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Blurring genres and violating guild norms: A review of reviews of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*

Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for Human Futures at the New Frontier of Power*. PublicAffairs: New York, 2019; 704 pp.; ISBN 9781541758001, $22.99 (pbk).

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The digital realm—in particular the world of algorithms and machine learning—is illegible. Even the engineers working on the complex, self-adaptive models that governs our online experience profess a measure of incomprehension: Some describe the output of advanced machine learning as a new form of "alchemy" (Hutson, 2018). This inscrutability is at root a political problem. Because digital technologies now pervade and mediate contemporary life, the preservation of democracy requires public accountability of their operations and operators.

In her magisterial 2019 *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for Human Futures at the New Frontier of Power*, Shoshana Zuboff makes a valiant effort to grasp—in holistic terms—the digital economy and its philosophical, social, and communicative ramifications. In the process, she also reflects on the challenges that her own project pose. They include the proprietary character of the data held by Google, Facebook, and others as well as the sheer scale and (to some degree) self-transforming designs of their systems, which make monitoring their operations a challenge. Zuboff maintains that the tech firms have imposed an unauthorized, asymmetrical "division of learning" about the operations of these systems that goes far beyond routine corporate efforts to protect trade secrets. This division blockades public access to knowledge about what data these corporations gather about users, how they market that data, and who makes those decisions.

Organized around these three questions—Who knows? Who decides? Who decides who decides?—Zuboff's analysis pulls back the silicon curtain to expose how surveillance capitalists have transformed what programmers once regarded as extraneous private information of users into a primary source of revenue. That is, they have taken the "digital exhaust"—the information that users' searches, transactions, and exchanges with family and friends leave behind—and transformed it into highly refined data that can be used to precisely target ever more specific audiences. They then sell this intelligence to

advertisers and others. The 2016 Cambridge Analytica scandal involving Facebook publicly exposed one tip of the lucrative commercial iceberg that Zuboff probes.

In this essay—a review of the book's reviews—we ask whether the published reactions to Zuboff's tome say something about the legibility problem. After reading them all, we came to wonder if the reviews themselves construct an additional hurdle to knowing Google, Facebook, and the rest: the Babelist din of competing knowledge cultures. With so many distinct dialects, the project of general understanding might be hobbled from the start.

The Age of Surveillance Capitalism is a retort, at least, to these norms of academic claim-making. Zuboff has taken it big, in C. Wright Mills' sense. Some of the reviews, the academic ones especially, chide her for that audacity. Her indifference to disciplinary borders is a special trigger. The most common complaint, even in the positive reviews, is that she failed to mention one or another theorist dear to the reviewer's scholarly reference group.

The Age of Surveillance Capitalism has attracted an unusually large number of reviews: over sixty to date, appearing in both academic journals and popular print outlets, with one review running to 27,400 words (Cuéllar and Huq, 2020) and another 16,500 (Morozov, 2019), both many times longer than most fully developed research articles in academic journals. Scholarly books usually receive only a few reviews, or none at all, as both popular and scholarly sources have cut back significantly on publishing reviews. But there was nothing typical about the debut of Zuboff's book, nor its promotion. It was a publishing event, complete with international book tour and major media coverage. The volume was almost immediately translated into multiple languages. Few academics, even academic celebrities, receive such a reception.

A number of reviewers compared Zuboff's volume with Thomas Piketty's (2014) bestseller *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*. British novelist Zadie Smith (2019) heralded it as "this generation's *Das Kapital*," asserting that

"[i]f a book's importance is gauged by how effectively it describes the world we're in, and how much potential it has to change said world, then in my view, it's easily the most important book to be published this century." Barack Obama put it at the top of his popular annual best-books list. It was also listed as the "Best Book of the Year" by *The Financial Times*, "Best Business Book of the Year" by the London *Sunday Times*, and "Notable Book of the Year" by *The New York Times.* The book has received almost 2000 ratings on Amazon, and more than 5000 on Goodreads. It is safe to say that *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* is a blockbuster, generating an exceptional amount of the "buzz" that publishers covet.

Despite the critical pugilism chronicled below, it should be noted that the vast majority of the reviews are positive. Even many of Zuboff's harshest critics preface their remarks with accolades to her achievement. Tributes include, for example, "groundbreaking and seminal," "epic," "tour de force," "theoretical triumph," "priceless," "magnus opus," "impassioned, eloquent, and thought-provoking," "brilliant, arresting analysis," and poised to influence "generations to come." Several reviewers use their critical engagement with Zuboff's work as an opportunity to incisively dissect her argument, and to think deeply with her about the contours, existential limits, and opportunities of the digital world.

