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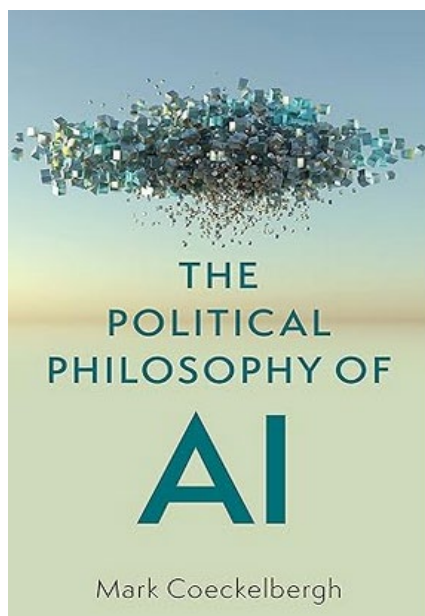
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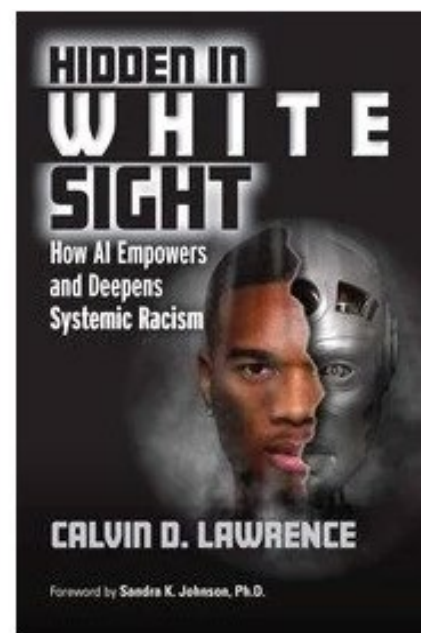
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The New Old Logic of AI: A Review of Mark Coeckelbergh's *The Political Philosophy of AI* and Calvin Lawrence's *Hidden in White Sight*

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COECKELBERGH, MARK. *The Political Philosophy of AI: An Introduction*. Polity Press, 2022. ISBN 9781509548538, 192 pages.



LAWRENCE, CALVIN D. *Hidden in White Sight: How AI Empowers and Deepens Systemic Racism*. CRC Press, 2023. ISBN 9781032437644, 241 pages.

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In 1985, Neil Postman argued that television was ruining the way we think because the superficial nature of television robbed us of the slow work that comes from creating and interpreting the written word. “Books,” Postman wrote, “are an excellent container for the accumulation, quiet scrutiny and organized analysis of information and ideas”¹ in a way that television, with its emphasis on brevity and superficiality, cannot be: “It takes time to write a book,” Postman wrote, “and to read one; time to discuss its contents and to make judgments about their merit.”² Twenty years later, Nicholas Carr, reflecting diminishing worries about television’s impact, argued that now the very infrastructure of the internet was reshaping our brains. “[T]he media or other technologies we use in learning and practicing the craft of reading play an important part in shaping the neural circuits inside our brains,” Carr wrote.³ What’s more, the kind of reshaping that the internet does is, like Postman’s earlier worries about television, one that prioritizes and rewards superficiality, rapidity, and distraction.

This idea — and this continued worry — that we should be particularly concerned about what our technologies prioritize and reward is one that underwrites two recent works on artificial intelligence (AI): Mark Coeckelbergh’s *The Political Philosophy of AI: An Introduction* (Polity Press, 2022) and Calvin D. Lawrence’s *Hidden in White Sight: How AI Empowers and Deepens Systemic Racism*

(CRC Press, 2023). The two writers approach the topic of AI from different directions: Coeckelbergh focuses on how politics can help us better understand the role we want AI to play in society, while Lawrence focuses on how the current use of AI is already shaped — even weaponized — by our existing politics to achieve particular, and often particularly sordid, social ends. Despite these different perspectives, the two writers nonetheless arrive at a similar, partially-hidden conclusion: the social impact of AI is neither accidental nor intentional, but, like Postman’s fears about television and Carr’s fears about the internet, has become increasingly dominant because it prioritizes and rewards the values of capitalism in a way that invariably undermines the values of justice, fairness, and democracy.

