

Surveillance Capitalism and the Age of the Unprecedented | Shoshana Zuboff

February 25th, 2019

I saw him crying, shedding floods of tears upon Calypso's island, in her chambers. She traps him there; he cannot go back home. — Homer, The Odyssey

INTRODUCTION

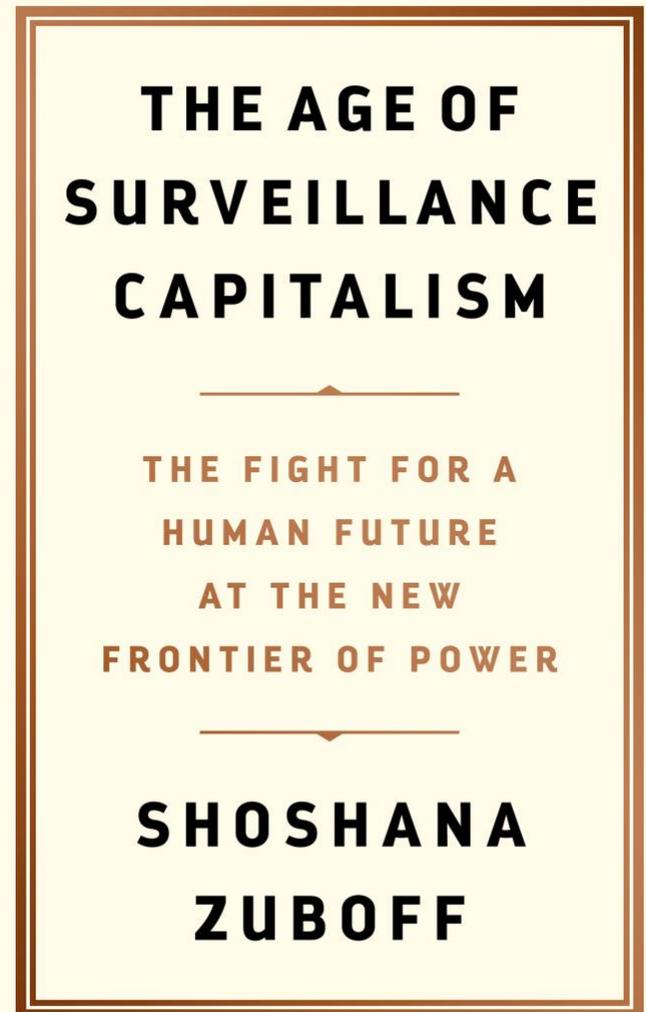
Shoshana Zuboff joined the Harvard Business School faculty in 1981. One of the first tenured women at the school, she was the Charles Edward Wilson Professor of Business Administration. In 2014 and 2015 she was a Faculty Associate at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School. Her career has been devoted to the study of the rise of the digital, its individual, organizational, and social consequences, and its relationship to the history and future of capitalism. She also founded and led the executive education program, *Odyssey: School for the Second Half of Life*.

WHAT ARE THE FEATURES OF SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM?

Sur-veil-lance Cap-i-tal-ism, n. — 1. A new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales; 2. A parasitic economic logic in which the production of goods and services is subordinated to a new global architecture of behavioral modification; 3. A rogue mutation of capitalism marked by concentrations of wealth, knowledge, and power unprecedented in human history; 4. The foundational framework of a surveillance economy; 5. As significant a threat to human nature in the twenty-first century as industrial capitalism was to the natural world in the nineteenth and twentieth; 6. The origin of a new instrumentarian power that asserts dominance over society and presents startling challenges to market democracy; 7. A movement that aims to impose a new collective order based on total certainty (the hive); 8. An expropriation of critical human rights that is best understood as a coup from above: an overthrow of the people's sovereignty.

WHY DO I CARE?

