

Algorithms of the Empire: Data Colonialism and the New Psychoanalytical Hegemony of Silicon Valley

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Abstract

The research paper probes the emergence of "Data Colonialism" as the contemporary demonstration of imperial domination. Moving from historical territorial occupation, modern colonization is digital, coordinated by Silicon Valley and global tech clusters. Utilizing Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias's framework of data colonialism alongside Frantz Fanon's psychoanalytical theories, this study scrutinizes how algorithms appropriate human experience as raw material. The paper argues that Big Tech has successfully instituted an "eternal hegemony" by restructuring surveillance and data extraction not as a curse of exploitation but as a phenomenal "boon" of connectivity and convenience. Through the psychological engineering of users, digital dependency has normalized a new form of cognitive domination.

This paper examines Silicon Valley's technological order through the intertwined lenses of data colonialism and psychoanalysis. Drawing on Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias's theory of data colonialism, Shoshana Zuboff's surveillance capitalism and psychoanalytic perspectives on platform desire, it argues that contemporary algorithms do not solely extract data; they reshape desire, fantasy and the formation of the subject. Data colonialism exemplifies historical colonial logics of appropriation into the domain of everyday life while platforms function as a new "algorithmic Other" that shapes desire, visibility and psychic life. The result is a form of hegemony that regulates less through apparent coercion than through the continuous capture and modulation of desire itself. The paper concludes by outlining the political and psychic stakes of resistance.

Keywords: data colonialism; Silicon Valley; psychoanalytical hegemony; Big Tech; algorithmic bias; digital dependency; Frantz Fanon; surveillance capitalism; Global South; cognitive domination

1 Introduction

The historical epoch of traditional colonialism, characterized by the physical occupation of lands and the extraction of natural resources, has largely ended. However, the structural blueprint of colonial exploitation remains active. In the 21st century, the new frontier of colonization is not geographical land, but human behaviour, identity and data. This phenomenon, known as Data Colonialism, represents a shift where global tech monopolies primarily situated in Silicon Valley extract data from global citizens to create trillions of dollars in predictive capital.

The deepest triumph of this digital empire is psychological. Just as historical colonizers used the "Civilizing Mission" myth to restructure violent conquest as a moral blessing, modern tech giants present hyper-surveillance and algorithmic control as an indispensable "boon" of progress, connectivity and artificial intelligence. This paper explores how this new psychoanalytical hegemony is constructed and sustained, making digital dependency an inescapable reality.

2 Theoretical framework: merging data colonialism with postcolonial psychoanalysis

To understand the depth of digital domination, we must synthesize modern media theory with postcolonial psychology:

- *Data Colonialism (Couldry & Mejias)*: This theory posits that just as historic colonialism appropriated land, infrastructure and bodies, contemporary capitalism appropriates human life through the medium of data tracking. Human experiences are converted into digital commodities.
- *The Internalized Gaze (Frantz Fanon)*: In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon detailed how the colonized subject internalizes the identity of the colonizer to feel validated. In the digital paradigm, the user internalizes the "algorithmic gaze." The postcolonial subject seeks validation, identity, and visibility through metrics (likes, shares, views, and streaks) designed by Western corporations, altering their psychological autonomy.

3 The illusion of the "boon": convenience as the new civilizing mission

Historically, empires built railways and bureaucracies to facilitate extraction while calling it "development." Today, Silicon Valley deploys applications, cloud computing and AI models under the banner of democratization. By offering free access to communication tools and AI platforms, Big Tech fosters a psychological environment where resistance feels counterproductive. The user willingly surrenders privacy, choosing the "boon" of algorithmic convenience over the "curse" of digital isolation.

In the contemporary digital landscape, Silicon Valley masks the aggressive harvesting of human behavioral data behind the rhetoric of absolute convenience and the promise of a technological civilizing mission. By offering sophisticated tools through a "free-tier" trap, Big Tech creates the psychological illusion of a benevolent boon while converting human experience into raw material for data extraction.

4 Data colonialism: continuities of appropriation

Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias define data colonialism as "an emerging social order for the appropriation of human life so that data can be continuously extracted from it for profit." Unlike oil, data is not a natural substance waiting to be found; it must be produced through relations of connection, tracking, and quantification. These "data relations" convert the flow of everyday life—clicks, movements, conversations, emotions, locations—into extractable resources.

The analogy with historical colonialism is functional rather than literal. Classical colonialism seized land, bodies, and natural resources; data colonialism seizes the abstract traces of life itself. Both rest on dispossession justified by a civilizing or progressive narrative. Both create core-periphery dynamics in which value flows outward from the colonized to the metropole. In the present case the metropole is primarily Silicon Valley (and secondarily the Chinese tech complex), while the periphery includes both the Global South and the domestic populations of the Global North. Data extraction is therefore both external and internal: it colonizes the formerly colonized and the home populations of the colonizers simultaneously.