Disciplinary dialects and conventions

Books published by university presses are not typically covered by the big dailies and high-circulation magazines. So it is notable that over a third of Zuboff's 60-plus reviews ran in popular outlets like *The Washington Post* or *Wired*.[1] Another third appeared in little magazines and sites appealing to intellectuals or narrow political audiences, such as *Foreign Affairs* or the *New Left Review*. The remainder was published in academic journals, with a predictable time lag. One index of spread is the sheer diversity of outlets that appraised Zuboff's work: socialist *Jacobin* alongside Christian journal *Mere Orthodoxy*, for example. Even the European Council's official site ran a (largely positive) review.

We follow sociologist Phillipa Chong (2020: 4–5) in distinguishing between journalistic, essayistic, and academic reviews. Zuboff and PublicAffairs (Hachette Book Group) pitched the book as a trade title with academic credibility—a genre-bending strategy that plainly worked. There was, however, policing on both ends of the genre spectrum.

Many of the scholar-reviewers penalize Zuboff for embracing a general readership. Kirstie Ball (2019), a business scholar, made explicit the boundary work that is in most academic reviews merely implied. The book, she (p. 253) wrote in *Surveillance and Society*, "was not written for us"; it is "more likely to be found in an airport bookshop than in a learned library." Various markers of the popular—the accessible prose style, open value commitments, the quotes and anecdotes—struck a handful of academic reviewers as credibility draining. A doctoral student in business (Ellinger, 2020: 1578) wrote that Zuboff's "blending of essayist and qualitative methods" damaged the "rigour of the argument." The reviewer came to regard the book as "polemic, even propaganda, for how facts are entrained to incite action" (p. 1579). Literary scholar Paul Giles (2019: 613) speculated that the publisher's crossover ambitions had left holes in the book; the absence of Foucault, "within an academic milieu," risks "imposing some limitations on Zuboff's intellectual credibility."

The border patrolling reached a humorous apogee in political scientist Blayne Haggart's (2019: 230–232) review. Over a dozen sarcasm-embossed pages, Haggart argued that the book "falls far short of the standards to which we should hold ourselves"—established procedures that Zuboff had flouted. Addressing "students!," Haggart lists "things to avoid when writing your own essays." With pedantic anti-intellectualism, the review catalogs the book's sins against the academy. "[I]f you're talking about big trends in capitalism and society from a critical perspective, Hannah Arendt is not your go to," and, likewise, Karl Polanyi is "not nearly enough." There is lots more in that vein.

So Zuboff is punished for blurring genres, for violating guild norms. The bridge-building to the public is, for some scholars, ipso facto evidence of unseriousness. That *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* paid the popularization penalty—that the "popularizer" epithet was assigned to Zuboff—is to some extent a reflection of her disciplinary homelessness. If the book resists classification, so does Zuboff herself. Trained in psychology, employed by a business school, partial to W. H. Auden, social theory, and mid-century existentialism, she is (to repurpose a condescending phrase from a handful of reviews) eccentric. Reviewers of all stripes struggled to identify her, with "sociologist" and "philosopher" among the errant labels.

Aesthetics: overheated metaphors, from swamp to stew

Perhaps no aspect of the book incites greater extremes of opinion than Zuboff's writing style. To cite some examples from opposite ends of the continuum: In the academic journal *Surveillance and Society*, a business scholar (Ball, 2019, 253) describes it as "at times" both "poetic and elegant," while a review for the London *Times* (Rifkind, 2019) characterizes the writing as "swampishly execrable prose." In a contribution to the journal *Social Change*, Aasim Khan (2019: 737) lauds Zuboff's "compelling prose," but essayist Nicholas Carr (2019), writing for *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, faults her "hackneyed phrasing," and "overstuffed" and "overwrought prose." Robert Thomas (2019) of the *East Village Magazine* characterizes her work as "a wily tale engagingly told," while Benjamin Pring (2019) of *Cognizant* characterizes it as a "long tough slog."

