



End of Capitalism, End of Humanity?

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Abstract

The emergence of biogenetics and the digitalization of our daily lives is an explosive combination, but are the latest tendencies of global capitalism really announcing a new era in which not only the market economy but also the very notion of being-human will be rendered obsolete? Should we celebrate these tendencies as a prospect of radical emancipation, or are they harbingers of a society in which humans will be reduced to cogs in a digital machine? This text tries to move beyond such simple alternatives by way of raising more basic questions: What do we mean by “human” when we speak of posthumanity? Is the vision of posthumanity a realistic prospect or an ideological dream? How can we think about today’s postcapitalist forms of domination?

Keywords

capitalism, commons, Internet of things,
market, posthumanity

From Cooperative Commons...

It has recently become popular to discern signs that point beyond capitalism within the latest tendencies of global capitalism itself, especially the rise of what Jeremy Rifkin calls “Collaborative Commons” (CC) (2014), a new mode of production and exchange that leaves behind private property and market exchange. CC are to be opposed to the two other forms of social organization that were operative in modern history: market interaction (the down-up spontaneous self-organization based on egotist competition and search for profit) and centralized planning (the up-down regulation of society by a strong state as in “really-existing socialism”). More precisely, the proper opposition to CC is the pre-state self-organization of “primitive” societies.

How, then, does this square of four forms function? One possible path to understand it was outlined by Kojin Karatani whose basic premise is the use of modes of exchange (instead of modes of production, as in Marxism) as the tool to analyze the history of humanity (Karatani 2014). Karatani distinguishes four progressive modes of exchange: (A) Gift exchange that predominates in pre-state societies (clans or tribes exchanging gifts); (B) Domination and protection that predominates in slave and feudal societies (here, exploitation is based on direct domination, plus the dominating class has to offer something in exchange, say, protecting its subjects from dangers); (C) Commodity exchange of objects that predominates in capitalism (free individuals exchange not only their products but also their own labor power); (X) A further stage to come, a return to the gift exchange at a higher level—this X is a Kantian regulative idea, a vision that assumed different guises in the history of humanity, from egalitarian religious communities that rely on communal solidarity to anarchist cooperatives and communist projects.

Karatani introduces here two further complications: (1) There is a crucial rupture, the so-called “sedentary revolution,” which takes place in early pre-state societies: the passage from nomadic hunter groups to permanently settled groups organized in tribes or clans; at the level of exchange, we pass from “pure” gift to the complex web of gift and counter-gift. This distinction is crucial insofar as the forthcoming passage to X will enact at a higher level the return to the nomadic mode of social existence. (2) In the passage from A to B, etc., the previous stage does not disappear; although it is “repressed,” the repressed returns in a new form. With the passage from A to B, a community of gift exchange survives as the spirit of religious reconciliation and solidarity; with the passage from B to C, A survives as nation, national community, and B (domination) survives as state power. For this reason, capitalism is for Karatani not a “pure” reign of B, but a triad (or, rather, a Borromean knot) of nation-state-capital: nation as the form of communal solidarity, state as the form of direct domi-

nation, capital as the form of economic exchange; all three of which are necessary for the reproduction of the capitalist society.¹

In CC, individuals are giving their products for free into circulation.² This emancipatory dimension of CC should, of course, be located in the context of the rise of the so-called “Internet of things” (IoT), combined with another result of today’s development of productive forces, the explosive rise of “zero marginal costs” (more and more products, not only information, can be reproduced for no additional costs).

What lurks behind the IoT is, of course, a properly metaphysical vision of the emergence of the so-called Singularity: our individual lives will be totally embedded in a divine-like digital Other that will control and regulate them. This extrapolation confronts us clearly with the utter ambiguity of the “Internet of things.” Two mutually exclusive readings of the IoT impose themselves: an IoT as the domain of radical emancipation, a unique chance of combining freedom and collaboration where, to paraphrase Juliet’s definition of love from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, “the more I give to thee, the more I have, for both are infinite,” versus an IoT as complete submersion into the divine digital Other where I am deprived of my freedom of agency. But are these two readings really mutually exclusive, so that the IoT is the ultimate field of the emancipatory struggle, or are they just two different views of the same reality?

