

AI as Ideology: A Marxist Reading (Crawford, Marx, Debord, Althusser)

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Kate Crawford: AI's Performative Promiscuity

Artificial intelligence (AI) is many things to many people. Its definitions are legion and often vague and intersectional. The indeterminacy of AI is just one aspect that relates it to a Marxist definition of ideology, whose polymorphous character is a persistent attribute which ultimately rests upon a substantial unity of meaning. Briefly, ideology always presents itself as a rich multiplicity when, in reality, it is always one and the same. Its multiplicity and diversity are pure chimera. The same can be said for AI.

Before focusing on the substantial unicity of ideology and showing how AI can be conceived as its contemporary avatar, we must first establish the substantial unicity of AI itself, the fundamental oneness that lies behind its chimeric diversity. In order to carry this out, I am relying on the critical work of Kate Crawford, in her *Atlas of AI* (Crawford). Crawford presents AI as a materialist-performative phenomenon with global reach, thus allowing us to view it with reference to Marx's thoughts on ideology. Thus, for Crawford, AI is first and foremost "neither artificial nor intelligent" (Crawford p. 8). It is not artificial because it is "embodied and material, made from natural resources, fuel, human labor, infrastructures, logistics, histories and classifications" (ibid.). It is not intelligent, since "AI systems are not autonomous, rational or able to discern anything without extensive, computationally intensive training with large datasets [and] predefined rules and rewards" (ibid).

The material performativity of AI means that it is "a registry of power". It is a set of "technical and social practices, institutions and infrastructures, politics and culture" (ibid.).

Further, AI is “a form of exercising power, and a way of seeing; it’s also a manifestation of highly organized capital backed by vast systems of extraction and logistics, with supply chains that wrap around the entire planet” (Crawford p.18).

Acknowledging the spurious multiplicity of AI’s configurations and meanings, Crawford writes, “The promiscuity of AI as a term, its openness to being reconfigured means it can be put to use in a range of ways... but it also gives us license to consider all these elements and how they are deeply imbricated” (Crawford p.19). I am taking this “license” seriously: the “promiscuity of AI”, the fact that it is configured in an endless variety of often contradictory meanings, is an opening through which AI can be considered as ideology. AI presents itself as having many rich meanings (Chatbots, efficiency tools, customer service, neuroscience, technological progress, liberation, deep thinking, existential threat to humanity...). However, the Marxist interpretation of Crawford allows us to grasp AI as one massive ideology. To be clear, I am not saying that there is an ideology *of* AI but that AI itself should be grasped as materially performative ideology.

Before discussing how ideology arises in the first part of the Marx/Engels *German Ideology* (on Feuerbach), I will leap ahead and quote Althusser’s clear Marxist definition. This will help us grasp the performative (political, social, personal) stakes involved in ideology and how AI can be grasped as its contemporary avatar.

In Althusser’s words, ideology is first and foremost “a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser p. 109). Not only does Althusser’s use of the term “imaginary” allow us to approach the chimerical quality of ideology, its occulting, de-naturing vocation over against “real conditions of existence” but the term “representation” also helps us grasp the linguistic nature of ideology. Hegelians readily

recognize how the language of *Vorstellung*, performative in religious doctrine (*Lehre*), stands distinct from the concrete, speculative discourse of Science (*Wissenschaft*). While Marxist Science has put Hegel's *Wissenschaft* on its head, both present their discourse as concretely distinct from that of representation.

Althusser's definition of ideology already predisposes it to a theoretical encounter with AI. As the performative language of data, AI is indeed a language (i.e. a system of signs) *representing* "an imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence". Referring to Marx/Engels, Debord and Althusser, I will argue that ideology's representations of an "imaginary relationship" to reality first take the form of exchange, then capital, then the spectacle (Debord), and finally, data. Data is therefore to be understood as both the spectacular avatar of capital and the performative language of ideology. Briefly, AI should be comprehended as the surplus value logic of data as capital, as the generative grammar of ideology. In other words, AI is no more than a process producing more data/capital as ideology.

The German Ideology: Ideology as Exchange

A central issue addressed in Marx and Engel's *German Ideology* (GI) is, how does a materialist philosophy explain the existence of something as immaterial, indeed, as anti-material as ideology? The answer: as language, which can be defined, in material terms, as a performative system of signs, resulting from the fundamental division of labor.

In the GI, language arises out of human reality, which is fundamentally economical. Indeed, human reality means the active, productive relation that the individual engages in with material nature. The productive relation grounds the individual's real material conditions.

