

Capitalism and the artificial intelligence revolution

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Last month, over 3,000 Google employees signed a letter taking a stand against Google's collusion with the United States' drone assassination program, which has killed and maimed tens of thousands of people throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

Google employees demanded that the company end its participation in "Project Maven," a system of mass drone surveillance integrated with the US drone warfare program, declaring, "We believe that Google should not be in the business of war." It called for the adoption of a policy stating that "neither Google nor its contractors will ever build warfare technology."

Google's collusion with the drone assassination program highlights the growing integration of the major technology companies with the US military, which, having declared a new era of "great-power competition" with Russia and China, sees pressing Silicon Valley into its war plans as the only way to regain its military power on the world stage.

Just as ominous is Google's role in mass domestic surveillance and censorship. In April of 2017, Google announced changes in its search algorithms—implemented through the use of "deep learning" and artificial intelligence technologies—to promote "authoritative content" over "alternative viewpoints." These changes led to a sharp fall in search referrals to left-wing web sites by as much as 75 percent—with the *World Socialist Web Site* a central target.

More broadly, Google, Facebook and Twitter have hired tens of thousands of professional censors, many with backgrounds in the military, police and intelligence agencies, to train and augment their artificial intelligence systems to censor and police what people say and read online.

Central to both the military's recruitment of the technology companies and the partnership of these firms with the intelligence agencies is the rapid development of artificial intelligence technology. Using the power of artificial intelligence, Google is helping the US military to mesh together drone footage to identify individuals and objects in a targeted area.

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg declared earlier this year that its "goal with AI [artificial intelligence] is to understand the meaning of all the content on Facebook," as part of

manipulations to the social media giant's News Feed.

The object of the military and intelligence agencies' use of artificial intelligence is the holy grail of every totalitarian regime: what the National Security Agency called "total information awareness," or, as its unofficial mission statement put it, "Collect It All, Know It All... Exploit It All."

This mission statement, which in another context would seem to be an unhinged dictator's megalomaniacal fantasy, is fast becoming an imminent reality through the power of artificial intelligence.

In his statement to the *World Socialist Web Site's* January 16 online webinar, "Organizing Resistance to Internet Censorship," Wikileaks founder Julian Assange warned of the immense dangers posed to humanity by the misuse of artificial intelligence.

"The future of humanity is the struggle between humans that control machines and machines that control humans. Between the democratization of communication and usurpation of communication by artificial intelligence," Assange warned. "Undetectable mass social influence powered by artificial intelligence is an existential threat to humanity. The phenomena differs in traditional attempts to shape cultural and political phenomena by operating at scale, speed and increasingly at a subtlety that eclipses human capacities."

The use of artificial intelligence for mass surveillance and war-making is only one of the destructive purposes to which this transformative technology is being used under capitalism.

Already, artificial intelligence is being used at Amazon warehouses to track every move employees make. Amazon's systems count how many times workers go to the bathroom and alert foremen if workers stop to catch their breath in the up to 15 miles they are forced to walk during a single shift. At companies such as Uber and Lyft, artificial intelligence is used to push drivers to work longer and harder, often to the detriment of their health and well-being.

But even more radical changes are on the horizon. As ride-sharing companies and shipping lines rush to implement driverless cars, trucks and boats, tens of thousands of jobs will be eliminated. The integration of AI with robotics will extend the wave of mass automation that has already displaced countless thousands of industrial workers into every single

field, from the building trades to food preparation, to custodial work and retail.

According to a 2013 survey by Oxford University, nearly half of US jobs will be destroyed by AI and robotics in the next two decades alone.

Since the industrial revolution, capitalism has managed to transform every development in technology into an instrument of human oppression and butchery. The introduction of the spinning jenny ushered in the horrendous social misery of 19th century slums of London and Manchester. The cotton gin brought a resurgence of American slavery. The airplane was converted—through the doctrine of “strategic bombing”—into a method for killing civilians by the tens of thousands. And the nearly limitless energy created by nuclear fission was turned into a means of destroying entire societies, and perhaps humanity itself.

But why should these technologies, which objectively create the conditions for a massive expansion of the standard of living for billions of people, be put to such horrendous uses? As the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky wrote in 1926:

Technique and science have their own logic—the logic of the cognition of nature and the mastering of it in the interests of man. But technique and science develop not in a vacuum but in human society, which consists of classes. The ruling class, the possessing class, controls technique and through it controls nature. Technique in itself cannot be called either militaristic or pacifistic. In a society in which the ruling class is militaristic, technique is in the service of militarism. (“Radio, Science, Technique and Society”)

In the hands of the ruling elites that control society under capitalism, every technological innovation becomes a cudgel: against the working class and against countries they seek to conquer and suppress through military violence.

In different hands, the same technology will produce different results. In a socialist society, the artificial intelligence and robotics revolution will create the circumstances for a massive elevation of not only the economic well-being of the population, but also its cultural life. The replacement of tedious and back-breaking occupations will mean not mass unemployment and destitution, but rather greater leisure and an expansion of workers’ opportunities for education, family life and cultural enrichment.

The automation of the building trades and the expansion of additive manufacturing (3D printing) to construction will vastly reduce the amount of labor required to build homes, schools and hospitals and ensure excellent housing for all. The leveraging of artificial intelligence in gene sequencing, drug development and analysis of medical studies will result in

unprecedented breakthroughs in human health for the whole of humanity, not just the few who can pay soaring drug prices.

The roboticization of both farming and transportation will vastly reduce the cost of food, ending malnutrition and ensuring a high-quality diet for all—not the ruin of small farmers by agriculture conglomerates.

In holding out this prospect for humanity, Marxists base themselves on the traditions of the Enlightenment, which drew a connection between human progress in science and society. Just as men like Isaac Newton were unlocking the secrets of nature, so too society could be rationally understood, and, once understood, changed for the better.

This view stands in direct contrast to the middle-class pessimists of the Frankfurt School, who, in rejecting the Enlightenment, claimed that the theory of gravity paved the way to the gas chambers of Auschwitz. What demoralized intellectuals such as Herbert Marcuse and Max Horkheimer—who falsely claimed to be students of Karl Marx and whose theories are still palmed off as Marxism at universities—ignored was precisely Trotsky’s point: that “technique and science develop not in a vacuum but in human society, which consists of classes.”

The question is: Who controls the means of production, and thus society?

Two roads are open to humanity. The capitalist road offers a relentless escalation of war, poverty, mass repression and totalitarian dictatorship. The road of socialism offers not just freedom from all those horrors, but the liberation of all mankind from oppression and want.

Which road humanity takes will be decided through the class struggle. Amid a growing strike wave throughout the United States, Europe and the whole world, the most critical question is the unification of the disparate struggles by workers in different industries and countries into a common political movement for the socialist transformation of society. Only then will the vast technological revolution on the horizon be transformed into a revolution for human liberation, not human enslavement.



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