

REVIEW ESSAY

A Rogue Force

Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, Profile Books, London, 2019, 691 pp, ISBN 978-1781256855, index, price (paperback) £12.99, (hardback) £37.84 (first publ. by Public Affairs, Hachette Book Group, USA 2019).

Reviewed by **Faysal Mikdadi**

PART I

Chasuble: Reading Political Economy, Cecily? It is wonderful how girls are educated nowadays. I suppose you know all about relations between Capital and Labour?

Cecily: I am afraid I am not learned at all. All I know is about the relations between Capital and Idleness – and that is merely from observation. So I don't suppose it is true.

Miss Prism: Cecily, that sounds like Socialism! And I suppose you know where socialism leads to?

Cecily: Oh, yes! That leads to Rational Dress, Miss Prism. And I suppose that when a woman is dressed rationally, she is treated rationally. She certainly deserves to be.

Chasuble: A wilful lamb! Dear child!

Miss Prism [smiling]: A sad trouble sometimes.

Chasuble: I envy you such tribulations. [*Goes down the garden with Miss Prism.*]

Cecily [*picks up books and throws them back on table*]: Horrid Political Economy! Horrid Geography! Horrid, horrid German!

From Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Act Two

This is a powerful and persuasive book. Shoshana Zuboff talks to each and every one of us. Her main thesis is best stated by her: '...surveillance capitalism is a rogue force driven by novel economic imperatives that disregard social norms and nullify the elemental rights associated with individual autonomy that are essential to the very possibility of a democratic society' (p. 11). Zuboff asserts that 'It is capitalism that assigns the price tag of subjugation and helplessness, not the technology' (p. 15). She is right, because technology is, after all, only a means that can lead to much that is good, whereas capitalism is driven solely by 'the desire for profit' and, as

such, is a choice that we make. Our very essence of rushing out to spend, spend, spend comes from the fact that we now act almost instinctively as if someone else, and not us, had control of our decisions and of our behaviours.

Zuboff argues that the imposition of 'a totalising collectivist vision of life' leads to 'psychic numbing' which emanates from the use of instrumentarian power, ultimately 'leading beyond 'prediction' to behaviour modification'.

The frightening questions posed in this book are 'Who knows? Who decides? Who decides who decides?' (p. 180). By now, barely a third of the

way through the book, our world picture is taking on a distinctly dystopian and dysfunctional quality more reminiscent of George Orwell's novel *1984* than that of academic political economy.

Of course, this reviewer is not pretending that it is all Google's, Apple's, Facebook's, Twitter's and other such giants' 'fault that we are underlings'. As ever, we collude in our own psychic morbidity by interacting, trivialising, succumbing and embracing learned helplessness.

In *Self & Society* online magazine, No. 6, Winter 2021, Sofia Johansson has written an outstanding review essay on Zuboff's book.¹ Anyone reading my own, much shorter review is urged to refer back to Johansson's excellent analysis of what is a really great book. Zuboff stands shoulder to shoulder with Karl Marx, Thomas Piketty and Adam Smith, to name but a few, whose works left a permanent imprint on our spiritual and intellectual development. Will Zuboff's brilliant book make a difference? One argument could be that our state of affairs now is such that we shall happily continue as we have been doing immediately after expressing outrage at the technology giants' intrusion into our very souls. Humanity has persistently replaced one ill with another for the simple reason that it refused to adopt a humanist approach to what we do, why we do it and how we do it. On the other hand, there is one

certainty: we always have choices, if only we 'have eyes to see' them. What happens next will depend on our choice.

Johansson has powerfully concluded that

If we really care about our planet, and indeed our very *humanity*, we need to begin to look at the grave cost of this new modernity [...] We cannot rely on algorithms or machines to do it for us; *we* must step in to ensure the double movement which will bring balance and ensure life for both ourselves and our fellow creatures with whom we share the planet; they are counting on us. (her italics)

These are grand aspirations which appear shrouded in uncertainty, hesitancy, helplessness, fear of the unknown and a largely failed education system. 'Shrouded' or not, we can still take control, and we *can* create our individual and collective futures.

Again, I urge you to read Sofia Johansson's review essay. Alternatively, if you would prefer, listen to Shoshana Zuboff herself talking eloquently and convincingly about surveillance capitalism² (recommended by Johansson for those who are not able to read Zuboff's book – though it is a really most enjoyable and accessible book: Zuboff has a style which talks directly to the reader, as she walks her or him through some fairly difficult arguments).

PART II

Two principles in human nature reign;
Self-love, to urge, and reason, to restrain;
Nor this a good, nor that a bad we call,
Each works its end, to move or govern all;
And to their proper operation still,
Ascribe all good; to their improper, ill.

Alexander Pope, 'An Essay on Man', Epistle II, first stanza

If the technology giants engage in comprehensive surveillance of all that we do on

our I-Phones, laptops, personal computers... etc... and if they are collecting data on us which help them to predict and, ultimately, amend our

behaviours in ways that profit only them and not necessarily us, how can we, mere mortals with little power these days, take control? More significantly, how can we, as our children's guardians and preceptors, ensure that they have the wherewithal to be in control, rather than to succumb to being controlled?

