marxism
& sciences

**A JOURNAL OF NATURE, CULTURE, HUMAN AND SOCIETY**

ESSAY

# Homo Datum and Socialized Cybernetics: Emerging Contours of the Latest Phase of Capitalism

## Arto Artinian

ABSTRACT: What are the implications of the current fundamental transformations in capitalist society? Above all, there is the emergence of a new form of political subjectivity. The dominant forms of liberal subjectivity are being replaced by the emerging subjectivity of digital social objects (DSOs). What are consequences of this? Succinctly, there is a shift from neo (or, ordo) liberalism to socialized cybernetics as the new ideological grounding of current capitalist society. The imposition of socialized cybernetics is transforming generalized proletarianization, leading to the further radical impoverishment and reduction of human life, and its transformation into new political categories. This new phase of capitalism (or perhaps, a moment where capitalism is approaching its systemic limits?) is centered on biological beings with human capacities, rather than human beings, a condition of stunted, dependent subjectivity more accurately described as Homo Datum. Capitalism is moving into a condition, where human beings are collapsed, reduced to, and made interchangeable with cybernetic digital social objects. The political is now the pseudo-political, having been incorporated into the positivist (non-dialectical) logic of the capitalist economic structures. Homo Datum denotes the now-nominally human, biological being with human capacities, which for the purposes of the capitalist economy functions as a particular instance of a digital social object. Crucially, social relations are now not necessarily human-to-human relations (even in their alienated forms) but are approached by capitalist economic structures and their subservient political forms, as particular cybernetic (mathematical) functions "adapted" in their application to social life: as datum. What are the consequences of this for political struggle? One approach centered on Soviet Marxists like Evald Ilyenkov suggest we must think of politics through the fundamental political question: what does it mean to be human? Centering our thinking about the political through this question, and from within this Ilyenkovian approach, can help in our struggle against the ideological structures that make sense of Homo Datum pseudo-subjectivity, and the related society of digital social objects under capitalist class control.

KEYWORDS: Marxism, Soviet Marxism, Evald Ilyenkov, capitalism, alienation, political subjectivity, Homo Datum, Digital Social Objects, socialized cybernetics, biological beings with human capacities.

- *Correspondence:* Arto Artinian, City University of New York.
- *e-mail*: aartinian[at]bmcc.cuny.edu
- ORCID: 0000-0002-5925-8327

## Introduction

The total crisis of humanity today is a direct affirmation of the fundamental premises of Marxism. The fundamental premises of Marxism are centered on the question: "What does it mean to be human?" The answer to this question delineates the horizon of Marxist politics: the formation of a society of fully-developed human beings. Not a society divided in antagonistic social classes, not a society of entrepreneurs who represent less than one percent of the population (for what is meant for the rest?), nor a society of consumers or "informed citizens."

For capitalism, the question of what it means to be human is *insufficient* and *uninteresting*. It is irrelevant. Why? Because capital has moved beyond thinking about the human being as the fundamental category, and because of this, the total crisis of humanity today is the crisis of the political itself, of the fundamental question, which infuses politics with meaning, and is thus of defining importance for political struggle. The crisis of the political means that the situation we're facing is indeed dire.

## The Crisis of the Political

The crisis of the political today is marked by the emergence of a new form of subjectivity. In place of liberal political subjectivity, as the dominant form produced by capitalism (the consuming Homo Economicus, prioritizing structured participation in the capitalist libidinal economy above all else), the very notion of "citizen," is now being replaced by the emerging new subjectivity of *digital social objects* (DSOs), which in its human form can be termed "Homo Datum" (continuing the line of thinking from Homo Faber, through Homo Economicus…).

Sketched in general terms, a digital social object is the *converted form of generalized proletarianization*, as the *base condition* that most people are reduced to automated beings of a *specific type*, as *social objects* with *digital* characteristics rather than political subjects (citizens). The point of emphasis is on "objects" to emphasize the deepening "thingification" (*opredmechivanie/опредмечивание*, as Evald Ilyenkov might have said it).

