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LLMs and Crisis Epistemology: The Business of Making Old Crises Seem New

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Abstract

Large Language Models (LLMs) like ChatGPT have set in motion a series of crises. These include disruptions to the labor force, education, and democracy. Some people believe that rich technocratic ‘saviors’ should solve these crises. Naomi Klein, in contrast, argues that this is a neoliberal fantasy. Tech CEOs will not solve AI-related crises because they have a vested interest in perpetuating disaster techno-capitalism and the social inequalities that keep wages low. Who, then, can solve the AI crisis? I submit that the answer is: oppressed groups with experiential and intergenerational knowledge of crises. To oppressed people, technological crises are not new, but merely an extension of hundreds of years of uninterrupted subjugation. The popular misconception that AI-related crises are unprecedented is an example of what Kyle Whyte calls ‘crisis epistemology,’ a pretext of newness used to dismiss the intergenerational wisdom of oppressed groups. If AI-related crises are new, then what can we learn about them from oppressed people’s histories? Nothing. I argue that oppressed groups (rather than billionaire technocrats) should be at the forefront of AI discourse, research, and policymaking.

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1. Introduction

Large Language Models (LLMs) like ChatGPT have set in motion a series of crises that are seen as imminent and unprecedented. An article in *Inside Higher Ed* warns, “Yes, we are in a crisis. We’d better start acting like it” (Scott 2023). The crisis in question is that students are using ChatGPT to generate their assignments, which could lead to a “decline of critical thinking” (Dans 2023). People also worry that LLMs could cause a crisis in the labor market as industries become increasingly automated (Cerullo 2023). LLMs could also lead to an erosion of democracy if they are used to generate disinformation campaigns and mislead voters (Robins-Early 2023).

On the other hand, optimists argue that ChatGPT could create new jobs (Asay 2023), encourage critical thinking (Abramson 2023), and enhance democratic competency (Geisen et al. 2022). Alas, these optimistic projections are, [as Naomi Klein argues](#), little more than a neoliberal fantasy (2023). They rely on abstraction from the real world, a world that Klein describes as a “techno-necro capitalist” regime, in which corporations use technology to mine people’s data, create targeted ads, market products, commodify human experience, and spread neoliberal propaganda, all in an effort to “maximize the extraction of wealth and profit” (ibid). Optimism about LLMs can be seen as an example of what Charles Mills (2017) refers to as ‘ideal theory,’ a methodology that focuses on theoretical ideals in abstraction from the concrete reality of structural injustice. Ideal theory not only masks intersecting oppressions, but also marginalizes the testimony of oppressed groups that tend to experience techno-capitalism not as a force for good, but as a system of

exploitation and alienation. In contrast to ideal theory, Kyle Whyte describes our society as a “dystopia” in which “settler colonial campaigns” have “already depleted, degraded, or irreversibly damaged the ecosystems, plants, and animals that [his] ancestors had local living relationships with for hundreds of years” (2017, 2). Similarly, Roxanne Dunbarr-Ortiz states that “the history of the United States is a history of settler colonialism—the founding of a state based on the ideology of white supremacy, the widespread practice of African slavery, and a policy of genocide and land theft,” which continues in various forms to this day (2015, 15). This is a far cry from the utopianism of ideal theory, which “seek[s a] history with an upbeat ending, a history of redemption and reconciliation” (ibid). The real world, properly understood, is characterized by imperialist violence and asymmetrical power relations.

In this ‘dystopian’ context, it is unrealistic to expect corporate elites to use technology for benevolent purposes. Instead, they will, as usual, leverage technological innovations to expand their control over the labor force and global resources. In this connection, Klein notes that

Many lives and sectors have been decimated by earlier iterations of this [corporate] playbook, from taxi drivers to rental markets to local newspapers. With the AI revolution, these kinds of losses could look like rounding errors, with teachers, coders, visual artists, journalists, translators, musicians, care workers and so many others facing the prospect of having their incomes replaced by glitchy code.