Jacob Silverman (2019), in *The New York Times Book Review*, writes that her sentences "may sound a little heady, like perhaps an over seasoned stew of po-mo economic jargon . . ."; a second review in the *Times*, by Jennifer Szalai (2019), suggests that Zuboff "has a dramatic streak" and observes that she can "get overheated with her metaphors." Frank Rose (2019), writing for *The Wall Street Journal*, also faults Zuboff for being "melodramatic." In the journal *Race and Class*, Nancy Murray (2020: 98) describes a "hypnotic, fugue-like cadence characterizing the entire book," whereas Haggart (2019: 239), writing for the *Journal of Digital Media and Policy*, faults Zuboff for using "emotional manipulation." Sam Batkins (2019: 52) of the Cato Institute's *Regulation* concludes that you will either be convinced that tech giants are "the most diabolical villains in history or you'll laugh off the book as anecdote-driven hysteria." In his *New Yorker* review, Alex Ross (2019) called it fair reportage, cautioning that "[w]henever Zuboff seems in danger of pushing her argument too far," tech leaders like Hal Varian and Eric Schmidt supply her with over-the-top claims about their digital ambitions.

Zuboff, to be sure, is doing something more than "writing up" her research findings. Every chapter begins with an epigraph drawn from Auden's vast corpus: Some are eerily prescient, others seem to function as prompts for, and resonate with, Zuboff's own probes. Occasionally, she engages in satire, irony, or an animated zinger. But she can also turn what in other hands might be a pedestrian chapter summary into a fresh grace note. In our view, anthropologist Anush Kapadia (2020: 330), writing for *Economy and Society*, captures Zuboff's distinctive literary style in a word: "operatic." If Zuboff's diagnosis is correct, that the Silicon behemoths are using their vast resources to bypass human autonomy—what she characterizes as the "will to will"— it is certainly a momentous enough threat to warrant operatic treatment.

But opera is not for everyone; and it is not what one expects from a business professor writing about the computer industry. For, as rhetoricians point out, academic disciplines have distinctive rhetorics of inquiry, with their practitioners communicating in distinctive "dialects" (Nelson et al., 1987: 5). These dialects flourish in academic journals, which often have narrow and prescriptive editorial policies linked to specific disciplinary paradigms; they target a specialized audience of experts and aspiring experts. They are incubators of jargon, which, when functioning as intended, draws distinctions, enhances precision, advances theoretical innovation, and names new discoveries—even as this private argot frustrates and alienates the uninitiated and reinforces disciplinary insularity.

Books like Zuboff's, which address public issues, are aimed at broader audiences and modulate their authorial voices accordingly. While she uses a method, the case study, commonly employed in business studies, in both style and substance her prose has a hybrid quality, one that incorporates both social science expository elements and literary tropes. So, perhaps it is not surprising that so many of her reviewers were trained in literary studies. It may be that she has succeeded in developing a public voice with literary resonance, as Zadie Smith's affirmation suggests.

There are, in addition to literary studies, 21 disciplines represented in the ranks of the reviewers, as measured by last degree earned. Among those currently working in the academy, the departmental spread is equally striking: 15 distinctive disciplines, represented in most cases by just one or two faculty reviewers. A single reviewer hails from Zuboff's business field, while law sits at the high end, with four working scholars. Geographers, library scientists, sociologists, historians, and anthropologists are the only others with two or more reviews.

The non-academics are a diverse lot too: About a fifth took literature degrees, and law, philosophy, and computer science are relatively plentiful among the dozen-plus disciplines represented. About a third of these non-faculty reviewers are independent writers, with a number of staff journalists, professional book critics, editors, and lawyers thrown in the mix. Befitting the topic, there is a data scientist reviewer, and a software engineer too. A pastor and privacy analyst round out the group.

We were surprised by the sheer heterogeneity of the reviewer pool. There is certainly no disciplinary or professional claimant to the topic. So it is telling that some reviewers, particularly the academic ones, seem to suggest that Zuboff's subject belongs to them.

We make no such claim. As media scholars, our initial readings focused on the corporate mediation of communication and on the political economy of the digital industry, as well as our shared interest in the sociology of knowledge. If anything, the experience of reading the reviews was humbling—testimony, again, to the confusion of tongues and the scattering of insight.

