Introduction: The Great Simplification

American politics has recently passed catastrophic equilibrium. On Twitter, Donald Trump performs his authoritarianism by labelling the news media as 'the enemy of the American people' (Trump, 2017a). Views like these are not to be lightly dismissed. As Trump proclaims, 'more than 90% of Fake News Media coverage of me is negative', and so, for him, 'Social Media [is] the only way to get the truth out' (Trump, 2017b). This manoeuvre is but one in a series of coordinated efforts by the Trump administration to routinely delegitimize media organizations like MSNBC and CNN to assert that he is the only valid source of information.

This technique has been very effective. Consider how the *New York Times* published a story based upon an 18-month investigation into Trump's taxes, which include tax fraud and financial losses throughout the 1980s of $1.17 billion (Barstow and Buettner, 2018). But while the reporters were later awarded a Pulitzer Prize for their journalism, the story effectively dropped from the news cycle.

Meanwhile the Trump administration is obsessed with national security, defined primarily in narrow terms to target refugees and migrants from Central America. Demonized and dehumanized through indefinite detention in concentration camps along the US southern border by lionized state security forces, these refugees are spoken of as a plague to be necessarily removed if the American nation-state is to prosper again. Yet in stark contradistinction to migrants being denied human rights, white supremacists have been embraced as a core constituency in Trump's electoral base. These conjoined beliefs now routinely find expression in the state. But it should not be surprizing as the officials Trump has appointed are the ideological kith and kin of South African apartheid-era securocrats. Staff appointments of this sort are to be expected, because, in plain terms as Republican Senator Lindsey Graham said of Trump, "He's a race-baiting, xenophobic, religious bigot" (CNN, 2015).

Having set the stage for the mainstreaming of devastating neo-Confederate politics, sadly, but to no one's surprise, right-wing stochastic terrorism is on the rise in the United States (Anti-Defamation League, 2019; Greenblatt and Selim, 2019). The Department of Homeland Security admits this, describing it as 'one of the most potent forces driving domestic terrorism' (2019, 4). By contrast, Trump has called American Nazis "very fine people" (Gray, 2017). Meanwhile, the silence from members of the Republican Party demonstrates how complicit they are with these developments. This is partly because, 'right-wing terrorism is a more extreme version of Trump's own political style', Jonathan Chait (2019) writes: 'It draws inspiration from his ideas and some measure of protection from his political power'. Sadly, many American conservatives are simply 'working towards' Trump (see Kershaw, 1993). To repurpose a notable phrase, the road Americans are on is 'built by hate but paved with indifference'.

Trump is the quintessential vulgar capitalist of our era; a reality TV star and social media braggart whose wealth was inherited, his businesses consisting of slumlord predation of precarious racialized groups in New York, manipulating financial instruments to limit taxation, and licensing his brand to all takers. Yet good faith pundits and journalists cannot fathom the conditions he personifies. Best seen on display on cable news, but also in the *New York Times* opinion pages, they tend towards superficial lay psychological cataloguing over policy analysis, giving disproportionate attention to throwaway remarks than state actions. Or bemoaning that Trump is not coherent, as if they have an expectation that fascism requires coherency. This kind of analysis offers us nothing in this post-catastrophic equilibrium moment.

Irrespective of the length of his time in office or the millstone of impeachment the significance of Trump is less about him personally. Rather his significance is about the perceptions by and representations to the American public about the white nationalist solution to the social question. And so minimally adequate analysis must go beyond his corruption, compromise or crassness. More generally, putting too much emphasis on the individual failings of politicians, whether Trump or his counterparts, neglects that they operate in a political system structured by capitalist social relations. By this I mean that they administer a capitalist state dependent on private profits and favourable market conditions to survive and fund programmes. Simultaneously they are encouraged to draw upon wealthy patrons to fund their electoral campaigns. Put simply, they represent capitalists' interests. They do so, because as Fred Block (1977) summaries, 'the ruling class does not rule'. One result of this rationalization is a mainstream American

party politics where there are basically no political conflicts. Herein the Republican Party exists purely to indulge the interests of capital, while the Democratic Party triangulates a preservation of the remnants of those interests but in such a way as to help facilitate the next round of exploitation writ large. But it is not only rationalization at play. As I explain in the middle part of the book, a ruling class consciousness exists, and it uses politics 'for itself'.

My starting point begins with noting how the 'savage sorting of winners and losers' (Sassen, 2010) has caused a near decades-long 'democratic recession' (Diamond, 2015). Mark Blyth (2016) has termed the blowback to this recession 'global Trumpism', signalling the sweeping reactionary contempt for democracy the world over. Nominally dissatisfied with neoliberalism and invoking the rhetorical trappings of democratic nationalism – but certainly not its spirit – this reactionary politics stops well short of extending rights and dignity to the most vulnerable, many of whom are racialized persons. These developments have amplified the strand of authoritarianism that has existed in US politics for quite some time (Parker and Towler, 2019). Betraying how democracy has only been acceptable as a management style for capitalism, rather than a means for political aspiration, Stephen Moore, a senior economic adviser to the Trump campaign, recently remarked that "Capitalism is a lot more important than democracy" (Schwarz, 2016).