Klein's essay highlights that technological joblessness is not a new problem, but an old one – as old as capitalism itself – which has been continuously intensified by the latest technologies, from the conveyor belt to the cotton gin to AI. The same can be said of crises in critical thinking and democratic competency, neither of which is novel. However, the *pretense* of newness diverts attention from the historical precursors to these crises, which can be traced back (at least) to the Industrial Revolution, which ushered in what Mills describes as a “political economy of domination,” a hierarchy of capitalist elites over oppressed groups (2017, 8). This was not the age of ‘reason’ and ‘incomparable progress’ that some philosophers presume (e.g., Pinker 2018). It was the height of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the eugenics regime, and patriarchal violence (Washington 2006). In short, the start of capitalism was gruesome. As Nancy Fraser puts it, “no one [can] doubt” that capitalism was built on “racially organized slavery, colonial plunder, and land enclosures,” which “kick-started the system’s development” (2016, 167). For oppressed people, capitalism was, and remains, a non-stop series of crises, fueled by technologically-assisted labor confiscation and wealth concentration at the top, which Klein refers to as “[disaster capitalism](#)” (2007). Recurrent disasters are profitable because they allow corporations to exploit mass public shock to pass “tax cuts, free trade, privatized services, cuts to social spending and deregulation,” and other neoliberal “reforms” that benefit capitalists (Klein 2007, 7). The current scale of inequality, which is unprecedented in the history of the world, wouldn't be possible without technology ([Kirsch 2017](#)). But the logic that allows corporate owners to use technology to entrench wealth inequality is as old as the factory.

This age-old relationship between technology and disaster capitalism is rarely discussed in mainstream philosophy. This is partly due to the prevalence of what Whyte calls “crisis epistemology,” an ideology that represents disasters as unprecedented and imminent (2020). Crisis epistemology erases the long history of disaster capitalism and the experiences of oppressed groups that have had to navigate and survive this system of oppression for generations. Hence, crisis epistemology perpetrates epistemic injustice in that it dismisses the testimony of oppressed people who experience disaster techno-capitalism as catastrophic.

In sharp contrast, the beneficiaries of disaster capitalism – the richest 1% – tend to have an optimistic view of techno-capitalism, since their existence as an elite class depends on it. On Klein's reading, the rich see disasters as opportunities to make money, often by selling technological products to governments and private citizens. These ‘solutions,’ however, do nothing to address the structural injustices that precipitate disaster and impose their harms on the least well-off. Nonetheless, technocratic billionaires – who see disasters as business opportunities – dominate the public conversation on crisis-mitigation. Meanwhile, oppressed people who have experiential knowledge of how to navigate crises are silenced and excluded.

To bring this problem into relief, consider the problem of technological joblessness. In 2022, American Indians and Alaskan Natives had a joblessness rate of 28.6%, nearly twice that of the general population (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistic 2022). Disabled Americans consistently have a joblessness rate of 80% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistic 2023). The high prevalence of joblessness for these groups is caused or

facilitated by emerging technologies, which shape the job market. For example, a lack of accessible workplace technologies limits the hiring and retention of disabled workers (Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion [2020](#)). This, in turn, disproportionately harms Native Americans, who are more likely to have a disability than other groups (Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services [2023](#)). While disabled/Native Americans experience high rates of technologically-facilitated joblessness, they are rarely included in popular discussions on how to address this crisis. Instead, the top Google results are by corporate-sponsored think-tanks, corporate-owned news sites, and privileged academics.

This is in spite of the abundance of resources on this topic by Indigenous and disabled thinkers (e.g., Coulthard 2014, Whyte 2018, Russell 2019, Slorach 2016, Tremain 2023). These anti-capitalist and technology-relevant critiques seldom appear in popular philosophical venues. Indeed, philosophers rarely even discuss the connections between technology and capitalism. This omission is an example of what Nora Berenstain calls “structural gaslighting,” which “arises when conceptual work functions to obscure the non-accidental connections between structures of oppression [like capitalism] and the patterns of harm they produce and license [like technological joblessness]” ([2020](#)). When philosophers write about technologies like LLMs without discussing technocapitalism and related systems of domination, they mislead people about the nature of reality, making it seem more ideal (and less catastrophic) than it truly is. These connections, however, figure prominently in the narratives and critiques of oppressed people.

