PI31019 Textual Commentary

Word Count: 1645

Offer a philosophical commentary on an article, extract, or link to a video/podcast/other media that addresses something you find exceptional about technology. Give voice to your own criticisms in the commentary. Specifically, you should aim to:

1.) Explain the main arguments/claims of the article/extract/link.

2.) Identify, examine, and critique the key terms and concepts used in the article/extract/link.

3.) Situate the extract in terms of other thinkers and texts (either studied on this course or encountered in your own further reading).

'Today political power asserts itself through its power over the machine process and over the technical organization of the apparatus. The government of advanced and advancing industrial societies can maintain and secure itself only when it succeeds in mobilizing, organizing, and exploiting the technical, scientific, and mechanical productivity available to industrial civilization. And this productivity mobilizes society as a whole, above and beyond any particular individual or group interests. The brute fact that the machine's physical (only physical?) power surpasses that of the individual, and of any particular group of individuals, makes the machine the most effective political instrument in any society whose basic organization is that of the machine process. But the political trend may be reversed; essentially the power of the machine is only the stored-up and projected power of man. To the extent to which the work world is conceived of as a machine and mechanized accordingly, it becomes the potential basis of a new freedom for man.'[1]

[1] Herbert Marcuse, 'The New Forms of Control,' *in Philosophy of Technology: The Technological Condition: An Anthology,* Scharff, Robert C., and Val Dusek, eds., (Wiley Blackwell, 2014) pp.449-451 (p.450)

Marcuse's main arguments

During the Industrial Revolution and later industrial civilisations, Herbert Marcuse theorised that the industrial machine (typically mechanised factories) only cares for productivity and profits, not the individual. Marcuse warns that those who have power over the machine process, ultimately have political power. Despite appearing democratic and affluent, Marcuse claims that industrial societies have developed subtle controls that limit freedom and individuality.

Unpacking key concepts, their relation to other thinkers, and technology today.

i. The Machine as a political instrument

Marcuse considers 'the machine' as an immense political instrument within new industrial civilisations, (which created more jobs, the middle class, and gave rise to an increase of unregulated work conditions and worker exploitation). He said that 'political power asserts itself through power over the machine process' and its 'technical organization.' Marcuse implies that the machine is a *mode* of political power, not merely a tool. He suggests that only *through the machine* can politicians exert true power, for example by enforcing harsh working conditions and a culture which does not consider workers livelihoods. In discussing the machine's 'technical organisation' Marcuse alludes to the calculated placement of the apparatus to sew submission amongst workers. Iain Stubbs observed that the industrial revolution 'generated large amounts of wealth that both created the middle class and enabled the already wealthy to gain significant power in society and markets.'[2] Whilst the rich were getting richer, (subsequently centralising control over the machine process), workers were exploited.

ii. How is the Machine a Political Instrument today?

[2] Ian Stubbs, 'How the Industrial Revolution Shaped Modern Capitalism', *Georgetown Law: The Denny Centre for Democratic Capitalism,* (2024), <How the Industrial Revolution Shaped Modern Capitalism | The Denny Centre for Democratic Capitalism | Georgetown Law> [Accessed 12th October 2025].

Today, the 'machine (s)' (advanced computer technology, AI, mobile phones, social networking services [SNS]) and those who control them have great political power. David Ingram discussed the influence of Elon Musk (and his platform X) throughout the 2024 Presidential Election:

> 'Musk promoted an X Community — a large group of users — called the Election Integrity Community…which is automatically added to a list of feeds users see when they log into X; when they join it **is full of users spreading conspiracy theories, misinformation, rumours and suspicions about voter fraud**'. [3]

Timothy Graham said the Trump campaign succeeded 'by bombarding audiences, journalists, and other key stakeholders with a constant supply of allegations, rumours, conspiracy theories and unverifiable claims.' [4] In this case study, Trump gained political power by having a tech billionaire in his pocket, who could manipulate algorithms and spread misinformation about political opponents. With the help of Musk, Trump undermined citizens by feeding them conspiracy theories and misinformation about his opponents, which swayed unsure voters and put him in power. Marcuse's claim of the machine as a political instrument is epitomised in this case study.

This case is just one example of the infiltration of 'Big Tech' in politics through their 'generous donations'[5]. A dangerous level of centralised control over the machine is being held in Silicon Valley. In recent years Big Tech firms have increased their political spending. Alix Fraser notes that:

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[3] David Ingram, 'How Elon Musk turned X into a pro-Trump echo chamber' *NBC News* (2024) <How Elon Musk turned X into a pro-Trump echo chamber> [Accessed 12th October 2025].

[4] Timothy Graham, 'Elon Musk's flood of US election tweets may look chaotic. My data reveals an alarming strategy.' (2024) <Elon Musk's flood of US election tweets may look chaotic. My data reveals an alarming strategy> [Accessed 12th October 2025].

