

Transcript of “Colonized by Data: The Costs of Connection with Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias” – September 19, 2019

[SIDE CONVERSATIONS]

Hello, everyone. Can you hear me OK? Great to see you all. Packed room. Important topic. Of course, the Swiss get nervous because it's already past noon. But everyone will catch up, I'm sure.

Delighted to welcome you all to this special group talk. My name is Urs Gasser, I serve as the executive director of Berkman Klein Center. And today, we're really pleased to have Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias here, who will talk about their new book.

And the book talk is Colonized by Data-- the Costs of Connection. It's promising to be a very interesting discussion. I have actually the pleasure to read the book. I'm that proud because usually I'm running around and don't read enough anymore. And one of the good side effects of moderating book talks is actually you're forced to read the book. Otherwise, you embarrass yourself if you try to ask questions later on.

Nick is a sociologist of media and culture, a professor at LSE. He's also a faculty associate of the Berkman Klein Center, so we've had the pleasure to work together for a couple of years. And I greatly benefited from many insights that I also now see here in the book. And Ulises is-- I think the first time that you are visiting us, is that correct?

Yes, I think so.

Particular warm welcome to you on a sunny day here in Cambridge. You are a professor of communications at the State University of New York. Is that correct? Great. And the co-author of the book. So we will proceed in three steps. First, we'll have a book talk by the authors for about half an hour. We'll then open up for some comments by a few colleagues from the Berkman Klein Center who will share quick reactions, about two minutes, so one thought, maybe one the reaction to what we hear.

And then we will open up for discussion. I have lots of questions myself. But I will save those, I guess, because I'm sure you will have many coincident thoughts too. Without further ado, over to you. I should say this is webcasted and recorded, so please keep that in mind when you introduce yourself and when you ask questions. Thanks for being here. Over to you. Congratulations on a great book.

Thank you. Thank you very much. Well, thank you very much, Urs. We're thrilled to be here, obviously. I'm particularly thrilled to be here knowing so many of you in the room, and also having written and thought a lot of my half of the book right here at the Berkman Center. So it's a special return, in a way. What we're going to do, we're going to obviously give you a flavor of the vote, which is outside if you're interested in buying it.

There are many strands to our argument. We're going to try and condense some of them in a half an hour. But all of them really center around a core question, which is a very, very simple question. What is going on with data across business and government, society, human life, all of our lives? Something big is going on, we know it, but what is it?

Is it, as many people have argued, a new phase of capitalism? There are lots of options there, new phases of capitalism, most famously, Shoshanna Zuboff's book on surveillance capitalism, which inspired us in its early form of an article, continues to inspire us. We have a lot of common ground. There's a lot to those ideas.

However, we want to ask in this book, is something potentially even larger going on, if you can imagine that? Not just a stage of the capitalism none of us know how to get out of, but something perhaps even bigger, a new phase in the relations between colonialism and capitalism, relations that of course, to summarize a lot of history in a sentence, go back 500 years when we think about how 200 years of colonialism were necessary for capitalism even to get started.

That's the question we ask, and we give a hint there might be something colonial going on from this business cliché-- "Data is the new oil." Front page of The Economist, two or three years ago. We all know that cliché. We can deconstruct it. It has a colonial air about it. We know about oil. Is it just a harmless business metaphor, or is it precisely, as we argue in the book, the ideological term that is needed to cover over a huge new appropriation of resource that parallels the original colonialism, the resource of human life itself?

And that colonial possibility was hinted at in a scandal that I don't need to say anymore about to this audience, the Cambridge Analytica scandal 18 months ago. Christopher Wiley, who opened-- spilled the beans, as it were, 18 months ago, a week or two into the scandal was asked about Cambridge Analytica's nefarious plans to expand their operations into India. He said on Twitter, "This is what modern colonialism looks like." The question is, what could that actually mean?

So a central part of our argument is that what we're facing is really an emerging reality, not just a metaphor. The way we use the term "data colonialism," it's not really metaphorical. What we're facing is a genuinely new phase of colonialism which we call data colonialism that in time will prepare the ground for a new mode of capitalist production, as Nick mentioned, in similar ways in which the original historical colonialism prepared the ground for industrial capitalism.

And of course this, will happen while coexisting with historical colonialism and its neocolonial legacy. I'll come back to that in a little bit. But we do want to be very careful, of course, when we use this term, because it is a sensitive term. Are we in fact suggesting that data colonialism matches the violence, matches the mayhem of historical colonialism? No. But there are continuities that should alarm us. And that's what we're going to be dealing with here.

So let me just give you a basic definition of what we mean by data colonialism. We say it's an emerging order for the appropriation of human life so the data can be continuously extracted from it for profit. And in order to make sense of this definition, we also need to distinguish between colonialism and colonality, a concept developed by the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano.

So we could argue that colonialism is over. Yes, nations got their independence. There are no more colonies per se. But Quijano argued that the legacy of colonialism continues. The heritage continues, of course. And that's what he called the coloniality of power. So if we think about economic relations, racial relations today, if we even think about terrorism, it's all shaped by the heritage of colonialism.

So what we're arguing is that while the modes and the intensities, the scales, and the contexts of colonialism are different, the function remains the same. And that function is to dispossess. Now, why is this so persistent? Why is it so hard to resist? Part of the reason is because there are some rationalities which are a continuation of old ones that we've lived with for a while. So they're both new and old.

Some of those rationalities include economic rationalities-- so if you think about the progression from cheap nature to cheap labor to cheap data. The way the colonizers framed the world as being made up of natural resources that could be appropriated, and then human labor that could also be appropriated and used to exploit those resources. Similarly, we're seeing now a certain kind of framing of data as some sort of exhaust, as abundant, and therefore as free.

