



“A Meaningless Jeremiad Presaging Armageddon”

BY NORMAN A. BAILEY

A review of

The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power by Shoshana Zuboff, PublicAffairs, 2019.

Surveillance capitalism rules by instrumentarian power through its materialization in Big Other; which, like the ancient tyrant, exists out of mankind while paradoxically assuming human shape. ... It replaces legitimate contract, the rule of law, politics and social trust with a new form of sovereignty and its privately administered regime of reinforcements.

This quotation from the last chapter of Shoshana Zuboff’s monumental doorstop is a perfect summation of over five hundred pages of hype, pseudo-scientific jargon, pretentious historical and literary references, breathless apocalyptic prophecies of the destruction of Western Civilization and democracy, and incredibly prolix repetition. Themes are repeated over and over again and Zuboff never uses one paragraph when three or four will do.

None of that would be worthy of mention if it were not for the fact that the phenomenon she refers to (multiple times) is in fact serious, and deserves serious analysis, prognosis, and diagnosis. The continuous invasions of privacy and appropriation of personal data without permission by the likes of Google and Facebook, as well as their anti-competitive practices, are ethically unacceptable and in many countries, illegal. However, society has many ways of protecting itself from these practices, in the same way it protects itself from similar activities by other companies in other fields of activity.

In the first place, no one is forced to use their services. By joining and signing the inevitable (and truth to tell, agonizingly long and complex) user agreements, the individual submits him or herself to the consequences.

In the second place, there is plenty of legislation on the books for the authorities to combat such practices, especially invasion of privacy laws and anti-trust laws.

In the third place, various countries and several states in the United States, as well as the European Union, have in fact taken measures to enforce such restraints and levied fines and other penalties on some of the companies involved in these practices.

Finally, such excesses emerge whenever a paradigm shift occurs in the productive process, such as the first and second industrial revolutions. We are now in the midst of the third industrial revolution which is as far-reaching and socially wrenching as the first two.

It would, indeed, have been strange if those in a position to do so had not striven to take advantage of them in the same way. Google, Facebook, and the others are simply the Standard Oils and General Motors of today, and they will be dealt with, sooner or later, in a similar way.

Will they, and their public lackeys, resist? Of course. Will they prevail? Very unlikely.

It is a shame that instead of publishing a concise, jargon-free description of the social, political, and economic problems posed by the third industrial revolution and the existing and perhaps new ways of dealing with them, Zuboff saw fit to pen a meaningless jeremiad presaging Armageddon.

Western Civilization, as always, is facing many serious threats, including China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, Muslim fundamentalism, left and right extremism, viruses, and climate change. The negative manifestations of the third industrial revolution form part of that list. They are not the most dangerous, but that does not mean they can be ignored. ♦

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