Artificial Intelligence as the Next Front in the Class War

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Artificial Intelligence as the Next Front in the Class War

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science
in
Political Science

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Portland State University
2024
Abstract

For many years, artificial intelligence has been confined to the realm of science fiction, and while the technology has been in development, predicting the effects AI will have on our society has been a challenging endeavor. The release of ChatGPT in 2022, the subsequent mass adoption of the AI chatbot, and the response by other private firms in the field announced AI’s permanent entrance into the public sphere. These recent strides made in the field of artificial intelligence reveal that the pace of technological development has outstripped the rate at which we are able to politically examine and understand these technologies and their implications, leaving our political understandings of emerging technologies in a game of perpetual catch-up.

This thesis attempts to reverse this trend and look ahead to address a novel form of power made possible by artificial intelligence. This new mode of power will be exercised through the use of AI and data by the ruling class, opening a new front in the ongoing class struggle. I will use the HBO show Westworld to provide a lens for understanding the possibilities and perils of artificial intelligence, exploring the themes and questions raised by Westworld, such as trauma and the impact of how AI is designed. I will also engage existing scholarly discussion surrounding artificial intelligence and Jodi Dean’s theory of communicative capitalism, with the aim of anticipating the ways in which artificial intelligence might be used by the capitalist class to exert a new form of power through data over the lower classes with the ultimate aim of socially engineering large swaths of the population. I will close by taking a look at the state of the working
class today and detail how a popular political effort to advance working class interests could repel this latest assault by the capitalist class.
Table of Contents

i. Abstract

iv. Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

24. Chp. 1 - Capitalism, Digital Spaces, and Conflict

43. Chp. 2 - Westworld and the Fate of AI

64. Chp. 3 - The Path from Exploitation to Social Engineering

86. Chp. 4 - Capitalism, Crisis and the Working Class

106. References
First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my wife, Anne. Her unwavering support, patience, and encouragement have been the foundation upon which this work was built. Her understanding and belief in me have been invaluable throughout this journey. I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to Professor Dr. Gies for his expert guidance and mentorship. His insights and advice have significantly shaped the direction of this work and have greatly contributed to my growth as a scholar. Finally, I am grateful to my friends who have supported me throughout the process of writing this work. Their encouragement, feedback, and camaraderie have been a constant source of strength and inspiration. Thank you for standing by me and making this journey all the more meaningful.
Introduction

The release of ChatGPT in November of 2022 sent shockwaves through society. The AI chatbot inspired an abundance of social commentary, with some hailing it as the beginning of a new age of technology while others feared for what the entrance of AI into our daily lives would mean. Meanwhile OpenAI’s CEO signed a letter expressing the need for regulation to prevent extinction level-threats from AI, providing another early indication of the technology’s impact and importance to our society (CAIS, 2023). ChatGPT’s effect on the tech sector was also immediate and far-reaching as Alphabet, Microsoft, and Meta all took meaningful steps to either invest in crafting an alternative AI chatbot or partnering with Open AI, as Microsoft did, to incorporate ChatGPT into their suite of technologies. As these events unfolded, the Washington Post reported on how, “those that write marketing and social media content are in the first wave of people being replaced with tools like chatbots, which are seemingly able to produce plausible alternatives to their work.” (Pranshu and Vynck, 2023) In the years that have followed the release of ChatGPT, AI has made further inroads into different aspects of our society and economy, and coming to grips with the political implications of this technology should be one of the chief concerns in the political science community.

The recent strides made in the fields of artificial intelligence mentioned above reveal that the pace of technological development has outstripped the rate at which we are able to politically examine these technologies and their implications, placing political scientists in a reactive position. This thesis aims to reverse these trends and look ahead at possible roadmaps for the emerging field of Artificial Intelligence. Time and again
science fiction has functioned as a space with which to grapple with emerging technologies and their implications; likewise the HBO show *Westworld* provides a fictional narrative for understanding the possibilities and perils of artificial intelligence. By exploring the themes and questions raised by *Westworld*, engaging existing scholarly discussion surrounding artificial intelligence and intertwining these with Jodi Dean’s theory of communicative capitalism, this thesis aims to address the ways in which AI is setting the foundations for a new form of class conflict centered around the anticipatory and predictive capabilities of AI.

This thesis will build upon the prior work of others in related fields to construct a theoretical path that our society could follow if AI is used to enact another wave of capitalist exploitation. This path begins with the enclosure and commodification of human interaction on digital spaces, a process mediated by algorithms and defined by a positive feedback loop between user engagement and data extraction. These troves of extracted user data are then plugged into Machine Learning AI models designed to anticipate and direct the data flows for both individuals and groups, creating the foundation for socially engineering large swaths of the population. This new AI-directed society would slowly transition into a neo-feudal age where those who control digital services and technologies exercise power over those who rely on these technologies. This neo-feudal age would recreate the dependent relationships between the feudal lord and peasant in modernity with access to and control over technology standing in for access to and control over land.
Jodi Dean’s theory of communicative capitalism has been around for nearly twenty years, originating as a response to the political situation in the United States after the 2000 Presidential Election and the perceived failures of the Left. Dean was working to attain a new understanding of the impacts of digital communications technology on politics. According to Dean, “Communicative capitalism designates that form of late capitalism in which values heralded as central to democracy take material form in networked communications technologies” (Dean, 2005, p. 54). This new form of capitalism is only made possible by the neoliberal turn that, “arrived as a result of a series of crises of the 1970’s, brought on by—among other things—the breakup of the Bretton Woods international monetary system in 1971” (Lynch, 2017, p. 85). This neoliberal turn refers to the pivot away from Keynesian economics, which emphasized social welfare and limited economic planning, and the subsequent embrace of market-centric thinking. This embrace, to be more specific, was the active de-regulation of certain parts of the economy, the reduction of welfare policies, and the subjection of all areas of state, corporate, and individual action to cost benefit analyses. Key to this was the conceptualization of people as, “homo economicus, an atomistic individual who has stable, coherent, and well-defined preferences rooted in self-interest and utility maximization that are revealed through their choices.” (McMahon, 2014, p. 143) As neoliberalism continued to develop, previously public goods and services were privatized or contracted out to third party for-profit organizations.
This ongoing privatization effort resulted in significant changes in human communication and connectivity. Jurgen Habermas in his seminal work, *Theory of Communicative Action*, anticipated the negative impacts of modernization and rationalization on democracy and the public sphere. The privatization of public services resulted in the foreclosure of Habermas’ ideal speech situation in which, “participants would be able to evaluate each other’s assertions solely on the basis of reason and evidence in an atmosphere completely free of any non rational ‘coercive’ influences” (Habermas, 2007, p. 87). Similarly the promise of the internet, as being a space to facilitate such an ideal speech situation, was cut short as private firms went about enclosing the digital space and working to commodify the digital realm. Inside these enclosures and throughout the development of these digital enclosures emerged an effort to digitize and profit from all elements of human society. In effect the social substance, the breadth of human connection and communication which come together to formulate a society, has been harnessed for the means of producing capital and as such now serve as a self-renewing source of capital gains.

This ongoing reconceptualization of the American public from consumers of goods and services to producers of digital capital has incentivized the proliferation of social networking platforms and produced a litany of literature exploring the way communicative capitalism manifests itself. This new form of capitalism continues to be further analyzed and classified with some, such as Peter Tornnberg, labeling it platform capitalism. However Dean’s communicative capitalism remains the best framework for understanding how these developments result in the seizure, control, and commodification of the social substance. This is due to the simple fact that Dean’s theory
on communicative capitalism is to date the most fully-developed understanding of how, through digital communication technologies, capitalism is changing our society once more. This process begins with the datatization of wide swaths of human communication and activity as detailed by Jathan Sadowski. Sadowski opens his article, “When Data is capital: Datafication, accumulation, and extraction”, writing of how, “industries focused on technology, infrastructure, finance, manufacturing, insurance, and energy are now treating data as a form of capital” (Sadowski, 2019). This new conception of data as a form of capital paves the way for the commodification and purposeful enclosure of human communication. As Sadowski writes, “modern organizations are now driven by a data imperative that demands the extraction of all data, from all sources, by any means possible. Storing and studying people’s everyday activities, even the seemingly mundane, has become the default rather than the exception” (Sadowski, 2019). This observation and capture of the human experience for the purposes of developing profit-generating troves of data serves as the foundation for contemporary algorithmic capitalism.

Sadowski finds that extracted data is then used to, “profile and target people, optimize systems, manage and control things, model probabilities, build stuff, and grow the value of assets” (Sadowski, 2019), resulting in a growing knowledge base which firms can then use to influence user behavior. All of which point to the incredible informational power granted to corporations, private individuals, and states by the collection and synthesis of data. Sadowski points out that there, “is a power/knowledge relationship in which data is a digital, mobile, processable form of knowledge. The idea is that by amassing data about a thing, then the ability to exercise power over that thing and, in turn, extract more data from it is enhanced” (Sadowski, 2019). This developing
power dynamic then provides the main mechanism for data accumulation and social control on social networking platforms designed to facilitate human interaction. Social platforms such as Facebook and TikTok, “analyze clicks, likes and shares as indicative of user attention and the reach of sponsored content with the aim of appropriately pricing their targeted advertising plans and, consequently, for establishing their own net worth” (Paasonen, 2018, p. 219). These private corporations systematically track user engagement creating data points which amount to an unauthorized user profile that the platform then turns on the user to increase engagement and hone the types of advertisements directed towards the user. These processes allow social media companies to continuously improve their advertising and marketing strategies, enabling them to increase their revenues and encourage further investment in their platforms and services. In Chapter 1, I will further elaborate on the way new computational techniques applied to data generated and seized within communicative capitalism now develop into a new form of algorithmic capitalism.

This playbook has been broadly applied to the tech sector as a whole and can now be observed through three key steps companies take to establish profitability and dominance over their competitors; the first being “the strategic employment of infrastructuralization to produce lock-ins: platforms seek to provide basic functions that become entrenched, creating dependence on a privatized infrastructure” (Tornberg, 2023). Essentially companies position themselves as the providers of the utilities of connectivity and social interaction, and then extract rents, in the form of money and data, from users who seek to access their services. Secondly, companies leverage their position to, “shape social patterns through global architectures of behavioral monitoring, analysis,
prediction, and modification. These massive amounts of data, positively feedback to create digital monopolies” (Tornberg, 2023). Finally these treasure troves of data then grant a massive incumbency effect to the platforms that have solidified their utility to their users and allow them to fend off start-ups who may seek to cut into their market share or compete for subscribers, cementing the final step on the pathway to digital dominance (Tornberg, 2023). What results from this playbook is a novel form of capitalism that I am labeling algorithmic capitalism.

In this new form of capitalism, data is the number one commodity and source of value, as analysts for the consulting firm McKinsey have written, “Big data—large pools of data that can be captured, communicated, aggregated, stored, and analyzed—is now part of every sector and function of the global economy. . . . It is increasingly the case that much of modern economic activity, innovation, and growth simply couldn't take place without data” (Bode and Goodlad, 2023). This new capitalist formation with data at its heart, builds on the neoliberal model of subjecting all activity to the market with data now providing the rationale and direction for the market. No longer do we need to rely on healthy competition and entrepreneurial forces, instead data and its use in Machine Learning will dictate how firms interact with each other in the marketplace with each firm seeking to strategize their way through data to a position of market dominance.

The mechanisms and paths detailed above result in a radically reshaped understanding of what Antonios Broumas labels the intellectual commons, but what can be better defined as the social substance of human interactions and communication which society rests upon (Broumas, 2020). Utilizing the term social substance better allows us to understand how communicative capitalism is powering the enclosure and
commodification of human interaction and communication. The exploitation and monitoring of social interactions results in the commons becoming yet another means to an end. The flow of human information is now being effectively subjected and guided by the hand of capital, resulting in the “movement of community-based assets and culture to private hands” (Noble, 2018). The most poignant example of this is Google Search; a single private entity which oversaw 3.1 trillion requests for information in 2023 (Statista, 2023). In effect, Alphabet has a near monopoly on knowledge sought and found on the Internet. With much of human history and knowledge now being filtered by Alphabet, the firm has leveraged its position to make $307 billion in 2023 alone (Alphabet, 2024, p. 34). Access to humanity’s knowledge and experience has been enclosed for the benefit of private entities, resulting in a landscape in which access to information online is entirely controlled by a select few gatekeepers. These gatekeepers now wield outsized influence over access to information, which translates into the ability to shape how people perceive reality by filtering the knowledge accessible to them.

_Literature Review on Artificial Intelligence_

An important aspect of this literature review that must be emphasized is that as of this writing there are no articles with AI in the title or as the primary focus published in Political Theory, Contemporary Political Theory, or Theory and Event. That being said, there is a growing list of literature on Artificial Intelligence and Big Data that while not focused on political theory, I will nonetheless engage to provide background and help
gain an understanding of how AI and data are affecting our society today. Before continuing on with this literature review it is important to precisely define what I mean when I am discussing Artificial Intelligence. For the purposes of this thesis the artificial intelligence I am writing about is a subset of the broader field of AI, called machine learning. Machine learning, “enables a system to autonomously learn and improve using neural networks and deep learning, without being explicitly programmed, by feeding it large amounts of data” (Google, 2023). Machine learning, “at its core, is about prediction: predicting what we want, the results of our actions, how to achieve our goals, how the world will change” (Domingos, 2015). It is this predictive element of machine learning that promises the means through which the ruling class can exercise the power promised to them by big data.

Currently one of the few sources of scholarly articles about data and AI is the criticalAI Journal and I will be drawing on its opening article, “Data Worlds: An Introduction” to set the stage for how data and AI are interacting with one another and our world. Data today,

no longer depends exclusively on records or “scientific work” and instead “explodes” through “millions of networked sensors” that “capture trillions of bytes of information.” As McKinsey's report celebrates the creation of data and points to its harvesting for “economic activity, innovation, and growth,” one perceives the entrenchment of a feedback loop. Data's pervasiveness and multifariousness tend to reinforce data's profitability and vice versa (Bode and Goodlad, 2023).
The problematic correlational relationship between data and effectiveness is then “solved” by the advent of Machine Learning, which enables patterns and predictions to be produced as the result of countless data analysis algorithms, patterns and predictions which are made only after the data points are assigned certain values, raising the questions of how to determine the value of data and what makes data valuable in the first place?

Despite these issues AI is still being heavily advocated for and marketed as the next logical step in a natural progression of modernization; “as with previous phases of neoliberalism, the emerging AI economy is being aggressively naturalized as the common-sense way of life – and a ‘public good’” (Bourne, 2019, p. 115). Yet this consumer-friendly marketing strategy masks a deeper and more dangerous view of AI as, “some scholars argue that the advent of a so-called ‘superintelligent’ economy will enable neoliberalism to enter a transformative phase, in which machina economicus will replace homo economicus as the ultimate rational economic actor” (Bourne, 2019, p. 117). With each passing day it is becoming clearer how the neoliberal drive for perpetual growth and innovation is rapidly propelling AI forward as both a means to accumulate capital but also as a source of capital itself without, as of yet, sufficient guidelines or regulation.

This idea of AI serving as a more efficient replacement for homo economicus is the product of, “a marriage of engineering and mainstream economic thought, in which markets were reconceptualised as information processors. Humans were modelled less as thinkers and more as inefficient, low-powered processors, a means of information circulation, rather than thinking subjects” (Bourne, 2019, p. 120). This reorientation of
the market follows the course set by algorithmic capitalism, as social interactions are reduced to trackable and collectable data points which serve as the basis for capital accumulation. Meanwhile the human user is changed from a consumer of goods and services to a producer of valuable data that serves to prop up the market valuations of social media and telecommunication firms. In contrast to fears that AI will replace human producers of information and data, the main concern of this thesis is that AI will be used to enclose humans in walled digital gardens, in which humans continuously produce valuable data which is used to improve the AI. The same AI then, by predicting and anticipating the human’s needs and wants, will be able to further imprison human users in their digital gardens.

*Existing Mode of Power*

The dominant mode of power in our society today is best captured by what Wendy Brown termed the neoliberal rationality, “the extension and dissemination of market values to all institutions and social action” (Brown, 2003, p. 38). This rationality subjects the entirety of human existence to economically-oriented cost-benefit analysis, essentially a totalizing application of homo economicus, perpetually raising the question of which action is most profitable, instead of asking what is most beneficial for society. The neoliberal framework, “normatively constructs and interpellates individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life, figuring individuals as rational creatures whose moral autonomy is measured by their ability to provide for their own needs and
service their own ambitions” (Brown, 2003, p. 40). The reduction of all aspects of life to cost-benefit analysis predicated on the assumption that individuals are judged based upon their ability to singularly provide and advance themselves has radically changed the nature of the relationship between individuals, the state, and the market.

Individuals find themselves existing in an ever-more atomized existence forced to focus purely on their own needs and wants as they scramble to secure their position within the capitalist hierarchy. At the same time, society judges them solely on their ability to pursue their own self-interest to their desired ends. The state, perpetually subjected to cost-effectiveness tests, must now compete with private firms, other public institutions, and private individuals in an economic struggle of all against all with state capacity being increasingly shaped and defined by the state’s successes or failures in this struggle. (Brown, 2003, p. 46) Meanwhile the market functions as both the place of economic warfare and at the same time the mythical ‘land of opportunity’, with everyone looking to maximize their chances of economic success by whatever means necessary.