There are technological rationalities as well, which basically tell us that more data is better, that smarter technology is always best. So if we think about the uni-directional notion of progress, we're being told that this is progress. This is for our own good. This is making society better. There are, of course, legal rationalities, the concept of terra nullius, which basically means no man's land, the idea that these resources are just there for the taking. Colonizers can take them, exploit them, because they have the infrastructure to do so.

And then there are epistemological rationalities. And to come back to Quijano for a little bit, he offered basically a critique of Western universal rationality which obliterates difference. And of course, we want to instead require the recovery of alternative rationalities which are based on respect for difference.

Now, in our book, we want to challenge all of those rationalities. You all will assume that. And we can give you more in the Q&A if you want to know how we do that. But let's come clean. We realize that framing what's going on with data in the global North and the global South everywhere today as a new form of colonialism is pretty provocative. It's not a comfortable thing if we're even half right. It's provocative.

So we want to anticipate our book's conclusion right here, assuming you do have doubts about this, and summarize what for us are the five main advantages we get from this new framing of what's going on. Not just this is about capitalism, which of course it still is, but this is about colonialism too. The first advantage we've already hinted at, which is it gives us a totally new timescale on which to think about comparatively.

We go back, as we said, not just the past four decades, let alone the past five years of Internet of Things, a blip in history. We go back the past 500 years to find a resource appropriation that is parallel to the scale of what's going on today. At one point, it was taking all the world's gold, silver, minerals, land, bodies to mine it. Now it's human life itself. An epochal change.

But we also have to project into the future, because if it's that large-scale, then we can't predict what the consequences are going to be entirely. We see some changes already. But remember that it was capitalism that was the main consequence of colonialism, and that took two centuries to emerge. So let's not assume we know exactly where this is going, or where we'll end up, rather. We can see the direction of travel. That's the timescale.

Then there's the question of scope, which has changed. Colonialism was a massive transformation, the seizure of everything on the planet. And today, we talk mainly about social media platforms as if they are the main thing going on. They're not, we argue in the book. There are much broader and more important things going on. So for example, the normalization of surveillance in most workplaces, particularly if you're paid less and are more insecure in your job, that's a big trend.

The gig economy-- exploiting labor through totally new forms that do not involve any form of institutional trust-- Uber, Lyft. These are radical changes. Logistics. 30, 40 years of changing the business model, so tracking every moment in space and time. Sounds good. You want your parcel to arrive on time. But at the same time, tracking workers.

And of course, internal corporate data. IBM, normally regarded as irrelevant to these changes, pointed out in its annual report a few years ago they didn't care about social media because 80% of the important data was internal corporate data. And of course, the Internet of Things turns what was just our life into internal corporate data-- the smart fridge. So this is expanding too.

But this complicated, as we recognize, there is an external and an internal colonialism going on here. There are profound global inequalities which are rolling out between data-supplying countries and data-extracting countries. But at the same time, the extraction is going on within the colonizer societies too. So that's a complex dynamic, and we can unpack that more if you want.

Two further things are fundamental which relate to the long-term consequences of this new perspective. The first is this will only happen, just as colonialism only stabilized and took root, through a new social order, a new way of organizing everything that fits together. New forms of dependency. New forms of governance and rule. All of it offered as just convenient, just what we have to do.

And finally, echoing the point that Ulises just made, the deeper trend that really took us to the end of the book to see most clearly underlying the idea of big data as what must happen is simply a continuation of the West's claim to know how things should happen, to have a special claim on rationality from a particular point in the world. And this is a relation between power and knowledge that de-colonial theorists have been telling us has been unfolding throughout modernity, throughout colonialism. We don't see that if we only listen to the critics of capitalism.

Now, how is this social order unpacking? How is it happening? It's happening through something we call data relations, which sounds a simple move, but actually, it involves quite a creative use of Marx's social theory. Orthodox Marxism says that capitalism, any big social order, is only

reproduced through labor relations, transforming the stuff of activity into something that can be exchanged on the labor market.

We want to be creative with Marx. Obviously, he couldn't anticipate what's happening right now. That's absurd to pretend he could. But he did have a radical theory of how big-scale change happens, and we need to pay attention to what that was. With the help of Moishe Postone, who died last year, who argues that underlying labor relations is something called commodification, making things into exchangeable commodities. And even underlying that is something even deeper, which is abstraction-- abstraction from the flow of human life to something that is exchangeable.

What is going on with data but abstracting, taking from the flow of our life, into something it's changeable? This is the deep core of Marx's work that we can use on today to understand how capitalism now has two engines, labor relations and data relations, often put together if you're working on the Amazon warehouse floor. Both fuse. But they're different.

Ordinary life, if this is true, becomes a direct factor of capitalist production. We can never be outside the capitalist machine. Or put it more brutally, human life is annexed to capitalism, through, of course, continuous monitoring of everything we do. We'll come back to the implications for freedom later on. And they're profound.

So just to sum up in an image, every time we click on an app, or rather put an app on our phone, join a platform, or maybe get a new smart device installed in our home-- and obviously, we want it to work-- we have to accept the terms and conditions of data extraction. We enter, we re-enter the spiral of data relations. None of us in this room, I suspect, know a way out.

Now, this raises a really even more important point, which is a great-- a really big difference from historical colonialism, which, again, might be troubling you. In historical colonialism, the resources were grabbed on the basis of no prior social relation. There was no way of negotiating seizing the gold or silver. There are only two options-- violence and deception. Both were used in rather large amounts in early colonialism.

What's different now? Well, the differences that we've had two centuries of getting used to social relations which only need to be tweaked a little bit to have a profound impact on the future of history. And that is what's going on. No violence necessary yet.

So who is behind this process? In the book, we wanted to come up with some terms that allowed us to collect all of the players. And so we use a term of Social Quantification Sector. The SQS is basically the industry sector devoted to the development of this infrastructure required for extraction. And yes, we wanted to talk about the big players-- Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon-- as well as their Chinese counterparts-- Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, Xiaomi.

