benefits, why, and how might it be changed?



### Readings

Atal, M. R. (2021). The Janus faces of Silicon Valley. *Review of International Political Economy*, 28(2), 336-350.

Zhang, L. (2020). When Platform Capitalism Meets Petty Capitalism in China: Alibaba and an Integrated Approach to Platformization. *International Journal Of Communication*, 14(2020), 114-134.

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<sup>2</sup> see: Keohane, R., & Nye, J. (1998). Power and Interdependence in the Information Age. *Foreign Affairs*, 77(5), 81-94; Strange, S. (1988). *States and markets*. London: Continuum.

See also (optional) the entertaining debate between Stephen Krasner and Susan Strange:

Krasner, S. (1994). International Political Economy: Abiding Discord. *Review of International Political Economy*, 1(1), 13-19.

Strange, S. (1994). Wake up, Krasner! The World Has Changed. *Review of International Political Economy*, 1(2), 209-219.

### **Task 1: Talk about the readings**

- Did you find the readings easy or hard to understand? Did you prefer one of the articles, and if so, why?
- What is the empirical basis of the articles? Did they use the material convincingly?
- How do the two articles proceed in terms of the structure of the argument (what do they say broadly in section one, section two, section three...)?

### **Task 2: The power of digital tech companies**

- Both of today's readings provide a historical account of the rise of digital platforms in the US and in China. Both cite the financial crisis of 2007-9 as a watershed moment for digital tech companies. How did the financial crisis contribute to the rise of Google/Facebook and Alibaba respectively?
- According to Atal, do digital tech companies undermine or expand the power of the US government?
- According to Zhang, does Alibaba challenge or expand the power of the Chinese government?
- Do you agree with the authors?

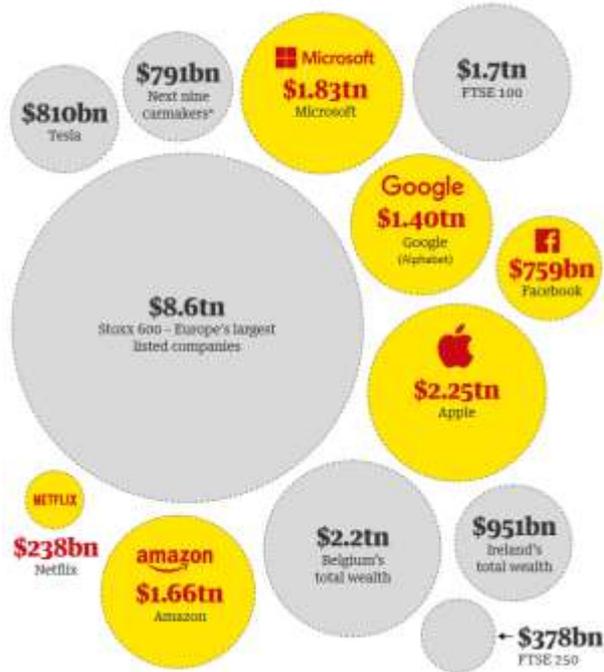
### **Task 3: Who benefits, why, and how might it be changed?**

- According to journalist Jasper Jolly, Alphabet's \$162bn of revenues outweighed the size of Hungary's economy in 2019, Apple's \$67bn earnings before tax could cover the UK government's combined spending on defence and transport, and Amazon's workforce worldwide numbers 1.2 million, which makes it the third biggest employer in the world (after Walmart and the China Petroleum & Chemical Corporation).<sup>3</sup> Do you think the enormous size of these companies is problematic? If so, why?
- Do you think big tech companies (can) have public benefits?
- Do you think the EU should compete with the US and China in developing the digital tech sector?

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<sup>3</sup> Jolly, J. (2021) Is big tech now just too big to stomach? *The Guardian*, 6 Feb:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/feb/06/is-big-tech-now-just-too-big-to-stomach> (Accessed 8 April).

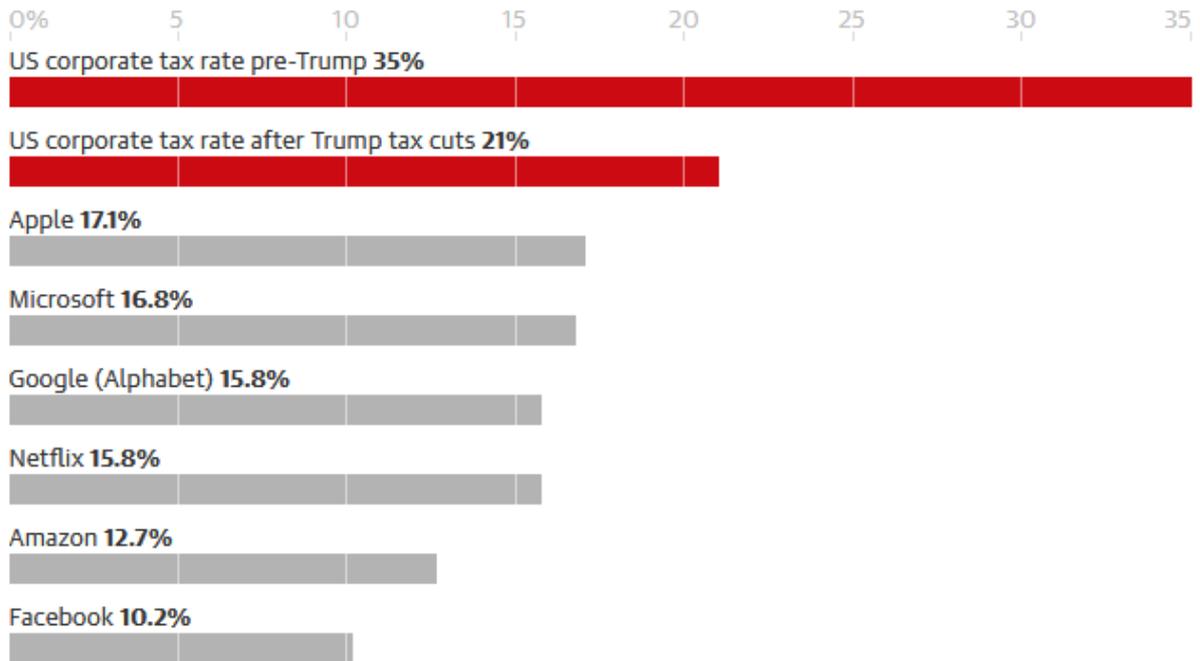
**Big tech stocks rival the wealth of nations**



**The founders of big tech have created the biggest personal fortunes ever seen**



**Even after the US corporate tax rate was cut to 21%, big tech paid substantially less**



Source: Jolly, J. (2021) Is big tech now just too big to stomach? *The Guardian*, 6 Feb: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/feb/06/is-big-tech-now-just-too-big-to-stomach> (Accessed 8 April).

