

Alex Taek-Gwang Lee

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6315-6630>

Kyung Hee University

Revisiting Post-May 1968 French Theory: Critical Thought and Data Capitalism

Abstract: This essay explores the critical crisis stemming from the normalization of data-driven capitalism in the neoliberal era. It proposes the concept of subjectivization of anachronism, developed by French philosophers in the 1960s, as a potential avenue for revitalizing critical thought. The rise of data capitalism, characterized by big tech-driven accumulation, emerged as a distinct mode of capitalist production during the post-war US-centric Cold War era and subsequent globalization from the 1950s onward. As artificial intelligence heralds a new technological paradigm shift, this essay examines the possibilities for critical subjectivity within this evolving landscape. By drawing on insights from 1960s French philosophy – a cornerstone of contemporary critical theory – the essay aims to reassess and reinvigorate critical discourse in the age of data capitalism.

Keywords: cognitive capitalism, surveillance capitalism, big data, critical theory, human capital

1. Anachronistic Subjectivity

This essay investigates the crisis in critical thinking stemming from the pervasive influence of data-driven capitalism during the neoliberal period. The current crisis in critical thinking can be attributed, in part, to the waning influence of Marxism. This decline was precipitated by the fall of the Soviet bloc and the subsequent global dominance of capitalism. The result of the ideological landscape has made criticism in the classical sense increasingly challenging. The global dominance of capitalism has significantly undermined the foundation for critical analysis of its inherent issues. As capitalism becomes ubiquitous, encompassing virtually all economic and social spheres, it increasingly appears as the natural, inevitable state

of affairs. This perception tends to neutralize critical perspectives, as the absence of visible alternatives makes it challenging to envision or articulate different possibilities.

The totalization of capitalism – its spread to nearly every corner of the globe and aspect of life – has led to a crisis of critique. This crisis manifests in the difficulty of maintaining a critical stance when capitalism seems all-encompassing. The lack of an exterior to capitalism, or readily apparent alternative values, weakens our capacity to identify and analyse its problems. This situation poses a significant challenge: How can we cultivate and maintain a critical perspective on “capitalist realism” that has become so pervasive that it appears to be the only possible reality? Recognizing this totalization of capitalism as a crisis of critique is crucial. The situation highlights the urgent need for new frameworks and approaches that can reinvigorate critical thinking and enable meaningful analysis of capitalism’s impacts and alternatives, even in the absence of immediate, large-scale systemic alternatives.

This crisis in critical thinking, I argue, stems from the dual forces of knowledge datafication and cognitive commodification – processes intrinsically linked to neoliberalism’s total financialization. As a potential remedy, I explore the notion of “subjectivization of anachronism,” a concept originating from French philosophical discourse after May 1968, as a means to reinvigorate critical thought. In a sense, the notion of a crisis of criticism may be inherent to the nature of criticism itself. This perceived crisis is closely tied to the decline of the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophical movements, which began with Kant and reached their apex with the Romantics. Since the core of criticism lies in reflecting on the legitimate use of reason, this crisis suggests a breakdown in the framework against which we measure that use.

Kant initially proposed the concept of *a priori* reason as a solution to this problem. However, in his later years, the philosopher embarked on a journey of reflection that significantly altered his earlier conclusions. This shift led to a reevaluation of the roles of intelligence and imagination in critical thinking. The current crisis of criticism can be seen as a challenge to Kant’s Copernican revolution in philosophy – the idea that objects conform to our cognition rather than the other way around. This revolution posited that things acquire meaning only through the medium of human subjectivity. The contemporary crisis questions this fundamental premise, potentially reshaping our understanding of criticism and its foundations. In some ways, therefore, the rise of realism in philosophy, such as Quentin Meillassoux’s Speculative Materialism, may be a response to this crisis of critique. Apart from the ambivalent assessment of whether the solution was adequate, the gesture is significant in terms of the development of Western theory in the 1990s as a response to the relativism of postmodernism. They call for reinstating the object’s status to contemplate *Das Ding* that Kant bracketed, or, in Meillassoux’s terms, to escape “correlationism,” which presupposes a dichotomy of

subject and object. While not without distinction, their problem lies in the attempt to account for the being of objects adequately.

Of course, these theories have emerged as a response to the crisis but do not seem to have solved the problem. Whether it is New Materialism, Posthumanism, or Affect Theory, these tendencies seem only to be a specialization of the currents of French philosophy that emerged after 1968 in the wake of the disappointment with Soviet socialism and the post-Stalinist winds. After all, the aim of these theories is more of an attempt to understand or explain objectivity more rigorously. Still, criticism is a matter of repeating or actualizing the excesses that cannot be reduced to the specialization of theories. In other words, the meaning and purpose of criticism is not to repeat a theory but to recreate the conditions that made that theory possible.