A salient example of structural gaslighting (and ideal theory) in philosophy can be found in the popular disciplinary blog [Daily Nous](#), which features regular posts on ChatGPT, almost all by white, nondisabled philosophers, and almost never on structural injustice (though a recent post called [Policing is Not Pedagogy](#) by Matthew Noah Smith is a notable, rare exception). These posts elevate the voices of the most privileged philosophers, perpetuating epistemic injustice in the field. At the same time, they tend to promote strategies that ignore, if not worsen, structural injustices. One example is the popular suggestion that we should more strictly police and punish students who use ChatGPT. This proposal does not address the fact that disabled, Black and other minority students *already face* stricter discipline than other students, and even stricter discipline would simply exacerbate these gaps, making education less accessible to the most oppressed people ([Peterson 2021](#); [Mitchell 2022](#)). (This is why crip and decolonial philosophers tend to oppose carceral techniques like harsher school discipline). This suggestion also disregards that ChatGPT could, in at least some cases, be used as assistive technology, which professors are banned from restricting by [anti-discrimination laws](#) (Ciurria 2023). The issue with the *Daily Nous* posts is not so much that they deny these claims as that they don’t even acknowledge them, since they don’t acknowledge structural injustice. This is not a mere accident, but has to do with the fact that most posters are white, nondisabled, tenure-track philosophers, who are largely insulated from these injustices by their privileged standing. Their perspective can be seen as an example of what Robin Dembroff describes as the white, nondisabled, “cisgender commonsense” of the academic elite – that is, “the presupposed concepts and terms built into

dominant [academic] ideology” (2020). This differs from the “commonsense of the racialized, poor, queer, transgender, or disabled” others, who have an interest in changing the structure of education, not merely policing students to ensure compliance with the status quo. Disciplinary solutions, of course, also benefit tech corporations that make ChatGPT-detection tools like *GPTZero*, which makes money through subscriptions and other services. These solutions do not address the structural injustices that makes education more accessible to some students while incentivizing certain groups to rely on AI.

The privileged standpoints overrepresented on philosophy blogs like *Daily Nous* are an example of ideal theory in that they fail to identify and address the connections between AI and structural injustices. They are also an example of crisis epistemology in that they tend to misrepresent AI-related crises as new, thereby masking their historical and cultural roots.

2. Crisis Epistemology, Indigeneity, Disability

a. *Indigenous knowledge*

Whyte defines crisis epistemology as an ideology that misrepresents crises as unprecedented and imminent. They’re “unprecedented” in the sense that “they are ones in which there are few usable lessons from the past about how to cope with the problems of today” (Whyte 2021, 4). Often, they are also framed as “complex beyond anything previously encountered” (ibid). (That is, they are ‘too complicated’ to be grasped by the ‘simple minds’ of ordinary folks). Second, crises are “imminent” in the sense that they “must be responded to quickly” (ibid), and in spite of any harms inflicted on people who ‘stand in the way

of progress.’ These dual assumptions “mask numerous forms of power, including colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and industrialization” (Whyte 2021, 6). By whitewashing the history and sociopolitical context of crises, crisis epistemology dismisses the expertise that oppressed groups have acquired by living through these crises, studying them, and collectively addressing them.

Whyte offers some historical examples of crisis epistemology that drive home this point. These include: (i) the use of indentured servitude in the 19th Century to address the soil crisis caused by industrial agricultural techniques, (ii) the construction of irrigation dams on white-owned farms, which eventually broke and flooded Indigenous territories, and (iii) the use of weapons and military might to break up Indigenous tribes and force Indigenous children into residential schools, under the guise of “sav[ing] their souls” and “avert[ing] spiritual catastrophe” (Whyte 2020, 1). What these crises have in common is that they are all part of an ongoing legacy of colonial violence, and they all involve the use of emerging technologies (like intensive agriculture) to perpetuate colonialism, leading to future crises. Since the ‘solutions’ to these crises do not address the underlying causes, they ensure that similar crises will recur in the future. In short, each case involves white, land-owning men trying to ‘solve’ problems of their own making using technologies that benefit their own social class at the expense of racialized others. The result is a vicious cycle of colonialism, which is a specific case of disaster capitalism:

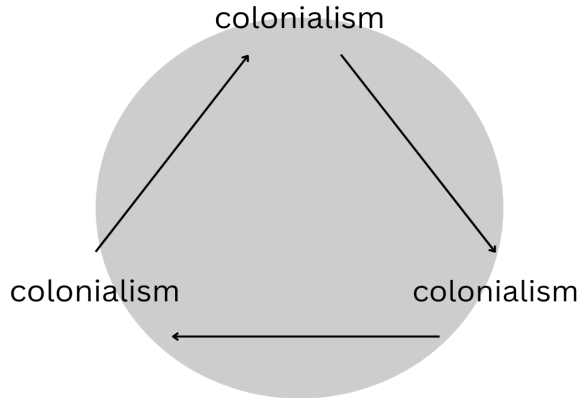


Figure 1. the vicious cycle of colonialism

Crisis epistemology is an ongoing problem. Recent examples include continuous attempts by settler-colonial governments to lay pipelines and install wind turbines on Indigenous territories without the free, priori, and informed consent of tribal leaders (e.g., [Amnesty International 2022](#); [Reuters 2023](#)). These neo-colonial practices are often justified by appeal to the ‘unprecedented and imminent’ nature of the climate crisis, which calls for immediate redress. But the climate crisis is *not* new to Indigenous people, who have been forced to live in the most inhospitable parts of the Americas for hundreds of years, becoming some of the “first ‘climate refugees’” (Whyte 2017, 54). The imposition of climate change on Indigenous peoples is “[nothing] other than an evolved practice of a familiar form of power” (Whyte 2021, 2) – that is, there is an unbroken line from the colonial past to the (neo)colonial present. Indigenous people are intimately familiar with anthropogenic climate change because it has been imposed on them by settler-colonial states for hundreds of years. Yet they are rarely consulted in climate policy decisions – on

the contrary, they’re silenced when their proposals don’t enhance the GDP. Indigenous climate expertise is discounted in the search for profitable technocratic solutions – things like windmills and solar panels and bioenergy, which leave colonialism intact.

In contrast to settler-colonial epistemologies, “no Indigenous story says that technology is the solution to climate change” (Whyte 2022). Instead, indigenous narratives emphasize kinship relationships of care, consent, and reciprocity, over and above technological innovation. This isn’t to say that Indigenous stories *do not* discuss technology – they do, but they let kinship drive technological development, not vice versa. But since kinship has no immediate monetary value, it’s dismissed by settler-colonial governments and corporations. Nonetheless, kinship is the only ‘technology’ will work in the future, and we know this because it’s the only technique that’s working right now. As I write this, Indigenous peoples comprise less than 5% of the global population but are protecting 80% of the world’s remaining biodiversity – more than all of the world’s leading governments combined ([World Wildlife Foundation 2020](#)). In fact, the U.S., Canada, and the European Union consistently fail to meet their own climate goals ([Bearak & Popovich 2022](#)). If corporate-driven solutions could work, then they would already be working.

Even some environmentalists dismiss the idea that relationships of respect and reciprocity are necessary for environmental sustainability. For instance, Jonathan Logan, the leader of Extinction Rebellion, publicly stated, “I can’t say it hard enough. We don’t have time to argue about social justice” (cited in Whyte 2021, 5-6). In other words, we don’t need oppressed

people’s input on climate change – the technology should come first. This colonialist mindset is the reason we’re facing a climate crisis in the first place. The leading cause of climate change – colonialism – can’t also be the solution to climate change! As Audrey Lorde very famously said, you can’t dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools (1979). If colonizing people got us into this mess, then continuing to do the same thing won’t get us out of it. Corporate owners have not made good progress on the climate change front, to say nothing of climate *injustice*. To move forward, we need to prioritize the experiential knowledge of marginalized groups that are already at the forefront of climate action and justice – that is, those most affected by climate disasters. In fact, the UN already acknowledges that “Indigenous peoples have the knowledge and practices needed for the global community to implement and scale-up climate action” (2022). It’s just a matter of putting that knowledge into practice, with Indigenous activists in the lead. This will necessitate a shift from crisis epistemology to kinship epistemology, from choosing fast, profitable solutions to fostering consent and respect.

