

Surveillance Capitalism and Algorithmic Struggles

Capitalismo de vigilância e lutas algorítmicas

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ABSTRACT

Over the last few years, the literature on digital technologies has recorded a spiral of denunciations against algorithms. According to it, algorithms would be nothing but neoliberal techniques through which a new phase of capitalism would globally subsume societies, enclosing them in an infinite repetition, ensured by data extraction and continuous surveillance. This essay problematizes surveillance capitalism – one of the main focal points of this debate. Furthermore, it re-positions the split between surveillance and security in the context of the covid-19 pandemic from the perspective of algorithmic struggles. As a result, we argue that surveillance capitalism hides the perspective of work and struggles, leading us to a political impasse and immobility.

Keywords – Techniques, surveillance capitalism, algorithms, social struggles

RESUMO

Nos últimos anos, a literatura sobre técnicas digitais rebentou numa espiral de denúncias contra os algoritmos. Eles seriam as técnicas neoliberais por meio das quais uma nova etapa do capitalismo subsumiria globalmente as sociedades, encerrando-as numa repetição infinita assegurada pelo extrativismo de dados e pela vigilância contínua. Esse ensaio problematiza o capitalismo de vigilância – um dos principais pontos de convergência deste debate. Ainda, reposiciona a clivagem entre vigilância e segurança no contexto da pandemia de COVID-19 sob a óptica das lutas algorítmicas. Como resultado, afirma que o capitalismo de vigilância escamoteia a perspectiva do trabalho e das lutas, lançando-nos ao impasse e ao imobilismo políticos.

Palavras-Chave – Técnica, capitalismo de vigilância, algoritmos, lutas sociais

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¹What we call *algorithmic acceleration* corresponds not only to the fact that “networks and algorithmic processing solidify the traces of metropolitan rhythms” and crystallize “flows in data (*big data*) whose processing becomes ever faster and more efficient”, but also to the acceleration of “[t]he very levels of abstraction of work, floating like virtualities, can be realized [...] at any moment and condensed [...] into billions of data” (35-36); but it also corresponds to the acceleration of “[t]he very levels of abstraction of work which, floating like virtualities, at any moment can be realized and condensed [...] into billions of decisions generated by hundreds of millions of *online* devices (*smartphones* and other *tablets*)” (Szaniacki and Cocco, 2021, p. 35).

ALGORITHMS ARE EVERYWHERE, at an unbridled pace. While we live in a vertigo that we could call *algorithmic acceleration*,¹ a gigantic body of literature cries out against “the dictatorship of algorithms” (Benasayag, 2019), the “algorithms of oppression” (Noble, 2018) or “weapons of *math* destruction” (O’Neil, 2020). Coming from different origins, pessimism is widespread. It is common to hear that we are in a “silicolonized” world (Sadin, 2016) where the “rise of data [determines] the death of politics” (Morozov, 2018).

This analytical panoply, along with the emotional atmosphere they mobilize, can converge in what Shoshana Zuboff (2020) has called “surveillance capitalism”. Condensed into this expression, the term “surveillance” is intended to herald a new stage of “capitalism”, now marked by an ultra-Orwellian condition of total control and transparency. What Zuboff proposes is not the notion of a *big brother* spying on everyone’s lives, but that of a big other – an idea inoculated by a new configuration of the political economy of power called “Instrumentarian Power”.

When technological determinism seems to have been abandoned, the surveillance capitalism approach reintroduces the economic determinism of neoliberalism and its new techniques of power (Han, 2018), with the air of a general and seductive critical matrix. However, rather than providing tools and alternatives for political action, we sustain that this path does no more than map out a general servitude to technology from which it would have become impossible to desert.

If algorithmic acceleration implies and mobilizes the development of cloud computing, these critical approaches in turn result in an intellectual fog that leads thinking about contemporary technique, technology and capitalism to an impasse. On the one hand, they address the “malaise” in algorithmic culture (Supiot, 2015). On the other hand, instead of providing solutions, this critical perspective only paralyzes us in the face of the true and urgent challenges that lie ahead. The editorial success of such surrounding literature bears witness to the impact of the psychosocial anxieties generated by algorithmic acceleration in the face of the growing uncertainties it generates about the future.

If, for a moment, the notion of cognitive capitalism (Boutang, 2012) adequately captured the transformations of value, it was because it had as its starting point the analysis of the transformations of labour, particularly linked to the themes of general intellect. These analyses proposed a post-Fordist capitalism entangled with the struggles of the multitude of immaterial labour – that which takes place in metropolitan circulation, as an intelligence organized

in a network, and resulting from the cooperation between the singularities that make up the multitude (Hardt and Negri, 2005).

For us, the problem with the critical argument of surveillance capitalism lies in the fact that its analysis overlooks the point of view of labour and struggles, and does not sufficiently take into account the question of social coordination. Capitalism is indeed a mode of exploitation of labour, but it is also (and before that) a mode of management of society. Going through struggles is not a moral question, rather, a question of method. As Marx would have it, struggles are internal to capitalism, even in its post-industrial or algorithmic configuration.