And what's interesting about these big players is that they're a combination of monopoly and monopsony. They're hybrids. So of course, monopoly means single seller. Monopsony, also a term from economics, means a single buyer. So we're all producers of media these days. We all generate videos and tweets and so on. But if you want that video of your cat doing something

funny to be seen by a large public, where are you going to upload it? YouTube. There are other options. There are other platforms. But if you really wanted to be seen by many people and your friends, you would upload it to YouTube.

So this monopsony hybrids acts as funnels, so to speak, that are single points of buying all of our content. And of course, there are other players of different sizes. Just to give you an idea of the broad scope, of course, hardware manufacturers, all the manufacturers of smart devices. There are software developers, platforms. Data analytics. Data brokerage companies. The people who collect the data, parse it in different ways, and sell it to a third party. So all of them we're calling as the Social Quantification Sector.

A bit of a change. So in the book, we spend a long time talking about the coloniality of data relations. And so right now, we only have time to give you one example of this kind of trans-historical comparison that we do in Chapter 3, so I want to start with this excerpt from the Google Chrome terms of service agreement. So as you can see there, this is a bit old. It's been revised since then.

But it says that you give Google a perpetual, irrevocable, worldwide, royalty-free, non-exclusive license to reproduce, adapt, modify, translate, publish, publicly perform, publicly display, and distribute any content which you submit, post, or display on or through the services. Pretty comprehensive. This is the language that none of us reads, understand, cares about. Most of us. I shouldn't say "all of us" in this room. And then we just click Accept and Install and move on. Now we have that app working.

So I want to compare this to another document from the colonial era at the time of the Spanish conquistadors. At that time, the conquistadors would arrive at a village in what is known in Latin America someplace in the middle of the night and would stand outside of the village and proceed to read this document called the requerimiento in Spanish to a non-speaking Spanish audience, of course. Let me read you a little excerpt.

"If you do not submit, I certify to you that with the help of God we shall powerfully enter into your country and shall make war against you in all ways and manners that we can, and shall subject you to the yoke and obedience of the church and of their highnesses. We shall take you and your wives and your children and shall make slaves of them, and as such shall sell and dispose of them as their highnesses may command. And we shall take away your goods and shall do all the mischief and damage that we can." Spanish requerimiento, 1513. Accept and install over there.

[LAUGHTER]

So that's just one example of what we gain from the colonial frame and the historical comparisons that it makes permissible, to make new sense of what we are all told we just have to accept, what Kevin Kelly called the inevitable. But before we conclude, I just want to give you a flavor of one other aspect of the book, because there's a philosophical dimension too.

In Chapter 5 of the book, we ask-- this new form of resource appropriation has, as we've explained, the means of constant surveilling, or monitoring more politely, of human subjects. And the question is, what are the implications for human freedom, assuming we still care about that, which I think in this room we certainly do. Now, we're not interested in a thin notion of freedom, consumer freedom. That's obviously rather helped by having lots of apps to choose from, lots of ways to falling into the spiral of data relations. Great.

No, we're interested in more substantive notions of human freedom than that. We need to go back to philosophy to look at this. And one source, maybe surprisingly, is George Hegel, his philosophy of freedom written 200 years ago. He defined-- and we could spend all afternoon on us trying to understand what lies behind this quote, and I'm not a Hegel expert. He defined freedom as the freedom to be with one's self in the other.

The "in the other" is his amazing discovery that freedom for you and me is relational. It comes from the social texture in which we live. That's how it emerges. But the key bit is the bit he rushes past to get to the "in the other." "To be with oneself." He didn't think that needed to be defended except in the case of a footnote of slaves who'd lost this.

To be with oneself is basis the possibility to know that when I'm thinking, did I do a good job, am I happy with my life, do I love this person, what do I think about dying-- nothing else can come between me and that thought, no external system. Yes, I'm in the social, but no external system that is not part of my thinking. That's an interesting idea. But of course, Hegel is very problematic. He was responsible for legitimizing colonialism in the early 19th century. So we need other sources for this thought.

And we can find one from an amazing source, which is the Argentinean-Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel, who in his Philosophy of Liberation, which was developed precisely to challenge the philosophy of the West, how does he define the core of freedom? It is the natural substantivity of the person, which basically is that material space, that boundedness that we know in the end is ours, unless we're existing under such profound violence, when we know it is that that is being threatened by those imposing violence on us.

So what are the implications of this? Well, we're saying-- and there's a lot of evidence for this from marketing documents all over the place-- that if the goal of marketing and business models today is over time to continuously track human beings without limit, if that is the goal, then there is a real possibility that we will cease to have a hold on the idea of being selves at all.

And if that's true, surveillance, self-tracking-- which we do a lot of it to ourselves-- the management of behavior through the gathering of data, all of this is leading gradually to an erosion of what we call in the book the minimal integrity of the self as a self. Not the grand idea of the autonomous grand subject who could rule the universe, no. The very basis of any possible notion of freedom, boundedness, that is what is being interfered with. That's what we think we have to confront and be concerned about.

I know we're almost out of time, so just to wrap it up. Sorry if things are not in order. But how do we resist this? Firstly, we should acknowledge that, yes, people, corporations, and governments

are having very different stakes in this new order. So one-track approaches are not going to work. Yes, we need to care about regulation. We need to care perhaps even about individual choices, about which platforms to opt in or out of. But by themselves, that's not going to be enough.

We also know that individual subjects are very differently positioned precisely because the earlier forms of racial, class, and economic differences are being reproduced through data relations, perhaps even more opaquely and effectively than before. We do need to reject the universal rationality of data collection, perhaps care more about seamfulness, not so much about seamlessness.