That the values of AI are not the same as those of inherent to democracy is a central idea in Coeckelbergh’s introductory text on the political philosophy of AI. Coeckelbergh’s text, expressly designed for students in the areas of political philosophy and philosophy of technology, is comprehensively organized. After an introduction that rebuts the widespread but naive assumption that “technology itself is neutral and everything depends on the humans developing and using it,”⁴ Coeckelbergh proceeds to demonstrate how “technology is not just a means to reach an end, but also shapes these ends.”⁵ Several chapters follow, in which Coeckelbergh investigates, one by one, how “new

¹ Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 69.

² Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 69-70.

³ Carr, Nicholas. “Is Google Making Us Stupid? What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains.” *The Atlantic*. (July/August 2008).

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/>. Accessed November 26, 2023.

⁴ Coeckelbergh, Mark. *The Political Philosophy of AI: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), 4.

⁵ Coeckelbergh, Mark. *The Political Philosophy of AI*, 4.

technologies put our very notions of freedom, equality, democracy, power, and so on, into question.”⁶

Though in this sense the book is hampered by its monumental project of defining millennia-old terms before being able to turn to their relationship to AI (as for example when Coeckelbergh ambitiously suggests that “[t]o know if and how AI may threaten democracy, we first have to know what democracy is”⁷), it provides an excellent and compelling introduction to how we might *begin* to think about that relationship. In the book’s strongest chapter, titled “Democracy: Echo Chambers and Machine Totalitarianism,” Coeckelbergh stakes out a variety of genuine, politically crucial issues that hover around AI: from a lack of public accountability for opaque political and legal decisions made with the help of AI (as for example in criminal sentencing protocols), to the social and communicational implications of information gathering and sharing. Coeckelbergh points out that, in addition to familiar worries about filter bubbles and echo chambers, AI can also do much more: for instance, “instead of exposing one’s views to public discussion and scrutiny by broadcasting, it is now possible to send highly targeted messages to many people all over the world.”⁸ Such targeted messages, determined via increasingly accurate AI algorithms, threaten the “deliberative ideals of democracy,” which requires “the public use of reason and

includes deliberating how to live together over a longer time.”⁹ Through both the private targeting of isolated views and the amplification of private communication among like-minded actors only, the widespread adoption of AI undermines the requisite *public* aspect of democratic politics, an aspect that demands open and transparent sharing of viewpoints and collective, deliberative reflection on the common good.

In another powerful chapter, titled “Power: Surveillance and (Self-)Disciplining by Data,” Coeckelbergh further explores the ways that AI influences how power is distributed throughout society – or, in other words, how AI helps determine who (or what) gets to control whom. Drawing in particular on the work of Foucault, Coeckelbergh suggests that the mere *presence* of AI “contributes to the creation of a new kind of panopticon.”¹⁰ But in place of the traditional Orwellian Big Brother, with its more straightforward and intentional employment by government and corporate actors, AI, in its actual applications in our phones and our engagement with social media, turns us all into tools of surveillance — a new kind of “peer-to-peer surveillance.”¹¹ (Such an endemic, lateral surveillance system is familiar to any users of apps like Uber, in which drivers “rate” passengers even as passengers “rate” drivers, generating data for the algorithm that oversees them both.)¹² This power, Coeckelbergh insists, is not

⁶ Coeckelbergh, Mark. *The Political Philosophy of AI*, 6.

⁷ Coeckelbergh, Mark. *The Political Philosophy of AI*, 64.

⁸ Coeckelbergh, Mark. *The Political Philosophy of AI*, 78.

⁹ Coeckelbergh, Mark. *The Political Philosophy of AI*, 77.

¹⁰ Coeckelbergh, Mark. *The Political Philosophy of AI*, 108.

¹¹ Coeckelbergh, Mark. *The Political Philosophy of AI*, 109.

¹² Worries about this kind of lateral social monitoring – and public punishing – that current technology enables has been a noted concern for some time, as in Jonathan Zittrain’s 2008 book *The Future of the Internet and How to Stop It*. More recently, *Black Mirror*-like applications that weaponize this, such as the rumored Chinese Social

metaphoric: just as the mere presence of speed cameras forces us to self-regulate our driving behavior on the road (whether the cameras actually work or not),¹³ “AI and its designers choreograph the movements that are necessary to operate the device and app in a certain way, and thereby exercise power over me and my body.”¹⁴ AI doesn’t just control the information we see, or how information about us is used, but it also controls, in a literal way, our very bodies.