We need to apprehend technique in a non-essentialist way. Problematizing it requires the reactivation of its political dimensions: the transversal struggles immanent to technosocial assemblages. In other words, it seems to us that the real impasse lies in the social struggles, and not in “capitalism”. Therefore, we need to think about technique in an operational, procedural, and metastable sense. *Only struggles make technique thinkable as a problem*, and no longer as a “question”.

To do this, we need to conceive of algorithms as technical objects or beings, open to exteriority and unfolding, unfinished, in the sense that the philosopher of technique and individuation Gilbert Simondon has seen them. This means understanding algorithms as real processes developed by the “lines [of their] genesis as the only true essence” (Simondon, 2020, p. 233). In Simondon’s vocabulary, “essence” no longer refers to “being in general” or “ontology”, but to relation, process and becoming – a condition for the thought of technique to overcome the impasse of critique and be able to rediscover its struggles.

The problem has never been technique or algorithms, but the struggles that constitute the meaning of technical objects and produce their modes of existence. The impasse in which we find ourselves is not defined by capitalism or surveillance, but by the difficulties in capturing the struggles that run through it. Paradoxically, defining capitalism in terms of surveillance takes us even deeper into an impasse. Let’s make it clear: we have no answers on how to get out of it. But that doesn’t exempt us from trying to formulate appropriate problems that can free up paths.

To do this, we will argue in two sections of this essay that the surveillance capitalism approach obscures the perspective of labour and struggles, throwing us into an impasse and political immobilism. The first, entitled “Surveillance capitalism”, is dedicated to defining, with appropriate critical counterpoints, the contours of the intellectual and emotional atmosphere that constitute



this approach, reviewing the contemporary literature that contributes to its formalization. This section organizes the prospection based on the ideas of “Instrumentalism”, which manifests itself in instrumentarian power, and the idea of commodified “data extraction”, embodied in the economic-political model of big techs; finally, on the idea of “reiteration” (recursion or feedback loop), which names the automatic reproduction regime of societies governed by algorithms.

As we shall see, the three main findings corresponding to each axis of analysis will be: political immobilism in the face of the technological and extractive impasse; the disconnection between the critique of capitalism and social struggles; and, finally, the representation of a generalized social automatism, governed by algorithms, which closes this chain of reasoning in a tautology emanating the impasse we describe.

The second section, entitled “The surveillance/security cleavage”, repositions the gap between surveillance and security in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, and proposes ways out of the impasse of surveillance capitalism. To this purpose, it interprets algorithmic capitalism as a material terrain in which struggles and socio-technical processes leverage each other. The argument develops by articulating two dimensions of this gap and three recent struggles in which we can see them manifest. This gap extends both to the political action of contemporary social movements, which are somehow crossed by digital technologies, and to the dimension of public policies.

In the vertical dimension of the surveillance/security gap, we have recovered the relationship between security and the genuinely biopolitical control of the health crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic. In the horizontal dimension of the same gap, we recovered the notion of *sousveillance* (surveillance from below) as a counterpoint to surveillance (surveillance from above) in order to detect trends in struggles emerging both from George Floyd’s case, in the reignition of Black Lives Matter, unleashed on a global scale, and from the struggles of delivery app workers – which reinserts into the analysis the dimensions of subjectivity, on the one hand, and contemporary labour, on the other.

In this way, we attempt to go back to technique as the immanent terrain in which struggles develop, drawing on the strength of the anti-racist movements and delivery app workers, as struggles that have taken place within the algorithmic “acceleration of acceleration” unleashed in the pandemic scenario.

SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM: INSTRUMENTALISM, EXTRACTIVISM AND REITERATION

In *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Shoshana Zuboff described the phenomenon that gives her book its title as a broad diagram of power that functions as “the puppeteer who imposes its will through the ubiquitous digital apparatus” (Zuboff, 2020, p. 427); as “the wizard behind the digital curtain” (Zuboff, 2020, p. 429), for whom *instrumentalism* functions as a “practical architecture” (Zuboff, 2020, p. 472) ordered to mine reality.

What Zuboff called “instrumentarian power”, thus naming its specific regime of power, reproduces the social structure set up by surveillance capitalism’s mode of material production. Its advent is grounded in the ubiquity of the digital apparatuses, network infrastructures, growing computer processing power and unprecedented effects of social totalization in order to impose itself as a universal technology of behavior. The material conditions of production, and of the new regime of accumulation that will present “surveillance as a service” (Zuboff, 2000, p. 480), instantiates the asymmetry of power between big techs, their magicians and priests, and ordinary users. The latter are no longer, as in the neoliberal adage, “the products” of free services, but “the abandoned carcasses” (Zuboff, 2000, p. 429) of continuous “hunting” actions in search of “behavioral surplus”.