### Week Three – Where do the profits of digital capitalism come from?

Last week's session looked at the implications of digital capitalism for state power, which has long been one of the primary concerns of IPE scholarship. How do new technologies alter the conditions under which states, governments, international institutions etc. operate? Such a concern not only spotlights the significant role of global business in international politics, it also raises specific questions with regards to the regulation and global governance of the digital tech industry. This week, we will shift the focus from state power and geopolitical rivalry to corporate power and the exploitation of labour. How does digitalisation change the way companies operate? Who benefits from these changes, and should (can) they be resisted?



#### Readings

Watch Nick Srnicek's lecture on 'Platform Capitalism', delivered at Goldsmiths, University of London on 6 February 2017 (link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bYCiUEB7kyg>). The talk summarises the main arguments presented in chapter two of his book 'Platform Capitalism'<sup>14</sup>

Moore, P. (no date) 'Tracking' on I-PEEL website, available at: <http://i-peel.org/homepage/tracking/> (accessed 08 April).

#### Task 1: The rise of platform business models

Srnicek argues that digital capitalism is characterised by the rise of 'platform' companies, which act as infrastructural intermediaries of the digital economy, i.e. they sell the digital means for third parties to interact or do business. This, in turn, places them into a primary spot to collect, analyse, and monetise data. Choose one platform company of your choice (e.g. Google, Facebook, Amazon, Apple, YouTube, Spotify, Netflix, Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, Uber, Airbnb, Tinder, Deliveroo): *Who interacts or does business on these platforms? What kind of data does the platform collect from these interactions? How does it monetise that data?*

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<sup>14</sup> Srnicek, N. (2016). *Platform capitalism*. Oxford: Polity Press.

Srnicek further identifies three key characteristics of platform companies (1) they capitalise on network effects (2) they cross-subsidise operations (3) they design 'user-experiences'.

- **Network effects.** Network externalities or network effects describe the impact the number of network adopters has on the utility of each user on a platform. So, the marginal benefit (or cost) that platform users gain increases as the number of the users on the platform increases. This, in turn, provides established platforms with a competitive advantage: once they reach scale their users are 'locked-in' and it becomes very difficult for competitors to make them change the platform of their choice. *How does the company you selected capitalise on network effects?*
- **Cross subsidisation.** A striking feature of many digital platforms is that they offer online services below market price or for free. They can do so because they cross-subsidise these services with profits generated somewhere else. But where do these profits come from? Broadly, it is helpful to distinguish between two sources: data monetisation and financial speculation. For instance, while Google web searches are free, it collects data on web searches and uses them to boost its advertising business. This raises questions about privacy. A number of high-profile 'platform' companies (Uber, Deliveroo, Snapchat, Spotify), however, do not (yet) make profits with data. They rely on the money they borrow from speculative investors who believe in their future profitability. *Do you think cross-subsidies can be problematic?*
- **User experience design.** Many digital platforms interact with their clients via digital interfaces, such as apps, websites, touchscreens. This has drawn scholarly attention to the manner in which the look of these interfaces are 'optimised' to steer users into certain behaviours. This is done, for example, via design techniques such as a/b testing, whereby a certain percentage of users receive one version of an app or a website and the other percentage receive another version. The company can then use the site analytics to determine the effectiveness of a single element such as the colour of a button, by seeing if the difference in design introduced systematic differences in behaviour. *Do you think user experience design can be problematic?*

## **Task 2: The exploitation of labour**

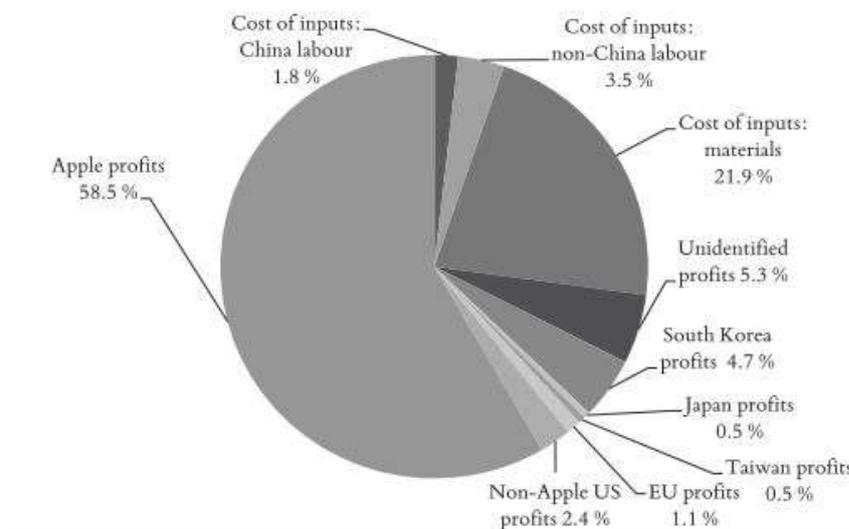
There is a curious disconnect between Srnicek's use of Marxist ideas and rhetoric and his apparent neglect of the role of labour in contributing to the value of platform companies. Yet, as Phoebe Moore reminds us, asking about the role of labour can powerfully challenge the common claim that platform companies somehow extract value from data. Continuous struggles over employment rights, fair wages, and acceptable working conditions, testify to the fact that platform companies, like all capitalist companies, (are forced to?) treat work as a cost factor and employees' livelihoods as a secondary concern.