My view is the exact opposite. Capitalism generates unacceptable social costs which harm democratic politics. As social inequality worsens in the US, so do its divisions and tensions, rendering democratic life just that much more difficult to conduct. But whereas I see this as a definitive characteristic of capitalism, others see it as a temporary deviation from what goods it ordinarily delivers. However, adopting the latter position requires overlooking much evidence from across the planet and so speaks to an interest aligned with capitalism. And so, I look to document and critique the scholarship, statecraft and ideology propping up this 'democratic recession'.

Computation and the social question

Ultimately this book is concerned with unfreedom and class rule in contemporary American capitalism as seen in the digital realm. This could otherwise be called computation and the social question. Charting the contours of these issues requires linking a series of diverse phenomena, like the battle over social resources and the looting of industries and sectors by telecommunication companies, as well as

the social impact of computation's unfolding development – like artificial intelligence (AI) – to argue that the ruling class has captured computational resources and are using them to drive their class's agenda. On matters of computation and the social question, Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) and Virginia Eubanks (2018) are right to warn that 'algorithms of oppression' will lead to 'automating inequality'. In accordance with this wider project, my book addresses the consequences that are courted when computational reason is flattened to satisfy the requirements of a capitalist ruling class. Given the footprint of the American economy, the effects of this capture are global in nature.

The instrumental distortion of computational reason points to a contradiction in capitalism where, notwithstanding the ever-increasing technological complexity through its 'system of equivalence', capitalism is responsible for the *great simplification of the social world*. Simplification is testament to the 'fatal abstractions' of capitalist rule that begets a line of thinking that there is no alternative, that social life outside of capitalism is characteristically 'short, nasty, and brutish', whereas in capitalism it is incidentally 'short, nasty, and brutish'. Here all other horrors are worse, that the present inequalities could be worse, that the incomplete democratization that barely hides the dictatorship of capital is less barbaric than overt tyranny. The great simplification has also impacted our reasoning, leaving us more vulnerable to lapses in judgement; for instance, perpetuating a political order that permits seemingly profitable carbon extraction that risks destroying almost all life on this planet.

Datafication is a good example of this great simplification, and one the book seeks to connect to class rule and unfreedom. Datafication is a process which converts human practices into computational artefacts. It also involves the advocacy for and implementation of computational reason to oversee human life. As will be elaborated upon later in this introduction, capitalism has a code that constitutes society. When adhering to this code, datafication encompasses a transformation of the grand tapestry of human life to quantifiable bits to then be computed for profit-seeking activities. As an example of this simplification, consider how finance technology allows capital to be deterritorialized, while persons are reterritorialized. Through swift codes, finance is instantly moved from region to region, while credit card data can be used to deny a person's mobility. Simplification can also be found in how capitalist computational reason encodes subordination and stratification. Due to the legacies of racial capitalism, unfortunately racialized persons the world over are especially susceptible to this encoded subordination.

Investing computational reason with automated and substantive decision-making power risks foreclosing politics, let alone activities that seek to shift the political frame. While this kind of foreclosure may not necessarily end debates about the social question, it can limit our ability to materially address the social question in ways that do not align with capitalist first principles. Accordingly, encoded subordination, algorithms of oppression and automated inequality are means by which capitalist social relations become fixed. When this happens, the 'democratic recession' that Trump personifies will become a permanent feature of life in the 21st century.

Using Marx's categories, this project traverses logical, theoretical and historical elements to trace the contours of the systemic nature of digital capitalist regimes and its subroutines. Given this goal, and because this is a short book, I do not intend to extensively review other Marxist contributions to the understanding of digital life. I have in mind here Jodi Dean's analysis of communicative capitalism, Christian Fuch's work on digital labour, Nick Srnicek's work on platform capitalism, Tiziana Terranova's observation on free labour, Maurizio Lazzarato's writings on immaterial labour, as well as many other excellent scholars. There is much I respect in these treatments of the current moment and so I will let them speak for themselves. What they do have in common is an assessment that datafication has weakened democracy leading to the US becoming the leading exporter of the machinery of Western fascism. This is a proposition I support and look to build upon over the coming chapters.

The limits of progressive neoliberal social theory

Not every crisis is the final battle. But it is clear that American politics is at a decisive historical juncture. Stalwarts in both the Democratic and the Republican Parties foresee the end of both parties. "I'm worried that I will be the last Republican president", George W. Bush said as he recoiled at the actions of the Trump administration (Baker, 2017). When reflecting on the significance of his speakership, John Boehner believes it marks "the end of the two-party system" (Alberta, 2017). In the Democratic Party Bernie Sanders (2012) wants to 'wage a moral and political war against the billionaires', while Nancy Pelosi forcefully declares "we're capitalists, that's just the way it is" (Raskin, 2017).