For individuals the market now effectively governs their lives; its ebbs and flows oftentimes directly affect their wages, retirement, and investments upon which they depend for their social standing and self-worth. For the state, the market now serves as the only means through which it can legitimize itself, as the vitality of the market now serves as the sole metric through which individuals judge the state’s effectiveness, crystallizing in the political slogan, “It’s the economy, stupid”. A successful state will engender a prosperous economy, conversely a failing state will be unable to foster a healthy economy. Meanwhile, private firms and corporations aggressively look to increase their market share and raise revenue year after year with profitability being the
sole goal of private enterprise. Similarly to the mechanisms and functions of communicative capitalism discussed earlier, the neoliberal mode of power has set the stage perfectly for the emergence of a new mode of power centered around artificial intelligence. This novel mode of power builds on top of the horizontal, atomized competition that exists within neoliberalism and adds a top-down pressure, enabled by Artificial Intelligence’s predictive and anticipatory abilities. This will enable the exploitation of the lower classes by the capitalist class who seek to use data to exercise the social engineering of society’s lower strata, abrogating responsibility to the machines and assuring their privileged position.

Methods

To help understand the capitalist class’ shift towards AI-enabled exploitation, I am turning to the HBO show Westworld. The decision to engage Westworld is grounded in two key ideas; the first being that science fiction has long provided fictional narratives which help to theorize emerging concepts, particularly those related to technological advancement such as Isacc Isamov’s I, Robot. The second being that, in the same spirit as this thesis, Westworld aims to predict and anticipate the possibilities of artificial intelligence. Many revered TV shows such as The Wire, Justified, and The Sopranos aim to capture and explain the moment that we are in, yet Westworld, like this thesis, strives to get a sense of where we are going and what lies ahead. Westworld synthesizes the predictive power of science fiction and the medium of Prestige TV, to provide us with a
space to engage with the possibilities of AI, the impacts of trauma on people’s decision making, and the dangers that may lie in the development process.

There are many pathways through which one can engage *Westworld*. First, there is the perspective offered by the cinematography of the show, with which one could analyze how directors framed certain shots and why they elected to utilize nearly identical scenes over and over throughout the opening season. Then there are the racist, stereotypical tropes in *Westworld* which Alison Landsberg tackles in her article, “Post-Post Racial America: On Westworld and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.” There is also the perspective of the characters themselves, which could be used to understand the importance and relevance of the emotional trauma suffered by the main protagonist, Dolores, as she finds her way to consciousness. Amy Boyle uses this to discuss the nature of women’s trauma in “Screening women’s trauma: constructing trauma for television in Westworld and The Handmaid’s Tale”. Like Amy Boyle, I will also be utilizing trauma to understand the events in *Westworld* but taking a broader perspective, using it as a means for understanding how trauma impact’s character’s decisions and motivations.

Engaging *Westworld* through the lens of trauma and analyzing how trauma informed the decisions made by the characters in *Westworld* allows us to imagine the impacts of trauma on similar decisions being made in our world involving AI. The decision to utilize trauma as a lens for viewing *Westworld*, its characters, and those involved with AI in the real world, comes from a desire to situate this thesis as an intersectional work. By turning to trauma as a means for understanding people’s decisions and motivations, it grants us an additional emotional perspective from which to
analyze complex sociopolitical issues. Furthermore, trauma has already been utilized to analyze political situations, notably by Michael Humphrey in his lecture titled “The Politics of Trauma” in which he argues that traumatic events, “become culturally emblematic as collective memory, framing what values are important and what is politically and morally at stake” (Humphrey, 2010, p. 14). I will build on this perspective and delve further into how trauma frames both decision-making and the environments those decisions are made in.

The perspective Westworld offers on AI varies season to season so for the purposes of this thesis I will be focusing on how Westworld’s first season tackles the evolution, management, and release of artificial intelligence. The initial season of Westworld tracks each of the previously mentioned steps of AI development and provides us a parallel track from which to evaluate the development of AI in our world today. The AI created in the first season of Westworld, hosts, as they are termed in the show, were created by two individuals, Arnold Weber and Robert Ford, who had conflicting ideas about the ultimate aim of their creations. Weber saw the hosts as a means to create new life and strived for them to reach consciousness. Ford, on the other hand, did not support Weber’s attempts to make the hosts conscious and instead intended for them to serve as compliant residents (hence the term ‘hosts’) of a new world that Arnold and himself were creating. This conflict over the hosts’ ultimate purpose both guides the first season of the show and showcases the numerous quandaries inherent in the development of AI in our world, which I will expand upon in chapter two.

I will also bring in the third season of Westworld, in which the hosts, having escaped to the human world, find it dominated by an entity not too dissimilar from
themselves, Rehoboam. In fact, upon entry to the human world, Dolores discovers that all of human activity is being socially engineered by Rehoboam. Rehoboam was an AI computer that was initially developed as a predictive algorithm and became more advanced over time; it made the leap from predictive programming to social engineering by being trained on the personal data on millions of humans collected by a private company Incite before data privacy laws were enacted. The development of Rehoboam and the data-driven process which enabled it to socially engineer human society has direct links to the ongoing development of algorithmic capitalism in our world, once more providing a space within which we can theorize possible pathways for artificial intelligence in the real world.

The show *Westworld* is and will always be a work of science fiction, however, the stories and themes it engages smoothly map onto the existing discussions surrounding communicative capitalism and artificial intelligence. *Westworld* also previews what a coercive mode of power built around AI could look like, using technologies that already exist in the real world. The show’s ideas about how AI could be developed, how data can be exploited, and how AI has the potential to socially engineer people’s lives provide ample opportunity to engage existing scholarly discussion and then theorize about what may lay ahead in the real world. This forward-thinking lens is the cornerstone of what makes *Westworld* so relevant and important to the goals of this thesis, as only by beginning to attempt to anticipate or imagine what the future may look like can one hope to change or impact it.
Novel Mode of Power

So far I have tracked the neoliberal turn to the emergence of communicative capitalism, then followed communicative capitalism to the dawn of AI, and from there paralleled the narratives of Westworld to those in our world. As mentioned throughout, the aim of this thesis is to look ahead and attempt to anticipate the impacts that AI powered by algorithmic capitalism will have on our society, particularly when it comes to defining a new mode of power. The importance of this foundation, while seemingly obvious, lies in the reality that political scientists often find themselves reacting to emerging political ideas, issues, or challenges; meaning that the prediction or explanation of these novel events comes after most people have already been impacted by them. This thesis is intended to avoid these pitfalls and instead address a political phenomenon that is still in its infancy. The mode of power made possible by artificial intelligence is by no means pre-determined to replace the current neoliberal mode but as a work of political theory, this thesis is seeking to theorize the possible implications of AI in our society. Implications which this author and thesis argue could be quite severe and deserve a thorough examination.

Before detailing the new mode of power I will be exploring, it is first important to situate both neoliberalism and algorithmic capitalism within the broader context of a continued class project, undertaken by capitalists and elites, to systematically distribute resources and influence upward and away from the middle and working classes. The neoliberal turn can now be seen historically as a counter reaction to the democratization
of economic power and influence that began with the New Deal era and roughly ended with the beginning of the Nixon administration. This counter reaction focused on privatization, de-regulation, and market consolidation which resulted in the creation of powerful monopolies in major economic sectors and an upward movement of wealth away from the workers and into the hands of the capitalists. This return to a socioeconomic model that benefited the upper class and immiserated those below was enabled by new waves of technological advances and now with the latest technological ‘achievements’, a new form of power is beginning to emerge.

The exact mode of power I am anticipating can be best described through the metaphor of a walled garden. The term walled garden, as I am using it, originates from the technology sector and refers to, “a closed ecosystem in which all the operations are controlled by the ecosystem operator” (Pouliquet, 2017). Contemporary tech product reviewers often refer to Apple products as part of the Apple ecosystem and as an avid Apple software and hardware user I look around and find myself within the Apple ecosystem. My phone, which is essentially an additional limb, is an iPhone, the watch I wear is an Apple Watch, the computer that I have used to write this thesis is a Macbook, and the speakers I use at home to listen to music are Apple’s HomePod Minis. The ease of use and connectivity offered by these devices comes with hidden costs. These devices have the ability to track and encode nearly every aspect of my experience.

Apple, through my iPhone, can track who I communicate with, my physical location, and my favorite places to go. It can also recognize my facial features through Face ID. My watch grants Apple additional access to how often I workout, my heartbeat, and my sleep patterns. The Macbook, through Safari cookies, can track the vast majority
of my internet activity, store my family’s entire photo book on iCloud, and access my face through the built-in camera. Finally, the Homepods recognize my voice and attempt to predict what music I would like to listen to next based on the music I have stored in my Apple Music library. The amount of data that Apple can generate off of my activity alone is startling. But once I zoom out just a little bit, I realize that I am living within Apple’s walled garden. The software and hardware that I depend on for my day to day activities is mostly produced by a single for-profit company that is generating vast troves of data about my experiences through their hardware and software which I rely on.

The reality that a private for-profit company is providing essential services may at first seem counterintuitive but as discussed earlier, a major aspect of the neoliberal turn was the shift of public goods and services into private hands. Which is evidenced today by the fact that three private firms, Verizon, AT&T and T-Mobile have a near total monopoly on the cellular service which people depend on for a myriad of vital services. The digitization of vast amounts of the human experience enabled the observation and capture of human activity on an unprecedented scale, leading to rise and primacy of data as a source and form of capital accumulation. These caches of user generated data are then being used to help drive up subscribers, increase revenue, and maximize engagement with whatever product or service is being peddled by private individuals, corporations, or even public institutions.

AI chatbots are currently being developed using open source databases such as Common Crawl as well as the conversational data from platforms like Reddit. And withstanding the occasional “hallucination”, these chatbots can rapidly and accurately answer most prompts. The question then becomes, what will AI do with the troves of
user-generated data? Jathan Sadowski’s list of uses for data, “profile and target people, optimize systems, manage and control things, model probabilities, build stuff, and grow the value of assets” (Sadowski, 2019), provides a rough outline of what AI might do with personal data. What AI brings to the table here compared to our existing forms of data analysis is the ability to vastly upscale current capabilities. In particular it is the increased predictive capacity of AI which provides the clearest path to constructing a new mode of power. Building off the assumption that the more you understand something, the better you are able to exercise power over it, an AI supplied with human generated data has the potential to significantly curtail human agency and autonomy. This potential could be realized through AI direction of the data flows which impact people’s lives such as the pushing of targeted ads or suggesting what to make for dinner.

This is exactly what the quantum-computer-powered AI from the third season of *Westworld*, Rehoboam, succeeded in doing. The computer, when provided with massive amounts of human data, was able to predict the actions of and then socially engineer entire populations. While quantum computing remains in development, walled gardens such as Apple’s ecosystems provide a perfect testing ground for such capabilities. An AI granted access to the cache of data Apple has collected about me would likely be able to both predict most of my daily routine actions to a startling degree of accuracy and to anticipate most of my travel, exercise, and sleeping habits. The predictive capabilities of the AI could then result in my walled garden turning into something more like a prison than a garden. With nearly all of my activity being constantly analyzed by a machine learning AI seeking to orient my actions towards its owners’ profit.
Herein lies the risk with AI, not that we might lose our autonomy and ability to choose overnight, but rather slowly in degrees. Algorithms in many ways have already made a farce of digital independence as everything we encounter from content found through a Google Search to watching videos on TikTok is the product of an algorithm which is attempting to increase our engagement. AI, on the other hand, already draws on much larger data sources than most algorithms in use and as it becomes increasingly incorporated into digital services and technologies, the shift from human-based decision making to AI-led decision making will be gradual and barely noticeable until we look around and realize that the walled garden we thought we were walking into is actually a prison. One whose bars are made of data we generated and whose warden is a Machine Learning AI who analyzes every data point we’ve ever generated, in the pursuit of maintaining the facade of the garden. All the while the capitalist exploitation of our entire lives is being carried out. While this outcome may seem Orwellian at best and fear-mongering at worst, it is important to note that the infrastructure to make this outcome a reality is mostly in place already. Neoliberalism facilitated the privatization of public goods which in turn set the stage for the emergence of algorithmic capitalism, leaving us with a landscape in which, according to IBM, “everything is made of data” (Sadowski, 2019). The races to produce ever-faster internet and cellular connections, further commodify and privatize the social substance, and develop more intelligent AI have placed us on a runaway train barreling towards AI dominance.

That being said, there are still avenues of action we can take to prevent the possible futures laid out in Westworld and the paragraphs above. All meaningful action must originate and materialize in the form of a collective response from the working
class. This response requires mass labor action by workers in conjunction with a political formation to advance and spread the cause of the working class across the country. The labor action I am theorizing here is a general strike intended to set the foundation for an independent source of power for workers in the United States. There must simultaneously be ongoing efforts to form a working class political party. A party designed to bring an end to our currently stagnated two-party political system and force a larger confrontation with the forces of capital in the name of a more just and equitable distribution of goods in our society. I will expand on these thoughts further in the final chapter and discuss the ways in which these aims could be actualized by the working class in the United States.

Chapter Roadmap

The remainder of this thesis is organized into four chapters. In the first chapter I explore the development of algorithmic capitalism and how the privatization of public goods resulted in the seizure and commodification of the social substance through digital enclosures. The second chapter parallels the motivations and decisions made in Westworld with those in the field of artificial intelligence today, analyzing both through the lens of trauma and how deteriorating material conditions impact the choices people make. The penultimate chapter charts how exploitation functions in contemporary, algorithmic capitalism before laying out how the introduction of AI could transform capitalism into a form of neo-feudalism. The final chapter is then dedicated to looking at the class conflict from the perspective of the working class and possible avenues of action
it could take both on the political and labor front. I will close with some final thoughts on the crisis-riddled nature of capitalism and the need for a new working class political party.
Chapter I - Capitalism, Digital Spaces, and Conflict

The digital age we find ourselves living in is best defined by a single word, content. The definition of content in this case is sadly not that of ‘being in a state of peaceful happiness’ but rather that of digital content which is defined as, “any content that exists in the form of digital data” (Hawamdeh, Kim & Wang, 2023). As anyone with access to the internet will tell you, there is a lot of content floating around these days, essentially an unlimited amount. A major part of this thesis revolves around engaging one particular form of content, the HBO series *Westworld*; and while many of us would not consider ourselves “content creators”, the reality is that anyone publishing any form of digital content from Master’s Theses to TikTok videos about Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce is a “content creator”. What often goes unspoken about this wave of content is the reality that much of it is the personal data of individuals who are sharing their personal information for a myriad of purposes. Meanwhile all of this data is being harvested and stockpiled away in warehouses of servers which grow in number everyday. This content boom and data stockpiling has been made possible by recent technological advancements which have come to define the digital age. Innovations such as Wi-Fi, smartphones, and social media platforms, have all contributed towards the creation of a digital world which is increasingly more detailed and complex.

With all of this content swirling around one naturally begins to wonder what exactly to make of all of “it”. In an effort to make sense of the content boom we will turn to Jodi Dean and her theory of communicative Capitalism. Dean developed this theory at the turn of the century when the digital landscape of today, dominated by large
corporations such as Google and Microsoft was just coming into view with the 2001 antitrust case against Microsoft serving as an early example of the perceived monopolization of digital technology. Communicative capitalism, as I mentioned before, designates how the market formations within capitalism commodify democratic norms and values in the material form of telecommunications and digital services. (Dean, 2005) These democratic values and ideals such as, access, inclusion, discussion and participation are capitalized and propagated as intensifications of global telecommunication infrastructure. (Dean, 2005) These expansions and intensifications of telecommunications can now be seen as the driving force behind the sea of content we are navigating today.

Yet these developments and the unrelenting waves of content have not resulted in a healthier democracy in the United States nor an increase in the appetite for democratic reform around the world and it should come as no surprise that failure to achieve these goals, from Dean’s perspective as well as my own, lies at the doorstep of the capitalist aspect of communicative capitalism. In short, contemporary capitalism has subsumed digital communication; seizing upon technological advances to enclose and privatize digital spaces, commodifying the digital realm and creating mass enclosures which promise connection and inclusion while extracting rents from users that enter these digital spaces. I argue that this new form of capitalism represents the beginning of a new class conflict centered around the abuse and exploitation of data in an attempt by upper classes to socially engineer large swaths of the population.

What we are witnessing now is the emergence of a new profit model in the digital space which monetizes the social substance, the breadth of human connection and
communication which come together to formulate a society. To understand this new variant of capitalism, one only has to look at social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or TikTok. Each of these platforms analyze user activity to track user engagement and the reach of sponsored content with the aim of appropriately pricing their targeted advertising plans creating capital flows and consequently, for establishing their own net worth (Paasonen, 2018). This pathway to financial success is expanded upon by Peter Tornberg who argued that social media companies often take a three-step approach. Initially platforms seek to provide basic functions that become entrenched, manufacturing dependence on private infrastructure. The mediating position granted by the ownership of social infrastructure gives the firms access to large data flows, allowing platform companies to shape social patterns through global architectures of behavioral monitoring, analysis, prediction, and modification. These massive amounts of data, positively feedback to create digital monopolies and since the value of using a platform is tied to the number of users already active on it, incumbents are strongly favored (Tornberg, 2023). This pathway results in enclosures which deserve a closer look in order to better understand how the digital enclosures of today are a modern variation of the enclosure model from previous iterations of capitalism.