The “Internet of things” is the network of physical devices, vehicles, buildings, and other items embedded with electronics, software, sensors, actuators, and network connectivity that enable these objects to collect and exchange data; it allows objects to be sensed and controlled remotely across existing network infrastructure, creating opportunities for more direct integration of the physical world into computer-based systems, and resulting in improved efficiency, accuracy, and economic benefit. When the IoT is augmented with sensors and actuators, the technology becomes

¹ The exemplary case of such a “return of the repressed” are radical millenarian religious communities that we find in Christianity (Canudos in Brazil, etc.), but also in Islam (e.g., Alamut)—no wonder that, as soon as a religion establishes itself as ideological institution legitimizing existing power relations, it has to fight against its own innermost excess. The Christian church faced a common problem from the fourth century onwards when it became the state church: how to reconcile a feudal society where rich lords ruled over impoverished peasants with the egalitarian poverty of the collective of believers as described in the Gospels? The solution of Thomas Aquinas is that, while, in principle, shared property is better, this holds only for perfect humans; for the majority of us who dwell in sin, private property and difference in wealth are natural, and it is even sinful to demand the abolishment of private property or egalitarianism in our fallen societies, i.e., to demand for the imperfect people what befits only the perfect. This is the immanent contradiction at the very core of the Church’s identity, making it the main anti-Christian force today.

² Collaborative Commons also seem to imply a citizen’s basic income: products are the result of collaboration in which we all participate.

End of Capitalism, End of Humanity?

an instance of a more general class of cyber-physical systems, which also encompasses technologies such as smart grids, smart homes, intelligent transportation, and smart cities; each thing is uniquely identifiable through its embedded computing system and is able to interoperate within the existing Internet infrastructure. The interconnection of these embedded devices (including smart objects) is expected to usher in automation in nearly all fields, while also enabling advanced applications like a smart grid, and expanding to areas such as smart cities. “Things” can also refer to a wide variety of devices, such as heart monitoring implants, bio-chip transponders on farm animals, electric clams in coastal waters, automobiles with built-in sensors, and DNA analysis devices for environmental/food/pathogen monitoring; these devices collect useful data with the help of various existing technologies and then autonomously flow the data between other devices. Human individuals are also “things,” whose states and activities are continuously registered and transmitted without their knowledge: their physical movements, their financial transactions, their health, their eating and drinking habits, what they buy and sell, what they read, listen to, and watch is all collected in digital networks that know them better than they know themselves.

The prospect of the “Internet of things” seems to compel us to turn around Hölderlin’s famous line “But where the danger is, also grows the saving power” into: “But where the saving power is, also grows the danger.” Its “saving” aspect was described in detail by Jeremy Rifkin who claims that, for the first time in human history, a path of overcoming capitalism is discernible as an actual tendency in social production and exchange (the growth of cooperative commons), so that the end of capitalism is on the horizon (Rifkin 2014). The crudest Marxist hypothesis seems re-vindicated: the development of new productive forces makes capitalist relations obsolete. The ultimate irony is that, while Communists are today the best managers of capitalism (China, Vietnam), developed capitalist countries go furthest in the direction of cooperative commons as the way to overcome capitalism.

Markets are beginning to give way to networks, ownership is becoming less important than access, the pursuit of self-interest is being tempered by the pull of collaborative interests, and the traditional dream of rags to riches is being supplanted by a new dream of a sustainable quality of life.... While the capitalist market is based on self-interest and driven by material gain, the Commons is motivated by collaborative interests and driven by a deep desire to connect with others and share (Rifkin 2014: 24).

As capitalist markets and wage labor become less relevant, an economy built upon new principles and social values will progressively emerge: decentralized networks will take the place of markets; access to an abundance of shareable goods and services will reduce the significance of

ownership and private property; open-source innovation, transparency and collaborative co-creation will replace the pursuit of competitive self-interest and autonomy; a commitment to sustainable development and a reintegration with the Earth's biosphere will redress rampant materialism and overconsumption; and the re-discovery of our empathic nature will drive our pursuit for community engagement and social belonging in a rising Collaborative Commons (Rifkin 2014: 23).

