

THE AI REVOLUTION NOBODY VOTED FOR

A Democratic Strategy Forum Essay

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“The Luddites were not opposed to technology. They were opposed to a social order in which technology was deployed without regard for workers, communities, or democratic control.”

— Adapted from historical accounts of the Luddite movement

Artificial intelligence is heralded from every corner as the technological revolution that will change everything—one that is inevitable, transformative, and perhaps the most important innovation of our lifetimes. Its advocates promise unprecedented advances in productivity, medicine, science, communication, education, and human knowledge. The few critical voices that breakthrough in mass media warn of job displacement, mass surveillance, misinformation, and the concentration of power.

Both sides, however, operate on the same premise: the central story is all about the technology in operation, not whether or not, or how it should be rolled out.

But what if the technology is not the story?

What if artificial intelligence is better understood as the latest chapter in a much older story—one that began long before computers, algorithms, or Silicon Valley? What if AI is not simply a technological revolution, but the newest stage in capitalism’s long effort to extend market logic into ever more areas of human life? By market logic, we mean the tendency to organize ever more spheres of life on the structure of competition, profit, efficiency, private ownership, and the pursuit of economic return rather than democratic, social, or human considerations.

Its advocates promise unprecedented increases in productivity, just as earlier generations celebrated the transformative potential of computers, automation, and the information revolution. Yet the last four decades raise an uncomfortable question: productivity for whom? The information technology revolution generated enormous gains in productivity and extraordinary new wealth, but the benefits flowed overwhelmingly upward.

Corporate profits, executive compensation, and the fortunes of the already wealthy soared, while wages, worker power, economic security, and democratic

influence stagnated or declined for many. If AI follows a similar path, the issue is not whether society becomes more productive. The issue is *cui bono*, who benefits and owns the gains.

Similar promises accompanied the information technology revolution of the 1990s. We were told that computers, digital networks, and automation would dramatically reduce working hours and expand leisure time. Productivity certainly increased. What did not increase was control over the benefits that productivity created. Once again, technological progress generated extraordinary wealth, but the distribution of that wealth remained overwhelmingly shaped by existing concentrations of economic power.

Viewed from this perspective, artificial intelligence begins to look less like a sudden historical rupture and more like a continuation of familiar patterns. Throughout its history, capitalism has repeatedly sought new frontiers for accumulation. Common lands, open to general use, were enclosed and privatized. Labor was disciplined and became a commodity to be bought and sold. Natural resources were transformed into assets. Consumer culture penetrated everyday life.

The 20th century saw the commodification of leisure, culture, and communication. The 21st century brought the monetization of data, attention, and social interaction.

Each expansion opened new realms/opportunities for profit while simultaneously extending the reach, and logic, of market relations into domains that had previously operated according to different values and social logics—reciprocity, public service, democratic deliberation, scientific inquiry, artistic expression, community stewardship, and other forms of social organization not primarily governed by profit.

Artificial intelligence represents the next frontier in that process. What is increasingly being organized, captured, automated, and monetized is not simply labor or information. It is cognition itself. And if that is true, are they far away from regimenting what is broadly termed the “human soul?”

Capitalism Finds a New Frontier

The history of capitalism is often described as the history of production. It is equally the history of expansion. Capital must continually seek new spaces for investment, new activities to commercialize, and new dimensions of life to bring within the orbit of accumulation. This process has never been purely economic. It is also cultural, political, and social, even permeating into our individual consciousnesses.

We can see this most problematically in the assault on nature itself, where more land, trees, oil, water, wilderness, the natural is never enough.

The great theorists of the twentieth century recognized this dynamic. Marx analyzed and articulated the commodification of labor. Later critical theorists, from the Frankfurt school forward, explored how culture itself became increasingly organized around commercial imperatives. What had once been spaces for reflection, imagination, public discourse, and democratic life became increasingly shaped by advertising, consumerism, and mass media, and the 1 commandment of capitalism –competition.

Artificial intelligence pushes this trajectory even further. The goal is no longer simply to organize production, communication, or entertainment. Increasingly, the object of capture is human intellectual activity itself: writing, research, learning, translation, creativity, interpretation, memory, and communication. Activities once understood as uniquely human capacities are being transformed into datasets, training materials, predictive systems, and commercial products.