Behavioral engineering mixes neoliberalism and radical behaviorism. It makes use of omniscience, control and certainty extracted and actively managed for the benefit of behavioral futures markets. All this turns instrumentarian power into a new type of statistical and totalizing knowledge-power, generating a social automatism that tends to be absolute: “a digital order that thrives within things and bodies, transforming will into reinforcement and action into conditioned response” (Zuboff, 2020, p. 430).

Instrumentarian power implies a regime of governance of behavioral flows, which are predictable and modifiable, inhibiting by default any threat of instability. In this subsumption of society by the new order of accumulation, utopia itself becomes an experimental practice of power that directs the flows of human actions by mimicking machines. This is why Zuboff (2020) envisions computational truths replacing political truths.

Surveillance capitalism thus rearticulates the old “instrumental reason” in terms of the instrumentarian power of the big other. In Zuboff’s point of view (2020,), the big other would generalize a “digital totalitarianism” based on public and private data, aiming to achieve the highest possible level of social automation. The big other is characterized as an institutional, ubiquitous



and networked regime that records, modifies and commodifies the everyday experiences of people and things in order to establish new monetization routes.

Although it reconfigures mass societies, it also makes social conformity irrelevant, insofar as the big other imposes “a new kind of automaticity” (Zuboff, 2020, p. 430) of behavior based on behavioral data that would feed-back, according to a broad circuit of capitalist valorization, new guidelines that follow the logic of stimulus-response that was described by radical behaviorists such as B. F. Skinner. According to Zuboff, what would have been missing to make a vision like Skinner’s practicable was the “computational truth” that data, flow records, machine-learning and computer modeling could provide today.

The descriptions of an instrumental society, totalized and subsumed by surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2020) will inspire a paranoid atmosphere, in which the danger of networked irrationality is tautologically transformed into a critical fatalism of reason. In network societies, instrumentalism is mobilized to manufacture differences to be incited, let free, developed, circulated, multiplied, and then exploited, extracted, mobilized and modulated according to multiple strategies of value generation by behavioral engineering. The production of behavioral value has become the ground for extracting surplus value from singularities, fragmentary differences and dividualities (Raunig, 2016). This would be the last frontier of the instrumental knowledge-power that characterizes surveillance capitalism.

The standardization, adaptation and conformity of the old industrial societies are now replaced by the singularization, extraction and modulation of instrumental networks. In this way, the approach in terms of surveillance capitalism places us in a situation where the only possible version of critique is on the side of paranoid technophobia and on the opposite side of permissive technophilia.

An attempt to get out of this impasse would be to qualify surveillance as extractivist. Thus, contemporary capitalism would be not only vigilantist, but also extractivist – and what links one term to the other is precisely data. Criticism will therefore be directed against the extractive model of production, aiming to intercept the trend line that runs through the earth, bodies and media.

In another territorial and metabolic context, Maristella Svampa (2019) summarized extractivism in three terms: 1/ extractivism is a regime of continuous capitalist accumulation; 2/ it takes advantage of the intensification of metabolic exchange between humans and nature; and 3/ its objective is to export commodities (raw materials, energy, resources) according to the

vectors of a colonial diagram that puts the peripheries at the service of the global centers.

The description of surveillance capitalism, on the other hand, is based on the evolution of the business models of the American and Chinese big techs (above all, Google, Facebook, Amazon, Alibaba, Baidu and Tencent, for example). Its premise is that contemporary capitalism has evolved from the Fordist mode of production to the extractive technique of the Google Model. While the former corresponded to a scaling economy of expropriation of labour that provided products and services, the Google model would have encapsulated a new and parasitic type of economy, based on data extraction.

Thus, raw materials and commodities are no longer just accumulated, nor is labour alone expropriated; more than that, data enriched with “behavioral value” is extracted and accumulated through global and diffuse computational architectures in order to model behavior and increase its predictability. Products and services no longer have value in themselves, except as routes in continuous construction, and as tests to constitute behavioral futures markets, making data extraction sustainable on a large scale (Zuboff, 2020).

It is not hard to see that the traits outlined in the critique of extractivism are incorporated into the approach undertaken by surveillance capitalism: 1) extractivism is a regime of continuous accumulation, now computationally engineered by surveillance; 2) expanding the interactions between man and nature, surveillance capitalism would be sustained by the intensification of metabolic exchanges between the nature of bodies and the post-human character of media – an intensification which has been favored by the ubiquity of extractive sensors, gadgets and wearables; 3) the purpose of extracting commodities (data) according to the vectors of a colonial diagram that goes from the peripheries of everyday life to the verticalized platforms of the Big Techs in Silicon Valley is maintained.