But this gives birth to new dangers, even if we discount false worries like the idea that the IoT will boost unemployment (isn't this "threat" a good reason to reorganize production so that workers will work much less? In short, isn't this problem its own solution?) At the concrete level of social organization, the threat is a clearly discernible tendency of the state and private sectors to regain control over the cooperative commons.

National governments are increasingly moving to enact their own legislations, citing sovereign rights, which threaten to undermine the open and accessible nature of the Internet. The private sector is also moving away from the collective alliance, instead seeking to gain greater profits through more centralized control over how content is delivered. Similarly, large controlling companies on the web such as Google, Facebook and Twitter are increasingly "selling the masses of transmitted Big Data that comes their way to commercial bidders and businesses that use it for targeted advertising and marketing campaigns (Rifkin 2014: 31)" (cj dew 2015).

In essence, vertically scaled profit-seeking corporations of the capitalist era are exploiting a laterally scaled and distributed CC for their own private ends. In other words, "companies are operating a social Commons as a commercial venture" (Rifkin 2014: 47).

Personal contacts are thus privatized by Facebook, software by Microsoft, search by Google, retail by Amazon... To grasp these new forms of privatization, one should critically transform Marx's conceptual apparatus: because of his neglect of the social dimension of "general intellect," Marx didn't envisage the possibility of *the privatization* of the "general intellect" itself—this is what is at the core of the struggle for "intellectual property." Here Negri is right, within this framework exploitation in the classic Marxist sense is no longer possible—which is why it has to be enforced more and more by legal measures, that is, by a non-economic force (Hardt and Negri 2004). This is why today exploitation more and more takes the form of rent: as Carlo Vercellone put it, postindustrial capitalism is characterized by the "becoming-rent of the profit" (2006: 31). And this is why direct authority is needed: it is needed to impose the (arbitrary) legal conditions for extracting rent, conditions which are no longer "spontaneously" generated by the market. Perhaps therein resides the funda-

mental contradiction of today's postmodern capitalism: while its logic is deregulatory, anti-statal, nomadic/deterritorializing, etc., its key tendency of the "becoming-rent-of-the-profit" signals the strengthening role of the state whose (not only) regulatory function is increasingly ever present. Dynamic deterritorialization coexists with and relies on more and more authoritarian interventions of the state and its legal and other apparatuses. What one can discern at the horizon of our historical becoming is thus a society in which personal libertarianism and hedonism coexist with (and are sustained by) a complex web of regulatory state mechanisms. Far from disappearing, the state is strengthening today.

In other words, when, due to the crucial role of the "general intellect" (knowledge and social cooperation) in the creation of wealth, forms of wealth are more and more "out of all proportion to the direct labor time spent on their production," the result is not, as Marx seems to have expected, the self-dissolution of capitalism, but the gradual relative transformation of the profit generated by the exploitation of a labor force into rent appropriated by the privatization of the "general intellect." Let us take the case of Bill Gates: How did he become the richest man in the world? His wealth has nothing to do with the production costs of the products Microsoft is selling (one can even argue that Microsoft is paying its intellectual workers a relatively high salary), that is, Gates's wealth is not the result of his success in producing high quality software for lower prices than his competitors, or in the higher "exploitation" of his hired intellectual workers. If this were to be the case, Microsoft would have gone bankrupt long ago, people would have overwhelmingly chosen programs like Linux that are free and, according to specialists, of better quality than Microsoft programs. Why, then, are millions still buying Microsoft? Because Microsoft imposed itself as an almost universal standard, a kind of direct embodiment of the "general intellect." Gates became the richest man in the world in a couple of decades through appropriating the rent for allowing millions of intellectual workers to participate in the form of a "general intellect" that he privatized and controls. Is it true, then, that today's intellectual workers are no longer separated from the objective conditions of their labor (they own their PC, etc.), which is Marx's description of capitalist "alienation"? Yes, but more fundamentally *no*: they are cut off from the social field of their work, from a "general intellect"—this one is mediated by private capital.

