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CHAPTER 1

A Material Critique of Digital Society

In a Marxist vernacular, capital should not be mistaken for an asset class that can generate income. Rather, historical in nature, capital is a relation found sometimes in the exploitation of labour power, sometimes in the products they make, sometimes in private property but certainly not limited thereunto. Its sole drive is to ‘valorize itself’ and so accordingly, identifying capital requires indirect observations to find a ‘specific social character’ appearing in ‘a definite social production relation’ in discrete social roles. One common way to study capital and the ramifications of its reproduction is to examine the transactions and circulation of commodities. A complimentary avenue, and the one explored in this book, is to study the social structure that emanates from the uneven pace of extraction and accumulation of value, and how this is underwritten using violence greatly enabled by digital technologies. This involves analysing the legacies of how ‘civilized horrors of over-work are grafted onto the barbaric horrors of slavery, serfdom’ (Marx 1977, 345). In both cases, there is a concern for particular kinds of relations, ones driven by the self-expanding drive of value.

Granted, some scholars analyse capitalism strictly as a mode of economic organization, presuming it to be a natural manifestation emanating out of humans’ trucking, trading, and bartering. Even setting aside this historical inaccuracy (cf. Polanyi 1957, Wolf, 2010, Graeber 2011), the preoccupation with the hard distinction between the political and the economic must necessarily wither in advance of a more insightful study of the growth of capitalism and the uneven development it creates. In the case of the capitalist mode of production, it is motivated by the dynamic interplay of capital accumulation and labour power. Furthermore, recalling one of Karl Marx’s many insights, it is not the things that can be exchanged that is ultimately important, but the ability and authority to decide that they can be exchanged in the first place. The ability to make a market and extract profits demonstrates the imbalance of

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power between capitalists and labour. Again, capitalism is a particular kind of relationship. This imbalance also reveals that economics is how modern politics is conducted.

In social analysis, one misses a considerable amount if there is a general neglect of how capital sustains a particular structure of power, maintains contradictions, and aggressively conceals itself. Still, even then, the accumulation drive is not a smooth or simple expansion. The 2008 Great Recession is a good example of how setbacks and crises do occur, but this is a temporary barrier until new things are commodified, exploitation is intensified, or resources are seized and incorporated into the economy. Each of these processes allows for a new phase of expansion, much like nearly a decade after the Great Recession, the Dow Jones Industrial Average is at record highs.

At present, capitalism prevails globally despite a culturally heterogeneous world and different local politics. This is to say that whatever variety of capitalism one confronts, whatever configuration it constructs, whatever veneer it creates is just particular local contouring. Again, to reiterate a point made above, it is not the form that is ultimately important, but the relationships between forms. Therefore, despite diverse manifestations and adoptions, capitalism still nevertheless has a definable set of principles that produces a distinctive political form incumbent with its own rules and norms that applies to the organization of authority, obligation, and obedience that in turn colour public affairs, international conflict, and most importantly social relations.

One useful way to detect the corroding influence of capital on social relations is to observe social inequality. To clarify lest there be some confusion: Social inequality is not group disparity. Structural inequalities do more than distribute wealth upward to the ruling class. And they do more than impose massive hardships and high hurdles on the truly disadvantaged. They curtail abilities and deprive persons of basic needs. They also generate forms of differential power, meaning that the ruling class can undertake collective violence at will thereby inducing high levels of social uncertainty and anxiety, which is dealt, almost exclusively, with a punishment regime. There is a hidden structure to violence: The technocratic language of industrial trade policy can destroy a society as effectively as bombs. Both have precision in mind when created. Both from regular use have legitimated and normalized the consequences of radical uncertainty that are to be borne almost always by persons themselves. As such: social inequality consolidates the ruling class, and shatters everyone else.

Following a series of landmarks studies of post-war America, C. Wright Mills concluded that decisive state power was in the hands of the military, economic and political elites. These groups were interconnected in a social structure where capital gave power. This power tended to concentrate; the more secretive, the more effective. In contrast to liberal pluralist explanations, this rule was not an anomaly, but business as usual (Mills 1948, 1951, 1956). Concurring, Ralph
Miliband declared, ‘More than ever before men now live in the shadow of the state’ (1969, 1). Therefore, this line of inquiry argued, the unbridled power of the capitalist state was a real threat to its citizens. However, contrary to Mills and Miliband, one prevailing belief during the late twentieth century was that the state was soon to be a redundant unit of analysis in political governance and international affairs. This was because multinational corporations had transcended the regulatory capacity of any one particular state, while persons sensing state decline were reinvesting in cities to open political space to achieve their desired quality and way of life.

Nevertheless, even excluding the post-9/11 unveiling of the security state it was an error to presume, like the hyper-globalists, that the state had ceased to be a viable political actor, or like the hyper-localists that the retreat to cities was an adequate political tactic. The state did not disappear in the 1990s; in fact, it was present through acts of war, genocide, and economic reconstructing. Moreover, despite the libertarian rhetoric of ‘rolling back the state’ there has been instead an enormous centralization of power. Whereas modern democracies sought parliamentary or congressional systems, late modern democracies are executive democracies; faith is placed in the executive to provide service delivery and to guarantee civil society. But it also means that the state commands the allocation of resources, and keeping in mind where the recession bailout money went, this underscores the fact that Mills and Miliband were correct: the state has been captured by capitalists. Centralization has also allowed executive branches to justify the accrual of instruments of rule that can be used against dissidents and rivals. Indeed, historically states have been relentless in using force to accrue resources.

Consistent with a long traditional in political theory, I consider the state to be an institution that collectivizes violence. As Theda Skocpol writes, ‘any state first and fundamentally extracts resources from society and deploys these to create and support coercive and administrative organizations’ (1979, 29). Elsewhere Skocpol notes how a state’s system of rule has an extra-national dimension while attempting to maintain a domestic order. She writes, ‘states necessarily stand at the intersections between domestic sociopolitical orders and transnational relations within which they must manoeuvre for survival and advantage in relation to other states’ (1985, 8). Preserving rule requires that the state undertake the ‘organization of armed forces, taxation, policing, the control of food supply, and the formation of technical personnel’ (Tilly, 1975, 6). Obviously, these resources do not appear overnight. So it is important to note that states develop over time, and maintain a path dependency until circumstances or social pressure create a new institutional order. This attention to continuity and change means that is best to study state institutions in light of their long causal antecedents, paying particular attention to how the state processes social demands into policy as well as the contention over and in institutions by various interests, entrenched or otherwise.
Beyond these observations, the literature on the state tends to split. One group comprises of post-colonial and Marxian historians who demonstrate how subaltern groups and workers resist, appropriate or help construct the state, highlighting how national identities were constituted in part through imperial interests. Involved in this project is an extended analysis of how the state acquires its reality in the daily experience, oppression, and division of the working classes, and how they are put to work on imperial projects. Alternatively, orthodox comparative political sociologists are generally more concerned with how state rule is accomplished; as Skocpol summarises it, ‘how states formulate and pursue their own goals’ (1985, 9). Tied together, this literature offers a complimentary analysis of state formation, identity, and capitalism. As my interest in this book rests with how the US state’s military apparatus secures value and relates to rule, I tend to draw upon the second set of literature, but I try to keep an eye on who happens to be the subject of state violence.