In a way, these two powerful approaches to extractive capitalism intersect in their critique of the commodification of data. The motto “data is the new oil” (Bridle, 2018) has burst out of literature, either denouncing the threats to liberal democracy (O’Neil, 2020; Zuboff, 2020) or proclaiming the end of politics itself (Morozov, 2018). This mutation would have permanently transformed the very regime of accumulation and concentration of wealth, reorganizing the computational and social architectures for these purposes.

To a certain extent, the criticism towards the extractivism of the land and of data integrate the same diagnosis, consisting in the threat to a “democratic ecology of rights”. While Svampa (2016) stands for the equation “more extractivism, less democracy”, Zuboff (2021) signed an opinion piece



in *The New York Times* advocating the incompatibility between surveillance capitalism, democracy and human rights.

Accepting all this implies admitting that technique subsumes both the social field and the political alternatives it generates. Consequently, there would be no room for struggles, except perhaps an entirely negative new luddism (Mueller, 2021). Should we then agree with Han (2018) and proclaim the obsolescence of struggles? For the theorists of surveillance capitalism, politics remains blocked by the ontology of technique, and all potential dissent has been absorbed into a model of governance by reiteration. We would be at the height of social automation and would be moving in the full logic of surveillance. *In extremis*, everything happens as if we were *automatons* governed by *autonomous* algorithms engendered by a general, open-air carceral paradigm (Katz, 2020).

Much of the contemporary literature on technology moves into an atmosphere in which the negative task of criticism implodes in the form of a denunciation of automated governance, of a society of repetition, digitally normalized and ontologically reiterative. In this realm, all traces that would allow us to see possible reconnections with the terrain of struggles, or with the political components of a socio-technical assemblage, are *a priori* neutralized.

These approaches continue to conceive contemporary artificial intelligence (AI) as the linear result of cybernetics and its feedback effect (Pasquinelli, 2023). So much so that recursion, feedback loops and their infinite repetition constitute one of the core problems in the way surveillance capitalism approach interprets algorithms. There, the complexity and technical indeterminacy of algorithms ends up being narrowed down to the mathematical notion of a recursive function: that is, “a function that repeats itself until it reaches a stationary state” (Hui, 2019, p. 120-121).

Cathy O’Neil (2020) emphasized the recursiveness of algorithms. Everything happens as if algorithms were time machines, controlling the present and blocking the future through opaque and pervasive mathematical functions that operate on the accumulation of past data, obtained through the extraction and soft imposition of social hypervisibility.

Since public and private policies enabling the exercise of rights become indexed to algorithms, these will be held responsible for the blind reiteration and automation of given social structures. For Virginia Eubanks (2018) or Yarden Katz (2020), algorithms and AI are nothing more than models whose flexibility is put at the service of structural invariants: reproducing inequalities, gender, race, poverty and criminalization biases, reinvigorating white privilege, etc.

These are the terms in which the tension between recursion (repetition) and contingency (difference) is posed according to the theorists of surveillance

capitalism. They will describe algorithms and AI as government machines that colonize contingencies and eliminate possibilities. All variation would be nothing more than a simulacrum of difference or an epiphenomenon of the deterministic repetition of a structure predisposed to reiterate.

This description extends a dystopian premise, echoed in Zuboff's concept of the big other (2020): "Whoever controls the past controls the future; whoever controls the present controls the past" (Orwell, 2009, p. 47). She suggests that the problem of repetition of the identical, or the relationship between memory and the future, is determined in advance by the strategies of power that operate in the present. In other words, algorithms and AI are nothing more than instruments for repeating sameness and controlling contingencies. The future will appear blocked not by the algorithmic government machine, but by the force that binds together the memory of data, the present of power relations and the virtualities of human action.

These analyses overlook the real challenges posed by algorithmic acceleration. One of the biggest paradoxes stems from the unreserved belief in the metaphors used to emphasize the strategic importance of data, and thus define them as commodities: as if they were equivalent to minerals or oil. Data – i.e. information – is indeed fundamental and constitutes the great reservoir of algorithmic acceleration. Although, it functions in a radically different way to the primary commodities that appear in the rear-view mirror of analysts that reduce contemporary capitalism to a vigilantist and extractivist drift, or one of mere "spoliation".

Firstly, the massification of data (big data), which now grounds the GAFAM's business models,² stems from a process of widespread connection (the internet of things). Connections precede data and instantiate its production. Secondly, unlike commodities, data are "non-rivalrous" goods: the use made of them does not prevent others from continuing to use them (Haskel; Westlake, 2018). As mineral deposits run out, the exploitation of data generates even greater volumes of data, in a spiral. Thirdly, the availability of vast warehouses of data has enabled the revival of a previously marginalized branch of Artificial Intelligence techniques: connectionism (Dupuy, 2009). Together with the exponential increase in the computing power of the planetary computing machine, Big Data is one of the determinants of acceleration based on deep-learning algorithms, i.e., the type of Artificial Intelligence that has underpinned the algorithmic acceleration of the last ten or fifteen years.