In a nutshell, surveillance capitalism allows the giant technology corporations to access all the unfettered knowledge about matters that concern each individual user. It also abandons 'historic organic reciprocities' whilst being 'sustained by radical indifference and its material expression in the Big Other'. These developments have led to the removal of real choices in our decision making, which in turn denudes democracy and erodes self-reliance. Zuboff quite rightly concludes that

indignant young people who act in the knowledge that effectiveness without autonomy is not effective, dependency-induced compliance is no social contract, a hive with no exit can never be a home, experience without sanctuary is but a shadow, a life that requires hiding is no life, touch without feel reveals no truth, and freedom from uncertainty is no freedom. (pp. 522–3)

Every effort that we make to educate and nurture our children must be aimed at giving each of them the unconditional love that engulfs their lives with warmth, understanding, a listening ear and carefully considered guidance. Both as parents and teachers we need to inculcate the needed skills, habits and character traits through offering each child experiences that help them to take control of their thought processes and of their life day to day, as well as in the long term.

A child's upbringing and education must have the following experiences created/provided by the home and by the school/college/university (these suggestions are not intended to extend the curriculum as discrete 'subjects'; rather, they are innovations and processes that should permeate students' learning across all subjects):

- (1) We need to create activities that give the child the confidence needed to think for themselves when making decisions, offering opinions, planning for the future, etc....
- (2) We should offer positions of responsibility that train the pupil to take charge and to make decisions on next actions based on careful reflection and reasoned arguments.
- (3) Students must be given an understanding of how healing restorative justice can be in resolving conflicts and in bringing people closer together without compromising their personal beliefs and ways of life.
- (4) Teachers should seek to use the teaching of drama in order to role-play parts that require empathy with experiences that are not necessarily familiar to the individual because of personal circumstances.
- (5) Adults around the child must create positions of authority in order for the pupil to understand the responsibilities involved and to develop a sense of how to use authority responsibly and humanely.
- (6) We should create opportunities for young persons to take part in debating and similar activities to learn and promote the art of disagreement and honourable compromises, as well as the ability to 'beg to differ' in an amicable way.
- (7) Young people need to gain a clear understanding of the power of technology and how to manage it in a safe and productive way.
- (8) Parents and teachers could create activities that inculcate a love of learning, e.g. reading, acting, creative performance such as dancing and singing, debating, purposeful nature walks, conducting scientific experiments alone or in groups, focused research projects, etc....
- (9) Students should have regular opportunities to perform publicly in order to enhance self-confidence, e.g. presenting experiment findings or reading a poem or an essay to an audience, debating, appearing in locally

produced videos and film clips, and so on....

- (10) Adults need to ensure that there are plenty of opportunities for young people to gain a sense of achievement for things well done, e.g. rewards, honourable mentions, competitions, etc....
- (11) Teachers could set tasks that require the student to be a critical thinker and to eschew compliance for the sake of it so that young persons are helped to develop in members of a generation of self-reliant and confident adults.
- (12) Teachers should teach the skills needed to ensure that all interaction with technology is not unnecessarily and unhealthy invasive and conducive to enhancing human frailty.
- (13) Adults should create activities that encourage peaceful reflection within nature and away from enclosed spaces and lit-up screens.
- (14) Educationalists should offer students civics lessons / general-studies sessions, the aim of which should include training to familiarise them with agreed civilised humanistic values, attitudes and reasoning skills needed for arguing one's point without offence and confrontational behaviours, and with the need to have the confidence to call out utterances and behaviours that are discriminatory of others, e.g. racism, sexism, national phobias, gender choices, bullying, religious hatred and other many ills of society.

These are only a few of the habit-forming suggestions that, in time, will contribute to the overall character formation of each individual. Most important are the qualities of self-reliance, independence and self-confidence.

Above them all comes the imperative and much-needed ability to do what each child did almost at the beginning of conscious interaction with adults; to wit, to keep asking 'Why?'. 'Why do I have to do this?' 'Why do I have to think this?' 'Why do I have to be this?' 'Why is everyone behaving this way just because our parents and grandparents did so?' 'Who said that this is the best possible way forward – is it only because it

has always been thus?'

And we can start by eschewing the slavish reliance on I-Phones, laptops, personal computers, processors, iMacs and so many of their friends and families. We can continue by having a sceptical mind-set that does not believe a word that some artificial-intelligence processor or algorithm tells us we urgently need and want – replacing such decisions by our own human ability to think for ourselves.

If we do not pay attention to the developmental and educational needs of the humanist side of our lives and of our decision-making abilities, we shall sleep-walk into a dystopian world of frightened and demoralised people easily manipulated by faceless corporations working hard to render us helpless, compliant and unthinking citizens of a dystopic brave new world. Instead of being free, we will be enslaved. Instead of being liberated, we will be unthinking responders. Instead of having 'an inner spark of divine fire', we will be fractured souls always in search of a remedy that is already within each of us, if only we could make the effort of accessing it.

It is up to each intelligent, independent and self-reliant individual to take charge of one's individual destiny.

Notes

- 1 Available online at <https://tinyurl.com/3fne44rt> (accessed 24 April 2021).
- 2 Available online at <https://tinyurl.com/y5aoq3xw> (accessed 24 April 2021).

About the contributor

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