The Age of Surveillance Capitalism is one of the more unique books that I have ever read. To begin with, it reads like poetry, and yet, it deals with a subject of the most technical and scientific nature. In some ways, the book is an affirmation of love for the human species. It presents an intellectual argument but meets the reader at an emotional level. There is an immediacy that one feels while reading it. I'm hard-pressed to explain this. The only thing I can say with certainty is that this is a *very difficult* read but not because the subject matter is scientific or technical. The challenge is in remaining emotionally engaged



throughout the reading, while being willing to engage with the metaphorically rich tapestry that Shoshana weaves in and out of as she explores what he calls “the unprecedented.”

I’m going to be perfectly honest and acknowledge that I have not been able to accomplish this task. There are certain books that can be read in pieces. A book like this is meant to be read in layers. I have only skimmed the surface of what it has to offer, and I have a strong hunch that with time, its ominous message will prove prescient.

Caveats aside, my reasons for reading the book are obvious. I have been concerned about the state of what I have often called our “over-technologized society” for a long while. I have devoted many episodes to this subject, most notably #28 on [Industrial Society and its Future](#), so it was only natural that this book should beckon at me. It provides the first comprehensive framework I have come across for explaining what exactly this phenomenon is that many of us (myself included) mistakenly identify as technology writ large, but which Dr. Zuboff aptly points out is actually an economic imperative driven by a logic of accumulation (explicitly, the accumulation of experience rendered as behavioral data).

The message of this book is alarming, but also, optimistic. Simply the act of naming what has, until now, felt like an amorphous, dark cloud, creates a sense of empowerment that inspires hope. My goal in this conversation is to give Dr. Zuboff the opportunity to report the message of the book and to explore, in whatever depth is possible, the implications of that message. I imagine that we will only manage to scratch the surface, and that more work must be done by me on this subject going forward.



SETTING THE SCENE

Nostos & Affirmation — You open the book with [a scene from Homer’s Odyssey](#), that is told and retold numerous times throughout the epic, and it is also told at the very beginning. It’s certainly one of the most powerful scenes in the epic....there are many....but it is what informs us about what it is that is at stake. It’s an affirmation of the love that compels the journey. When Odysseus slays the suitors and takes back his kingdom, the scene of him weeping on the shore of Calypso’s island looking out towards Ithaca longing to return home *burns* in the audience’s mind. **Q:** Why did you choose to open a book about the state and future of our digital civilization with this scene from a story that took place more than 10,000 years ago?

What is Home? — **Q:** Can the digital future be our home? Will his emerging civilization be a place that we can call home? Why this focus on homecoming? Is this a place that we want to call home?

False Prophets — Interestingly enough, there are many who would prefer Calypso’s island to Ithaca. There is this sort of religion in Silicon Valley that I loosely refer



to as “[technological futurism](#),” which celebrates many of the implications that you disparage. **Q:** Have you thought about the role that this “cult of technological futurism” plays in shaping the decisions of the architects?

Primitive Sanctuary — I want to bring us back to this notion of home and “homecoming” for a moment. We recently did an episode on minimalism in the digital age, and one of the focuses of that conversation was a [meditation on the importance of solitude](#). You talk about this in terms of sanctuary. **Q:** What is sanctuary, how does it fit into your thesis, and why is it important? You talk about this need for “safe refuge” at times, using primitive images like caves and seashells. Why this primitive iconography? What is its significance? What does it mean?



WHAT IS SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM?

What is Surveillance Capitalism? — **Q:** How is it different than prior forms of capitalism like industrial and financial capitalism? What are its distinguishing characteristics?

