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Wir leben jetzt im Zeitalter des Technofeudalismus

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Eine Video-Text-Zusammenfassung meines Arguments, dass wir jetzt im Zeitalter des TECHNOFEUDALISMUS leben (in 16', 2000 Wörter):

Wohin wir uns auch wenden, wir werden Zeuge des Triumphs des Kapitals. Das Kapital hat sich überall durchgesetzt: in Lagerhäusern, Fabriken, Büros, Universitäten, öffentlichen Krankenhäusern, den Medien - im Weltraum, aber auch im Mikrokosmos der Gentechnik. Wie kann ich es also wagen zu behaupten, dass der Kapitalismus getötet wurde? Von wem? Die köstlich-ironische Antwort ist, dass der Kapitalismus durch seine eigene Hand getötet wurde... durch das Kapital!

Wenn ich recht habe, geht es nicht darum, was die KI uns in Zukunft antun wird, sondern darum, was bereits geschehen ist: Das Kapital wurde so dominant, dass es zu einer so giftigen Variante mutierte, dass es wie ein dummer Virus seinen Wirt, den Kapitalismus, abtötete und ihn durch etwas viel, viel Schlimmeres ersetze.

Dieses neue mutierte Kapital, das den Kapitalismus getötet hat, lebt in der sprichwörtlichen Wolke - nennen wir es also Wolkenkapital.

Was ist Wolkenkapital? Was macht es so anders?

Das Wolkenkapital lebt natürlich nicht wirklich in der Wolke. Es lebt unten auf der Erde, bestehend aus vernetzten Maschinen, Serverfarmen, Funktürmen, Software, KI-gesteuerten Algorithmen - und natürlich lebt es auf dem Boden unserer Ozeane, wo unzählige Meilen von Glasfaserkabeln liegen.

Im Gegensatz zu traditionellem Kapital, von der Angelrute über die Dampfmaschine der Industriellen Revolution bis hin zu den modernen Industrierobotern von heute, die als Produktionsmittel hergestellt werden, produziert das Cloud-Kapital nichts - es besteht aus Maschinen, die so hergestellt werden, dass sie die

A video-text summary of my argument that we now live in the age of TECHNOFEUDALISM (in 16', 2000 words): Wherever we turn, we witness the triumph of capital. Capital has prevailed everywhere: in warehouses, factories, offices, universities, public hospitals, the media – in space but also in the microcosm of genetic engineering. So, how do I dare claim that capitalism has been killed? By whom? The deliciously ironic answer is that capitalism was killed by its own hand... by capital!

If I am right, the issue is not what AI will do to us in the future but what has already happened: Capital became so dominant that it mutated into a variant so toxic that, like a stupid virus, it killed off its host, capitalism, replacing it with something far, far worse.

This new mutant capital, that killed capitalism, lives in the proverbial cloud – so, let us call it cloud capital.

What is cloud capital? What makes it so different?

Cloud capital, of course, does not really live up in the cloud. It lives down on Earth, comprising networked machines, server farms, cell towers, software, AI-driven algorithms – and of course it lives on our oceans' floors where untold miles of optic fibre cables rest.

Unlike traditional capital, from fishing rods to the steam-engines of the Industrial Revolution to today's modern industrial robots that are produced means of production, cloud capital does not produce anything – it comprises machines manufactured so as to modify human behaviour.

That's what Amazon's Alexa or Google's Assistant or Apple's Siri is: It is a produced means of behavioural modification. It is a machine, a piece of capital, which we train to train us to train it to determine that which we want. And, once we want it, the same networked machine sells it to us, directly, bypassing markets.

As if that were not enough, the same machinery succeeds in making us sustain the enormous behavioural modification machine network to which it belongs with our free voluntary labour. We are sustaining it as we post reviews, rate products, upload videos, rants, photos - we help reproduce cloud capital without getting a penny for our labour. In essence, it has turned us into its cloud serfs!

Meanwhile, in the factories and the warehouses, where waged proletarians work under increasingly precarious conditions, the same algorithms that modify our behaviour and sell products to us directly – those algorithms are deployed, usually by digital devices tied to the workers' wrists, to make

proletarians, workers in the warehouses, in the factories work faster, to direct and to monitor them in real time.