DSOs are also a converted form, of the specific instance of the capitalist commodity form known as *data*. Thus, what's different about DSOs is that they represent a new form of dehumanization, whereby human beings themselves are posited as a particular instance of a digital social object.

In this sense, there is a change in the *meaning* of the fundamental categories governing the political (i.e., the categories that directly shape social

relations). Under contemporary capitalism, "the political" consists of purely economic capitalist structures of a new type, consisting of digital social objects, grounded in a new ideology: socialized cybernetics. The political itself is locked in a non-free form; it has lost its former functioning as the ground of ideological space.

How is this transformation in subjectivity happening?

## Generalized Proletarianization and Socialized Cybernetics

The roots of the present crisis of the political are in the previous epoch of capitalism—the period variously characterized as the libidinal economy of the citizen-as-consumer, or politically, the time of neoliberalism/ordoliberalism—marked by the reduction of the liberal political subject, the citizen, into a condition of *generalized proletarianization*.

Generalized proletarianization is a condition of a sustained loss of capacities and meaning of political subjectivity. This happens through various forms of exclusion, marginalization, and is accompanied by loss of *abilities,* and the general awareness of how to live and how to do (as Bernard Stiegler has written), beyond simple survival, or living a "bare life" (as Giorgio Agamben has put it). There are various symptomatic examples from the last thirty years that describe this condition of dehumanization: the general, sustained, reduction of wages accompanied by record growth in productivity, the record-breaking growth of fictitious capital profits as indicated by record-breaking stock market valuations—even as the gulf between the productive sector of the capitalist economic entities and the fictitious, virtualized entities of capital accumulation widens, the shift to rent collection from private money producers like Amazon and the large social networks silos, the general devaluation and quality of education, the interruption of historical memory, etc.

Generalized proletarianization means the expansion of the condition of the proletariat across all social classes, as a *disposition*, a way of being in everyday life. The current crisis is driven by this process of simplification of the class structure. This is a dynamic that is inherent to capitalism and has been already outlined by Marx in *The Communist Manifesto*. The important question here is the realization that generalized proletarianization appears to be a converted form of a deeper transformation that capitalism is undergoing.

For one, this process indicates a fundamental change in the ideas that ground the ideological space of capitalist society. Liberalism, long the dominant political philosophy of the capitalist class has lost its hegemonic position within the power bloc. It has been displaced by *socialized cybernetics*.

From a formal-mathematical logic standardized into formal systems that enable the functioning of generalized and networked computing—which are themselves machinic networks functioning exclusively through calculation and particular forms of *usage structures*—cybernetics has left university and military labs, entered the corporate boardrooms and capitalist means of production, before displacing explicitly political categories and beginning to function as hegemonic ideology: an organon of making sense of everyday life.

The logic of capital today is the logic of socialized cybernetics. There is a dire need of uncovering the details of its functioning.

## The Mediating Link to Homo Datum: Biological Beings with Human Capacities

What are the consequences of generalized proletarianization?

A human being (in individual and collective forms) reduced to a condition of generalized proletarianization and shaped by the ideology of socialized cybernetics, has been transformed into a *biological being with human capacities* (BBHC).

This designation seems to capture the condition of *loss, disorientation, total dependency, de-skilling* and thus the specific *dehumanized* way of daily existing; the proletarianization of virtually every aspect of social life, for most of the population.

We can think of examples of such a condition to include: the reduction of human-perceivable temporal structures into a singular time, which is Now-time. This is a fundamental change, the systematic erasure and atrophy of other temporal structures, such as the ones involved in socially formed historical memories, without which *culture* (in the broad sense of the concept) is impossible.

At the same time, BBHC captures "what comes next," because of generalized proletarianization, a *qualitative change* of the very meaning of "what is means to be human." Simply put, generalized proletarianization leaves human beings functioning as simple biological beings, their bared lives are far from what Marxists would consider as human life worth living.

