# *Open Philosophy Network* Reading Group on Shoshana Zuboff’s *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*

**Week 1 Reading: Chapter One – Home or exile in the digital future (p.3 – 24)**

**I - The Oldest Questions**

The guiding question of this chapter, and her work, is “can the digital future be our home?”

According to Zuboff, certain ‘eternal political questions/themes’ return again and again, and each generation must respond to them anew: knowledge, authority & power.

She claims that the hyper-connected nature of our information civilization means that these questions, and the dilemmas they pose, permeate a broader portion of society than ever before.

**II - Requiem for a Home**

She uses the 2000 “Aware Home” project from Georgia Tech as a contrast to contemporary IoT (she mentions Nest) to illustrate what she calls **surveillance capitalism**. She notes the following three principles underlying Aware Home:

“﻿**first**, the scientists and engineers understood that the new data systems would produce an entirely new knowledge domain. **Second**, it was assumed that the rights to that new knowledge and the power to use it to improve one’s life would belong exclusively to the people who live in the house. **Third**, the team assumed that for all of its digital wizardry, the Aware Home would take its place as a modern incarnation of the ancient conventions that understand “home” as the private sanctuary of those who dwell within its walls” (p.6)

She claims that such concerns for data rights and privacy are totally absent from contemporary IoT:

“﻿Today these rights to privacy, knowledge, and application have been usurped by a bold market venture powered by unilateral claims to others’ experience and the knowledge that flows from it” (p.7)

**III – What is Surveillance Capitalism?**

Page 8 contains several key terms, which are introduced but not expanded upon:

“﻿Surveillance capitalism unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data. Although some of these data are applied to product or service improvement, the rest are declared as a proprietary **behavioral surplus**, fed into advanced manufacturing processes known as “machine intelligence,” and fabricated into **prediction products** that anticipate what you will do now, soon, and later. Finally, these prediction products are traded in a new kind of marketplace for behavioral predictions that I call **behavioral futures markets**.” (p.8)

She claims that surveillance capitalism seeks ever broader, and more predictive sources of behavioural surplus, and thus continually expands into new domains of data collection.

Importantly, surveillance capitalism is not merely content to know, but wants to control/modify our behaviour: “the goal is to automate us.”

The means of production becomes, in this novel form of capitalism, **the means of behavioural modification**. She terms this new form of power **instrumentarianism**.

She writes about how surveillance capitalism behaves with a sense of inevitability: “﻿Just as industrial capitalism was driven to the continuous intensification of the means of production, so surveillance capitalists and their market players are now **locked into** the continuous intensification of the means of behavioral modification and the gathering might of instrumentarian power” (p.9)

She questions whether “being connected” is inherently pro-social, and claims that whereas traditional capitalism “fed on” human labour, “surveillance capitalism feeds on every aspect of every human’s experience.” (p.9)

For Zuboff, General Motors epitomized managerial capitalism, Google epitomize surveillance capitalism. She seems to have an optimism with regard to Amazon and Apple, however.

She uses extremely strong, negative language to describe Google: e.g. invasive species on p.9. She also claims that Google benefited from post-9/11 security attitudes.

Surveillance capitalist benefited from working on uncharted terrain: “﻿They were protected by the inherent illegibility of the automated processes that they rule, the ignorance that these processes breed, and the sense of inevitability that they foster.” (p.10)

Surveillance capitalism does not foster constructive producer-consumer relations. We are not the customers: “﻿We are the sources of surveillance capitalism’s crucial surplus: the objects of a technologically advanced and increasingly inescapable raw-material-extraction operation. Surveillance capitalism’s actual customers are the enterprises that trade in its markets for future behavior” (p.10). She describes our situation as a Faustian pact.

*Asymmetries:*

“Surveillance capitalism operates through unprecedented asymmetries in knowledge and the power that accrues to knowledge. Surveillance capitalists know everything about us, whereas their operations are designed to be unknowable to us. They accumulate vast domains of new knowledge from us, but not for us. They predict our futures for the sake of others’ gain, not ours. As long as surveillance capitalism and its behavioral futures markets are allowed to thrive, ownership of the new means of behavioral modification eclipses ownership of the means of production as the fountainhead of capitalist wealth and power in the twenty-first century” (p.11)

Industrial capitalism benefited at the expense of nature, surveillance capitalism will grow by destroying human nature.

**IV. The Unprecedented**

She speaks of the “horseless carriage syndrome” – surveillance capitalism is able to triumph so effectively because it is unprecedented and thus misunderstood:

“﻿This is how the unprecedented reliably confounds understanding; existing lenses illuminate the familiar, thus obscuring the original by turning the unprecedented into an extension of the past. This contributes to the normalization of the abnormal, which makes fighting the unprecedented even more of an uphill climb” (p.12)

Failing to grasp the radical novelty of surveillance capitalism means that we can end up fighting the wrong battles: “﻿We rely on categories such as “monopoly” or “privacy” to contest surveillance capitalist practices. And although these issues are vital, and even when surveillance capitalist operations are also monopolistic and a threat to privacy, the existing categories nevertheless fall short in identifying and contesting the most crucial and unprecedented facts of this new regime.” (p.14)

She stresses the importance of **a new naming** as an essential step to combat the threat

**V. The Puppet Master, Not the Puppet**

“﻿Surveillance capitalism is not technology; it is a logic that imbues technology and commands it into action. Surveillance capitalism is a market form that is unimaginable outside the digital milieu, but it is not the same as the “digital.”” (p.15)

“﻿That surveillance capitalism is a logic in action and not a technology is a vital point because surveillance capitalists want us to think that their practices are inevitable expressions of the technologies they employ” (p.15)

She wants to challenge the idea of technological inevitability.

p.15-16 she defines technology as the expression of non-technological interests.

She clearly defines surveillance capitalism as “capitalism gone wrong”, with the implication that capitalism itself is not the issue:

“﻿Surveillance capitalism is not an accident of overzealous technologists, but rather a rogue capitalism that learned to cunningly exploit its historical conditions to ensure and defend its success.” (p.17)

**VI. The Outline, Themes, and Sources of this Book**

She describes the book as an “initial mapping of a terra incognita” (p.17)

She then summarizes the content of the book.

“﻿Only “we the people” can reverse this course, first by naming the unprecedented, then by mobilizing new forms of collaborative action: the crucial friction that reasserts the primacy of a flourishing human future as the foundation of our information civilization. If the digital future is to be our home, then it is we who must make it so.” (p.21)

p.21 has interesting methodological comments:

“﻿My methods combine those of a social scientist inclined toward theory, history, philosophy, and qualitative research with those of an essayist: an unusual but intentional approach. As an essayist, I occasionally draw upon my own experiences. I do this because the tendency toward psychic numbing is increased when we regard the critical issues examined here as just so many abstractions attached to technological and economic forces beyond our reach”

Her style is thus deliberately emotive and polemical, rather than being an objective analysis.

She again makes a distinction between the “pure data companies”, for whom she has little hope, and Apple/Amazon, for whom she harbours some hope:

“﻿Time will tell if Apple succumbs to surveillance capitalism, holds the line, or perhaps even expands its ambitions to anchor an effective alternative trajectory to a human future aligned with the ideals of individual autonomy and the deepest values of a democratic society.” (p.23)