

Aspen-Germany/Socrates Symposium Seminar
“Good Technology—Good Democracy”
October 14-16, 2024
Klostermühle, Germany
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Seminar Description

“Good Technology—Good Democracy” invites participants to explore the challenges and opportunities inherent for our democracies in the current rush of advances in artificial intelligence. While we don’t fully understand our own creation, over the past several decades it has changed our lives, disproportionately benefiting some individuals and communities and disadvantaging others. As the pace of AI development accelerates, individuals, organizations, and whole societies seek to use it to ensure a more equitable distribution of the gains and deter both the top-down control and the criminal predation that AI itself appears to mediate. Climate change, populism, authoritarianism, ongoing (de-)globalization, migration, and war may yield to technology solutions democratically applied: in “Good Technology—Good Democracy,” we identify practical steps to make the most of our novel circumstances, for the benefit of all.

Sessions

1. October 14: Digitizing the Self, Digitizing the Planet

- Ashish Vaswani et al, “Attention Is All You Need” (excerpt)
- Stephen Wolfram, *What Is ChatGPT Doing . . . and Why Does It Work?* (excerpt)
- Anon. et al., “A Right to Warn About Advanced Artificial Intelligence”
- Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (excerpt)
- Benjamin Bratton, “Planetary Sapience”

We begin the seminar with a case study in the most recent and attention-drawing developments in AI: ChatGPT and similar apps appear quite suddenly to have brought us human-level competence in whole new realms of on-line discourse. What is happening in the black box of the transformer, and how can we manage the narrative power that it has unleashed? Having explored the aims articulated for LLMs by veterans of Google Brain, OpenAI, and WolframAlpha, we situate digital media relative to the 20th-century philosopher and culture critic Walter Benjamin’s views on art in a time of mass political culture and Benjamin Bratton’s argument that we and the Earth must now forge a planetary-scale “synthetic intelligence.”

2. October 15: Finding a Voice

- Ralf Dahrendorf, “Eight Remarks on Populism” (2003)
- Martine Rothblatt, *Virtually Human: The Promise—and the Peril—of Digital Immortality* (excerpt), and “Foreword” by Ray Kurzweil
- “Autonomous Weapons: An Open Letter from AI & Robotics Researchers,” at <http://futureoflife.org/open-letter-autonomous-weapons/>
- Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (excerpt)
- Fang Fang, *Wuhan Diary: Dispatches from a Quarantined City* (excerpt)

What values do we bring to the nexus of work and human purpose in the 21st century? Ralf Dahrendorf’s “Eight Remarks on Populism,” written at the turn of this century, registers the persistent challenge that populism poses for democracy. Martine Rothblatt, Ray Kurzweil, and the Future of Life Institute show how advances in robotics, automation, and bioengineering make a full understanding of the interaction between humans and their machines imperative. Shoshana Zuboff argues that surveillance capitalism has effectively flipped the thesis of individual autonomy in a capitalist democracy to the absolute freedom of the corporation and a model of authoritarian governance. Writing from Wuhan, finally, Fang Fang measures how our on-line existence has been weaponized to suppress individual and collective conscience at its most essential.

3. October 16: Re(de)fining Democracy

- “Second Convivialist Manifesto” (excerpt on democracy)
- Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West* (excerpt)
- Kohei Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene* (excerpt)
- Acemoglu, Autor, and Johnson, “Can We Have a Pro-Worker AI?” at: <https://shapingwork.mit.edu/research/can-we-have-pro-worker-ai/>.
- Donella Meadows, “Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System”

Having identified the technical constraints that AI may impose on our self-governance and our ability, or even our inclination, to empathize and work with one another, we turn now to solutions. The authors of the “Second Convivialist Manifesto” return us to a more communitarian view of who we are and how we advance our democratic agenda. Mohsin Hamid opens a tech- and magic realism-mediated window onto global populations on the move. Kohei Saito re-interprets late Marx to connect his vision of a thriving human society to the environment and the ecological possibility of degrowth. Daron Acemoglu, David Autor, and Simon Johnson identify the risks in technology-driven unemployment and lay out practical extensions of human striving through AI, and Donella Meadows takes us beyond paradigms to the possibility of full-on systems change.

Looking back across our three modules, then, we imagine how we might leverage our current circumstances and the technologies that shape them to build an integrated, innovative, and visionary democracy.

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