Language is entirely symptomatic of these conditions, their real expression. It is crucial to understand that this is not the case because language reflects or represents those material conditions, according to a correspondence theory of truth where propositions represent or signify an absent, objective state of affairs. Rather, for Marx and Engels, language is the realization or actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) of economic states of affairs. If the human *brain* (not *Geist*, GI p. 47) develops conceptions and ideas, then these are unreal and of no scientific interest until they are given voice in language. Thus, language is the objective iteration of real material conditions, which are nothing other than the productive (or unproductive) relation that human individuals entertain with their natural environment. Already, we understand how ideology takes on material existence: as language, which is a performative iteration of material conditions.

We have shown that exclusive, systematic occupation with thought [as an independent existence] on the part of ideologists and philosophers, and hence the systematization of these thoughts, is a consequence of the division of labour... [N]either thoughts nor language in themselves form a realm of their own, [...] they are only manifestations of actual life. (GI p. 118)

In the GI, Marx and Engels present the notion of a fundamental division of labor, as the productive relation between the individual and nature. The division of labor reflects this relation and thus bespeaks human reality. The division lies between those who actually produce things and those who exchange the resultant products: “the contradiction between the productive forces and the form of exchange [*Verkehr*]” (GI 88). The “contradiction” is real and actual in that the forces of production or labor stand against the forces of exchange, forming the basis for class struggle.

Significantly, labor has its own language, articulated by those involved in real production: the material discourse of Marxist science. On the other hand, the forces of exchange

produce the language of ideology. It is an unreal, representational discourse consisting of meaningless signs divorced from the material signified. This is the reality of ideology, a language *alienated* from reality and *alienating* from reality, hiding the real conditions of material existence. In the GI, the exchange language of “petty-bourgeois conditions” (GI 118) produces the empty language of German ideology, which Marx and Engels present as made up of meaningless linguistic signs. Thus ideological concepts are put into scare quotes, becoming empty signs:

It is self-evident, moreover, that “spectres”, “bonds”, “the higher being”, “concept”, scruple” are merely the idealistic, spiritual expression, the conception of the isolated individual, the image of very empirical fetters and limitations within which the mode of production of life and the form of exchange coupled with it move. GI 52

It is important to stress that as the discourse of exchange, ideology *is* pure exchange. It is “the direct efflux of [the] material behavior of those whose “real existence” is material exchange (ibid). As such, ideology is fundamentally unchanging. Because it is the direct iteration of exchange, ideology loses all pretention to independent self-movement. “They have no history, no development” (ibid.). Or rather, apparently changing, ideology remains the same, like Heraclitus’ river. Thus, the language of ideology presents itself as a narrative of progress and change recounting dialectical “revolutions” whereas it is always one and the same discourse of exchange.

In the GI, exchange takes the form of capital, which appears as an inherently globalizing, universalizing agent of “rapid circulation”, destructive expansion, whose performative axiom is “the automatic system” (ibid.) of big, mechanized industry. Later, in the *Communist Manifesto* (CM), the concept of capital comes to embody a globalizing economic class: the bourgeoisie. Finally, in *das Kapital*, the economic logic of surplus value produces exchange, capital and thus,

the performative discourse of ideology. The bourgeoisie, as a class, is the real-time performance of the ideological script.

The present-day form of capital is data, the latest avatar of exchange (*Verkehr*). As ideology, data can be “read” as a performative system of signs that occults the true conditions of existence. As the algorithmic logic of data production, AI can thus be comprehended as a mechanism of surplus value: the logic producing more data and as capital through alienation and exploitation of labor. AI is the grammar of ideology.

Communist Manifesto: Globalization of Data-Capital

In the CM, the bourgeoisie as an economic class embodies and iterates the powers of exchange that become explicitly “capital” in *das Kapital*. As human individuals, the bourgeois are language-generating, discursive entities and their language is that of the material activity that defines them: exchange. Several theses regarding the bourgeoisie (as an expression of exchange and capital) are helpful in apprehending data and AI as ideology.

The bourgeoisie (capital) spills out over all the world, colonizing, constantly looking for new markets, new consumers and cheaper sources of labor/production. No “Chinese walls” (CM p. 7) can stop its flow. Bourgeois colonizing is also intensive. In any given locus, huge manufacturing takes the place of the workshop; millionaires of industry replace “the petty bourgeoisie” of shop keepers, craftspeople and artisans. In today’s AI world, data is inherently expansive and global while intensively accumulating in the hands of ever-fewer, ever-richer individuals, data-rich capitalists.