Who is here, who is not? Theoretical perplexities

Zuboff mobilizes an eclectic band of theorists to inform her argument: The most frequently cited (in the index, at least) are Hannah Arendt, Max Meyer, Karl Polanyi, Thomas Piketty, and B. F. Skinner. Beyond these figures, Zuboff's expansive, pan-disciplinary endnotes draw on an unusually broad range of multidisciplinary thinkers. Yet the originality of her theoretical synthesis—her failure to align with any currently ascendant theory group—clearly disturbs many of the academic reviewers. They want to impose familiar taxonomies and they seem frustrated that they do not fit her analysis.

A few read Zuboff as presenting a Marxist critique, while many others chastise her for being pro-capitalist—reformist not revolutionary, functionalist rather than critical. Several ask, how can a book on surveillance possibly relegate Foucault to a single footnote? It is a fair question, but Zuboff draws on similar sources to Foucault's own, acknowledging her debts to Bentham, Marx, Durkheim, and—through Weber—Nietzsche. Some complain of Zuboff's reliance on "dated" figures like Sartre and Skinner; others lament the absence of Althusser, Bauman, Bourdieu, Deleuze, Gramsci,

David Lyon, Peter Marks, and Robert W. McChesney. She is said to leave out whole traditions: cybernetics, behavioral economics, political economy, even surveillance studies. "The phenomena detailed within [the book's] pages," writes Ball (2019: 253),

> have been a concern of surveillance scholars for the last twenty years. I would even go so far as to say it is not a work of surveillance scholarship at all. For reasons known only to the author, it sidesteps many of the contributions of surveillance studies and duplicates their core arguments.

Zuboff has, to Ball and others, violated guild norms around credit and engaging with "the literature." A couple of reviewers fault her for failing to cite their own work; and others cite Evgeny Morozov's long, self-assured review in their own. Yet another critical thread in some of the reviews is apparent animus to both business as a field and to elite institutions like Zuboff's Harvard.

It is a liability of specialization, as a way of academic seeing, that non-specialists come off as deficient by default. The specialist gaze is up close and in focus, alert to blemishes and anomalies. It is compartmentalized competence, to borrow Richard Posner's (2001: 51) phrase, and underwrites the citation policing from some of the academic reviewers. Even so, we found the subfield sharpness—that specialist way of seeing—illuminating, particularly when scholars from across the disciplinary spectrum unwittingly converged.

A spirited but frustrating call to action

A clear majority of the reviews fault *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* for its anticlimactic conclusion—its spirited but empty call to action. Even those who applaud Zuboff's diagnosis tend to criticize her solutions as anemic and off-key. One typical remark (Johns, 2020: 1051) is that Zuboff "certainly has a fight in her," but that her political and analytic weapons are not "up to the task of struggle." "After such terror, some guidance on how to respond might be nice," write legal scholars Mariano-Florentine Cuéllar and Aziz Z. Huq (2020: 1294) in the *Harvard Law Review*. Anthropologist Anush Kapadia (2020: 332), likewise, calls Zuboff's solutions "blandly legalistic and not a little nostalgic." A number of reviewers cite Zuboff's frequent appeals to Polanyi; how, they ask, could a Polanyian double movement emerge in the face of a system so pervasively effective at, among other things, pacifying its would-be critics? Zuboff, *The Nation*'s critic (Fitzpatrick, 2019) writes, "spends a lot of time encouraging us to act but gives us very little sense of how." The book's long meditation on surveillance-resisting art comes in for criticism along these lines.

A small subset of reviewers denies that there is anything to worry about. So the problem, for them, is not Zuboff's weak-kneed call to action, but the book's alarm raising. *The Economist*'s review (Anonymous, 2019: 75) complains that the tome "barely mentions the benefits of Google's products," and basically concludes: Fed up with Google? Then switch to DuckDuckGo. In the same libertarian vein, a Cato Institute reviewer (Batkins, 2019: 52) writes that it "never seems to occur to Zuboff that people may generally like the goods Google, Microsoft, and Facebook provide." Where, exactly, is the

consumer harm here, he asks? In the *New Atlantis*, a third libertarian (Rosen, 2020: 106)—this time affiliated with the American Enterprise Institute—assails Zuboff for ignoring the "tremendous benefits" of Big Tech, and labels her a Marxist.

Most reviewers, however, treat the tonal mismatch between diagnosis and solution as a by-product of Zuboff's politics of capitalist nostalgia. Indeed the book is keen to label the predations of Google and Facebook "rogue capitalism," with explicit contrast to the legitimate, post–World War II variety. Since Zuboff is committed to defending "good" capitalism, she has—or so the critics allege—boxed herself in. She has "no recipe," in one academic reviewer's (Weiskopf, 2020: 977) take, "for making capitalism edible."