In this context, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari refer to May 1968 as “the order of a pure event, free from all normal or normative causalities” (2001, 209). As they see it, the events of 1968 were not a response to or a consequence of any crisis but rather illustrated “the current crisis in France, the impasse that stems directly from the inability of French society to assimilate May ’68” (209). In this text, written ten years after May 1968, Deleuze and Guattari write that “the children of May ’68 [...] know perfectly well that nothing today corresponds to their subjectivity” (210). This anachronistic subjectivity of the “children of May ’68” is the political conjunctures irreducible to theory. Criticism is not an act of understanding or explaining pure objectivity without subjectivity but an act of making that objectivity possible, of reinventing the subjectivity that is written within it but has disappeared. This subjectivity is born out of material conditions, but it is not irreducible to those material conditions themselves; that is, it is not independent of external invention. The role of critical theory, or the desire to critique, is to uncover this subjectivity, which is another practice of sustaining the subjectivity of events that have disappeared from material conditions.

2. Human Capital and Normalization

The situation that we are witnessing today is indicative of the direction of our times, which is pushing for its own demise. Statistic consensus has become the dominant tendency, excluding critical excesses deemed normal. In essence, this situation represents the culmination of what Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer identified as the culture industry in their seminal work, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. For them, the cultural industry is, first and foremost, about technological standardization. They emphasized that “the technology of the culture industry confines itself to standardization and mass production and sacrifices what once distinguished the logic of the work from that of society” (Adorno and Horkheimer 95).

The logic of this totalization is driven by algorithms based on big data, and the completion of this rationality serves as the axiomatics of the market, which leads to the externality of the critical subject as excess. The subjectivity that constantly repeats what does not exist, which Deleuze and Guattari already predicted in 1978, is an object of treatment that requires clinical psychology. In effect, the meaning of this normalization is the new concept of *homo æconomicus*. The implication is an inversion of the human capital accumulation axiom that “my babies” should be a potential fortune. In this business of human capital, parenting becomes a technique, and parents who are not good at it are stigmatized as bad or even immoral deviants. As Michel Foucault points out, the core of bio-politics materialized through neoliberal norms of parenting: “the number of hours a mother spends with her child, even when it is still in the cradle, will be very important for the formation of an abilities-machine, or for the formation of a human capital” (229). This technologization of parenting says there are no bad children, only lousy parenting. However, all this nurturing knowledge only supports and reinforces the norms of bio-politics in that it is a dogma to achieve the absolute goal of capitalist normalization.

The ideology of normalization is the logic of reproduction that underpins the new capitalist ethos of neoliberalism. As Wolfgang Streeck has shown, since the 1980s, neoliberalism has become a “unique idea (*pensée unique*) for the center-left and center-right” (6). In the process, the old debate between liberals and conservatives has been discarded. The reforms envisaged from this perspective were labor market flexibility and incentives and accelerated privatization and marketization in the name of price competition. At the global level, trade unions were weakened, and strikes declined. The accompanying exodus of intellectuals is not unrelated to the “post-factual politics” that has recently emerged as an issue. The origins of these changes can be traced to the policies implemented by Thatcher and subsequent neoliberal leaders, who systematically dismantled the post-war consensus that had established the foundation for the social welfare system following World War II.

The decline of social democratic values, or the end of the postwar Keynesian state, led to the rise of “alternative facts” today. This shift’s core is the erosion of trust in traditional institutions. Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy clarified that the rise of neoliberalism caused two types of consequences: “First of all, finance managed the crisis according to its own interests, which prolonged the crisis; second, this stretching out of the crisis made it possible for finance to shift the course of history in its own interests” (16). The convergence of widespread financialization and rapid technological advancement has ushered in a new phase of capital accumulation, wherein the living world is increasingly quantified, digitized, and commodified as data.

As social democratic values weakened, many people lost faith in government, media, and academia. This loss of trust created a vacuum that alternative narratives,

including those not grounded in factual evidence, could fill. Simultaneously, the decline of social democratic policies coincided with increasing economic inequality in many countries. This growing disparity led to resentment and distrust of elites, making some individuals more susceptible to populist rhetoric that often incorporated “alternative facts.” The media landscape has also played a crucial role in this transformation. The fragmentation of media sources and the rise of social media echo chambers have contributed significantly to the spread of misinformation. This aligns with the decline of shared social democratic values and the emergence of more partisan information ecosystems. Furthermore, the weakening of labor unions, traditionally associated with social democratic movements, has reduced working-class political power and cohesion. This shift has led to a fragmentation of shared narratives and increased vulnerability to misinformation.

As traditional class-based politics associated with social democracy declined, identity-based politics gained prominence. This shift sometimes led to competing narratives about social realities, potentially paving the way for “alternative facts.” Additionally, the erosion of social democratic values often coincided with increased globalization, which some groups perceived as a threat to their cultural identity. This anxiety created fertile ground for nationalist narratives. The weakening of social democratic institutions often correlates with reduced emphasis on civic education, potentially leaving citizens less equipped to evaluate information critically and more susceptible to misinformation. This environment has given rise to the concept of “post-truth” politics, where emotional appeals are more influential than the objective facts. Such an atmosphere is conducive to the propagation of the alt-right.

Technological factors have also played a role. The rapid pace of technological change and information overload can lead to confusion and a desire for simple explanations. Moreover, as social democratic values weakened, the shared sense of reality that these values often supported began to fracture. This fragmentation of a common understanding made it easier for competing, factually dubious narratives to gain traction. It is important to note that while these factors contribute to the relationship between declining social democratic values and the rise of alternative facts, the connection is not direct or causal. Rather, it is a complex interplay of various elements that created an environment where anti-intellectualism could flourish.