Couldry and Mejias emphasize that data colonialism does not replace earlier forms of domination; it superimposes a new layer of extraction upon them. The result is a social order in which social life becomes a continuous input to capitalist production. Just as historical colonialism prepared the

ground for industrial capitalism, data colonialism appears to prepare the ground for a further stage of capitalism—the capitalization of life without limit.

5 Algorithmic hegemony and cognitive subjugation

The psychoanalytical hegemony of Silicon Valley operates silently through cognitive restructuring:

- *Predictive Modification*: Algorithms do not merely observe behaviour; they actively shape it. Through feedback loops, users are subtly conditioned to consume, think and vote in ways that maximize corporate profit.
- *Epistemic Violence*: Knowledge production has been centralized. Search engines and AI models dictate what is "truth" or "fact." This Eurocentric algorithmic bias marginalizes local, indigenous knowledge systems of the Global South, creating an intellectual dependency where the West remains the sole architect of the digital future.

Algorithms translate the abstract logic of data colonialism into concrete infrastructures of prediction and control. Platforms do not merely collect data; they actively shape the environments in which data is generated. Ranking, recommendation, personalization, and engagement metrics organize visibility and attention. What appears as neutral technical optimization is in fact a political economy of attention and behaviour.

Shoshana Zuboff's analysis of surveillance capitalism complements this picture. Surveillance capitalists claim private human experience as free raw material, transform it into behavioural data, and use it to produce prediction products sold in behavioural futures markets. The ultimate horizon is not merely prediction but the modification of behaviour at scale so that outcomes become more certain and therefore more profitable. Free will is treated as friction to be engineered away.

This constitutes an "algorithmic empire" in several senses. First, it is infrastructural: a small number of firms control the dominant platforms, cloud systems, and AI models through which much of global communication, commerce, and knowledge now passes. Second, it is epistemic: algorithms filter what can be seen, known, and desired, producing stratified regimes of visibility. Third, it is geopolitical: data and AI infrastructures create new dependencies, particularly for states and populations in the Global South, while consolidating power in a handful of corporate centres. The empire requires no formal colonies; continuous connection is sufficient.

6 Implications and resistance

The combined effect of data colonialism and psychoanalytical hegemony is a form of power that is both extractive and constitutive. It extracts value from life while simultaneously shaping the forms of life from which value can be extracted. Subjects are produced as data-generating, attention-paying, desire-expressing entities whose psychic life is continuously available for modulation.

Resistance must therefore operate on multiple registers. Legal and regulatory efforts—data protection, antitrust, algorithmic accountability—remain necessary but insufficient if they treat the problem solely as one of privacy or market concentration. Decolonial approaches insist on the historical continuity of appropriation and the need for collective refusal of data relations that convert social life into raw material. Psychoanalytic insight adds that resistance also requires working through the forms of enjoyment and recognition that bind subjects to platforms. Alternative infra-

structures, practices of disconnection or selective connection, and the cultivation of forms of sociality not mediated by continuous quantification are part of any serious response.

The stakes are high. If data colonialism succeeds in normalizing the capitalization of life without limit, the space for autonomous subjectivity—and for politics grounded in that autonomy—narrows. The algorithm of the empire does not merely rule; it seeks to become the condition of possibility for desire itself.

7 Conclusion: towards digital decolonization

The transition of colonization from a physical mechanism to a psychological, data-driven framework marks the birth of an eternal hegemony. Silicon Valley has successfully commercialized the human psyche. Because the infrastructure of data extraction is built on the consent of the user—disguised as convenience—dismantling it requires more than legal regulations or antitrust laws.

True digital decolonization demands a radical psychological shift. It requires users to look past the illusion of the digital "boon," question the algorithmic frameworks governing their daily choices, and reclaim sovereignty over their cognitive and behavioural data.

Silicon Valley's order is best understood as the convergence of a colonial logic of appropriation and a psychoanalytical logic of hegemony. Data colonialism seizes human life as extractable resource. Algorithms operationalize that seizure at scale. Platforms then occupy the place of a new Other that reorganizes desire, fantasy, and jouissance. The result is an empire that colonizes both the social world and the inner world.

Recognizing this dual colonization is the precondition for any effective resistance. The task is not to reject technology as such, but to refuse the particular social relations and psychic configurations through which technology currently extracts and governs. Only then can alternative forms of connection, knowledge, and subjectivity become imaginable.

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