

**From Bloody Hell to Landless Empire:  
The British East India Company and Data Colonialism**

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Anthony Nguyen



“The Last Effort and Fall of Tippoo Sultaun,” by Henry Singleton, c.1800

In 1611, the British East India Company—“the Company” for short—first entered India by establishing a trading post in Masulipatnam, a port city on India’s eastern coast. In 1757, the Company won a decisive victory at the Battle of Plassey against the Mughals in the Indian province of Bengal. The Company proceeded to install a puppet ruler in Bengal.

From here on, the Company steadily gained control over the entire Indian subcontinent. In 1800, the Company had an army of approximately 260,000 soldiers. That is more than twice as many soldiers as there were in the British Army at the time. The British elite, of course, profited immensely from the Company's exploitation of Indians. The Company flooded British markets with cheap tea, spices, and textiles; moreover, the Company heavily taxed its Indian subjects. British exploitation of India was so complete that we might even say that "Indians literally paid for their own oppression" (Tharoor 2016, 20).

British colonialism was as violent as it was profitable. Social scientists estimate that British rule—whether by means of massacre, extreme poverty, or induced famine (Nightingale 2007)—caused the deaths of approximately 165 million Indians from 1880-1920 (Sullivan and Hickel 2023, 12). Admittedly, these millions died while India was under the formal rule of the British Crown, to whom the Company ceded India in 1858. But the Company was no stranger to putting Indians to the sword and starving them to death. Historians estimate that the Company's harsh response to the Indian Rebellion of 1857, and the famines directly following it, killed roughly 800,000 Indians (Peers 2006, 64). The Company's rule in India is an example of colonialism in which a powerful private company exercised statelike powers over a territory and its inhabitants.

From the Company's rule in India, we might initially infer four philosophical claims about the nature of colonialism:

- (1) that companies can be colonial powers,
- (2) that colonialism must involve economic exploitation,
- (3) that colonialism must involve territorial expansion, and
- (4) that colonialism must involve physical violence.

But we might be only half-right to draw these lessons. The Company proves (1) is true, and I will assume (2) is true. But (3) and (4) might be false. They arguably both succumb to a contemporary counterexample: "data colonialism" (Mejias and Couldry 2024). Data colonialism involves neither land nor physical violence. These results are of philosophical significance. Philosophers have critiqued colonialism on the grounds that it violates either territorial rights

(Ferguson and Veneziani 2020) or rights to freedom from arbitrary physical violence (Bufacchi 2017). These normative views are plainly false if data colonialism exists.

In data colonialism, big tech companies—such as Meta, which owns Facebook, Instagram, Threads, and WhatsApp—exploitatively extract internet users’ data. In today’s digital world, there are no reasonable alternatives to using the internet and engaging with some social media. As a result, there are no reasonable alternatives, under present socio-technical conditions, to the use of services that lead to the extraction of our data. For example, regarding facial recognition, “it is virtually impossible for an individual to fully opt out of facial recognition identification or control the use of their images without abstaining from public areas, the internet, or society altogether” (Lee and Chin-Rothman 2022). To avoid data extraction, one would have to effectively exit political society. Good luck learning about candidates, communicating with political parties’ spokespersons, persuading others to vote for the candidate(s) you favor, or running for office without using the internet and therefore having your data extracted. I don’t even know how to pay my taxes except by using the internet.

But “consent” to something to which there are no reasonable alternatives is not meaningful or morally transformative. That’s why, if I give a mugger my wallet only to avoid physical harm, I’m not giving meaningful consent. After all, I’m not exactly *gifting* my wallet to the mugger. Therefore, since we lack reasonable alternatives, we do not meaningfully consent to data extraction.

You and I are unjustly exploited. Big tech companies profit by selling our data. Moreover, this data is often made available to the state, which can use this data to accomplish panoptic levels of police surveillance previously unimaginable (Lee and Chin-Rothman 2022). Our data has become the new *terra nullis* (nobody’s land)—the new resource that *seems* “perfectly normal” for some of the global elite to take and profit from.

Given the prevalence of the internet, big tech companies can—by extracting (perhaps better: stealing) their data—systematically exploit vulnerable communities across the world (Kwet 2019). This global exploitation predictably creates an inegalitarian flow of wealth internationally.

One surprising feature of data colonialism is that the old distinction between the Global North and the Global South is not relevant in the same way it was under historical colonialism. As existing big tech companies are largely based in the United States and China (Mejias and Couldry 2024, 147), data colonialism contributes to greater economic inequalities between these two countries and the rest of the world.

We should, for instance, be suspicious of Facebook’s Free Basics program, which offers free, limited internet access to citizens of 28 African countries but allows Facebook to engage in “digital experiments on marginalized communities and data extraction” (Nothias 2020, 337). Might Facebook’s Free Basics be a contemporary, technological spin on the civilizing mission of old? Notably, some techno-capitalists embrace their status as colonizers. When Indians decided to block Free Basics in their country, Facebook board member Marc Andreessen expressed his frustration by posting the following tweet: “Anti-colonialism has been economically catastrophic for India for decades. Why stop now?” (Taub 2016)

While data colonialism involves neither territorial expansion nor physical violence, it does involve global exploitation that is hard to escape. This global exploitation is so pervasive and so asymmetrically beneficial to the techno-capitalist elite in a few countries that we might reasonably suspect that it qualifies as *colonial* exploitation. Data colonialism needs to be on more philosophers’ radars. There is more work to be done on how technology shapes our global political landscape, on how to best define colonialism, and what the full philosophical implications of data colonialism’s existence are.

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