The book's wistful glance back to an era of consumer-corporate reciprocity gets bashed on other grounds too. Zuboff's anointment of Apple as the model of good corporate behavior draws charges of "apple-philia" and first-world obliviousness. More fundamentally, a large subset of the reviews reject Zuboff's premise of an epochal shift in capitalism itself. "Capitalism Has Always Been 'Rogue'" reads the *Jacobin* (Christophers, 2020) headline. An education scholar, in her review (Whitcomb, 2020: 487), calls the book's failure to recognize the "the ceaseless evils of capitalism and our nation's plutocracy" a "bit shocking." A number of reviews stress that surveillance capitalism, if anything, is an intensification of capitalism's roving extractivism. What Zuboff "treats as a breakup," wrote an anthropologist reviewer (Evangelista, 2019: 250), is "really about continuity." Even the driving novelty of the Google era—data hoovering—has sweeping precedent in the twentieth-century credit rating industry, among other forms of panoptic sorting. "Credit surveillance," historian Keith Breckenridge (2020: 933) writes in his review, "lies at the core of the Fordist project that Zuboff believes is the alternative to Google and Facebook." As a confirmed believer in what another reviewer (Silverman, 2019) called the "bygone halcyon era" of industrial capitalism, Zuboff exaggerates the novelty of our own.

This line of critique, in at least a handful of reviews, feeds into a charge that Zuboff overestimates the potency of Google's predictive algorithms. She has, the argument goes, taken the company's boasts for the truth of the matter, when in fact the crunched data are not all that good at getting its users "right." In other words, the behavioral futures that Facebook and the other surveillance capitalists mine, refine, and sell do not have the totalizing omniscience that Zuboff frets over. The qualitative depths of individual character—the tacit and cultural dimensions of social life too—may elude all the recombinant click-and-comment data profiling. The server-side doppelgängers are missing a lot. As a result, they produce (as one scholarly review (Maly, 2019) put it) "rather linear and crippled behavioral scripts." The geographer Mark Whitehead, in this respect, turns Zuboff on her head: The very behaviorism that the book convincingly ascribes to Silicon Valley is an arguable drag on the industry's predictive powers. To Whitehead (2019: 17), Google's behaviorist tenets are a "potential source of hope rather than despair," since the company is less likely to succeed in "actually diminishing the human condition."

To be fair to Zuboff, the reviewers' complaints around the book's politics and proposed solutions are often set in otherwise laudatory reviews. The near-consensus among reviewers (including us) that the book's last call-to-action chapters fall flat is tempered by the reviewers' own flailing dissensus on next steps. Ironically it may be the very

potency of Zuboff's argument that fuels the disappointment in her anticlimactic conclusion, which Sahara Varghese's (2019) review in *Wired* describes as "less a call to arms than a general wake up call." Zuboff has, however, taken a leading role in high-profile campaigns to hold the tech giants accountable since the book's appearance last year. As for the romanticism charge, the critics have a point. But Zuboff's warm feelings for pre-surveillance capitalism are, for the most part, restricted to the post–World War II interregnum, when the system's inequalities were checked by welfare-state politics. The broader point is that the book's incisive critique of Google *et al* does not hinge on these areas of disagreement, so can accommodate them.

Another line of criticism is the book's fixation on the rich West, with scant attention paid to the rest of the world. China and its giant companies are mostly absent from the book, save for a short discussion of the country's "social credit" system. "In Zuboff's account," one reviewer (Breckenridge, 2020: 928) complained, "Chinese firms scarcely exist." The less-developed, post-colonial swath of the globe, meanwhile, is hardly mentioned at all. To a handful of reviewers, these omissions amount to a troubling blind spot. The complaint is that Zuboff, by sidelining capitalism's history of resource-extractive imperialism, misses decisive features of the current configuration too. Industrial capitalism rested on center-periphery patterns of exploitation; isn't it plausible that its surveillance stage operates by a similar logic? Rafael Evangelista (2019: 246, 250), for example, calls *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* a "priceless work," but one written from a "certain political, philosophical, and geographical position." The book would be more powerful, the Brazilian anthropologist writes, if it were "de-centered," to account for "global divisions of labour and knowledge." (A sustained, if less-noticed, argument about "data colonialism" has since appeared, in Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias's (2019) *The Costs of Connection.*)