- Choose one platform company of your choice (e.g. Google, Facebook, Amazon, YouTube, Spotify, Netflix, Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, Uber, Airbnb, Tinder, Deliveroo):

- What kind of jobs does the company create? Do you expect that workers are rewarded fairly by the company?
  - What kinds of jobs are rendered invisible by the claim that the company extracts profits from data?
  - Do you think digital capitalism could contribute to promote fair working conditions?
- Consider the following description of the global value chain of Apple's iPhone:

*"What jumps out immediately is that more than half of the total value, across the whole of the production process, is captured by the lead firm – Apple – as profit. The figures for labour costs, by contrast, offer an insight into the relationship between capital and labour in the global economy, and the relative proportions of value that are captured by each. The costs of materials involved in production are vastly greater than the human input costs associated with labour. The proportion of profits flowing to the principal countries in which the iPhone is produced are insignificant compared with the profits that flow to a single private company"<sup>5</sup>*

**Figure 2: Distribution of value for the iPhone, 2010**



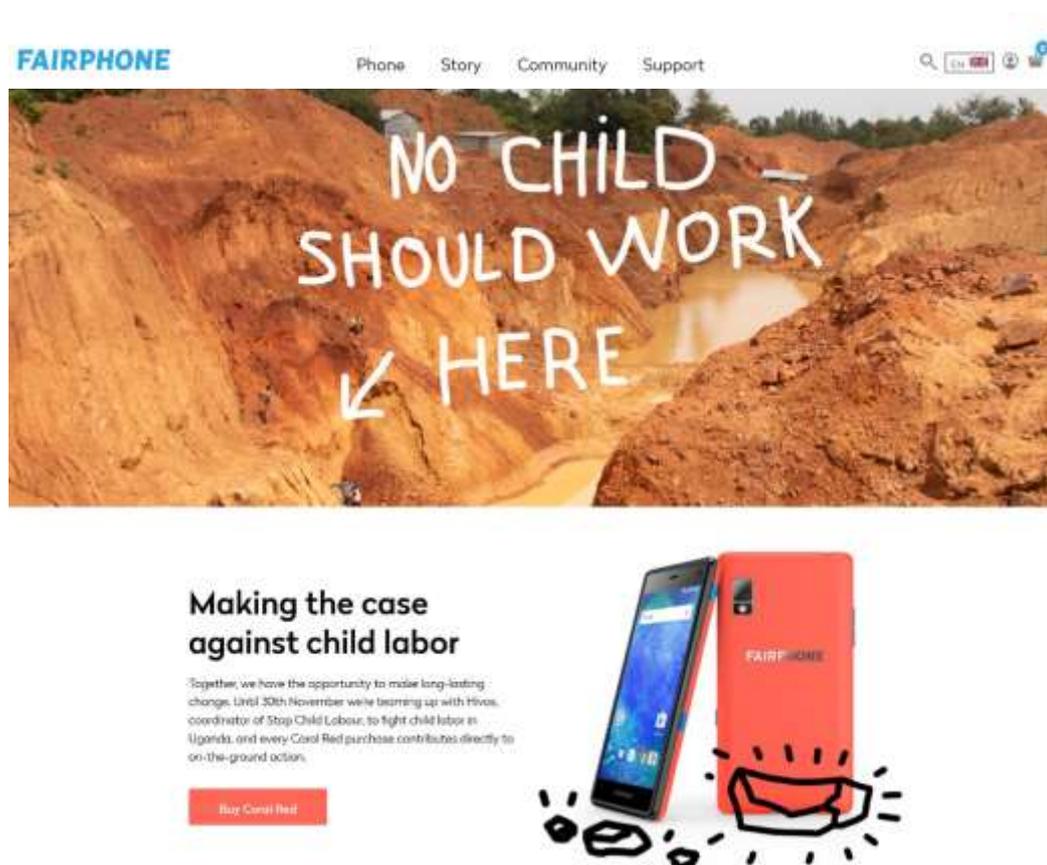
<sup>5</sup> Phillips, N. (2017). Power and inequality in the global political economy. *International Affairs*, 93(2): p.43.

Phillips suggests that Apple's global value chain unfairly benefits capital income over salaries. *Do you agree? Are there further relations of power at play? Reflect on the following social structures of inequality – race, gender, nationality. In how far are they constitutive of the Apple value chain? Find one example for each of them.*

### **Task 3: The role of consumers**

'Fairphone' is an enterprise that aims to build a movement for fairer electronics by presenting every step of the production line (including mining of minerals, selection of manufacturing partners and distribution of profits) on its webpage. Apart from promoting a controlled 'ethical' value chain, Fairphone presents smartphones as storytelling devices with the potential to uncover how products are made. It allows consumers to monitor the enforcement of social standards. Such 'ethical' consumption presents scholars of digital capitalism with a dilemma. On the one hand, it offers a powerful critique of 'commodity fetishism' and serves as an important tool to politicise unacceptable working conditions. On the other hand, 'ethical' products are big business. A sense emerges whereby ethical concerns are commoditised and marketed to particular consumer segments, only to leave the larger contours of global capitalism intact.

- What can be done? Could 'ethical' production become universal? Who should be made responsible for this task? Governments? Producers? Consumers? Who can afford ethical, organic, or Fair Trade produce? Why does virtually nobody buy fairphones?



The image is a screenshot of the Fairphone website. At the top left is the 'FAIRPHONE' logo. To its right are navigation links: 'Phone', 'Story', 'Community', and 'Support'. Further right are search and utility icons. The main visual is a photograph of a large, deep, orange-brown mining pit. Overlaid on the image in white, hand-painted style text is 'NO CHILD SHOULD WORK HERE' with an arrow pointing to the bottom left. Below the image, on the left, is the heading 'Making the case against child labor' followed by a short paragraph: 'Together, we have the opportunity to make long-lasting change. Until 30th November we're teaming up with Hivos, coordinator of Stop Child Labour, to fight child labor in Uganda, and every Coral Red purchase contributes directly to on-the-ground action.' Below this text is a red button that says 'Buy Coral Red'. To the right of the text is an illustration of two smartphones: one is a blue smartphone, and the other is a red smartphone with 'FAIRPHONE' written on its back. The red phone is surrounded by a hand-drawn sketch of a smiling mouth with radiating lines, suggesting a positive or happy outcome.

## Week Four – Is digital capitalism by men for men?

In the previous session we discussed some of the implications of digital capitalism for corporate power. We focussed on the manner in which digital tech companies seek to position themselves as the infrastructural intermediaries of digital capitalism and explored how a focus on labour can complicate conventional claims that digital tech companies generate profits from 'data'. This week we will shift our attention from labour to gender as constitutive of the digital economy. Just like labour, a focus on gender can serve to complicate conventional assumptions about digital capitalism. Feminist IPE scholars usually mobilise gender in one of two ways. They either mobilise it as an empirical category to expose the structural inequalities between men and women, or they mobilise it as an analytical vantage point to re-think or subvert the manner in which binary stereotypes dominate our thinking and acting. The two perspectives are not always easy to reconcile, but they both yield important insight into the constitutive role of gender in the making and remaking of digital market life.