Of late, social scientists tend towards a nebulous definition of the modern state. Emblematic thereof is Schmitter, who defines the state as ‘an amorphous complex of agencies with ill-defined boundaries performing a variety of not very distinctive functions’ (Schmitter 1985, 33, as cited by Hay 1999, 153). This is generally at odds with conventional Marxian takes that seek to establish that the form and function of the capitalist state, serve the requirements of the capitalist mode of production, and aids the reproduction of capitalist relations. Nevertheless, beyond the general claim that the state is a nodal point in capital relations, there is some disagreement about its precise mechanics. Colin Hay groups these mechanics under the labels ‘the state as the repressive arm of the bourgeoisie,’ ‘the state as an instrument of the ruling class’ and ‘the state as a factor of cohesion within the social formation’ (Hay, 1999). While any one of these labels may describe any particular capital-state relationship, applying more in some cases and less in others, each in their own ways gets bogged down when dealing with questions of bureaucratic agency (see Jessop 1990 for full details).

One way to avoid this gridlock is to follow Bob Jessop in understanding the state as ‘a specific institutional ensemble with multiple boundaries, no institutional fixity and no pre-given formal or substantive unity’ (Jessop 1990, 267). Jessop’s model views the state as strategically selective, with structures and operations that while ‘more open to some types of political strategy than others,’ (Jessop 1990, 260) are not beholden to them. For Jessop, there is no guarantee that the state will act as the bourgeoisie’s repressive agents, further the interests of the ruling class, nor constitute a particular kind of society. Hay sums up this contingent approach as ‘there can be no general or fully determinate theory of the capitalist state, only theoretically informed accounts of capitalist states in their institutional, historical and strategic specificity’ (1999, 171).

I am sympathetic to Jessop’s argument about state actions in a capitalist society being contingent, indeterminate, and without guarantee, at least with regard
to the intentions of various capitalists themselves. The state’s intervention into
social life is uneven. Indeed, political aspirations, cadre deployments, and local
uses of the state apparatus to settle struggles make it appear as if state power and
action can be wholly idiosyncratic and without an overall inherent purpose. But
while conceding that the state is not a monolithic enterprise—different agencies
may advance different practices and visions of state functioning—it neverthe-
less remains important to attend to the nature of the state to understand what
produces differentials in state functioning and public authority.

In line with the call to be attentive to ‘historical specificity’ I place significant
emphasis on the state’s effort to preserve and reproduce the social structure by
being strategically selective and situationally responsive. I call this intention the
security state, the security kernel to which the ‘amorphous complex of agencies’
attaches to, these themselves having ‘no institutional fixity’ because they are
situationally responsive strategic selections. In this respect, I think the question
of bureaucratic agency and relative autonomy can be addressed by distingui-
shing between the securocrats of the security state, who have a narrow agenda
to maintain their power, and bureaucrats staffing the amorphous complex of
agencies, whose actions, even if they conflict, are roughly permissible provided
they do not thwart the securocrats’ goals. This distinction offers one possible
way of reconciling ‘complexity’ and ‘coherence’ positions staked out in the vari-
ous ongoing debates between state-as-society and state-in-society proponents.

There is another point worth raising: discussion of the state as an ‘actor’ is so
taken for granted that it is worth remembering that states do not and cannot
act. Therefore, mentions of state actions or the security state are but shorthand
for the various people who staff and administer the organization. Granted there
is much politics and jockeying, inside and between political parties, the federal
government, the civil service, and the security forces. Brevity and focus exclude
an extended treatment of this politics, however suffice to say that the Byzan-
tine complex that presently exists seeks to maintain rule and forestall revolt.
Another important point is that members of the security forces and securocrats
have a central role in shaping government policy, and in each of their respective
ways work toward the ‘national interest’. In this way, special attention must be
given to how rulers acquire their means of rule and the resources required for
coercion and constraint.

Informed by Marxian analysis, this statist modality seeks to retain the view
that modes of material production and political domination (overt or other-
wise) are important items to study, it does not restrict itself solely to the internal
affairs of national entities, but necessarily addresses the international system to
account for disparate outcomes, like uneven development. Herein this mixture
of material pressures and the drive to accumulate value pattern the formation
and development of political and economic relations. One good way to see the
connection between these items is to examine the ‘economic taproot’ of inter-
national affairs (Hobson 1965, 71). This means the expansionist tendency of
capital via imperial action conducted by the state. 'Imperialism,' John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson remind us ‘is a sufficient political function of this process of integrating new regions into the expanding economy’ (1953, 5), and can be accomplished in many different ways, not necessarily via direct occupation or annexation.

To reiterate a theme in my earlier remarks, empire is not just accumulation, nor necessarily authoritarian and draconian rule. On the contrary, it is a kind of polity. As Charles Maier remarks,

Empire is a form of political organization in which the social elements that rule in the dominate state…create a network of allied elites in regions abroad who accept subordination in international affairs in return for the security of their position in their own administrative unit. (2006, 7)

Maier adds that empires tend to be differentiated in numerous ways, but that the political organization seeks to stabilize these differences by ‘reconciling some rituals and forms of equality with the preservation of vast inequality. The empire is large enough that zones of violence and zones of pacification can usually be kept apart’ (2006, 23). Further, empires are scalar:

They replicate their hierarchical structures and their divisions at all spatial levels, macro and micro—at the level of the community and the workplace as well as the continent. Hospitals, offices and factories, shopping malls and markets, stadiums, airports and bus terminals, housing (from gated communities to urban projects), and so on all recapitulate the social structure of the whole. (Maier 2006, 10)

I take this to mean specific accumulation processes are linked to the US social structure, inequality and stratification, as well as public institutions. Imperialism also reveals itself in the systematic cooperation between capitalist states; this reflects the prevailing balance of power in the international system. Here agreements are but a means to maximize returns upon extraction at any given time, and should new methods emerge, or should the balance of power shift, so strategic selections would change. In effect, peace is less about armistice; rather, it is the stability of world order along an American imperative. This understanding of interstate cooperation as tentative, contingent, and without guarantee neatly aligns Jessop’s understanding of the state.