The claim that AI controls what happens to our bodies would not surprise Calvin Lawrence; indeed, his *Hidden in White Sight* is at its core an articulation of the vital idea that we are increasingly governed by the applications of AI in specific and not just abstract or conceptual ways. Lawrence, unlike Coeckelbergh, is not an academic¹⁵ but is rather “a well-respected IT industry veteran with a career that has spanned almost three decades.”¹⁶ Not infrequently, Lawrence refers to his personal experiences with engineering, coding, and AI ethics in various roles for the IBM corporation, as well as his historically- and culturally-positioned identity as a Black man in the United States, and so is able on both counts (also unlike Coeckelbergh) to provide a unique, on-the-ground perspective for how AI both gets created *and* gets experienced. In an early anecdote, for instance, Lawrence describes how, late one night, car trouble forced him to call a tow

truck while parked in a “predictive hotspot”: “an area,” he explains, “determined by a computer algorithm used by the Atlanta Police Department to be the likely scene of an upcoming crime.” Though he made it out of the situation without harm, he writes that “[b]ecause of my day job, I knew more than I cared to admit about AI-enabled systems that predicted the likelihood of crime” in racially biased ways.¹⁷

This dual perspective, which underwrites all of Lawrence’s text, is of particular value when read alongside Coeckelbergh’s. Where Coeckelbergh focuses on the abstract nature of freedom, democracy, equality, and power, Lawrence presents concrete and powerful examples of each. His text, like Coeckelbergh’s, is organized around a series of issues emanating from biased applications of biased AI: policing, home ownership, medical care, social media advertising, and more. Lawrence’s text shines light on the individual applications of AI that can too easily get lost in abstract academic scrutiny. In an especially enlightening example, Lawrence describes how fast-food restaurants increasingly expansive turn to AI tools for ordering, delivery, and communications are likely to have profound practical but otherwise unnoticeable effects on the Black community: namely, as the loss of a rare source of employment for teenagers. Lawrence’s own first job was at a Chicago McDonald’s at age

Credit app, have been in the news (see an *MIT Technology Review* discussion at <https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/11/22/1063605/china-announced-a-new-social-credit-law-what-does-it-mean/>).

¹³ Coeckelbergh, Mark. *The Political Philosophy of AI*, 13.

¹⁴ Coeckelbergh, Mark. *The Political Philosophy of AI*, 119.

¹⁵ Interestingly, Coeckelbergh hopes that more academic philosophers engage with

AI because “there is a lot of non-academic writing that does little more than scratch the surface” of the topic (152).

¹⁶ Lawrence, Calvin D. *Hidden in White Sight: How AI Empowers and Deepens Systemic Racism*. (Boca Raton, Florida: CRC Press, 2023), xi.

¹⁷ Lawrence, Calvin D. *Hidden in White Sight*, 26.

15 and, he explains, “There were only three ways in my neighborhood by which you could keep a young Black youth out of the streets: church, sports, or a McDonald’s job.”¹⁸ With the loss of McDonald’s jobs due to the efficiencies of AI, one of those three options is beginning to fade away.

Lawrence points out that, indeed, AI affects our politics and our culture and our philosophy, but it does so in fundamentally unequal ways. As one of many examples, he explains that “many inner-city Blacks are employed in jobs that involve a single repetitive task and [...] [h]istory tells us that when overall job loss occurs, communities of color suffer the brunt of the loss.”¹⁹ In other words, AI threatens jobs, but it does so unequally. Similarly, things as seemingly politically neutral as electric vehicle adoption and autonomous driving are suffused with racial inequity: charging stations are rarely located in communities of color,²⁰ and, shockingly, since autonomous vehicles’ AI systems are much less frequently “trained” on individuals with darker complexions and are thus less able to recognize them *as* humans, “you may be more likely to get struck down by an autonomous vehicle than your white counterparts.”²¹ (If you’ve ever wondered why you or a non-white colleague doesn’t show up clearly on Zoom or Skype or FaceTime, it’s for a similar reason: insufficiently trained on non-white complexions, the AI system fails to distinguish these faces *as* faces.)

¹⁸ Lawrence, Calvin D. *Hidden in White Sight*, 106.

¹⁹ Lawrence, Calvin D. *Hidden in White Sight*, 110-11.

²⁰ Lawrence, Calvin D. *Hidden in White Sight*, 112.

²¹ Lawrence, Calvin D. *Hidden in White Sight*, 115.