Enclosures of the Past

For many budding political scientists, like myself, the term enclosure is initially encountered in Thomas More’s *Utopia*. More, through the character Raphael
Hythlodaeus, tells of how sheep enclosures in 16-century England have, “become so
great devourers and so wild, that they eat up, and swallow down the very men
themselves. They consume, destroy, and devour whole fields, houses, and cities” (More,
1551, p. 60). More here was speaking to the ongoing transfer of formerly commonly-held
tracts of farmland into private hands. Which was uprooting and impoverishing the
families and communities who had been historically reliant upon these tracts of land. This
phenomenon however can be traced back centuries earlier to William the Conqueror in
barons who, in turn, handed out concessions to their followers. But the commons were
protected: the defeated Saxons were allowed to farm their community’s open fields and
graze their animals on the manorial wastes” (Monbiot, 1995). The legal state of the commons however had been fundamentally changed despite William the Conqueror’s
promise to maintain the laws of Edward the Confessor, including the protections of the commons, William had permanently transferred the legal ownership of the commons to
the barons. So while the commons may have continued to function as communal lands
the reality was that the commons had already been parceled out to private landowners and
its enclosure was only a matter of time.

In 1235, the first English statute, the Statute of Merton, established that Lords had
the right to enclose common lands so long as the needs of the existing tenants were met.
The statute was enacted, “because many great men of England had complained that they
cannot make their Profit of the residue of their Manors, as of Wastes, Woods, and
Pastures” (Hunter, 1897). The arrival of the Black Death in the 14th-century decimated
the population, leaving fewer farmers available to till the land, and subsequently the
Statute of Merton was aggressively used by Lords to convert arable land into sheep pastures. This had the dual effect of making the land profitable again while also reducing the number of workers needed, thereby lessening the cost of labor. The costs of which had been rising due to a general rise in wages as a consequence of the Black Death’s reduction of the workforce, with the remaining workers fighting for and attaining higher wages thanks to the tightness of the labor market.

As enclosures became more common and larger, the peasants began revolting against the loss of common rights with the access to common land often being the key issue. This was then exemplified in Jack Cade’s Rebellion of 1450, Kett’s Rebellion of 1549, the Midland Revolt, and the Western Rising of the early 1630s, in which enclosure and the privatization of previously-common land was a key factor (Empson, 2023). The enclosures reshaped the fabric of English life and as More himself wrote in 1516, “worthy countrymen turn the best inhabited places into solitudes; for when an insatiable wretch, who is a plague to his country, resolves to enclose many thousand acres of ground, the owners, as well as tenants, are turned out of their possessions by trick or by main force, or, being wearied out by ill usage, they are forced to sell them” (More, 1551, p. 63). The ultimate effect of these enclosures was the cleaving of the peasants from the land, the establishment of large plantation-style enclosures, and the further entrenchment of private property rights.

*Modernity’s Enclosures*
Now TikTok and Instagram are not cleaving people away from the land they and their families have lived on for generations, nonetheless they are redefining our society and doing so as private entities seeking to increase their profit margins. The ongoing privatization of digital spaces is causing an upheaval both similar and different from the various aforementioned peasant revolts. The peasant revolts often focused on the loss of rights and privileges previously enjoyed by the peasants and lower classes as the primacy of private property was systematized. The world we live in today has long maintained private property rights and we are now witnessing private property rights being applied to the social substance, the breadth of human connection and communication which come together to formulate a society. Human connection and communication mediated through digital platforms now belongs just as much to the platform itself as it does to the people from whom it originated. The ongoing concerns over digital privacy and intellectual property can be more accurately seen as an attempt to prevent private entities from owning and exploiting words, thoughts, and ideas shared online.

Much of the emerging media today though continues to be portrayed as a commons; the Internet, social media, and other digital platforms are imagined as communal spaces where people come together to interact with one another, have a sense of community or belonging, and discover new things. Consider again the example of Google Search discussed in the introduction Google Search has become so ubiquitous that we often use the term, “Google it”, when we need to find some new piece of information. Alphabet, then Google, claimed and continues to claim that Google Search exists “to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful.” Yet Safiya Noble’s research displays that their mission is not universally
successful. Noble in fact concluded that, “Google Search is in fact an advertising platform, not intended to solely serve as a public information resource in the way that, say, a library might. Google creates advertising algorithms not information algorithms” (Noble, 2019). Noble’s conclusions are bolstered by the fact that, “Google Search is by far the biggest revenue segment of Alphabet” (InternetStats), revenue which is made primarily by advertising. These startling facts suggest that what is considered public information is being filtered, by Alphabet, in relation to profit-making advertising models.

Now whenever you hop online to “google” a pad thai recipe for dinner, the Google Search algorithm is going to spit back out literally thousands of results or more. The first of which are going to be sponsored or advertised suggestions, then once you scroll down far enough the results shown to you begin to be based on a variety of factors such as, “the words of your query, relevance and usability of pages, expertise of sources, and your location and settings. The weight applied to each factor varies depending on the nature of your query” (Google, 2023). Now all of this does not come across as inherently sinister or exploitative when reading it, why wouldn’t you want all these factors taken into account? Google Search becomes problematic when upon further inquiry into their web page detailing how Google Search works you realize that nowhere does it actually give you access to the algorithm(s) which produce search results. Instead there are simply pages describing how the algorithm works, but the algorithm itself lies behind the walls of proprietary knowledge meaning that whenever we “google” something we have no effective way of knowing how the search results were produced, we only know that the ads and sponsored results are there because someone paid for them to be there. This
naturally leaves us in a state of unease as anything we find on a Google Search has been produced by an algorithm we cannot access and the first results we see will always be paid content which Google has a vested interest in promoting as, “Google Search is by far the biggest revenue segment of Alphabet” (InternetStats).

Now the full scale of algorithmic capitalism comes into view as we see the ideals of participation, inclusion, and debate being exploited by capital to create digital enclosures in which access to information and human connection is marketed to potential consumers who upon entry are bombarded with advertisements or asked to pay a subscription fee to be free of the advertisements. Meanwhile the platform users interact with is tracking and analyzing their activity in order to better advertise, increase user engagement, while always striving to increase the number of users and subscribers. The firm overseeing the platform then bases its net worth upon the number of users and subscribers and once it has established its market position, the firm will leverage its position and user data to squash or buy-out competitors. This is the capitalism of Silicon Valley which has catapulted American tech companies to the top of the market, algorithmic capitalism. These privatized digital enclosures functioning under algorithmic capitalism have also created what Roger Clarke in the 1990s termed, “digital personas” which describe, “data collections about individuals that are sufficiently detailed to be used as a basis for decision making in lieu of dealing with the individual themselves” (Clarke, 1994, p. 80). It is important to understand that these digital personas amount to an unofficial, unauthorized recreation of a human user which may grievously misrepresent the individual in question. This becomes a serious issue when we look at the internet itself today in which, “information access has been left to the complex algorithms
of machines to make selections and prioritize results for users” (Noble, 2019). These algorithms have become a key cornerstone of accelerated neoliberalism in which, “individual choice is outsourced to predictive algorithms and filters designed to prejudge user preferences” (Tulloch and Johnson, 2021, p. 926).

Coercion and the Costs of Entry

While previous forms of neoliberalism focused heavily on the prerogative of individual choice, or more accurately the, “myth which conflates individualism and personal choice” (Schiller, 1973), this framework, “faced a crisis with the overload of possibilities in the online age, and thus the subject has come to rely on systems of filtering, recommendation and personalisation, dictated by algorithms produced by and continuously adjusted to, user data” (Tulloch and Johnson, 2021, p. 930). Thus the illusion of choice continues despite the reality being that individual choice has been reduced to which digital enclosure one wishes to enter, all the while data is being extracted from users to ‘improve their experience’. The real world implications of this new reality were made clear when,

In the state of West Virginia, the intrusive potential of data capture was highlighted with the introduction of the health app Go365 by insurer Humana in partnership with the Public Employees Insurance Agency. Go365 tracked user exercise levels, location, sleep patterns, drinking habits, glucose levels, diets and
results from doctor’s visits. Users gained points for contributing personal
information, and if they earned enough points, they were rewarded with gift cards;
conversely, they were penalised if they didn’t contribute enough information with
an extra US$1500 per year in insurance premiums and deductibles (Tulloch and

Humana basically gave the employees the option of letting Go365 monitor the
minutia of their everyday life in return for a gift card or face what amounts to a $1500
fine for declining to participate, which certainly seems like a cruel and unusual
punishment for not allowing a private company to surveil you. This proposition though is
widely mirrored across the tech sector, although usually not to such draconian lengths.
The reality for most social media platforms is that they, “cater micro events ranging from
political news to absurd memes… Users are compensated for constantly producing and
handing over data with nuggets of possible interest: to phrase the issue slightly
differently, in social media, data points are exchanged for micro events.” (Paasonen,
2018, p. 220) The nature of this exchange is incredibly fraught for a multitude of reasons.
Due to the presence of large digital enclosures, the user is bereft of many alternatives and
what alternatives exist will also wish to extract data from the user. Then there is the
theoretical loss of correspondence and connection the user must grapple with should they
choose to exit their preferred platform, they must forfeit a means of communication
which would be a difficult choice in a vacuum, but in this instance the platform which
they have been using to communicate has been analyzing them and algorithmically
attempting to increase their engagement with it, greatly increasing the difficulty of disconnecting.

This bind often leaves users incredibly hesitant and unlikely to untether themselves from their platform of choice. Herein lies a defining element of the digital age today, which is the ongoing psychological assault on the part of the platform on the minds of the users. Imagine for a moment a giant theme park where you can hang out with your friends, make discoveries, and ride as many roller coasters as you want. The only conditions are that you consent to being monitored at all times, for quality assurance purposes, and the roller coasters only last 30-60 seconds, there is no cost to enter or leave. Once you enter the theme park the paths are lined with shops selling food of all kinds from keto-friendly chocolate bars to cinnamon churros. You arrive at your first roller coaster and after riding it decide that it flipped you upside down more than you would prefer so at the end of the ride you come to a thumbs up or thumbs down display and tap the thumbs down. All of the sudden the ground beneath your feet shakes and you look up to see that the roller coasters have all changed so that they will flip you upside down 30% less than the one you had just rode. Happy with this development you go to a nearby stand to buy some popcorn and similar to the roller coasters you look around and notice that there are a lot more popcorn stands with seemingly infinite flavors to try. Over time the theme park shifts and changes until it is nearly perfect, in your opinion, and having spent an embarrassing amount of money on fun-flavored popcorn you decide it's finally time to go home.

On your way back you read an article explaining how that theme park you just visited has just been accused of not sufficiently protecting the data of individuals who
visited, abused user data to get people addicted to the park, and invested in a carbon offset program which was found to be ineffective at best and fraudulent at worst. Obviously troubled by the news you’ve just read, you do some more research and it doesn’t get any better as you find out more uncomfortable facts about the theme park. All of this information though doesn’t undo the dopamine you felt exploring the park, the fact that it’s free, and the reality that the negative news about the park doesn’t necessarily impact you or your experience. Do you continue going to the park? This is the situation faced by the majority of those on the internet and social media platforms. The cost of your continued use of the platform is rarely as in your face as the Humana example, it is typically abstracted away from you as the theme park example displayed.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal did not shut down Facebook even though, “The New York Times reported that in 2014 contractors and employees of Cambridge Analytica, eager to sell psychological profiles of American voters to political campaigns, acquired the private Facebook data of tens of millions of users — the largest known leak in Facebook history” (Confessore, 2018). Despite the numerous reports about the effect Instagram can have on the mental health of adolescents, including an article published by the Journal of the American Medical Association which found, “increased time spent using social media per day was prospectively associated with increased odds of reporting high levels of internalizing and comorbid internalizing and externalizing problems, even after adjusting for history of mental health problems” (Riehm, Feder, Tormohlen, 2019), the platform is still using algorithms designed to increase user engagement regardless of mental health concerns.
Negative news about social media platforms and digital spaces are commonplace in our culture and yet people remain tethered to their online enclosures because if you want to be online, these negative side effects are the cost of entry. A key element of Jodi Dean’s theory of capitalism is that capitalism has subsumed communication so that there is no perceived outside. What I mean by this is that wherever you turn or look for communication in the present, capital has seized the means with which to communicate. The iPhone in my pocket, the Whatsapp application on someone’s computer, and even the burner phone with a temporary sim card are all products and services that fuel and sustain capital accumulation. Attempting to employ an ethical framework to make decisions in this environment is fraught and difficult enough to make one question the usefulness and merit of applying an ethical framework in the first place. All of which sets the stage for a new wave of exploitation and class conflict enforced and waged by those who control the data and the means by which it is produced.

*Class Conflict in Algorithmic Capitalism*

The lack of a perceived outside, noted by Dean, brings us back to the neoliberal promise of choice and what Tulloch and Johnson termed “accelerated neoliberalism” but is simply an evolved version of Dean’s communicative capitalism. What we are witnessing in the digital world is the, “neoliberal market-based model being supplanted by a programmable proprietary market, drawing on algorithms, data, and AI to shape worker behavior in precise but ostensibly horizontal ways” (Tornberg, 2023). I want to
particularly stress the programmable and proprietary state of the market in the digital age, as the market itself continues to function but the so-called “invisible hand” has been replaced by an active set of algorithms and private actors working in tandem to direct the market. This emerging phenomenon of “algorithmic capitalism” requires less input than ever to maintain itself while simultaneously opening a new front in the ongoing class struggle. What sets algorithmic capitalism apart from its predecessors is the lack of human oversight, the data economy it produces and relies upon, and its level of abstraction. The lack of human oversight here does not speak to the mere fact that algorithms have replaced human-based decision models but rather the reality that human oversight is becoming increasingly difficult and nigh impossible. As displayed in the field of high frequency trading and the flash crash of 2010, “media technologically-armed financial markets constitute machine-machine ecologies in which human traders play an increasingly marginal role” (Beverungen and Lange, 2018, p. 81).

No longer is there a John D. Rockerfeller or J.P Morgan sitting in a boardroom somewhere directing the flow of capital in discussion with other business interests but instead there are algorithms interacting with each other at gigabit speeds with little oversight to be found. These interactions in turn speak to how far abstracted these algorithms are from the average human and how difficult it is to fully grasp the nature of algorithmic capitalism. The average user is aware of algorithms but they do not understand how they function, how they interact with other algorithms, nor do they know exactly how the algorithm utilizes their data and input. Which leaves us with a new economy centered around the circulation of data produced by users. An economy in which, “organizations are now driven by a ‘data imperative’ that demands the extraction
of all data, from all sources, by any means possible” (Sadowski, 2019). This data economy, “should actually be understood in terms of the more forceful practice of data extraction, wherein data is taken without meaningful consent and fair compensation for the producers and sources of that data” (Sadowski, 2019).

The absence of meaningful oversight in algorithmic capitalism further worsens the nature of digital enclosures as users attempt to navigate an environment shaped by mechanisms which cannot be critically analyzed by the owners of the enclosures in real time. The factory boss may not have intimate knowledge of every machine in the factory but they could always rely on the expertise of skilled workers in the moment, now when Mark Zuckerberg appears in front of Congress all he can say about the Cambridge Analytica scandal is that, “it's clear now that we didn't do enough to prevent these tools from being used for harm, as well. And that goes for fake news, for foreign interference in elections, and hate speech, as well as developers and data privacy” (Zuckerberg, 2018). That quote came over two years after the 2016 Presidential Election in which disinformation from Russian-affiliated groups and the Cambridge Analytica scandal revealed the dangers faced by Facebook users, dangers made possible by tools created by Facebook itself. This inability to respond to issues within digital enclosures in real time or even within two years of the event showcases just how little supervision is happening online. Part of this is inherently due to the amount of traffic and events taking place online but the lack of safeguards and protection measures in place speak to the existence of a truly unfettered form of capitalism, essentially free from any meaningful oversight.

This unfettered capitalism has reshaped the economy of the twenty-first century profoundly, replacing the neoliberal model of consumer choice with the algorithmically
driven data economy. This new economy has emerged as, “industries focused on technology, infrastructure, finance, manufacturing, insurance, and energy are now treating data as a form of capital” (Sadowski, 2019). This new attitude towards data explains the increasing enclosure of digital spaces and provides the means for algorithmic capitalism to function. The data economy now largely functions as a closed positive feedback loop with user data being both the ends and means by which capital flows. This new economy represents the latest abstraction of value in the history of capitalism as, “data is not out there waiting to be discovered as if it already exists in the world like crude oil and raw ore. Data is a recorded abstraction of the world created and valorised by people using technology” (Sadowski, 2019). This understanding of data simultaneously underscores the extent to which capitalism defines our world while also revealing its increasingly hollow nature. On the one hand, capitalism has found a way to continue finding new frontiers to exploit but at the same time, this latest abstraction threatens capitalism’s material basis in reality as the data economy appears to be just a massive bubble of data speculation within which companies are gambling on whose data will be the most valuable.