The Means of Production → The Means of Behavioral Modification

The Division of Labor in Society → The Division of Learning in Society

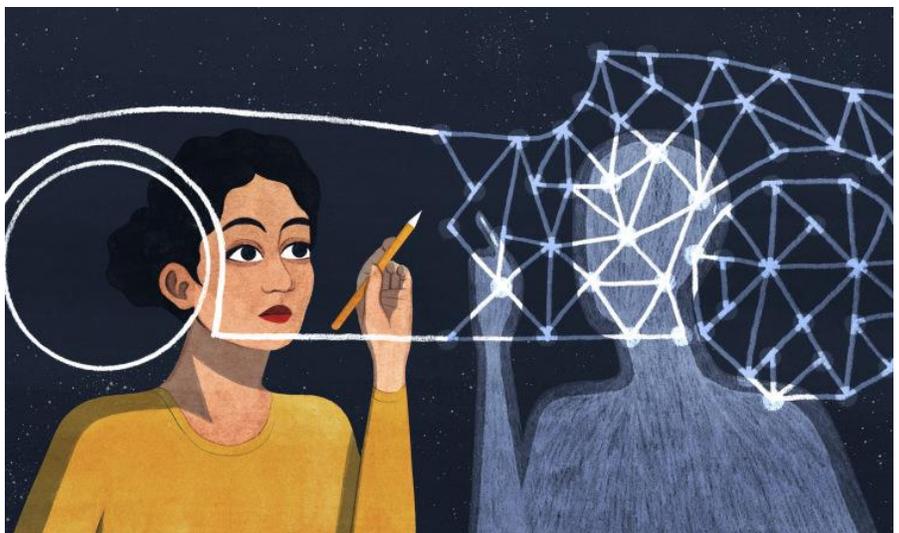
Capital + Labor + Resources = Products & Services → Behavioral Data + Machine Learning + Behavioral Futures Products

THE MEANS TO OTHER’S ENDS: BEHAVIOR VS. EXPERIENCE

Behavioral Surplus — There are certain words and phrases that you repeat often, and one of those is “[behavioral surplus](#),” otherwise known as “data exhaust,” basically, information, codified in machine language about our behavior. **Q:** What is the significance of this “behavioral surplus,” and how does it factor into your longer timeline?

It is not a matter of bringing the world into the laboratory, but of extending the practices of an experimental science to the world at large.
— B.F. Skinner

Behavior vs. Experience — When you describe the raw material that is extracted by the system for its own ends, you alternate between describing it as “[experience](#)” and as “[behavior](#)” or “[behavioral data](#).” I wonder, if this is not intentional, and if these distinctions betray a philosophy without which the economic logic of surveillance capitalism would not follow. **Q:** In other words, is it possible to understand this economic logic without [stripping ourselves of the](#)



mystery of human experience and the possibility that we could be more than just highly evolved automata that have no individual rights to our own experiences?

The Right to Choose — **Q:** Can such a logic exist without a philosophy that looks to strip us of the notion that we can author our own experiences? Is this logic stripping us of our right to choose and do we have a right to choose? (modern attempts to attack notions of free will...brings us back to “cult of technological futurism”)

Big other poaches our behavior for surplus and leaves behind all the meaning lodged in our bodies, our brains, and our beating hearts, not unlike the monstrous slaughter of elephants for ivory. Forget the cliché that it's free, “you are the product.” You are not the product; you are the abandoned carcass. The “product” derives from the surplus that is ripped from your life. — Shoshana Zuboff

Instrumentarianism — Another phrase or description that comes up often in your work is that we become “the means to others' ends,” and that the power to modify our behavior is something you call “instrumentarianism,” which is the equivalent of totalitarianism for a surveillance society. **Q:** What is instrumentarianism? **Q:** Why do you refer to China's social credit system as the “apotheosis” of instrumentarian power?

What does a Surveillance Future Look like? — When speaking about the transformation of the assumptions about the aware home, you write “today, these rights to privacy, knowledge and application have been usurped by a bold market venture powered by unilateral claims to others' experience and the knowledge that flows from it. What does this sea change mean for us, for our children, for our democracies, and for the very possibility of a human future in a digital world? This book aims to answer these questions. It is about the darkening of the digital dream and its rapid mutation into a voracious and utterly novel commercial project that I call surveillance capitalism.” **Q:** What does this sea change mean?



SUR-RENDERING EXPERIENCE

Who/What are We? — Q: Who are surveillance capitalism's customers? What are its users?