b. Crip knowledge

Crisis epistemology is also used to dismiss the testimony of disabled people. Shelley Tremain makes this point in [her presentation on MAID](#) or Medical Assistance in Dying in Canada (2022). She argues that the Canadian government used the covid-19 crisis as an excuse to push through MAID legislation without consulting with disability activists, who wanted elected officials to prioritize structural change. While the government was expediting MAID legislation, it did virtually nothing to improve the material conditions of disabled people,

although this would have reduced the number of people ‘choosing’ euthanasia. In fact, the governments’ Covid-19 policy made disabled people’s lives worse than ever, as many were forced into overcrowded, unsanitary, and abusive nursing homes at the peak of the pandemic. The Canadian military documented “horrific conditions [and] abuse in pandemic-hit Ontario nursing homes” ([Brewster & Kalpalos 2020](#)) – precisely the type of chronic disaster that disability activists had been petitioning the government to address. Instead, legislators made it easier for disabled people to end their own lives. This was after convening an “expert panel” on MAID that “reflect[ed] a range of disciplines and perspectives, including clinical psychiatry, MAID assessment and provision, law, ethics, health professional training and regulation, mental health care services,” and finally, “lived experience with mental illness.” Disabled people were greatly outnumbered by professionals on the panel, reflecting a favoritism for professional authority over experiential wisdom. This favoritism goes against J.S. Mill’s observation that individuals are in the best position to judge what is in their best interests (1989). It also positions medical professionals as ‘able-bodied saviors’ who know what is best for disabled people.

As a matter of fact, chronically ill people like myself were especially well-positioned to respond to the covid-19 pandemic, since we deal with pandemic-like conditions every day. That is, the pandemic was not ‘immanent and unprecedented’ for us – it was par for the course. But many nondisabled people could hardly imagine that the crisis would continue indefinitely, had little understanding of how to live in a pandemic-beset world, and were eager to ‘move past’ the pandemic and resume their ‘normal’ lives, even

though covid-19 continued unabated, and still kills many nondisabled people in 2023. Chronically ill people had a much better grasp of how to cope with the ‘new normal,’ as as Amy Amy Gaeta confirms on the *Disability Visibility Project*,

We [chronically ill people] are experts when it comes to isolation and pandemics. We know how to advocate our legal rights as patients, navigate Medicaid and other private insurance claims, and stock up on supplies for weeks. We know how to live vulnerably, which is to live together. We know all this because for many of us, it’s our daily reality. (2022)

Nonetheless, the Canadian government minimized disabled people’s expertise and chose to expedite the MAID expansion instead of addressing structural ableism and other injustices.



Figure 2. Elon Musk depicted as a technocratic savior.

In spite of all this, there is a prevailing belief that we should trust ‘technocratic saviors’ like Elon Musk and Bill Gates to use their technological expertise to manage crises like covid-19. (Effective altruists think something along these lines). But

this reasoning is completely backwards. First, it gives even more control to the people who own technological infrastructures and use that ownership to hoard wealth and resources. Second, it attributes expertise to the least knowledgeable people, the ones who can most easily escape crises in their private jets and yachts. Climate change is a perfect example. Billionaires are the least affected by climate change, they produce the highest rates of greenhouse-gas emissions in the world, and they have the most to gain by selling profitable technological solutions that do nothing to address the structural injustices that produce climate change – structural injustices that allow billionaires to exist as a class. And let’s not forget that green technologies rely on [unethical, exploitative labor practices, including child labor \(Morton 2022\)](#), which, in turn, intensify climate *injustice*, or the disproportionate impact of climate change on oppressed groups. The same can be said of any *merely* technological solution: because they ignore the relationship between technology and disaster capitalism, they mis-allocate resources to the most well-off while denying epistemic credit to the least well-off. Therefore, they lead to future crises.

3. The AI Crisis

Crisis epistemology is also used to mask the connections between joblessness, lack of critical thinking, and democratic decline on the one hand, and disaster techno-capitalism on the other.