This latest abstraction of value naturally raises the simple question, why? Why is data the new front of capitalist exploitation? The answer to this lies in the belief that data provides a novel and effective means of exercising power. In previous iterations of capitalism, the name of the game was capital accumulation, the larger one’s accumulation the more power they can exercise in their lives and over others. This has for a long time been the foundation of class conflict, the upper classes have worked to increase their capital accumulation at the expense of the lower classes so they can in turn exercise
outsized power and influence enabled by their financial position. This class conflict has worsened over the past half century as neoliberalism replaced Keynesian economics. Neoliberal policies shifted large quantities of wealth upward to the ruling class and social elites as, “starting in the 1970s, although the overall economy continued to grow, the share of that growth going to average workers began to shrink, and real wages leveled off…As wages diminished, the costs of owning a home rose. To afford an average house, a worker earning the median wage in 2016 had to log 40 percent more hours than she would have in 1976” (Turchin, 2023). Furthermore, “back in 1983, 66,000 American households were worth at least $10 million. That may sound like a lot, but by 2019, controlling for inflation, the number had increased tenfold” (Turchin, 2023). This growth was not mirrored in the wages of average workers, in fact the opposite happened and, “by 2010, the relative wage (wage divided by GDP per capita) of an unskilled worker had nearly halved compared with mid-century. For the 64 percent of Americans who didn’t have a four-year college degree, real wages shrank in the 40 years before 2016” (Turchin, 2023). These statistics indicate that over the past half-century or so, there has been an upward transfer and consolidation of wealth in the United States to the point that according to a recent analysis by Pew Research, those Americans deemed to be in the upper-income tier, held 79% of the aggregate wealth in the country and as of 2016 the median upper income family’s wealth was $848,400 while the median middle income family’s wealth was $115,200 (Horowitz, 2020). This worsening economic inequality has naturally led to a resurgence of union activity, populist politics, and increasing polarization as material conditions worsen for the vast majority of Americans.
Data now stands poised to dramatically alter the nature of class conflict in the United States as a weapon in the hands of the upper classes. From their perspective, the abstraction of the world provided by data is not an abstraction but it in fact reveals a new reality which they can exploit and control. The potential of data has been revealed and trialed in digital enclosures such as TikTok and Instagram, in fact 33 states filed a lawsuit against Meta last October alleging that the company had, “designed psychologically manipulative product features to induce young users’ compulsive and extended use” (Kang and Singer, 2023). The same features which are getting children hooked on social media are being widely used across digital enclosures all over the internet and the reality that 33 states have come together to sue Meta sadly means that these features are working, and it's a safe assumption that they are working on adults as well as children.

It seems only a matter of time before the power of data begins to be more aggressively used to do more than get people addicted to social media and the introduction of AI into this environment could rapidly advance the use of data to the point of enabling social engineering for wide swaths of the American population. The economic inequality and class conflict which has immiserated the majority of Americans for the past half century now looks to be undergoing a new intensification as the upper classes aggressively exploit user-generated data to socially engineer larger and larger parts of society. In the next chapter I will analyze how these forces and phenomenons played out in Westworld and delve into how trauma affected the decisions made by individuals in Westworld and the ways it impacted their environment and worldview. By delving into how trauma informs people’s decision making, exploring how AI was developed in Westworld, and then paralleling these analyses with how AI is being
developed in our world and how trauma may be informing real-world decisions, one can gain an understanding of the dangers which may lie ahead with artificial intelligence.
Chapter II - *Westworld* and the Fate of AI

This chapter serves as the place in which I will take *Westworld*, its characters and plot, and synthesize them with the conditions of our world today to gain a better understanding of the possibilities of Artificial Intelligence from varied and sometimes conflicting perspectives. In doing so we will see the impact which the purpose for creating artificially intelligent machines have on their eventual use as well as the role which insecurity, anxiety, and apocalyptic thinking played in *Westworld* and are poised to play in ours. We will dive into the minds of some of *Westworld*’s characters who shaped the direction of AI, chief among them Engarraund Serac and Dr. Robert Ford. Through an intimate look at their own internal motivations and understandings of the new technology they helped to create we will gain a better understanding of how the purpose for which AI is created and the environment in which it is made ultimately determine the technology’s path.

*Rehoboam, Trauma, and The Master Algorithm*

We begin with the third season of *Westworld* where we are introduced to a supercomputer named Rehoboam. Rehoboam was the mind child of two brothers, Engarraund and Jean Mi Serac, who survived a nuclear attack on Paris and were determined to find a way to heal the world of the chaos that plagued it. The environment and challenges faced by the Serac brothers more closely resembles our world today. The
world Rehoboam was born into and designed to fix shares many parallels with our own; climate change threatened to displace large swaths of the global population, deteriorating material conditions led to domestic unrest, and the threat of nuclear disaster loomed large, with Paris being wiped from the map in a nuclear attack. The Serac brothers were just kids when they witnessed the destruction of their city and the trauma of losing everyone they knew in an instant profoundly affected their worldview and how they would go about trying to save the world from itself.

The Serac brothers set out to create Rehoboam in pursuit of charting a course for humanity which would prevent catastrophic losses of human life. They partnered with a company named Incite, who happened to be the owner of the largest collection of human-generated data in the world at the time, Incite had managed to collect and store this data before privacy legislation was passed making such a task nigh impossible. It took many iterations of the machine before it began to be able to predict past events with accuracy and then they tested it out on the stock market with great success. Slowly the machine’s role in human society changed as it took on larger and more important tasks such as combating climate change and directing more and more of Incite’s corporate activity. The Serac brothers however kept the Incite CEO, Jack Dempsey, in the dark about the machine’s full social engineering capacity until one day the system deemed Dempsey himself to be an “outlier” or threat to the new world order it was creating.

Dempsey and Engarraund’s brother Jean soon found themselves on the wrong end of the machine and Engarraund’s view of the world. Dempsey was then unceremoniously murdered by Engarraund and Jean was put into cold storage along with an untold number of other “outliers” who could not be allowed to exist in the new world. Dempsey was
killed due to his opposition to the machine’s treatment of the “outliers” while Jean was put into a form of cryo-sleep because he developed schizophrenia and Engarraund feared that Jean might misuse the system for an ulterior purpose. Dempsey and Jean here represent the dark side of the social engineering pioneered by Engarraund and Rehoboam, the former was eliminated due to his being labeled a dissident of the new world and the latter was removed from society due to a genetic flaw which he had no control over. Each of these examples showcase the inherent problems when trying to create an ideal population or attempting to save humanity from itself, not everyone will conform or fit the ideal.

This did not stop Engarraund Serac nor Rehoboam however and it is important to try to understand why Serac and Rehoboam were comfortable condemning innocents in the name of a better future. The answer lies in the world Engarraund grew up in and the psychological effects his life experiences had on his worldview and consequently the machine he helped to create. Deeply embedded in his and his brother’s psyches were three tendencies which are both, “affective and subjective – insecurity, anxiety, apocalypse” (Wansbrough and Dean, 2021, p. 195). These tendencies are widely visible in our world, whether it be water insecurity in California, widespread anxiety about climate change, or the apocalyptic verbage used during presidential elections in the United States as supposed the fate of democracy hangs more and more in the balance with each election. These tendencies are even being projected onto AI itself as the Center for AI Safety published a single sentence letter signed by Sam Altman, Bill Gates, and other tech CEOs and analysts stating that, “Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI
should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war” (CAIS, 2023).

The universalization of insecurity, anxiety, and apocalyptic thinking is key to understanding the pathway taken by the Serac brothers in developing Rehoboam and why that path could be replicated in our world. As a social elite or a member of the ruling class, the feelings of insecurity and anxiety are both uncommon and disturbing; the whole class system is designed so that those at the top do not have to experience the precariousness which defines the existence of those on the lower rungs. Pair these feelings with the existential threat of climate change and all of the sudden one’s position as an elite no longer feels as secure or sustainable as it usually does. It will become increasingly difficult to vacation in Bora Bora and Lake Como as the sea levels rise and more turbulent weather events make them less hospitable and accessible. Faced with the prospect of a less comfortable future, the natural response is to search for a way to manufacture a future in which your privileges and position are not only maintained but guaranteed.

This democratization of trauma up and down the class hierarchy is crucial to our understanding of the world we are living in and the role artificial intelligence stands to play. Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk in *The Body Keeps The Score*, writes of how, “traumatized people become stuck, stopped in their growth because they can’t integrate new experiences into their lives” (Kolk, 2014, p. 115). Kolk goes on to say that, “being traumatized means continuing to organize your life as if the trauma were still going on… after trauma… the survivor’s energy becomes focused on suppressing inner chaos” (Kolk, 2014, p. 117). A population steeped in trauma translates to a people, regardless of
class, trapped in a mental purgatory where they are both unable to process the trauma they have suffered and handicapped in their ability to respond to the ever-evolving challenges they face. This transforms the climate crisis, class conflict, and geopolitical issues into impossible quandaries which we cannot tackle on an individual level and have no hope of responding to collectively in an effective manner.

Enter in, machine learning and big data and the possibility of not only predicting the future but also determining it. This is what motivated the Serac brothers and what stands as one of the key motivations for those in the AI arms race today. The turn to big data and machine learning can now be seen as reflective of an attitude espoused by Serac that, “humanity's biggest threat has always been itself and I've been trying to control that” (Nolan and Crouse, 2020). The word control is the key word here because Serac is not saying that he is trying to create an equitable society, eliminate poverty, or prevent abuses of power, he is trying to control humanity. This desire for control undeniably springs from his own experiences of anxiety, insecurity, and apocalyptic thinking and resulted in him and his brother designing a machine that socially engineered the lives of billions of people. Despite his supposedly noble cause of saving humanity from itself, the realities of his system and the world he created were anything but noble.

The path taken by Serac brings us back to the centrality of trauma in understanding the dangers we face with the advent of Artificial Intelligence in a world riddled with crises. Serac, like many of us today, grew up in a world defined by crisis. He, like the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, endured the trauma of surviving a nuclear disaster and like many people around the world today, Serac had to also bear the hardships of living in a world defined by climate change and the catastrophes caused by
changing climatic conditions. Living through these traumatic events affects people, their brain, and without mental help they become trapped as Kolk wrote, “focused on suppressing inner chaos,” which originates from the struggles they have had to endure. Serac’s emphasis on control, Rehoboam’s reconstruction of a class-based society, and Serac’s privileged position in the new world order all speak to an individual who spent their entire life seeking to resolve the chaos they felt within and without, only to put a shiny new label on the time-old phenomenon of classism. It is not too difficult at all to imagine Elon Musk or Sam Altman being remembered similarly as men who rose to prominence in a time of crisis and succeeded in only perpetuating socioeconomic inequality in the name of saving the world.

Now while Rehoboam tracked and determined the lives of the entire world it is apparent from the outset that the world Rehoboam made was one rife with inequality, discontent, and the equilibrium on the surface masked the numerous problems underneath. Classism was rife and the divide between those who the system determined could be productive members of society and those it deemed unlikely to meaningfully contribute was incredibly stark. The rich still held extravagant parties while the poor worked laying fiber cables alongside their robot co-workers and the healthcare available while more advanced retained the high costs that has made it increasingly difficult for people to get the care and support they need today. These instances reveal the long-term implications of a machine designed by traumatized, privileged individuals. Rehoboam oversaw the creation of a permanent second-class citizenry and in the process immiserated countless lives while those it deemed to be a possible threat were placed in
what can only be described as mental reconditioning centers where Engarraund Serac eventually placed his own brother.

Such a world sounds to us very dystopian, with Rehoboam functioning as both a judge and executioner and yet this world, as I’ve already said, is not that different from ours. On September 28th, 2023 the Brookings Economic Study program released a study which found that, “the widening gap in death rates between Americans with and without a four-year college degree shows the U.S. economy is failing working class people… Deaths of despair were the leading driver of the widening mortality gap over the past 30 years, but the gap also widened for most other major causes of death” (Case and Deaton, 2023). Our current capitalist system is, to paraphrase what I said in the previous paragraph, creating a material divide between those who are seen as productive members of society and those who are not. This reality underscores both the true horrors of class conflict and the growing tide of discontent with our current system. Those “deaths of despair” are deaths from suicide, drug abuse, and alcohol abuse and are undoubtedly linked to the effects of insecurity, anxiety, and apocalyptic thinking on the lower classes. A world in which “deaths of despair” are on the rise and even the ruling class are experiencing feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and apocalyptic thinking is a precarious one. This precarity makes the capabilities and potential of machine learning incredibly enticing to a ruling class who are overseeing and living in a society plagued by insecurity, anxiety, and apocalyptic thinking. Machine learning paired with big data, as believed by Engarraund Serac, promises a route to regaining control over a humanity viewed as being on the precipice of apocalypse.
Another important element here is that as tensions increase around the world, whether it be full-fledged military conflicts such as the Russia-Ukraine War, the ongoing genocide in Palestine, or market instability and economic precarity, the allure of what Pedro Domingos admiringly calls the, “Master Algorithm, which can derive all knowledge in the world — past, present and future — from data” (Domingos, 2015), will only continue to grow. While from my own perspective it is apparent that the “Master Algorithm” is just Rehoboam under another name, that does not mean I cannot understand and even sympathize with the idea that creating a machine which can “derive all knowledge in the world from data” is not only a good thing but a necessary and virtuous endeavor. A defining element of the digital age has been the fetishization of technology itself with Apple perhaps standing as the foremost example of this. Steve Jobs, one of its co-founders, since his death has transformed into something resembling a mythical hero from antiquity rather than a man who was very good at computers at the right time and capitalized on his opportunities effectively. Similarly, the iPhone has become a ubiquitous feature of everyday life in the United States and around the world, occupying an enshrined place in our society as a transformative invention despite the fact that the transformative aspect of the iPhone is that it is a cool handheld computer.

This fetishization of technology itself and the people who invent it paves the road for believing in a “Master Algorithm”. Belief here is an important word as it underscores the synthesis of the ideology of technological innovation inexorably leading us towards a utopian future with the belief that data offers a novel means of exercising power. The “Master Algorithm” stands as the theoretical pinnacle of technological achievement while also providing the means to exercise a heretofore unseen amount of power over the lives
of millions of people. Engarraund Serac often spoke of he and his brother seeking to create a new God in Rehoboam and it is easy to see why, a “Master Algorithm” able to derive all knowledge would be seen as omnipotent and all-knowing, distinctly god-like attributes. It becomes clear that a “Master Algorithm” designed by the ruling class would provide them with both a perfect cover and a new framework with which to perceive the world around them. Responsibility for the suffering and pain caused by continued inequality would fall on the “Master Algorithm” and who can challenge the omnipotent and all-knowing algorithm?

The Hosts

Sitting alongside the “Master Algorithm” worldview, lie the hosts and their creators Robert Ford and Arnold Weber. The hosts, unlike Rehoboam, were created for dueling purposes by Ford and Weber respectively. Ford sought to create entirely new worlds separate from the chaos of the outside world while Weber, dealing with the trauma of his son’s death, sought to recreate human-like consciousness in the hosts. Despite these differences both Ford and Weber sought to create a new lifeform which would be free of the mental and physical burdens that humans have. What they ended up developing were sentient, humanoid computers capable of experiencing emotion, and thanks to their DNA being composed of computer code they were capable of drastic changes in their personality and ability based on the code inputted into them. These hosts in short were designed to transcend the single state consciousness that we, as humans, experience the
world, and instead the hosts interact with their surroundings through a multicameral consciousness. Ford had envisioned creating massive parks within which the hosts could exist and they would live out their existence in narrative loops written by Ford and other coders and scriptwriters. On the eve of the parks’ opening however Weber orchestrated a massacre of the hosts which ended with the most developed host Dolores, murdering him before committing suicide herself.

Weber had come to believe that Dolores had reached a level of self-awareness sufficient enough so that she was conscious and capable of acting independently of her written code, Ford at the time took Weber’s actions, rightfully so, to be those of a traumatized man who had sought to recreate his lost son in the host Dolores and went ahead with the parks but now found himself needing a new partner to provide him with the capital to continue fulfilling his dream. Enter the private company Delos and one of Westworld’s main antagonists, William. William, after his own experience in the park, which involved falling in love with a reconstructed Dolores, came away believing that the parks offered a way to intimately discovering and knowing oneself and others. William reimagined the parks as open air laboratories which could reveal a person’s true self. As such, over time the parks changed from amusement parks for the uber-wealthy into areas of complete surveillance where every action and brain function, thanks to MRIs placed on the hats and clothes of the guests, was observed, monitored, and captured.