Thus, the more data is used, the more data flows increase, turning the global economy into a "perpetual motion machine of data" (Slaughter & Cormich, 2022). It does not work as in a mere extraction of commodities, but as in an algorithmic production of meanings which unfold themselves from

² Acronym for the Big Techs Google, Apple, Facebook (now Meta Platforms) and Amazon.



previous meanings. This is what has been called “data-driven innovation” – a process that can foster innovation incessantly, without exhausting itself.

An example of this, which will be detailed next, was the online circulation of data on the genetic sequence of the COVID-19 virus. Just a month after the first infection was reported, this data allowed Big Pharma companies, such as the US-based Moderna, to immediately start working on a vaccine, adding this information to what they had already developed based on the innovative concept of “messenger RNA” (Ball, 2020).

Another correlated example was the management of the contagion curve in the first months of the pandemic. As we will also discuss next, it showed that probabilism can be a biopolitical tool for protecting life – for example, in tracking the spread of contagion, or in assessing the balance between health protection and minimizing the cost of human capital (Zhunis et. al, 2022); or even to guide the decisions and logistics of vaccine distribution (Bicher et al., 2022). Far from statistical probabilism and prediction being merely reiterative of a given social formation, they can be tools linked to material dynamics that are crossed by bifurcations, and full of possibilities for struggles.

In our view, techniques constitute a terrain of struggles that a surveillance capitalism approach cannot fully grasp. We will present afterwards two gaps that help to concretely demonstrate the multiple ways in which digital technologies constitute a means for the development of struggles.

Therefore, we pinpoint and analyze the gaps between surveillance and security, and between the vertical (*surveillance*) and horizontal (*sousveillance*) dimensions of surveillance and control. Nuancing them allows us to show how they were able to articulate themselves biopolitically during the worst moments of the Covid-19 pandemic, but also provides the social field with new weapons in the context of racial and democratic struggles against racism and police violence. Meanwhile, its developments testified in favor of political reversibility of technologies, especially regarding the struggles of delivery apps’ workers.

As we shall see, the trend lines that emerge here are directly connected to public policies on health-risk management (in the case of the pandemic), control of police activity (in the case of Black Lives Matter) and universal basic income policies (in the case of app workers).

THE SURVEILLANCE/SECURITY GAP: TECHNIQUE AS A TERRAIN OF STRUGGLE

The definition of contemporary capitalism as “surveillance” begs the question of whether Michel Foucault was wrong to attribute this quality to the

disciplinary regime typical of industrial capitalism. The other way around, we think that Foucault's periodization – updated by Gilles Deleuze's "Postscript on the societies of control" – remains productive. Especially if it is taken more as a starting point (and support) than as a point of arrival. The relevance of the Foucauldian approach is proven by its ability to grasp the tensions that shape the new power regime and, more importantly, the precedence of the struggles that run through it.

The concept of surveillance refers to a concentrationary universe whose paradigm is the "prison-factory". It is no coincidence that the two delusional and speculative forms of disciplinary modernity – real socialism and national socialism – sought to affirm a model of coordination based on the Soviet forced labour camps and the Nazi concentration and extermination camps. The soviet *Gulag*³, as well as the motto *arbeit macht frei* ("labour sets you free") – still legible on the portico of the Auschwitz concentration camp – were the explicit and radical faces of a system of labour surveillance planned as a penal regime.

³Russian acronym for "General Coordination of Labour Camps".

In fact, when commenting on contemporary algorithmic governmentality, Yarden Katz (2020) matched our condition to that of a "general open-air carceral" regime. This is perhaps reminiscent of Michael Hardt (1997), who criticized the notion of "outside" to say that "life *in* prison only reveals life *as* a prison". Disciplinary apparatuses, however, control the bodies of each individual by inserting them into a mass serialization, and making use of punitive tools that explicitly restrict freedom. What is at stake today seems to be of a different magnitude.

As early as the second half of the 1970s, Foucault anticipated the neoliberal turn by researching the "Birth of Biopolitics" in the interplay between security, territory and population. It was clear that the shift from disciplinary to security technologies did not imply the disappearance of the preceding ones (such as archaic sovereignty, and industrial discipline). Nevertheless, this did not erase the fact that security technologies became prevalent regarding previous ones. In the definition of security technologies we find a mention of "data" *avant-la-lettre*. "Security," Foucault (2004, p. 18-19) claimed, "is based on a certain amount of material *data*". It exercises itself upon "a space full of phenomena and events" as the art of "minimizing negative elements and maximizing positive ones through the study and modeling of probabilities" (Foucault, 2004, p. 19).

We have already mentioned the role that data played in the algorithmically accelerated invention of an effective vaccine in the fight against coronavirus. However, as soon as the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that we were facing a pandemic, the initial debate on containment policies and management of the contagion curve – which took place between March and



May 2020 – spelled out how security technology was (and continues to be) the substrate of neoliberal reason: a substrate so powerful that the markets suffered an unexpected sideration (Boutang, 2020).