Faustian Bargain — You say that we are something akin to the fossils from which are extracted the fuel of this new economy. We are the resource for a predictions market that, at scale, creates a highly automated, predictive, and regimented hive. I would like to explore the model of behavioral surplus you detail in the book. Q: How is human experience rendered into behavioral data and how is the "exhaust" from that data used to create ever more prediction products that are sold in behavioral futures markets to those who are looking for increasingly "guaranteed outcomes?"

Unrecognizable World — You say the logic of making customers out of those who trade in these "behavioral futures markets" is something that "turns ordinary life into the daily renewal of a twenty-first century Faustian compact. 'Faustian' because it is nearly impossible to tear ourselves away, despite the fact that what we must give in return will destroy life as we have known it." Q: How would it destroy life as we have known it? Is this why you tell the story of the loss of your home in the fire?

FALSE INNEVITABILITY

Illegitimate Choices — You say that "surveillance capitalism imposes a fundamentally illegitimate choice that twenty-first-century individuals should not have to make, and its normalization leaves us singing in our chain." Q: What is that illegitimate choice that surveillance capitalism imposes? We have this notion that "resistance is futile" in the march towards modernity, but we have also synonymized surveillance capitalism with technology. Why have we linked the two?

THE UNPRECEDENTED

Shadows in the Deep — The most important word you use is "The Unprecedented." The way you introduce this term feels very foreboding, like some shadow under the depths of dark waters. Q: What is the unprecedented and what is its significance? (Metaphors are hard, because computers are different. — Bruce Schneier, Hidden Forces).

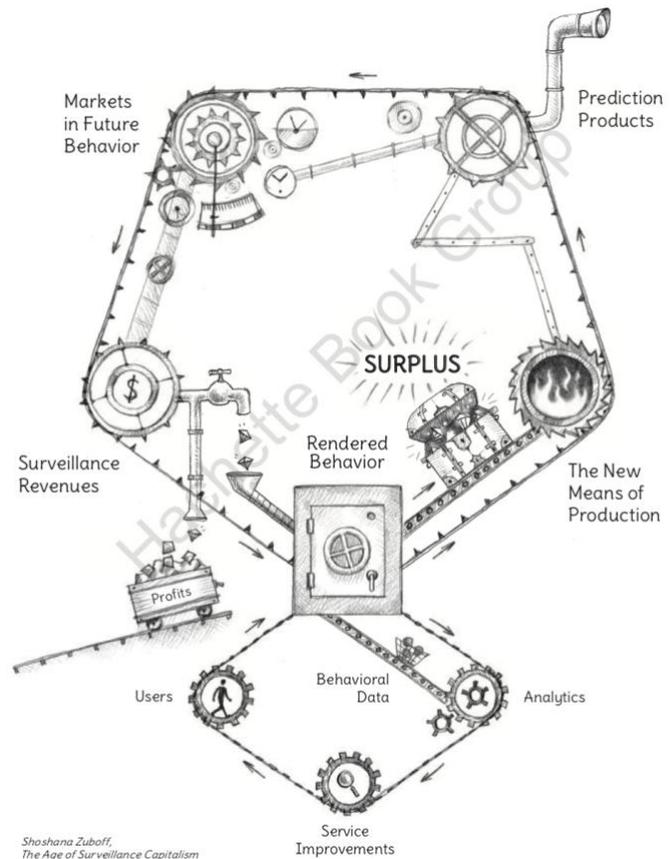


Figure 2: The Discovery of Behavioral Surplus



Spanish Conquerors & Digital Natives — You talk about the first Spanish conquerors who washed upon the shores of the Caribbean and central America who were interpreted and welcomed by the natives as Gods. **Q:** Are we the digital natives of a new conquest? How do we learn to see the unprecedented for what it is, if we have never known anything like it before? Is your book a map of this new world, of this new reality?