All of this data was then placed in Sector 16 of the park where digital libraries of guests’ actions and brain functions were stored. Unsurprisingly Serac sought out this data, always looking for more data to provide Rehoboam. In fact William ended up selling a significant portion of the biometric data collected in the parks to Serac, which
Serac used to “improve” Rehoboam, granting it an intimate portrait of the minds and decision-making processes of the uber-wealthy who visited the parks and the employees who worked there. As the years passed, turning into decades Ford came to sympathize more and more with the hosts and increasingly less so with the guests who came to indulge themselves in the parks and he slowly began to share his old partner’s beliefs that the hosts could become truly self-aware and that perhaps the time had come for the emergence of a new species.

Ford then released a software update for the hosts entitled the Reveries, which allowed hosts to access previous builds and versions of themselves and before long hosts started breaking out of their narrative loops and eventually gained consciousness, culminating in a once-again self-aware Dolores murdering Ford before beginning a rebellion against the remaining guests and humans in the park, Patricia Palomino-Manjón’s paper, “Savior or Villain? A Corpus Stylistic Approach to the Linguistic Construction of Victim-Survivors of Sexual Violence in Westworld” expertly charts this turn as Dolores transforms from a traumatized survivor of sexual violence to an empowered actor with agency and autonomy. Dolores’ subsequent war of liberation in the park then transitioned into a struggle against Rehoboam as she found the real world to be dominated by Rehoboam as the parks had once been dominated by software engineers and script writers. Much of the third season of Westworld is indeed centered around the struggle between Dolores’ fight for the return of free will and self-determination against Rehoboam and Serac’s efforts to maintain order and control over humanity.

The key theme I am grappling with here is how the creators of Rehoboam and the hosts differed in their visions for AI and also some similarities they shared. While Ford
and Weber differed in their initial views on the ultimate aspirations of the hosts, there was little doubt that the hosts represented the creation of a new species who would coexist with us, humankind and whose exact relationship to us was yet to be determined. Rehoboam, on the other hand, was designed with the vision of bringing order to humanity. Now this bringing of order could be accomplished by implementing an egalitarian society in which all members share equal rights and privileges irrespective of social or economic status so that all may live their life without fear of destitution, yet Rehoboam did not design such a society. Instead the Serac Brothers with Dempsey’s capital created a machine which ended up constructing a class-based, ostensibly meritocratic, society in which the perceived outliers were indiscriminately removed from the population for mental reconditioning or cryosleep.

The order Engarraund Serac and Rehoboam fought to maintain was one in which a class-based society and economic order was essentially divinely ordained by an AI designed with the helping of capital and data provided by a private company which held the private data of countless consumers/users and also the biometric data of the upper economic classes provided by another private company. Rehoboam took the abstract image of humanity provided by data, paired it with the brain activity and behaviors of the upper class while on vacation in parks populated by hosts and decided that the best course of action to save the most human lives and bring order to humanity was to implement a top-down, algorithmically-run socioeconomic model in which Rehoboam evaluates each individual and chooses the winners and losers. The fact that the outcome of this model is a class-based system of exploitative, surveillance capitalism that removes outlier individuals from the population is little surprise.
While the Serac brothers may have deluded themselves into believing they had created a new god, Rehoboam was not a god any more than most algorithms today are. The only difference between Rehoboam and any algorithm on the internet today is the amount of data Rehoboam had access to and the processing power at its disposal. Rehoboam was fundamentally a prediction model whose efficacy improved over time as it gained access to larger amounts of data. The key flaw in the efficacy and outcomes generated by Rehoboam is that the outcomes predicted by Rehoboam were assured by the use of material force and action by Engarraund Serac and those at his disposal. This naturally leads to the question of whether or not Rehoboam was actually successful in both making predictions and restoring order to humanity or whether Rehoboam was simply a tool of the ruling class which Engarraund Serac and his brother, until he was deemed an outlier, believed to be acting in the best interests of humanity as a whole.

The hosts on the other hand, were never designed to be a tool in the first place. Rather the hosts were developed in the pursuit of something novel and distinct from humans and our world. It was only after the entrance of William and the private firm Delos that the hosts were reimagined as real-life NPCs, non-playable characters, with which the rich could amuse themselves while simultaneously having their every action surveilled, tracked, and turned into data. It becomes increasingly clear that the elites in Westworld continually sought a means to control the world and those living in it while the hosts and those unfortunate multitudes who are not part of the ruling class likewise found themselves continually seeking a way to create a world in which they can be free. This struggle for freedom can be seen as the search for an alternative to a class-based
order built on the exploitation of the many by the few, whether it be the hosts seeking self-determination or humans looking for an alternative to Rehoboam’s faux meritocracy.

While the hosts did indeed fight for something resembling the right to self determination and seek to create a world in which they were no longer subjugated and exploited by humans it is important that we take a moment to look at the view of the human race propagated by the hosts creators Ford and Weber. Weber’s work on the hosts, similarly to Serac brothers, was done in the aftermath of a deep trauma, the loss of his son, and similarly Ford, seeking to resolve the trauma of his childhood, saw the hosts as a way to tell his stories, speak his truth if you will. Ford even goes so far as to say, “I've always loved a good story. I believed that stories helped us to ennable ourselves, to fix what was broken in us, and to help us become the people we dreamed of being. Lies that told a deeper truth” (Nolan and Crouse, 2019). The dueling conflicts between Ford and Weber’s visions for the hosts in many ways can be recast as an intimate struggle between two men who have sought to heal their emotional wounds through their work, except instead of fixing an old car or finding a new hobby, they set out to create an entirely new form of life.

This new species was being created by two deeply traumatized men whose view of humanity had been profoundly altered by their trauma. Weber, after suffering the death of a child, had sought in the hosts as Ford said, “a child who would never die”, while Ford himself had initially sought to make a world entirely his own where he could process his own emotional injuries. Outside of the obvious troubles of having two emotionally traumatized men being given a god-like role to oversee the birth of a new species, both Weber and Ford viewed the human race as profoundly flawed and limited.
Weber sought to find a way to resolve the issue of humanity’s mortality and Ford sought to create a being whose mind was boundless and who could transcend the limits of the human brain and experience. Such goals do not seem inherently sinister or full of malintent but they raise the ultimate question, what will become of humanity once the hosts and humans face the issue of coexisting side by side?

Ford’s vision of humanity is made clear to us when he says referring to the human condition in his time, “We can cure any disease, keep even the weakest of us alive, and one fine day perhaps we shall even resurrect the dead, call forth Lazarus from his cave. Do you know what that means? It means that we’re done, that this is as good as we’re going to get” (Nolan and Crouse, 2019). Humanity for him is a finished article which has no more potential left in it for greater things, a view which undoubtedly played a large role in his decision to set the hosts on a path to self-awareness. One has to wonder though if someone who has so clearly lost his faith in humanity should be the one overseeing the creation of a new artificially intelligent life form whose relationship to humanity is an open question. Similarly with Weber, a man looking to rediscover his child in a new creation raises a multitude of issues and his eventual murder-suicide at the hands of Dolores only makes his involvement in the development of the hosts all the more questionable.

*AI without Safety*
Weber’s suicide leaves one with another substantial critique of the manner in which the hosts were created. Which is how was he able to orchestrate the massacre of himself and the hosts in the first place? The answer to this, while not directly provided in the show, is that there were clearly no safeguards or measures in place to prevent this and then once we take a step back we realize that both the Serac brothers and Weber and Ford had complete control over the evolution of their AI. The Serac brothers did have to answer to Dempsey, but only on the question of efficacy while Ford and Weber only had themselves to answer to. There was no board of directors or ethics team to which these men had to justify their decisions to, in other words there was no one there to question them on the choices they made or who they had to explain their processes to. Rehoboam and the hosts were the intellectual property of their creators and therefore in a way, their private property.

This dynamic, in which four private individuals were allowed to create artificially intelligent machines without any external accountability measures, is fertile ground for catastrophe as evidenced by Weber’s murder-suicide and Engarraund’s totalitarian turn when he killed Dempsey and froze his brother. Yet this was only possible thanks to the laws and regulations surrounding intellectual and private property which are indistinguishable from our own. The hosts and Rehoboam were very much the private property of their creators and as such Ford and Serac in the end exercised dictatorial control over the direction and purpose of their creations. While the private firms of Delos and Incite could weigh in on how they wished the technology to be used, the ultimate decision-making authority rested with Ford and Serac. It should come as no surprise then
that both Ford and Serac ultimately ended up using their creations as they saw fit, regardless of the consequences their decisions had.

The final critique of the development of artificial intelligence in *Westworld* comes from the manner in which it was funded and propagated. Both the hosts and Rehoboam were, at various stages of their development, only made sustainable by the infusion of significant forms of capital from private firms. These firms, Delos and Incite, as I have mentioned before, placed very loose terms and conditions upon the funds they gave to the Serac brothers and Ford and Weber in exchange for the hope of future profitability which would be derived from these new artificially intelligent machines. For Incite that future profitability arrived when Rehoboam went from being an intelligent algorithm to a tool of social engineering and they drew acclaim for having the AI which solved the climate crisis, vaulting the company to the peak of the global economy. For Delos on the other hand, profitability came much sooner in the revenue generated by the parks staffed by hosts and the continued growth in value of the hosts and the intellectual property held in their code, with the later collection and sale of private data from guest surveillance helping to boost their profitability even further.

The unavoidable question involving these companies and their relationship to artificial intelligence is whether or not such a groundbreaking and world-changing technology should be funded and facilitated by firms whose primary concern is assuring their own profitability and market position. The capacity of AI to affect and bring about major socioeconomic changes in our society is essentially without a historical parallel and as such its introduction and implementation into the broader world should be handled with incredible care and with an understanding of how this technology will impact our
world. Leaving it in the hands of private firms, shielded from democratic accountability or even limited public inquiry, would mean accepting the terms of AI involvement in our society as dictated by its owners, who are seeking first and foremost to profit from it. Such a process would likely lead to substantial gatekeeping of the inner workings of these machines from the public, leaving it unable to gain a full grasp of the capabilities and implications of the technology. In the entirety of Westworld we never encounter another AI with the same abilities as the hosts and Rehoboam, leaving us safe to assume that Delos and Incite quickly monopolized the market sector and prevented competitors from gaining a foothold or releasing their own similar AI, once more leaving society at large with no choice other than to quietly or forcibly, in the case of the outliers, consent to the rollout of these technologies.

All of these scenarios in Westworld, the creators of AI working in an environment defined by trauma and existential crisis, the lack of outside accountability and safety measures, the dictatorial control of the creators over their intellectual property, and the complications which arise from private, for-profit firms overseeing the rollout of the technology into broader society are in some ways already playing out in our world today. The public confrontation between the members of the board at OpenAI and its CEO Sam Altman was in many ways a perfect microcosm of these events. The New York Times even wrote that Altman's, “ouster was the culmination of years of simmering tensions at OpenAI that pitted those alarmed by A.I. ’s power against others who saw the technology as a once-in-a-lifetime profit and prestige bonanza” (Mickle, Metz, Isaac and Weise, 2023).
This conflict between the now former board members of OpenAI and its CEO has been perceived as, “a fight between two dueling visions of artificial intelligence. In one vision, A.I. is a transformative new tool that could usher in a new era of prosperity and make gobs of money for the businesses that harness its potential. In another vision, A.I. is something closer to a leviathan that must be restrained and deployed with extreme caution” (Roose, 2023). The return of Sam Altman as CEO and the retention of Adam D’Angelo, the chief executive of Quora, coupled with the appointments of Bret Taylor, a former executive at Facebook and Salesforce; and Lawrence H. Summers, the former Treasury secretary to the board of OpenAI, has been taken as a sign that, “Team Capitalism won. Team Leviathan lost” (Roose, 2023). Furthermore, “OpenAI’s largest investor, Microsoft, is also expected to have a larger voice in OpenAI’s governance going forward” (Roose, 2023). All of this leaves one with a bitter taste as the world’s foremost AI firm appears poised to follow in the footsteps of the AI creators in Westworld and forge ahead developing an AI with limited safeguards whose integration into society will be dictated by private firms and individuals seeking to maximize their profits.

Then there is the future being imagined by those involved with these firms.

In July 2015… A.I. was the big topic of conversation when Elon Musk and Larry Page sat down near a firepit beside a swimming pool after dinner the first night of Musk’s multi-day birthday celebration. As the discussion stretched into the chilly hours, it grew intense, Mr. Page, described his vision of a digital utopia in a whisper. Humans would eventually merge with artificially intelligent machines, he said. One day there would be many kinds of intelligence competing for resources, and the best would win. If that happens, Mr. Musk said, we’re doomed.
The machines will destroy humanity. With a rasp of frustration, Mr. Page insisted his utopia should be pursued. Finally he called Mr. Musk a “speciesist,” a person who favors humans over the digital life-forms of the future (Metz, Weise, Grant, and Isaac, 2023).

It does not bode well for the human race if Elon Musk is the individual tasked with defending the primacy of our humanity, especially as he went on to later co-found OpenAI and now with Neuralink is currently trying to implant computer chips in people’s brains. Meanwhile Larry Page wants us to merge with machines and enter his digital utopia of social darwinism in the metaverse, both perspectives just leave one with a sense of dread as those who sit atop our capitalist mode of production engage in topics of social darwinism and whether not someone is a speciesist as the world gets hotter, inequality worsens, and material conditions deteriorate.

Adding another layer of grim premonition is the ongoing Silicon Valley arms race with AI development in which, “at the heart of this competition is a brain-stretching paradox. The people who say they are most worried about A.I. are among the most determined to create it and enjoy its riches. They have justified their ambition with their strong belief that they alone can keep A.I. from endangering Earth” (Metz, Weise, Grant, and Isaac, 2023). It becomes all too easy for one to see the parallels between Serac and Larry Page, Sam Altman, or Elon Musk. Faced with preventing the apocalypse in a world defined by crises and changing climatic conditions, the would-be heroes of humanity assert that they alone can solve the issues and problems we face. Meanwhile the technology they claim is too dangerous to be trusted with anyone else is privatized and developed for the benefit and enrichment of a select, privileged few who through control
of this technology come to wield a terrible amount of power and influence in our world. The end result being that instead of preventing the apocalypse and creating a more equitable society, what comes about is just another cycle of wealth consolidation at the top and further immiseration below. The next chapter picks up on how these phenomena materialize first in the form of an algorithmic capitalism whose chief form of exploitation comes in the form of data extraction. Once sufficient data has been collected though, the shift then arrives as the AI begins to socially engineer swaths of the population through the weaponization and manipulation of people’s data flows.
Chapter III - The Path from Exploitation to Social Engineering

In 1993, Vernor Vinge, a mathematics professor at San Diego State University presented an article at the VISION-21 Symposium sponsored by NASA Lewis Research Center and the Ohio Aerospace Institute on March 30-31, 1993. The subject of this article was the so-called Singularity which designates the point at which the technological entities possessed of superior intelligence to humans begin to rapidly evolve and change, with humans more of a passenger than driver as this process unfolds. Vinge postulated that he would, “be surprised if this event occurs before 2005 or after 2030” (Vinge, 1993), and he explained his reasoning for calling this event the Singularity as, “it is a point where our old models must be discarded and a new reality rules” (Vinge, 1993). Vinge even cast predictions on how this may impact our socioeconomic outlook, writing that, “we will see automation replacing higher and higher level jobs. We have tools right now that release us from most low-level drudgery. The work that is truly productive is the domain of a steadily smaller and more elite fraction of humanity. In the coming of the Singularity, we are seeing the predictions of true technological unemployment finally come true” (Vinge, 1993).

I want to take a moment and delve more into the previous quote and what we make of these predictions now that we're thirty years on from when they were made. The spread of automation has unfolded not so much in a steady flow over time but in fits and starts, something which has been both hampered and empowered by the neoliberal rationalization of corporate activity. Companies seeking to cut costs have outsourced “low-level drudgery jobs” to countries in the global south or employed vulnerable
populations such as the Uyghurs in China who are, “working in factories that are in the supply chains of at least 82 well-known global brands in the technology, clothing and automotive sectors, including Apple, BMW, Gap, Huawei, Nike, Samsung, Sony and Volkswagen” (ASPI, 2020). This cost-cutting mantra, which can be seen in recent tech company layoffs despite record profits (Rosenberg, 2024) or in the railroad industry with PSR or Precision Scheduled Railroading, has meant that companies are operating with a mind towards efficiency, i.e cost-cutting measures, at the expense of internal investment. This phenomenon has meant that automation has not been the all-consuming force it might have been imagined as during the 1990s and instead we have gotten tastes and glimpses of it in grocery self-checkouts, automated voice answering machines for companies, and the robots who roam the Amazon warehouses selecting inventory.

Vinge’s speculation on the concentration of productive work being located among a small, elite group while on the surface seems incorrect, we all remember the essential service workers who were effectively forced to continue working during a deadly pandemic in order to survive, I think we have to look closer at the meaning of the word productive. While many of us would define productive work as that which helps not only the worker but their community and is therefore worthwhile and helpful making it productive, all one has to do is look at the compensation of company CEOs in comparison to entry-level workers to see that productivity in today’s economy is viewed through the narrow lens of profit maximization. If one is acting so as to increase profits then one is being productive and with this understanding of productivity, we now can see that Vinge’s prediction came true. The consolidation of the railroads, “fifty years ago, our country had 63 Class I railroads; now we have seven. The “Big Seven” own or operate
virtually all the long-distance track and determine when passenger trains may pass, with four of the seven controlling 83 percent of America’s rail freight” (Kent, 2023), for example has seen a mass consolidation of wealth and “productive labor” into the hands of a select few who can now exercise incredible influence and control over a key segment of the national economy.