The significance of AI therefore lies not only in what it can do. It lies in what it reveals about the direction of contemporary capitalism. The next frontier is not simply labor. It is the human mind. Having extended market relations into land, labor, culture, communication, data, and attention, capitalism increasingly turns toward cognition itself.

Knowledge, Consciousness, and Power

Much has been written about automation and employment. Those concerns are real. Yet focusing exclusively on jobs risks missing something larger.

Industrial capitalism transformed physical labor. Artificial intelligence aims to transform intellectual labor. But even that formulation may not go far enough. Every society depends not only on the production of goods, but

on the production of meaning. It depends upon education, communication, memory, interpretation, imagination, and public reasoning. These activities are not simply economic functions. They are among the foundations of culture, democracy, and human self-understanding.

Throughout the twentieth century, critical theorists increasingly turned their attention to the relationship between knowledge, consciousness, and power. They recognized that modern societies are shaped not only through control of economic resources, but also through control of information, communication, and the institutions through which people come to understand themselves and the world around them.

Schools, media systems, cultural institutions, and increasingly digital platforms all help shape what people know, what they believe, what they consider possible, and how they imagine the future.

Artificial intelligence enters this landscape as something more than a labor-saving technology. It increasingly mediates how people search for information, conduct research, write, communicate, learn, create, and interpret reality itself. The question is therefore not merely whether AI will make intellectual work more efficient. We have heard similar promises before.

The information technology revolution promised to eliminate routine paperwork, reduce drudgery, and free human beings for more meaningful activity. Yet for many workers, digital technologies ultimately intensified monitoring, accelerated work rhythms, expanded expectations of constant availability, and increased managerial control.

The lesson is not that technological innovation is inherently harmful. It is that the social consequences of technology depend less on the technology itself than on the economic system into which it is introduced. The question is who will control the infrastructure through which knowledge is increasingly produced, distributed, and validated.

Under current conditions, the answer is obvious. The infrastructure is overwhelmingly owned and directed by a small number of corporations backed by extraordinary concentrations of private wealth. This should concern us even if every promise made by AI advocates proves true.

If AI dramatically increases productivity, who will own the gains? If AI transforms education, who will control the systems? If AI reshapes communication, who will determine the rules? If AI changes how knowledge is

produced, who will own the infrastructure through which knowledge flows? These are not merely technical questions. They are political questions. They are questions about power, legitimacy, and ultimately the conditions under which democratic societies understand themselves.

Artificial intelligence represents not simply the automation of tasks, but the growing possibility that the institutions shaping knowledge, communication, and consciousness themselves become increasingly subject to the logic of accumulation. If that trajectory continues unchecked, the colonization of labor and culture may be followed by the colonization of cognition itself. And if that is true, are we very far from attempts to regiment the human soul?

How the AI Revolution Was Made

One of the most revealing aspects of the AI boom is how little democratic discussion surrounded its emergence.

The public was not asked whether it wanted its schools reorganized around AI systems. Workers were not asked whether they wanted their professions transformed by automation. Communities were not asked whether they wanted enormous new data centers consuming energy, water, and public resources. Citizens were not asked whether a handful of corporations should play such a decisive role in shaping the future of communication, education, research, and governance.

For traditions of democratic thought associated with John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and Jürgen Habermas, legitimacy depends not simply on outcomes but on the quality of the public dialogue through which collective decisions are reached. Democratic societies are strengthened when citizens participate in informed discussion, mutual learning, and public reasoning about matters that affect their common future. Democracy, in this view, is not merely a method for counting votes.

It is a way of organizing public life around communication, participation, and collective problem-solving. Yet no such dialogue accompanied the emergence of artificial intelligence. Citizens were largely presented with a finished project rather than invited into a democratic conversation about whether, how, or under what conditions these technologies should reshape social life.

Instead, the transformation largely arrived as a fait accompli...take it or be taken by it.

This was not an accident.

The rapid deployment of AI has been driven by enormous concentrations of private capital, supported by political institutions that have largely accepted the transformation as inevitable and inadvertently—or intentionally—gone along for the ride. The logic has often resembled both an old capitalist maxim and a modern Silicon Valley creed: move quickly, secure advantage, capture markets, and let the devil take the hindmost.