Reading not only with an eye to 'incurable structural contradictions' (Gramsci, 1971, 178) these statements can be juxtaposed with the conspicuous absence of genuine substantive discussion about Jeb Bush and Hillary Clinton being the front runners in the two-year lead-up to

the 2016 election. Not only is this significant given that members of their families have held presidential office, but also because the funds required to run a presidential campaign appear to demarcate electoral politics as the sole domain of select dynasties competing against one another, competition that in turn requires 'great' personalities at the helm of these campaigns. For example, the 2016 US electoral cycle cost $6.5 billion, with the 0.01 per cent contributing $2.3 billion (Sultan, 2017). It should be no surprise that these testimonies emerge at the crest of massive capital consolidation, where class warfare 'from above' has created intense social inequality which has stratified the American social structure, a *revanche* in the wake of the 2008 recession.

Much of the energy for my project comes from reviewing the contemporary analysis offered by progressive neoliberal scholarship on these developments. Despite many generally good efforts from Mark Lilla (2018) and Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018), among others, this social theory is not quite able to make complete sense of American authoritarianism and the social life in which it is situated. Put simply: a fair appraisal of the market is missing.

As an example of this oversight consider that while his recent book *On Tyranny* begins with a useful discussion of anticipatory obedience, instinctual habituation and consent to authority, Timothy Snyder's (2017) rally to defend democratic institutions turns upon appeals to decency, as opposed to the extension of material provisions. Instead, he focuses on trivialities like reminding people to regularly delete their browser history or apply for a passport and travel internationally. Granted, he does worry about paramilitaries and unwarranted demonization, and he does recommend peaceful protests like marches. But even in progressive neoliberal categories, surely there are better ways to say that robust democratic institutions help mitigate problems caused by hoarding wealth.

Aside from a few sporadic clauses, Synder offers little about what Franz Neumann called 'totalitarian monopolistic capitalism's' wealth concentration, or reactionary revolts to neoliberalism. Synder's recommendation to improve interpersonal conduct by individually financing civic life cannot really target the vital organs Franz Neumann and Robert Paxton respectfully identify in their analyses of the anatomy of authoritarianism. And so, if anything, Snyder underestimates authoritarianism's affective charge in American politics because his discourse ethics does not directly engage with the relations that stem from the organization of basic socio-economic forms.

These kinds of oversights are similarly present in the analysis of international politics. For instance, by systematically upturning old

alliances, bargains and institutions that comprise 'collective security' and 'free trade', progressive neoliberals interpret the Trump administration's contempt for liberal internationalism as a significant destabilization of US hegemony. This destabilization comes precisely when there is a global power shift underway. While China and the South more broadly might not create geopolitical blocs that entirely negate US hegemony, it does mean the liberal international order will be curtailed, returning to being but a global subsystem similar to the situation during most of the 20th century (see Ikenberry, 2011; Acharya, 2014; Colgan and Keohane, 2017; Ikenberry, 2018).

Perhaps the preeminent proponent for 'the liberal international order', John Ikenberry, believes that for the US to remain hegemonic the state's actions must be grounded in normative principles about action and conduct, not narrow concerns that cater to the interests of neoliberal capital. For Ikenberry, liberal internationalism is 'a way of thinking about and responding to modernity – its opportunities and its dangers'. At the heart of this project was one kind of answer to the social question:

> Across these two centuries, the industrial revolution unfolded, capitalism expanded its frontiers, Europeans built far-flung empires, the modern nation-state took root, and along the way the world witnessed what might be called the 'liberal ascendancy' – the rise in the size, number, power and wealth of liberal democracies. (Ikenberry, 2018, 11)

The response to the 'grand forces of modernity' was to double down on universalism – as seen in the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – backed by military power. Another component of this order was a belief in a natural fraternity among liberal Western states based upon the assumption that similarly shared first-order values would translate into interests that roughly overlap, hence increasing the likelihood of cooperation.

However, Ikenberry writes that 'the globalization of liberal internationalism put in motion two long-term effects: a crisis of governance and authority, and a crisis of social purpose' (Ikenberry 2018, 18). What he means is that progressive neoliberalism was too successful. In global ascension, so arose global dissatisfaction. Accordingly, for the liberal order to prosper it must return to New Deal principles, a governmentality that he argues spurred inclusive economic growth and stability, and somewhat tamed the intensity of capitalism. This version would need to 'cultivate deeper relations with democratic states within

the rising non-western developing world'. But even supposing this was acceptable and successful, how much confidence can one put into these New Deal values if they were not able to generate an adequate defence against the neoliberal *revanche*? And how much stock can one put into these values when the revered liberal rules-based order was built through spilling blood abroad? (see Bevins, 2020).