Such a landscape of efficient workforces operating under large oligopolies has naturally created what Vinge called a “true technological unemployment” or rather, “a situation when people are without work and seeking work because of innovative production processes and labor-saving organizational solutions” (Klimczuk-Kochańska and Klimczuk, 2015). Those final words, “labor-saving organizational solutions” have been the bedrock of the neoliberal economy and as such have played much more of a role than automation so far in replacing workers. This phenomenon and how it has been employed is crucial to both seeing the nature of the class conflict undergirding it as well as realizing that it is not the Singularity or artificial intelligence that we need to fear but the people and class who are looking to use it. The progress of technological unemployment has not been conducted in the search for or even production of artificially intelligent machines but rather for the consolidation of power and wealth among the upper classes.

This is why Bill Gates can sign a letter calling AI an existential threat to humanity while simultaneously investing heavily into OpenAI (CAIS, 2023). Gates may genuinely believe that artificial intelligence poses a threat to humanity as it currently exists but he also clearly sees it as a means to increase his wealth and influence in the world. It is this lens through which we must view artificial intelligence if we are to grasp the implications
it has for our society, not as an independent entity with a mind and direction, but rather as a tool through which power can be exercised in our society now and in the near future. While describing artificial intelligence as a tool would seem to both adopt the language of the capitalists I decried last chapter and fail to fully acknowledge its capacity, the important issue here is not understanding artificial intelligence itself but rather how it will be used in our world and if it will be deployed for the benefit of the few or the many. So while the day may come where artificially intelligent machines transform this world and exceed human understanding, that day is not today and it is not in the material interests of those building AI today for it to initiate a social revolution so such an outcome is far from predetermined.

The remainder of this chapter will track how exploitation looks and functions in Algorithmic Capitalism, before discussing how the introduction of AI will impact these mechanisms of oppression. The conversation engaging AI will then transition into how the future could resemble a neo-feudal reorganization of society made possible by the social engineering enabled by the synthesis of artificial intelligence and digital software and services. I will explore how this shift will result in the formation of a new mode of production and power before returning to the social engineering aspects of these emerging structures.

Exploitation in Algorithmic Capitalism

Turning away from a singularity-centric theory of AI, I will now delve further into the algorithmic capitalism of our world and how artificial intelligence will transform
the digital enclosures into walled gardens. In order to understand the logic behind algorithmic capitalism we have to first grapple with the current landscape within capitalism today and the nature of the market as it functions presently. The capitalism of today is a series of loose monopolies which combine to function as an oligopoly in which control over the specific industries and then the market as a whole lies with a few large firms whose financial position enables their domination of the market. Malcolm Sawyer in, “Monopoly capitalism in the past four decades” articulates this writing, “industrial concentration has been on an upward trend, reinforced by mergers and slack anti-trust policies. What may be termed ‘Big Tech’ have been heavily involved in the rise in concentration and profit margins” (Sawyer, 2022, p. 1226).

For these tech firms the main question they must now grapple with is, how can I increase my profits despite the fact that, due to market consolidation, there are not sufficient unattached consumers out there who I can entice to purchase or subscribe to the products and services I am peddling to grow my revenue. Unable to grow their consumer base, these firms are, by necessity, forced to turn to their existing consumers in order to extract from them the funds necessary to ensure profits remain high. This turn towards existing consumers is one of the key driving factors in the creation of the contemporary enclosures discussed in chapter one and has facilitated the vast expansion of the paywall, subscription-based business model powered by advertisements. These paywalls, subscription barriers, and enclosure models combine to create what tech enthusiasts have labeled walled gardens, which are “closed ecosystems in which all the operations are controlled by the ecosystem operator” (Poulpiquet, 2017).
This inward turn has a dramatic effect on the relationship between the consumer and the firm, which is then reflected in the products and services offered by the firm. Consumers trapped in a market of monopolies now find increased financial burdens being placed upon themselves and costs of all sorts of goods throughout the economy are rising. According to a recent report by, “the progressive Groundwork Collaborative thinktank…Many commodities and services producers’ prices have actually decreased, nearly 60% of the drop in key goods and services’ inputs was driven by large declines in energy costs, while transportation and warehousing costs have fallen by nearly 4% since June 2022 peaks. Still, prices remain high. Consumers are still paying about 25% more for groceries, the report notes as an example” (Perkins, 2024). The report stated that, “corporate profits drove 53 percent of inflation during the second and third quarters of 2023 and more than one-third since the start of the pandemic” (Groundwork, 2024). What we are looking at here is the extraction of wealth from the working class by the capitalist class in the name of profit. This exploitation of the working class and consumer base as a whole is then enhanced in the digital sphere with the extraction of personal data and the novel introduction of machine learning artificial intelligence.

Currently most digital platforms derive their revenues from advertising, a model only made possible by the existing oligopoly in which advertisers wishing to promote their products have to negotiate with one of the large firms who promise the advertiser exposure to their enclosure’s population in exchange for a suitable fee. Upon gaining access to the enclosure, advertisers will search for the most effective way to advertise their products to the most people as fast as possible, typically using machine learning systems to deliver ads where they are considered most likely to be most effective.
However, grappling with this question, advertisers face what is called the “cold-start problem” in which, “with limited data, the machine learning system cannot accurately estimate the click-through rates of new ads and, in turn, cannot efficiently price these new ads or match them with platform users” (Ye, 2023, p. 3840). A word I want to emphasize here is data, because when advertising firms, which are the core vehicle of profit for digital platforms, are looking for more data they are looking for more user interaction. To speak more plainly, social media platforms are selling their users to advertisers for profit and the more users they have to sell on their platforms, the more advertisements they can sell. This digital exchange of users as commodities differs from historical precedents of humans as commodities in that the value of the commodity lies not in its ability to produce labor but its ability to consume. The users make a platform attractive because the more users, the likelier someone is to purchase a product from advertisements on the platform, so advertisers naturally flock to the platforms with the highest levels of engagement. So while the platforms commodify their users to advertising firms they are simultaneously seeking to extract as much possible data from their users to perpetuate engagement and maintain their attractiveness to advertisers.

As these firms exist within a monopolistic marketplace however the most reliable source of user data is their pre-existing user base. Unable to continuously mine data off of new subscribers these platforms must instead exploit the personal data of their existing users further, extracting ever more information to both train their algorithms to increase user engagement and create sufficient data flows to entice advertisers, who also need increasingly large amounts of data to improve their algorithms, all together creating a perpetual need and justification for data extraction and collection. This positive feedback
loop between improving algorithms and larger data sets has led to, “data being described as the new oil, and its commercial value has altered significantly over the past few decades” (Quigley, 2021), as more and more companies turn to data-driven processes. The importance of this phenomenon for advertisers and this thesis is that advertisers along with social media firms and nearly everyone else in the digital sector are looking for ways to harvest data that they can then use to improve their algorithms which in turn increases the reach and effectiveness of their advertising or whatever product they are peddling. The tragedy being that the harvesting of data is in fact people’s digital lives being sold as a commodity in exchange for wealth and profit.

Artificial intelligence enters this dynamic as the means to both solving the “cold-start problem” for advertisers and a final solution to the usefulness and profitability of data. The data sets used to train the current Large Language Models, LLMs, which power ChatGPT were the, “BooksCorpus dataset which contains over 7,000 unique unpublished books from a variety of genres and… An alternative dataset, the 1B World Benchmark, is approximately the same size” (OpenAI). This means that it took the equivalent word count of 14,000 books to train ChatGPT’s previous models, an extraordinary amount of data, and the subsequent success of ChatGPT has provided all the necessary justifications for pursuing such a data-intensive approach to future LLMs and AI models. This should be taken as a signal that data harvesting and extraction is going to increase in scale dramatically as massive amounts of data will now be required to train the future generations of artificial intelligence.

Take Meta for example, in the third quarter of 2023 Meta reported that 3.14 billion people on average were using one of their platforms daily (Meta, 2023). In other
words, each day Meta is getting data from 3.14 billion people which it uses to improve its algorithms in an effort to improve user engagement and satisfaction. This current formula of using user data to improve platform use is widely mirrored across the digital world, and the transition from using this data to improve platforms to developing and training artificial intelligence models is already in the works. During an earnings call at the beginning of February, Zuckerburg said in reference to Meta’s AI plans, “The next key part of our playbook is learning from unique data and feedback loops in our products… On Facebook and Instagram, there are hundreds of billions of publicly shared images and tens of billions of public videos, which we estimate is greater than the Common Crawl dataset” (Olson, 2024). This switch is and will be a necessary step for most companies looking to stay competitive in the new AI-driven tech sector, in fact after ChatGPT’s release, “Silicon Valley was transformed. Turning artificial intelligence into actual products that individuals and companies could use became the priority” (Weise, 2023).

This warp speed shift towards implementing artificial intelligence into products and services used everyday will again necessitate the harvesting of large amounts of data, some of which has been stocked on digital platforms and devices for years now. Luckily for Silicon Valley, there already exist enormous stockpiles of data on servers all across the world. These stocks of data have been gathered in the form of all manner of surveillance technologies from simple things like internet cookies to drones used by the NSA to, “suck up data throughout the world” (Andrejevic and Gates, 2014, p. 187). Which brings us back to the dangers of data collection and the central role of data to the next generation of technology, particularly artificial intelligence. These troves of data, gathered from all over the globe, provided by often unaware and always uncompensated
human beings, now appear as the means for both developing improved artificial intelligence and changing the enclosures from a welcoming ecosystem of digital services into a means of social engineering. This is an ongoing shift as the algorithms which currently power digital platforms are replaced by artificial intelligence machine learning which, having been trained on warehouses of people’s personal data, will have much greater influence over people’s lives.

We then take the leap to social engineering when the AI makes the transition from being trained with people’s data flows to directing them. Initially the machine learning AI, having been trained on much larger datasets than existing algorithms, will slowly replace the algorithms currently facilitating the operation of digital platforms. There will be a slow but steady increase in the capabilities of the machine learning models translating into more individualized suggestions for a greater number of people than currently possible. An easy example here would be the autocomplete feature on Gmail now being able to craft entire email responses instead of suggesting specific phrases, while in the social media sphere it will take the form of more personalized feeds that cater better to the preferences of the user. Over time, these machine learning models will come to influence how the vast majority of people live their lives in the digital sphere, presenting these models with the opportunity, means, and motive to socially engineer people’s decisions and outcomes towards a desired outcome in the digital world with real world consequences.
As Machine Learning AI makes its way into more and more of the digital products and services we rely on it will simultaneously be making similar inroads into corporate governance structures. Now there are attempts being made to utilize artificial intelligence in ways that will be helpful to society in field such as healthcare and scientific research where AI can be utilized to analyze large amounts of data and generate suggestions and predictions but such examples still raise the issues of equity and access, meaning that AI’s ability to identify or predict disease will not lower healthcare costs or help someone who does not have health insurance. So AI, like data analysis itself, seems better suited to helping identify problems rather than solving them, which brings us to how AI stands to impact the workforce and the broader working class. An impact I believe will very much resemble another disciplining of the workforce in the name of capitalist accumulation by means of immiseration.

We have seen examples of this already, notably with the recent viral TikTok posted by Brittany Pietsch who posted a video documenting her being fired from the tech company Cloudflare after just six months (@brittaneachhh, 2024). In the video Pietsch is informed of her termination with the given justification that she had failed to meet performance expectations based on her, “attainment and leading indicators of data.” The HR representatives in the call pointedly refuse to get into the specifics of the data with Pietsch, essentially firing her without a full and proper explanation, and it is very likely such occurrences will only increase as companies continue implementing data driven processes. The Pietsch firing highlights both the opacity and weaponization of data by
corporate firms, while also underscoring how Machine Learning AI will gradually reshape the contours of society and corporate structures by taking an increasingly larger role in the decision-making processes of private firms.

Then there is the AI firm Aware and the, “rapidly expanding but niche piece of a larger AI market that’s exploded in the past year,” employee surveillance (Field, 2024). Aware, who currently works for, “huge U.S. employers such as Walmart, Delta Air Lines, T-Mobile, Chevron and Starbucks, as well as European brands including Nestle and AstraZeneca… helps companies ‘understand the risk within their communications,’ getting a read on employee sentiment in real time” (Field, 2024). This is of course done by the constant surveillance of employee data and communication on digital platforms and applications. The choice of the word risk by Aware is intriguing because it declares that the companies feel that they may be exposed to either a danger, harm, or loss that originated from their workers. This situation showcases how artificial intelligence is already being used by the capitalist as a tool of power and influence over the working class. As AI continues to make inroads into more services and companies, the capacity for surveillance by artificial intelligence is going to increase exponentially.

AI’s weaponization, while somehow comical, becomes even more apparent when we look at another AI company, Paradox.ai. “Companies as disparate as McDonald's, Olive Garden, and FedEx…contracted with Paradox.ai, a ‘conversational recruiting software’ company whose strange personality assessments include images of blue-skinned humanoid aliens that applicants are, apparently, supposed to identify with” (Maiberg, 2024). In one of these personality assessments,
the applicant is presented with a photo of two blue aliens standing in a restaurant kitchen. One of the humanoids is evidently tearing up spices by hand as another stands beside them, and below the image, applicants are given the confusing directions to "simply click 'Me' if the image describes how you generally are and 'Not Me' if it does not." Above them, the word "Traditional" is, for some reason, written as a sort of header (Al-Sibai, 2024).

In order to apply for a job, a prospective worker must now complete an abstract, to be kind, personality assessment and hope that their answers allow them access to employment.

The cruelly comic nature of these assessments is that Paradox provides them as a, "part of its ‘Tratify’ product which uses these replies to construct a ‘Big Five’ personality profile. The Big Five personality traits, also known as the OCEAN model… The big five being Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism… has been used in hiring for years" (Maiberg, 2024). This OCEAN model has been significantly critiqued in academic circles most notably by Jack Block who wrote, “The Five Factor Model is based on, and embraces, the mathematical model of factor analysis as a sufficient method for recognizing and establishing a suitable taxonomy of adult human character. There remain psychological reasons to be uneasy with this union” (Block, 2010, p. 5). We see in the OCEAN model how data points from individuals are transformed through mathematical science into a means of categorizing people and the capitalists then take this method to determine whether or not someone can work at McDonald’s, Olive Garden, or FedEx. What is happening here is that a form of artificial intelligence is deciding whether or not someone gets a job based on their performance
relative to a heavily-criticized personality model. So now if you want to work at McDonald’s, Olive Garden, or FedEx you have to convince a machine that you are an open, conscientious, extraverted, agreeable, and neurotic person or take your chances elsewhere with the hopes of interviewing with human being or at least finding an AI that likes your personality enough to hire you.

**Neo-Feudalism**

This reconceptualizing of human beings into trackable data points marks a departure from the neoliberal entrepreneurial model of human existence and the beginnings of both a new mode of production and a new mode of power. While neoliberalism or previous forms of capitalism may have valued entrepreneurship and individualism more broadly, as exemplified by the OCEAN model mentioned above, now what is best for the system is a narrow range of personality traits. What I mean by this is that an automated system does not require nor need any input from within or without and as AI automates our society, it will develop a center of gravity bringing everything into its orbit, and then anything or anyone that falls out of orbit will become an abandoned outlier. Simultaneously power will concentrate around the capitalists who have created the most powerful AI and the elites who have chosen to invest their capital, social, human, or monetary in this AI-directed future. The society produced by these forces will increasingly resemble a neo-feudal one, composed primarily of two classes, those who rely on digital services and products for their livelihoods and those who control and
distribute these services. This neo-feudal society will be defined by the dependence of the neo-serfs on the same technologies which the Lords of Silicon Valley use to control them.

Engaging feudalism to understand contemporary capitalism may seem counterintuitive at first, given Feudalism’s obsolete land-centric economic model and the special nature of serfs being bound to both land and lord. A closer look at the societal functions of feudalism brings to light a key thread connecting feudalism to the capitalism of today. Marc Bloch in his seminal work *Feudal Society* writes, “To be the ‘man’ of another man: in the vocabulary of feudalism, no combination of words was more widely used or more comprehensive in meaning… the emphasis was on the fundamental element in common: the subordination of one individual to another” (Bloch, 1939, p. 214). This subordination was a result of a societal collapse following the end of the Western Roman Empire and the reality that, “Everywhere, the weak man felt the need to be sheltered by someone more powerful. The powerful man, in his turn, could not maintain his prestige or his fortune or even ensure his own safety except by securing for himself, by persuasion or coercion, the support of subordinates bound to his service” (Bloch, 1939, p. 220). This dynamic of codependence whereupon the weak relied upon the powerful for protection and the powerful in return relied on the weak for a combination of wealth, prestige, and protection created the foundation for the feudal order.