Ornamental Chains & Spider Webs —

Q: Are we, as you put it, “singing in our chains?” Are we entangled in some kind of web that we cannot see but only feel? Do we need to wake up from this dream and take back control of our lives and of our privacy? How important is it that we find our outrage?

NAMING AND TAMING

Naming — **Q:** How important is ‘naming’ in this journey to understand the unprecedented?

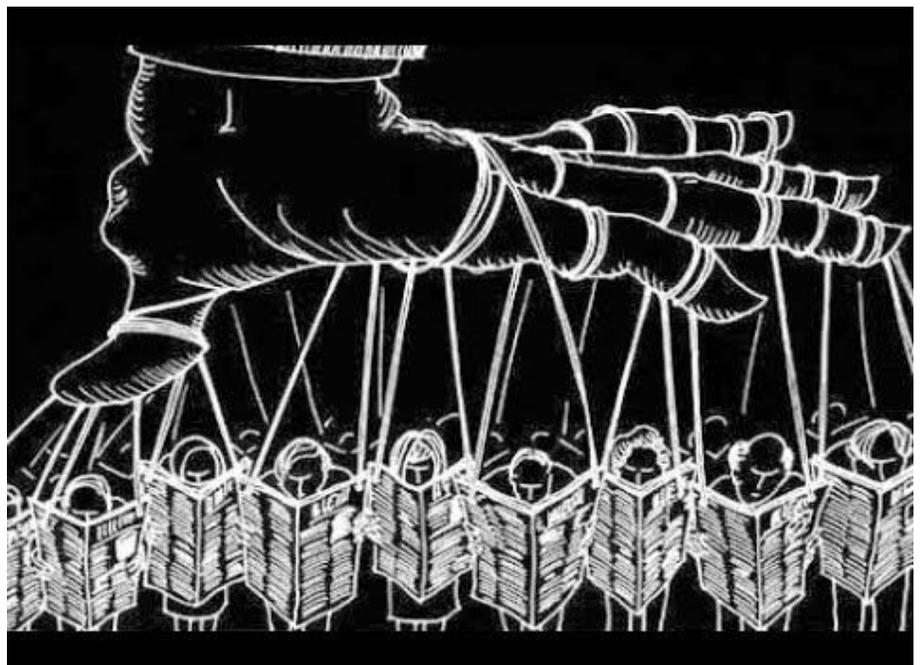
Who is the Puppet Master? — You write that, “our effort to confront the unprecedented begins with the recognition that we hunt the puppet master, not the puppet.” **Q:** If the puppet is the technology, who is the puppeteer? So the big story is not really the technology per se but the fact that it has spawned a new variant of capitalism that is enabled by the technology?

EXISTENTIAL THREATS TO DEMOCRACY

Democracy in the Balance — You site some alarming statistics in your book that show a weakening of support for democracy across the western world. **Q:** What are the risks to our democratic institutions? How does this relate back to instrumentarianism? How does it compare to the totalitarian impulses that took hold of Europe in the 1920s and 30s?

Radical Indifference — You refer to something called “radical indifference,” which reminds me a lot of the void of nihilism that enabled the rise of the Nazism in Germany. **Q:** What is this “radical indifference” and why is it important?

China Credit System — **Q:** What are we seeing today in China? Are we falsely comforted by the comparison between us and the Chinese? (see, *that’s* surveillance, not what we have here!) Is there danger in the possibility that China’s people, who are already accustomed to much less privacy, will be more easily militarized and turned against the west?



Unworkable Economy — **Q:** How many people know that GM employed more people during the height of the Great Depression than either Google or Facebook employs at their heights of market capitalization? Can such an economy possibly be democratic if no one can find a job?

The Berlin Wall fell for many reasons, but above all it was because the people of East Berlin said, "No more!" We too can be the authors of many "great and beautiful" new facts that reclaim the digital future as humanity's home. No more! Let this be our declaration. — Shoshana Zuboff

RECLAIMING OUR INFORMATION CIVILIZATION

Be the "Friction" — **Q:** What are the sorts of things that we can begin to do in our daily lives in order to push back? (digital minimalism?)