I started by saying that wherever we turn, we stumble on the triumph of capital. But it is cloud capital that is the real winner. It is amazing how it performs, at once, five roles that used to be beyond capital's capacities: Cloud capital grabs our attention. It manufactures our desires. It sells to us, directly, outside any traditional markets, that which is going to satiate the desires it made us have. It drives proletarian labour inside the workplaces. And it elicits massive free labour from us, its cloud-serfs.

Is it surprising that the owners of this cloud capital – let's call them cloudalists – have a hitherto undreamt power to extract? To extract gargantuan surplus value from proletarians; untold quantities of free labour from almost everyone; and mind-numbing cloud rents from vassal capitalists – from sellers? Is it a wonder that they are vastly more powerful than Henry Ford or Rupert Murdoch could ever be?

"Hang on", I hear you say. "Is Jeff Bezos really different to Henry Ford? Aren't they all a species of monopoly capitalists? Monopolists?" No, <http://amazon.com> is not a monopolistic capitalist enterprise.

The moment you enter <http://amazon.com> you have exited capitalism altogether! Sure enough, the place is teaming with buyers and sellers. So, yes, it is an enormous trading platform but, no, a market it certainly is not! One man called Jeff owns everything. But he is much, much more than a mere monopolist.

Jeff doesn't own the factories that produce the stuff sold on his platform by traditional capitalists who have to use it to ply their trade. What he does own is more important: Jeff owns the algorithm that decides which products you see and which you don't – the very algorithm that you have trained to know you perfectly so that it matches you with a seller, whom it also knows perfectly well, with a view to maximising the probability that every such match, transaction, will generate, for Jeff, the highest rent that Jeff can charge the seller for what you buy: up to 40% of what you pay is pocketed by Jeff, the cloudalist!

The mind rebels at the enormity but also the radical novelty of this kind of exploitation: The same algorithm that we help train in real time to know us inside out - that same algorithm both modifies our preferences and administers the selection and delivery of commodities that will satisfy these preferences.

If you and I were to type "electric bicycles" or "binoculars" while in <http://amazon.com>, you and I would get totally different recommendations. In a traditional market or shopping mall it would be as if you and I were walking next to each other, our eyes trained in the same direction, the same shop

window, but we were to see different things depending on what Jeff's algorithm wants each one of us to see.

Everyone navigating around <http://amazon.com> – except Jeff Bezos of course – everyone in <http://amazon.com> is wandering around in algorithmically constructed isolation as if in a Panopticon where, unable to see each other, we only see Jeff's all-seeing algorithm or, more accurately, only what his algorithm allows us to see with a view to maximising his cloud rent – which is, of course, today's version of the ground rent that the feudal lords used to extract from their vassals and their peasants.

This is not capitalism. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to technofeudalism!

How did cloud capital kill capitalism? How did it rise up? Who paid for it?

Capitalism, lest we forget, had two pillars: markets and profit. Of course, markets and profit remain ubiquitous. Nevertheless, cloud capital has evicted both markets and profit from the centre of our socioeconomic system, pushing them out to its margins, and replacing them:

Markets, the medium of capitalism, have been replaced by cloud fiefs – digital trading platforms like <http://amazon.com> or Alibaba which, as we saw, look like, but are not, markets.

And Profit? The fuel of capitalism? Well, that has been replaced by its feudal predecessor: rent. But, specifically, a new form of rent, a cloud rent that must be paid for access to those cloud fiefs or digital platforms.

But how did cloud capital emerge? It began life in the late 1990s when the original Internet, which was a Commons – it functioned as a capitalism-free-zone – that original Internet, Internet 1.0 if you want, was privatised by the emergent Big Tech.

Who paid for the trillions it cost to manufacture and to accumulate cloud capital so quickly in the hands of so very few cloudalists? The startling answer is: The G7 countries' central banks, mostly! How did that happen? Well, by accident, or – to be more precise – by... crisis!

After the financial sector collapse of 2008, our central bankers printed up to \$35 trillion to bail out the bankers at a time when the governments were subjecting our peoples to harsh austerity. Capitalists were clever enough to foresee that the many would be too impecunious to buy their stuff. So, instead of investing, they took the central bank money to the stock exchange and the bond markets, where they bought shares, bonds – along with yachts, art, bitcoin, NFTs any 'asset' they could lay their hands on. The only capitalists who actually invested in capital were Big Tech owners. For example, 9 out of every 10 dollars that went into creating Facebook came from these central bank

monies! That's how cloud capital was financed and how the cloudalists became our new ruling class.