The worst thing to do here is to simply oppose the "good" and "bad" aspect, following the legendary US politician back in the Prohibition era who, when asked what he thought about alcohol, answered: "If you mean by alcohol the dreadful drink that ruins families and causes fight, then I am against it. But if you mean the wonderful drink that makes the evening relaxing and brings joy to a company, then I am for it." Applied to digital commons, this stance amounts to: "If you mean Google or another big corporation knowing us better than we know ourselves and regulating our

lives, then I am against; but if you mean free cooperation then I am for it.” The predominant view is that such companies play an intermediate role in the passage from market to cooperative commons, and they will disappear by themselves through the expansion of CC:

Companies such as Uber and Airbnb will attempt to bridge the gap between the two economies and take advantage of both. However, as truly decentralized peer-to-peer networks begin to take over at near zero marginal cost these hybrid companies will not last. Truly decentralized networks of exchange on the Commons will allow for direct peer-to-peer transactions without the need for third-party intermediary trust or involvement (Rifkin 2014: 39).

Such a smooth solution avoids the real problem: Is this encroachment by big corporations just a parasitism to be overcome, or is it that CC cannot stand alone and needs an external controlling and regulating agency? What if—while fighting against corporations that privatize our commons—the direction of this fight should not be to dream about the moment when decentralized collaborative networks will take over the entire field, but to find another organization and form of power external to commons that will regulate its functioning? But even if we abstract from this reprivatization of commons and imagine a full Collaborative Commons, another problem arises in the management of CC.

The significance of reputation systems should be noted. Reputation rankings will play an important role in ensuring compliance with norms and regulating activities. These systems are designed to rank an individual’s *social capital* in the Commons. With the growth of the Commons, “expect social-capital ratings to become as important to millions of participants on the Collaborative Commons as credit ratings were to consumers in the capitalist marketplace (Rifkin 2014: 258)” (cjdew 2015).

OK, but how will reputations emerge, how will ratings be established? Envy enters here with a vengeance. In his “American Utopia,” Fredric Jameson totally rejects the predominant optimistic view, according to which in communism, envy will be left behind as a remainder of capitalist competition, to be replaced by solidary collaboration and pleasure in other’s pleasures; dismissing this myth, he emphasizes that in communism, precisely insofar as it will be a more just society, envy and resentment will explode—why is this so? Jean-Pierre Dupuy proposes a convincing critique of John Rawls theory of justice (2002). In the Rawls model of a just society, social inequalities are tolerated only insofar as they also help those at the bottom of the social ladder, and insofar as they are not based on inherited hierarchies, but on natural inequalities, which are considered contingent, not merits (Rawls 1999 [1971]). Even the British Con-

servatives seem now to be prepared to endorse Rawls's notion of justice: in December 2005, newly elected leader David Cameron signalled his intention of turning the Conservative Party into a defender of the underprivileged, declaring how "I think the test of all our policies should be: What does it do for the people who have the least, the people on the bottom rung of the ladder?" But what Rawls doesn't see is how such a society would create conditions for an uncontrolled explosion of *ressentiment*: in it, I would know that my lower status is fully "justified" and would thus be deprived of the ploy of excusing my failure as the result of social injustice. Rawls thus proposes a terrifying model of a society in which hierarchy is directly legitimized in natural properties, thereby missing Friedrich Hayek's key lesson: it is much easier to accept inequalities if one can claim that they result from an impersonal, blind force; the good thing about the "irrationality" of the market and success or failure in capitalism is that it allows me to precisely perceive my failure or success as "undeserved," contingent... (Hayek 1994). Remember the old motif of the market as the modern version of an imponderable Fate: the fact that capitalism is not "just" is thus a key feature of what makes it acceptable to the majority. I can live with my failure much more easily if I know that it is not due to my inferior qualities, but to chance.