The modern bourgeois world is the product of a “series of [bourgeois] revolutions” (CM p. 4). These are spurious revolutions in that they are simply ways of entrenching the division of

labor while producing more capital through extraction/exploitation, for example in bringing about the end of the feudal economic model. Bourgeois “revolutions” are bent on maintaining and growing the status quo: generating capital as profit. Ideologically, they feed a false narrative of progress while continually de-stabilizing, rendering precarious the proletariat. Similarly, the AI world fetishizes the “new” through pseudo-revolutions and the narrative of technological progress, of “moving forward” by revolutionizing, constantly upending the conditions of work. In fact, AI itself is presented as the ultimate existential revolution, one where the very existence of humanity is presented as being at stake, the last word in proletariat destabilization. Taking the AI data-world as exchange and capital allows us to see it as is fixed and unchanging ideology. Its revolutions are bogus.

The bourgeoisie brings about the constant transformation of the instruments of production (technology) and thus of the conditions of production (which are human). However, we must remember that technological “progress” is only there to increase productivity, i.e. to increase exchange, profit, capital, and for us, data. As in the invention of shipping, the railway, the telegraph, the exchange of capital is the agent and substance of technological change. Thus, AI, as the latest iteration of technological progress, should be seen as fundamentally driven by the logic of surplus value, the increase of exchange as capital as represented by data. Rather than seeing AI as the shiny new fruit of human ingenuity, which may be harnessed for good (freedom) or evil (human enslavement) we must recognize it as the bastard child of capital and ideology.

In the CM, technological “progress” means constant shake-ups, pseudo-revolutions, “constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production” (CM p. 6), fomenting insecurity and upending all social conditions. Today, AI driven robotics are constantly putting people out of

work or forcing them to adapt to new AI systems or forcing them to live in precarious part-time jobs (gig economy). These jobs are nothing more than servicing and feeding data-hungry, data-generating AI apps, e.g. Amazon, Door Dash, Skip The Dishes, Uber. As well, anxiety caused by constant pseudo-revolutions in the form of new AI apps fuels further consumption (of data) and further precariousness, further anxiety...

In the CM, the bourgeois world has created a global proletariat who has grown along with the expansion of bourgeois capital. Workers are a commodity only valued for their cheapness and their ability to produce profit as surplus value. Therefore, the more “workers”, the more capital. For us, the contemporary AI proletariat is similarly a commodity valued only for its ability to produce capital as data. Further, the AI proletariat produces data capital immediately, through their consumption of data. The more consumers of data, the more producers of data, and vice versa. Consumption of data produces more data or capital. As a commodity, the AI proletariat worker *is* data, valued for their ability to produce surplus data as capital through AI. In AI, the worker/consumer is valued only as “eyeballs”. AI has created a truly global proletariat.

In other words, the capitalist AI system is based on the proletariat as a producer/consumer of data. Further, as a commodity, the proletariat as data producer/consumer is inevitably reduced to data themselves, leading to a world where everything is simply data (or capital). Or ideology. This does not mean that there is no longer a Marxian proletariat of actual, exploited workers. As Crawford shows, AI structures are based on the most venal, brutal forms of worker exploitation and resource extraction. But since it is generally “off-shore” where this takes place, we in the northwestern hemisphere do not witness it in our super clean, streamlined AI devices. If our phones actually produced the black coal smoke, poisonous tailings, blood and

sweat that is materially involved in their production and use, we would throw them away in horror and disgust. Recall that AI as ideology hides these real conditions of existence.

In the AI world, there is no separation between product (data), the consumer (data), and the worker (data); in fact, it is all the flow of capital, which, as data, is the performative language of ideology, masking the real conditions of existence. It does not matter whether the latest chatbot is telling the “truth” or disinformation, the language spewed forth is exchange, capital and ideology.

In the CM, “the strict demands of cash” replace the complex social bonds of society, which the bourgeoisie or capital has “torn asunder”.

The bourgeoisie [...] has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom – Free Trade. (CM p.5)

In the above quote, we can replace the term “bourgeoisie” with “AI generated data”.

Of course, Marx and Engels hold no nostalgia for the supplanted past forms of religion, feudal patriarchy or sentimentality, themselves “political illusions” or primitive forms of ideology. If capital has eradicated these earlier social forms with “naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation” (ibid.), it is simply that a later ideological form has replaced another earlier one. In fact, as we have seen, in spite of its apparent multiplicity, ideology is always one and unchanging. It always expresses the exchange and capital while occulting the real material conditions of production. The bourgeois world has certainly revolutionized the earlier feudal forms of production but the ideological message remains the same. What has changed, according to the CM, is both the scale of the modern ideological intervention and its language, which has

been reduced to “the strict demands of cash”, to “free trade” and the “icy waters of... calculation” (ibid.): for us, the data-capital of the AI world.

One does not have to be a sociologist to remark that today’s data world has indeed torn asunder complex social bonds, whether they be the family, community associations, workplaces, churches, trade unions, romantic bonds... We may be alarmed at the decimation (digitalization) of these forms because in AI’s reduction of them to “exchange value” threatens our anthropological status as “zoön politikon”.