Human computers – Jet Propulsion Laboratory employees. Photo by NASA from [Wikimedia Commons](#) NASA / Public domain. "The first computers", writes [Miriam Rasch \(2020\)](#), "were women, with well-sharpened pencils and paper, calculating the trajectory of spaceships, rockets, and atoms." The first computer programmers were also women. In the article "Beards, Sandals, and Other Signs of Rugged Individualism" Nathan Ensmenger (2015) traces how computer programming was initially viewed as 'women's work' but later rebranded as the work of 'non-conformist, masculine genius' through corporate hiring practices that effectively excluded anyone from professional programming, who was not white and male.

### Readings

- Dunbar-Hester (2020). *Hacking Diversity: The Politics of Inclusion in Open Technology Cultures*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. [Introduction: pp. 1 – 31].
- Weber, C. (2017). The Face of Sexuality: Why Do AI-Generated Sexual Orientations Matter? The disorder of things, 20 Sep: <https://thedisorderofthings.com/2017/09/25/the-face-of-sexuality-why-do-ai-generated-sexual-orientations-matter/> (accessed 08 April 2021).

**Task 1: If the answer is diversity, then what is the question?**

Dunbar-Hester provides a comprehensive introduction to the multiple stakes involved in the politics of diversity, or what used to be called 'gender mainstreaming'.

- (a) **Representation.** Dunbar-Hester recounts the shock in the open-source community, when a report showed that fewer than 2% of open-source developers were women (p.2). *Why do you think the underrepresentation of women was perceived as a problem? Do you think we need more women in the digital tech sector? If so, why?*
- (b) **Barriers of entry.** Consider the following quote: "If I wanted to even start being part of the technical community, I had to start by fixing the technical community — patching the roof and fixing the plumbing, so to speak — before I could even walk inside and start to live there..." (p.15). *What kinds of challenges do you think the blogger was facing? Is the digital tech sector hostile to women in ways it is not hostile to men? Is it more hostile to women than, say, academia, or finance?*
- (c) **(In)Visibility of women's work.** Consider the following claim: "If we zoom out from the Global North and take an expansive notion of tech work it can hardly be said to have a diversity problem per se, because women workers of colour actually abound" (p.20). *What kind of women's work is rendered invisible in the digital tech sector?*
- (d) **The limits of diversity.** Despite her sympathy of diversity advocates, Dunbar-Hester is clear that the idea to simply "add women and stir" is problematic (pp. 17-21). *What are the limits of such an approach to diversity? Should we celebrate the fact that (gender) diversity has become a mainstream concern? Or should we be sceptical of the ease with which diversity fits into corporate agendas?*



Picture by Orlagh Murphy, see: <https://hbr.org/2018/07/want-less-biased-decisions-use-algorithms> (accessed 08 April 2021).

**Task 2: How do gendered logics shape our understandings of and interactions with digital capitalism?**

Where the diversity advocates researched by Dunbar-Hester mobilise gender as an empirical category to expose the systematic violence, and injustice experienced by women in the digital economy, Cynthia Weber uses gender as an analytical lens to expose the violence inflicted on women *and men* by gendered stereotypes and assumptions. On this view, gender can never serve as an unproblematic background assumption but must be placed into question itself: how does it assume significance in digital capitalism? This prisms open a space to think about gender not as a 'natural' category but as a social construction that is continuously brought into being and increasingly encoded into digital technologies. It allows a shift away from a thinking in terms of men and women towards a thinking in terms of masculinised and feminised bodies, activities, and technologies.

- (a) **Biased technology.** Weber demonstrates how AI-powered facial recognition technology contributes to normalising specific (hetero-)sexual orientations at the expense of others. *Do you know of digital technologies that normalise masculinity or femininity in similar ways? Could facial recognition be used to feminist ends? What would a more feminist Google, Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter look like?*
  
- (b) **Gendered identity.** The rise of digital capitalism has been accompanied by the valorisation of 'geekiness' as a masculine trait. Traditionally, geeks were considered to be outsiders: physically weak, unattractive, creepy, socially awkward, etc. Recently, however, geeks have been linked to more positive – even sexy – connotations: quirky, intelligent, skilled, creative, rebellious, entrepreneurial, successful, etc. Politically, geeky masculinity is therefore ambiguous. On the one hand, it may be viewed as a challenge to traditional ideals of masculinity that invites men to embrace failure, empathy, and humour as masculine traits. On the other hand, it may be viewed as a new form of toxic (heterosexual) masculinity, that perpetuates dangerous assumptions about male superiority, based not on physical strength but intellectual abilities. *Does the valorisation of geek culture grant economic privileges to men? Does it also exclude men? Why are there no female geeks? How does geekiness intersect with digital identities such as 'hacker' or 'entrepreneur'? Do you think that popular figures, such as Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg, invoke geekiness opportunistically? Is geekiness part of their business model?*

## Week Five – Does digital capitalism perpetuate colonial legacies?

Last week, we discussed how digital capitalism is pervaded by gendered ideas, assumptions, practices, inequalities, and indeed, violence. This week we will continue our discussions by considering colonial legacies and the continuation of racial prejudice, inequality, and violence in digital market life. Similarly to feminist IPE, postcolonial and decolonial scholarship emphasises the structural inequalities that persist along colonial and racial lines as well as the role of race – in social theory, natural sciences, politics, and daily life – in perpetuating these inequalities.



Picture taken from Luckie, M. (2015) What it's really like to be a black employee at a tech company. Medium, Sep 15: <https://marksluckie.medium.com/what-it-s-actually-like-to-be-a-black-employee-at-a-tech-company-e32bb222818b> (accessed 08 April 2021).

### Readings

- Madianou, M. (2019). Technocolonialism: Digital Innovation and Data Practices in the Humanitarian Response to Refugee Crises. *Social Media + Society* [online only].
- Benjamin, R. (2019). *Race after Technology*. Cambridge, UK: Polity. [Introduction: pp. 1 – 27].

## **Task 1: Techno-colonialism**

One of the most important yet least discussed aspects of digital capitalism has been the growing importance of big tech companies in the development sector and in the field of humanitarian crisis response. On the one hand, development and humanitarian agencies praise the new possibilities opened up by digital technologies to develop 'better' policies and interventions, i.e. more targeted, evidence-based, cost-effective, etc. On the other hand, they radicalise previous trends towards the marketisation of development and humanitarian crisis response, whereby the interests of international investors, donors, and governments are systematically prioritised and protected against those of the purported beneficiaries.