The debate in the context of the health emergency was articulated between modeling the likely effects of the speed at which the virus spreads and the imperatives of “flattening the curve” of contamination. It was a perfect example of the general definition of security proposed by Foucault: “Modes and technologies used to keep a certain type of phenomenon within limits that are socially and economically acceptable” (Foucault, 2004, p. 06).

The West never tried to eradicate contagion as in the Chinese policy of *zero covid*. The target was stopping its spread, keeping it below a certain rate, and avoiding saturation of the health system. At the heart of this strategy was upcoming data on the curve of new infections. Just as in the definition: organize the phenomenon “around an average that will be considered optimal for the functioning of a given society” (Foucault, 2004, p. 07). It is no coincidence that Foucault’s Heideggerian readers (Agamben, for instance) immediately aligned themselves with the negationism of the extreme right (such as Trump and Bolsonaro), protesting against the governmental measures to protect populations – up to the point of joining *noVax* demonstrations (Cocco, 2022). In paranoid readings, security and surveillance are equivalent.

However, this was far from what Foucault has told us. According to him, the gap was indeed more nuanced. In the pandemic, biopolitics appeared as a politics of life, whilst the population surged as a “medium” of natural and artificial existence, a “point of articulation between culture and nature that [is] the terrain for the exercise of security technologies” (Foucault, 2004, p. 24). Here we find *the gap between surveillance and security*: the former aims to discipline subjects so that they produce wealth; the latter aims to constitute the population in relation to a *milieu* of life, existence and labour. If discipline implies government, security is governmentality (Foucault, 2004, p. 24). In the “struggles against asphyxiation” (Corrêa, 2021) waged during the pandemic, this gap undoubtedly appeared, and displayed how technophobic readings could endorse a necropolitics of the new extreme right-wing.

Although the debate remains open, the issue of surveillance does not help to break the deadlock. These gap lines consistent with the social struggles need to be sought-out in another way. The concept of “security”, as Foucault problematized it from the point of view of probabilistic risk management technologies, is as much crossed by biopolitical vectors as it is by collations of controls. When this concept began to unfold, Foucault’s paranoid readings were opposed by those who wanted to nuance security technologies by using the

implicit difference between biopolitics and biopower. While biopolitics would imply a politics of life, of “making-live” as power, biopower would have been a technology of power over life, an almost totalitarian way of making-live. In our view, not only is it impossible to find this distinction in Foucault, but it is also useless. Foucault was interested in understanding how power circulates and, at the same time, how to avoid the effects of domination – how to strengthen power relations against states of domination.

What the pandemic made clear was something else. Since biopower made explicit its dimension of protecting life, the opposition driven by the new extreme right-wing appeared openly as a necropolitics. The politics of letting “the weak” die was not embedded in biopower, as Foucault thought in his 1976 course (Foucault, 1997) – and both Roberto Esposito (2004) and Achille Mbembe (2019), inspired by him, also emphasized. In the urgency of the pandemic, necropolitics appeared clearly separate from and inimical to biopower, fashioning a new trend of fascism.

Doing so, it exposed how surveillance in Western societies is limited, to the point where applications to track the spread of infection cannot be implemented, except on an optional basis. In China, on the other hand, surveillance was embedded in the *zero COVID* policy – and not through the pastoral route, but through the hunting model of the virus (Keck, 2014). Thus, recovering the Foucauldian notion of security in all its breadth allows us to think of surveillance not as a fundamental characteristic of contemporary capitalism, but as one of the contradictory gaps between its biopolitical dimension and its necropolitical manifestation – crystallized nowadays in the new global extreme right-wing.

This is a gap that can lead to other gaps. For instance, those that could stem from a better understanding of the valuation mechanism that involves data security and connection. McAfee and Brynjolfsson (2017) emphasized that this shift has become a pattern: “Uber, the world’s largest cab company, owns no cabs”; “Facebook, the world’s most popular media outlet, produces no content”; “Alibaba, the most valuable retailer, has no inventory, and Airbnb, the largest lodging company, owns no real estate” (McAfee & Brynjolfsson, 2017, p. 06). These asset-light companies very quickly reached hundreds of millions of users. In 2015, one million people a day used Uber in 300 cities in 60 different countries (McAfee and Brynjolfsson, 2017, p. 07).

Rather than surveillance capitalism, we are dealing with companies whose capital is connectionism; which engender processes of valorization by means of the incessant production of consistencies, the weaving of plots between machines, platforms and the multitude. Unlike most products and services,



whose value is independent of or diminished by the presence of other users, the value and attractiveness of networked platforms grows as more and more users adopt them – a process that economists call the positive network effect (Kissinger et al., 2021). This effect occurs in “information exchange activities in which the value grows along with the number of participants” (Kissinger et al., 2021, p. 102).

