

Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, New York: PublicAffairs, 2019, 704 pp., \$38, ISBN: 9781610395694

Pedro Pinheiro (Centre of Ethics, Politics and Society, University of Minho)

In *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, the American sociologist Shoshana Zuboff analyzes how our days confront the surreptitious control of human behavior and draws out the consequences of such control. Zuboff locates the current moment of surveillance capitalism in a wider segment of time: “the third modernity.” She argues that the development of modernity began two centuries ago with what she calls the “first modernity,” the time when life became “individualized” for great numbers of people as they separated from traditional norms, meanings, and rules.⁶ During the second half of the twentieth century, the history of individualization changed, thus marking the beginning of another phase: the “second modernity.” Zuboff writes, “democratic politics, distributional policies, access to education and health care, and strong civil society institutions complemented that wealth, a new ‘society of individuals’ first began to emerge.”⁷

Whereas the first modernity suppressed traditional cultures and communities, creating new collective solutions to replace the preceding ones, and simultaneously suppressed the expression and growth of the self as then known, the second modernity made the “self” all that exists. The second modernity was the moment in which the capitalism of indus-

⁶ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 34.

⁷ Ibid., 35.

trialization and mass production allowed each individual, in their singularity, to give a new meaning to terms like family, religion, sex, gender, morality, matrimony, community, etc. Finally, from that paradigm, we jump into the moment of the “third modernity,” in which digitalization merges with capitalism. Zuboff notes that this jump is not accomplished with neoliberalism, as we could easily – but wrongly – imagine. The “neoliberal turn” is a central moment of the second modernity, as the societal focus was completely transferred from the masses to the individual. Zuboff argues that during the 1970s, socio-economic inequalities in Western society were unveiled because of events like the US financial crisis, the Watergate scandal, and the increase in government corruption. Such events made it necessary to accept neoliberal policies. Consequently, citizens’ existential possibilities were circumscribed by the cult of the competitive entrepreneur.

The third modernity, in which Zuboff argues we are currently living, is defined by the conjugation of capitalism with the digitalization of the world. The third modernity is the step into a digital world where capitalism persists, but not as we would typically understand it. Contemporary economies are based on surveillance capitalism, thanks to the digital, and Zuboff describes not only the lineaments of this situation, but also how it came to be. Advertising played a very important role in the first phase of surveillance capitalism. It was the heart and lungs of the digitalization organism. With the passage of time and the growth of the internet marking a new dimension of our social dynamics, user profiles started being created out of the search history in a given search engine. All the data included in search histories and clicks around the web were to be used exclusively for developing the capabilities of websites like Google. Instead, they were used to improve marketing targeting.

In what way does this represent a problematic turn? Zuboff argues that Google’s economic model doesn’t consider users as clients, or even products. Without even knowing or noticing it, users are “the sources of surveillance capitalism’s crucial surplus: the objects of a technologically advanced and increasingly inescapable raw-material-extraction operation.”⁸ Like the colonial economies of the Americas in the nineteenth century, Google’s policy favors the digital expropriation of users’ be-

⁸ Ibid., 10.

havior. In this new digital world, it is impossible to answer three questions: who knows? Who decides? Who decides who decides? Users become the source of surveillance capitalism by consenting to a contract that is a non-contract. In response to this situation, the author promotes the need for regulation in this uncivilized and anti-democratic field.

Exceptional circumstances offer the best opportunities for surveillance capitalism to conquer and build users' blind consent. Zuboff explains that relations between the Pentagon and Google grew closer after 9/11, when the government wanted security more than privacy. Additionally, reading Zuboff's argument in the aftermath of the measures against the Covid-19 pandemic (like telework that erodes the frontier between the domestic and work realms) helps one to understand the debate regarding security and privacy and to see the pros and cons of each side.

The expropriation of behavior is not exclusive to the internet. Many Western homes are now "intelligent houses," based on the expropriation of behavior data: Smart TVs can hear and see, apartments built by Amazon have Dot microphones that listen to conversations and teach "Alexa" how to speak, intelligent vacuum cleaners share the plan of the house with their manufacturer, etc. The rise of such new digital technologies, which are not exclusive to the home but begin to infiltrate all areas of our lives and society, work towards the new goal of the third stage of capitalism: "acquire ever-more-predictive sources of behavioral surplus: our voices, personalities, and emotions."⁹

Zuboff conceptualizes the power of surveillance capitalism on its own, as she considers it distinct from power wielded by the twentieth century's totalitarian Western governments. This new form of power, which she terms "instrumentarian power," is surprisingly the antithesis of George Orwell's 1984 "Big Brother." This type of power reduces human experience to measurable behaviors and aims to process, render, calculate, scan and control all behaviors: "the instrumentation and instrumentalization of behavior for the purposes of modification, prediction, monetization, and control."¹⁰ Instrumentarian power doesn't want to oppress people like totalitarian power did, but instead wants people to talk freely – as long as it can scan their dialogue. It's obvious that if we

⁹ Ibid., 11.

¹⁰ Ibid., 352.

inhabit a world where every expression is scanned, we are all “living in glass houses.” Consequently, Orwell’s “Big Brother” is replaced by the “Big Other.”¹¹ Instead of having a Big Brother appraising one’s behavior, glass houses allow one to be observed by all the others that form the Big Other. In other words, it replaces “the engineering of souls with the engineering of behavior.”¹²

Zuboff notices that we now face a philosophical problem: the end of the self. That is, the abolition of all parts once human behavior is rendered in machines that are one machine, since all machines are synchronized. Against this background, Zuboff demonstrates the singularity of twenty-first century surveillance capitalism, which differs from the capitalism theorized by Adam Smith in the eighteenth century and even the capitalism described by Friedrich Hayek during the second half of the twentieth century.

Living in glass houses (a metaphor that Yevgeny Zamyatin exploits in his novel *We*, to which Shoshana makes no reference) causes us to run to cover up and hide from our own lives. That is the new need of humankind, since the outlaw digital machine impedes our escape from hive dynamics. We are free, but under surveillance. Zuboff argues that laws and regulations are needed to stop the growth of the anti-democratic threat that surveillance capitalism represents. The absolute knowledge of citizens’ behaviors by corporations with private interests enhances inequality and increases social injustice. Perhaps, democratic institutions can decelerate the controlling capital and reduce quantitatively the instrumentarian power. In my opinion, Zuboff’s proposal is not enough. It is important to understand that change is happening not only on a global scale, but also on an intimate one. I propose studying this issue from a structuralist and subjective perspective.

Zuboff argues that surveillance capitalism destroys privacy. This means that there is no space for secrets, as there is no space for non-visibility. To be alone is an important requirement for creating divergent thinking, for not being influenced by the community, but being alone is impossible since there is no space for non-visibility. Even our silence is observable and quantifiable by instrumentarian power. I argue that, con-

¹¹ Ibid., 376.

¹² Ibid., 374.

sidering the dangers of being alone or of loneliness (which is serious and can kill), we must get away from the “Big Other” by trying to develop an encrypted language. New types of language and communication, new small-scale community languages and expressions can be created away from digital sensors. The ability to create and communicate such creations is the first step in opening the difficult conditions for freedom, as freedom is the possibility of escaping from extraction and prediction. It is also a way to avoid the loneliness in which the digital world subversively puts human beings. Briefly, encrypted language is the way to the survival of the self. In addition to the need for structural reforms (constitutional changes) that promote equality and democratic regulations, human beings would keep alive the possibility of freedom through the creation of languages that act in conflict with the “Big Other” and make use of the ignorance of the latter to restore the self.