

## Digital Capitalism and Discontent. In conversation with Evgeny Morozov.

Reflections from the Critical Studies Group (GEC-Madrid) regarding the cycle [Six Contradictions and the End of the Present](#), from Museo Reina Sofía (Spain).

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In the XXI Century the capacity to analyze data and extract knowledge from it seems to be the main resource of power. It gives agents the option to influence and control populations, sell them products efficiently, convince them on how to vote, discover and produce new trends, and much more. This powerful resource could also be used to build more efficient cities, better public transportation systems; to find solutions to health problems, to reduce energy consumption, and any other social goal that involves the coordinated actions of millions of people. In the end, any form of quantitative analysis is about knowing and influencing society - be it for the interests of agents competing for global domination and maximum profits, or for what most people would consider reasonable social goals, such as environmental sustainability, social justices and equality, human rights and democratic values.

However, the picture looks dark in an scenery where the main agents able to capture and analyze digital data are mobilized by the forces of the market, and therefore this resource of power will be used to promote capital accumulation and higher stakes of social domination. In this sense, the collaboration between financial capital and the technological elite is well understood: the massive amount of capital already accumulated is allocated in technological ventures, which are the only ones that can still offer big returns, due to their ability to put in use the new resource of power through their networks of social control. This can only mean a higher accumulation of capital and the degradation of social justice, political freedom and any other democratic value.

In order to counteract this trend, Morozov points out to the need of putting limits to the Big Tech and their data extraction industry, by setting conditions such as making them share their data with public institutions. The logic here is that if data and the capacity to use it are the new key resource of power, public institutions need to access it in order to enable the political power of democracy; as representatives of the social or national interests, they are the only ones who can use this knowledge to benefit society and provide the “good aims” we *all* share as basic human values.

So the question then will be if public institutions are up for this task or not. First, they will need to have the power and will to negotiate with Big Tech companies, which means: a) a radical change in the basic neoliberal logic that rules Western politics, and b) the political capacity to assume a position of force to set conditions to the most powerful global players—which means, of course counting with the support of their populations, national industry and other institutions. Furthermore, these negotiation should be done on a supranational level, because local public institutions lack of the necessary power to impose strong conditions. In Europe this is particularly challenging, because of the role of neoliberal discourse in the EU Commission, while in countries such as China, Russia and the USA, a single government can take quick and strong decisions based on their immediate geopolitical interests.

Secondly, even if public institutions are able to negotiate with Big Tech at a supranational level, they will still need to be able to extract actual value from data in order to help improve the management of social needs—assuming, of course, they will do it inspired by social and democratic values, instead of partisanship. Just to picture an example, the data extracted from the Uber driving service or smartphone apps could be used to develop super-efficient public transportation and reduce pollution. Governments should just tell Uber the condition for operating in their territory is to share their data. However improbable this picture seems in Europe, this is exactly what governments like China ask from the tech-companies that want to access their market. Therefore, overcoming the growing power of Big Tech could be just a matter of political will.

The problem with this reasoning is that it only addresses the issue partially. It is really good advice for politicians: they urgently need to put in value their political power over their territories and population in order to limit the influence of the data extractivism industry. Forcing them to share their information, and to some extent also their knowledge, will help to development more efficient public services which on the long run will “compete” or co-exist with the private solutions offered by the tech companies. In some way, it is such as saying to them: *you can take part of the cake of my national market, but it is really the government who rules here*. As much as a reasonable proposal that it seems—particularly in democratic countries—it will clash with the monopolistic aspirations of Big Tech firms. If Uber wants to be the only contractor for transportation, they will not be happy with a healthy public system taking away their market share. So, no matter what, it will be a rough negotiation.

Furthermore, the proposal is based on the idea that we need complex digital data analysis to run modern societies. So, from the start it gives the advantage to the ones owning the data and the technological capacity to use it. So even if they accept sharing data or any other condition, it will be just an strategic withdrawal, while in the long run they will keep struggling to become the only one player. They will continue to gather data and technological power until they have enough of it to challenge political forces; extracting and analyzing data is what they do, so most probably they will win this race. China might be the only government offering a good challenge to American Big Tech, but they are also not offering any socially attractive future for humanity.

In other words, the assumption that data analysis is crucial for modern societies sets the geopolitical frame as a global competition for owning this resource of power. No matter how keen governmental and public forces are in this race, it will never be won democratically. It is like the arms race, no matter how the adversaries are at the beginning, the logic of the race ends up shaping them in similar ways. At war, power comes from the ability to kill people, here what matters is the ability to control their lives and change their minds. However pragmatic and realistic this approach might seem, it leads to a dead end.

This does not mean that digital data analysis cannot be used for social purposes and under respect for democratic values, but accepting it as the basic resource of power means assuming the ideological frame of (digital) totalitarianism: populations need to be controlled and all power comes from social control. As far as we take populations as passive agents unable to gain autonomy over their lives, we will continue to empower those who make use of them as resources. And to that extend, if people are not able to think, decide and act for themselves, why should we care?

In order to even imagine a possible solution, we need to overcome the merely realistic overview and aim for more radical proposals. There is nothing wrong with analyzing data to produce knowledge, but data which only use is social control and manipulation should not be gathered in the first place. Other forms of technology should be developed. There needs to be a change in social dynamics and economic systems, and this cannot be done by negotiating with the main agents of the present, because that means accepting the logic we need to counteract.