[5] Eric Garcia, 'Despite their public fallout, Musk continued donating millions of dollars to Trump,' *The Independent*, (2025), https://www.independent.co.uk/bulletin/news/musk-trump-maga-donation-b2800588.html [accessed 24 October 2025].

Jessica Piper, 'Elon Musk gave Trump and the GOP $15M even as he was fighting with the president', *Politico*, (2025), <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/07/31/elon-musk-donations-clf-slf-00487699> [accessed 24 October 2025].

> ‘From 2020 through 2024, major tech firms…spent a staggering **$260 million**…on federal lobbying. These companies have employed nearly 500 lobbyists over three different Congresses — one for every two members of Congress — to shape policy behind closed doors’.

An obscene amount of money is being spent in the US on federal lobbying by Big Tech. It is not philanthropic, its calculated influence. With hundreds of billions in annual revenue, these companies can, *and have*, shaped markets, steered policy and influenced public opinion to suit their interests.[6]

i. Productivity and Labour

Marcuse asserted that this political power (as gained through power over the machine) can only advance itself when it succeeds in exploiting the ‘mechanical productivity’ in industrial civilisations. Furthering his theory that political power can only be actualised through control over the machine process. Again, alluding to the calculated placement of the machine to exploit workers physically (awful working conditions) and emotionally (conformity and culture of silence). Intriguingly, Marcuse states that this enforced productivity does not care for any individual or group interest, implying it *only* cares for profit.

‘Productive labour,’ a term integral to Marxist thought, is labour which directly contributes to the accumulation of *surplus* capital (profit).[7] It is work which constitutes the creation of a commodity, which will be sold for profit. The value a worker adds exceeds their wage and this surplus is captured by the company as profit. For Marcuse, when mechanical productivity is exploited, it doesn’t simply

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Bryan Metzger, ‘Elon Musk spent at least $260 million backing Trump and the GOP. Here's where all that money went,’ *Business Insider*, (2024) <https://www.businessinsider.com/elon-musk-260-million-spending-trump-republican-party-2024-12> [accessed 24 October 2025].

‘America PAC,’ *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopaedia* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/America_PAC> [accessed 24 October 2025].

[6] John D. McKinnon and Ryan Tracy, ‘Inside Big Tech’s Bid to Sink the Online Kid Safety Bill,’ *Wall Street Journal*, (2024) <https://www.wsj.com/politics/policy/meta-google-lobbying-child-online-safety-bill-5ee63dcc> [accessed 24 October 2025].

[7] ‘Productive labour... is wage labour which... produces surplus value for the capitalist.’ Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, vol. 1 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1969), p. 152

produce more goods, it creates a culture which centres around the machine and poses the potential for individuals to become machine-like; whose key goal is to generate profit. This notion of 'man as machine' is addressed in Arendt's crucial differentiation between work and labour, which are often confused. Labour refers to the necessary activities to sustain human life, while work denotes the production of a thing.[8] When we 'work' we are labouring in exchange for a wage. [9] However, with the industrial revolution, workers whose jobs were replaced by the machine can use their 'labour' (energy) elsewhere; the creation of the machine multiplied workers, allowing companies to generate more profit.

ii. Labour and Productivity Today.

Today, productivity has been digitised. Digital Labour refers to work done online, typically facilitated through platforms and software systems[10]. It has transformed how work is organised and performed. The Sustainability Directory noted that, 'historically, labour often involved physical exertion in a tangible workspace, like a factory or a farm. Digital Labor, conversely, occurs in virtual spaces and may involve cognitive or emotional exertion rather than physical strength.'[11] This inversion has seen work enter the private sphere; think of SNS influencers who earn money by posting online from the privacy of their home. Digital Labour has many facets, however the principle is that the Digital Age has transformed how, when, and where we work. Whereas in Marcuse's context, where work was geographically bound, these were not choices to be made. [12]

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[8] 'Hannah Arendt,' *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (2023) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/arendt/#VitaActiLaboWorkActi> [accessed 24 October 2025].

[9] Joel White, 'Labour and Marx', *The Philosophy of Work*, University of Dundee, 1 October 2024, Lecture Notes.

[10] 'Digital Labor Definition,' *Sustainability Directory*, (2025) <https://esg.sustainability-directory.com/term/digital-labor-definition/> [accessed 24 October 2025].

[11] 'Digital Labor Definition,' *Sustainability Directory*, 2025.

[12] Graham, Mark, Isis Hjorth, and Vili Lehdonvirta, 'Digital Labour and Development: Impacts of Global Digital Labour Platforms and the Gig Economy on Worker Livelihoods,' *Transfer (Brussels, Belgium)*, 23.2 (2017), pp. 135–62, doi:10.1177/1024258916687250

i. A new freedom for man.