3.1. Joblessness

To begin, technological joblessness isn’t new. It can be traced back to the industrial revolution, when agricultural workers lost their jobs *en masse* and were forced to take jobs in urban factories, which Marx

famously described as exploitative, alienating, and unsafe. That is, the joblessness crisis led to a second crisis: harmful workplace conditions. The transformation of the economy from an agrarian to an industrial one also allowed corporate owners to exclude entire populations from the wage economy, forcing them into invisible, undocumented labor. This includes enslaved people, most women, and many disabled people (Fraser 2016, Russell 2019, Rose 2017). Nancy Fraser describes this division of labor as the distinction between ‘exploitation’ and ‘expropriation.’ “Exploited” workers (traditionally, white men) have “no claim on the surplus value their labor generates, which accrues instead to the capitalist,” whereas “expropriated” labor is “confiscated... outside of the wage nexus” (Fraser 2016, 164-166), without the protection of a wage contract. Modern-day “regimes of expropriation” encompass unpaid and predatory labor relations, such as “prison labor, trans-national sex trafficking, corporate land grabs..., foreclosures on predatory debt,” and other forms of “contemporary imperialism” (Fraser 2016, 167). Victims of expropriation do more work for less money, and sometimes no money, because they are excluded by a domination contract that designates them as ‘non-contractors.’ These groups have a bleaker view of capitalism and the technologies it has engendered, ranging from the factory to ballistic missiles to surveillance software, and so on.

While Fraser believes (optimistically) that “no one doubts” that capitalism started with “slavery,” “plunder,” and “land enclosers,” there is less consensus around the fact that “‘mature’ capitalism [still] relies on regular infusions of commandeered capacities and resources, especially from racialized [and other expropriated]

subjects” (2016, 167). There is also less recognition that expropriation intensifies and absorbs more people in times of crisis:

Advantageous even in “normal” times, expropriation becomes especially tempting in periods of crisis, when competition is intense, recent productivity gains are generalized, ecological degradation raises costs, and/or rates of profit fall below what are considered acceptable levels. In those times, which occur periodically and for nonaccidental reasons in the course of capitalist development, expropriation serves as a critical, albeit temporary, fix for restoring profitability and navigating crisis. (2016, 168)

In other words, expropriation is a feature of disaster capitalism. In the wake of a disaster, capitalists exploit and oppress vulnerable people, whom they can pay less, or nothing. Technology plays a critical role in this cycle. For instance, the growing demand for green energy in response to the climate crisis has accelerated the use of “modern-day slavery,” which expropriates labor from the most oppressed people in the world. Hence, the following trends:

- An increase in child labor, hazardous working conditions, and toxic exposure in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which produces 15-30% of the world’s cobalt (used in rechargeable batteries).
- An increase in the forced labor of Ecuadorian workers, including payment in drugs, and displacement of local Indigenous tribes by companies that make blades for wind turbines.
- An increase in the forced labor of millions of Uyghur and Kazakh

people detained in “re-education programs” and labor camps that produce solar-grade polysilicon in China ([Morton 2022](#))

These are just a few examples of expropriative regimes driven by the ‘immanent and unprecedented’ need for green energy. This ‘solution’ is an example of what Whyte refers to as “intensified colonialism..., a form of domination in which at least one society seeks to exploit some set of benefits believed to be found in the territory of one or more other societies, from farm land to precious minerals to labor” ([2017, 154](#)). Unethical supply chains reproduce the vicious cycle of colonialism, leading to future cycles of instability. Whyte emphasizes that, “together, colonialism and capitalism [have] laid key parts of the groundwork for industrialization and militarization—or carbon-intensive economics—which produce the drivers of anthropogenic climate change” (2017, 154). The use of ‘slave labor’ to produce green energy does not address the colonial-capitalist system that gave rise to climate change in the first place.

Another example of technologically-facilitated crisis is surveillance capitalism, which Shoshana Zuboff defines as “the unilateral claiming of private human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data,” which is then “sold into behavioral futures markets — business customers with a commercial interest in knowing what we will do now, soon, and later” ([2019](#)). Why do corporations invest in surveillance technology? Because they can use it to “nudge, coax, tune, and herd behavior toward profitable outcomes” (2019, 15). The end goal is not merely to understand and predict human behavior, but “to automate us,” shaping our hearts and minds to make us better consumers

and more compliant workers (*ibid*). Zuboff believes that the “unprecedented” nature of surveillance technology makes us prone to underestimating its risks, but she also notes that the *logic* of surveillance capitalism, the way it is designed and used, is as old as industrialization. In Zuboff’s words, surveillance capitalism “revives Karl Marx’s old image of capitalism as a vampire that feeds on labor, but with an unexpected turn. Instead of labor, surveillance capitalism feeds on every aspect of every human’s experience” (2019, 16). Whereas industrial capitalists sought to control workers’ bodies, surveillance capitalists seek to colonize our desires, beliefs, hopes, and dreams. This level of control makes it easier for corporations to commandeer labor, land, and resources.