And lastly, we need to learn. We need to learn from past and present decolonization struggles. We need to learn from the people who have been doing this for a long time about reimagining forms of collectivity, about thinking of new ways of appropriating technologies, thinking of new ways of imagining common knowledge and solidarity. And with that, I think we will end to give you time for questions. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you so much. Wonderful presentation. So we have now four respondents. But to make it more challenging for them, I will actually not just pass on the mic but will ask questions to the respondents and hopefully get quick reactions also from the authors, if that's OK. So the first respondent is actually [? Electra ?] [INAUDIBLE], an SJD student here, and is also affiliated with the Berkman Klein Center. [? Electra, ?] I'm sure you're totally prepared for your comments, but let me ask a slightly different question based on the work that you're doing.

In your work, you have looked very closely at all sorts of power asymmetries between individuals and platforms and systems, with a strong focus, actually, also on the data economy and the new world that is described in the presentation and those in the book. Throughout your research, you have also looked quite carefully at the different terminology and concepts that are used to some sort of describe the problem or the challenge that we are confronted with.

And here, obviously, in a very thoughtful and careful way, a new frame, a new lens is introduced, the idea of data colonialism. And I was wondering, what's your initial response? How do you feel about this analogy or taking a previous concept to the next level? Does that resonate with you? Do you see some sort of difficulties with that language or that framing?

Yes. Thank you, Urs, for this question. Yes, I think this terminology is extremely interesting and eye-opening in lots of ways. So I actually came across it last year when I started talking to Nick about his work. And it was really a Eureka moment. And I thought this parallel is very salient and uncovers a lot of what is at stake and helps us interpret many of the phenomena that we're observing through a different lens.

One thing that actually I had a question about for the authors was whether this insistence that it is not a metaphor is fully persuasive. And if it's not a metaphor, what might it be? It does not seem like we're in the presence of what we have been calling colonialism in the world we live in today.

So maybe it's a transposition, it's a form of language that might help us understand things. But is it really colonialism, or do we need to coin a different word?

A lot of what I feel about the phenomenon of data is that it's a very sui generis, very specific thing. Shoshanna Zuboff says it's unprecedented. So I think somehow there is something very unprecedented. And using the parallel is super illuminating, but I wonder whether we want to go further than that and say it's a way of understanding a different phenomenon.

Thank you, [? Electra. ?] I think that's a great question to elaborate on for maybe a minute or two.

Yes. You've really hit the core there. This is what we have to get right in doing a serious and risky historical comparison. This book is-- we're taking a big risk with this argument, but we feel we have to. The way I'd answer it is that we need to compare like with like. So we're comparing the beginning of this new colonialism with the beginning of the original colonialism. We're not comparing the beginning of this colonialism with the end, 500 years later, of the old colonialism.

So there must be differences, which means we must abstract, if you pardon the phrase, from those differences to get to the core. And that's why in the book we say the core of the historic colonialism, though this might be a very contested point, was not the violence or the cultures of racism that came to be the tools to enforce the colonialism. The core was the grabbing of resource, taking everything because it was just ours if you happen to live in Europe.

That's the core. And it's that that we're saying is the-- therefore, it is dislocating to say this is like the colonialism. No, it is not, and we expect for those who say, this just does not work for me. But we have to be able to go back to history and take what we need from it to understand the present. And that's what we're doing. Therefore, our reality we're talking about is not the metaphorical take. We are looking at a different, deep, if you like, core reality. And that's why we stress that point.

I would just add to go back to one of our main points. I think what is valuable is that we're focusing not on the form or the content of the definition of colonialism but the functional, that extractive function, the dispossession. And so, yes, it seemed to us a missed opportunity if we just call it a metaphor to explain which is evocative. And metaphors are great. Nothing against metaphors. But we wanted to be very specific about the dynamics that are unfolding.

Thank you. So I was wondering whether Primavera De Filippi, who joins us from Europe, is also a faculty associate here at the Berkman Klein Center and is doing a lot of work more generally on governance, what your reflections are specifically on the problem description still? You're doing a lot of work on blockchain technology, distributed architectures, how that shapes power relationships, or as you call it, information relationships or data relationships, in the book.

And I was wondering while reading the book-- what you describe is very compelling. But at the same time, is there an alternative universe where technology could be used-- the same technology could be used or similar technology could be used to actually level some of these power asymmetries as a matter of DNA, of how we connect the things that you say are so costly?

And so I was wondering, how do you think about that, this alternative view on technology that is used to actually empower, to actually circumvent some of these big platforms? What comes to mind when you listen to this story here, which is a very different one?

Yeah. So there is a lot of developments that are happening today, whether it's with blockchain technologies, whether it's just like decentralized technology or personal data store and so forth. And the idea being, can we actually use the technology in order to give more power to the individuals, to actually control, trace, and somehow dictate the way in which those data can actually be used and spread by those operators?

So there are developments going on. My fear or my preoccupation with those solutions is that they rely on these basic premises that individuals giving the power of-- whether it is consent or whether it is leading to technical proprietization of data and so forth, is actually going to solve the problem, as opposed to actually recognizing the fact that if users actually want to use those services, to some extent they will consent.

No one agrees with those terms of services, and yet they click on it because they want to use the service. And the apparent cost of giving the data is somehow overwhelming in favor from the apparent benefit of using the service. And so to me, there is-- and if we go back to the metaphor of what is data, the new oil, data as capital, data as labor, and like all those questions which really, to some extent, make data into something that is actually exploitable. All those metaphors are towards the exploitation of data.

And so to me, actually-- and that's because of my background of Creative Commons and all of those questions, public domain, copyright-- I'm actually very interested, especially when I hear about this colonization. It reminds me a lot about the-- at the time in which we were thinking about the exploitation of the public domain, with people like James [? Boles, ?] that were actually using the analogy of environment. And how do we preserve the public domain is by actually giving them a positive recognition so that it's no longer just seen as the negative of intellectual property right.