There are few other points about imperialism worth mentioning. To begin with, the apparent absence of colonial settlement or formal viceroys does not indicate the suspension of imperial relations between the United States and the other parts of the planet. Rather, the important thing is to examine the extent to which other countries cater towards the US agenda, these being shorthand for the general interests of the US ruling class.
Furthermore, an exclusive examination of formal organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or World Bank, or trade agreements like the WTO can overlook the informal set of pressures and influences that seek to extort force on other states to do the bidding, however begrudgingly, along terms established by the US. In other words, there are pressures to compel participation in these organizations and treaties to act in accordance with ‘numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms’. So much like how ‘free labour’ refers to detachment and destruction of feudal constraints such that human labour power could be commodified and exchanged on a market,10 ‘free trade’ refers to the process by which the autonomy of particular territories is compromised because they are coerced to participate in market exchanges. The stronger party sets the tone of these relations, and that strength may not necessarily be directly evident in the organizations or treaties themselves. Effectively, a constellation of security apparatuses supports the prerogatives of capital accumulation.11

1.1 Radical Political Economy as an Organizing Intellectual Framework

In 1999, when Dan Schiller wrote that ‘the arrival of digital capitalism has involved radical social, as well as technological, changes’ he was well aware of the historical forces that animate our current condition. From his vantage, ‘this change does not alleviate, and indeed may increase, the volatility of the market system’ (2000, xiv, 206). In 2017, I think Schiller was correct, and that we are now seeing state security forces being further integrated into everyday life to police the by-products of this market volatility. And so to echo him, I seek to demonstrate how inequality and domination are the leading features of digital capitalism.

To guide the analysis in the coming chapters, methodologically I am indebted to radical political economy. Unapologetically historical in orientation, this approach traces the plurality of trajectories open to state development, but is characterized by identifying economics as a prime mover of human affairs. This economic foundation of different institutions and their change over time is then employed to look at the forces exercised over social life. This understanding of economics neatly aligns with Jessop’s remarks about the state being tentative, contingent, and without guarantee. In the interest of brevity, I shall not offer a pre-emptive defence of this method. Rather, I hope to show the benefits of this approach by being able to broadly account for outcomes of security and rule, extraction and extortion, exploitation and dispossession. The configuration and ratios between these items highlight how this occurs as rulers co-opt and make alliances with different classes and subjects, whilst concurrently seeking to create and shape certain kinds of subjects. This orientation is analytical, historical, and dialectic.

Guided by the radical political economy tradition, and moulded by events like the Gulf War and the Great Recession, I seek to synthesize much
contemporary research on US security state rule whilst simultaneously contributing to a broader understanding of the dynamics of global capitalism and political power in the early twenty-first century, as well as their intersections with cultural and social developments. Examining the US security state’s encroachment on civil liberties and the political scramble for positions within the digital mode of production I demonstrate how this dynamic structurally contributes to the widening social inequality currently being experienced in the US.

This exercise requires strong support, and so I turn to various branches of Marxian communication research to account for the inevitable variation caused by politics while not losing sight of the general direction of political development. This kind of project is a social history concerned with understanding the development of structures of oppression and economies of bondage. It includes and synthesizes more narrow sectarian concerns to plot them within a broader understanding of the totality of history, rather than a fetish for its parts. In that respect, there is an analytical utility to grand narratives rationally tested by known historical evidence and functional first material causes to envisage how structures and patterns unfold over time. The conceptual technique is intellectually productive for adequately understanding the origins, transformation, and prospects for social development.

Sadly, grand narratives are epistemologically unfashionable. To explain why it is important to know that in the early 1970s American social scientists, in line with domestic upheaval in social, economic, and political beliefs and institutions, found that the excessive abstraction of explications produced by functionalist sociology were nearly entirely devoid of contextual historical processes. Functionalism’s implicit assumption that social systems have reached stability in the composition of institutions made it inherently difficult to deal with social change, and so was ill equipped to understand and explain the most basic features of American life in the post-Vietnam War era such as mass protest, racial inequality, urban poverty, and maladaptive political structures.

Following the collapse of structural-functionalism, American social scientists sought to import social theory from Europe and India and as well cultivating revivals of pragmatism, feminism, and communitarianism to enlarge conceptual, methodological, and political discussion. These new sources, new entrants in general, led to calls for interdisciplinary hoping that cross collaboration would help comprehend the rapid changes to social organization and civil life. Much ink was used addressing these kinds of problems within specific disciplines and produced many handbooks and sourcebooks, theoretical manifestos and programs. Boundary policing and disciplinary politics about inclusion and exclusion, canon wars, methods all played out at the level of individual appointments, search committees, and journal acceptance letters. With so much going on, it seemed hubris to claim a conceptual grasp of the whole.

Presently there seems to be a relative conceptual entente characterized by efforts to offer a diagnosis of contemporary social conditions. To be sure, much
like the aforementioned American social scientists, there is some recognition that the intellectual resources at our disposal are insufficient to deal with post-recession social inequalities, looming environmental catastrophe, and systematic oppression of the poor, women, and racialized others. This inadequacy comes, in part, from the lack of intellectual synthesis and a prevailing organizing intellectual framework.

Throughout these developments, the radical political economy tradition has continued, albeit as a minor literature within the broader social sciences. Notwithstanding this relatively smaller position, most importantly, within Communication Studies it has maintained due attention to states, conflict, and imperial actions (cf. Schiller 1969 as the kernel for this research tradition). This is either through research on propaganda (Herman and Chomsky 2002), efforts to understand the general regulatory permissibility facilitating capital concentration on the American continent or abroad (Smythe, 1981, Mosco and Schiller 2001), the development of Arpanet (Feenberg 2009), the close connections between Silicon Valley, entertainment and militarism (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, Jin 2013), or the encoded surveillance in emerging labour regimes (Cohen 2011, Neff 2012, Huws 2014). Presently, the interest in value theory and digital economies harkens back to early attempts to delineate the politics and mechanics of industrialism to assess what kinds of structural modifications might occur in the present moment as capitalism attempts to consolidate in the wake of the Great Recession (Wasko 2014, Fuchs, 2016a).

Like Christian Fuchs, I think Marxian political economics offers the best scaffolding for an intellectual agenda that seeks to understand how the various parts of society constitute a whole way of life (Fuchs and Winseck 2011, 267). Scholars within the radical political economy tradition have done much to investigate the close connections between the state, its security forces, and capital. Of course, disagreements abound as intermural debates unfold, but these debates underscore an intellectual agenda proudly ‘connected to the struggle for a just society’ (Fuchs and Winseck 2011, 268, cf. Greaves 2015). Elsewhere, Richard Maxwell writes that Herbert Schiller’s ‘ideas helped foster a distinct and robust discourse within critical media studies’ which showed ‘the centrality of communication in the imperial “American Century”’ (2003, 1). His focus is on the North American element of international political economy where he gave central attention to the historical development of states, markets, and conflict, social and military alike. Like Schiller in Mass Communication and American Empire, I think there is tremendous benefit to subject foreign policy and state security actions to a methodology predicated upon ‘the structural analysis of the largest governmental and corporate producers/users of information, as well as historical analysis documenting a conscious annexation of this resource by US commercial and imperial forces around the world’ (Maxwell, 2003, 30).