It is the very dynamics of the valorization of network platforms that leads some of them to retain hundreds of millions, and even billions, of users, while others desert and die. In other words, “network platforms are inherently large-scale phenomena” (Kissinger et al., 2021, p. 100). Thus, the antagonistic tension that drives the struggles may not be in surveillance, but could be in the dynamics of value creation that causes the AI used by network platforms to produce an “intersection between humans and Artificial Intelligence on a scale that suggests an event of civilizational significance” (Kissinger et al., 2021, p. 95).

The pandemic has been a theater of dynamic struggles that perhaps indicate gaps in the surveillance/security riddle. Not counting the mobilizations within the health system in an effort to jointly fight the virus and denialism, we can pinpoint two lines of mobilization, among many: the one against racism in the United States, and that of app delivery labourers. Each of these struggles crosses and is crossed by algorithmic acceleration.

On May 25th, 2020, George Floyd, a black North American former security guard, was murdered by a white police officer in Minneapolis. Hours later, protests began on the ground, and quickly proliferated into a large national movement that lasted months and played an important role in Donald Trump’s electoral defeat (Tensley, 2020).

The fundamental mechanism of the mobilization was the dissemination of videos recorded by passers-by who witnessed the scene of Floyd’s police chokehold. It wasn’t the first time that the visibility of racist police violence had acted as a trigger for revolt. We only have to remember the extremely violent six-day riots that shook Los Angeles in 1992, shortly after a jury acquitted four police officers accused of beating Rodney King, a black driver.

The two episodes have a lot in common: the racism of sections of the police in certain US cities and the violent uprising that immediately took over the streets. But there are big differences that show how technique can work as a terrain of struggle. The trigger in Los Angeles was the fortuitous presence of someone who, with a camera, recorded a videotape that was later broadcast by television networks. The Minneapolis murder, on the other hand, was recorded on the smartphones of several passers-by. At first, the images

went viral on social media. They were only broadcast on television after the uprising had taken hold of every city in the United States. Throughout the months of protests, the use of social networks to call for demonstrations, and smartphones to record the mobilizations and monitor the abuses of repression (e.g. in front of the White House, with Donald Trump himself present), never stopped.

This trend was displayed in other episodes of racist violence committed by the police, such as the chokehold murder of Eric Garner in 2014 in New York, from which comes the *slogan* “I can’t breathe” that would be repeated six years later by George Floyd. In 2014, an uprising followed the murder of Michael Brown by a police officer in Ferguson. In 2015, it was the murder of Freddie Gray, who died in a Baltimore police car. The Black Lives Matter movement has been growing since 2013 in the mobilizations that followed each of these cases. In all of them, communication via social networks, videos recorded on smartphones, were the triggers and means of proliferation of mobilizations, revolts and processes of indignation. That’s why David Dufresne (Le Monde, 2020a) goes so far as to say that the “camera is the weapon of the unarmed”.

This shows that surveillance has at least two dimensions, one vertical and one horizontal. At the beginning of the 2000s, engineer Steve Mann – considered one of the fathers of wearable devices – coined a neologism by means of an aversion. Alongside *surveillance*, he made *sousveillance* thinkable: i.e., to the surveillance “from above”, thought up by Bentham and problematized by Foucault, he contrasted surveillance “from below”, made possible by the ubiquity of portable or wearable tech devices. This term was the subject of debate in France in relation to a security law aimed at limiting the dissemination of images produced of police actions (Le Monde, 2020b). The same debate recently took place in São Paulo, where the far-right State governor promised to eliminate body cameras for military police (Poder 360, 2022). Despite this, there is constant talk of *surveillance* and very little of *sousveillance* – which implies a diffuse and ubiquitous dynamic.

Philosopher Jean-Gabriel Ganascia (2010) ponders that the binary opposition doesn’t work because the two situations mix in the reality of networks and platforms. It is this mixture that we must investigate. In this respect, Bernard Harcourt (2020) proposes the notion of a “society of exposure” in which the desire to expose oneself and publish is in the intermediate zone between *surveillance* and *sousveillance* – and seems to touch on the concept of security proposed by Foucault, or that of control, by Deleuze.

At the same time as the pandemic was the theater of a major slowdown, it was also the stage for an algorithmic “acceleration of acceleration” that led to a



vast process of “digital literacy” of entire sectors of the population, who began to intensively use all kinds of online services. The number of app delivery workers increased at the same rate, and we soon saw significant mobilizations of these workers in several countries.

Even before these events, a “digital operaism” was claimed to appear as a mass composition of digital workers (app workers) to which the Trontian method of the technical and political composition of the “class” could be applied – with slight adaptations. When these struggles emerged, these authors thought that they would pave the way for a “digital operaism” that would make it possible to avoid the “risk of falling into the post-operaist trap of looking for the new social subject anywhere but in the workplace” (Englert & Woodcock, 2020, p. 50).