Lastly, writing in the *New Yorker*, Salman Rushdie (2018) channelled a set of worries that could be considered emblematic of many American progressive neoliberals. His concern is with the triumvirate of asymmetrical political polarization, the intensification of political affects as enabled by technological processes, and fragmented reality that has apparently bifurcated shared conceptions of reality thereby creating 'conflicting and often incompatible narratives'. For him, these affects are on a whole different scale than the strains in the late modern period. Like many others, he endorses the sentiment that reality is fractured and multiple, that truth is an embodied performance interpreted according to culturally mediated conceptual schema. Still, this view seems to leave little room for those who wish to judge that certain conceptions of reality are in fact false and flawed, and indeed tyrannical in that those conceptions serve racism and climate change denialism. The apparent bind is that if one denies the former, as many modernist social projects do, this will lead to tyranny, yet the latter *is* racial tyranny.

Plainly, Rushdie's suggestion is to continue with Rawlsian procedural liberalism with reasonable doubt and the giving and taking of reasons: 'I don't pretend to have a full answer. I do think that we need to recognize that any society's idea of truth is always the product of an argument, and we need to get better at winning that argument.' Arguably this kind of approach permitted fascism to emerge in the first place, for it failed to address American capitalism, or how the search for profit overdetermines the discourse within public affairs in capitalist societies. For example, it is important to recognize how disruptive post-truth politics has been a staple tactic used by industrial-capitalists and their agents for at least 30 years, if not longer, as they have sought to induce a debate on climate change to stall regulations that threaten the profitability of their enterprises. However, encountering new modalities of propaganda does not licence magic thinking about times when truths were uncontested and universally accepted. Still, there is no space in Rushdie's triumvirate for critical reflection about how a capitalist media system in combination with a 1 per cent campaign financing regime might be undermining the giving and taking of reasons.

What Synder, Ikenberry, Rushie and likeminded progressive neoliberals now refer to as resistance in the Trump era is really basic civic engagement. But civic engagement detached from a full appraisal of American life is not enough to retake the nearly 1,000 seats between Congress, the Senate, and statehouses lost by the Democratic Party during the Obama presidency, let alone recover the Supreme Court (Yglesias, 2017). As Clare Malone (2017) summarized, 'Barack Obama won the White House, but Democrats lost the Country'.

Despite this down ballot collapse, the Democratic Party seems reluctant to review their policy agenda or politics. The internal ire towards Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and recently elected Justice Democrats is testament to foot-dragging on that front. Instead, Democrat operatives attribute Trump's electoral victory to racism, as if they forgot that Obama won two landslide victories. Or sexism, as if Hillary Clinton had not received the most votes ever cast in an American election. Or resort to vote shaming those who cast their ballots for the Green Party, as if Democrats believe they are entitled to certain constituencies. From my vantage, these scapegoating premises are always assumed but never demonstrated. And, as an outsider, I am amazed at how incredibly convenient it is that their explanations do not threaten their interests.

Understanding how this down ballot defeat occurred requires many more pages than I have available here, but one important component can be attributed to the development of progressive neoliberal social theory in the 20th century. This political philosophy inherited the concerns of procedural liberalism with secondary instrumentalization. Sparing all but the essentials, this social theory was a response to the emergence of large-scale enterprises with concentrated ownership. As historians like Howard Zinn and others have shown, mass commercial enterprises outgrew decentralized political governance. Preserving some semblance of a democratic society required resolving this imbalance of power. It mostly came through concentrating political power to produce the clout required to effectively regulate big business according to 'national interests' as these were put into the custody of a technocratic professional managerial class. Legitimacy for this exercise required the nationalization of politics. The creation of a political community at scale introduced a mass politics, in which communication technologies like radio played a central constitutive role. Michael Sandel (2005, 170) summarizes the process by saying that 'in the twentieth century, liberalism made its peace with concentrated power'.

But there is another important point worth making. Conditions have never been more favourable for capitalism and more conducive to capital

accumulation. Certainly, the digital revolution in telecommunications helps in that regard. But the naturalization of capitalist values is broader than just novel developments in technology. In addition to a labour regime shaped by the installation of neoliberal politics, intentional wage containment and a decline of union membership there is the ideological triumph of capitalism after the Cold War and little meaningful resistance in the Global South relative to the decolonization movements in the postwar era. Using scholarship, statecraft and ideology, neoliberalism promotes and implements structural adjustment to cater to the imperatives of international capital which pursues different interests in different places. Instead progressive neoliberals continue their concerns with secondary instrumentalization, seeking to better adjust distribution within a capitalist system in line with their professional judgements. This helps explain why we now speak of social problems and not social questions.

