Book Review

Review of Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: Public Affairs.

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After coining the term surveillance capitalism, Shoshana Zuboff captivated the imagination and intellect of activists and researchers from various disciplinary fields, brilliantly identifying the main working mechanism of a new phase of capitalism, which emerges based on the circulation, collection, data management, and extraction of knowledge from the behaviour of populations. Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* is the in-depth complement to the concepts presented earlier in the seminal paper *Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization*.

The Age of Surveillance Capitalism is a priceless work that will undoubtedly result in countless other studies that also have repercussions on non-specialist audiences. However, we have to keep in mind that Zuboff's book is written from a certain political, philosophical, and geographical position. It is not that other works that can also be called sociological or scientific are not also written from these perspectives. But in the aforementioned book, this positioning, which the author does not hide at any moment, seems to function as a narrative motor that structures the main debate. A reader who enjoys the same positioning as the author will identify with the same moments of shock, wonder, and urgency of the counter-action that follows the detailed description of the social process that leads to the emergence of surveillance capitalism, and also the identification of "this new form of capitalism on its own terms and in its own words" (p.62). Others will surely be able to note the same sensations the work transmits, although from another point of view in terms of the development of capitalism and human history. For them, the first step is perhaps to de-center the work; that is, to produce an understanding of the main concept—surveillance capitalism, especially—without necessarily committing to the same ideas about human nature and the history of capitalism as those that come from the author. But how do we understand the implications surveillance capitalism has for humanity in a more broad and global manner?

Although writing about a worldwide phenomenon—nobody can deny the reach of the internet and surveillance, nowadays—with repercussions on populations around the globe, Zuboff is focused on how surveillance capitalism threatens "western liberal democracies" (p.21). The democratic balance of relations she describes, and that are now disturbed, are the social, economic, and democratic relations that are fundamentally characteristic of Anglo-Saxon America and Western Europe. In the introduction, she points out that surveillance capitalism, like mass production, is "an American invention... [That] became a global reality" (p.24). The development of this invention would have occurred in the US, but the "consequences of

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these developments belong to the world” (p. 24). The problem with this kind of assertion is that it ignores the global and inter-relational characteristics of capitalist development, especially in the twentieth century, which is precisely the time of the greater democratic glory of western liberal systems. But something was also present in previous centuries, those marked by colonization and a slave trade that targeted huge populations. There is a reason to believe that, just as industrial capitalism has a logic of development and functioning that had a specific pattern of exploitation of determined territories and populations—one for the centers of power and consumption, another for the periphery and production—the same happens with surveillance capitalism. This is a shortcoming of the book; however, it does not affect the quality of the concept Zuboff develops nor does it invalidate the tremendous value of her work for other researchers.

Zuboff departs from an idealization of the free human being that has been inserted and produced by a context of democratic freedom in the western capitalist system. This individual was built over centuries of human history and is seen as having a soul whose ultimate attempt to control came from totalitarian systems, especially fascism and Stalinism. This “free” individual takes its place in society as both a worker and a consumer, having space for the development of a personal and social life within their “sanctuaries.” This satisfactory insertion into a democratic market system was possible thanks to the double movement, a term borrowed from Karl Polanyi, which refers to “a network of measures and policies. . . Integrated into powerful institutions designed to check the market action relative to labour, land, and money” (p.39). Polanyi’s double movement appeared spontaneously in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. Zuboff points out that in the United States it would have arisen from processes of a “social contest” having also unfolded in environmental and civil rights legislation. But the development of such a system should also be attributed to the ethical clarity of men like the inventor Thomas Edison and industrialist Henry Ford who “understood that the moral life of industrial civilization would be shaped by the practices of capitalism that rose to dominance in their time” (p.17). According to Zuboff, these men helped guide a “more rational capitalism in order to avert a future of misery and conflict” (p.17).

The Age of Surveillance Capitalism is a story of the threats to this scenario, of the disturbance of this “sanctuary” whose most evident image is that of the house but which also refers to spaces of intimacy in which the self can be peacefully fed. The path of the development of this threat begins with the work of Hayek and gains strength with the ascension of neoliberalism. However, Zuboff specifically cites the “shareholder value movement” as a turning point when the attack on managers as part of the management structure of companies and the theory in favor of their valuation according to companies’ stock prices lead managers to align themselves, in an extended way, to the interests of the owners and not to the bureaucratic structure of the company or their fellow workers. This was the business structure that created the conditions required for the emergence of surveillance capitalism. This is how the attacks on the double movement began which, if the sole criteria were market metrics, resulted in a solution for the economic stagnation of the 1970s but also started a process of increased financialization and an accumulated reduction of industrial jobs, especially in the West.