And so to me, when I actually hear those things, I'm actually very curious whether-- on the one hand, yes, of course we can use technology or we can just focus on giving exclusionary rights to people in order to give them power on the use of the data. But it seems to me that there is actually-- one of the fundamental problems of data colonization is that actually, those operators which are collecting the data, eventually, whatever is the [INAUDIBLE], you can pay user for using-- for collecting the data. but yet, they're going to collect this data, accumulate, aggregate, and create this incredibly powerful data set which enable them to then build more value by training the AI or whatever is it that they are doing with this data.

So my question is, can we actually look-- instead of looking at how do we react against this colonization from a negative approach-- as in, like, what is it that we cannot do with the data-- will it makes sense to actually take a more positive approach, as in, given the fact that there is this colonization, that there is this appropriation and exploitation of data, should there be some kind of rights to actually access, for other people to access the value that is generated by those people that appropriated the data?

And I think here we can actually think about data as infrastructure, and looking at anti-trust law, where we have this concept of, for instance, essential facilities, where when there is a particular resource that becomes necessary in order to create added value, in order to create services on top, or in order to train AI and so forth.

Then shouldn't there be some kind of obligation, not necessarily to share that data and just spread personal information around, but actually to provide access to this information that has been the result of colonization so that other parties, including the parties that have been expropriated of their data, can actually benefit from this expropriation and can themselves have an opportunity to build resources, to build services on top of that?

Thank you, Primavera. May I ask, just to maybe focus a little bit more on still the problem description-- I want to segue into solutions as well in a minute. But we heard a couple of things. Well, there are alternative architectures in there-- you also mention them in the book-- that are more decentralized, that try also alternative business models. So we discussed that.

We also heard people actually may want to use-- many of us want to use these services. How do we deal with some sort of these choices made by all of us? Briefly mentioned were also legislative frameworks and protections that are in place. Why is that not enough or even part of the problem, if I read your book correctly, before we go to the solution part, which I want to go later.

Well, you raised so many points. And your work on blockchain is very provocative and I think is also very disruptive of certain conceptions of blockchain. So I see a lot in common between the way we're working here. There's so much to say. First of all, we are not saying data is bad, obviously. I got here using my new bus app on my phone. The 77 bus is so irregular. It's helpful to have a collective pool of information just where the damn thing is.

So I'm happy with that as long as it's not gathering other data about me as I use it. So there can be good uses of data. We can imagine cities where information needs to be used well. We need to collect information on the environment and so on and so forth. We're not against that. We want there to be collective use of that data and so on and so forth.

The difficult bit, which your work on blockchain pushes us to confront, is the infrastructure and whether built into the current infrastructure we have, where data is gathered by default, it is used somewhere else by default by those we don't even know-- how are we going to disrupt that default in infrastructure? That is very, very different. Certain alternative proposals are great. They exist. But they are not enough to challenge, as we said, the whole social order through which a different goal is being achieved. And that's what we need to disrupt, the goal. It's not neither yes nor no, but there's more to say, as it were.

Yeah. I would just add-- I know we don't want to go into solutions just yet, but there's so much to unpack. And I would just say that I think to me, sometimes I think of data as a new kind of colonial language. And colonized subjects sometimes had to use the colonizer's language to describe their own position, to think about their own identities. I think similarly, we can find productive uses of data so that we don't have to abandon our apps that help us get through the

bus-- navigate the bus system. So I think-- but there's a similar way in which we can appropriate. Just like colonized subjects appropriated the language, we can also appropriate some of these uses.

Great. Before I turn it to Sasha with a question, I wanted to briefly follow up with an own question I have that I think nicely connects with the discussion here. I was wondering-- in the book, you make a very compelling argument that, yes, some sort of-- it starts with data in some sense, the argument, but it goes far beyond data. And Prima mentioned the role of infrastructure. And you also highlight the role of infrastructure.

You go beyond infrastructure. You say, well, the description of what's happening here has to do also with social norms and social ordering. It has to do, of course, with economic incentives. You point out that there is an entire governance system in place that supports the current trajectory that you're describing. And so at some point, I was wondering, is this a fundamental critique, not so much of the world of data, this brave new world, but of society as such? How do you draw the boundaries in this book? Is it really a story about data, or is it a story about where we're headed as societies?

Well, that's again a great question. So you could say the same about colonialism. There were critiques of colonialism around 1520, 1530, 1540 in the Spanish court. And there are many books about that. And many people were very uneasy about the grabbing of resource and the killing of bodies that could have become Christian souls. And there was a lot of debate. But anyway, nonetheless, in the end it was resolved in terms of justifying what was going on because a whole new society was being built.

So colonialism was both a grabbing of resources and the creating of a new type of colonial society, which we now take for granted. So in this short presentation, we couldn't touch on Chapter 4 of the book, which is a difficult chapter because we had to confront a very difficult analytic problem. Because if it's true that data is both value, something from which value can come, and knowledge, information-- the same two together fused-- that is, again, a new phase in human history.

Because in the past, knowledge has always been sellable, valuable, contributing to business, but it's not literally been the same thing as economic value. But with data, it starts to be fused. And that has an implication for society, because even if we have critical views of society, we rethink it, we interpret it, we have to do it on the basis of a shared coinage of knowledge, common knowledge.

And what if that coinage is changing? That's the question we ask in Chapter 4. The coinage is changing because it's deriving more and more from privately accessed, privately processed data sources rather than public sources such as statistics, censuses, public debates about the meaning of those, and so on. And that's the big change. So society will change. Our very idea of social science is in the course of changing. And again, protecting that is part of what we have to protect if we want to resist data colonialism.

Yeah, I think that's a great point, Urs. And I think we need to think of colonialism as a partnership, a collaboration that involves all aspects of society. It's not just the extractive processes done by corporations, the mining, et cetera. It does involve all of society. And in that respect, we have been thinking lately after the book was finished about how, for instance, Frantz Fanon defined the psychopathology of the colonized subject.