Just as the CM sees the bourgeois world spreading “over the entire surface of the globe [where] it must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere” (CM p.6), the data world of AI does the same. Like the bourgeoisie (or capital), AI “creates a world after its own image” (CM p.7). Just as the proletarian laborer becomes “an appendage of the machine” (CM p. 10), “a commodity” (CM p. 9), the AI world reduces everyone and everything to consumable data and its production. Like property wealth in the CM, data capital accumulates in “a few hands” (CM p.7), today, the few data-rich billionaires we can count on one hand. I will return briefly to the question of revolt and resistance at the end.

Guy Debord: the AI World as Spectacle

What is the spectacle? For Debord, it was the imaginary, idealized, fictional world presented by mass media and advertising, populated by stars who seemed to live in this aspirational realm of commodity heaven. The spectacle is not only divorced from real life, it occults it. In doing so, the spectacle is an affront to real life. Thus, it corresponds to the Marxist definition of ideology: “The spectacle is the acme of ideology. For in its full flower it exposes

and manifests the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life.”

The spectacle represents the omnipresent avatar of capital. Since capital is the representation of labor, the spectacle is the representation of capital. Recall that representation (*Vorstellung*) implies a language that is unreal, immaterial, divorced from its essential content or, in linguistic terms, the transcendental signified that it posits as elsewhere. That transcendental signified is “reality”, a material world (labor) removed from the signifiers of spectacular language. Such language is ideological since it is divorced from and occults true material conditions. Debord’s spectacle is ideology. The spectacle also develops what the CM hinted at: the commodification of labor. Alienated labor, as capital is represented in the spectacle, which is nothing more than the world as consumable commodities. For us, the spectacle thus represents a crucial aspect in grasping how AI data not only commodifies the world but renders consumption ideological, for what we consume is the data world as ideology.

Following the lessons of the CM, we appreciate that the spectacle must go global. It must chase its tail around the globe, and it does so as a consumable commodity. Debord: “The world that the spectacle holds up to view is at once here and elsewhere; it is the world of the commodity ruling over all lived experience” 37. The spectacle, “completes its colonization of social life... the world we see is the world of the commodity”. 42. The commodification of the world means reality is reduced to consumption for the sole purpose of producing more capital and thus, more spectacle, more ideology. Following the logic of capital, the spectacle is self-perpetuation and exponentially self-producing. Today, in the form of data, the spectacle has attained the ultimate commodification of the world, reality for consumption which produces

more data as capital, spectacle, data ideology. Again, the onto-logic of the spectacle allows us to see that the nightmare scenario of the AI domination of humanity is already here.

The global pretensions of the spectacle mean that it presents itself as an idealized world, as a *whole* of infinite quality. However, “the real consumer can only get his hands on a succession of fragments of this commodity heaven – fragments each of which naturally lacks any of the quality ascribed to the whole”. 65. The spectacle *represents* “the blissful unification of society” but does so by fragmenting real life.

In fact, the spectacle is always apprehended in a fragmentary fashion. It is always for the individual spectator, whose relation to the whole must remain partial and perspectival. Nonetheless, in the spectacle, “Images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream [i.e. the spectacle]... Apprehended in a partial way, reality unfolds in a new generality as a pseudo-world apart, solely the object of contemplation... The spectacle in its generality is a concrete inversion of life, and, as such, the autonomous movement of non-life.” (2).

Of course, AI employs the same narrative of movement, progress and novelty. In reality (or unreality), the only flow is cash flow. Behind the back of such flow, the reality of ideology is that nothing changes. Thus, the spectacle manifests itself as “an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute. All it says is: Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear. The attitude it demands is the same passive acceptance that it has already secured...” Reading AI through the lens of the spectacle helps us see why the former can present itself as inescapable, as the inevitable status quo. In the words of the apocryphal mafia hitman: “It is what it is”. Or again, “Nothing personal. It’s just business.”

Debord understands that the spectacle cannot be reduced to the technology through which it presents itself. It is not “a mere product of the technology of the mass dissemination of images (thesis 5).” Rather, the spectacle is a “*Weltanschauung* that has been actualized, translated into the material realm.” If indeed the spectacle has become an actual worldview, “an objective force”, it is because it is ideology, taken in the sense of a performative language of signs. Indeed, “the language of the spectacle is composed of signs of the dominant organization of production [which are] the ultimate end-products of that organization” 7. In contemporary terms, the linguistic signs of the spectacle are data, end-products as commodities. Significantly, those consuming the spectacle are likewise those who produce it. This follows the economic logic of Marx and Engels: what is produced must be consumed in order to produce profit or capital. It is important to grasp that in the world as spectacle, the producers are the consumers, an element easily applicable to AI and data as capital.