However, unlike Schiller, I spend comparably less time examining the global resistance and challenges to these aforementioned forces. This is not because I
think this resistance is unimportant, or simply because circumstances are different, but rather because in my view the best challenge to American Empire comes from the inside, from internal social movements like the Movement for Black Lives. Non-exclusionary movements like this one demonstrate how a reconstructed Marxism attentive to the legacies of bonded labour in the western hemisphere does offer a way out of the intellectual cul-de-sac of fixed difference versus false universalism. They also move past the obsessions with narrow identities, seeking instead to attend to how the multiplicity of durable forms of oppression and exploitation intersect and operate to reproduce social inequalities. Moreover, these groups are not just offer an inward gaze, but are deeply concerned with American imperial actions worldwide, and so seek to build transnational alliances, to take but one example, support Palestinians by seeking to reduce American martial support for Israel.

So while this book is not an intellectual history of the radical political economy tradition, it does use their concepts to produce an analysis of the US social structure, the coercive elements of global capitalism, and the particular role of digital technologies as coercive in themselves, as well as sites of coercion. To this end, I endorse Fuchs and Nick Dyer-Witheford when they write that ‘Marxian analyses are crucial for understanding the contemporary role of the Internet and the media in society’ (2012, 793). This kind of project is vital given digital technologies have enabled the militarization in all aspects of social life, even areas that were once previously beyond the reach of state violence. This creates a certain pattern of rule, both abroad and domestic. It is this pattern that I shall attempt to describe in the chapters ahead.

1.2 The Need to Jettison Idealism

Despite the aforementioned literature, one acute problem in Communication Studies more broadly is the neglect of the radical tradition and commodification, let alone the coercive components of that process. Dan Schiller laments that this tradition is the ‘sideshow’ in the discipline (2011, 265). This sentiment is not meant to lionize the radical, but rather to suggest that there now exists a general historiographic amnesia of the very intellectual tradition that nurtured and gave the discipline distinction. Researchers know historical facts, but are not historically minded. This amnesia is a methodological limitation that curtails empirical inquiry as well as ignores the politicized contexts in which academic questions and concepts emerge.

However, more than neglect, the absence of genuine historical sensitivity reflects a twenty-first-century idealism. I do not mean that this is a feature of this or that current of this or that theory. Nor do I mean it emanates from this particular geographic region, or that sociological stratum of researchers. I mean that this is generally the disposition of the discipline as a whole and
its overall trajectory, and I mean this in metaphysical, historical, and ethical senses: conceiving of reality as confined to perceptions, then discussing, rationalising and evaluating an agent’s actions in these terms is limited and partial. Granted, ideas are properties of finite embodied minds, but they are also products of historically developing social relations like widespread commodity production. A disciplinary anthropology self-confined to conveying an agent’s ontology or aesthetics preferences tells us less than what we ought to know about the historical specificity of those beliefs, and the reason—often elusive to the agents themselves—why those particular beliefs exist at all.

One can see idealism manifest in the revisionist prioritising of agency or the fetish of partial sectarian standpoints and the subjective sentimental judgements which arise therefrom. It is also present in studies completely undertaken without reference to material change, or when researchers emphasize ‘nuance’ but miss the explicitly entrenched interests of capital. When scholars guided by this idealistic tendency confront material analysis, they often dismiss it as reductive and ethically lapsed for it is inconsistent with an agent’s textured self-description. Nevertheless, a good grasp of historically grounded political economy is imperative to understand the structures that shape and situate a person’s lived experience, the very forces that give self-description texture in the first place. If anything, historical materialism properly executed is anathema to reduction precisely because of the emphasis on the various particular elements that constitute totality.

This would otherwise be an academic quarrel if not for the fact that the neglecting material change invites politics to become exclusively linguistic in character. Discourse is what is fought over, such as whether one presents the appropriate sentiments or uses the permitted descriptions. This discourse is meant to be corrective to structural injustice, but ironically, politics ultimately comes to favour those skilled in the use of language by demanding an understanding of linguistic and social codes that the truly disadvantaged cannot possibly have already learnt outside of elite higher education, itself subject to numerous class barriers. Inadvertently, this politics polices the expression of lived experiences. So if language exclusively sets the terms of engagement and material evaluation is foreclosed, then there is a great distance between what is thought to be true, and what is true. Idealists can thus posture as radicals without ever expending any effort to first examine material causes that give rise to exploitation, inequalities, and oppression. As with all forms of idealism, this allows the beneficiaries of the social structure to escape criticism by being rhetorically nimble. In effect, idealism actually disrupts efforts to dismantle alienating socioeconomic conditions, and so it weakens scholarship as well as providing a poor substitute for political practice concerned with changing social relationships to the means of production. This means Bryan Palmer’s adage—‘Critical theory is no substitute for historical materialism; language is not life’ (1990, xiv)—applies as much now, as it did at the height of the ‘history wars’.
One must not infer from this brief critique of communicative idealism that I dismiss agency to follow an agenda. It is quite the contrary. Persons and their universal emancipation are ultimately the prime Marxian concern—it is the desire for humans to reach their de-alienated species-being: as the adage goes, ‘from each according to their ability, to each according to their need.’ Alternatively, in a contemporary register: living according to the utility-sufficiency principle persons can fulfil their capacity and flourish. This is what matters. And it is only through class struggle from below, that is coordinated actions of persons using what situated agency they have, that emancipation is possible allowing persons to ‘hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon.’ Still, there is much that persons do not know, only partially aware of, mistaken about, or guided by ideological priors. This is because we live in a social structure where the imperative is to ‘accumulate, accumulate!’ Techniques are thus required to compensation accordingly, and this is the role of Marxian theory. ‘Theory’, Palmer argues, is the only way to enhance a history of lived experience, extending understanding of the past in ways that can address human activity with an appreciation of the confinements that were not necessarily perceived and fully comprehended by men and women caught within them. (1990, 94)

To make the point another way: The lived experiences and various beliefs of communication researchers influences their studies and approaches. Researchers are continually shaped by the interaction of identities and class. In my case, this work is informed by growing up in the Global South when the Berlin Wall fell. These events facilitated the end of South African Apartheid. Being from South Africa, there was an ever-present awareness of how natural resources extraction and international trade, client states and interventions, state security forces and military raids, race and class shaped biographies and social issues. Yet, until theory is used to pry open the relationships between apparently discrete areas, it is hard to understand a ‘whole way of life’ and the long-tail ramifications of structural injustices as various parts work together to reproduce a stratified social order. Seeking some understanding of the totality of interconnected processes requires paying close attention to ‘definite social production relations.’ Ultimately, it is this desire for enhancement that animates the grand narrative of several features of a historically specific social structure. But doing so first and foremost requires jettisoning reoccurring idealism.

