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Social power and a new understanding of the world in the age of artificial intelligence

A review of the book by *Kate Crawford: Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence*; Belgrade: Faculty of Media and Communications

When, in a single book, one can see how artificial intelligence subtly shapes geopolitical, economic, security, military, psychological, cultural, and historical spheres, we feel compelled to recommend it to a wider audience. But when you add to this that AI simultaneously transforms technical and social practices, institutions, and infrastructures at an unimaginable speed, it becomes clear that it deserves our full attention. Kate Crawford, a leading scholar of artificial intelligence and the material changes it entails, shatters all doubts and dogmas about the neutrality of digital technologies in her new book, making no

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secret that they serve to consolidate the dominant power of existing global elites while deepening economic inequalities, accompanied by increasingly pervasive surveillance and control of civilian populations. A professor at the University of South Carolina, lead researcher at Microsoft's New York lab, and the first visiting chair of artificial intelligence and justice at the École normale supérieure in Paris, she dismantles taboos surrounding the design of new technologies because, fundamentally, every use depends on the ethical norms of the society that employs them. Responsibly and expertly, she argues that AI is neither artificial nor intelligent, as it entirely depends on political and social structures: "Due to the capital required to build AI at scale and the way it optimises perception, artificial intelligence systems are inevitably designed to serve existing interests of domination." In this sense, artificial intelligence is a "register of power" (p. 21).

From a terminological clarification of the concept itself to a phenomenological analysis of a precise conceptual atlas of AI, the author offers numerous practical examples, structuring the most important points of social power that are crucial for framing technology, politics, capital, and the governance of reality. The imaginary map guides us through the "aesthetic paradigm of the visual and the epistemic paradigm of knowledge," assisting us on a journey through the unknown world of artificial intelligence, which, after reading this book, we come to understand in a completely different way. Crawford points out how the IT industry aims to firmly grip the entire world, yet these opportunities remain accessible only to technologically educated and politically aware social categories. Knowledge lies in the skill to understand how a system functions, and how a contextual environment is built with models that guide the desired policies. Western centres of power are now colonising public space, which is anything but neutral!

This work is essential for understanding what is happening to us today, as well as for anticipating what lies beyond our limited cognitive horizons. Although it is presented to laypeople as a purely technological and communication tool, in practice it depends heavily on fossil fuels, rare minerals, and intensive human labour. For example, lithium is a mineral without which modern computing cannot exist, so extraction costs for companies can never be limiting, no matter how high they are. To make computer-generated images even more perfect and enticing, increasingly demanding software is required, which consumes ever more energy. Human dependence on technological tools casts a shadow over ecological extraction: seventeen rare elements are necessary for the continued use of mobile phones, laptops, and the most critical components of artificial intelligence infrastructure. The world should know that just last year Google's data centres consumed nearly 23 billion litres of water, roughly a third of Turkey's annual consumption. The carbon footprint of AI will become even more visible, as the voices of environmental activists grow louder due to the lack of ecological safeguards, yet the artificial intelligence system rests on the logic of big capital expressed in the militarisation of the new world order, which offers no acceptable alternative. In other words, artificial intelligence is a new force reshaping the life of the planet, and nations and cultures that recognise this will have an advantage over others. "Artificial intelligence, in the process of remapping and intervening in the world, is politics by other means, even if it is rarely acknowledged as such. The politics are driven by the Great AI

Houses, about a dozen companies that dominate planetary-scale computing" (p. 31). It is an extractive industry, whose success is measured by the degree of exploitation of underdeveloped environments.