### **1.1. The promises and problems of digital humanitarianism**

What are the promises of the app-based distribution of aid and the biometric registration of refugees? What are the purported benefits for (a) Refugees? (b) Humanitarian agencies? (c) International investors? (d) Big tech companies? (e) National Governments?



The growing emphasis on digital identity and inclusion in humanitarian intervention has coincided with the rapid decline of aid support from international actors, including the UN refugee agency (the UNHCR) and other donor countries in the Global North. Picture from: [https://www.unhcr.org/blogs/wp-content/uploads/sites/48/2018/03/2018-02-Digital-Identity\\_02.pdf](https://www.unhcr.org/blogs/wp-content/uploads/sites/48/2018/03/2018-02-Digital-Identity_02.pdf) (accessed 08 April 2021).

### **1.2. Digital humanitarianism and the legacies of colonialism**

In how far does digital humanitarianism invoke *colonial* legacies?

What is at stake – politically and analytically – in analysing digital humanitarianism as a form of technocolonialism, i.e. as a continuation of colonial power and/or inequality?

## Task 2: Race after Technology

In a recent introduction to a special issue on 'raced markets' Tilley and Shilliam emphasise how 'race' "may have begun as fiction, an invention of Europeans in the service of colonisation, however, the fiction of race became material over time, reproduced in relation to the manifold raced markets of the global political economy."<sup>6</sup> Ruha Benjamin's book *Race after Technology* (2020) provides a succinct articulation of the various ways in which race becomes material in the raced markets of digital capitalism. Her introduction invites us to think of race as a technology that interlinks with and is being absorbed into digital technologies.

2.1. **Tailoring: Targeting.** Benjamin argues that targeted advertising is problematic in several ways. First, it can render invisible the persistence of racial and gendered economic inequalities. Second, it can reify, i.e. render 'normal' or 'natural' racial and gendered identities that perpetuate the valorisation of whiteness/masculinity at the expense of non-whiteness/femininity. How should we think about these problems? Should we reject diversity in advertising or cautiously welcome it? Can digital platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube contribute to overturn hierarchical notions of gender and race that attribute more value to masculinity and whiteness than to femininity and non-whiteness? Can they empower women and people of colour in economic terms? Or are they necessarily complicit in perpetuating existing hierarchies?



Source: <https://www.ruhabenjamin.com/credits> (accessed 08 April 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Tilley, L. Shilliam, R. (2018). Raced Markets: An Introduction. *New Political Economy*, 28(5), 534-543.

- 2.2. **Surveillance and/as a racist practice.** Benjamin cites Simone Browne's observation that "surveillance is nothing new to black folks". On this view, the rise of 'surveillance capitalism' is not really a new phenomenon, but rather a mainstreaming of practices that have been pioneered previously in other domains. Recent anxieties around 'privacy', thus, provide an example of white privilege in action: privacy seems to matter only, if white populations are involved. Surveillance of non-white populations is broadly accepted by the political mainstream. What can be done? Should we reject privacy campaigns that selectively exclude the 'privacy' of non-white populations?
- 2.3. **The social situatedness of Race after Technology.** Benjamin's analysis of race is grounded in the socio-economic dynamics of the US and thus in a specific history and politics of racialized identities that cannot be presumed universal. The name "Jim Crow" for example invokes the history of legalized racial segregation in the US between the 1890s and the 1950s (Jim Crow laws). Is race mobilised differently in the European tech sector or by digital tech companies operating in Europe? What can we learn from Benjamin to articulate a critique grounded in European histories of raced markets?



Source: <https://datacapitalism.d4bl.org> (accessed 08 April 2021).

Please visit the site: <https://datacapitalism.d4bl.org/>. The website is based on the report *Data Capitalism and Algorithmic Racism* by [Data for Black Lives](#) and [Demos](#). Data for Black Lives is a movement of activists, organizers, and mathematicians committed to the mission of using data science to create concrete and measurable change in the lives of Black people.

Please also look at: <https://www.fastcompany.com/90644593/1-year-3-8-billion-later-how-2020s-race-reckoning-shook-up-big-tech>.

## Week Seven – How to critique digital capitalism

So far in this seminar we have tackled a set of questions that can be straightforwardly linked to specific research traditions, whether it be Realist-, Liberal-, Marxist-, Feminist-, or Post-/Decolonial IPE. From this week onwards we will begin to unpick a number of (policy-)issues that are less easily linked to any specific line of research but rather may be tackled from a number of different theoretical perspectives. Today we will talk about specific limitations attached to the academic critique of digital capitalism. Vinsel (2021) warns of the dangers of 'criti-hype', i.e. a critique that become strangely complicit in exaggerating the power of digital tech companies because it all too easily accepts the promotional claims of tech enthusiasts as real. Farrell (2020) points to the phenomenon of the 'prodigal techbros', i.e. recovering and remorseful entrepreneurs who claim authority in the critique of digital capitalism because they used to be part of it. Both readings raise broader questions about the role of the social sciences in digital capitalism: what work can/should academics do in this context?



Source: Trailer of the Netflix documentary 'The Social Dilemma', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaaC57tcci0>. Popular and academic critiques often paint a dramatic image of big tech companies as dark corporate forces with an almost unlimited ability to manipulate individuals via digital technologies. Are such depictions accurate? Are they exaggerated? Are they politically useful?

### Readings

Farrell, Maria (2020) The Prodigal Techbro, *The Conversationalist*, March 5:

<https://conversationalist.org/2020/03/05/the-prodigal-techbro/> (accessed 5 April 2021).

Vinsel, Lee (2021) You're doing it wrong: notes on criticism and technology hype, *Medium*, Feb 1:

<https://sts-news.medium.com/youre-doing-it-wrong-notes-on-criticism-and-technology-hype-18b08b4307e5> (accessed 5 April 2021).

### **Task 1: 'Criti-hype'**

- According to Lee Vinsel, what is 'criti-hype', and why is it problematic?
- Vinsel quotes the Netflix documentary 'The Social Dilemma' and Shoshanna Zuboff's bestselling book 'Surveillance Capitalism' as prominent examples. Do you know of other examples that you would describe as criti-hype? Do you think e.g. any of the previous readings were hype-y?
- Vinsel argues that the public obsession with digital technologies distracts academics from 'real' problems with more mundane technology, such as "septic tanks, mobile homes, and trailer parks". Do you agree with Vinsel? Name a technology that you think is dangerously neglected by social scientists, today!
- Who should decide what technologies social scientists focus on, and how?