There is another complication here. Marx always emphasized that the exchange between worker and capitalist is "just" in the sense that workers (as a rule) get paid the full value of their labor power as a commodity. There is no direct "exploitation" here, that is, it is not that workers are not paid the full value of the commodity they are selling to the capitalists. So while, in a market economy I remain de facto dependent, this dependency is nonetheless "civilized," enacted in the form of a "free" market exchange between myself and other persons instead of the form of direct servitude or physical coercion. It is easy to ridicule Ayn Rand, but there is a grain of truth in her famous "hymn to money" from *Atlas Shrugged*:

Until and unless you discover that money is the root of all good, you ask for your own destruction. When money ceases to become the means by which men deal with one another, then men become the tools of other men. Blood, whips and guns or dollars. Take your choice—there is no other (Rand 2007: 871).

Did Marx not say something similar in his well-known formula of how, in the universe of commodities, "relations between people assume the guise of relations among things" (Marx 1990: 165)? In a market economy, relations between people can appear as relations of mutually recognized freedom and equality: domination is no longer directly enacted and visible as such. Really-existing socialism in the twentieth century proved that the overcoming of the market-alienation abolishes "alienated" freedom and

with it freedom *tout court*, bringing us back to “non-alienated” relations of direct domination. To what extent are the CC exposed to the same danger? Can they survive without a regulating agency that controls the very medium of collaboration and thereby exerts direct domination?

... to the Posthuman

There is, however, another, more radical threat at work in the rise of CC: the end of humanity itself. One should be very precise here: Is the vision of posthumanity an actual threat to subjectivity, a real danger that subjectivity will disappear, so that the only way to retain subjectivity is to block the passage to posthumanity, or is there still subject in the posthuman condition, which means that the vision of posthumanity is ultimately an ideological fantasy? One can effectively claim that the vision of posthumanity relies on a too-short notion of human subjectivity. When cognitivists speak about humanity, they mean a standard naïve notion of an individual who experiences him/herself as a free, responsible agent—the Freudian subject is nowhere in sight here. On the other hand, J. A. Miller’s attempt to save subjectivity (and therewith space for psychoanalysis) in the ongoing onslaught of cognitivism and biogenetics rehashes the standard hermeneutic operation: even if we are totally objectivized in the eyes of science, we still have to adopt a subjective stance toward this objectivization, that is, it matters how we subjectivize or experience our situation, and this mode of subjectivization is the space of psychoanalytic intervention.

Let’s take a step back and look into what is actually going on. The prospect of radical digitalization combined with the scanning of our brains (or tracking our bodily processes with implants) opens up the realistic possibility of an external machine that will know us, biologically and psychically, much better than we know ourselves: registering what we eat, buy, read, watch, and listen to; our moods, fears, and satisfactions; the external machine will get a much more accurate picture of ourselves than our conscious Self, which as we know doesn’t even exist as a consistent entity (Harari 2016). Our Self is composed of narratives that retroactively try to impose some consistency on the pandemonium of our experiences, obliterating experiences and memories that disturb these narratives. Ideology does not reside primarily in stories invented (by those in power) to deceive others, it resides in stories invented by subjects to deceive themselves. But the pandemonium persists, and the machine will register the discord and will maybe even be able to deal with it in a much more rational way than our conscious Self. Say, when I have to decide to marry or not, the machine will register all the shifting attitudes that haunt me, the past pains and disappointments that I prefer to sweep under the carpet. And why not even extend this prospect to political decisions? While my Self can be easily seduced by a populist demagogue, the machine will take

note of all my past frustrations, it will register the inconsistency between my fleeting passions and my other opinions—so why should the machine not vote on my behalf? So while science of the brain confirms the post-structuralist or deconstructionist idea that we are the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, and that these stories are a confused *bricolage*, an inconsistent multiplicity of stories with no single Self totalizing them, it seems to offer (or promise, at least) a way out that is due to its very disadvantage: precisely because the machine that reads us all the time is blind, without awareness, a mechanic algorithm, it can make decisions that are much more adequate than those made by human individuals, much more adequate not only with regard to external reality but also and above all with regard to these individuals themselves, to what they really want or need.

Liberalism sanctifies the narrating Self, and allows it to vote in the polling stations, in the supermarket, and in the marriage market. For centuries this made good sense, because although the narrating Self believed in all kinds of fictions and fantasies, no alternative system knew me better. Yet once we have a system that really does know me better, it will be foolhardy to leave authority in the hands of the narrating Self. Liberal habits such as democratic elections will become obsolete, because Google will be able to represent even my own political opinions better than myself (Harari 2016: 338).