Colonialism creates a particular kind of subjectivity and neurosis. And so we can equally start to think about the neuroses that colonialism is creating-- data colonialism is creating in terms of the anxiety, in terms of the depression, in terms of the narcissism, of changing cognitive processes. So obviously, it's having wide repercussions.

Thank you. So moving-- let's assume we agree roughly on the problem description, that there is a pretty fundamental problem. I also feel there is a sense this is a helpful lens through which to analyze the problem, using the concept of colonialism. Now, what are we going to do about it? This is Chapter 6 in your book. But before we give you a chance to share some of your ideas, I want to turn over to Sasha Costanza-Chock, who's over at MIT.

And Sasha, this is a complex problem that's described here, where data, capitalism, governance structures, incentives, how we live our lives, all together are in an interesting and complicated way part of the problem description. And I was wondering-- you have deep insights into what seems to me is necessary to make a change here, which is movements, where activists, designers, thinkers, builders, doers come together and really challenge the status quo and help to imagine an alternative future.

So I was wondering, given your work and experience in studying movements, but also taking action yourself, what's needed if we want to create an alternative to the world that's described here as a trajectory? That's a very simple question, I confess, but I'm sure you will have thoughts on it.

Well, that's an easy one. Before I get to that, I did want to put a little parenthetical note in here. I am concerned by the framing of colonialism is over, and I think we need to critique that a little bit. So we could talk about the ongoing active forms of traditionally understood colonialism in places like Puerto Rico, in places like Palestine with active settler colonialism, displacement of indigenous peoples by force. We could talk about Standing Rock, where the resource extraction is directly tied to displacement of indigenous peoples from their lands to access the old oil, not the new oil of the data.

Or we could talk about what's happening in the Amazon right now as the Amazon is burning as part of the process of the increasingly fascist Bolsonaro state desire to support settlers and resource extractors against the claims of indigenous peoples to their lands. So that old colonialism is still with us, and so I think we need to-- that's a question. What does that mean for this theory? What's the relationship between the new form of data colonialism and the ongoing forms of both extractive and settler colonialism?

I think we also need to understand the ways that colonialism-- I agree with you. You're framing historical and data colonialism as being primarily about extraction and commoditization. But I

think it's worth-- as we think about how to resist it, we need to also consider some of the other larger forms of power inequality that were instantiated and globalized and reproduced through both historical colonialism and, I would say, data colonialism.

And so I'm thinking of the ways-- and you talk about this in the book, but you didn't really get into it much here. So I'm talking about the ways that race and gender are implicated in colonial processes. So we could talk about the way that surveillance has always been a carceral technology. Ruha Benjamin will be here next week to talk about her new book *Race After Technology*. And so we want to think about the ways that surveillance has always been about marking other bodies, marking black bodies, marking native bodies for control, exclusion, limiting movement, and so on and so forth, and how that's re-instantiated in the new forms of data colonialism.

And also, thinking about, at the same time that they're reading these *requerimientos*, there's also this process by which the binary gender is being imposed upon native peoples throughout the Americas and other parts of the world, where a particular vision of patriarchy and patriarchal power is being violently instantiated. Third-gender people are being massacred. And I think that the same-- not the same, but we could talk about how that's happening with new data processes. So binary gender classification is normalized throughout most of the computing systems that we are building and developing, the sorting functions.

And so to resist all of that, to me, I'm always interested in what are people already doing? What are the resistance strategies that are active? And I think that you do a good job of talking about a number of those throughout the book, everything from the ways that people might personally refuse to participate in particular systems, taking part in the delete Facebook movement and so on and so forth.

But also, you're saying that's not enough. We need collective action. And even that's not necessarily enough, because if we just impose certain new forms of law or regulation, if it's only mitigating the worst harms but it's allowing the underlying logic to remain intact, we're still screwed. I think that's what you're saying.

Yeah.

And I agree with that. And yet, I'm worried about a I guess not suffic-- we don't want to impose new binary logics on people's resistance strategies and say deleting Facebook is useless. It's not useless. It's a micro-instantiation of, I think, people's resistance to these processes that you're describing. So yes, it's not enough. But is it not what we need? I wouldn't necessarily say so. So I think we want to recognize the ways that these different strategies might work together in the process of forming resistant subjectivity to the new forms of data colonialism.

And then, finally design is crucial. And there are emerging communities of practitioners who are thinking together about how do we redesign these systems, including data sharing systems, so that they're not extractive, so that they are actually consentful. We could look at the consentful technology initiative at consentfultech.io. We could talk about the Design Justice Network, the

practitioners there. And I'm part of that group. We could talk about the colonizing design group that's developing both theory and practice on how to do some of this stuff.

My last point on that would be we want to be careful of the emerging explosion of seemingly resistant groups, organizations, and discourses. So there's a lot of talk right now about AI ethics. There are industry groups that are being convened by these, the big players themselves, to talk about what-- how they are recognizing that the public is unhappy. There's a tech lash, and they want to create their own discourse about how to mitigate that. So I'm curious about what you have to say about how are we going to move into this new moment of resistance and not let it be captured by the very same industry that we think is building the infrastructure for data colonialism?

Great points.

Yes. Well, I think you're right. A lot of this has to do with strict definitions. So when we talked about colonialism being over, yes, we were thinking specifically about countries being defined as colonies. But you're correct that if we think about Puerto Rico, Palestine, we could similarly think about those in that way. But that's why we introduced the concept of colonality, to suggest that the heritage and the legacy continues. And it is particularly a heavy price that-- you're right. Minorities, women, different populations continue to pay a heavy price for that cost.

As far as what to do about it, I think it's very fruitful to think about-- to look back at the decolonization struggles. And you're right. Maybe we do-- we are critical that maybe the individual choice to leave Facebook fits into this model of the liberal subject as being able to act on a particular choice. We are critical of that. At the same time, we do have to remember that in many decolonial struggles, sometimes people, the only tool they had to resist was their mind. So even with their bodies, they could not resist, and sometimes decolonial struggles happened by resisting with your mind. So we do need to-- we want to keep open all of those different possibilities.