Marcuse's poignant commentary of machine power as the 'projected power of man' suggests the machine as a conceptualisation of man's potential for work. His commentary criticises the idea of man as a machine, whose sole purpose is to work and generate profits for a company. However, in a more optimistic light, he suggests that machines aren't alien or oppressive by nature, but extensions of human effort, intelligence, and creativity. Their power is projected *human* power: every aspect of the machine is a manifestation of human labour and work. For example, how AI technology is built upon *human* intelligence. [13] The 'machine' itself is not inherently sinister; the social and political organisation of the machine determines whether it enslaves or empowers people. Which, dependent on its organisation, can threaten or lift societies. Two interpretations of Marcuse's sentiment, which I have arrived at, are that the machine (1) will mobilise man like never before, creating further freedoms or (2) if organised 'incorrectly' it will threaten freedom. As Arendt said, men may become 'helpless slaves and thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible, no matter how murderous it is.'[14]

ii. Surveillance Capitalism

The term Surveillance Capitalism, popularised by Shoshana Zuboff, expresses the commodification of personal data by corporations for profit, without knowledge or consent of individuals, a notion with great relevance to Marcuse. [15] Zuboff states that Surveillance Capitalism is 'as significant threat to human nature in the twenty-first century as industrial capitalism was to the natural world in the nineteenth and twentieth'.[16] Just as Marcuse envisioned the centralised power of the machine process

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[13] John Haugeland, *Artificial Intelligence: The Very Idea,* (MIT Press, 1985), < Artificial intelligence : the very idea : Haugeland, John, 1945-2010 : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive> [Accessed 27 March 2025], pp.255-256

[14] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 3.

[15] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (Profile Books, 2019)

[16] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism,* p. i.v.

as threatening to individual freedoms, Zuboff too deems the age of 'surveillance capitalism' as a significant threat to personal agency. Zuboff argues that this age undermines personal autonomy and erodes democracy, explaining Surveillance Capitalism as:

> 'The unilateral claiming of private human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioural data. These data are then computed and packaged as prediction products and sold into behavioural futures markets — business customers with a commercial interest in knowing what we will do now, soon, and later.'[17]

The commodification and exploitation of human experience is seen across the internet; especially on SNS with algorithms which take personal data (without consent) to determine which posts and advertisements users see. Ben Lee explains that 'through machine learning algorithms personal data is converted into prediction products, which are traded on the "behavioural futures markets."'.[18] Marcuse would deem this as an exploitative mode of political power which is abused and actioned through power over the machine. Surveillance Capitalism is a clear leap in terms of what Marcuse viewed as a form of control. Instead of implementing subtle controls of conformity within the workspace, Big Tech has infiltrated the private sphere and actioned a new form of control, surveillance. Every piece of content liked on SNS, and every message sent is captured by the company to then predict future behaviours and push certain content. Surveillance Capitalism highlights a drastic change in the measures of control in industrial societies to contemporary; these

[17] Christina Pazzanese, 'Harvard Professor Says Surveillance Capitalism Is Undermining Democracy,' *Harvard Gazette*, (2019) <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/03/harvard-professor-says-surveillance-capitalism-is-undermining-democracy/> [accessed 24 October 2025].

[18] Nathan J. Robinson, 'Putting the Capitalism in Surveillance Capitalism,' *Current Affairs*, (2021) <https://www.currentaffairs.org/news/2021/05/putting-the-capitalism-in-surveillance-capitalism> [accessed 24 October 2025].

controls now take the form, as explained by Marvin Landwehr, of 'infringing privacy, manipulating user behaviour, social control and manipulation.' [19]

Marcuse's key argument that political power asserts itself through power over the machine process persists in relevance, perhaps more so, in the Digital Age. The infringement of the private sphere through Surveillance Capitalism, Digital Labour, and the pushing of certain political ideologies on SNS highlight a shift in controls compared to what Marcuse envisioned. The subtle controls Marcuse predicted have shifted from the public sphere into the private, and individuals interact with these infringements daily in various capacities. [20] These controls are concentrated within Silicon Valley, whose influence extends beyond economics and tech making; it dives into policymaking, shaping legislation and public opinion in ways which blur corporate interest and democratic governance. Marcuse's theory is one of urgency and utter relevance, due to the change the machine has faced from 1964 to 2025; the 'machine' isn't just industrial anymore, its informational, algorithmic, and *always* present.

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[19] Nora Landwehr and Alan Borning, 'Designing for Human Values in ICT Systems: A Value Sensitive Design Approach,' *Proceedings of the International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies and Society,* (2022), <https://homes.cs.washington.edu/~borning/papers/landwehr-ics-2022.pdf> [accessed 24 October 2025].

[20] Andrew Griffin, 'Is My Phone Listening to Me? New Report Leads to Worry That Devices Are Snooping,' *The Independent*, (2024), <https://www.independent.co.uk/tech/is-my-phone-listening-to-me-ad-microphone-privacy-b2606445.html> [accessed 26 October 2025].

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