1.3 The Labour Regimes of Digital Capitalism

One way for Communication Studies to do justice to its radical and material heritage would be to pay more attention to the coercive aspects of labour regimes that are created by a capitalist ruling class located in the United
States but which have global ramifications. Nowhere is this more visible than in ‘digital capitalism’. Digital capitalism is predicated upon thin margins on vast volumes of trades to produce revenue, but also huge inequality and poor employment thereby pointing to impending conflicts over the struggle of social reproduction. As I will explain, this is because digital communication, with its low transaction costs, is both an enabler and site of global capital accumulation efforts. This mode of accumulation gathered momentum when national capitalism declined towards the end of the twentieth century as the infrastructure of money became decentralized and global, transforming not only economic sectors but whole economies. This is the key to understanding twenty-first-century labour regime changes and I will revisit the topic towards the end of Chapter 2, as well as in Chapter 5.

To deploy Mills’ terms it is clear that digital entrepreneurs are the ‘new men of power’. Bezos, Gates, Huffington, Omidyar, Thiel, and Zuckerberg are the leading edge of a billionaire class who have increased their wealth from less than $1 trillion in 2000 to over $7 trillion in 2015. Granted, they have different market strategies and products, but each pursues the same basic goal: they seek to induce disruptions and efficiencies with little regard for anything other than profit. Developing online platform services that profit from uncompensated digital work, this ruling class is an unaccountable centre of power notorious for absconding tax obligations, and who employ relatively few people in their companies. Structurally, the result is a rapid transfer of wealth from the many to the few.

In the meantime, it is important to note that in the digital mode of production even seemingly minor technical changes can have significant social ramifications. Consider that the pending impact of automated vehicles extends beyond job losses for professional freight drivers or satellite support sectors like independent mechanics, auto parts retail, car washes, and dealerships but also includes administrative positions in government licensing departments and insurance companies. Still, the same technology can be used for warehouses and storage facilities, further reducing the requirement for labour. This example illustrates how the digital mode of production does not level the playing field, but rather introduces and even amplifies existing social inequalities. The resultant concentration of wealth is less because of any one particular development, and more because intellectual property governs and facilitates the qualified production, distribution and exchange of commodities. In this sense, this property regime is a key site of social struggle. It has several distinct forms:

To begin, the digital market itself is a de facto rent economy; digital rights management ensures that product tampering or modification voids use, and that resale rights are limited. In this sense, the relationship between the producer and the consumer is inverted; instead of production serving the interests of consumption, the interests of the consumer are subsidiary to the producer. The power dynamic in this kind of economy is central to the social costs of digital capitalism.
While on the topic of costs, digital capitalists try to carry as few as possible. For example, in the early 1990s, tax havens accounts held ‘more than 20 percent of US foreign direct investment and nearly a third of the foreign profits of U.S. firms’ (Hines and Rice, 1994). Now the digital economy has put this into overdrive. As Katherine Rushton reports,

Amazon’s UK operation generated £4.2bn of sales last year [2012], but it used a subsidiary in Luxembourg to help it reduce its corporation tax bill in the country to just £2.4m in 2012. According to documents filed at Companies House, the company received £2.5m in government handouts over the same period. (Rushton 2013)

Amazon replied, saying that [it] ‘pays all applicable taxes in every jurisdiction that it operates within.’ (see Rushton 2013). Globally, Google has a tax rate of 6.6 per cent (Mossman 2016), and their own fillings show how they ‘avoided about $2 billion in worldwide income taxes in 2011 by shifting $9.8 billion in revenues into a Bermuda shell company, almost double the total from three years before’ (Drucker 2012). These tax havens are no more than the commercialisation of the sovereignty of fairly fragile or welcoming minnow states; in short deliberate attempts to withhold money from redistributive exercises.

The Panama Papers describe the mechanisms and means the global ruling class use to safeguard their wealth. Given the deliberately complex arrangements, Gabriel Zucman (2015) nevertheless proposes a conservative estimate that 8 per cent of the world’s financial wealth, or about $7.6 trillion in 2014, is hoarded in tax havens. This figure will likely increase as emerging economies in the Global South are looted with impunity and as the 0.01 per cent aggressively seek to conceal their wealth. As it pertains to the US Ruling Class, American companies report most of their profits in international subsidiaries that are located in low tax jurisdictions, irrespective of where the goods and services are produced. The money is periodically repatriated under tax amnesties but without significant penalty. In turn, governments overlook tax havens precisely because they are protecting corporate profitability.

A third broad source of problems is a digital divide between labour and capital. Marked by differences in marketable skills and technical competency, this divide has profound implications for class (de)composition and the labour regime. Supporting Christian Fuchs’s (2014) observations above, Enda Brophy (2011, 2015) notes how emerging market economies attempt to develop technical service centres, but find themselves betrothed to the risks of capital flight. Here foreign direct investments and capital mobility create and maintain a labouring class that is just technically competent enough to do menial digital work, but hindered from developing technical expertise where they could become producers, and then competitors themselves.
The cumulative effect of ownership for accumulation requires ever-increased efficiencies of production. Initially, this process attempts to make embodied labour—that is the labour time required to make a commodity—the same as counterfactual labour, which is the labour time required necessary to make a commodity. In effect, persons are treated as if they are machines, able to be ever more efficient. However, when increased demands for profits require efficiencies beyond what the person's counterfactual labour might be able to offer there is little other option but to automate the labour process. Two options are possible: either people are left unemployed and underpaid, or subject to a labour market which has yet to account for the intervention of mechanization. This has disastrous impacts for the relative wellbeing of a society. In short, the excess desires for accumulation breaks social goods and introduces new social forms, many of which have undesirable social consequences.

Turning attention away from inequalities and towards the organization of workplaces themselves, the digital component of digital capitalism facilitates the decentralization of the workplace. This means that work occurs at several locations. While some workers may find decentralization conducive to their immediate interests, over the long run it favours the employer by far. To be clear, decentralization is not democratization. A central workplace is an amenable condition to foster labour organization thereby providing unions with an opportunity to strike and disrupt production. By contrast, decentralization means that chances of successful contention begin to diminish. Instead, encounters between organized labour and capital are replaced by individualized direct dealings, with utility and compensation determined on a case-by-case basis. Increasingly workers compete with each other because they are well aware that they are interchangeable. Again, some workers might find due reward for their ability and contribution appealing, but overall this favours the few as opposed to the many.

Contrary to narratives suggesting otherwise, digital workplaces seek to deskill their employees as a way to break the labour costs of highly-skilled employees. Deskilling has other benefits too. For one, this process favours the employer as it lessens the training cost for employees, limits the employee from starting up their own firm, but also allows worker turnover, all the while using the divided labour process to thwart workers from recognising a shared struggle. The ruling class and their agents have then spent considerable time promoting the narrative that automation, not politics, is the cause of job losses in the manufacturing sector.