This tendency is inherent in the principles of neoliberalism, which emphasize the truth of the market. This credo of neoliberalism is TINA (There Is No Alternative). Herbert Spencer was the source of this famous phrase, which was quoted by the “Iron Lady” Margaret Thatcher. Spencer used the phrase to emphasize the fact that the laws of natural evolution and the laws of social development are intertwined. The implication was that whether or not society recognized these natural laws, the laws of evolution had a way to go (Spencer 41). The neoliberal doctrine of no alternative is an ideology that enforces the notion that there is no alternative to capitalism. The neoliberal turn was a de-nationalization of capital as the US-led post-war growth model encountered difficulties.

Post-war economic growth, made possible by the “Great Levellers” of the Great Depression and World War II, was in trouble by the 1970s, and global capitalism emerged as a response to this problem. The standard operating model for the world economy until the 1970s was the “Age of Invention” that unfolded in the United States after the Civil War. According to Robert Gordon, the neoliberal reforms that began to come to the fore in the late 1970s can be understood as the globalization of the “American model of growth,” an attempt to return to the “Age of Invention,” which, in turn, had led to significant economic leaps forward (Gordon 2017, 2). However, the results have not been as spectacular as in previous eras and have only increased inequality and global poverty.

The neoliberal doctrine of “no alternative,” no matter how reformist and centrist it is dressed up in language, is ultimately just rhetoric that repeats the old anti-communist rhetoric. Clearly, the French intellectuals who emerged after May 1968, such as Bernard-Henri Lévy, were articulating the logic of the center-left and center-right. The Left Bank of post-war Paris was the name given to the moderation of these intellectuals. In his book *Sartre: The Philosopher of the Twentieth Century*, Lévy wrote that “the ideology of revolution, which had galvanized, to a huge degree, the life and work of Sartre was sputtering out like a candle” (3). For former French intellectuals like Lévy, French philosophy may have been a fleeting passion that dominated their youth. The affinity between French philosophy and the American neoliberal logic that emerged after May 1968 was challenged as early as Dominique Lecourt. Lecourt pointed out that the real objective behind the scenes of Marxist criticism at the front of the stage is to depoliticize the intelligentsia to prevent the mobilization of the masses (134). François Cousset also observed that French intellectual movements (inspired by thinkers like Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze) flourished in American universities yet faded from prominence in their native France (309). According to him, these figures are now primarily remembered in obituaries or viewed with a sense of nostalgia, and their intellectual contributions have become the domain of a small, exclusive group.

While there is some criticism of the “Americanized French theory” based on these perspectives, it is hard to see how the challenges and failures of the French philosophy in the post-war Third World non-aligned movement and the international search for new political possibilities under the banner of post-Stalinism can be so easily relegated to a particular academic reception as a way of examining its legacy today. As Alain Badiou points out, French philosophy after May 1968 wanted “the concept itself to be a journey whose destination we did not know necessarily” (2012, lxiii). In this sense, the anachronistic subjectivity that Deleuze and Guattari point to is the desire to accord “the thing itself” its rightful significance against the Kantian sense of critique, the desire to take the “path of the unknown.”

While numerous skeptical counterarguments have been levelled against both the French philosophical initiative and its American offshoot, critical theory, I argue that this intellectual movement – broadly termed “poststructuralism” – emerged

from a complex set of historical and ideological pressures. It represents an attempt to navigate three interconnected challenges: first, to preserve the Idea of communism while grappling with the influential legacy of Marxist thought; second, to critically engage with and move beyond the shadow of Stalinism; and third, to formulate a response to the increasing mechanization of cognition brought about by the rise of cybernetics and artificial intelligence technologies in the United States. This multifaceted intellectual endeavor sought to reconcile revolutionary political thought with emerging technological paradigms. A comprehensive analysis of these relationships and their implications for contemporary critical thought warrants a more extensive discussion, which, due to space constraints, must be reserved for future exploration.

3. The End of Radicalism

The emergence of Claude Lévi-Strauss' structuralism played a crucial role in shaping postwar French philosophy and its transition to new modes of thought. Structuralism catalyzed a paradigm shift in philosophical inquiry, transforming traditional metaphysical thought into a novel anthropological methodology. This transformation laid the groundwork for what is now recognized as French theory, a diverse and influential intellectual movement. By reframing human phenomena in terms of underlying systems and structures, structuralism offered a new lens through which to examine culture, society, and the human psyche.

The structuralist method moved beyond individual consciousness to explore the often-hidden rules and patterns that shape human behavior and cultural productions. This approach paved the way for subsequent schools of thought, including post-structuralism and deconstruction, which further developed and challenged structuralism. Collectively, these intellectual currents foster the rise of French theory, which has profoundly impacted disciplines ranging from literary criticism and sociology to politics and cultural studies. Through theoretical experimentation, however, whether successful or unsuccessful, structuralism did not break with Marxism but rather sought to develop its theories further on a foundation of mathematical imagination.