And just very briefly, because I know we have another respondent, you raised so many great points, but the core of it is when we're saying dropping off Facebook or Twitter or whatever is not enough, we are not saying that's necessarily a bad thing or you shouldn't do it. We are saying, let's not confuse the part with the whole. Facebook is a small part of the whole. So if you're doing it knowing the whole is bigger, that's a very different thing.

But that links to the other point, that if-- there are costs of this. Therefore, it's inconvenient-- if I organize my kids' parties through Facebook, it's damn inconvenient to do it because I've been doing for 10 years. I don't want to stop. That means we have to help each other do it, which means the acts has to be not acts of individuals but in a solidary form, helping each other carry the costs of connection. That's the beginnings of something, but we don't claim to know what that something is going to become if we start acting that way. That would be arrogant. And we just want to light the touch paper and start to see what would happen if we thought about resistance differently.

Great. Thank you. So we have about 15 minutes left. I know some people have to go and take classes, but we will open up for Q&A in just a second. But Juan Ortiz Freuler, you're with the Web Foundation. You're a policy fellow there. You're also affiliated with Berkman Klein. When I read this final chapter about solutions, the first thought I had-- oh, there is a new social contract that we need. And the Web Foundation is actually making a tremendous effort, and you're deeply involved in bringing together all these different stakeholders that you mentioned that are some part of the problem to also become part of the solution.

So I was wondering, particularly also your own work perspectives, how do you think about that? And if I looked back at the principles of the new social contract for the web, actually, it re-emphasized we need more connectivity for everyone. So it's some sort of an interesting tension. It's a movement, yes. A new social contract, yes. So similar spirit, but with different principles. How do you reconcile these two possible pathways forward?

Great question. So I think when the web was built, it was built with this idea of the commons that perhaps Primavera was signaling. It was built by academics that understood that they had control over knowledge and wanted that knowledge to be available to others. I think in the past couple of years, particularly perhaps 10, 15 years, things have radically changed. And the way data is being processed has changed.

And the web perhaps hasn't accommodated those new spaces, and those new spaces have been taken over by apps and actors that have other purposes, which is perhaps the extraction of life. And that's where I think that the book is super powerful in that it provides language to speak about these things that didn't exist or weren't visible 15, 20 years ago.

And when we have conversations within the contract for the web, I see that the discourse has changed. Even when you sit down with a company, the starting point perhaps now is GDPR, whereas a year ago, GDPR was insane. Now you can say, this is the starting point, and we want you to do more on this and this and that. And I see that these types of initiatives that provide language for us to move the discourse forward and take control over our commons I think is fundamental.

And the question perhaps is also, when we had colonialism or when we thought about capitalism, it often created these dichotomies-- capital-labor, North-South. When we think that this is an expansive move, and now the human body, every human body, is part of the abstraction, what's on the other side? How can we-- we need something around which to co-ordinate, a rallying call to identify who our friends are and perhaps who should be called out. But when everyone is part of the extraction, who is on the other side? Or is it that the Silicon Valley leaders don't give their kids phones and so they're not part of it?

Very good point.

Great point.

Who's on the other side?

Well, at no point in the book do we say there's an evil corporate capitalist conspiracy, and we know the guys, and let's get outside. There is one, but that's not our target in this book. We're looking at-- because last week, Meredith [? Wittig ?] was outside [INAUDIBLE] house and so on. Let's assume-- that say that's a given. That's going on. That's bad. But there's a much bigger thing that humanity has fallen into.

We're looking at profound side effects on many, many levels interacting to create an order that no one exactly planned, although now some people are claiming they planned it because they want credit for it. So it's very difficult. We're very-- we have huge respect for what you're doing at the Web Foundation. The early versions of it inspired our conclusion. Obviously, we didn't know what you've done most recently.

Because of the spirit in which you're doing it, the collaborative spirit, bringing people together, thinking-- saying humanity has a problem, that's exactly the sort of register what we want to raise our concerns to. I think we have two concerns with the proposal you have at the moment, which I share with you privately. One is going back to the infrastructure part.

It's incredibly difficult to separate out my data, my photos, my tracks and so on, from all forms of other data related to me which are being used to exploit me or to discriminate against me. There's a whole darker zone which I'm not convinced data portability can get to for structural reasons. That's the main worry. But there's also a moral one, that I didn't see in your proposal any, if you like, philosophical interruption.

I think there are some forms of data extraction going on today, on the Amazon factory floor, for example-- constant tracking of human beings so they literally cannot move without being tracked. I find that inhuman. I think it should be stopped, period, regardless of the benefits. Similarly, marketers dream that they're going to put implants into our bodies. We didn't even give you the scarier quotes. But there's a lot of serious marketing talk about how great it's going to be when we all have implants.

So feeling a bit thirsty? Well, here's a great bottle of water, which relates to the bottle of water you had yesterday, round the corner. Again, I think that's unacceptable. There should be certain things which just should not be done. And I think that moral sharpness I didn't see. Maybe it's because you're building a collaborative document at the beginning. But I hope you will get there as the negotiations develop. But there's a point that I know Ulises wanted to pick up on the [INAUDIBLE].

Well, yes. In the last chapter of the book, we do have a section on tools for common knowledge, because we do agree with the kind of work you're doing and others are doing that we need to collectively develop some tools to understand how this is going to unfold. And so we do talk about the kind of research that needs to be done, the kind of universal research, so beyond academia, not just located within academia. But the kind of research that needs to be done so that everybody who is affected can think through this problem and collectively come up with solutions. Was that the point that--

Yeah, that's the one.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

So that's where we end up, basically, in the book.