The idea of the emergence of a “second modernity” in the Western world also plays an important role in Zuboff’s narrative; that is, modernity produces a different type of individual, one that breaks with mass society. Although the individual is an heir of the first modernity, this individual is also freer from hierarchies based on race, class, ethnicity, religion, occupation, etc. This is an in-depth process of individualization, since the first modernity still favoured collective solutions. In the second modernity, “the self is all we have” (p.36). These are unstable conditions because in their expectations of self-determination, individuals of the second-modernity face political and economic constraints. Surveillance capitalism companies will operate on that need, on those unmet expectations. Zuboff points out that as Apple is in the front of the line in terms of its quest to meet the demands of those individuals, but it exempts itself, at least so far, from operating according to the surveillance-capitalism practices that Google, Facebook and Microsoft would adopt. For a moment, Apple seemed to be leading the way to a third modernity, summed up in the phrase “my life, my way, at a price I can afford” (p.46). The invention of iTunes was also an inversion of the industrial capitalism logic. However, Apple showed itself as conducting business as usual by breaking trust with society by using “extractive pricing policies, offshoring jobs, exploiting its retail staff, abrogating responsibility for factory

conditions, colluding to depress wages via illicit noncompete agreements in employee recruitment, institutionalized tax evasion, and a lack of environmental stewardship” (p.47).

According to Zuboff, iPhones, iPads, and iTunes opened the door for the possibility of “democratized information in the context of individualized economic and social relations” (p.55), a new model for a third modernity; but it was Google, with its AdSense and content-targeted advertising, at first, and Gmail, in a second moment, that laid the groundwork for “a new economic order.” Google began to try to read users’ minds so they could more accurately target people when they were delivering their advertising. Surveillance capitalism uses massive data collection, collected through surveillance, to establish practices for extracting information and knowledge about individuals in order to foster prediction and sales practices based on the exploration of individuals’ intimate spaces; it is a behaviour-surplus business. This collection is not restricted to the web or smartphones but is based on the increasing computerization of public and private spaces, the informational mapping of all of the territories on the planet, the unremitting locating of individuals, and the capture of body information and health and behaviour data. This is one of the book’s highlights, as Zuboff sketches a scary picture of how surveillance capitalism firmly defies boundaries all the time, seeking the most exhaustive collection of data possible. Any kind of data is of interest. And for this, “free” products are offered, as surveillance capitalism’s ultimate goal is to capture personal information. The real product is developed from the processing of this information; Zuboff calls this product “shadow text”; it is invisible to us but companies use it in their prediction practices and behaviour-modification operations.

This scenario established, in Zuboff’s words, a hijacking of the “division of learning in society” (p.176). For that argument, she uses her breakthrough research of the 1980s, published in the book *In the Age of the Smart Machines* in which she discusses how the adoption of information technologies in the work environment meant a shift from a division of labour to a division of learning. Automate also means informate and informing leads to more automation; that is, work environments come to be controlled informationally, which along with the neoliberal ideology leads to more automation and to the export of jobs “rather than investing in the digital skills and capabilities of the US worker” (p. 181). What marks the age of surveillance capitalism and differentiates it from the age of the smart machines is that the hijackers of the division of learning in society not only use the text of which we are the authors but also the text we are able to read (web content, tweets, even “likes” on Facebook pages); and then they produce a second hidden text, a “shadow text,” in a process that is the source of an asymmetric power: that text is about us and our behaviour, but it is not for us. Just as the Spanish conquistadors invented laws and justifications for the invasion of the American continent and the plundering of natural resources, not to speak of the enslavement and relegation of entire populations to subhuman status, so would business of surveillance capitalism engage in successive appropriation movements of behavioural data. This action is established as a fact, as a right of the hijackers, in violent activities of usurpation and dispossession.

The consequences of these practices that seem to shock the author the most—where she identifies a process of the dehumanization of individuals—are in connection with the behavioural science of B. F. Skinner, a Harvard professor and colleague of Zuboff’s with whom she reports having had conversations with during her time as an undergraduate. Skinner is a leading figure in the constitution of a branch of psychology that is dedicated to controlling social behaviour. In that school of thought, the human being is just an organism like any other and is compared to an animal. This approach to studying the human being must use an alienated perspective where the organism is considered an Other-One, not an Our-Selves. In this radical behaviourism, the idea of freedom and free will is inversely proportional to knowledge. The more knowledge that is accumulated about the environment in which the organism lives and about the determinations that operate on the body, the more the impossibility of freedom is revealed and we can recognize how it is an illusion.