Thanks to the resistance movement during World War II, Marxism was firmly entrenched in post-war France (Foster 51). It is well known that Western Marxists, including Georg Lukács, had already argued for a "humanist Marx" in response to dogmatism disguised as science and that Lucien Goldmann, the leading post-war French Marxist critic, adopted Lukács' Marxist critique in his literary studies. Sartre's existential Marxism also criticized Stalinism along these lines. The Soviet Union was already taking these currents of Western Marxism and existential Marxism, which revolved around the concept of alienation, as a more serious problem than the Cold War situation (68).

In other words, the situation in French philosophy that we know today as “postmodernism” was already visible in Lukács’ Western Marxism and Sartre’s existential Marxism, which criticized the fossilization of the communist movement. It is more accurate to say that May 1968 was the realization in a mass movement of a critique of the French Communist Party and Stalinism that had been developed at the philosophical level. Indeed, the challenge that May 1968 left for French philosophy was to criticize the problem of voluntary servitude. As early as Spinoza, the philosophical problem of politics struggling for the freedom of submission rather than liberation had been posed as a philosophical challenge, and the post-war theories of the New Left, particularly Adorno, had their own critiques of this problem.

French philosophy after May 1968 was nothing less than a search for a theoretical outlook beyond the official Marxism of Stalinism, as evidenced by the efforts of Louis Althusser, who struggled to put this revolutionary event into philosophical language. Althusser states in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*:

I have taken the considerable risk of putting forward theses on these two points which, while they are in perfect conformity with the theory and practice of the Marxist-Leninist workers’ movement, had not yet been stated in systematic theoretical form. Thus I have sketched a theory of what I call the Ideological State Apparatuses and also of the functioning of ideology in general. (2014, 2)

Althusser’s response to May 1968 was an analysis of the ideological state apparatus, a theoretical point left vacant by conventional Marxism. It was structuralism that gave Althusser access to this problem. Althusser’s response to the changed situation explains the French philosophy project after May 1968. If there is such a thing as poststructuralism in opposition to structuralism as a theory of the repeated reproduction of structures and the formation of off-centered subjects, then it can only be a theory of the transformation of structures and subject modalities determined by its own necessity. This post-1968 theory aptly illustrates the problematic concern of French philosophy to revive the spirit of resistance while renewing official Marxism, which had become a dogmatism of self-preservation. To this end, Foucault and Deleuze sought to upset the subjugated modality of the subject with the question of immanence, and Althusser and Derrida sought to change the fixed structure with the materiality of events.

Interestingly, this problem of French philosophy attracted as much attention from the outside as from within, precisely from the American intelligence services, which sought to reconstruct the post-war order. A report by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), “France: Defection of the Leftist Intellectuals,” dated December 1985, was the result of this interest. Although its analyses and projections are crude and not in line with the facts, the existence of this document proves that the CIA considered French philosophy to be a political variable at the time. The year is

1985, four years after the Mitterrand government was formed. At the outset, the report describes the new intellectual currents emerging in France. It diagnoses that the spirit of anti-Marxism and anti-Sovietism prevents anyone from organizing openly against American policies. While it is hard to deny that criticism of US policy remains strong in France, the report also notes that “the Soviet Union that is now on the defensive with New Left intellectuals – and is likely to remain there at least in the medium term” (CIA v). Mitterrand’s aloof attitude towards the Soviet Union contributes to this atmosphere, but it does not mean that his party reflects the arguments of French left-wing intellectuals in its policies, the report analyses.

The report analyses a change in the role of intellectuals due to a shift in the role of intellectuals. In other words, the decline in the influence of the once-powerful left-wing intellectuals in France has led to a critical approach to Marxism and the Soviet Union. According to the report’s analysis, the New Left is forming a two-pronged front: one in support of “moderate Socialists who are striving to create a broad-based center-left alliance” (v) and the other in opposition to “hardline Socialists to reforge the now defunct ‘unity of the left’ with the French Communist Party in the forthcoming legislative elections” (vi). The report’s judgment was that the New Left’s activities would alienate supporters from the Socialist and Communist camps.

Crucial to the “decline of left-wing intellectuals” that the CIA report considers so important were the “New Philosophers” who began to emerge after May 68, criticizing the established left as “totalitarian.” The report argues:

Billing themselves the ‘New Philosophers,’ they were mostly former Communists who had left the party after the traumatic events of May 1968. Most of them were also graduates of France’s most prestigious training school for teachers and thinkers, the *École Normale Supérieure* (ENS), and they had in common not just their experience in the Left Bank student movement of the 1960s but also their rejection of the Stalinist sophistries taught at ENS. (5)

While the report considers Lévy and André Glucksmann to be the leading ideologues of the May 1968 revolution, they do not necessarily agree with capitalism. Although Lévy and Glucksmann claim that “all Marxist thought is ultimately totalitarian,” these “neo-philosophers” criticize de Gaulle but do not abandon their view of capitalism as evil (5). They remain ambivalent about capitalism. Furthermore, despite presenting Lévy and Glucksmann as important May 1968 thinkers, the report’s authors state that remnants still adhere to the tradition of French left-wing intellectuals. Sartre, Barthes, Althusser, and Lacan are among the “remnants” named in the report.