²² Lawrence, Calvin D. *Hidden in White Sight*, 160.

As unnerving as these examples are, what is ultimately most surprising, and most revealing, about Lawrence’s text are the frequent recognitions and acknowledgments that he himself — a self-described social-justice oriented Black man — has, in his “day job” as a coder and engineer, been responsible for many of the biases that people like him experience. For example, at one point he describes how “some years ago, I was on a team that developed and deployed code with the Miami Dade Police department. Not once did I stop to say, ‘Are these cops going to use this code to discriminate against Black citizens?’”²²

Indeed, this is perhaps both the value and the detriment of Lawrence’s text: his insider’s enthusiasm for the technology is evident and manifest, which often leads to (not always self-conscious) contradictions. Take, as an instance, his discussion of facial recognition software: on the one hand, Lawrence is optimistic about its uses for positive applications like Disney World using it for “helping parents find lost children” or, vexingly, law enforcement’s using it to identify and locate the Boston Marathon bombers;²³ on the other hand, however, he also points out that the technology could be used by those same institutions to create “watch lists for keeping out people who might be considered

²³ Lawrence, Calvin D. *Hidden in White Sight*, 69. His pointing to the Boston Marathon bombing as a positive example of AI use is particularly vexing in how he neglects to recognize, even a decade later, that the technology led to a variety of harmful false accusations. (See for example <https://theweek.com/articles/465307/4-innocent-people-wrongly-accused-being-boston-marathon-bombing-suspects>.)

undesirables.”²⁴ In another instance of a fraught application of AI, Lawrence describes the emerging technology of “insurance trackers” used by car insurance companies to monitor driving behaviors: good drivers can be rewarded with up to 40% off their insurance premiums by avoiding things like hard braking or hard acceleration, speeding, and phone usage while driving — all good things that make roads safer. However, at the same time, other less-desirable elements inevitably creep in: another way insurance companies can assess your risk factors (and premium rates) is to monitor “whether you frequent a minority neighborhood” or other driving behaviors that empower potentially discriminatory pricing policies.²⁵ These contradictions of AI are recognized throughout Lawrence’s text without, however, ever being satisfyingly reconciled.

Ultimately, it is in this space of contradictions where Lawrence’s and Coeckelbergh’s text come into a kind of powerful alignment and make, together, a single point about the central problem of AI: *its* priorities are not the priorities of democracy, or freedom, or social justice, or racial equality. Early in his text, Lawrence admits that “even I, a Black senior technologist, have, at times, overlooked social consciousness for profit, without even knowing that I was doing so.”²⁶ Lawrence’s admission resonates with Coeckelbergh’s invocation of Hannah Arendt’s notion of the “banality of evil,” when he points out that “it is highly likely that a particular team of developers and data scientists do not *intend* to increase bias in society. But by doing their job within a larger corporation or governmental organization, they

might do exactly that.”²⁷ Even in the absence of intentionally evil actors, evil systems can and do emerge.

Behind this perspective is the idea, present in both Lawrence and Coeckelbergh, that even though the *technology* of AI is new, the *logic* of AI is not — indeed, this logic is very old and very familiar. In a particularly lucid metaphor, Lawrence compares the impact of AI to the legacy of Jim Crow:

The segregation of every fountain, pool, bus, and train didn’t start with Jim Crow; it was only legalized by Jim Crow. Jim Crow eventually converted virtually every person into a racial categorization expert and screening specialist to comply with regulations. It made them law-abiding citizens in a literal sense. Many entities, both public and private, were required by law or social convention to classify and screen according to Jim Crow legislation.²⁸

Lawrence’s point here is that the mere logic of Jim Crow required that everyone see their interactions with others through the lens of race; the mere presence of Jim Crow laws and culture made everyone understand the world in a “race-essentialist” way — whether you, individually, cared about race or not, the logic of Jim Crow *required* you to do so (even if only in deliberate defiance of those laws). Both Lawrence and Coeckelbergh recognize that AI is working a similar

²⁴ Lawrence, Calvin D. *Hidden in White Sight*, 69.

²⁵ Lawrence, Calvin D. *Hidden in White Sight*, 116.

²⁶ Lawrence, Calvin D. *Hidden in White Sight*, 23.

²⁷ Coeckelbergh, Mark. *The Political Philosophy of AI*, 90.