Yet, they retain, at least theoretically, their human capacities (the potential to engage in thinking, concept formation, to make sense through contradictions, etc.), but these human capacities have been pushed deeply aside from the surface, elementary behavior that their condition has been reduced to. This elementary behavior is one geared towards simple, automated existence, *usage-structures* in a social sandbox.

An example of the above, a report by the McKinsey consulting firm, for instance, cites a contemporary cyberneticist, Andrew Ng, who asserts that, "almost anything that a person can do with his or her brain within one second is something that machine learning is able to do."[1] What are the implications of this? First, it shows that AI is basically a primitive approximation of human reasoning, since it can accurately reproduce the most surface-level reactive reasoning (up to 1 second of human comprehension, should yield little beyond impulse, instinctive, and/or basic automated behaviors). But the implication is that such primitive functioning is *socially sufficient* for capital, since it enables the replacement of millions of human workers, who have already been reduced to simple machinic functioning by the capitalist economy. In other words, AI approximation of human reasoning with a scope of one second, has *sufficient practical implications* for capitalists, because enormous amount of human social activity today has been reduced to engaging that 1-second scope of human cognitive abilities (particularly, control over memory, which has direct impact on knowledge-formation, reasoning, and ultimately thinking itself).

An important new category emerges here in this discussion, and that is *data*, or *datum*, a specific abstract object, which is pre-analytical and pre-factual, as Rob Kitchin has noted (2014, p. 29). In this sense, data are abstractions containing minimal inherent meaning; they are that "which exists prior to argument or interpretation that converts them to facts, evidence" (Kitchin, p. 29). Still, they contain political meaning and function, having been produced as data by those who own the associated technical apparatus. The problem is for those who are now compelled (or treated as) to *function as data*, they are functioning essentially in minimally-conscious ways (in terms of political subjectivity). This is not a problem of digital social objects of type (AI algorithm in particular software), but a huge problem if we're talking about human beings.

---

1.    https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/how-will-automation-affect-jobs-skills-and-wages

## Homo Datum: The New Post-Generalized Proletarianized Phase of Capitalism

From the internal logic of socialized cybernetics, biological beings with human capacities are *digital social objects* (DSOs). They are *digital* because of the crucial importance of *datum* as the single grounding principle for social sense-making (for the processes of individuation and socialization) in socialized cybernetic ideology. Just as the myth of the liberal citizen—who live in bourgeois society in both, the public and private sphere, and also through the duality of his political persona, and economic position with the structures of capitalist reproduction—under socialized cybernetics, the socialized mathematical logic grounding the technical apparatus of the new capitalist economy, produces datum as a particular form of sense-making for the social: a fixed grounding, not accessible to thinking by virtue of its functioning as already-formed knowledge.

Thus, with datum, there is mostly movement of *objects* within the political, rather than citizens, to say nothing of human beings. Objects, because such living is externally well-formed, are subjected to minimal autonomy, reduced to social interactions of type "*usage-structures*" located in a "sandbox," a well-formed and controlled social space optimized for simple usage of some other object.

Crucially, such social relations are not *necessarily* human-to-human relations. They can be purely human, machinic or potentially hybrid (cyborg): relations that are mathematical functions "adapted" in their application to social life.

For instance, when I apply for job at some tech company today, I form a temporary, directed relation with a digital social object (the AI-powered initial resume processor). I am subjected to a directed action by the AI digital social object because I have no way of meaningfully interacting with it, nor of influencing it—however, the AI DSO *can* and does directly influence the state of my job application. This interaction is an example of a *usage-structure* interaction within a digital sandbox. To apply for the job position, I must *use* this digital social object, in particular and well-defined (i.e., limited) ways. I must click through the few buttons that are required for this directed relation to be completed. Afterwards, my application is processed and this "social" relation ends because it has no *meaningful* reason to persist beyond this narrow calculative moment. It exists only for the duration necessary for a particular statistical range of values to be populated in some *useful* for the task digital database. I, the human being-worker

is reduced to some *data* with a single signifier: not useful for hire, useful for hire, or some intermediary modality.