One can make a realist case for this option: it is not that the computer registering our activity is omnipotent and infallible, it is simply that, on average, its decisions work substantially better than the decisions of our mind. In medicine, it makes better diagnoses than our average doctor, etc., up to the exploding algorithmic trading on stock markets where programs that one can download for free already outperform financial advisers. One thing is clear: the liberal “true Self,” the free agent that enacts what I “really want,” simply doesn’t exist, and fully endorsing this inexistence means abandoning the basic individualist premise of liberal democracy. The digital machine as the latest embodiment of the big Other, the “subject supposed to know,” which operates as a field of knowledge (a chain of signifiers) without S_1 , without a master signifier that “represents the subject for other signifiers” by way of adding a specific “spin” or bias of a particular narrative... There is, of course, a whole series of questions that persist here. Is the function of the master signifier just a negative one (imposing on a field of knowledge a subjective spin) or does it play a positive role? Harari is well aware of this ambiguity:

In the past, censorship worked by blocking the flow of information. In the twenty-first century, censorship works by flooding people with irrelevant information.... In ancient times having power meant having access to data. Today having power means knowing what to ignore (Harari 2016: 396).

Can this ignoring be done by a “blind” machine or does it require a minimal form of subjectivity?

So where, in the space of a digital machine, is there an opening for subjectivity? If the (almost) omnipotent digital big Other stands for our radical alienation (our truth located outside ourselves, inaccessible to us), what then would “separation” (Lacan’s name for the operation that counters alienation) mean here? Separation is not the separation of the subject from the Other but an operation that takes places within the Other itself, exposing the Other as “barred,” divided from itself, marked by an antagonism—and is the digital big Other also not prone to its own glitches, inconsistencies? And does this imperfection/inconsistency of the big Other not open up a space for subjectivity, even for subjective freedom? One should be careful here not to confuse freedom and randomness: even if a process is not fully determined but depends on genuinely random processes like the decay of uranium atoms, it is in no sense free but merely determined by meaningless randomness.

One can discern yet another opening for subjectivity. There is a long tradition, in philosophy and science, of denying free will, but doubts about free will “don’t really change history unless they have a practical impact on economics, politics, and day-to-day life. Humans are masters of cognitive dissonance, and we allow ourselves to believe one thing in the laboratory and an altogether different thing in the courthouse or in parliament” (Harari 2016: 305). Harari points out how even popular champions of the new scientific world, like Dawkins or Pinker, after writing hundreds of pages that debunk free will and freedom of choice, end up supporting political liberalism (2016: 305). However, today, “liberalism is threatened not by the philosophical idea that ‘there are no free individuals,’ but rather by concrete technologies. We are about to face a flood of extremely useful devices, tools and structures that make *no* allowance for the free will of individual humans. Can democracy, the free market and human rights survive this flood?” (Harari 2016: 306). So if development will render *homo sapiens* obsolete, what will follow it? A posthuman *homo deus* (with abilities that are traditionally identified as divine) or a quasi-omnipotent digital machine? Singularity (global consciousness) or blind intelligence without awareness?

With regard to the possibility of new forms of awareness emerging, one should bear in mind Metzinger’s warning. While he considers artificial subjectivity possible, especially in the direction of hybrid biorobotics, and, consequently, an “empirical, not philosophical” issue, he emphasizes its ethically problematic character: “it is not at all clear if the biological form of consciousness, as so far brought about by evolution on our planet, is a *desirable* form of experience, an actual *good in itself*” (Metzinger 2004: 620). This problematic feature concerns conscious pain and suffering; evolution “has created an expanding ocean of suffering and confusion where there previously was none. As not only the simple number of

individual conscious subjects but also the dimensionality of their phenomenal state spaces is continuously increasing, this ocean is also deepening” (Metzinger 2004: 621). And it is reasonable to expect that new artificially generated forms of awareness will create new “deeper” forms of suffering...