These are but a few illustrations about how progressive neoliberals cannot form a critique that rejects the forces that produced the Trump presidency. Indeed, they tacitly accept burdens, suffering and a technique of class rule that came along with a catastrophic equilibrium. Instead they are simply concerned with discursive and performative respectability. That Trump's manner offends their mores tells you about the limits of those mores. Taking offence at the bucking of bureaucratic norms seems out of step when leading economic sectors are lionized for seeking to 'move fast and break things'. Moreover, this kind of offence is sterile for it cannot convert genuine grievances into a broad-based movement that has the potential to dramatically improve social relations, ones conducive to a consolidated establishment of deep and widespread human flourishing. At best, progressive neoliberals simply seek to defeat Trump at the ballot box. But doing so simply returns us to a moment that produced Trump in the first place, all the while with climate change accelerating as our carbon budget is being depleted.

In short, when progressive neoliberals invoke democracy what they mean is their class's way of life. Within this framework hope and change are synonyms for the quiet restorative stability of the status quo where they were once insulated from the effects of that politics, where they have the cognitive comfort of not having to think about politics as it really is, that being the allocation of suffering and decisions over who lives and who dies. American progressive neoliberalism is unable to comprehend the behemoth of capitalism because the inequality it permits fuels authoritarianism, as Synder, Ikenberry and Rushdie's oversights demonstrate. Little wonder then that there is a creeping sense that their resistance to Western

fascism is ineffectual. This is because the issues progressive neoliberals attribute to anomalies can be better understood as contradictions. Contradictions can be managed, but that just renders structural and systemic weakness elsewhere in other forms. Unless there is political realignment, they can never be solved. Outside of Marxism there is little recognition of this basic fact.

As one might anticipate, I am unconvinced about the proposition that the concept of neoliberalism was too elastic, too adaptable, and therefore open to semantic drift implying that the concept is ill-suited for use in concrete analysis. For me, this robust adaptability mirrored capitalism itself, and so it was a virtue. In addition to its 'travel' across many disciplines, neoliberalism was an 'essentially contested concept', one subject not only to extensive and good faith intellectual debate but also susceptible to obstinate and bad faith politicking. Neither of these approaches justifies jettisoning the concept simply because lay pundits were unwilling to do the work to trace this travelling or to read widely enough to see that the concept refers to the distinctive lionization of capital wherein everything was subjected to a one-dimensional model of economic reasoning.

Granted, understanding neoliberalism is important in tracing global de-democratization, the consequences of a half century of neoliberalism, one strand of which is personified by Trump. But that effort by itself is one critique late. It is attuned to the old foes who are departing the stage. Certainly, our present conjecture emerges out of neoliberalism. But it heralds something different. Datafication ushers in a 'new political terrain of struggle' and new political projects seeking new unities. We are at a decisive historical juncture and it will be settled one way or another.

Communication and the end of neoliberal politics

Class struggle is the first and last force shaping developments in communication. Consider how computers are built using commodity chains and a labour process, both organized by the supremacy of a private property rights regime. Subsequently, as data and code are central to almost every facet of contemporary life, capitalist ideology with its conceptions of suitable social relations are reflected in the uses and programming. It is thus appropriate to worry about when, as opposed to whether, automated decision-making algorithms and their ilk will be used by corporations to optimize for profit at the expense of people. As a concrete example, in the US that society's computational capacities are being invested in technologies of

surveillance, limiting rather than aiding human flourishing. These are revolutionary developments.

Given that scholars have a solid understanding of the social costs and consequences of the Industrial Revolution, the concerns about automation, as but one example, aiding a major reconfiguration of the US labour regime is legitimate. So even while we do not know the next area of life to be colonized and commodified or the next business sector to be looted and restructured, decisions are currently being made about digital technology which will have far-reaching consequences. And much like how the organization of industrial technologies like factories shaped class formation in the 19th century, it is a safe conjecture that digital technologies will play a similar constitutive role going forward. At stake is whether life becomes a laboratory for datafication and the social purpose it is beholden to.

Although the consequences will be long felt, the era of neoliberalism is a good place to trace the initial beginnings of the social purpose of datafication. For me, late neoliberalism consolidated into a prolonged polycentric class project designed to capture the commanding heights of the international political economy to create a regime of accumulation that deliberately and systematically skewed resources to the global ruling class. Accordingly, the neoliberal project rhetorically masqueraded as a self-regulating capitalist market without the need for political intervention, whereas its policy consensus insisted that regulatory interventions were often required to sustain itself. For this reason, it sought to enter state institutions, easily so because neoliberal policy makers were aware of who benefited from the arrangement. For the aforementioned reasons it is a misnomer to treat neoliberalism exclusively as an economic form, rationalization or mode of rule. Rather it includes a public way of life. David Harvey (2018) writes that this ideological project justifies value passing through different forms, conditions and states at different rates as it seeks to expand. This development reflects one of capitalism's many historical tendencies to increase the extraction of surplus value, production and consumption through colonizing ever more areas of life, oftentimes with the tacit consent of a surprizing number of people.