The struggle of delivery workers would allow us to “move away from a focus on technology or users and instead privilege workers’ self-activity” (Englert; Woodcock, 2020). The search for the “working class” as the *conditio sine qua non* of struggles implies that “algorithmic surveillance and control are key to understanding the changing composition of work on platforms” (Woodstock, 2020). Not by chance, literature registers a diffuse and proliferating approach: the image of an algorithmic panopticon.

However, when we look at the forms of struggle carried out by delivery workers, we find signs of a dynamic that does not fit in with any revival of the “old” working class. Firstly, the mobilizations are metropolitan and bear urban traits; secondly, the success of the strikes is based on the sympathy and support of important sectors of users. The struggles in the realm of services always involve a composite horizon made up, on the one hand, of *the metropolitan-making* (Szaniecki & Cocco, 2021) and, on the other, of mobilizations to co-produce the services and the struggles themselves. The success of the mobilizations relies on the metropolitan and transversal dimension of the struggles, just as the movements against racism are intersectional.

As well as the struggles against racism, delivery workers’ mobilization in not taking place in parallel with surveillance, but in the reverse engineering of *sousveillance*. Two additional elements point to the challenges within this new condition: in terms of income and the fight against precariousness, the struggle of app workers is traversed more by income policies than by the establishment of a formal wage relationship. In Brazil, these struggles have been particularly affected by Emergency Aid Salary and, more generally, by the issue of Basic Income. In other words, what is at stake is no longer guaranteed or formal work, but access to income streams – made possible by “free” activities, without direct “patronage”, and at the same time algorithmic and “platformed”.

This trend is even stronger in the recent demonstration by immigrant delivery workers in Portugal – most of them Brazilians. Although this episode does not carry any statistical weight, it is an indicator of how “self-activity” or “self-entrepreneurship” needs to be thought of from the point of view of the production of subjectivity: “Representing around 90% of delivery workers for the main digital platforms in Portugal, Brazilian *motoboys* have united to fight against the government’s plan to regularize the sector” (Jornal O Globo, 2022). Still in the Portuguese context, this tendency is reinforced by a survey carried out by the University Institute of Lisbon (Lourenço, 2022), according to which 87% of *motoboys* operating on digital platforms in Portugal state their will to remain freelancers.

Could it be that these tendencies are just the effects of the ideological conditioning promoted by the “neoliberal apology” for self-entrepreneurship? Are they perversions of the desire of the deproletarianized masses who are just waiting to be reproletarianized in the terms of the old wage-earning subordination?

What can we say, then, about the Great Resignation (Big Quit) (Forbes, 2021) and the worldwide quiet quitting initiatives (Johns Hopkins, 2022) that seem to extend the two previous lines of tendency: on the one hand, the economic crisis linked to the post-pandemic scenario (wage stagnation, the rise of the cost of living, limited opportunities for professional growth, global inflationary scenario, etc.); on the other hand, they extend the struggles for freedom of activity according to a trend that breaks with the model of the salaried binding?

Perhaps the challenge lies in understanding how, in the new working conditions that take place outside the wage relationship, struggles for freedom (Boutang, 2022) regain terrain; in other words, struggles against the forms of slavery that remain in it, but which are also renewed in it and find new ground and unexpected horizons.

FINAL REMARKS

Geert Lovink (2019) states that we do not need to describe algorithmic assemblages as monumental technical effects of the transformations of platform economies; we lack to explain, however, how the social enters these assemblages – beyond the dystopia of cyber hives, democratic fatalism and political immobilism. The social functions politically in the new socio-technical assemblages, *i.e.* in algorithmic struggles, as “[a type of] conscious infrastructural activism of multiple interconnected layers” (Lovink, 2019, p. 74).



Neither the political solutions proposed by the surveillance capitalism approach, nor the reiteration that its theorists believe they can find in a social field traversed by networks, algorithms and platforms, can take us beyond the critical and cognitive effect inherent in this critique.

Although it describes and denounces the harmful effects of the general digitalization of life, the critique elaborated by surveillance capitalism can no longer estimate the “politics of possibles” involved in an immediately algorithmic culture (Finn, 2017). It does nothing more than endlessly map a diagram of power that presents itself as given and politically inescapable.

This is also why the critical consciousness it develops cultivates the oblivion that denunciation is nothing more than a diagnostic tool for the antagonisms within the progress of modern technique and reason. As soon as denunciation becomes an end in itself, the exercise of reason that it contains ends up making us prey to an insoluble impasse. And yet this impasse is challenged daily by the proliferation of struggles, in the living gaps that constitute the terrain of technique and algorithmic acceleration.

The real challenge lies in finding forms of convergence and political recomposition of these fragmented struggles that make the algorithmic realm their constitutive terrain. The autonomy of resistance must meet the strength of automata, and class intelligence must develop its capacity – including the artificial one – to use algorithms (of the common) against algorithms (of expropriation).■

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