The tightly structured content of the book, organised into seven chapters, examines both secret and well-known knowledge about computing and artificial intelligence, always highlighting the dialectical closeness of technology and the development of human society. The historical arc is evident, from the invention of the steam press, which increased productivity and accelerated the movement of capital, to artificial intelligence, which will optimise social decision-making, control climate change, and enable sufficient food production for an already overpopulated planet. The author possesses a strong critical spirit, with a distinctly clear stance on the dangers that *technosolutionism* brings, accompanied by its propagandistic mantra.[2] The game is sophisticated and cunning: the myth of pure technology conceals a series of "battles and secret agreements", while the greatest costs of its logic are borne by the Earth's atmosphere, ocean ecosystems, and poorly paid workers around the world. The experience of work is being redefined as surveillance increases, while algorithms assess the limits of human labour. "False automation does not directly replace human labour; it merely relocates and disperses it across space and time", observes Crawford (p. 75), as powerful industries creatively design different combinations of computer and human work interaction. Neural networks, logistic regression, and decision trees are only a small part of the machine learning repertoire, which can scan millions of emails, photos, or speeches in a matter of moments. Clichés like "data mining" or claims that data is "the new oil" rhetorically camouflage the centuries-old practices of powerful colonisers: if nature is no longer alive but merely a fund of free resources, then data is no longer personal but a profitable corporate investment.[3] Here we can recognise a colonial pattern applied in the early phases of territorial conquest – from other people's land (*terra nullius*) to other people's data (*cookies*) – extending a neoliberal view of the information market as the primary measure of value. Crawford names this phenomenon the ideology of data, warning of its consequences in the field of political and security action: "When data are merely a form of capital, then everything is justified, and all spaces can be subjected to increasingly invasive means of datafication", she concludes.

A major strength of this book is its simplicity and accessibility to the average reader, who does not need an expert level of knowledge to understand and interpret it. The titans of the technology industry have become so thanks to the naivety of people who willingly offered them their family albums, business photos, and military exercises – overlooking that in doing so they were exposing their own privacy. Ethics is observed from a distance, as is the protection

[2] According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, technosolutionism represents the idea that "all problems can be solved with technology, even though the truth may be more complex". This means that in the social sciences, the term has a negative connotation, which critics see in the emergence of so-called capitalist modernity that favours only economic growth.

[3] "To say that data are 'the new oil' not only highlights their profitability, but also conceals the problems of the fossil fuel industry: from the costs of the oil and mining industries, to contractual slavery, geopolitical conflicts, resource depletion, and consequences that exceed the timeframe of a single human lifetime", Crawford notes (p. 118).

of public goods. AI is not neutral, with algorithms producing discriminatory or biased outcomes, which are analysed in detail throughout the content. "A typical structure of an episode in the ongoing narrative about AI bias begins when an investigative journalist or insider discovers that a particular AI system produces discriminatory results. The story then becomes widely known, and the company in question promises to address the issue. The system is subsequently replaced with a new one, or technical interventions are made to produce more equitable outcomes. These results and technical corrections remain proprietary secrets, while the public is told they can be confident that the bias 'disease' has been cured."[4] The selection of information that artificial intelligence will use in training and technical systems is important for the accuracy of the results obtained, but the real question is – who decides which criteria will be applied? "Histories of classification show us that the most harmful forms of human categorisation – from apartheid systems to the pathologisation of homosexuality – did not simply disappear under the scrutiny of scientific research and ethical critique", highlighting the importance of political organisation and long-term media campaigns. In the digital constellation, even emotions can be recognised and captured within networks of standard behavioural patterns, but if we leave it to machines to construct and shape them, we are entering an age of orchestrated revolutions. In this context, we interpret conclusions about the weakening role of states and nations, replaced by complex, intertwined networks of multinational and multilateral programmes, infrastructures, and labour. The delegation of key state functions to technology entrepreneurs will be felt through the phenomenon of the outsourced state, where territorial sovereignty is exchanged for data sovereignty. "Space becomes the ultimate imperial ambition, symbolising an escape from the limitations of Earth, the body, and law", the author concludes, announcing a new colony where the *ubermensch* will live freed from any biological, social, ethical, or ecological boundaries.

Kate Crawford is a public policy advisor at the United Nations, the White House, and the European Parliament, where she frequently speaks on the political design and application of artificial intelligence. When she states that the shaping of knowledge, communication, and social power today directly depends on the scale of artificial intelligence employed by the state, she should be trusted. Careful reading of this work may help us better understand the fear Crawford discusses — both of individual and collective death — the "fear that our time is truly running out".

References

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