As a public way of life, late neoliberalism encourages certain political subjectivities. With brevity in mind Nancy Fraser attributes the rise of 'struggles for the "recognition of difference"' to shared historical circumstances (2000, 107). This common experience helps explain why this kind of politics is practised by a wide array of actors, ranging from ethno-nationalist bigots with their nostalgic yearning for a fictional past to feminists responding to the ongoing marginalization of women

in public and private life. For Fraser this 'grammar of political claims-making' is a response to the increasingly aggressive concentration of power with capitalists. She explains that following the defeat of labour politics and as neoliberalism gained momentum, identity politics emerged as a means and venue to make claims on the current mode of distributing power and wealth. This tactic has had a degree of success because it shifted away from broader egalitarian demands to more discrete targets. Fraser is not suggesting that identity politics causes this inequality; rather it is a limited responsive technique given prevailing conditions. As such, the rise of identity politics is indicative of the ever narrow way to undertake politics, permissible mostly because class-based politics have been banished to the wilderness.

This narrowing has two consequences, Fraser says. The first is a problem of displacement insofar as identity politics often does little to enrich wider redistribution politics – rather it seems to push them aside in favour of targeted gains for discrete groups. The second is a problem of reification. As intercultural communication has increased, rather than embracing hybridity and plurality, instead people 'drastically simplify and reify group identities'. For Fraser, communication in neoliberalism 'encourage[s] separatism, intolerance and chauvinism, patriarchalism and authoritarianism'.

To push the argument a little, communication in neoliberalism is premised on *misrecognition and social subordination* as those with little civic status are 'prevented from participating as a peer in social life' (Fraser, 2000, 113). Misrecognition does not occur through 'free-floating cultural representations or discourses' but is rather a material practice that is reproduced by 'institutionalized patterns', these being 'the workings of social institutions that regulate interaction according to parity-impeding cultural norms'. In other words, institutionalized patterns deny some members of society the status of normative full partners in interaction, capable of participating on a par with the rest. Misrecognition can come in many forms, laws, administrative codes, and professional practices. It can also be institutionalized informally through longstanding customs or sedimented social practices of civil society. As I will allude to throughout this book, encoded subordination, simplification and the associated concepts I use point to how misrecognition is a basic constitutive element of unfreedom in digital society.

While on the topic of unfreedom, capitalism is not about 'markets' or even private property per se. Rather it is a political order that consolidates decision-making power over the use, circulation and consumption of resources in a wealthy minority in ways that are opaque.

For example, capitalists have used the power of the state to reregulate and relegislate in such a way as to undermine unions and co-opt other means of worker power to stall challenges to that order. Moreover, the problem with capitalism is not just who accumulates wealth and power. Rather, it is that human experiences and social relations are distorted and instrumentally subordinated to a logic that always prioritizes the extraction of surplus value. Such subordination leaves people alienated as they are not free to fully develop their capacities as they see fit.

As communication is a component of class formation it is also inflected by the structural antagonisms and contradictions inherent in capitalist societies. For instance, the wider rollout of AI is heralded by technologists as an exciting moment, albeit with some growing pains. But by my measure it is necessary to plot the social impact of AI by examining how it changes or preserves the existing balance of power between labour and capital. Here one can examine how the ramifications might undermine democracy and solidify stratifications and inequalities, or if used in another political framework, how this technology might alleviate those same issues. Accordingly, the critique of computation cannot be sufficiently radical if premised on the immutability of capitalism and value struggles.

It is hard to summarize Marxism's findings and intricate arguments. The best succinct version I have found comes from Ben Fine. He writes that in Marxian analysis, 'emphasis is placed upon the capitalist economy as organized around the accumulation of capital through the production, circulation, and distribution of (surplus) value as a totality of economic relations, processes, structures, dynamics, and corresponding agents' (Fine, 2013, 48). It is worth focusing on the role of value in this system. David Harvey explains that value in motion is 'the social labour we do for others as organized through commodity exchanges in competitively price fixing markets' (2018, 4). Emphasizing the role of equivalence, he writes that value is 'socially necessary labour time' which although 'immaterial' has a 'subjective force'. He uses a motif of 'valorization, realization, and distribution' to map each of the three volumes of *Capital* to issues of class, status and factionalism respectfully.

To wit, the core attributes of a Marxist critique centrally involve at least one of either the discussion of the historical nature of capitalist political economy; capitalist societies being a 'collection of commodities' whose circulation is shaped by the antagonism between labour and capital; the use of labour markets to extract surplus value; and the alienation that facilitates the operation of each of these processes. A good clear summary of the chief method, historical materialism,

can be found in Marx's 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Here a mode of production is formed through a combination of material forces and the social relations surrounding production. Marx writes that the 'relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness' (1977). He adds that these four items are articulated such that changes in material forces and the conflicts with which they are associated lead to new configurations of modes of production, what could be characterized as a transition or a revolution. In a capitalist society, transitions to any new configuration of the mode of production is hindered by the prevailing private property rights regime.