In an economy with rampant deskilling, high divisions of labour, and ready supply of cheap labour, workers have few opportunities to differentiate themselves. Thus, the unique grounds for an individual worker’s wage and salary bargaining are structurally undermined. In these circumstances, workers have two broad options. First, they could acquire additional skills, but often at their own expense or financed with debt. For workers undertaking affective labour,
these skills are often intangible and are normally distinctive to personalities. Courses teaching affective skills have proliferated even as it is difficult to establish solid criteria because of the intangible nature of affect. Soon a dilemma arises, for as primary skill sets become narrow and sufficiently common, these intangibles become methods of distinction and inform hiring decisions.

Where labour docility and corporate sycophancy are desired attributes, hiring can be made on the basis of affective servitude, and the willingness of workers to embody the corporate ‘brand’, which is nothing less than the entire subordination of a person to the goals and purpose of the company as a whole, as opposed to simply being a place to work. Further, it is now an accepted norm that companies will search for a person’s online profiles to assess whether they would be a suitable employee – in some cases even demanding passwords to online accounts.

Skilled workers in research and development or executive management are well paid, but they are only a fraction of Silicon Valley’s workforce. Most employees are underpaid. Consider that Apple employs about 50,000 people in the US, but two-thirds of them work in retail and earn approximately $25,000, significantly less than the mean national income at near $40,000. Workers who possess skills that are in demand have some geographic mobility, either through international operations, or by deciding to work for other companies. Knowing this, a skilled worker can be enticed to stay with the company, often through stock options. However, as the case of Enron best illustrates, the downside is that the stock options are tied to the company’s performance, and given the fictitious nature of this value, it can evaporate due to corruption and mismanagement by majority shareholders and senior executives.

Capitalists favour decentralization and deskilling for an additional reason: short-term contracting and a rotating labour force leave little local labour memory, and employees must heed demands to increase their productive capacities, or they are not retained for the next project. The pretence is that workers are entrepreneurial subcontractors who collaborate with firms. Nevertheless, this more resembles sharecropping insofar that there is an illusion that workers are freely choosing their life course (and sometimes they are insofar that the system allows them to do so) but these persons are still beholden to a system which has shifted the risk from capital to workers. There is also the asymmetrical information of the process that capital withholds from workers. Together, this is a designed recalibration of the burden of risk: workers carry what used to be done by capital. Simply put, decentralization has radically shifted the balance of power to employers to the extent that capitalists can push portions of risk onto the labour force and population as a whole. One major problem is that people now live in precarious circumstances characterized by highly individualized work in workplaces with little room to confront employers.

Unfortunately, most digital work itself lacks meaning, social purpose, genuine agency or discretionary judgement. The intensity to maintain productivity gains means that contemporary workplaces are mentally taxing and emotionally
draining. Productivity gains mean that there could be shorter workdays, but capital seeks to maximize the exploitation of labour. Additionally, longer work hours are a means of rule, dissipating a person’s energy, paired with an economic culture calculated and built upon consumptive practices meant to shore up emotions, status, and boredom (Graeber 2013).

Even the unemployed are often busy undertaking unpaid work simply for the honour thereof. Although it can be for the social good, like voluntary community service, some work is undertaken at corporations or public institutions. These kinds of jobs range from internships to research associateships at medical units and are often undertaken to hide unemployment, maintain skills or access to institutional resources, accrue professional networks, as well as maintain a personal identity and a belief of social contribution. While these may be good reasons to do the work, their circumstances are precious and marginal. Moreover, as these jobs are funded out of pocket by the unpaid worker, they are in fact subsidizing the employer for what Erik Bahre (2014) describes as ‘the honour of exploitation.’ This means that unpaid workers draw upon state or civic welfare, family or intergenerational wealth, or personal debt to subsidize corporations or institution. This is the near ultimate reserve army of labour; at capital’s disposal and off the books.

Within professions, unpaid internships are used as class filters. Effectively, as Sarah Kendzior puts it, they transform ‘personal wealth into professional credentials’ (2013) all the while undermining wages. This aids differential life chances as these credentials beget other opportunities. In this framework, the rich use divide and rule tactics to create a near global labour market wherein wages are in a race to the bottom. At the bottom, forces within the state are making life harder for the unemployed by withdrawing social services or putting in place humiliating means testing (cf. de Peuter, Cohen, and Brophy 2015).

Altogether, these developments point to a totalising predicament where many people will lose their source of income then have to compete in a labour market where their skills are redundant, and in which the number of jobs are shrinking. With looming machine learning, there is little to indicate that this will change. So it is morally callous to simply tell people to work harder or longer hours, or to insist that they undertake low-wage easy-entry work, in part because this kind of work is currently hard to come by as it is. Along similar lines, as not everyone can perform difficult, high skill, high demand jobs it seems contrary to human flourishing to enrol people in meaningless make-work projects as it wastes valuable human potential and time that a person could use to enrich their life. In short, persons are exploited for their surplus until they are surplus.

A fourth point worth considering is the entanglement of the international division of labour. To better illustrate this divide, consider Apple, a company that at the end of 2016 had nearly $240 billion in savings: it clearly represents issues surrounding material and immaterial labour in digital capitalism. Marisol Sandoval writes,
For many years Apple’s products have been known as the preferred digital production technologies for the knowledge work of designers, journalists, artists and new media workers. iPhone, iPod and Co are symbols for technological progress that enables unprecedented levels of co-creation and sharing of knowledge, images and affects as well as interaction, communication, co-operation etc. At the same time during the past years Apple has become an infamous example for the existence of hard manual labour under miserable conditions along the supply chain of consumer electronics. (Sandoval 2013, 319)

Elsewhere, when describing the materiality of digital labour, Trebor Scholz says,

“It’s worth remembering that whether a worker toils in an Amazon warehouse or works for crowdSPRING, her body will get tired and hungry. She’ll have to take care of car payments, medical bills for her children, and student debts, not to mention saving for retirement. Digital work makes the body of the worker invisible but no less real or expendable. (Scholz cited by Carrigan 2017)

These bodies—as well as the international division of labour—are often an afterthought. Unfortunately, this is why people tend to overlook that ‘the global information economy is built in part on the backs of tens of millions Chinese industrial workers’ (Zhao and Duffy 2008, 229). These bodies are important components in global supply chains. Meanwhile, the management of these goods ‘overlap with specific time conflicts with are inherent in worker exploitation and the associated strategies of class rule’ (Hope 2016). Thus, the coordination of space and time is crucial to understand the labour regimes of digital capitalism. But the nature of digital work is the disaggregation of workflows and permits the general neglect of how labours and infrastructures combine to create these supply chains.