The famous technology-industry slogan “move fast and break things” was more than a business strategy. It expressed a broader worldview in which speed became a virtue, caution became weakness, and social consequences were seen as acceptable collateral damage in the race for innovation and market dominance.

Waiting for democratic deliberation, labor consultation, environmental review, or meaningful public oversight was increasingly portrayed as an obstacle to progress. Risks could be addressed later. Harms could be managed later. Mistakes could be corrected later, or they would just be written off as “externalities”, a term coined by polluting industries for the public bearing the weight and cost of their anti-social processes.

The priority was to build first, dominate first, and secure competitive advantage first. In a field as potentially consequential as artificial intelligence, that mentality deserves far more scrutiny than it has received.

The corporations investing hundreds of billions of dollars in AI infrastructure are not charitable institutions. They are among the most powerful concentrations of economic power in modern history. As public concerns about AI continue to grow, corporations will inevitably present themselves as responsible stewards of the technology through philanthropy, educational initiatives, and campaigns promising to democratize access.

Such efforts, whatever their merits, do not alter the underlying question of ownership, governance, and control. Their executives, lobbyists, consultants, and investors possess extraordinary access to political institutions. Campaign contributions, lobbying networks, revolving-door appointments, think tanks, industry partnerships, and media influence all help shape the environment in which public policy is made.

To point this out is not to claim that every politician has been bought or every public official acts in bad faith. The deeper problem is structural. Under contemporary (fast)

capitalism, concentrated economic power routinely translates into political influence.

While outright corruption certainly exists and periodically erupts into public view (particularly under the current Trump regime), what often appears as corruption is frequently the predictable outcome of institutions that allow immense private wealth to shape public decision-making.

The result is a political environment in which the priorities of major investors, corporations, and economic elites are consistently granted greater access and influence than those of ordinary citizens. The result is that the boundaries of acceptable debate become remarkably circumscribed. The question is rarely whether society should accept a particular technological trajectory.

The question becomes how quickly it can be implemented, how effectively it can be commercialized, and how national competitiveness can be maintained.

The public is invited to adapt. It is never invited to set the terms....to decide.

The Public Built the Foundation

An overlooked and critical aspect of the AI story is degree to which the foundations for this ‘revolution’ and the IT revolution in general were created by public institutions and our taxes—not private capital at all. The technologies that made the digital revolution possible emerged from decades of publicly funded research and development.

Government agencies such as the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) and later the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) helped fund foundational advances in computing and networking. The National Science Foundation (NSF) supported basic scientific research. Public universities trained generations of scientists, engineers, and computer researchers.

Taxpayer-funded institutions helped create the conditions under which the internet, modern computing, and eventually artificial intelligence could emerge. Stanford University, itself the beneficiary of decades of federal research funding and defense-related investment, became one of the principal institutional incubators of what would later become Silicon Valley.

This pattern extends well beyond AI. Much of the foundational research behind pharmaceuticals,

biotechnology, aerospace, semiconductors, and other transformative technologies has relied heavily on public investment. Society often assumes the risk, funds the early research, trains the workforce, and builds the infrastructure. Private firms then enter later stages of development, commercialize the results, and capture much of the resulting wealth.

The contradiction and irony simply slap you in the face! The public paid for the research, built the institutions, trained the workforce, and assumed much of the risk. Private corporations then arrived to claim ownership of the result. What is often celebrated as a triumph of entrepreneurial genius begins to look like one of the largest transfers of collectively created knowledge and public investment into private hands in modern history.

The public played the major role in creating the knowledge, institutions, and infrastructure that made the AI revolution possible, yet control over and ownership of that revolution is increasingly concentrated in a handful of corporations and investment networks. The pattern is familiar: socialized risk, privatized reward. The profits are private, but the foundations were collective.

The story of AI, in this respect, resembles the story of many modern technologies: public investment creates the possibility, while private capital claims ownership of the result. What is presented as a triumph of entrepreneurial genius is often built upon generations of public investment, shared knowledge, and collective effort.

Recognizing that history raises an obvious democratic question. If the public helped build the foundation, why should the public not have a meaningful voice in determining how these technologies are developed, governed, and used? If artificial intelligence truly represents a transformation on the scale its advocates claim, then democratic societies have an even more powerful claim—not a weaker one—to participate in shaping its future.