Zuboff's Western lens is responsible, a few reviewers observe, for the moral accent that the book places on the free individual. Her "right to a future tense," they continue, is grounded in a liberal picture of human flourishing—a parochial, and unexamined faith in free-willing agents. Buttressed by references to mid-century existentialism, she holds that the good at stake is something like the individual's self-determining freedom. One reviewer (Sam, 2020: 243) calls this a "rather simplistic view of free will," while another (Giles, 2019: 613) refers to Zuboff's existentialist commitments as "oddly old-fashioned." Her individualism, a small number of reviewers suggest, may make her less sensitive to other, thicker forms of social life also threatened by the surveillance capitalists. Likewise, lines of difference *internal* to Western societies are arguably subsumed by this unitary conception of the willing individual. Cuéllar and Huq (2020: 1323), in an otherwise respectful review, write that "concerns about regressive distributions of wealth and social capital, as well as stratification along racial and gender lines, are almost entirely absent from her account." Morozov (2019) adds that the book's specter of Google-imposed gray uniformity—the quintessential liberal fear—leads Zuboff to miss the interest that Silicon Valley has "in keeping us diverse and eccentric."

Here again, the critics (many of them fans of the book) have identified important limits to Zuboff's project. She is writing about the West from a standpoint resonant with its particular moral traditions. She leaves out, for the most part, the rest of the world. We see these limits, however, as an invitation for more writing—elaborations, extensions,

and critiques, set in her ambitious, public-facing key. The book's topical spread is already stunningly catholic, so much so that Zuboff exposed herself to the inevitable carping from specialists. To ask that she sweep in the globe, or universalize her moral framework, amounts to a counsel of perfection. The book is mostly silent on other major issues too, after all: There is little on journalism and the epistemic crisis, and scarce space devoted to the state's data surveillance capabilities. She would have needed a full bookshelf and, besides, a sharp diagnosis of the underlying economics is accomplishment enough.

We see *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* as a standing invitation to take up the project that the book began. So it was gratifying to discover a few especially astute reviews, each one a serious attempt to revise and extend Zuboff's analysis.

Critical reviews advance Zuboff's scholarship

As Zuboff makes clear in her discussion of the "asymmetrical division of learning," there is much that we do not know about the data that surveillance capitalists collect about us and how they refine and market it. In addition, machine learning processes subject that learning to constant change; so she does not pretend that *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* is the definitive word on the topic. Indeed, she has since expanded the range of her own public scholarship to include, for example, the intersections of the surveillance state and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2021). She conceives of disarming the "Big Other" as a collective effort, even a social movement, which will require many voices and forms of expertise.

A handful of the reviews have begun that work of revision and enlargement. Each is a full-fledged essay, a work of standalone scholarship in dialogue with Zuboff. One outstanding example is Mariano-Florentine Cuéllar and Aziz Z. Huq's (2020) incisive critique and redirection of Zuboff's opus, which spreads over 56 densely footnoted pages in the *Harvard Law Review.* The review essay foregrounds the role of the state in both surveillance and in establishing the parameters of economic activity. "An economic sociology of this era that lacks a role for the state is a bit like *Hamlet* without the prince—or at least without the ghost," they write (p. 1304). Cuéllar (a California Supreme Court justice) and Hoq (a law professor) pluralize the concept of surveillance capitalism into "surveillance economies," on the grounds that advertising constitutes just a sliver of surveillance commercialization. Their essay also broadens the concept of human agency to account for race and gender. Their objective, they explain, is to encourage legal scholars "to engage with her theoretical positions and her examples" (p. 1283), arguing that her broad, systemic questions have captured the digital-anxiety zeitgeist. They maintain, as well as demonstrate, that deeply informed critique of Zuboff's argument can advance her framework in new directions.