Like its industrial predecessors, surveillance technology is especially harmful to oppressed groups. Zuboff notes that the “behavioral surplus” gleaned from privileged consumers is used to police and punish victims of totalitarian regimes, who live in a panopticon-like police state. In China, facial recognition technologies are used to assign people a “social credit score” based on their compliance with the dictates of the government (2019, 364). People are punished for violations ranging from jay walking to unpaid debt to criticizing the dictatorship. More alarming still, surveillance technology is used to track and control members of the Uighur Muslim minority population, many of whom are imprisoned in ‘re-education’ and forced labor camps.

Who will save us from surveillance capitalism and the related problem of modern-day slavery? Surely not the capitalist owners who have been intensifying technocapitalist regimes for centuries. Zuboff believes that only “we the people” can

“reverse the course” of surveillance capitalism and its logic of confiscation (2019, 27). This resonates with Marx’s appeal to the “workers of the world” to unite against capitalist owners. But “we the people” as defined by the domination contract, and the “workers of the world” who are protected by wage contracts, are relatively privileged. The most oppressed people under disaster techno-capitalism are the expropriated laborers, the people whose labor isn’t even recognized as “work,” whose labor is uncompensated or barely compensated because it is excluded from the social contract. It is the victims of human trafficking, prison labor, predatory loans, and other types of expropriation.

As Olufemi Taiwo observes, even progressive leftists tend to exclude the *most* oppressed people in conversations about oppression, instead deferring to token minorities who just happen to be in the room – in academia or Congress, for example (2022). It’s not enough to reclaim the narrative about technology from billionaires and hand it to just anyone else; we need to extend the conversation to “people who aren’t yet in the room,” who can contribute to “constructive politics” – that is, who understand and are actively resisting systems of oppression (Taiwo 2022: 118). In other words, to effectively address disaster techno-capitalism, we need to hear from the people most harmed by that system, who have developed and are implementing solutions collectively.

When it comes to joblessness, some of the leading experiential experts are disabled and Indigenous people, who experience high rates of joblessness, not only in America but around the world. A constructive politic requires that we feature these perspectives in public discourse. Similarly,

narratives about other crises should focus on oppressed voices.

3.2. Critical thinking & democratic competency

Philosophers worry that AI is harming students’ critical thinking skills, but lack of critical thinking is hardly a new problem. The education system has always been a poor conduit for critical thinking because it exists in techno-capitalist conditions that promote conformity and compliance. Bell hooks describes American culture as a “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (1997), to highlight the injustices that intersect with (disaster) capitalism. In these non-ideal conditions, formal education fosters obedience to authority, not dissent and critical thought. At every level of education, students are taught to accept the received wisdom of past generations and the ideologies of privileges groups. Hooks recalls how in graduate school, she

was often bored in class. The banking system of education (based on the assumption that memorizing information and regurgitating it represented gaining knowledge that could be deposited, stored, and used at a later date) did not interest me. I wanted to become a critical thinker. Yet that longing was often seen as a threat to authority. (1994, 5).

Hooks learned through experience that American education is shaped by a colonial-patriarchal-capitalist social contract, to which all students, but especially minority students, are expected to submit. The standard curriculum is antagonistic to critical thinking, although it purports to facilitate critical analysis. In sharp contrast,

anti-oppressive pedagogies, like Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, *do* foster critical thinking, but they are not the norm in schools.