Nevertheless, the report conveys a mood in France where anti-Americanism has declined sharply, and it predicts a possible change in the political climate. This shift in French culture is evident in films like *La Bohème*, made in the 1980s. In

this film, French teenagers are depicted as drinking Coca-Cola while listening to American pop songs. The “American Wave” as it was called in France at the time, was not just a cultural phenomenon but a political and economic transition that was underway with the end of the de Gaulle regime and the start of neoliberalism.

Despite these problems, in some ways, the CIA report exemplifies the emergence of neoliberalism and the subsequent normalization of liberal norms in the 1980s. Basically, the decline of “public intellectuals” such as Sartre and the visible eviction of Marxism that the report describes meant that the theoretical initiatives of French philosophy after May 68 were unable to respond effectively to the neoliberal situation. This is not to say, however, that it was completely unconcerned. Against Gramsci’s proposition that every man is a philosopher, Althusser emphasizes the distinction to be found in the knowledge of communist philosophy. The goal of the new Marxist philosophy, in Althusser’s view, was to overthrow philosophy’s identification with systematic acceptance and to establish a “general theory” of “the *conjunction* of important events in class relations and the state, on the one hand, and the history of the sciences on the other” (2014, 17). Indeed, this goal is still relevant in French philosophy.

As Warren Montag makes clear in his preface to the English edition of *Philosophy for Non-philosophers*, the most urgent task for Althusser was to communicate directly to the “popular masses” the importance of philosophy and Marxism (Althusser 2017, 3). Althusser’s effort to dissolve the distinction between philosophy and non-philosophy remains an urgent task, as does the need to apply the practicality of philosophy, which operates as “a theoretical laboratory,” to the situation of the here and now. Of course, Althusser’s “theoretical laboratory” is not the grammatical proposition that “Marxism is a philosophy of practice,” but the insight that philosophy can never return to philosophy but must encounter non-philosophy remains valid today.

1986 was a pivotal year for Europe, coming shortly after the CIA report on French philosophy was written. This year marked the signing of the Single European Act (SEA), the first major revision to the 1957 Treaty of Rome. The SEA was championed by the European Economic Community (EEC), the precursor to the European Union, with France and Germany as key players. The SEA laid out a roadmap for creating the Single Market by 31 December, 1992, with its provisions beginning to take effect on 1 July, 1987. This act was significant as it pushed for greater economic integration and harmonization among member states. It required compromises from various nations, including France’s acceptance of more liberal economic policies and the UK’s deeper engagement with European institutions.

The CIA report on French philosophy is relevant not only to the neoliberal shift occurring around 1985 but also highlights the role of François Mitterrand’s Socialist government in spearheading these changes in France (Watkins 8). This context helps us understand that the current conjunctures stem from political and economic transitions that gained momentum in the 1980s. However, it would

be oversimplifying to view this shift as an inevitable conformity to structural changes. Instead, we can interpret the “neoliberal transition” through the lens of cognitive capitalism, as conceptualized by Yann Moulier-Boutang. This framework provides an understanding of the economic and social transformations of the late 20th century. In light of these historical developments, it is crucial to examine the recent rise of surveillance capitalism. The following discussion will explore these implications and consider how critical thought can respond to this new paradigm of data-driven economic and social control.

4. Surveillance Capitalism and Big Data

According to Moulier-Boutang, cognitive capitalism is “a paradigm, or a coherent research program, that poses an alternative to post-Fordism” (113). Cognitive capitalism is based on the idea that technological advances have transformed the modes of accumulation, production, and exploitation in traditional capitalism. The crucial difference distinguishing cognitive capitalism from traditional capitalism is that knowledge is the object of accumulation. In short, the knowledge-based economy is the engine of cognitive capitalism, and the ubiquity of the Internet has accelerated the globalization of cognitive capitalism. There are those who see the emergence of cognitive capitalism as a new level of freedom.

From an autonomist perspective, such as Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, the analysis of technology and the Internet as tools for liberation takes on a more radical and worker-centered approach: The advent of the Internet and digital technologies represents a new terrain of struggle in the ongoing conflict between capital and the working class. These technologies, far from being neutral tools, are battlegrounds where the autonomy of the working class can be asserted against the domination of capital. In the tradition of *operaismo* (workerism), technological development is driven by workers’ struggles and capital’s attempts to control labor. The Internet, in this light, can be seen as a response to the crisis of Fordism and the rise of cognitive labor. However, unlike previous technological shifts, the decentralized nature of the Internet offers unprecedented opportunities for worker autonomy and self-organization. The concept of the social factory, where all of society becomes a site of production, is intensified in the digital age. The Internet extends the realm of production beyond traditional workplaces, making every aspect of social life potentially productive for capital. However, this also means that every online interaction becomes a potential site of resistance and refusal.

The refusal of work, a key concept in autonomist thought, takes on new forms in the digital realm. It manifests as the creation of free and open-source software, peer-to-peer networks, and collaborative knowledge production outside the logic of capitalist accumulation. These practices embody the autonomist ideal of self-valorization, where workers create value for themselves rather than for capital.