Nevertheless, there is a coming crisis as the Chinese working class aspires to a fairer share of profits. ‘The labour force in China, the base of global electronics supply chains,’ Vincent Mosco writes,

has grown restive in recent years, prompting tighter workplace controls and a redeployment of electronic manufacturing sites. It is unlikely these measures will do anything more than delay the inevitable choice between substantially raising the living standards, including the wages, working conditions and political freedom of China’s workforce, or face escalating mass civil unrest. (Mosco 2016, 526, cf Sealey 2010)

Accordingly, one contributing factor in China’s ‘historic claims’ over the South China Sea is to use nationalist sentiments to help quell and offset brewing civil unrest.
1.4 The State of Data

Gina Neff and Dawn Nafus note that ‘when data mediates so many things, control over the meanings of data is a type of power’ (2016, 186). With this remark in mind, I turn to briefly give attention to the digital mode of production, which Vincent Mosco illustrates by using the case of cloud computing. This mode ‘involves the storage, processing, and distribution of data, applications and services for individuals and people’ (Mosco, 2014, 17, also see Mosco 2016, 517). It also ‘deepens and extends opportunities to eliminate jobs and restructure the workforce’ (Mosco, 2014, 166), by ‘increase[ing] the economic efficiency of networks by allowing them to be shared more thoroughly and effectively among many users’ (Schiller, 2000, xv).

Set side by side with the decentralized and on-demand workforce, cloud computing enables aspects of ‘leaner production’. Co-currently, the miniaturization and relative cheap cost of sensors means that they can be installed almost anywhere to detect almost anything, allowing distributed networks to collect a range of data. And so social life is increasingly excessively mediated through data or platforms that harness data. To be sure, as the average internet user spends nearly three hours per day on social media networks; they create consumer data for behavioural analysis. Mosco writes that ‘cloud computing and big data are vital for building and managing the global supply chains necessary to sustain the complex networks of transnational capital’ (Mosco 2016, 526), and if the previous section is correct, then the entangled labour regimes do not offer much hope to increase human flourishing: what freedom there will be is workers free from the ownership of property.

Despite my assessment, scholars like Viktor Mayer-Schönberger and Kenneth Cukier make the promissory proclamation that ‘The world of big data, is poised to shake up everything from businesses and the sciences to healthcare, government, education, economics, the humanities, and every other aspect of society’ (2013, 11) Similarly, Erik McAfee and Andrew Brynjolfsson laud this development as a near unparalleled ‘management revolution’ offering more opportunities for competitive advantage and improved forecasting (2012). This practice is only going to become more common as it is now cheaper to store data than delete it.

These ‘celebrants’ suggest that the comprehensive scope of big data will overcome the problems of limited samples, incomplete data, and other kinds of sampling errors showing that was once thought to be idiosyncratic behaviour is a product of deeper, hidden variables. Implicit in this endeavour is the assumption that with enough sophisticated statistical tools and a large enough collection of data, signals of interest can be weeded it out from the noise in large and poorly understood social systems thereby overcoming the limits of intuitive lay accounts of causal relations thus correcting for perceptive bias.

Notwithstanding the possibilities, the big data hubris has several methodological oversights. As boyd and Crawford (2012) note, it changes not only the
scale and scope of research, but also the ‘objects of knowledge’. To use a mundane example, as most data analysis involves cleaning there is always a moment for subjective decision making about categorization. Furthermore, irrespective of size, big data is hardly random or representative. So big datasets are not necessarily good datasets. As Alice Marwick writes, ‘Big Data is made up of “little data,” here, ‘Each piece of information, by itself, may be inconsequential. But the aggregation of this information creates a larger picture that may be more than the sum of its parts.’ (2013, 2, 5) Moreover, the proprietary nature of big datasets means that there is no general epistemic community to check methodology and results.

This means one needs to understand the conditions of production of data, and this includes the potential methodological compromises or compounded sampling errors of datasets that are laced together. These limitations curtail possible statistical interpretations. So as boyd and Crawford note ‘claims to objectivity and accuracy are misleading.’ Irrespective of size and scale, datasets have limitations to the kinds of queries that can be run, and so have partial conclusions.

Compounding these methodological errors, Zeynep Tufekci notes that web-platforms have sampling and selection issues. These arise ‘when big data sources are too few,’ she writes, ‘and when structural biases of these too few sources cannot be adequately explored’ (2014a, 1). The design characteristics of these platforms matter, as those that design the system, design which questions to ask, and so in turn get to dictate the shape of the findings. Jaron Lanier elaborates:

Facebook suggests not only a moral imperative to place certain information in its network, but the broad applicability of one template to compare people. In this it is distinct from Google, which encourages semistructured online activity that Google will be best at organizing after the fact. Twitter suggests that meaning will emerge from fleeting flashes of thought contextualized by who sent the thought rather than the content of the thought. In this it is distinct from Wikipedia, which suggests that flashes of thought be inserted meaningfully into a shared semantic structure. Wikipedia proposes that knowledge can be divorced from point of view. In this, it is distinct from the Huffington Post, were opinions fluoresce. (Lanier 2013: 188–9).

Notwithstanding the different appearances of the design of these platforms, common to all of them is a process of ‘datafication.’ This process is the induction of previously quantified items, and storing them for later examination or sale. Here, ‘Google’s augmented-reality glasses datafy the gaze. Twitter datafies stray thoughts. LinkedIn datafies professional networks.’ The problem with a datafication design is that it cannot capture historical elements, meaning that researchers have a one-dimensional understanding of the present.
The value of data lies in making connections and seeing patterns in mined and aggregated data, about the relationships whatever they might be, whether as boyd and Crawford write ‘about an individual, about individuals in relation to others, about groups of people, or simply about the structure of information itself.’ This is the attempt to quantify and score all aspects of human performance. But in trying to measure the things that can be measured, so presuming all important job information is quantitative and not qualitative. As the adage goes, just because something is easy to measure does not mean it is important while counting the countable because they are countable is hardly an improvement. Therefore, there are epistemological category mistakes and this renders conceptually flawed interpretations of actions.

Besides epistemic errors, it is important to note that big data has class effects. To elaborate, the observational and predictive analysis of big data sets will give some an advantage to certain kinds of opportunities. What will emerge is a kind of information inequality. Thus, the principle of equality of opportunity is eroded if it is not paired with equal access information. To this extent, the enclosure and commodification of data will likely follow a similar tale to that of land; the need to do so arises from the crisis and limitations of the prevailing mode of production, and this instituted change supported by the state through law and coercion.