### **Task 2: The Prodigal Techbro**

- According to Maria Farrell, what is the problem with prodigal techbros?
- Farrell suggests that recovering entrepreneurs divert attention and funding away from scholars and activists who have been studying digital capitalism with more critical distance. Is there a need for converted 'insiders' in the social scientific study of digital capitalism? In how far does the privileged access of converted insiders to media attention and/or funding intersect with other well-established structures of inequality, i.e. their gender, class, and race?

### **Task 3: The role of the social sciences**

Both readings raise broader questions about the role of the social sciences in digital capitalism:

- What work can/should academics do?
- How is the social scientific study of digital capitalism different to, say, investigative journalism? How is it different to digital activism/advocacy/art?
- Should social scientific research contribute to shape, improve, or resist digital capitalism?

## Week Eight – Why is there an app for everything?

Last week we engaged in a kind of meta-discussion about the limits and possibilities of critique: in how far can critical accounts of digital capitalism become complicit in reproducing it? In how far can recovering or remorseful insiders contribute to a critical discussion of digital technologies? This week, we will go the opposite extreme and take a deep dive into the nitty-gritty of how apps work. Both of today's readings point to a peculiar paradox of apps. That is, whilst they appear to be simple, even trivial, because of their limited and often unremarkable functionality, it is precisely their ordinary appearance that has allowed them to thrive. Thus, they suggest, apps' simplicity can be read more politically as an achievement of sorts; an outcome of multiple interlocking systems; and a result of various strategic efforts to mobilise apps' simplicity for financial gain. So it is worth asking: who benefits from the mass-adoption of apps, and how?



Source: <https://www.theverge.com/2020/1/30/21080313/apple-app-store-subscription-developer-options-rent-seeking>.

### **Readings**

Goggin, G. (2011). Ubiquitous apps: politics of openness in global mobile cultures. *Digital Creativity*, 22(3), 148-159.

Morris, J. W. and Elkins, E. (2015). There's a History for That: Apps and Mundane Software Commodity. *The Fibreculture Journal*, 25, 62-87.

Watch the first 14:23 minutes of Steve Jobs' launch of the iPhone 1 (which preceded the existence of mobile apps), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQKMOT-6XSg>.

### **Task 1: Apps as 'mundane' software**

Morris and Elkins (2015) argue that apps are 'mundane' software: they reframe all manner of unremarkable activities as problems solvable by software. A key characteristic of apps is that they unbundle activities into 'micro-functionalities' – i.e. discrete sets of computable tasks – so that a visit to the cinema, for instance, can be parcelled up into a sequence of small steps, each targeted by a respective app. One app to buy tickets, another app to send a reminder, a third app to travel to the movie theatre, and so forth. (There is even an app for timing toilet breaks during a movie called 'runpee'<sup>7</sup>). Another key characteristic is that they enable 'micro-transactions' which make it possible to add a price tag to ever more aspects of daily life. But why does this matter politically? What do you say to tech enthusiasts who argue that 'appfication' is great, because it makes everyday life easier and more convenient? Think about...

- (a) ...the authors' critique. What would the authors say to tech enthusiasts?
- (b) ...the surveillance critique. Do apps generate data that should not exist? Do they violate our privacy?
- (c) ...the behavioural critique. Do apps encourage problematic behaviours (e.g. impulsive purchases, over-indebtedness, trolling, etc.)?
- (d) ...the commodification critique. Do apps inflect daily life with opportunistic motives? Are there mundane activities that should never be 'appified'?
- (e) ...the monopoly critique. Do apps make it impossible to refuse the services of particular companies?
- (f) ...the Foucauldian critique. Do apps change the way we think about ourselves as subjects?
- (g) ...the ecological critique. Can apps conceal the ecological costs of erecting data infrastructures – from telephone masts to optic cables, to satellites, and server farms?
- (h) ...the anarchist critique. Do apps make it easier for governments to police and administer 'deviant' populations (corona-app, etc.)?

### **Task 2: App stores as obligatory passage points.**

Goggin (2011) emphasises the pivotal role played by 'app-stores' in the commercial success of the iPhone and of smartphones more generally. App stores provide third-party developers with the means to build and promote their own apps. But they also impose certain rules as conditions of access to the app economy. As such, they can be described as 'platforms' in the sense discussed in week 2. In how far are app stores a political concern?

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<sup>7</sup> <https://runpee.com/>

## Week Nine – Can digital tech prevent environmental catastrophe?

Last session we spoke about the 'appification' of market life and we discussed how seemingly technical developments can have significant political and economic ramifications. This week we will address a more mainstream concern and ask how digital capitalism is linked to environmental disaster and catastrophe. Can digital tech contribute to solving environmental issues or is it necessarily part of the problem?



Source: AI Now Institute (2017). AI and Climate Change: How they're connected, and what we can do about it. *Medium*, Oct 2017: <https://medium.com/@AINowInstitute/ai-and-climate-change-how-theyre-connected-and-what-we-can-do-about-it-6aa8d0f5b32c> (accessed 5 April 2021).

### **Readings**

Joppa, L. N. (2017). AI for Earth. *Nature*, 552, 325-328.

Halpern, O., Günel, G. (2017). *The Fibreculture Journal*, 29, 51-73.

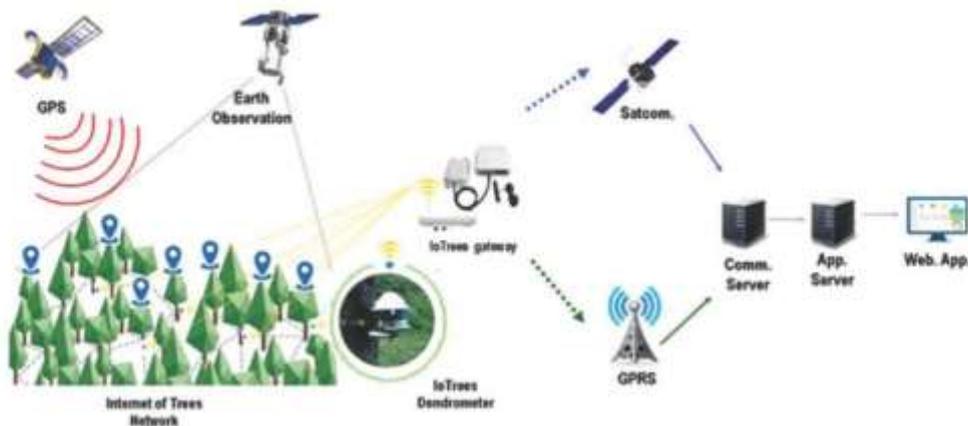
### ***Further recommendation:***

Adam Curtis, "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace", Episode 2, available at:

<https://vimeo.com/groups/96331/videos/80799352>.

