Scientific and Social Research, 2026, Volume 8, Issue 9
https://bbwpublisher.com/journal/SSR
Online ISSN: 2981-9946
Print ISSN: 2661-4332

The Governance Logic of Digital Capitalism and Biopolitical Critique

Xiaomei Ma*

School of Marxism, Hangzhou Dianzi University, Hangzhou, Zhejiang 310018, China

Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

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Abstract: The governance logic of digital capitalism reconstructs human social identities and social relations with the digital-human as the governance subject, and forms digital computational governance modes as well as spatio-temporal situational fields by means of digital technologies. This logic incorporates life activities into a computable, predictable, and controllable governance framework, giving rise to practical dilemmas of subject alienation and social disorder, which constitute the core proposition of biopolitical critique.

Keywords: Digital capitalism; Digital society; Digital governance; Biopolitics

Online publication: October 21, 2026

1. Introduction

Centered on algorithmic technologies and digital capital, the governance logic of digital capitalism constructs the art of governance of digital capitalism and forms a new analytical framework for digital biopolitics. This logic contains multiple contradictions: at the level of governance subjects, there exists the subject-object contradiction between human beings and data; in terms of governance approaches, it highlights the difficulty of governance boundaries between humans and machines; in the domain of governance power, it manifests as conflicts between public power and private capital power. Therefore, the critique of the governance logic of digital capitalism serves as the core proposition of biopolitical critique, and also constitutes a practical concern for reshaping the global governance system and governance pattern in the digital era.

2. The digital transformation of capitalist governance

Generative artificial intelligence technologies are becoming increasingly practical; the digital platform economy is evolving into a large-scale business ecosystem; and comprehensive digital community networks continue to be refined—all of these factors are driving the digital transformation of the capitalist social

governance system. Digital governance is characterized by intelligence, refinement, diversity, efficiency, and holism. It resolves the governance dilemmas of traditional industrial society while giving rise to entirely new governance challenges. The emergence of new issues such as digital labor exploitation, platform capital monopoly, conflicts between public and private power, and tensions between surveillance and privacy indicates that digital capital has expanded from monopoly in the economic sphere to manipulation in the political domain, surveillance across various fields of social governance, and even capitalized appropriation of living subjects.

Foucault defines the art of governance as "the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses, reflections, calculations and strategies that enable this particular yet complex form of power to be exercised. This power targets the population; its primary form of knowledge is political economy, and its fundamental technical instrument is security apparatuses."

From sovereign power, which secures territorial possession through violent deterrence such as death penalties and prohibitions, to disciplinary power that achieves bodily discipline via spatial segregation and normative training, and further to biopower that governs populations through security apparatuses and the modulation of freedom, capitalist governmentality continuously intensifies the micro-shaping and invisible control of living subjects through the deployment of power.

Governance arts in the digital era rely on big data, algorithms, and platforms to comprehensively construct the legitimacy of capital power. Through algorithmic regulation and digital surveillance, state governance, urban governance, governmental governance, and market governance are incorporated into a management-control system featuring precise computation and real-time early-warning. Data become the representation of living subjects, and micro data chains serve as regulatory hubs for productive and life activities in digital society, realizing the disciplinary control over freedom and mental manipulation of living subjects.

3. The governance logic of digital capitalism

Advancements in digital-intelligent technologies have profoundly transformed the subjects, tools, fields and power structures of digital-capitalist governance, thereby building a closed logical loop for the governance of digital capitalism.

3.1. Subject logic: Identity construction of the digital-human as governance subject

People in the era of industrial capitalism produced "human independence based on dependence upon things" [2].

Digital capitalism reconstructs the logics of traditional production, labor, and power operation with data as its ontological foundation. It also transforms human existential conditions and gives rise to the new identity of "digital-human." The digital-human is a data virtual entity generated in the form of code-symbols within cyberspace on the basis of real-world physical portraits. In essence, data evolve into the carrier medium for individual identity markers and social relations. Kucklick employs the term *monad-individual* to refer to "individuals rendered radically differentiated and unique through measurements by digital technologies." In this sense, the digital-human is exactly the monad-individual [3].