There is a prima facie case that new digital technologies of governance and control continue the objectives of Taylorism’s scientific management by seeking to retain a monopoly of knowledge over the work process to raise productivity and reduce overheads. This management revolution is rhetorically positioned as for employee self-improvement. However, more nefariously, by employing predictive statistical analysis of performance-outcome and user-generated data the field of ‘worker analytics’ seeks to extend managerial control to statically capture and assess. Dedicated analytics teams are attempting to use predictive analytics to assist companies ‘grow smarter’. These processes illustrate the respective efforts to optimize the exploitation of labour. This fine micro-analysis of workplace behaviour means that workers are vulnerable to dehumanization as their ‘time-on-tasks’ are repeatedly logged (see Huws 2016).

The hubris of a relentlessly empirical data-driven approach to the labour market, supposedly means the transformation of nearly every aspect of hiring, performance assessment, and management. Efficacy is meaningless if this practice is ethically fraught and unduly intrusive. Even so, there is a legitimate concern that this kind of approach will lead to systematic bias against whole groups of people by increasing the divergent life courses between classes, making upward social mobility even more difficult and so solidifying social stratification. Without a person’s consent, their digital footprints are being sought to quantify and measure that person’s employability, and hence their ability to reproduce themselves in capitalism. The proposed benefits of cost savings and increased efficiency are questionable returns for mass surveillance or when
automation mistreats human interactions as problems in need of technical solutions. This is especially true given the relationships between corporate surveillance of consumers and workers, and the US government’s domestic surveillance of citizens, a topic which I will address at length in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4. Altogether, these errors set up the ruling class for a gilded life.

While these developments are worrying in and of themselves, the larger purpose of this analysis is for capitalist firms to identify areas where they can automate their administrative and clerical labour, either replacing the labour regime, or using the threats of these technological interventions to suppress wages (Mosco 2016, 522). This is a continuation of the general tend to assess the labour process to see what machinery can be substituted for employees. Where once manufacturing jobs evaporated, so too is there the looming prospect of ‘knowledge workers’ jobs evaporating.

These cases point to some of the perennial problems of labour, which are reduced labour demand, efforts to induce labour docility, and the creation of a reserve army of labour, and an international division. Any potential labour renaissance has to work around these realities. Nevertheless, labour movements are fragmented and union membership is in decline while it is rare that emerging areas of the economy are unionized. Meanwhile, collective labour is largely defensive, seeking to hold onto provisions largely at the expense of future employees who will likely not be extended the same provisions.

Weak labour rights are unsurprising, for in a market society capital is given the lion’s share of policy concern and consideration. It has also allowed capital to reinterpret labour law to shift as much of the cost of labour training onto the public purse and personal debt, all the while claiming that the profit margins are too tight for regulatory tinkering. This rhetoric is doing little more than ensuring that electorates do not push for suitable administrative oversight. This way capital can maintain control over the production process. Beyond the need of a reserve workforce, capital has always fantasised about all other labour being self-supported and ready-to-hand.

Central to these labour regimes is the state. The capitalist state maintains the rule of law and so enforces private property rights. A high functioning state is necessarily symbiotic to markets, providing the basic public goods and power supply that enable profit-seeking activity. As a contemporary example, the products that digital entrepreneurs peddle are only possible because universities or the US military supported the initial research. The utility of cellular devices that connect to the internet or rely upon GPS comes directly from US state investment, through either TCP/IP which was a DARPA project, or TRANSIT, a satellite navigation system created for the US Navy. All of the fundamental research of private commercialized digital technologies—the ones currently driving the US economy—has been paid for by the public sector. This happened via grants to universities, but also through defence procurement. To elaborate, often under the pretext of increasing security, one of the main roles
of the Pentagon has been to use tax revenue to subsidize the ongoing development of advanced digital technologies until these become profitable. Using the public sector to carry the enormous costs, the ruling class has been able to sustain research into improved manufacturing of items like transistors, supercomputers, aircraft, satellites, fibre optics, all of which are then are transferred to the private sector where profits can be extracted. This is but another way in which the security state protects the interests of the ruling class.

Granted, Silicon Valley and the security state do not always neatly align, as the iPhone encryption case after the 2015 San Bernardino attack demonstrates, but such cases are anomalies. For the most part there is a tight convergence between these two clusters of interests. The convergence is evident when agencies of the security state purchase data storage services from Amazon Web Services (AWS), or when Eric Schmidt, the former chief executive officer of Google, was invited to head a newly formed Pentagon advisory board aimed at bringing Silicon Valley innovation and best practices to the US military. This development creates ‘a dangerous direct connection between anti-democratic forces in the United States’ (Mosco, 2016, 519).

Still, the basic facts of the organization of cloud computing specifically and the digital mode of production more generally predispose persons to surveillance. As data moves from being under personal control to being vested with remote parties it is susceptible to surveillance and analysis. This is because the nature of capitalist firms is to maximize profit-seeking ventures, even if they come at the expense of ethical norms like privacy; it is simply a part of their everyday business practices (see Mosco 2014). When there are objections to this general organization of digital production, it tends to concentrate upon cybercrime where hackers have compromised the security of these facilities in one form or another and customers have been compromised. But in an ironic twist, digital firms deflect and use these events to increase state controls over information, thus justifying the growth of the security state’s investigative powers in the area. All in all, people do not know the full extent of how their audience power is commodified and how vulnerable they are to subjugation.

What political resistance there is to this social structure is itself vulnerable to digital coercion because activists’ ‘digital repertoire of contention’ and organizing is predicated upon using tools owned by the ‘new men of power’ or surveilled by the security state. This is particularly acute for the ‘The New Civil Rights Struggles’ currently underway in North America; struggles which are inflected by matters of identity and class, as well as responses to the intrusion and shaping of conceptions security and freedom through algorithmic regulation, whether by corporate entities or by the state.

Movements like #OccupyWallStreet, #BlackLivesMatter, and #StopSOPA, as well as the national security whistleblowers like Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, make the headlines, but they are a fraction of a great many organizations labouring against structural injustice. Despite their differences, a shared
feature of these organized struggles is how their demands for a radically reformative politics is fundamentally incompatible with actually existing capitalism. A product of increasing social inequality broadly construed, these new civil rights struggles are advancing the outlines of political agenda part reformative and part revolutionary and attempts to contend stratifications solidifying in the early part of the twenty-first century. The social and political theory behind this is orientated towards the repressive dimensions of political and economic power of the capitalist state and its security auxiliaries.

Contrary to prevailing ideology, the practices and processes I have described above are persistent problems of capitalism: it makes people surplus to production without granting them the dividends of that production. As Jean and John Comaroff write,

> Capitalism flourishes as democracy is displaced by autocracy or technocracy; where industrial manufacture opens up ever more cost-efficient sites for itself; where highly flexible, extraordinarily inventive informal economies—of the kind now expanding everywhere—have long thrived; and where those performing outsourced services for the north develop cutting edge enterprises of their own, both legitimate and illicit; where new idioms of work, time, and governance take root, thus to alter planetary practices. (2012)

One cannot be neutral about capital. Nor can one be neutral about the states and security forces that maintain its imperial character. And so this is not the time for idealism.