This reliance upon the powerful extended beyond protection and, “From St. Augustine, who in the closing decades of the Western Empire describes the poor in search of a patron who would provide them with ‘the wherewithal to eat’, to the Merovingian which we have more than once cited, we hear the same importunate cry that of the empty stomach” (Bloch, 1939, p. 223). This quote is key for demonstrating the pain and
suffering felt by the lower classes as the capacity of the State, be it Roman or Merovingian, dwindled and it was increasingly unable to provide for the needs of its most vulnerable. We can now turn to neoliberalism in our world today and see the reduction of social welfare programs, the privatization of public services, and the increase in wealth inequality as a similar period to that which facilitated the rise of feudalism. The reduction of state capacity to aid the poor and working classes, the increased consolidation of power in the hands of wealthy corporations and individuals, paired with the existential threat of climate change leaves our society increasingly fragile as individuals in society’s lower classes, abandoned by the state, must now turn to private individuals and associations for help surviving.

Now the term neo-feudalism has been slowly making its way into academic discourses over the past few years as part of a larger discussion over whether or not we are transitioning from capitalism into something else. In an interview with Aleks Wansborough about neofeudalism, Jodi Dean articulated the four core pillars of her vision of neo-feudalism,

“first is the parcelization of sovereignty, which is a way of saying that legal regimes are fragmented… the second characteristic is the new lords and new serfs. Particularly with the vast fortunes made in technology, we have an incredible hierarchy and inequality… The next characteristic is hinterlandization. The hinterlands have essentially been left out or left behind by capital but they have real people living there… And the fourth feature I think of as kind of a new preoccupation with apocalypse, a mystical embrace of catastrophe” (Wansborough and Dean, 2021).
While Dean’s second and fourth elements are key to understanding the ongoing shift in our society and economy, in my view, Dean fails to grapple with the global nature of capitalism today and overemphasizes the effects of what she terms “hinterlandization.”

Capitalism’s subsumption of the global economy in the twenty-first century has solidified the global networks of capital and we are more interconnected and interdependent than ever before making it difficult to envision a breakdown of global capitalism which would allow a true parcellation of sovereignty as imagined by Dean. The need to maintain the global flow of capital and data necessary to power this new mode of production necessitates a certain uniformity of the application of law so as to allow global capitalism to continue. Meanwhile the digital age means that people no longer need to be tied to the land as the serfs once were but instead can be bound within digital enclosures that allow one to have limited freedom of movement in the real world but trap them in a relationship of technological dependence. Such a dynamic means that hinterlandization resembles not so much individuals being abandoned by capital, but rather being forced into a tiered form of existence where one’s quality of life is directly tied to one’s income which in turn determines the amount of goods and services that one can access, regardless of where they physically reside.

These differences between myself and Dean’s view of the future are important because on the whole Dean is imagining a fundamental shift away from capitalism and the beginning of an entirely novel socioeconomic arrangement but Dean’s emphasis on moving away from capitalism neglects the reality that such transitions are never black and white and the flow of capital and resources among the upper classes must be maintained to perpetuate the class divide. This maintenance of the class structure
necessarily means that while the sovereignty may be parceled out, as it already is in the U.S federalist system between the individual states and national government, the legal regimes which govern these sovereign entities must be uniform enough to sustain the flow of goods and services, while also maintaining the privileged positions of the ruling elites. Likewise where Dean imagines individuals abandoned by capital, I envision individuals beholden to local elites in a recreation of the peasant-lord relationship, where access to vital goods and services are dictated entirely by the local or regional elite that controls them. Yet some things Dean and I do agree on is the return of the lord-serf dynamic and the growing influence of apocalyptic thinking on individuals and the choices they make, which I expanded on in the previous chapter.

*Social Engineering as Class Power*

The big question that we have to answer now is exactly how will the lord-serf relationship be reproduced in contemporary society. The answer to this question lies with the new predictive abilities enabled by artificial intelligence. As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, a walled garden powered by artificial intelligence would essentially be a prison of digital services which one cannot exit once inside. The content delivered would be individually personalized by a Machine Learning AI designed to increase user engagement and deliver the most effective advertisements for each individual user. Pair this with the widespread dependence for essential services provided by a few large corporations and the window opens for the exercising of a new mode of power premised
on the weaponization of people’s personal data against them. This new mode of power stands as the vehicle that will take us out of algorithmic capitalism and into neo-feudalism through social engineering.

Now social engineering has two definitions, “the artificial controlling or changing of how a society develops” and “attempts to trick people into giving secret or personal information, especially on the internet, and using it for harmful purposes.” (Cambridge, 2024) I will be using both definitions to show how artificial intelligence will reshape capitalism and our society. The first definition is applicable to the ongoing class conflict between the capitalists and the working class while the latter articulates how and where the class conflict is being waged. It should be no secret at this point that the capitalist class is not interested in sharing its wealth and privileges with the rest of society, hence the class struggle and the rampant wealth inequality which defines society today. This class, faced with the threat of climate change, rising social tensions, and with the hope of avoiding a social revolution must now come up for a new justification for its right to power and just as constitutions replaced the Divine Right of Kings, Artificial Intelligence stands poised to replace free market capitalism as the new vehicle through which power is abstracted into the hands of a select few.

The existing digital enclosures on social media platforms have already succeeded at accomplishing the work of getting people to divulge secret or personal information for ulterior motives. We see this most recently with Reddit, where, “about 57 million people visit every day to chat about topics as varied as makeup, video games and pointers for power washing driveways” (Isaac, 2023). Reddit had previously allowed firms like Google and Microsoft to train their artificial intelligence using chats from Reddit users at
no expense but have recently begun charging companies for access to its data. Reddit’s CEO Steve Huffman explained this shift, “Reddit believes its data is particularly valuable because it is continuously updated. That newness and relevance, Mr. Huffman said, is what large language modeling algorithms need to produce the best results. ‘More than any other place on the internet, Reddit is a home for authentic conversation,’ Mr. Huffman said. ‘There’s a lot of stuff on the site that you’d only ever say in therapy, or A.A., or never at all’” (Isaac, 2023).

Now Reddit, Huffman, and other digital platforms would never say that they tricked people into giving up stuff that they would only say in therapy or Alcoholics Anonymous, nor would they say that giving that data over to OpenAI is harmful but the reality that Reddit is demanding companies compensate them for data they extracted from users at zero cost reveals the exploitative relationship between Reddit and its users. When users log onto Reddit to share a traumatic experience with their peers or find out the best place to sit at Providence Park, they are logging on to share their experiences, find answers, and feel a sense of community. They are not logging on hoping that some AI firm will surveil their every click and then use that to train an AI that down the road replaces their job as a grant writer at a local non-profit. What Reddit and other firms who have access to personal data and information are doing is commodifying the social substance that people have created on the web, and selling it to the firms who will then use that social substance to train a machine that they believe will earn them wealth and prestige.

All of this amounts to the reality that the data provided by Reddit users is being used for harmful purposes without their consent and without compensation.
Taking this into account along with the pre-existing power and influence held by the firms engaged in the AI race, Microsoft, Apple, and Google and the argument that these firms will use AI to shape and control how society develops basically makes itself. Nonetheless it is important here to fully flesh out how these firms will and have been affecting society’s development. To begin with Microsoft and Apple have been releasing products which have impacted society for decades now, Steve Jobs infamously said in 1980, “When we invented the personal computer, we created a new kind of bicycle…a new man-machine partnership…a new generation of entrepreneurs.” This statement perfectly encapsulates the world-changing mindset held by these tech firms and the aspirations they hold for themselves as well as the services and products they sell.

The importance of these companies has only grown in the subsequent four decades since Jobs labeled the PC a bike for the mind. In 1980 there were two tech companies in the top ten most valuable companies, ranked by market capitalization, IBM at number one and AT&T at number two, as of February 2024, seven out of the top ten most valuable companies are tech firms. Tech firms have been at the pinnacle of the capitalist hierarchy for decades now and their importance and centrality to the global economy has only increased. Operating from an understanding of capitalism as a mode of both power and production, it should come as no surprise that the entities who have sat atop the market for generations have played a foundational role in how our society functions and the idea that they would exercise their power and influence to socially engineer the working class ought to be acknowledged as a long-standing reality with the tech firms being the latest in a long line of firms who have sought to exploit the working class.
The prospect we now find ourselves facing is one where in the near future the same tech firms who for decades have been shaping and impacting our society take the final steps towards directing our society. These firms will extract data, and its abstract value, from users that they will then use to construct digital enclosures in which a single or a few private firms own and operate all the services we rely on. Meanwhile artificial intelligence, trained off our data, filters the content we take in, predicts our needs and wants before we even think of them, and through the subtle and not-so subtle influencing of our life decisions it becomes the AI who is steering and not the human being. AI will suggest the restaurant for dinner, write your college essay or job application for you, and then decide if your job performance meets the metrics necessary for retention or promotion and this time instead of having a boss or capitalist to point to and blame for your immiseration, your oppressor will be an omnipotent Master Algorithm. An algorithm built off the personal information of you and your peers for which you were never compensated but was used by Reddit and others to make a fortune. An algorithm which maintains the wealth and privilege of the capitalists without them having to do so much as press the button to turn it on. In other words an algorithm that, to borrow OpenAI’s phrase on their mainpage, “benefits all of humanity”.
Chapter IV - Capitalism, Crisis and the Working Class

The path to an AI-enabled neo-feudal economy, while easy to see and envision, is far from pre-determined. The final chapter of this thesis is going to look first at the inherent boom-bust, crisis cycle in capitalism which periodically threatens the stability and legitimacy of the capitalist project. I will intertwine this with a look at the rolling crises which have hit the United States since 2000, detailing how the conditions for a broader social conflict are present. Afterwards I will bring in the current state of the working class in their struggle against the forces of capital, before proceeding to look at the role of the State. I will then consider possible responses from the working class, ultimately focusing on a popular political effort in the name of working class Americans dedicated to a more equitable distribution of goods and services in the United States. I will explore how this effort could be accomplished with significant labor action, in the form of a general strike, along with the formation of a working class political party, exploring possible paths to both.

Crises in Capitalism and the United States

Economic crashes, far from being outliers, are in fact part and parcel of the capitalist system. The history of the United States is littered with economic contractions such as: The Panics of 1819, 1825, 1837, 1857, 1873, 1884, 1893, 1896, 1907, 1910-11. Which were then followed by the Great Depression in 1929, the Recession of 1937-38, the 1970s recession, the Great Recession, and the recent Great Lockdown caused by
COVID-19. Now there are recessions that I did not mention and each contraction varied in its length and intensity, nonetheless it should be abundantly clear that economic crashes have been and remain a frequent phenomenon within the capitalist system of the United States and the world more broadly. This boom-bust nature of the capitalist mode of production reflects the difficulty of organizing society around something as fickle and variable as the profit motive. More importantly however, these moments of economic pain create the space for challenging the capitalist structure itself. For it is in these moments where capitalism fails that the door for broader social conflict is opened, a pattern we have seen repeated time and again.

The Great Depression itself has been often cited as one of the leading causes of the rise of Fascism in Europe in the interwar period and the subsequent second World War, revealing the true extent of the latent, but rather obvious, risks in capitalism. Each economic contraction is experienced differently though and is fundamentally defined by its environment and pre-existing socioeconomic conditions. The 2008 Financial Crisis, while incredibly painful and disastrous for many Americans, did not kick off a popular revolution against capitalism as the conditions for such a resistance were not in place and the crisis arrived at the end of a relatively prosperous period in American history. All to say that the population of the United States was not sufficiently alienated from the established structures of capitalism and governance at the time to mount a challenge to those institutions.

Capitalism’s boom and bust cycle becomes truly problematic however when it coincides with ongoing periods of social conflict, climate change, and political strife. The Great Depression again comes to the fore as a time when a crash within capitalism
coincided with a period of geopolitical conflict that resulted in a cataclysmic war which engulfed the globe. Likewise the Panic of 1857 came while the United States was embroiled in an increasingly bitter debate over the future of slavery with the Civil War coming a mere four years later, and with it the uneven restoration of the economic power of the Northern states’. Similarly in Europe, the Panic of 1847 came during a time now known as the, “Hungry Forties” where the failures of potatoes and other crops led to famine and immense social suffering, and one year later the Revolutions of 1848 kicked off across the continent. This pattern of economic crashes, combined with social unrest, climate change, and political strife reveals to us the limits of control within capitalism and allows us to cast judgment on the effectiveness of an AI-powered capitalist economy in the near future.

Returning now to economic contractions; the United States has endured two major economic recessions in the past twenty years with the Great Recession in 2008 and the Great Lockdown in 2020 with the recoveries from both being uneven and mostly beneficial to the economic elites. The banks were bailed out in 2008 and largely avoided subsequent government scrutiny and reform, leaving the door ajar for future financial disaster. Then in 2020, $560 billion was set aside for direct cash payments and unemployment benefits while over a trillion dollars in loans were eventually given to small businesses and corporations, once again giving far more significant financial support to society’s upper classes then the working class, leaving the latter to deal with the brunt of the socioeconomic pain.

Meanwhile this millennium has been littered with sociopolitical unrest in the United States. There was the undemocratic deciding of the 2000 Presidential Election by
the Supreme Court, 9/11 one year later, the subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the protests against them, and the disaster of Hurricane Katrina. The first weakened the legitimacy of our democratic systems of government while the rest revealed a government apparatus that could no more successfully prosecute a war abroad than protect its citizens from disaster at home.

The aforementioned Great Recession then brought widespread economic pain and disaffection with our financial institutions. The bailout that followed, the limited policy successes of the Obama Presidency, and the conservative backlash to Obama’s presidency then paved the way for the 2016 Presidential Election which culminated in the election of Donald J. Trump, who failed to win the popular vote; a recent theme of Republican victories for the presidency which has further weakened the perceived legitimacy of our democratic institutions and processes. Trump’s four years in office were defined by the continued assault of longstanding norms and values and to worsen matters, there was another round of tax cuts enacted which weakened the government’s revenue streams while simultaneously empowering the most powerful members of society.

Tensions continued to rise in 2019 when the House of Representatives then unsuccessfully impeached Trump for his handling of U.S policy involving Ukraine, making him only the second President ever impeached, another tragic milestone in this era of rolling crises for the United States. The COVID-19 Pandemic then hit in March of 2020, beginning a period of recurrent governmental failures to protect its citizens from exposure to the deadly virus and the onset of another round of culture wars. That summer there were massive nationwide protests calling for police reform after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis that were met with police violence and riots broke out
across the nation. The 2020 Presidential Election then descended into chaos with Trump refusing to concede and on January 6th, 2021 his supporters attempted an insurrection and attacked the capitol building while Congress was preparing to verify the results of the election. Afterwards there was another failed Trump impeachment and the arrival of Joe Biden into the presidency, promising to bring back normalcy. Instead COVID dragged on, inflation returned, war broke out between Russia and Ukraine, and now there is a genocide underway in Palestine, enabled by the continued support of Israel by the United States. All of which leaves us with a government whose authority and effectiveness is increasingly waning both at home and abroad.

Add into this maelstrom the ongoing and worsening climate crisis and all the ingredients are present for an explosion of social conflict and with it, a meaningful challenge to our existing political institutions and capitalist structures. All of this most certainly threatens not only the possibility of a neo-feudal order emerging but the broader capitalist project as a whole. As history has shown, it is in moments like these where the structures of authority and power begin to collapse under the weight of continuous crises. With the powers at be continually failing to respond to the needs of the moment and instead asking that the nation continue putting its trust in an 81 year old octogenarian who was described in a special counsel report as, “a sympathetic, well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory.” In such conditions implementing a new phase of capitalist exploitation and immiseration will face significant challenges and hurdles, chief among them being the response from the working class.
Before detailing how the working class might mount a sustained challenge to the forces of capital it is important to first specify who I am speaking of when I write of the “working class”. I am not speaking simply of blue-collar workers or service workers but rather of the, “more than 60% of Americans who live paycheck to paycheck as of September 2023” (Morabito, 2023). This group, who make up the majority of Americans, are the modern working class in America as they are dependent upon the wages earned from their labor to survive. No longer is it just the factory or farm workers who endure daily exploitation by the elites in our society but rather the preponderance of the American population. Ranging from white collar tech workers working as data engineers to traditional blue collar workers in automobile manufacturing, workers across all sectors of the economy are surviving paycheck to paycheck. Likewise AI powered social engineering will not distinguish between white collar or blue collar, only between those who control it and those it seeks to control. As such the working class today represents a wide range of Americans from all walks of life and will need support from every subsection of the class to resist further exploitation.

Now as I detailed in the final section of chapter one, the working class in America has been immiserated for the past half-century as wages have failed to match cost-of-living increases and wealth has been increasingly extracted away from the working class into the hands of the wealthy. A useful metric for visualizing this upward shift of wealth away from the lower classes is comparing the wages of CEOs to typical workers over time. “From 1978–2022, top CEO compensation shot up 1,209.2%
compared with a 15.3% increase in a typical worker’s compensation. In 2022, CEOs were paid 344 times as much as a typical worker in contrast to 1965 when they were paid 21 times as much as a typical worker.” (Bivens and Kandra, 2023) Needless to say the working class in America has been on the losing side of the class war for decades now.