Another example is the recent public release of the ChatGPD, a powerful new AI chatbot. Now, believable college essays can be written by such digital social objects, along with an increasing slew of other human-like activities, such as provisioning of various service purely by such digital social objects, etc. This is a symptomatic example of this fundamental aspect of the functioning of digital social objects, including its nominally human form, Homo Datum: the deepening of the effects of generalized proletarianization by the further erosion of human thought itself, its externalization to the new sense-making social apparatus of socialized cybernetics, the formation of a pseudo-human subjectivity, which knows very little (and wants to know even less), living through a passive pseudo-subjectivity of *using* already-formulated things, which it automatically expects to receive from the capitalist controlled *datum*, the externalized source of those things necessary for the DSO's bare survival.

A digital social object with human capacities can be called *Homo Datum* (to keep inline with conceptual markers denoting the human conditions, from Homo Faber to Homo Economicus, and now Homo Datum), to denote the emerging functioning of the generalized proletariat as *maximally aligned with the other constitutive digital objects* of the current phase of capitalism, grounded in socialized cybernetics. The maximal alignment has to do with virtually the entire ensemble of socialization: speech patterns, forms and categories of reasoning, the conditioning of social memory (via the various retention mechanisms accessible to human beings), in brief: this shift affects directly "what it means to be human."

What is the significance of the above example? We're living through times in which a new type of social relation is forming of extreme dehumanized type, where Homo Datum BBNCs interact *interchangeably* with other digital social objects (cybernetic machinic assemblages) with *simulated simplistic human capacities* (the various cybernetic amalgams known as "AI" and Big Data today).

To summarize, Homo Datum denotes the now-*nominally* human, biological being with human capacities, which for the purposes of the capitalist economy functions as a particular instance of a digital social object.

Thus, politics through the lens of Homo Datum is the politics of the *subjectless digital social object*. Capitalism is moving to a state, where human beings are collapsed/reduced and made *interchangeable* with cybernetic digital social objects. The political is now the pseudo-political, having been

fully incorporated into the positivist logic of the capitalist economic structures.

## The Marxist Positions

It is obvious that Marxism rejects the dystopia of a society populated by *biological beings with human capacities,* interacting interchangeably with machinic assemblages with simulated simplistic human capacities.

This crisis makes it clear why we must structure our politics through the fundamental political question: what does it mean to be human? The answer to this question demolishes Homo Datum pseudo-subjectivity and the related society of digital social objects under capitalist class control.

The great Soviet Marxist philosopher Evald Ilyenkov defined the communist political horizon as follows (Ilyenkov, 1977):

> The communist transformation of social relations is the formation of social conditions and of a system of upbringing and education, under which each child grows up to become, before anything else, a human being, and not a locksmith, machinist, or philosopher.

In other words, the fundamental premises of Marxism are centered on the formation of a society of fully developed human beings, and not stunted, zero-dimensional humanoid objects, referenced through digital computing networks. The achievement of this goal through the formation of a communist subjectivity: "There are no incapable people that emerge 'from nature.' Everyone can master mathematical thinking, art, philosophy [...] All specifically human abilities are mastered throughout life, they are not inborn" (Ilyenkov 1977).

To reach one's own full potential is purely a function of social relations that aim towards such a political goal. This is a *universal* aspect of the political for Marxism, which is to say, a category of fundamental importance—and a practical guide—for the political struggle.

Unlike the non-dialectical rigidity of socialized cybernetics, communist understanding of politics is based on an analytical framework dialectical logic, a logic that accepts contradictions as an organic part of the political, and has an apparatus for *working through* contradictions, an approach that allows direct and effective engagement with contradictions caused by political struggle. Against this, socialized cybernetics offers the logic of *avoidance of contradictions*, as Ilyenkov noticed in his 1960s polemics against the cyberneticists of his day.