Another option: if the machines win, then “humans are in danger of losing their value, because intelligence is decoupling from consciousness” (Harari 2016: 311). This decoupling of intelligence and consciousness again confronts us with the enigma of consciousness: in spite of numerous rather desperate attempts, evolutionary biology has no clear answer to what is the evolutionary function of awareness/consciousness. Consequently, now that intelligence is decoupling from consciousness, “what will happen to society, politics and daily life when nonconscious but highly intelligent algorithms know us better than we know ourselves?” (Harari 2016: 397).

Another and most probable option: a radical division, much stronger than the class division, within human society itself. In the near future, biotechnology and computer algorithms will join powers in producing “bodies, brains, and minds,” with the gap exploding “between those who know how to engineer bodies and brains and those who do not”: “those who ride the train of progress will acquire divine abilities of creation and destruction, while those left behind will face extinction” (Harari 2016: 273). The main threat is therefore that of the rise of a

...small and privileged elite of upgraded humans. These superhumans will enjoy unheard-of abilities and unprecedented creativity, which will allow them to go on making many of the most important decisions in the world... However, most humans will not be upgraded, and they will consequently become an inferior caste, dominated by both computer algorithms and the new superhumans. Splitting humankind into biological castes will destroy the foundations of liberal ideology (Harari 2016: 346).

One thing is sure: from a psychoanalytic standpoint, what the shift to the posthuman amounts to at its most fundamental is the overcoming (leaving behind) of the Sexual in its most radical ontological dimension—not just “sexuality” as a specific sphere of human existence but the Sexual as an antagonism, the bar of an impossibility, constitutive of being-human in its finitude. And the issue carefully avoided by the partisans of the new asexual man is: to what extent are many other features usually identified with being-human, features like art, creativity, consciousness, etc., dependent on the antagonism that constitutes the Sexual. This is why the addition of “asexual” to the series of positions that compose LGBT is crucial and unavoidable: the endeavor to liberate sexuality from all “binary” oppressions to set it free in its entire polymorphous perversity, necessarily ends up in the abandonment of the very

sphere of sexuality—the liberation *of* sexuality has to end up in the liberation (of humanity) *from* sexuality.

The ultimate difference between the digital universe and the symbolic space proper concerns the status of counterfactuals. Recall the famous joke from Lubitsch’s movie *Ninotchka*: “‘Waiter! A cup of coffee without cream, please!’ ‘I’m sorry, sir, we have no cream, only milk, so can it be a coffee without milk?’” At the factual level, coffee remains the same coffee, but what we can change is to make the coffee without cream into a coffee without milk—or, even more simply, to add the implied negation and to make the plain coffee into a coffee without milk. The difference between “plain coffee” and “coffee without milk” is purely virtual, there is no difference in the real cup of coffee, and exactly the same goes for the Freudian unconscious: its status is also purely virtual, it is not a “deeper” psychic reality—in short, the unconscious is like “milk” in “coffee without milk.” And therein resides the catch: Can the digital big Other that knows us better than we know ourselves also discern the difference between “plain coffee” and “coffee without milk”? Or, is the counterfactual sphere outside the scope of the digital big Other, which is constrained to facts in our brain and social environs that we are unaware of? The difference we are dealing with here is the difference between the “unconscious” (neurological, social...) facts that determine us and the Freudian “unconscious” whose status is purely counterfactual.

This domain of counterfactuals can only be operative if subjectivity is here, since the basic twist of every signifying structure (the “primordial repression” of the binary signifier) implies a subject, or, as Lacan put it, a signifier is that which represents a subject for another signifier. Back to our example, in order to register the difference between “plain coffee” and “coffee without milk,” a subject has to be operative.

A more general methodological conclusion concerns the status of determinism. According to the standard view, the past is fixed; what happened, happened, it cannot be undone, and the future is open—it depends on unpredictable contingencies. What we should propose here is a reversal of this standard view: the past is open to retroactive reinterpretations, while the future is closed since we live in a determinist universe (see Frank Ruda’s defense of determinism [2016]). This doesn’t mean that we cannot change the future; it just means that in order to change our future, we should first (not “understand,” but) change our past, reinterpret it in such a way that opens up toward a different future from the one implied by the predominant vision of the past.

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