Zuboff develops the operational and philosophical characteristics of what she calls instrumentarian power. This power has totalitarian characteristics, and she spends many pages establishing parallels between it and fascism and Stalinism. This is the only time she uses the word “imperialism” when she says how critics of

totalitarianism used the language of imperialism to address the threats of totalitarianism. In practice, she ends up suggesting a temporal succession from imperialism to totalitarianism and then to instrumentarianism as attempts to control society. One of the differences from totalitarianism would lie in the fact that for an instrumentarianism that is informed by radical behaviourism, the human being must be considered as having no soul. Totalitarianism attempted to use the shaping of souls as a strategy to achieve a particular social project. Instrumentarianism, as it operates on organisms that do not differ from animals, acts by control in the informational sense and also by operations of behaviour change. There is no soul to be changed.

One addition could have been a commentary on cybernetics, an interdisciplinary effort that was greatly influenced by behaviourism and also treated human beings as organisms and organisms as machines. Being highly popular during the 1950s and the 1960s, cybernetics was one of the main sources for the constitution of the information sciences. Cybernetics ideas were also widely spread among the hackers, activists, and cultural personalities that built most of the companies in Silicon Valley. Zuboff's approach to history is very focused on the specific actions of certain subjects, even though these are used as representatives of more general intellectual movements. In this case, Skinner and his *Walden II* dystopia were chosen instead of Norbert Wiener and his *Human Use of Human Beings*. Also missing is some comment on Gilles Deleuze's concept of a society of control, since it seems to perfectly fit the process the book describes, even so far as to produce a contrast with industrial capitalism and the idea of disciplinary society.

Zuboff shows how instrumentarian power uses techniques of radical behaviourism to seize data on human behaviour as the source of its intelligence operations (the shadow text) while, at the same time, acting on the environment and having human behaviour as its target. In this sense, we are the sources of raw material while, at the same time, objects of interventions. Also important to this operation of the instrumentarian power is the stimulus of a kind of behavioural contagion by means of social pressure and comparison with peers whose most vivid images are found on social networks like Instagram and Facebook. Zuboff sees surveillance capitalism as producing an instrumentarian collective that is made for the ultimate goal of maximizing profits and in disregard of free will.

The only specific comment the author makes about Global South societies—even though this seems to have been an issue of only secondary research—is when she identifies China's use of instrumentarian power for the constitution of a “social credit.” Here, Big Other, the materialization of this instrumentarian power in action, would create stimuli for good behaviours in detriment of bad and the Chinese government defines which is which. Being a technology developed in the US, at home Big Other serves in the creation of profits; in China, it serves a government that wishes to control the social body. How those tools are imported—if they really are just imported—and how they are adapted for other uses, in different contexts, is certainly an interesting question that is open to new research.

The Age of Surveillance Capitalism is written with the intensity of someone who wants to save a type of subjectivity of the individual, of society, and the dream of freedom that seems to vanish when facing a new type of power. For Zuboff, the motor of history seems to be a dialectical relationship between a free subject that is constituted by the capitalist markets both as consumer and worker and the actions of those subjects in order to guarantee democratic freedoms that can control raw capitalism. Throughout the book, sometimes this action seems to come from collective struggles that were able to curb capitalism and, at the same time, made it thrive and become more civilized. In other passages, those restrictive actions towards capitalism seem to have come from some kind of self-awareness of the capitalists who gave workers humanized status while transforming them into consumers. This book appeals in favour of democracy and for democratic mobilization but it is also a call for capitalists to save capitalism from itself. Surveillance capitalists, the digital barons, are the new robber barons.

The book is driven by a denunciation of surveillance capitalism as a new practice of dehumanization. Surveillance capitalism sees the human being as a mere organism and operates towards the annihilation of humanity's soul—be it an invention of Western liberalism or a natural fact. This is what compels the author

more than any censure of the historical or new inequalities produced by capitalism—be it in its raw version or under control—and it must be remembered that even when surveillance capitalism is under control, at its center, historically, capitalism has continued to produce harmful effects on the periphery. What surveillance capitalism announces is an enhanced return to a capitalism in its most perverse moments.