Moreover, the Internet facilitates the circulation of struggles, allowing for rapid communication and coordination among workers across different sectors and geographical locations. This network of struggles echoes the autonomist concept of “class composition,” where the technical composition imposed by capital is met with a political recomposition of the working class.

The figure of the cyborg worker, melding human and machine, emerges as a new subject of struggle. This hybridization, rather than representing a loss of humanity, offers new possibilities for expanding human capacities and resisting capital’s attempts at control and measurement of labor. However, we must remain vigilant. Capital constantly attempts to recuperate and enclose the commons created by this collective intelligence. Platforms that appear to offer freedom often become new forms of exploitation, extracting value from our social interactions and digital labor. The challenge, then, is to continuously create new forms of digital commons and to refuse the commodification of our online lives.

In this sense, the Internet is not merely a tool for freedom but a site of ongoing class struggle. The potential for liberation lies not in the technology itself but in our collective ability to appropriate it, to refuse its capitalist logic, and to create autonomous spaces and practices that point towards a post-capitalist future. This perspective emphasizes the conflictual nature of technological development, the centrality of worker autonomy, and the need for constant struggle against capital’s attempts to subsume all aspects of life under its logic. It sees the Internet not as inherently liberating but as a contested space where the self-activity of the working class can potentially overcome capitalist domination.

However, I believe that cognitive capitalism is also the foundation of surveillance capitalism, which has gained attention. In terms of technological progress alone, surveillance capitalism would not be possible without cognitive capitalism. Of course, surveillance capitalism is an outgrowth of cognitive capitalism, but the difference between the two is clear. The former sees knowledge as the object of accumulation, while the latter sees data as the object of accumulation. While cognitive capitalism operates as a paradigm of self-improvement, with “self-learning” as the keyword, surveillance capitalism is less about “self” and more about individual behavior that can be reduced to data.

The term “surveillance capitalism” first appeared in Shoshana Zuboff’s book, which was of the same title. Despite its popularity, the term is more of an improvised notion for data capitalism, as represented by Google, Amazon, and Facebook, than it is a precise concept. Nevertheless, the problem of surveillance capitalism operating as a surrogate for Zuboff’s argument certainly deserves serious discussion. If surveillance capitalism has arrived, what are its implications, and how does it affect us? Is the surveillance capitalism that Zuboff discusses different from cognitive capitalism as conceptualized by Moulier-Boutang? As mentioned earlier, Moulier-Boutang sees cognitive capitalism as a paradigm or research program proposed as an alternative to post-Fordism. According to him, cognitive

capitalism can be understood through the transformation of three economic factors: accumulation, modes of production, and modes of exploitation. It is the steady progress of technology since 1975 that has made this transition possible. Although the term “information society” was once in vogue, Moulier-Boutang believes that this concept does not adequately explain the transformation of capitalism through the transformation of the three economic factors. According to him, “the object of accumulation consists mainly of knowledge, which becomes the basic source of value, as well as the principal location of the process of valorization” in cognitive capitalism (57).

In cognitive capitalism, the object of accumulation is knowledge, which is both the source of value and the point at which prices are set. The knowledge-driven economy restructures the division of labor in the traditional sense and promotes the spread of horizontal structures reinforced by data collection systems such as the Internet. It is hard to deny that cognitive capitalism has enabled the rise of surveillance capitalism. Regarding technological progress, cognitive capitalism is also the foundation of surveillance capitalism. In a way, surveillance capitalism could be called one of the many characteristics of cognitive capitalism. However, from my perspective, what makes these types of capitalism different is the role that “learning” plays in accumulation. The consistent paradigm underpinning cognitive capitalism is the production of knowledge through knowledge. It is the exploitation of creative capacities. In this process, knowledge functions as a commodity. However, this compatibility of knowledge with commodities cannot easily be called the commodification of knowledge. Rather, the process of accumulation in cognitive capitalism is more about the reconfiguration of property rights and the expansion of wealth. This is why cognitive capitalism is the foundation of surveillance capitalism in that it enables and accelerates the commodification of private data.

Data is a natural resource in surveillance capitalism. Extracting and analysing data from human behavior is essential to the economic principles of surveillance capitalism. Google is the best embodiment of the logic of this new capitalism, so it is safe to call it a party to surveillance capitalism, just as Ford and General Motors were to industrial capitalism. This surveillance capitalism does not emerge from the abolition of capitalism itself. It transforms capitalist accumulation by leaving the existing laws of production competition, profit maximization, productivity, and growth in place and introducing other laws in their place (Zuboff 66–67). What is important about Zuboff’s point is that this change in the mode of capitalist accumulation is relevant to private law. The new logic of accumulation, Zuboff says, is based on economies of scale that extract the surplus of behavior (87). Extracting the “surplus of behavior” means generating a surplus by inducing human behavior. In other words, surveillance capitalism must constantly produce subjects who are supposed to act as objects of surveillance.