I follow the Marxist's conception of class as a social relation. As such it is not a social rank, nor a flat socio-economic indicator. Granted, it is one among several central organizing features of contemporary life, like status and party, which make up the classical Durkheimian tripartite analysis or Harvey's broad motifs of *Capital*'s thematic arc. Still, in Marxism the mode of production has explanatory priority. Accordingly, Marxist analysis is attuned to class antagonisms not because workers are necessarily the most oppressed or the bulk of the population. They need not be either. Rather it is because in this mode, capitalists, by virtue of their position in society, extract value in the form of profits from the surplus labour workers do; there is an antagonism between those that produce surpluses and those that have the authority to appropriate it. But this dependency also means that workers are especially well-positioned to hold profit hostage, and in doing so can minimize the capitalist's power to the point that other groups can take advantage of the situation to leverage concessions.

Altogether Marx, Fine and Harvey intimate that capital is very much connected with everyday life through the transformation of social relations, and this transformation is not confined to class lines, they include civic ascription, subjective experience and self-fashioning. Accordingly, these realized experiences of capitalism need not be uniform. Even within the US, a white man and a black woman may share a class position, but matters of status through gender, race and sexuality among others give rise to dramatically different lived experiences of the rule of capital. Logically, these differences do not automatically mean these two agents cannot share beliefs and cooperate to advance a capitalist agenda, but it does introduce a politics of distribution as these persons interact. Channelling Gramsci, Stuart Hall noted that capitalist ideology 'articulates into a configuration, different

subjects, different identities, different projects, different aspirations' from this difference, 'it constructs a "unity"' (1988, 166).

Hall was among the first to recognize 'a new political project on the right', this being the attempt by the Right to hegemonize the defeat of the Left post-1968. His attention to differences and transformations within conservative politics pointed to the adaptability of capitalism. It meant that 'those transformations [changed] the political terrain of struggle before our very eyes, we think the differences don't have any real effect on anything. It still feels more "left-wing" to say the old ruling class politics goes on in the same old way' (Hall, 1988, 163). Hall was adamant that fighting old foes, old fights, misses the conjunction upon which a 'new terrain on which a different politics must form up'. Subsequently his agenda was to find the appropriate questions to ask about the dynamics of this new regime, what we now know as neoliberalism. Much like Hall used Gramsci as a guide for this task, Hall can similarly help us. Not as a consoling 'old prophet', but to remind us to refuse the 'easy transfer of generalisations' from one era to another. Adapting Hall, the point of the present inquiry is to understand how computation is being used to encode subordination, this exercise to help illuminate the 'constructions of new agendas' by information robber barons, a new force in American politics, and how they are aiming for a long occupancy of power.

A material consolidation

Although perhaps now more likely to find space in media history courses, at one time it was commonplace to encounter the blind spot debate and its legacies woven throughout the communication curriculum. Rightly the arguments offered by Dallas Smythe, Sut Jhally and Graham Murdock were valuable in reforming the terms investigating communication not only in and under a capitalist regime, but how communication was constitutive of that regime too. Where communication was once thought of as having no commodity form, expressed most commonly through either simply treating it as a means to induce the purchase of commodities or as a means of mystifying capitalist social relations, by tracing the labour process Smythe was able to move critical communication theory out of the cul-de-sacs of vulgar materialism (Baran and Sweezy, 1966) and subjective idealism (Enzenberger, 1974) to find how audiences were produced, commodified and circulated. In doing so, he empirically consolidated the intellectual material offered by Western Marxists among others. This is but one example of how through Frankfurt

School critical theory Marxist ideas have contributed central concepts to communication studies, strengthening the historical scholarship in the discipline perhaps more than any other tradition of inquiry.

For this reason, it is time for another materialist consolidation in the 'sphere of circulation'. The onset of datafication provides a means to undertake a similar reframing of the associated terrain of argumentation in digital scholarship. In the attempt to conduct an analysis of this conjecture, like Smythe before, I am guided by a commitment to a historical-material analysis above all else. This commitment does not signal fidelity to sectarianism or dogmatism. I have little patience for either. Rather this approach prioritizes comprehending the historically informed parameters of social change, thereby ensuring the development and dissemination of the conceptual tools that allow all persons to undertake a broad kind of analysis of their circumstances. Less important is whether 'Marx was right' (Eagleton, 2011) or if 'Marx is Back' (Fuchs and Mosco, 2012).

Accordingly, I focus on the results of systems, relationships and structure as they move in history along with the concepts and methods required to achieve that aim. Attention to the ever-changing dynamics of capitalism means adopting a conception of action that is based in dialectics. Indeed, too rigid a conception of historical development ends up privileging some elements over others in ways that are ultimately unhelpful. Finally, to be clear, a Marxist analysis is not editorializing about one's personal politics. Nor is it prophetic indoctrination. It is an intentional effort to examine the stakes, distribution and rewards of power. As such, I attempt to continue a scholarship anchored to an historical conception of knowledge, striving for a conception and critique of how meanings and value are produced in digital capitalism.