An example of a nefarious instrument that comes back many times in the book is the adoption of smart contracts, which Zuboff calls uncontracts. These new types of agreements break relations of trust between partners in traditional contracts that are used by the legal system to the benefit of the automated enforcement of penalties. For instance, a car owner that fails to make payments on a car loan, due to some financial eventuality, will not be able to use the car in an emergency because the credit agency controls some automatic trigger that facilitates this process. To produce a contrast, Zuboff gives the example of a repo man who, having to collect a vehicle from an elderly couple in debt for buying medicines, refuses to take the car and argues with his manager, who in turn agrees to find another way. A fund-raising campaign follows, and the couple is even given a turkey for Thanksgiving and another \$1,000 for expenses.

Looking from the window of my apartment to the streets of my blue-collar city, embedded in southeastern Brazil, the story seems anecdotal, albeit real. In some way, it would demonstrate a humanity that is possible beyond raw capitalism, one based on relationships of trust and empathy, one able to overcome the coldness of economic agreements in special situations that constitute a society in solidarity. But the norm of capitalism is not like that, and if these kinds of practices sometimes become public, this is exactly because they are an anomaly of capitalist subjectivity. Also, uncontracts are not exactly new but a valid example of what can be enhanced through the use of more surveillance technologies. Since the 1990s, for the populations of the Global South, the prepaid model is the typical form of contract with telephone companies. If you have no credit on your account, it does not matter if there is an emergency, your cell phone will not work. In Bolivia, in the early 2000s, a process of privatization of the water system culminated with the threat of installations of prepaid water meters. The whole process led to the so-called Cochabamba Water War. To this day, similar water meters are marketed in countries on the African continent. Such dehumanizing acts are the daily norm for capitalism in the Global South, like the violent expulsion by the police of landless workers who occupy unproductive agricultural land, or homeless people living in vacant properties, actions sanctioned by Brazilian courts.

None of this invalidates or detracts from Zuboff's preoccupations with the dehumanization put forward by surveillance capitalism; it only serves to put into perspective what she treats as a breakup but what is really about continuity. As Achille Mbembe recalls in an interview, "One such taboo capitalism fundamentally disregards is the idea that a human being is not a thing, personhood is the antithesis of thinghood" (Goldberg 2018: 210). He even points out that the process of transforming blacks into commodities or human objects, something that has already happened in Atlantic capitalism, is entirely possible to universalize.

Zuboff's book provides an excellent basis for understanding this process universalization, this new level of the treatment of humans as objects. Or organisms, whose existence is accepted and enacted on by a system that occupies a position in production and consumption, both materialized in informational data and subjected to technics of instrumentation. However, the book would be more powerful if it were de-centred; this would open up the possibility of constructing other understandings, complementary to those located in liberal democracies and which may also be critical of asymmetries of power but also of global divisions of labour and knowledge. If Apple has not yet become one of the leading forces of surveillance capitalism, it is certainly because it has found ways and a market in which it guarantees to certain populations, those with purchasing power, their right to privacy and sanctuary. We need to see how inequality continues to be produced in surveillance capitalism and how different violations affect specific populations differently.

The dystopias/utopias quoted in the book are Big Brother and Walden II, but the speculative fiction whose setting accompanied me when reading *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* was H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. In it, a time traveller finds a world divided between fragile and bouncy beings, running free and naïve on grassy surfaces, while monstrous, dehumanized beings live underground. In the dark of night, time

and time again, the surface beings disappear, being captured by the Morlocks of the underground. Aristocrats and their servants have both evolved to become affected by dehumanization. Morlocks sustain the system materially and live with the machines underground. Elois live in controlled regulated freedom, becoming livestock when caught in the middle of the night.

The Age of Surveillance Capitalism is a book about the very deep processes that are, indeed, capable of transforming society and are a threat to the existence of democratic institutions, whether or not they are within capitalism. Knowledge about market fluctuations, the ability to control the other end of deals by producing demand for products—something always coveted by capitalism, along with reductions in production costs—the extraction of very deep and elaborate knowledge about society and its creative and productive processes, coupled with the unprecedented ability to manipulate those processes, pose enormous challenges to the planet. They are mechanisms for the extraction of value from behaviour monitoring and a logic that already leads to power asymmetries, which Zuboff identified in a very competent manner. One point of debate is whether this is a new logic or whether we are identifying fundamental elements of a system of dispossession that has been in action for a while but which has gained a new dimension at the present moment. A neoliberal dominance of the world economy, plus profits from enhanced surveillance technologies reapplied to more surveillance, coupled with the treatment of human beings as mere objects for production and profit, has certainly led to the present huge threats to society. The book's narrative has a necessary emotional weight and inquisitive though it is, it offers civil society and researchers an excellent toolbox with which to understand the current challenges surveillance capitalism poses and to act in defence of democratic principles and the autonomy of individuals and collectives.

References

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