Within the algorithm-driven, data-supremacist context of production and daily life, human labor practices and social interactions are abstracted into code-symbols, and interpersonal relations manifest as interactions among reified data-virtual entities.

"In the biopolitical context, society is constituted by radical plurality, or the heterogeneous multiplicity of irreducible singularities" [4]. Compared with traditional governance that enforces standardized

and homogenized administration via unified rules, digital governance accommodates differentiated developmental demands of individuals. By virtue of algorithmic recommendation, it implicitly and flexibly induces individuals to engage in self-compliance and self-discipline, erasing their irreducible singularities.

Within the framework of the digital-human subject-logic, it appears as if humans create digital technologies to advance social governance. In reality, digital technologies achieve the enslavement of human beings through the identity symbol of the digital-human, inverting the master-slave relationship. Hegel thoroughly analyzed the dialectical evolution of the master-slave relationship in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In digital-capitalist society, this dialectical reversal presents itself as the inversion of the master-slave relation between human beings and digital technologies. Human beings, who ought to be masters of technical instruments, are reduced to digital slaves of platforms, sustaining their digital existence by relying on algorithmic recommendations, platform traffic, and data-driven evaluations. Human value perceptions, self-awareness, and behavioral practices lose their independence.

While technologies seemingly take command over humans, technologies themselves fall into the category of "things" in Hegel's theory, functioning as the mediating term between master and slave. As digitalized "things", data, algorithms and platforms sustain the master-slave bond between digital capital and digital-humans, acting as capital-controlled instruments for human enslavement. Accordingly, the traditional master-slave relation undergoes digital dialectical development. As the true master, digital capital exercises discipline and exploitation upon digital-humans through the mediation of digital technologies.

3.2. Technical logic: Computational governance of cognitive and behavioral processes by algorithmic programs

Essentially, computational governance takes big data as its core governance element and algorithmic computing power as technical support, fundamentally reconstructing the governance logic of digital capitalism.

"Big data is a source of new cognition and new value for human beings; it is also a means to transform markets, organizations, and relations between governments and citizens" [5].

Contradictions within the physical world are represented by massive big-data samples. Efficient data-analysis models generate optimal solutions for problems or even enable risk pre-emption, and real-time data feedback forms closed governance loops.

The widespread adoption of digital technologies brings about a situation where "the source of productive forces lies in technologies for knowledge generation, information processing and symbolic communication."

The overwhelming logic of algorithms permeates all spheres of human production and daily life. Through technical measures such as data surveillance and performance assessment, algorithms rigorously control labor time and labor intensity, amplifying exploitation of laborers in more concealed manners. Recommendation mechanisms such as targeted advertisements based on digital portraits trap users within consumption traps fabricated by algorithmic programs, depriving individuals of capacities for independent judgment and rational decision-making.

Within the technical-logic framework of computational governance, instrumental reason prevails over value reason, and data ontology usurps the subjective status of human beings.

Through the notion of "Second Enlightenment," Byung-Chul Han interprets the profound impacts of the data revolution upon human subjectivity. The Enlightenment of the digital age substitutes data for reason and

data totalitarianism for freedom. Humans are re-enchanted due to excessive reliance on data. Self-perception and behaviors within algorithmic contexts appear to be autonomous human expressions, yet in fact they are outputs yielded by continuous training of data samples according to algorithmic programs [6].

Algorithmic technologies themselves constitute neutral objective existences, and computation itself follows programmed input-output settings. Nevertheless, the application of computational governance within digital-capitalist society features bias in data collection and priority settings embedded in programs, bringing about governance dilemmas of algorithmic black boxes and algorithmic discrimination.

Algorithmic black boxes raise justice concerns for social governance. The concealed operational rules of algorithmic programs, opaque power intervention, and ambiguous accountability mask their essence as instruments of power, further intensifying social stratification caused by imbalanced distribution of digital resources. Individuals surrender their informational privacy and entitlements. Monopolistic platforms that control data and technologies obscure power expansion behind algorithmic black boxes, constructing a highly centralized "digital Leviathan."

