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Ulises A. Meijas & Nick Couldry,

Data Grab - The New Colonialism of Big Tech and How to Fight Back

(e-book: The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2024, 303 pages)

At the end of the 15th century, European man began correcting and exploiting life at his own discretion, and degrading its dignity in what was, from his perspective, a newly discovered world. This practice continued for the next few centuries, and the consequences are still felt in damaged societies today. The authors of this book describe this period using the term *historical colonialism*. They identify, point out, systematically analyze and find common features with a new type of colonialism – *data colonialism*. Every high-tech apartment in an apartment building has cell phones, computers, air conditioners, dishwashers, washing machines, and other devices connected to the Internet, and every single one of them generates data, and even this narrative illustration is reductionist in scope. A city stretches across an endless horizon of such buildings, a country of such cities, a continent of such countries, all of them generate data. Individual data does not mean much, but when huge amounts of data from multiple sources are merged, they become valuable. This book recognizes and explains this and much more, takes the reader through the abstraction of this kind of colonialism and demystifies the significance of exploited data, how it is stolen, by whom, and for what purpose, but does not leave the reader hopeless, in other words, it offers a set of solutions and organizational recommendations. The book is conceptually based on the authors' previous work *The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating it for Capitalism* (2019, Stanford University Press), due to the evolution of their thinking following written responses and dialogues they

engaged in with members of various communities. In the introductory part of the book, following the model of the strategy video game *Sid Meier's Colonization* (1994), the authors break colonialism down into four steps, that is, the four Xs of colonialism (both historical and data): Explore, expand, exploit and exterminate. The fourth is tricky because the type of colonialism in question does not directly cause fatal consequences, but the authors justify it with indirect influence such as the involvement of Facebook as a platform for misinformation in the Rohingya genocide, the Cambridge Analytica scandal and so on. In addition to this comes the transhumanist civilizing narrative that technology ennobles, the idea that no matter how many problems AI creates, it solves humanity's problems. Authors make a comparison with the civilizing narratives of historical colonialism, which was then justified by the spread of Christianity and European rationality without choice, in the same way that life today adapts to the terms and conditions of use of corporate platforms like Google.

The book is divided into six chapters, each of which begins with a narrative fictional story in which we follow the protagonist's situation that, with its somewhat dystopian character based in the present day, resembles episodes of the Netflix series *Black Mirror* (2011), which are a very good way of presenting the problem for easier understanding. The first chapter, *A New Colonialism*, defines the corporate-colonial relationship of our digital lives and technology, why capitalism cannot be understood without colonialism, insisting that they are bound by the same kind of colonial gene with the additional mutation of landgrab becoming datagrab, but the core mission remains the same. The authors argue that we are witnessing the development of a new kind of elitism, which implies that, as things are right now, effects of data extraction will not be distributed equally, although they understand that it makes no sense to be against the processing and use of data, they nevertheless advocate sustainable, non-oppressive solutions. The second chapter, *Data territories*, deals with the area of data colonialism, that is, *data territories*, programmed spaces that are accessed by computer, and these spaces force interactions, *data relations*, so that an opportunity for the exploitation of the data generated by these interactions is created. On this track, the authors explain optimization, a way of organizing human realities for the purpose of their goals, the reality of which is that the only limits are the programmed ones, regardless of the environmental problems that

data centers bring with them. Almost every part of human activity has become a data territory, they have been created in healthcare, agriculture, driving, education, nutrition, work, shopping and others.

The authors use the third chapter, *Data's New Civilising Mission*, to deconstruct three civilizing narratives given by data colonialism, in each they find benefits but clearly indicate damaging factors. The first is the consideration of this technology through the prism of the conveniences and infrastructure of life, which they argue turns into a forced convenience under the force of circumstances. The second narrative is about connecting people and things (Internet of Things). Clearly defining what we do not want is key, and the kind of connection we do not want is one in which what is considered true depends neither on debates nor political negotiations but solely on the virality of that content, Meijas and Couldry state. The third civilizing narrative presents AI as smarter than humans. It is presented as an innovation that bypasses human biases, although the fact is that AI in itself means nothing, the data on which it was trained is important, so it often reflects these data and their biases, and can draw unacceptable conclusions. The authors write about the importance of questioning these myths, noting that it captures the social imagination in a way that datagrab cannot.

The fourth chapter, *The New Colonial Class*, deals with the emerging new colonial class, noting that depending on the example, it sometimes works independently and sometimes in collaboration with governments. This class includes a huge number of programmers, designers, managers and people employed in marketing. They coined the apt term, *Social Quantification Sector*, explaining it as the set of institutions that make up a given colonial class, found in all industries. In this chapter, the authors show that the purpose is to reorganize economic and social life, and not just by mere data extraction. They very clearly identify the main actors and describe their state and scope of business, they understand well the complexity of globalized processes and the geopolitical complexity of today, as well as the fact that a direct Western bias cannot be read in the book, but they clearly focus their attention on processes in other parts of the world.

The fifth chapter, *Voices of Defiance*, indicates that today's revolution is an act of understanding that the knowledge we as humanity have acquired in the last 5 centuries was largely shaped by colonial processes, that things do not happen

out of context, and that the favorable position of Europe and North America is the result of these processes. All the stories that start the chapters are fictional except the one that starts the sixth chapter, *A Playbook For Resistance*. It is an Argentinian platform for trans developers (Alternativa Laboral Trans) who, affected by bad conditions, created a space for work as a way of operating outside the box. This chapter shows the ways of rebellion of citizens, workers, activists, indigenous and all other communities. In addition to the world of raw power, the authors also understand the world of meaning well, so in this manner they write that decolonization is the cessation of looking at the world as imposed by the colonizer, it is the process of imagining and implementing an alternative. In the context of this book, it is the finding of an alternative to the extractivist model of data collection, and this alternative must respect the norms and dignity of the communities whose data is processed. Meijas and Couldry understand that there is no cheat code, nor a single universal solution to the problem, therefore they offer and support with examples three suggestions for action - *Working within the system*, *Working against the system*, and *Working beyond the system*.

The book is an extremely useful, well-rounded whole that connects all actors participating in the data chain, the strategies they use and the consequences of their actions. As useful as it is for students, researchers, and professors in the social sciences and humanities, it is equally important for those in STEM sciences, as well as for the general population to whom it is perhaps most important because of the eye-opening effect it can have due to the abstraction inherent in these processes. It is written in a way that is easy to understand and at the same time thought-provoking, with occasional lack of concreteness with examples and empirics, which can partly be justified by the topic of what is being written about, since an individual does not have access to a detailed insight into the algorithm of large platforms, which the authors themselves address in the book.