## Task 1: AI for Earth

1.1. In a 2017 article for 'Nature', one of the world's leading science journals, Microsoft's chief environment scientist, Lucas Joppa, called for the digitalisation of environmental science and policy. How, according to Joppa, can artificial intelligence contribute to saving the planet? Do you think Joppa is primarily interested in the environment or in juicy profits for Microsoft? Are the two reconcilable? Is it conceivable to prevent environmental destruction *against* the corporate interests of companies such as Microsoft?



Environments are increasingly becoming technologized sites of data production. From smart cities to smart forests, digital networks are analyzing and joining up environmental processes. Should we embrace smart environments as a necessary means to protect the planet or should we reject them as a new tactic by corporations to capitalise on natural disaster? Picture from Gabrys, J. (2020). Smart forests and data practices: From the Internet of Trees to planetary governance. *Big Data & Society* [preprint online].

1.2. A common critique holds that companies such as Microsoft engage in 'greenwashing'. They support environmentalism in some places but do not hesitate to exploit or destroy it in others. For instance, they remain silent on their own contribution to climate change. According to one estimate the global tech sector accounts for more than 2% of global carbon emissions.<sup>8</sup> This puts it on a par with the aviation industry and makes it larger than that of Japan, the fifth biggest polluter of the world. Does this observation undermine Joppa's call for AI-powered environmentalism? Is AI-powered environmentalism necessarily complicit in environmental destruction? Or can it be used in climate-friendly ways?

1.3. A related critique is directed at 'carbon offsetting', which allows individuals and companies to invest in environmental projects around the world (anything from planting trees to distributing efficient cooking stoves or capturing methane gas at landfill sites) in order to balance out their own carbon footprints. The idea, here, is not to reduce damage, but to increase reparations. And most of the big players in tech, such as Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, Alphabet, and Facebook, have made pledges to use carbon offsetting to become carbon neutral.<sup>9</sup> But can environmental damage simply be

<sup>8</sup> See: Jones, N. (2018). How to stop data centres from gobbling up the world's electricity. *Nature*, 12 September: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-06610-y> (accessed 08 April 2021).

<sup>9</sup> See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-climate-change-tech-factbox-idUSKBN1ZF2E7> (accessed 08 April 2021).

repaired? Critics have pointed out that carbon offsetting led to major land grabs in developing countries, where multinational companies bought agricultural land to turn it into tree plantations, displacing local communities and causing multiple food crises. In this sense, carbon offsetting seems problematic because it leaves the primacy of profit intact. So while companies may be pressured by consumers or even by governments to balance emissions, they ultimately remain indifferent to the environment, causing all manner of derivative problems. What can be done? Can environmentalism be profitable? Or is it necessarily at the expense of profits?

### **Task 2: Pre-emptive hope**

Another critique of 'green tech' refers to the mode of environmental governance. Here scholars highlight that sensors and sensing practices are not simply apprehending already-existing environmental problems waiting 'out there' to be explored. Rather, they actively constitute our understanding of 'what counts' as an environmental problem. On this view, it seems strange, for example, that no matter the threat, the proposed response of big tech companies is the same: to add sensors, generate data, analyse data, and optimise outcomes.

- 2.1. Halpern and Günel (2017) suggest that the digital mode of protecting the environment is problematic because it does no longer seek to prevent environmental disaster, but merely attempts to mitigate it. Do you agree with the authors? Do you think expecting disaster rather than preventing it is cynical? Or do you think we should welcome it as a kind of liberation from the hubris of absolute control? What other modes of environmental protection recede from view, e.g. downscaling, degrowth, etc?
- 2.2. Halpern and Günel (2017) also offer an aesthetic critique of pre-emptive hope. They point to how digital dreams of smart cities and smart environments are rendered beautifully in adverts that promote them, suggesting that some of us could live through environmental collapse rather comfortably. Do you think the aesthetic representation of smart cities and environments has political or economic ramifications? Does it trivialise actually existing environmental crises?

### **Task 3: Global Environment Hack**

You are invited as creative disruptors to the 54th virtual session of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change from 26-30 July. You are asked to contribute an 'app4future' prototype, which helps solving some of the world's biggest environmental problems. Develop a 90 seconds pitch that follows the structure below:

1. The problem you are trying to solve.
2. The name of your app.
3. The solution you have come up with and how it will change the world!

The following video might help the process: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7\\_bpUS-c6hI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_bpUS-c6hI).

## Week Ten - Should we regulate, resist, or repurpose digital capitalism?

Over the course of this seminar, we have covered a broad range of topics and often returned to the question of 'what can be done?'. Today, we are going to zoom in on this question and consider strategies to regulate, resist, and repurpose digital capitalism. It is fair to say that scholars of IPE tend to focus on the question of regulation: how can we use existing political institutions to make digital capitalism more tolerable, more environmentally friendly, and more just? However, arguably the most successful political responses to digital capitalism have emerged outside of existing institutions in alliance with broader political movements such as Extinction Rebellion, Black Lives Matter, and Me Too. These movements occupy a curious position within digital capitalism. On the one hand, they rely on digital tech to mobilise interest and attract public attention. On the other hand, they mobilise people to resist digital tech – or at least reinvent it. Next to the question of 'governance' – i.e. what kinds of legal frameworks should guide and direct digital tech companies? – they therefore raise broader political dilemmas. What does it say about digital capitalism, for example, that it provides a space for critiques of itself? Can we resist social media platforms by repurposing them into 'weapons of the chic'? Or should we #DeleteFacebook, drop our smartphones, and go off-grid?



### Readings

Please read at least two of the following three readings:

Eyert, F., Irgmaier, F. and Ulbricht, L. (2021), Extending the framework of algorithmic regulation. The Uber case. *Regulation & Governance*, [online pre-print].