Anthropologist Anush Kapadia's (2020) "All that is solid melts into code" is a second case in point. It is, more than any other, a writerly achievement, crafted with lightly worn erudition and sentence-level care. The essay positions abstraction as a thread in Zuboff's story that is, on Kapadia's view, insufficiently developed. His first move is to broaden her critique of surveillance capitalism's "radical indifference" to capitalism itself: "formal indifference is *already* the logic of capital" (p. 339). He has in mind, drawing on

Marx and Polanyi, the way that capitalism abstracts objects and social relations marked by difference into a flattened system of exchange. Surveillance capitalism, if anything, extends this logic of commensuration from the factory floor into our living rooms. It is not just the scope that is new, but also the means: the digital form that makes equivalences with robotized efficiency. So, Kapadia's aim is to re-narrate Zuboff's account in terms of intensifying abstraction, as a friendly amendment of sorts.

Evgeny Morozov's (2019) long critique of Zuboff, published in *The Baffler*, faults what he sees as her ahistorical and individualist reformism. Asserting that her analysis of capitalism is tautological, he contends that the weakness of her policy solution is foreordained. Because she prioritizes the individualized "emancipated user-consumer," Zuboff is almost constitutionally unable to make collective demands. Conceding that she has successfully raised a public alarm about digital extraction, he writes that "Google and Facebook will certainly find themselves under closer scrutiny by anyone who reads the book—not a trivial achievement." In Morozov's view, however, this is not enough. His review, which influenced some subsequent reviewers, sets a theoretical agenda for those who would develop more radical interventions.

A fourth standout essay-length review, by geographer Mark Whitehead (2019: 1), puts the Marxist elements he finds in Zuboff's book in "conversation with geographical thought and theory." As a result, he is less interested in whether surveillance capitalism is a new "rogue" form of capitalism, and more concerned with the ways digital technologies transform human environments. Central to his argument—really an extension of Zuboff's—is the notion of the "digital nudge," an algorithmic counterpart to the analogue nudge popularized by behavioral economics. The digital nudge is more sinister: privatized, pervasive, and coded into the Internet of things. While Whitehead considers Zuboff's book "essential reading for anyone who cares about the future" (p. 20), he is not a-critical. For Whitehead, the missing piece for geographers is how users actually respond to the behavioral designs that Silicon Valley imposes.

A final example comes from Tim Wu, author of *The Master Switch* and *The Attention Merchants*. Unlike most critics, he fully grasps the theoretical relevance and dangers of Zuboff's Skinnerian dystopia. Writing in *The New York Review of Books*, Wu (2020) credits Zuboff with demonstrating that traditional civil rights, free speech, and privacy protections are no longer enough to protect human freedom. "[W]hat we most urgently need," he writes, "is something else: protection against widespread behavioral control and advanced propaganda techniques." Calling for anti-surveillance regulation much tougher than European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), Wu maintains that a "real anti surveillance law" would ban gratuitous surveillance and mandate that, "after collecting data, firms would be forced, by default, to get rid of it . . ." What Wu thinks matters. He was recently named to the National Economic Council as special assistant for technology and competition policy, where he is now poised to turn Zuboff's wake-up call into a call for US government action.

These reviews, each of them, have in common with *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* a certain cross-disciplinary mettle. It is not their length that distinguishes them from the others. There is, instead, a willful polyglottism that puts them in Zuboff's good company—a shared conviction that "analytic pointillism" (in Cuéllar and Huq's (2019: 1284) phrase) would not do for an object this sprawling.

Conclusion

Zuboff is an interstitial scholar, and therefore a target for disciplinary chauvinists. There is, as we have seen, plenty of complaining about missing citations and neglected literature. She jumps between disciplinary dialects, mastering none and ignoring others. Even 130 pages of endnotes cannot do justice to all the bounded literatures and established rhetorics. That she failed in this is utterly predictable; that she took on the Sisyphean task anyway is admirable. It is fine, even appropriate, to call her out for her blindspots and omissions. It is true that her politics, her privilege, and her background make her analysis parochial, unavoidably so. The work of knowledge-making, to take the point further, requires the disciplinary subcultures that she inevitably oversimplifies.

But we need Zuboff's view-from-everywhere chutzpah too—her willingness to take on what is, perhaps, too big to know. The alternative is paralysis by fragmented consciousness, a disciplinary Babel that leaves surveillance capitalism to Silicon Valley. Without interventions like Zuboff's, we risk self-censorship by scholarly congestion. In light of all the other barriers to understanding that Google and Facebook erect—proprietary data and K Street mystification campaigns—we need fearless, wide-aperture, public-facing books like Zuboff's.

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Note

1. The full corpus of reviews is available as a dataset on Zenodo (Jansen and Pooley, 2021).

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