The spectacle is essentially tautological, for the simple reason that its means and its ends are identical. It is the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire globe, basking in the perpetual warmth of its own glory. 13

Similarly, in the AI world, data production and consumption are one. Online “activity” is indistinguishable from data consumption. To “be” online is to both consume and produce data, just as Debord remarked regarding the tautological loop of the spectacular proletariat. We are AI proletariats. As such, we likewise produce and consume the ideological *Weltanschauung* of AI. In such a world, meaningful political action is problematic. I’ll return to this.

Just as the spectacle’s *Weltanschauung* cannot be confined to the technology through which it initially appears, AI has spilled out from behind our screens, out of that hidden and desired idealized world imagined and consumed as data, to colonize and populate virtually every aspect of our lives, determining us as spectators, fragmenting or decimating (digitalizing as

decimation) the world. I believe we can understand how the spectacle pertains to the AI world, and our relation to it as proletariat producer/consumers, through the notion of “entertainment”. AI ideology, as the avatar of the spectacle, determines the world as entertainment.

I don’t have the space here to refer properly to a recent article in *The Atlantic* (by Megan Garber) who makes this point. Rather than seeing the metaverse as the aspirational dream of big data (Facebook, Google, Apple, Microsoft...) Garber argues that we are already living in it, in our approach to reality as either entertaining or nothing. Her argument rings particularly true if we understand the metaverse in terms of Debord’s spectacle.

Saying the spectacle spills out from behind our screens to reconfigure all of reality, replacing holistic worldhood with the fragmentary pseudo-world of ideology means that actual reality is evaluated principally for its entertainment value, which is appraised in terms of its ability to be commodified as consumable data. In the spectacular world of AI, saying the world must be entertaining is the same as saying it must be producible and consumable as data, as capital and ideology.

Althusser: Labor-power Renewal and AI

In his essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, Althusser deals with the Marxist notion of the “Reproduction of Labor-Power”. Labor-power is the human productive power that is necessarily part of the conditions of production and therefore for the production of capital through surplus value. More production means more profit, which means more capital. How is ideology performative in the reproduction of labor-power.

Althusser quotes Marx: “No production is possible which does not allow for the reproduction of the material conditions of production”. Such conditions are the general means of

production, including raw materials, technologies, fixed assets (buildings) and lines of transportation for the exchange of goods and capital. However, above all, the material conditions of production refer to labor-power and its necessary reproduction.

Labor-power must be constantly renewed. On one level, this is done through wages. Paying labor a minimum ensures that the workers are able to live and work. It means they are housed, clothed and fed enough for them to furnish the labor necessary for production. It also means workers have enough to satisfy themselves on a purely animal level: satisfactions of eating, drinking and procreating.

Of course, very little material goods are required to keep the AI proletariat producing data. Basically, food, water and the ability to recharge one's cellphone battery are enough. To Marx's proletariat satisfactions of beer and sex AI adds the endless dopamine rewards of the spectacle through the voyeuristic consumption of the world as fragmentary entertainment. In the AI world, spectacular leisure activities have themselves become a form of labor immediately productive of data capital. Data consumption and satisfaction immediately reproduce the labor-power needed for the production of data capital.

Another aspect of labor renewal for Althusser is his portrayal of state education as essentially an exercise in skills development. To renew itself, labor-power must be skilled enough to carry out its assigned tasks, and managers must be trained to oversee production. The repetitive nature of proletariat labor, the reduction of the worker to machine-like gestures, where he becomes "an appendage of the machine" (CM), means that, on one level, training is minimal, a form of behaviorist conditioning or dressage. However, since the bourgeoisie is constantly "revolutionizing the instruments of production, training must be ongoing and unsettling, a physical conditioning endlessly imposed on the worker.

Pace Althusser, AI makes the state education system redundant. The data proletariat is mainly self-taught and self-managing. Management means optimizing the flow of data, something the data proletariat does with ease and skill by simply buying into AI and its apps. No resistance or blockages must interrupt the entertaining movement of “non-life” as a total *Weltanschauung*. As Marx observed, the petty bourgeois manager falls into the ranks of the proletariat. For us, the data proletariat is her own manager.

Ideology Interpellates Individuals as Subjects of Ideology

For Althusser, ideology becomes real, or rather, comes to have a “material existence” (Althusser p. 112) through subjective representation, whereby ideology is actualized. Ideology creates the subject it needs, that is, the “free, conscious agent [...] acting according to his ideas” (Althusser p. 113). “There is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects” (Althusser p. 115). In the AI world, the actions of the individual subject are a pseudo-activity: keyboarding, screen-touching. It is through these “free” subjective actions that the data proletariat produces data/capital. Althusser’s notion of interpellation explains how the subjective representations of ideology become the spectacle, the avatar of capital and AI, that is, how the modern, free, self-determining subject becomes the data proletariat.