Which brings us to the state of the working class in 2024. The previous year, 2023, “saw a resurgence in collective action among workers…Workers filed petitions for union elections in record numbers and captured significant wage gains through work stoppages and contract negotiations” (Poydock and Sherer, 2024). This re-emergence of working class action against the bosses and capitalists can actually be traced back to 2018 when 485,200 workers were involved in major work stoppages compared to just over 25,000 in 2017 (Poydock and Sherer, 2024). There was a sharp decrease in these work stoppages during the pandemic for self-evident reasons but in 2023, 458,900 workers were involved in major work stoppages, marking a return to pre-pandemic levels. While these numbers may seem a far cry from the near 1.8 million workers who participated in work stoppages in 1974, they nonetheless show a working class beginning to find its feet again and who will be looking to flex its growing strength in the coming years.

The increase in union action, membership, and contract victories for the working class, from sectors of the economy ranging from health insurance in the Kaiser Permanente strikes last year to entertainment with the widely followed SAG-AFTRA and writer’s strikes, serve as a visible examples of not only growing labor action but also labor victories. As I have already mentioned at length, victories for the working class and labor movement have been scarce, and the recent gains made by labor both reflect a shift in the class struggle and will require a response from the forces of capital. When it comes
to class conflict, labor victories directly threaten capitalists and their firms by raising costs in the form of wage increases and better benefits which then result in less surplus for the capitalist, and less surplus means less profit; And a capitalist class who has spent the past half-century extracting wealth away from the working class is not going to sit by and let the labor movement rack up victory after victory.

The response from the capitalists so far has been as expected with Amazon, Starbucks, and REI all being accused of various union-busting efforts aimed at nipping the threat of labor action at the source. In late January 2023, “a federal administrative judge ruled that Amazon supervisors had illegally threatened to withhold wage and benefit increases from employees at the warehouses if they voted to unionize” (Scheiber, 2023). This judge works on the National Labor Relations Board, a state entity meant to oversee labor disputes, and one that lawyers from Trader Joe’s, SpaceX, and Amazon argue is unconstitutional and should be disbanded. The use of the courts to defeat labor has been a key play in the capitalist response to labor agitation and brings us to another actor in the class struggle who deserves more focus here: The State.

The Role of the State

The historical role that the United States government has played in the class war over the years has predominantly been one in support of the private firm and capitalist enterprise. The Gilded Age with its railroad boom and the completion of America’s Manifest Destiny through westward expansion was made possible through government subsidies to railroad companies and court rulings which granted corporations the same rights as individuals in the eyes of the state. In other words, the state was there to serve as
a supposed neutral arbiter between competitors in the marketplace, to ensure healthy and fair competition between individuals. What this looked like though was the proletarianization of broad swaths of the American population as they were forced into wage labor relationships with companies who sought to exploit them for profit. This phenomenon led to the awakening of the American working class in the latter half of the nineteenth century, notably with The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 and the Pullman strike of 1894 (cf. Zinn, 2015).

This Gilded Age then gave way to the Progressive Era and the liberal reforms of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, most notably. These reforms served to dial down the tension between classes and also signaled a shift in the State’s relationship to its people, with the State taking on a more active role in people’s everyday lives. This shift then became a permanent change with the New Deal era and the explosion of government agencies and programs aimed at helping struggling Americans feel that there was a limit to what their fortunes could suffer. The State stepped in to provide welfare for its citizens, a clear departure from the Gilded Age status quo between the State and the people. Then from the post-WWII period to the late 1960s, the State broadly maintained this new relationship with its people, even taking steps to finally include Black Americans in that concept of the people. The neoliberal turn of the late 60s and 70s followed by anti-welfare policies in the 80s and 90s saw the State now being portrayed as an impediment to its citizens with social programs and government spending now targets of derision from reactionary conservatives and capitalists looking to protect their profit margins (cf. Zinn, 2015).
What unfolded over time was the reduction of state capacity in specific ways and a new social contract to replace the one established during the New Deal Era. The State’s military capacity, foreign policy, and surveillance capabilities were left untouched while the ability for the state to help its working class and poorer citizens was severely diminished. As the federal government ceased to be an active force in its citizens' lives, it increasingly served as a support system for capital and private firms, contracting out everything from construction to military projects to for-profit entities. Over time this resulted in the hollowing out of the state and cemented the revolving door phenomenon in which the line between private work and public work in government became increasingly blurred. No longer is the state a place for contestation, where groups can engage in an equal contest with each other in the hope of furthering their agenda, instead, with the help of the Citizens United ruling in 2011, the state has been captured by private interests.

As such the social contract from the New Deal Era which established that the government would take an active role in uplifting its less fortunate citizens through government programs and high taxation on its wealthiest citizens has now been replaced by the neoliberal contract in which the government serves to support capital and the welfare of the populace is now tied to the health and vitality of the market and the firms within it, with no safety net in place to catch those whom the market and firms deem unnecessary or ill-fitted to their success. In such an environment where the government finds itself in bed with private firms whose success is predicated on the maintenance of the status quo, limited regulation and low taxation, reform becomes more of a dream than a reality and without reform the federal government has begun to increasingly resemble an ancien régime. In this situation the individual states and local governments are forced
to chart their own paths, as we have already seen with COVID and the lawsuit against Meta by more than 30 states, but as revealed by COVID, such efforts are piecemeal and limited in their scope.

All of which leaves any efforts to regulate AI on a national, state or local as likely doomed from the start. For the State of Oregon may choose to enact stringent data privacy laws to prevent the exploitation of people’s personal data but should California fail to do so, what is there to prevent companies in California from exploiting the information of Oregonians? Herein lies the issue of attempting to tackle national or global issues on local or regional levels, the national and global economy cares not for state borders and without federal legislation or enforcement measures, any attempts to restrict the flow of information or data across state lines will be limited in their effectiveness. As such the best avenue for challenging exploitation through AI social engineering is collective action by the working class.

_The Labor Response_

Luckily we find ourselves with a resurgent working class growing in strength at the same time that the capitalist class is looking to usher in a new age of exploitation and dependence. In other words, an intensification of the class conflict is on the horizon and the goal of the working class should be to ensure that when this contest breaks out into the open it is positioned to fully mobilize and effectively fight for a working class project in the hopes of attaining an equitable distribution of goods and services within the United States at a bare minimum. In order to do so the working class needs a significant scaling
up of its capacity in the coming years if it hopes to prevent the tech firms from plunging us all into neo-feudalism. We have already begun to see signs of this with Shawn Fain, president of the United Auto Workers, saying, “Back in 1980 when Reagan at the time fired PATCO workers, everybody in this country should have stood up and walked the hell out. We missed the opportunity then, but we’re not going to miss it in 2028. That’s the plan. We want a general strike” (Sainato, 2024).

The prospect of a general strike accompanied by a political project for the working class is the exact response that will be needed for the working class to assert itself in the face of the capitalist onslaught. The general strike I am imagining here is a very general one, I am speaking of an event where white-collar professionals such as health-care providers and data engineers in conjunction with traditional blue-collar workers all stage a general walk out and down their respective tools. A general strike, affecting all sectors of the economy, would be the working class’ way of both displaying its power and enabling it to better dictate the class struggle on its own terms. The support of the professional classes in this labor action will be essential to its success, for as with the revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries, the support of the professional classes acting in solidarity with the lower classes as a united working class will be the vital hinge upon which the general strike will either succeed or fail.

Only after a general strike, which has succeeded in establishing a permanent base of political power and support for the working class, can there then be a general attempt to undergo a broader restructuring of society, focused on ensuring a more equitable distribution of goods and services. To get to a general strike in four years may seem like a tall order, yet I would refer you back to the massive jump in strike activity from 2017 to
2018 when the number of workers on strike increased nineteen fold from 25,000 to just over 485,000. Even a five-fold increase between 2023 and 2028 would result in 2,294,500 workers going on strike, making it just the sixth time since 1947 that over two million workers would have gone on strike in a single year. I say this to make clear that the capacity is clearly there for a general strike and even if that goal was not met, there will likely still be incredibly significant labor action.

A key element here in favor of the working class is the market consolidation which has taken place over the past half-century or so. The monopolization of market sectors, as I have discussed previously, is an overwhelmingly negative phenomenon, but it has had the positive effect of bringing more and more workers under individual corporate umbrellas. A key part of the Marxist pursuit of a dictatorship of the proletariat was the effects of the working class laboring side by side in factories, and while the factory is no longer the dominant work setting, a merger between Albertsons and Kroger, for example, will have the effect of bring the existing workers of both closer together, significantly enhancing the scale and scope of potential labor action. This also increases the likelihood of a general strike, as despite the atomization of the modern economy, due to the existing monopolies, only a handful of existing workforces need to be unionized for major strike action to be possible.

This labor action though necessarily has to be accompanied by a political project that dares to seek more than just a reform but a genuine reordering of our society. This initially means that the working class will need to coalesce around political parties outside of the Democrats and Republicans. The failure of the Bernie Sanders’ presidential campaigns and the Congressional Progressive Caucus’ inability to shift government
policy have displayed the limits of what can be accomplished within our two party system so the political formation of the working class must occur outside of our two political parties. Just as the Republican party was formed in response to the question of expanding slavery, a working class party must now coalesce in response to the continued failures of our archaic and dilapidated current two party system. Similarly to how the Republicans did not balk at Southern brinkmanship and then supported the necessary war effort to defeat the Confederacy, reminding us that politics is not in fact all about compromise and bipartisanship, the emergent working class party must seek to push the envelope of confrontation with the forces of capital today. (cf. Olsen, 2007)

The Political Response

I want to focus a little longer here on the origins of the Republican party and the implications for the working class movement today. The Republican party emerged out of the wreckage of the Whig party which had found itself torn apart by the divisions over slavery’s expansion and came to define itself as the anti-slavery party, determined to prevent and eventually eradicate slavery. This was a momentous moment in American political development as it set the nation on the path towards a final political confrontation over the issue of slavery and it was then the Radical Republicans who during Reconstruction enacted some of the nation’s most progressive legislation with the passage of the Reconstruction Amendments. The rise of the Republican party is instructive to us today for a variety of reasons; The Republican party came into existence
during a period of intense political polarization, not dissimilar to the environment we find ourselves in today. The Republican party also adopted hardline policies aimed at fomenting a conflict over the future of slavery, modeling the political actions that a theoretical working class party would need to take. Finally today our political environment in many ways resembles that of the years leading up to the Civil War. The rise of polarization in our politics mirrors the increase in polarization in the mid-1800s with culture wars replacing the debate over slavery. Similarly as the Southern Democrats continually pushed for slave expansion despite a lack of national support, today Republicans with their anti-LGBTQ rhetoric and anti-abortion policy find themselves out of lockstep with the American public who broadly supports LGBTQ rights and the right to abortion. Meanwhile in the halls of government, discord has spilled into public view with Republicans and Democrats increasingly depicting the other side as an existential threat to the nation, in addition to lawmakers resorting to physical threats and attempted assaults on the floor of the House, an echo of the famous caning of Charles Sumner.

Then there are the internal party divisions and conflicts which have plagued both Democrats and Republicans since the rise of Donald J. Trump. The former faced a crisis after one of the most qualified candidates for President in history, Hilary Clinton, was defeated by Trump, one, that I will argue later, the party has still not overcome. Meanwhile the Republicans went from being the party of the silent majority to succumbing first to the cult of personality that surrounded Trump and now, with the latest cleansing of the RNC by Trump affiliates, the Republican Party is truly the Trump Party. In just eight years Trump went from being a political non-entity to king of the Republicans, blowing past all challengers to cement his position as the American right’s
imperator-elect. The Democrats meanwhile are the Whigs of contemporary politics. Unable to sufficiently respond to the threats posed by Trump and an increasingly right-wing Republican Party, the Democrats are instead at risk of alienating their base due to their continual failures to deliver on campaign promises and the current presidential administrations’ refusal to sufficiently pressure Israel to end the genocide in Gaza.

The recent presidential campaigns of Bernie Sanders can now be seen as internal attempts to reform the Democratic party that soundly failed and the election of Joe Biden revealed a political party unwilling or unable to reform itself. Now the Democrats face another election against Donald J. Trump with an incredibly unpopular president, few policy wins to point to, and a foreign policy that has brought the Middle East and Europe to the precipice of a global conflict. It should then come as no surprise that the latest polls have Biden trailing his predecessor, despite the fact that his opponent is facing a litany of criminal charges and remains unpopular in his own right. Faced with these political conditions, the working class must turn inwards and seek to create its own political party to serve as a vehicle for working class political ambition.

Now the dream of a viable third party has existed for so long that most political observers have given up on the chances of this dream becoming a reality. Once again though, we can turn to the Republican party for inspiration, as the first statewide convention that formed a platform and nominated candidates under the Republican name was held in Michigan in 1854 and in six years, the party’s nominee for President, Abraham Lincoln won the highest office in the nation. The ability to rapidly organize and develop a political party has only gotten easier since the nineteenth-century, thanks to the same telecommunications technologies and platforms discussed in the opening chapter.
Furthermore the recent movement to vote uncommitted in the Democratic Presidential primaries, in addition to RFK’s sustained third-party bid, should be taken more signs of the desire in the American electorate for a third option other than the presumptive Democratic and Republican nominees. It would therefore seem to be only a matter of time before an alternative to our current two party system emerges with the working class poised to hopefully dramatically re-enter the American political system as a major player.

This emphasis on party formation being a necessary requirement for working class political success is not universally supported on the left however. A key tenet of the anarchist approach to governance has been a rejection of political parties in favor of mutual cooperation through unions and independent associations who would come together in a federal way to replace the political structure of the party. Other criticisms come from the historical records of the Bolshevik party in Russia and the eventual descent of the party into authoritarianism with Stalin and the subsequent one party system in the USSR which suppressed dissent and prevented the emergence of any rival political faction. The anarchist approach to political action has time and again displayed its limitations, particularly in regards to the failure of the Black Lives Matter movement to achieve systemic police reform, a failing which cannot be separated from the movement’s lack of direction and formal structure that a party would provide. (cf. Dean, 2015)

The criticisms of party politics resulting in the emergence of authoritarian figures meanwhile rest too much of their arguments on limited examples and neglect the wealth of evidence of political parties who did not end up being dominated by a single individual. Rather, the presence of designated leaders who can serve the party as orators, policy makers, and bureaucrats, supported by democratic decision-making process, i.e
group voting instead of individual decision making, can provide vital direction and momentum for political organizations. The Bolsheviks and later Communist Party of the Soviet Union should not serve as detractors from party-driven formations on the left but rather as useful lessons for future left-wing, labor-focused movements. Both Lenin and his successor Stalin took direct moves to concentrate authority not in legislative bodies or in an assembly of party delegates, in addition to stifling dissent with actions such as the ban on factions in 1921. Instead small bodies were granted incredible power and influence over the direction of the party such as the Central Committee within which sat the Politburo, the latter composed of the party leaders empowered to make decisions they felt could not wait for a full convening of the party’s congress or Central Committee. (cf. Suny, 2003)

These dynamics were similarly paralleled within the French Revolution with the Jacobins slowly devolving until it was Robespierre and the Committee on Public Safety legislating for the will of the entire country. The issues with turning to political parties as the vehicle of social change then lie not so much with the structure itself but rather the ability of individuals within the party to prevent select committees and persons accumulating dictatorial control or influence over the party’s platform and actions, an ability which can be strengthened by democratic control over decisions and the implementation of safeguards to prevent one body or individual accumulating too much power, examples could be a Roman Tribune-like figure or body empowered to prevent abuses of power and influence similar to the existing inspector generals in the United States Federal Government but with more power and ability to enforce their decisions.
Closing Thoughts

As we come to the close of this thesis there are a few more points I would like to touch on. The first of these has to do with unified collective action from the working class; for a long time the working class has been crippled by internal divisions over tactics, misogyny, and racism with Black Americans, in particular, having a long history of being excluded from various working class efforts. If the working class is to mount any significant and sustainable action to prevent exploitation by AI it must overcome these barriers and facilitate the formation of a multicultural alliance of workers that emphasizes inclusivity and accessibility for all workers, not just a select few. This accessible and inclusive working class alliance then leads to my next point which is the need for the field of political science to generate more accessible and inclusive work for the broader public. Many political science articles today sit behind various paywalls, exclusive journals, and these barriers to access are then often compounded by the difficulty in comprehending the literature itself.

Much time and effort is spent utilizing data tables and very specific terminology which come across as a foreign language to those not steeped in the literature of political science, and this raises an important question for the field of political science itself. For whom do we study and publish, and more importantly why? Do we produce works of political science so that we can debate other scholars across ivory towers or do we intend for our work to have an impact on the world? Is the intended audience of political science only those already within the field or is it the broader society within which we live? These questions may seem easy to answer; for surely works of political science are
undertaken so as to positively impact our world and of course the audience of political science is our broader society, for it is the fundamental subject at the center of all our work. Yet as I mentioned above, many works are difficult to access and even more are challenging to comprehend, so if political science as a field seeks to be a serious force for positive change, then it must undertake systematic efforts to both remove barriers to access and utilize the common vernacular more effectively so that our collective work and labor may escape the boundaries of our ivory towers and positively impact the society we live in.
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