All right. So we collect about three questions, if you would be very concise with your questions, and then you would respond. We have one question right here. [INAUDIBLE] I think there was a question about [INAUDIBLE].

How are you doing? I'm Joshua Adams. I'm an assistant professor at Salem State. I'm writing a chapter on digital ethics of Google searches, digital colonialism. So maybe I should change it to data colonialism. But my question was where do you see search engines and search optimization in this process in the sense of search engine optimization incentivizes a certain ownership over the digital representation of things?

Hi. Dan Scarnecchia, humanitarian researcher at HHI. And I want to know how optimistic you are about that potential for positive social change coming out of this. Coming from the discipline I'm coming from, I'm thinking about the laws of war, which did have a lot of negotiation going around the ending of colonialism. And the implementation of some of that was only possible because the previously entrenched powers were extraordinarily weak after the Second World War, which was just a global fracturing of power. And do you have an optimistic view of the possibility of those solutions without that sort of disjointment?

We'll take one last question, and then--

[INAUDIBLE], a visiting fellow at the [INAUDIBLE] Center from the University of Geneva. And my question is also-- I really enjoyed your talk, and I'm looking forward to read the book. And it's on the unintended consequence of colonialism, like for example, health-wise. Half of the indigenous population in the Americas died because of the flu rather than violence. And in that sense, what are the unintended consequences that you can see now, and how we can act upon them?

Thank you very much.

Can you take first question, search engine optimization?

Whatever order you would like to respond.

Yeah. Well, I think you can probably tell us more than we can tell you about search engine optimization and how that's going to play out. But I do think it's this notion of customization, the idea that we are going to get the search results that we want that are very specific to us, it plays into the development of this identity as perhaps building a certain sense of dependence on these tools. But certainly, something to think about.

Just very quickly about your point, yes, it's a big question. Who knows what's going to happen? I'm encouraged, for instance, when we see-- in terms of big historical movements, who can tell? But it was surprising to see, for instance, what's happening in Hong Kong and the way, for

instance, that activists are taking down the lampposts with the surveillance cameras, that they're appropriating different apps like Tinder to organize social movements when other apps are being blocked. Too early to tell, but maybe those little movements will start to add up to something else.

Starting with search engine optimiz-- that's a very difficult area because we've developed habits under this system as it's evolved. Some of them are pleasurable, and we're aware of it and we adapt. So SEO is not necessarily a bad thing, but the whole question of search engines is difficult. I think now that we exist in a connected space-- and that's the one thing in the book we say it's not reversible. The connectability of the world cannot be reversed. It's a fundamental-- changed the precondition of everything that follows.

Then, how do we live in that? Something like a search engine is clearly necessary. We want to know what is out there to be connected with. How it can be funded. Could we imagine a publicly funded search engine that had sufficient scale to give genuine benefits and not exclude those who weren't visible in its light and yet was not driven by the economic models that are so profoundly puzzling with Google?

That's a massive open question for policymakers who-- we don't have those skills. That's a massive collective problem for the next 10 years. So it's a really difficult area. But I just want to emphasize, our book, the one area that we absolutely see as strong allies is critical data science, the work being done on algorithmic ethics, all of this, particularly around issues around race, this we take as a given, as an essential ally for this argument. And we don't repeat it therefore in the book, but we take it as a given because this is part of the alliance that has to be built.

On the question of are we optimistic, I think we would have to answer that individually because we are different people with different views of the world. And that's been one of the amazingly exciting things about writing this book together and bridging that. But I think I would start optimistic, but probably imagine a future pessimism. So I'm optimistic because we say in the book the most powerful tool that human beings have ever had-- and we're talking about slave populations.

We're talking about people in Latin America resisting US imperialism 50 years ago-- is imagination, re-imagining the world you're in and naming it differently and saying, no, I want to build a different world, and I am going to rename it from now on so that I can build a different world. Imagination, we say at end the book-- and this is the policy point-- is the most practical tool. It is the starting point for every policy proposal. So I'm optimistic, and we are genuinely optimistic about that. That's why we've written the book.

Longer term, though, we've got to recognize that this is going to be playing out in a geopolitical space where there's not just one big imperial power-- Spain/Portugal, England/Holland-- but two-- US and US's allies and China and China's allies, with India in between, unclear, Russia maybe willing to switch sides, get involved. Very unclear. We are entering a hyper-competitive space of data colonialism, no longer just involving one part of Latin America. The whole planet is going to be involved in this. Therefore, how that's going to work out-- well, I'm not fool enough to be

optimistic about that. That means this global solidarity has to be really clear, and it has to reach across difference, across countries, and see it as a global struggle for humanity.

The point about deep [INAUDIBLE], yes, that's a very interest-- because in a sense, it was literally the bodies that happened to be there without them knowing it carried the disease. That was beyond intention. But you raise really the question of extermination, which we do touch on in the book. Not in the slides. Maybe we should go back to that, because it's in the book, and I think it's important for you to hear what our answer is on that.

Well, basically, we say that what data colonialism exterminates is not so much bodies but alternative ways of thinking and alternative ways of being. So I think-- who knows what the unintended consequences of that if you project it a couple of decades or more are going to be?

Just a gloss on that. The starting point of Chapter 5 on freedom, a quote that really shook me to the core was from a commentator on Hegel. I couldn't read Hegel himself.

Why not?

Beyond re-- impossible, However long you try, unless you're-- commentators on Hegel are extremely good, though.

[LAUGHTER]

Because they need to be. And one phrase that I read really shook me to the core, and it's where we start Chapter 5 with it. It's a philosopher saying, what will be the greatest loss of freedom imaginable? It will be to reach a state of being where you could no longer remember what freedom was. That's what we think is beginning to go on. That's why we need to start resisting now and help each other do so.

What a powerful way to end this session. Thanks for a great conversation to be continued. Thank you. Thank you, everyone. Thanks.

[APPLAUSE]