The Democratic Contradiction

This raises a question that should be obvious but is rarely asked.

If artificial intelligence truly possesses the transformative power its advocates claim, then shouldn't the society directing that transformation be as democratic as possible?

If AI will reshape work, education, culture, communication, governance, and everyday life, possibly

human thought, then democratic oversight should become more necessary, not less. Decisions of such magnitude should require the broadest forms of public deliberation, citizen participation, labor representation, and democratic accountability.

Yet the opposite has occurred.

The more consequential AI is claimed to be, the more decisions surrounding it have been concentrated in corporations, investors, executive agencies, military institutions, and elite political networks.

This contradiction exposes a deeper tension within capitalism itself.

Democracy assumes that people should collectively participate in shaping the conditions of their lives. Capitalism, particularly in its contemporary form, increasingly concentrates decision-making power in institutions that are neither publicly accountable nor democratically governed. The tension between these two principles is not new. It has appeared repeatedly throughout modern history. AI simply reveals it in a particularly dramatic and aggressive form.

One of the most consequential social transformations of the twenty-first century is being directed primarily through private economic power.

That should trouble anyone who takes democracy seriously.

What Democracy Might Have Looked Like

Defenders of the status quo often respond that technological progress cannot be stopped.

Perhaps not. But that is not the relevant question.

The question is whether democratic societies should have any meaningful role in deciding how transformative technologies are developed, deployed, and governed.

Imagine a different path.

Imagine national public hearings before widespread deployment. Imagine citizen assemblies, labor representation, educators, community organizations, independent researchers, and public-interest advocates participating in decisions about how these systems would enter society. Such ideas are not purely theoretical.

Citizen assemblies, participatory planning processes, and other forms of democratic consultation have already been used in parts of Europe and elsewhere to help shape

public policy, community development, and long-term planning. For those who dismiss such proposals as unrealistic, it is worth noting that these processes already exist and have been successfully used to address complex public questions.

On a smaller scale, organizations such as the Southeast Community Research Center have employed dialogue-based and participatory approaches for decades to help communities deliberate, learn collectively, and shape decisions affecting their shared future.

Imagine public ownership models, democratic oversight boards, transparency requirements, environmental reviews, and enforceable public-interest obligations.

Such measures would not necessarily have prevented AI development. Nor would they have guaranteed democratic outcomes.

They would, however, have acknowledged a simple principle: that technologies capable of reshaping society should be subject to democratic judgment rather than treated as private matters to be decided by a tiny fraction of humanity—investors, executives, and the institutions they influence.

That possibility was never seriously explored.

The assumption from the beginning was that AI's future would be determined primarily through competition, investment, and market power.

In other words, through the normal operating logic of capitalism.

Beyond Artificial Intelligence

The deeper significance of AI therefore lies beyond the technology itself.

Artificial intelligence provides a window into the character of the society that produced it. It reveals a political and economic order in which private wealth increasingly (overwhelmingly?) directs public outcomes, where transformative decisions are made with limited democratic participation, and where market imperatives continue to expand into ever larger aspects of human life and where the benefits increasingly accrue to a tiny class of owners, investors, and technology elites.

The emergence of the world's first trillionaire in Musk—deeply embedded in the technological and AI sectors—is not an historical accident. It is a visible expression of the extraordinary concentration of wealth and power that

contemporary capitalism continues to generate. The issue has never been whether AI is good or bad. The issue is whether human knowledge, communication, creativity, and intellectual life will become the next territories absorbed by the logic of accumulation.

This is not a technological question. It is a political one. Artificial intelligence may prove to be one of the most powerful technologies ever created. If so, the democratic challenge is massively greater. The more consequential the transformation, the stronger the case for public oversight, collective deliberation, and democratic control.

Yet the trajectory so far points in the opposite direction.

The AI revolution was not simply invented. It was financed, organized, promoted, and politically accommodated. Like so many transformations before it, it emerged through the institutions of capitalism and carries the imprint of the social order that produced it.

Yet history offers another possibility. Every major expansion of concentrated power has eventually generated resistance, democratic struggle, and demands for public control. The future of artificial intelligence, like the future of democracy itself, remains unwritten—and its final shape will depend on what people choose to build together.

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