Human beings are predisposed towards thinking through contradictions, or even better, of constantly living through contradictions. Both Hegelian and Marxist dialectical logic, as well as psychoanalytical concepts of the subconscious, and also Vygotskian understandings of how human beings make sense of the world (through his discussion of "zones of proximal development," for instance) constantly emphasize that "what it means to be human" above all, is the originary act, the creative act, the activation of the imagination, in arriving at a "way out" of some contradiction, irrespective of how it is experienced: as tension caused by a specific situation, the realization that the previous ways of doing things cannot work, or simply in encountering a hard time when trying to grasp something.

To be human means to yearn for those things that are common-to-all, and to strive to live *meaningfully*. And, meaning comes from within us/me, it is grounded in oneself, in the common-to-all universal of "us." Meaning of this form cannot be found grounded in some *externalized* approximation of "us" and "me," served from some digital computing service that replaced actual human intelligence with its "artificial" simulacrum. (For the record: I find artificial intelligence simulacrums to be incredibly useful, but only if they are used for human purposes that enhance common-to-all meaningful social interactions).

We obtain meaning, we make sense of something through activity, which is to say through struggle. And this activity-as-struggle expresses itself in the production of *culture*, which is to say of the particular forms of everyday life that characterize life in a particular society. Ilyenkov gave us this way of thinking about culture (while referencing Hegel and Plato):

> [...] the whole general ensemble of social institutions that regulate the life-activity of the individual—as well as its household, moral, intellectual and aesthetic manifestations [...] everything that constitutes a distinctive culture of a "certain polis," a state, everything that is present called the culture of a people or its "intellectual culture" in particular, the laws of living the current polis in general [...] (Ilyenkov 2014, 34)

To this dynamic, digital social objects offer nothing of substance, other than the canned, pre-formulated algorithmic "paths" of action, which can produce nothing but simulation of already-actualized human thought and reasoning: atomistic existence, devoid of culture, where that which is common-to-all has been replaced by individualistic/singular interactions with subjectless digital social objects.

To conclude: a lot of difficult work needs to be done to arrive at a clear logical understanding of the emerging structures of socialized cybernetics,

digital social objects, and Homo Datum. Marxism has achieved a profound understanding of the capitalist economic structures, through its tradition of critiquing capitalist political economy. Now, the task at hand, it seems to me, is to arrive at a similar level of understanding of these novel structures of capitalist power, which directly target human subjectivity at its core.

## REFERENCES

Ilyenkov, Evald. 1977. "Pravo na tvorchesto [The Right to be Creative]." Interview by G. Solovieva. *Caute*. http://caute.tk/ilyenkov/texts/int/creatio.html.
———. 2014 [1974]. "Dialectics of the Ideal." In *Dialectics of the Ideal: Evald Ilyenkov and Creative Soviet Marxism,* edited by Alex Levant and Vesa Oittinen. 25–78. Leiden: Brill.
Kitchin, Rob. 2014. *The Data Revolution: Big Data, Open Data, Data Infrastructures & Their Infrastructures*. Sage Publications.

## Biography

**Arto Artinian** is a musician and a student of political philosophy. He grew up in both Bulgaria and the Soviet Union, before pursuing his university studies in the United States. His current interests include the articulation of new communist politics, Soviet Marxism, Eastern European political thought, and history during the socialist period, as well as writing and performing electronic music. He is presently working on two projects: "Homo Datum," centered on the emerging transformations of political subjectivity in contemporary capitalism, and "June 1941: Soviet Ukraine," a historico-philosophical reconstruction of the first months of the Nazi invasion of Soviet Ukraine, in an attempt to counter current historical revisionist narratives of that war, that are increasingly popular across Europe. Arto is currently an associate professor of political science at Borough of Manhattan Community College—City University of New York. He lives in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, while also travelling to New York as his academic position demands.