3.3. Spatial logic: Reconstruction of governance fields in digital-spatial contexts

As a vital dimension of social governance, space's structure, distribution, and hierarchy shape governance modes and effectiveness. Georg Simmel holds that space bears exclusivity and boundedness. Social space is divided into regional scopes according to certain criteria, and different regions hold exclusive domain-specific power on the basis of particular group identities with clear boundaries.

In the digital age, the emergence of communication networks and virtual technologies has broken down distance boundaries of traditional physical space, giving rise to an interconnected digital space where the virtual and the real co-exist. Mitchell maintains that "people in the 21st century inhabit not merely the 'real-world cities' constructed from steel and concrete, but also dwell in 'soft cities' built by digital communication networks" [7].

Digital twins construct virtual digital mirrors of physical space via modeling and simulation technologies. Bidirectional flows of data, technologies and subjects between the two spaces form closed governance loops. Within digital-spatial fields, data serve as fundamental governance elements; artificial intelligence, virtual simulation and other technologies act as technical links connecting the two spaces. The spatial distribution of data nodes extends human social relations and forms a digital-governance pattern with multi-agent collaborative participation.

Building upon Henri Lefebvre's trialectics of space, the intervention of digital technologies expands the connotations and social attributes of trialectic space. Digital spatial practice extends the scope of spatial practice; representations of digital space generate new digital-platform rules and algorithmic orders; representational digital space invigorates spatial vitality via digital-nomad communities, meme culture and other forms, producing stronger tensions with representations of space. Accordingly, the reconstruction of governance fields within digital-spatial contexts essentially shapes new power structures and social orders through the dynamic equilibrium of digital trialectic space.

In the digital age, space-time-space-compression accelerates spatial mobility and differentiation, and facilitates accelerated capital proliferation and expansion. "Society is structured around flows: flows of capital, flows of information, flows of technologies, flows of organizational interaction, and flows of images, sounds and symbols" [8].

From factories to digital platforms, capital constructs a legitimacy framework of absolute monopoly through the production, mobility and reorganization of space. Power exercises all-round discipline upon individuals by means of spatial boundary demarcation, spatial-behavior norms and spatial-order construction, reducing human beings into appendages of urban space.

4. Biopolitical critique of governance under digital capitalism

Biopolitics constitutes the art of governance in modern society. Its core lies in power's comprehensive intervention, appropriation, and discipline over human life, transforming life itself into exploitable governance resources. Foucault's art of capitalist governance has undergone a paradigmatic shift from bodily discipline to governance over data-virtual entities within digital-capitalist society, realizing the digitalization and capitalization of life and giving birth to digital biopolitics. Within the framework of digital biopolitics, the fundamental logic whereby power shapes subjects remains capital logic: namely, the shaping logic of human existential forms by capital-dominated power-operation systems.

4.1. From bodies to virtual-entities: Critique of subject alienation in digital biopolitics

Foucault argues that disciplinary societies achieve the standardized formation of living subjects through "hierarchical surveillance, normalizing judgment, and their combination within that power-specific procedure — examination" [9].

After the Industrial Revolution, factories, workshops, and cities became spatial apparatuses of biopolitics. Humans became appendages of machinery, attaining existence as docile and useful bodies. In the 1990s, "within societies of control, corporations have replaced factories; a corporation is a spirit, a gas" [10].

Individuals appear to be liberated from enclosed production workshops, yet they actually enter control networks of round-the-clock, all-pervasive surveillance. Human subjectivity gradually dissolves. Vital elements such as emotions, volition, bodies, and behaviors no longer exist in the form of complete independent living beings, but become fragmented, flowing "dividuals" in the sense of Gilles Deleuze.