As a result, real power today resides not with the owners of machinery, buildings, railway and phone networks, industrial robots. These old-fashioned, terrestrial capitalists continue to extract surplus value from waged labour, but they are no longer in charge, as they used to be. They have become vassals in relation to the owners of cloud capital, of the cloudalists. As for the rest of us, we have returned to our former status as serfs, contributing to the wealth and power of the new ruling class with our unpaid labour — in addition to the waged labour we perform, when we get the chance to do it.

But surely, someone will say, this is still capitalism, isn't it?

So, you are still unconvinced? I know, it is hard to part with the term, with the word, capitalism. It is not just liberals who think of capitalism like fish think of the water they swim in — as natural. Socialists too need to feel that our purpose in life, the reason we landed on this Earth, is to overthrow capitalism. The news that I bring that capital beat us to it, and now we have something worse in capitalism's place, that news is hard to accept. Indeed, it is mostly my fellow-travelling leftist friends who try to dissuade me — to convince me that, yes, cloud capital may be important but "this is still capitalism mate".

Let's call it rentier capitalism or monopoly capitalism, they suggest. But that simply will not do! Cloud rent is not like ground rent, because it requires massive investment in new tech. And it is not monopoly rent either, because Bezos and Zuckerberg, instead of monopolising markets to sell their manufactures (like Ford and Eddison did), Bezos and Zuckerberg have replaced markets and have no interest in manufacturing anything (unlike Henry Ford and Thomas Eddison).

How about surveillance capitalism? Again, no, it won't do. Cloudalists do not simply use algorithms to brain wash us on behalf of advertisers in an otherwise capitalist setting. No, cloud capital reproduces itself through our free-labour, it directly exploits waged labour, and it squeezes cloud rents from vassal capitalists in trading platforms that are not markets. This is not capitalism folks! Any kind of capitalism.

But what about the observation that technofeudalism is parasitic on the capitalist sector within it? Yes, it is true. Were the conventional capitalists to die out, cloudalists would perish, unable to skim off cloud rents from the manufacturers. So what? After capitalism overthrew feudalism, capitalists were also parasitic on landowners, in the sense that, without private land producing food, capitalism would wither. Similarly, now: While the traditional capitalist sector feeds technofeudalism, it is cloud capital and cloud rent that dominate. Does it matter whether we call it technofeudalism or some form of capitalism?

At this point, it is important to recall Marx's maxim that the point is not to interpret but to change the world. So, does it matter if this is still capitalism or whether we call it technofeudalism? I think it does.

Recognising that our world has become technofeudal helps us grasp the enormity of what it will take to organise the victims of exorbitant power, the exploited who, now, include not only waged labourers but also the hordes of cloud serfs who are reproducing the very cloud capital that keeps them in a state of deepening precarity.

The concept of technofeudalism drives home the point that organising auto-workers and nurses, while still essential, is insufficient. It elucidates what it will take to organise the movements against the fossil fuel cartel when our means of communication are run on cloud capital primed to poison public opinion. It explains how the shift to electric cars caused German deindustrialisation, as profits due to precision mechanical engineering are being replaced by rents extracted by owners of the cloud capital keeping tabs on the drivers' routes and in-cabin habits. Elon Musk's decision to buy Twitter suddenly makes a lot more sense. Twitter for Musk is an interface between his mechanical capital stock at Tesla and SpaceX and cloud capital. The New Cold War between the USA and China, especially after the war in Ukraine, is explained as the repercussion of an underlying clash between two technofeudalisms, one whose cloud rents are denominated in dollars the other in yuan.

Isn't it mindboggling? It took mind-bending scientific breakthroughs, fantastical neural networks, and imagination-defying AI programs to accomplish what? To create a world where, while privatisation and private equity asset-strip all physical wealth around us, cloud capital goes about the business of asset-stripping our brains. To own our minds individually, we must own cloud capital collectively. Once we have reclaimed our minds, we can put them collectively to work out a way to create a new cloud capital commons. It will be damned hard. But it's the only way we can turn our cloud-based artefacts from a produced means of behaviour modification to a produced means of human collaboration and emancipation.

Cloud serfs, cloud proles and cloud vassals of the world, unite! We have nothing to lose but our mind-cloud chains!

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