Mills, S. (2020). #DeleteFacebook: From Popular Protest to a New Model of Platform Capitalism? *New Political Economy*, [online pre-print].

O'Meara V. (2019). Weapons of the Chic: Instagram Influencer Engagement Pods as Practices of Resistance to Instagram Platform Labor. *Social Media + Society*, [online only].

### **Task 1: Regulation by and of technology.**

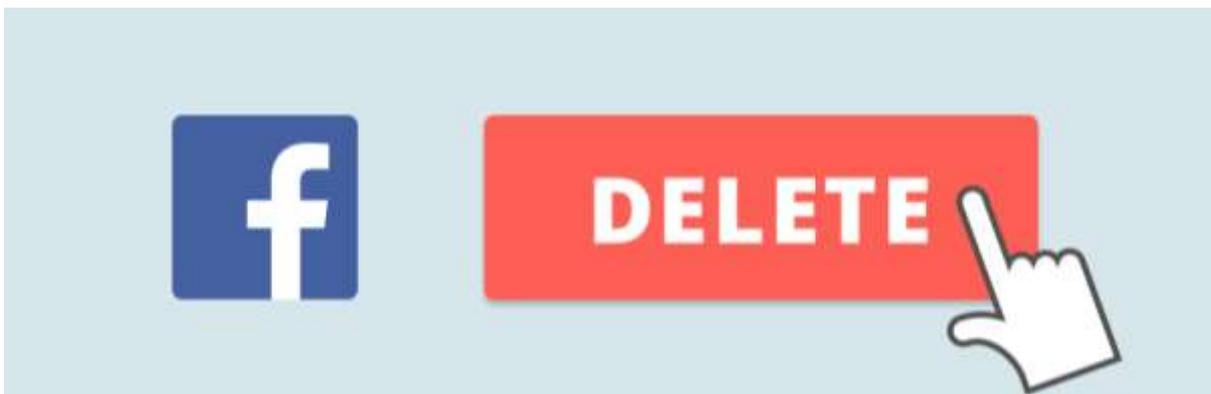
1.1. Evert, Irgmaier, and Ulbricht (2021) develop a conceptual framework to analyse 'algorithmic regulation', i.e. regulation by technology, along three lines: representation, direction, and intervention. *How do these categories differ? What specific issues do they capture? In how far does an understanding of regulation by technology contribute to the regulation of technology? Can the framework be brought to bear on the following regulatory concerns: (a) algorithmic bias (b) fake news (c) facial recognition (d) data privacy (e) environmental impact (f) labour rights (g) gender inequality (h) colonialism?*

1.2. The question of how to develop a legal framework for the digital economy is a notoriously difficult one. *Do you know of any examples, where governments have taken first steps into the right direction (e.g. the 'right to be forgotten', the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the 'digital tax', etc.)? Where do you think governments should act next?*

### **Task 2: Resisting digital capitalism.**

2.1. Mills (2020) discusses the impact of the #DeleteFacebook campaign, which was one of a series of instances, in which users sought to boycott digital capitalism by simply turning it off. In a similar move, and linked to various efforts to build awareness of racial discrimination in sport, the ex-Arsenal, Barcelona and France footballer Thierry Henry argued that positive actions on social media always face the dilemma of manifest online racism. As a result, he made a pointed step to delete all of his social media accounts. In subsequent weeks, a number of sporting personalities and organisations took part in similar, often time limited, boycotts. *How should we think of such efforts to simply 'switch off' digital capitalism? Is it desirable, as in, would we be better off if we decided collectively to stop interacting online? Is turning off still an option, and more importantly, is it easier for some people than for others?*

2.2. Beyond the normative question whether it is desirable to #DeleteFacebook, there is a more practical one about its efficacy. Why, according to Mills, did #DeleteFacebook fail to gain traction? Can you think of further reasons? Has resisting big tech companies become futile?



### **Task 3: Repurposing digital capitalism.**

3.1. O'Meara discusses how a group of social media influencers formed 'comment pods' in order to boost their income on Instagram. She argues that comment pods should be thought of as a form of 'mutual aid':

"Practices of mutual aid emerge in the context of shared material conditions that are particularly difficult or when faced with a common adversary. [...] Importantly, while practices of mutual aid have the potential to undermine capitalist domination, they are generally ambivalent in their politics, and so, they can also perpetuate or more deeply embed workers into the social relations of capitalism."

*How should we think about these ambiguities? Do you think 'comment pods' have the potential to undermine the algorithmic power of Instagram? Can they serve as an example for a specific mode of political engagement?*

3.2. One way to think about comment pods is as a form of creative repurposing or indeed 'hacking', as Gabriella Coleman explains:

"Since many technical objects are simultaneously bound by certain limits yet exhibit potential excesses, during the course of their existence, they can be exploited and redirected toward new paths of functionality by acts of hacking. Hackers are thus attuned not simply to the workings of technology but also seek such an intimate understanding of technology's capabilities and constraints that they are positioned to redirect it to some new, largely unforeseen plane." (2013, p. 98)

*Can hacking serve as a broader strategy to organise political opposition against digital capitalism? Or does it merely reproduce its preferred mode of agency? Does hacking or repurposing come at the expense of more collective forms of radical mobilisation? Does big tech fear most to be regulated by states, opposed by workers, ignored by consumers, or hacked by its users?*



## Week Eleven – Summary and Conclusion

With their article 'The Society of Algorithms' Jenna Burrell and Marion Fourcade have provided one of the most comprehensive state-of-the-art review of contemporary debates about digital capitalism. To conclude the course we will discuss how their article speaks to the themes and topics covered over the past weeks.



Photo: Tomás Saraceno's Cloud Cities and Solar Balloon Travel, <https://studiotomassaraceno.org/tomas-saracenos-cloud-cities-and-solar-balloon-travel-interview-with-the-creators-project/>.

### **Reading**

Burrell, J., Fourcade, M., (2021). The Society of Algorithms. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 47(23), p. 1.23

### **Task 1: Talk about the reading.**

How does the article proceed in terms of the structure of the argument (what does it say broadly in section one, section two, section three...)? Do you have major disagreements with the article? In how far does the article touch upon issues and debates that we have covered in this course? Do you find significant blind-spots?

### **Task 2: Talk about the seminar.**

What were your expectations when you decided to take the course - did the course meet these expectations? Which text was your favourite, and why? Which text did you most strongly disagree with, and why? What are your main takeaways from the seminar?