To “interpellate” comes from the French verb *interpeller*, meaning to call out to, or to hail someone. Typically, it refers to a figure of authority, particularly, a police officer, calling out to a citizen, demanding that they stop and identify themselves, justify their presence. Similarly, ideology calls out: “You, there. Yes, you. Stop. Identify yourself.”

In everyday life, interpellation replays Hegel’s dialectic of recognition. When I respond to the hail, “Who it is?” with “It’s me”, I recognize “you”, the voice calling out as addressing

itself to *me*. The same dialectic of recognition is re-interpreted with regard to ideology, which interpellates me, calls out to me to identify myself. Reciprocally, in identifying myself, I am recognizing the ideological voice that calls out to me. The only way I know that I am a subject, a self in the world of other selves, is because ideology has first recognized me as a subject. It does so by calling out to me. By saying, “Hey, you there” (p. 118). This is how “the category of subject is constitutive of ideology, which only exists by constituting concrete subjects as subjects”, writes Althusser (p. 117).

Again referring to the Hegelian structure of recognition as mutual and reciprocal, when ideology hails me as a subject, I in turn recognize ideology as a fellow subject but now as a kind of Absolute Subject (p. 122) since ideology’s timeless quality makes it appear as eternal and universal. Recognizing the Absolute Subject of ideology that interpellates me into existence is the same as recognizing the “existing state of affairs” (123), recognizing that “it is really true that it is so and not otherwise, that [we] must be obedient to God, to [our] conscience... to the boss, to the engineer” (123). Our self-recognition in ideology is thus expressed as a humble, passive acceptance: “So be it” (123). Althusser helps us see that the subjection through ideology makes the workers “work all by themselves”, as *self-managing*, free subjects.

The relation between the entertaining data-world of AI as ideology and subjective interpellation is self-evident. We only have to examine our own relationship to the online world and its devices; how it constantly calls out “hey you, there”, demanding our response, and how we respond in a way that defines us as subjects *of* and *subjected to* AI ideology. Our subjection is witnessed phenomenologically in the submissive, recumbent body posture of the data proletariat but also in our avowed addiction to our devices or in the fact that we tend to faithfully and truthfully respond to online queries and surveys about what we like, how we feel, who we are,

faithfully identifying ourselves as subjects of AI ideology. However, even if we choose not to respond, our cookies are saved, our profile banked, our tastes, likes, thoughts, opinions, all the gestures and pronouncements that make us who we are as selves feed into the algorithms that then interpellate us, hailing us with ever more honed precision and categorical specificity.

Further, as the Absolute Subject that we recognize when interpellated, the ideology of AI presents itself as a massive and absolute inevitability, demanding complete surrender to digitalization, to the inescapable adoption of AI, its apps, devices, programs, technologies. Resistance is futile.¹

Reality and Resistance

If ideology is a discourse that dissimulates the true nature of reality, then what is reality? What are the real conditions of existence that ideology masks and traduces? I don't have the time or space to investigate all the possibilities. One might refer to Debord's idea of free, anarchist association or other social realities, to real friendship or civil society.

Further, more positively, "real conditions of existence" might mean actual social relations, an affirmation derived from Debord's anarchist ideal of association and friendship, counteracting the solitude and isolation of the individual living in the spectacle, isolation that we witness in "social" media's ongoing pandemic of loneliness, mental illness, suicide, radicalization etc.

Finally, our actual relation to the natural environment might constitute the real conditions of existence that AI as ideology occults. Indeed, while AI presents itself as clean, ethereal and disembodied, as Kate Crawford has shown us, it is the exact opposite. The "clouds" that AI depends upon, the banks of data capital, are huge data processing, storage and distribution facilities in the Nevada desert and elsewhere, sucking up oceans of electrical energy and rare

earth minerals, often mined, under slave-labor conditions, in countries with few or no environmental regulations. As ideology, AI makes us forget not only the very real and abject working conditions of the real Marxist proletariat, involved in the transformation of nature into products and surplus value but also the symbiotic relation that humanity has with nature generally. Briefly, the “real life” occulted by AI ideology refers to human interaction with the environment, and particularly to the effects visited upon it by AI itself. The ideological metaverse causes us to forget the environmental waste that is visited upon the world by AI itself.