In the digital era, biopolitics shifts its governance objects to data-based life-virtual-entities, intensifying comprehensive exploitation of life. Daily life activities become major sources of data production. Digital capitalism thereby implements a pre-emptive, flexible, and covert mechanism of life governance. Cloaked in the guise of free individualization, capital power embeds discipline within consciousness, desires, and attention themselves, inducing individuals to pursue self-data domestication amid voluntary labor, consumption, and entertainment.

Open and transparent platform spaces are in effect digital panopticons, substituting physical surveillance with data monitoring and violent control with self-regulation. "In Bentham's panopticon, inmates know that the watcher is always present, whereas inhabitants of the digital panopticon live under illusions of freedom" [11].

Digital surveillance not only violates individual privacy boundaries and life freedom, but also appropriates life surplus in data forms without compensation by shaping digitalized, capitalized, and instrumentalized living beings, enabling accelerated capital accumulation. "The world, the self, and the body are reduced to 'objects', dissolved into the bloodstream of a vast new market concept" [12].

Along with socio-historical development and shifts in knowledge paradigms, the human being as cognitive subject and experiential object in Foucault's theory has been effaced within digital-capitalist

society. Individuals are no longer autonomous rational subjects, but life-virtual-entities reconstructed by data, algorithms, and capital. They lose the autonomy and diversity of life and fall into the predicament of digitalized life.

4.2. From power to capital: Critique of capital logic in digital biopolitics

The underlying logic of digital biopolitics remains the logic of capital. Capital constructs power legitimacy through the seizure of life data and domination over biopower, reconstructing the governance logic of biopolitics accordingly. Shifting from comprehensive disciplinary power over life to comprehensive capital exploitation of life, the capitalization of life constitutes the core predicament of digital biopolitics.

Digital capitalism acts as a vortex that absorbs human life into capitalist productive logic, rendering life activities the motive source of capital proliferation. Digital platforms dismantle the boundary between production and daily life. Individuals' leisure and entertainment activities on platforms are not pure life experiences; the consumed lifetime generates quantifiable, extractable, and profitable data surplus-value. Productive labor is no longer the objectified existence of production workers. Negri and Hardt put forward the concept of biopolitical labor: users produce not only material goods, but also non-material vital elements including knowledge, emotions, experiences and social relations. All these are appropriated gratis by platform capital to become data commodities, realizing more concealed exploitation of data surplus-value and a parasitic mode of capital accumulation dependent upon subject existence. Commodities in their material form become evidence whereby people validate their own existence and social relations. "Definite social relations among human beings" assume "the fantastic form of a relation between things" [13].

Human beings evolve from commodity-and-money fetishism to digital fetishism, which serves as the ideology peculiar to digital capitalism. Technologies become digital shepherds. Combining with power through these digital shepherds, capital forms technical pastoral power. Digital technologies subject both material production and spiritual life to quantitative governance. Human digital-living spaces become panoptic life-cages operated by capital. Human spirituality is fully exposed within transparent society, while power operations are concealed within invisible dark boxes. "The new power agenda consists not in controlling history, but in controlling the future via psychopolitics" [14].

5. Conclusion

Digital capitalism does not transcend biopolitics; rather, it pushes it to its extreme. Instrumental rationality prioritizes efficiency and outcome-oriented approaches, while technological rationality undermines human subjectivity; algorithmic black boxes, algorithmic discrimination, and algorithmic bias hinder the inclusivity and fairness essential for social development.

The biopolitical critique of digital capitalism does not negate the progressive value of digital technologies. Instead, it explores paths for transcending life governance in the digital age.

As Foucault put it: "I do not think that the will to not be governed can be treated as some innate aspiration. In point of fact, I believe that the will to not be governed is always the will to not be governed in this way, not by these people, and not at such cost" [15].

Equitable possession and shared utilization of digital technologies, together with free development and rational participation of digital living subjects, will liberate life from data-driven representations, restoring its irreducible generativity, and achieve genuine return of human essence through united, emancipatory and resistant forces.

Funding

General Scientific Research Project of the Zhejiang Provincial Department of Education, “Research on the Logic of Digital Governance in a Capitalist Society in the Digital Age” (Y202249611)

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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