Today, the corporatization of education is intensifying the problem. Klein notes that in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, private corporations hijacked New Orleans' public school system, converting virtually all public schools into privately run "charter schools," firing unionized teachers, reversing gains in desegregation, and restructuring the curriculum. In fact, she cites this as a textbook case of disaster capitalism. By co-opting schools, corporations can package neoliberal propaganda as value-neutral 'education' and 'objective knowledge.' Noam Chomsky similarly warns that "market-driven education" is a "real and harmful" threat to critical thinking, and "should be regarded as part of the general neoliberal assault on the public" ([Sage & Polychroniou 2016](#)). Corporate-run schools prioritize profits over learning outcomes and promote privatization and deregulation, which benefit corroborate shareholders ([Saltman 2014](#)). The corporatization of public education is an ongoing threat to critical thinking.

Critical contract theorists approach the same problem from a different angle. Charles Mills describes liberalism, originally promoted by white supremacist philosophers like John Locke and Immanuel Kant, as a racial contract that enshrines dominance by white contractors over racialized non-contractors. Political liberalism, then, is simply another name for "racial liberalism..., an agreement among white contractors to subordinate and exploit nonwhite non-contractors for white benefit" (2015, 29). Liberalism doesn't wear its racism on its sleeve, however. It disguises it under specious ideologies

about the 'equal opportunities' afforded to everyone in liberal societies. This false narrative has been very effective at disguising racism, to the extent that Mills estimates that almost everyone, regardless of race, suffers from some level of 'white ignorance' or racist belief. Racist belief, of course, impairs critical thinking about race, by presenting racism as rare, accidental, and interpersonal (as opposed to structural and systemic). It shifts attention from racist structures onto racist encounters. Hence, the domination contract has harmed our collective ability to think critically about race and racism.

(Now, Republicans are trying to reverse any gains on this front by banning critical race theory).

Other critical contract theorists, such as Carole Pateman ([1989](#)) and Stacy Simpson ([2015](#)), have made similar claims about sexism and ableism, arguing that these prejudices are enshrined in the domination contract, resulting in a structurally sexist and ableist culture. But these injustices are obscured by pervasive sexist and ableist ideologies that misrepresent sexism and ableism as rare, accidental, and individual, not structural, systemic, or political. By the same token, the domination contract corroborates the testimony of able-bodied white men, whose experience of sexism and ableism more closely aligns with dominant ideologies.

Since the domination contract has a long history, and the domination contract stifles critical thinking, poor critical thinking has a long history as well. Critical thinking did not suddenly start to decline with the advent of AI. Rather, racist, sexist, ableist ideologies have suppressed critical thinking (at least) since the start of the domination contract and the construction of race itself. Why did Locke and Kant think that

Indigenous people were inferior and cultureless? Why were they sexist and ableist? Because they lacked critical thinking skills, as did many other ‘contractors’ who benefited from racial-patriarchal-ableist liberalism. White, male, able-bodied philosophers have had countless chances to set the record straight on structural injustice, and (as Mills’ critique shows) they have consistently disappointed, with few exceptions. Meanwhile, marginalized people have written *extensively* on this crisis (e.g., hooks, Mills, Pate-man, Simpican), but their testimony continues to be marginalized in mainstream discourse. This allows the problem to continue. If we really want to address the crisis in critical thinking, we must understand its relationship to historical and present-day structural injustices.

Un-critical thinking is an old problem and its resolution requires greater diversity and epistemic justice.

4. Solutions from Below

AI could and in fact *will* be used to accelerate technological joblessness, (neo)liberal indoctrination, and democratic decline if nothing else changes. The solution to AI-related crises is not more technology. It’s more social justice. If we want people to use technology responsibly and fairly, we need to ensure that oppressed people not only have a say in the conversation about technology but have a *controlling stake* in that conversation. In other words, we need to stop listening to rich technocrats and start listening to the people who are most affected by AI-related crises, who have epistemic authority on techno-capitalism’s impact on oppressed groups. In addition, we should acknowledge that technological crises are not new, but date back to the industrial revolution. The people who were

excluded from the emerging industrial economy in the 18th Century are the *same people* who are being excluded from the AI revolution today – the poor, queer, racialized, and disabled masses. We mustn’t repeat the mistakes of the past by colonizing and silencing these groups, or pretending that technology is too complicated for them to understand, or saying that the latest crisis is so urgent that we don’t have time to consult with the public. The only solution to the AI crisis – and techno-capitalism in general – is social justice, and the experts on social justice are oppressed people.

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