Reality, Resistance, Revolution

If ideology is a discourse that dissimulates the true nature of reality, then what is reality? What are the real conditions of existence that ideology masks and traduces? For Marx/Engels, “real” first refers to the material conditions of labor experienced by the proletariat in their working relation with nature. Ideology, we recall, springs from the exchange of the products of work, carried out by a separate class, one which eventually becomes the bourgeoisie. For Marx/Engels, to be human is to produce, to work, to transform the things of immediate nature, as Hegel might easily have expressed it. We can therefore imagine a reality where the products of work are exchanged by those who produce them, removed from the economic logic of surplus value and the resultant commodification of labor. In such a reality, production would take the form of craft, of artisanal or even artistic work and the barter of products, a reality bearing resemblance to what Marx seems to have imagined as a classless society. This social reality might seem “primitive” but it is distinct from the world Marx conceived as existing before the division of labor. The classless, communistic society would not rid itself of technological acquisitions but rather use them in the service (not the servitude) of humanity. The post-

revolutionary world might appear utopic but it also might simply respond to modern-day or future ecological prescriptions: “buying local”, using locally-sourced products, leaving a small carbon footprint, repairing and recycling etc.

Since ideology and its world, i.e. the existing metaverse of the commodified spectacle, is fundamentally linguistic, one level of reality, of “existing conditions” must also be linguistic, conceived of as a performative discourse reflecting those actual conditions, in a way similar to how Marx conceived of his own materialist Science (*Wissenschaft*). Briefly, the discourse of Marxism is, in itself, a form of reality. For us, this means critically realizing and sharing the truth: that online activity may be many things, some of them indisputably favorable, but in its present form it is always also the generation of capital, through the surplus value logic of AI. Further, following my argument, a Marxist critique of AI means acknowledging that online activity is performative as ideology, which spills out from behind our screens to configure the world as the spectacle. Criticizing AI ideology means recognizing that such a world is fundamentally *not* reality, denying its interpellative power. We thus refuse to accept that AI is evitable or necessary, refusing to believe that it is artificial or intelligent, that its thinking is “deep”. Rather, we recognize AI as totally superficial, like ideology itself. A critical discourse that stands against ideology has already attained a fundamental, performative degree of reality.

More positively, “real conditions of existence” might mean actual social relations, an affirmation derived from Debord’s anarchist ideal of association and friendship, counteracting the solitude and isolation of the individual living in the spectacle, isolation that we witness in “social” media’s ongoing pandemic of loneliness, mental illness, suicide, radicalization etc. For Debord, a true anarchist objecting to the Marxist fetishization of work, spontaneous human interaction is the form of reality that the ideological spectacle does away with. Thus, simply

hanging out together, associating, talking, bullshitting, getting together in cafes, on street corners are already political in their recalcitrant opposition to the spectacle's ideological "pseudo-world". Debord invites us to imagine or remember a world of existing social relations, with real friendships, not "friends", real relationships, not online pornography, real likes, not "likes", where being-together is alive, spontaneous and not reduced to individual, monadic views onto the Absolute Subject of ideology.

Finally, our actual relation to the natural environment might constitute the real conditions of existence that AI as ideology occults. Indeed, whereas AI presents itself as clean, ethereal and disembodied, Kate Crawford has helped us understand that it is none of the above. The "clouds" that AI depends upon, the banks of data capital, are huge data processing, storage and distribution facilities in the Nevada desert and elsewhere, suck up oceans of electrical energy and rare earth minerals, often mined under slave-labor conditions in countries with few or no environmental regulations. As ideology, AI makes us forget not only the very real and abject working conditions of the present-day Marxist proletariat, involved in the transformation of nature into commodities and surplus value, but also the symbiotic relation that humanity has with nature generally. Briefly, the "real life" occulted by AI ideology ultimately refers to human interaction with the environment, and particularly to the effects visited upon it by AI itself.

Is resistance possible?

The anarchist revolt of not working, of withholding labor, imagined by Debord (and Max Stirner) no longer works, as such, because "not-working" inevitably involves turning to our screens, consuming/producing more data in order to remain entertained. When the light, touchless touch on the screen is all that is required to produce capital and ideology, the distinction between work and leisure disappears. Therefore, "not working", withholding one's

labor or striking must mean something different, involving the re-imagining what “leisure” means. I do not have the time or space to explore the question here, but resistance to AI’s conflation of work and leisure as coeval with data consumption/production might mean adopting an idea of leisure akin to the Greek ideal of *skolé*: Epicurean, Stoic or Cynical practices of balance and frugality, where work is leisurely and neither work nor leisure is viewed exclusively in terms of productivity, commodification and consumption. For us, this might mean “going analogue”, actively refusing the digital, producing as little or no data as possible, and actively resisting the digitalization of spaces like the university where *skolé* is meant to have its home.