In this context, Zuboff understands surveillance capitalism as “*behavioral modification.*” By cooperating with “its machine-intelligence-based ‘means of

production,” we “voluntarily” change our behavior to suit the totality of information and control (67). This process creates an unprecedented framework of “*instrumental power* and social implications.” It is this framework, or system, that matters here. It is not an Orwellian Big Brother that makes surveillance capitalism possible, but rather a system that aligns our behavior with the algorithms that constitute the rationality of technology. Unlike cognitive capitalism, surveillance capitalism shifts the object of its accumulation from knowledge to data. Of course, this shift does not mean the end of cognitive capitalism. The two modes of capitalist accumulation coexist. In cognitive capitalism, knowledge is not a direct commodity but rather a commodity structure. This commodity structure makes the non-exchangeable exchangeable. In cognitive capitalism, the key is the control of knowledge, which is essential to living labor. The nature of cognitive capitalism creates a crisis in the Smithian and Taylorian division of labor that prevailed in industrial capitalism and drove technological progress. The mode of accumulation is fundamentally changed, which is why the “information technology revolution” does not simply mean a change in the mode of production.

5. Technology and Voluntary Servitude

These analyses of the relationship between technology and capitalism are rooted in Marx’s earlier analysis of the relationship between the introduction of machines and capitalist accumulation. Marx’s analysis of machinery in *Capital*, particularly in “Machinery and Large-Scale Industry,” provides a comprehensive critique of the role of technology in capitalist production. Marx begins by defining a machine as an instrument of labor that replaces human power with natural forces, and human operations with mechanical ones. This distinction between tools (operated by human power) and machines (powered by non-human sources) is crucial to understanding the transformative impact of machinery on the labor process. According to Marx, the introduction of machinery fundamentally alters the relationship between worker and means of production. In his words, “in handicrafts and manufacture, the worker makes use of a tool; in the factory, the machine makes use of him” (Marx 548). This shift represents a profound change in the nature of work itself, with the worker becoming, in many ways, subordinate to the machine.

Marx recognizes that machinery greatly increases the productivity of labor. Machines can work faster, longer, and with greater precision than human workers, driving capitalist accumulation through enhanced production capabilities. However, this increased productivity comes with significant social costs. Marx observes that the introduction of machinery often leads to a deskilling of labor, as complex tasks are broken down into simple, repetitive operations that can be performed by less skilled (and thus cheaper) workers. This transfer of skill from worker to machine is a key aspect of Marx’s critique. Paradoxically, while machines increase

productivity, Marx notes that they often lead to an extension of the working day. Capitalists seek to maximize the use of their expensive machinery and keep it running as long as possible, including through shift work. This drive for constant operation not only extends working hours but also allows for the employment of women and children in factories, often under exploitative conditions. Marx sees this as a degradation of family life and worker health.

The intensification of labor is another consequence of mechanization that Marx highlights. While machines take over much of the physical labor, they often increase the mental strain on workers who must keep pace with the machine's rhythm. This intensification and the extension of working hours represent a dual workforce exploitation. A crucial concept in Marx's analysis is the creation of a "relative surplus population" or "reserve army of labor." As machines replace workers, they generate a pool of unemployed individuals. This surplus population serves to keep wages down and workers compliant, further benefiting the capitalist class.

Marx points out a fundamental contradiction in the capitalist use of machinery: while it has the potential to reduce labor time and ease the burden of work, under capitalism, it often leads to longer hours and more intense work for those employed and unemployment for others. This contradiction underscores the conflict between the productive potential of technology and the social relations of capitalist production. Despite his critique, Marx sees machinery as potentially revolutionary. He argues that the development of machinery creates the material conditions for a future society where necessary labor is minimized, and human creative potential can be fully realized. This perspective illustrates Marx's dialectical view of technological progress – seeing both its oppressive role within capitalism and its liberatory potential under different social relations.

Marx views machinery not just as a technological development but as a social relation that transforms the nature of work, the composition of the working class, and the dynamics of capitalist accumulation. In this sense, technological progress leads to paradigm convergence, corresponding to the crisis of capitalism. Technological progress is the guardian of capitalist accumulation. The word "guardian" is a metaphor used by Marx to describe the judicial recognition of commodities. Commodities cannot be sold in the market alone. They must be judicially approved to acquire the status of legal goods. In other words, even in surveillance capitalism, new technological transitions always presuppose judicial sanction. Self-driving cars and drone deliveries are good examples of this, as they have not been commercialized partly due to legal challenges.

Insofar as technological revolutions occur as part of the capitalist mode of accumulation, whatever cognitive capitalism or any other capitalism, the technology is not outside the principles of that capitalism; Marx argued that "the judicial relation, whose form is the contract, whether as part of a developed legal system or not, is a relation between two wills which mirrors the economic relation"

(178). For Marx, the content of the judicial relationship is the exchange of “two wills.” Economic relations determine this exchange. This insight of Marx allows us to understand the relationship between accumulation and the judicial system. Therefore, if we want to understand the nature of accumulation, whether it is cognitive capitalism or surveillance capitalism, we need to understand how it relates to the judicial system. In other words, surveillance capitalism is predicated on the legal authorization to use private data for economic purposes.