For this reason, I am sympathetic to Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp's (2016) emphasis on a media-centred approach to communication research. In contrast to media-centric approaches (where the media is a driver of change), a media-centred approach proposes that the media is a key venue where social changes can best be identified. For Couldry and Hepp, this analysis of place arises because of the 'deep mediatization' of organizational and social life writ large. As deep mediatization affects conceptions of epistemology, ontology and personhood, the explanatory utility of a media-centred approach is that it points to a political economy of reality. For myself, this requires researchers to ask which classes can disproportionately shape this reality, how they use the media as instruments to this great end, and what might the consequences be for prospects of collective social life.

To compensate for Couldry and Hepp's relative inattention to class relations and capital investment, we can draw from Rick Gruneau's (1996) social theory of media. He argues that communication technologies are not independent or autonomous agents of social change. While any one technology has some inherent properties that predispose it to certain kinds of actions, there is no inherent political meaning. Instead, the production and use of technologies is always the outcome of historical, social and economic forces and contests. Neither are technologies simple reflections of existing social conditions – they help constitute social conditions. For example, the internet is neither inherently democratic nor authoritarian. In short, like other communication systems, platforms are 'not a transparent medium', Gruneau argues, 'rather it is a complex social and cultural production that frames and shapes our perceptions of reality' (1996, 12). The same applies to code, algorithms and databases.

Likewise, Gruneau's theory would not understand digital audiences and platform users as random, arbitrary groups driven by pleasurable sensation. Rather they are formed by their social position, identities and personhood. While audiences and users may be somewhat demographically predictable, identity is fluid as are attachments to genres and narratives. Platform companies grapple with these factors as they themselves seek to produce and commodify audiences and users for advertisers. These dynamics also shape the evaluation and judgement of taste. A politics of aesthetics means that groups have different definitions and means of assessing taste while the positive qualities of a medium and the content are viable conventions. Social dynamics overdetermine technical elements that support aesthetic expression.

Finally, comparing companies and regulatory environments shows that institutional differences matter. These come to shape the content and advertising models present on platforms. Content on a platform is an outcome of complex processes of selection, one which involves the uploaded content, input and feedback of audiences. Still, discussions that are limited to audiences, tastes and identity compromise our ability to analyse platforms' relationship to power and ideology. Platforms play a role in shaping reality through maintaining the ideas and values that support the dominant bloc of social interests. And so it is valuable to remember that the tools we rely upon in digital society are, as Gruneau writes, but a 'socially, culturally, and industrially produced vision of the world' (1996, 12).

Although they have different projects and so resist simple synthesis, what Couldry, Hepp and Gruneau collectively prompt us to focus on are the fundamental forces that contribute towards a general constitution

of social life, ones best able to be identified (but by no means confined to) the politics in and over digital networks. These sentiments and summary lines of analysis express a return to the proverbial 'big issues of social change'. In that spirit, the current task is to plot sightlines for the current transformation initiated by digital developments to see what kinds of trajectories and transitions are possible, to see what kind of social relations are 'in motion'.

Summary and outlook

Inarguably, developments in communications have created near unprecedented socio-economic change, ones with global and historical significance. But it is not enough to argue over the empirical accuracy of descriptions about these developments. More important is the raw conceptualization that allows us to generate subsequent empirical statements. This requires analysing the conjunctures in front of us, as yesterday's assumptions may not hold tomorrow. If we wish to better understand the relationship between unfreedom and class rule a great simplification will not do.

In Chapter 1, I argue that the radical critique of computation and calculation must work from the register of capital. Using the example of the automation of control rights, I link 'algorithmic regulation' with mature capitalist logics – where capital dominates the labour–capital antagonism – to show why computation is necessarily a venue for radical political advocacy, an urgent task on the 'hard road to renewal'. In Chapter 2 I turn to questions about the social life of data. I use the case study of econometrics to look at how datafication disproportionately shapes the comprehension of reality. This is because econometrics is used to produce authoritative facts about the world that come to decide who lives and who dies. Yet, as numbers enjoy a central place in modern reasoning (particularly in government as their presumed objectivity and neutrality assist 'impartial' decision making), it is important that they receive scrutiny for their role in encoded subordination.

To the extent that one can, given the constraints of form and publicly available evidence, in Chapter 3 I look at the response of the ruling class to an organic crisis in the US. With an aim to understand the character of the unfreedom and class rule I examine their class struggle 'from above'. In Chapter 4 I trace how digital media instruments are used by different factions within the capitalist ruling class to capture and maintain the commanding heights of the American social structure. Drawing upon principles presented earlier

in the book Chapter 5 examines the role of data and whiteness in American social life. Chapter 6 extends these themes and applies theoretical insights around misrecognition to better understand the intersection of misinformation and ideology in the US. Chapter 7 traces the evolving intersection of capital, security and technology to examine the broad trajectory of unfreedom. Collectively, these chapters drive at the central stakes of technology in 21st-century American life: whether technology will help codify flat capitalist realism, or if it can help deliver broad-based emancipation.