Perhaps Camus, another anarchist, might also provide an answer to the question of resistance, through art. Certainly, Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler’s joint installation at New York City’s MoMA is a perfect example of such “agitprop” art, as is Andrew Norman Wilson’s installation, again at MoMA, *Workers Leaving the Googleplex*, a video revealing the secret existence of segregated “yellow badge” (!) workers at Google, low-paid scanners, mainly people of color, bussed in and out of the Googleplex. Bypassing a Google court injunction preventing him from filming and interviewing these real representatives of the AI proletariat, Wilson presented his reportage as an art installation, allowing it to be disseminated. The fact that the above examples are best accessed by googling them might be seen as a lively expression of Debord’s practice of *detournement*: using data in order to subvert AI’s data ideology.

Other anarchist responses to AI might well include boredom. Not just accepting *ennui* as the null state of not being entertained by the world as spectacle but cultivating and celebrating boredom, nurturing it as a non-productive activity, something like Aristotelean contemplation, the divine immobility of the unmoved mover. More down to earth, boredom seems akin to

Debord's idea of *la dérive*: wandering aimlessly through the city, going walk-about, random thoughts about nothing in particular, no screens, pointless *ennui*.

Debord's anarchist notion of associative life as a reality or "existing conditions" that ideology seeks to occult and undermine testifies to the monadic, individualistic, isolating, alienating nature of AI and the data-world metaverse. The various doomsday scenarios regarding AI should also be seen in this light: not as cautionary tales against AI and its "dangers" but as actually part and parcel of AI ideology itself. First, those scenarios are meant principally to acclimatize us to the monstrous inevitability of AI. Second, by narrowly defining AI to the realm of machine learning, doomsday scenarios hide its true nature as capitalist ideology. Finally, AI doomsday scenarios also teach us that discreet measures and policies can be taken so as to attenuate or moderate its more obviously nefarious effects while maintaining the status quo. This is similar to how, for Marx and Engels, bourgeois ideology teaches that small adjustments to the capitalist system (higher minimum wage, better working conditions) keep workers distracted from their material conditions as the proletariat.

It is also significant that frightening portrayals of "superintelligence" (e.g. Bostrom) tend to compare the workings of AI with the those of the *individual* human brain, a comparison where the latter is inevitably found deficient. Leaving aside the question of whether individual human mind (*Geist*) can be reduced to the material workings of the brain, we might follow Hegel in recognizing the nature of mind as humanly associative, communal and historical (*Geist*). If we compare AI with this more holistic view of mind, i.e. with human intelligence as a communicative, collective activity of thinking, questioning, conceiving and articulating, then resistance becomes feasible, particularly since it is the communicative, critical dimension that

allows us to recognize AI as covert ideology. Briefly, against individual spectators, AI wins; against communal mind, it loses.

Of course, for Marx and Engels, the revolution, while hastened by critical activism, is dialectically inevitable, brought about by the bourgeoisie's own incessant revolutionizing, which, like Hegel's negativity, drives the narrative to its scientific outcome. In this vein, the present-day fear that AI will annihilate humanity can again be read as part of the same bourgeois practice of destabilizing and terrorizing the proletariat in order to make workers accept and cherish the status quo, as if their lives depended upon it. No one wants to be replaced by an AI chatbot. Capitalism thrives on worker anxiety and apprehension; ideology promotes and encourages such anxiety, mainly through its constant revolutionizing of the means of production, the introduction of new machines, new techniques, new crises. The Marxist lesson shows that, in fact, all we have to fear is fear itself.

Indeed, just as the proletariat, as alienated producers and consumers, is absolutely necessary to the successful functioning of bourgeois capitalism, the human data proletariat is absolutely necessary to AI. AI needs humans to produce and consume data in response to its always increasing demands. Data/capital is AI's life blood. Starved of human-generated data, AI would feed upon itself and collapse. Such an end echoes the dialectical revolution that Marx foresaw in capitalism, and which thus may be applied to AI as the performative language of capital. If we accept the nightmare scenario that AI's goal is ultimately the replacement or extinguishing of humanity, for example through the full implementation of the multiverse as spectacle, then we arrive at AI's inevitable self-contradiction and defeat. Referring to the dialectical collapse of capitalism, where over-production and proletariat "pauperization" starves exchange, allows us to conclude that AI's colonizing dehumanization is ultimately self-

contradictory and self-defeating. Over-production of data brings about a state of saturation where what is produced can no longer be consumed (and produced) by a thoroughly “pauperized” (dehumanized) AI proletariat. Unfortunately, such revolutionary impoverishment only occurs when the AI proletariat has himself become all data. Then, borrowing from the *Manifesto*, AI’s fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable (CM p. 16).

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¹ Speaker at a recent University Webinar on AI and education.