Cognitive capitalism eats into the working class in the traditional sense and associates the cognitive dimension of labor with production. Cognitive arrangements organize the axioms and desires of human capital. Mass education and mass knowledge are the preconditions that make new accumulation possible. Cognitive capitalism forces individuals to cultivate their own voluntary servitude to capitalism. On the ideological side, cognitive capitalism reinforces the automatism of labor and abolishes manual labor. For this reason, the ethos of cognitive capitalism drives an obsession with self-directed learning. According to Malcolm Knowles, the principle of self-directed learning is that everyone takes the initiative to engage in learning without the support or assistance of others, self-diagnosing their own learning level and needs, setting goals for learning, and evaluating the results of learning (18).

The task of self-directed learning constitutes the ethics of the new Protestant ethos in cognitive capitalism. It is a return to the “self-help” ethos of industrial capitalism, but of a fundamentally different nature, in that this self-directed learning enables the accumulation of a knowledge base. Surveillance capitalism, on the other hand, mediates “a pervasive global architecture of ubiquitous computational knowledge and control constructed and maintained by all the advanced scientific know-how that money can buy” (Zuboff 308). Those who do not conform to the technology are easily rendered obsolete or their labor less valuable. Zuboff warns that big data companies like Google, Amazon, and Facebook collect private data for commercial purposes but do not directly profit from selling our personal information. They are using big data to create a perfect artificial realism that predicts consumer behavior. This artificial but all-too-real reality is the mechanism that ensures the continuation of surveillance capitalism in the future. Where is this mode of accumulation leading us? It is time to start thinking about this fundamental question.

At the heart of surveillance capitalism, as Zuboff points out, is not the commodification of data itself but rather the sale of programming frameworks that predict and guide individual behavior through big data analysis. The formalization of these algorithms results in behavioral induction, whereby only the behaviors typified by big data are accepted as normal. This is why Zuboff describes surveillance capitalism as “behavior modification.” At this point, we cannot help but recall Spinoza’s dictum, echoed by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*, that “why do men fight for their servitude as stubbornly as though it

were their salvation?” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 29). Zuboff’s characterization of surveillance capitalism is a different name for data capitalism or AI capitalism. Data capitalism is the automatization of accumulation, the formalization, and the stylization of behavioral inducement through data. This process reminds us that the immanent critique of “voluntary servitude” is still an important critique today. The behavioral inducibility of surveillance capitalism makes this problem of subordination more universal.

If there is still a need for critical thought, it is the desire to intervene in this artificial reality. Surveillance capitalism means that we live in the age of big data. Everything turns into data, and it is accepted as a function of criticism to decode or rearrange that data to create meaningful value. If technology is a process of capturing the movement of immanence in an algorithm of rationality, then issues such as the inability of elements to converge into the categories of sameness enforced by that algorithm, the unconscious automatism of repetition, or the a priori nature of pure difference, remain objects of critique. Like Althusser in the 1980s, when he witnessed a great anachronism, the reality of surveillance capitalism today reminds us of the need for a reinstatement of criticism against the anti-intellectualism that has been encouraged by the alt-right. This revival of critical thought will not be unrelated to the return of political subjectivity. It is necessary to recall the problematic concerns of French philosophy after May 1968 to rethink the question of politics, which, in the post-war system, developed a variety of ideas in relation to the mathematical models.

In conclusion, I insist that we must revisit the historical context of French philosophy, often broadly termed “French theory,” to recapture and reinvigorate the conditions that gave rise to its theoretical radicality. This retrospective exploration is not merely an academic exercise; it is crucial for the vitality of critical thought in our present moment. We must, in effect, reinvent our understanding of the past to renew the power of critique in the present. This imperative aligns with what Badiou identifies as the challenge of “postmodern discourse.” Badiou argues for the necessity of asserting a decisive and fundamental philosophy even as we grapple with profound uncertainty (2015, 3). This philosophical assertion, far from being a retreat into dogmatism, is a commitment to engaged critical thought in various situations.

By critically engaging with this call for philosophical decisiveness, we can transform our approach to the theoretical legacy of May 1968. Rather than allowing these theories to become reified – threatened as static, historical artifacts – we can reactivate their critical potential. Specifically, we can repurpose these theoretical tools to develop a nuanced critique of desire within the context of data-driven capitalist accumulation. This transformation is particularly crucial in our current era, where the dynamics of desire are increasingly shaped by algorithms, big data, and digital platforms. French theory after May 1968, with their incisive analyses of power, subjectivity, and desire, provide invaluable resources for understanding

these contemporary phenomena. However, they require careful reinterpretation and development to address the specificities of our digital age.

By undertaking this critical appropriation and transformation of French theory, we not only preserve its relevance but also extend its reach into the pressing issues of our time. This approach allows us to develop a critique that is both historically informed and acutely attuned to the current configurations of desire and power in data capitalism. In essence, this process of revisiting, reinvigorating, and repurposing critical theory enables us to maintain the radical edge of philosophical critique in an age often characterized by technological determinism and market-driven solutions. Through this engaged, critical approach, we can hope to navigate the complexities of our data-driven world while preserving the emancipatory essential potential of thought.

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