²⁸ Lawrence, Calvin D. *Hidden in White Sight*, 82.

kind of transformation of society, only now instead of race essentialism, we have, as it were, data essentialism.

When Lawrence argues that AI bias can be uncovered and undone by “ensur[ing] that I have representative data in my training model,”²⁹ what he necessarily assumes is that there *is* such a thing as “representative data.” In other words, it assumes that we are all of us, at heart, no more than the data that can be mined from us. Or, as Coeckelbergh frames it, “It is not just that others or AI algorithms make us into data. Through our performances with the technology, *we also make ourselves into data* as we technoperformatively constitute our selves on social media and elsewhere.”³⁰ Just as under Jim Crow’s reign we must see others and ourselves as primarily constituted by our race, under AI’s new prominence, we must see ourselves as now primarily constituted by our data. Our identities are reduced to our expressible data sets: we become, as Coeckelbergh calls it, the “quantified self.”³¹

This, finally, exposes the inescapable (and old) logic of AI, as both Coeckelbergh and Lawrence see it: not the logic of democracy or fairness or equity, but the inevitable and all-consuming logic of capitalism. “The real problem,” writes Coeckelbergh, “is that AI and robotics are used within a capitalist system, which uses these technologies not for the emancipation of the people, but for the sole benefit of making capitalists even richer than they already are.”³² “It should be pointed out,” Coeckelbergh further explains,

that making ourselves into data “is incredibly useful to companies whose business model it is to monetize our data, such as Facebook.” Whether we want to or not “we work for these companies” simply by existing as generators of data about ourselves.³³ Lawrence’s insider perspective is powerful here, when he points out that the conflict is not between different notions of bias or justice, but rather between achieving those ends or realizing a profit. “There could be many reasons that account for this corporate hesitancy when it comes to trying to tackle the AI bias issue,” he writes. “Maybe the most striking one is that AI has become a cash cow for many organizations,” and, “[o]ftentimes, an action that leads to profit creation may be at odds with the organization’s choice to act ethically.”³⁴ Lawrence’s point, as is Coeckelbergh’s, is that until there is a profit-motive to undo the biases of AI, it will remain biased.

It will remain biased because, by prioritizing profit, AI rewards, above all else, speed. In a stunning admission, Lawrence points out that unbiasing AI and its algorithms isn’t actually that hard. “Technologically,” he writes, “this isn’t a difficult task to do as there are tons of tools available in the industry that will help one accomplish this — what makes it extremely difficult is that it requires *one to stop what they are doing to do it*.”³⁵ Currently, there is no reward — financial, economic, or otherwise — in a capitalist system to slow things down merely in the name of justice, democracy, or freedom. As

²⁹ Lawrence, Calvin D. *Hidden in White Sight*, 162.

³⁰ Coeckelbergh, Mark. *The Political Philosophy of AI*, 120.

³¹ Coeckelbergh, Mark. *The Political Philosophy of AI*, 114.

³² Coeckelbergh, Mark. *The Political Philosophy of AI*, 49.

³³ Coeckelbergh, Mark. *The Political Philosophy of AI*, 120.

³⁴ Lawrence, Calvin D. *Hidden in White Sight*, 172.

³⁵ Lawrence, Calvin D. *Hidden in White Sight*, 156. Emphasis added.

Lawrence suggests, we know pretty well what justice is, but when it comes to AI, it just doesn't pay. The moment one company slows down to think through its biased algorithms, they will have been replaced by another, faster company that didn't.

In *The Case against Perfection* — another book that worried about the sudden progress of certain technologies (in this case, genetic engineering) — the philosopher Michael Sandel wrote that in times of rapid change we often struggle to understand how we feel about the technology because our moral vocabulary itself struggles to keep up: “When science moves faster than moral understanding, as it does today, men and women struggle to articulate their unease” because the current moral vocabularies available are inadequate to the task.³⁶ Both Coeckelbergh's and Lawrence's new books demonstrate, I think, that this difficulty of articulating our unease also appears in the new and emerging world of AI. To a far more powerful extent, however, they also demonstrate that while our moral (and political, and social) vocabularies may fail to keep up, our business and capitalistic vocabularies do not. Both these books offer fair warning about what might happen — and what is already happening — when we have only the language of capitalism with which to talk about AI, and provide an excellent start toward building out the necessary new vocabulary that we might start using to center other values.

³⁶ Sandel, Michael J. *The Case against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic*

Engineering. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2007), 9.