Regulation & Government Action — **Q:** How can collective action help? What types of regulations have been proposed and what types of regulations would be most appropriate? How effective has GDPR been for the Europeans?

Market Opportunities — What are the market opportunities? DLT? How is [Apple taking advantage of this privacy void](#), along with its unique position as a hardware *and* software platform?

PART I: THE FOUNDATIONS OF SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM

Q: Google invented and perfected surveillance capitalism in much the same way that a century ago general motors invented and perfected managerial capitalism. How important was the collapse of the bubble in Silicon Valley and the need to find a [monetization model for Google](#) that gave birth to surveillance capitalism? How close are Google's ties to the intelligence agencies and the government? ([John Hanke](#) and [In-Q-Tel](#))

Q: How important was a change in [privacy norms after 9/11](#) to enabling the evolution of capitalism into surveillance capitalism?



PART II: THE MIGRATION FROM THE ONLINE TO THE REAL

Q: What do you mean by “the migration from the online environment to the real world?”

Q: Can we discuss some of the examples in your book like the Facebook voting and mood experiments and Google’s AR “game” Pokémon Go (2-level game). Here we see again, a strong connection between Google and the intelligence community. ([Niantic Labs](#))

Q: How have they gotten away with this?

Q: Industrial capitalism has come with its costs, most notably, to our environment. We are in what the journalist and author Elizabeth Kolbert, has called “[The Sixth Extinction](#),” brought about by the changes we have made to the environment over more than 100 years of industrialization, the pollution of our atmosphere, our rivers, the cutting of our forests, etc., for the commercialization of our environment. If industrial capitalism has so imperiled nature, what is – and what could – surveillance capitalism do to *human nature*?

PART III: THE MIGRATION FROM THE REAL TO THE SOCIAL

Q: What do you mean by the “migration from the real to the social?”

Q: Can we talk about the internal moderation guidelines of these social media giants?

QUOTES

“Instrumentarian power aims to organize, herd, and tune society to achieve a similar social confluence, in which group pressure and computational certainty replace politics and democracy, extinguishing the felt reality and social function of an individualized existence. The youngest members of our societies already experience many of these destructive dynamics in their attachment to social media, the first global experiment in the human hive. I consider the implications of these developments for a second elemental right: the right to sanctuary. The human need for a space of inviolable refuge has persisted in civilized societies from ancient times but is now under attack as surveillance capital creates a world of “no exit” with profound implications for the human future at this new frontier of power.” — Shoshana Zuboff

“Instrumentarian power has been viewed through the old lenses of totalitarianism, obscuring what is different and dangerous. Totalitarianism was a transformation of the state into a project of total possession. Instrumentarianism and its materialization in Big Other signal the transformation of the market into a project of total certainty, an undertaking that is unimaginable outside the digital milieu and the logic of surveillance capitalism.” — Shoshana Zuboff

“Surveillance capitalists know everything about us, whereas their operations are designed to be unknowable to us.” — Shoshana Zuboff

“Home is our school of intimacy, where we first learn to be human. Its corners and nooks conceal the wetness of solitude; its rooms frame our experience of relationship. Its shelter, stability, and security work to concentrate our unique inner self, an identity that imbues our day dreams and night dreams forever. Its hiding places—closets, chests, drawers, locks, and keys— satisfy our need for mystery and independence. Doors—locked, closed, half shut, wide open—trigger our sense of wonder, safety, possibility, and adventure.” — Shoshana Zuboff

“Those ageless polarities in which we discover and elaborate our sense of self are casually eviscerated as immensity installs itself in my refrigerator, the world chatters in my toothbrush, elsewhere stands watch over my bloodstream, and the garden breeze stirs the chimes draped from the willow tree only to be broadcast across the planet. The locks? They have vanished. The doors? They are open.” — Shoshana Zuboff