

How to define the normativity of techniques in the era of the Capitalocene and surveillance?

Jim Schrub

Résumé

L'article examine la manière de définir la normativité des techniques à l'ère du capitalocène et du capitalisme de surveillance, en partant du constat que l'économie capitaliste est responsable d'une destruction systématique des espaces de vie — économiques, mentaux, sociaux et politiques. Pour nommer ce processus, l'auteur mobilise le concept d'écofragmentation, inspiré de Baptiste Morizot, et propose de repenser la technologie à partir de ce que Gilbert Simondon appelle l'alimentation, entendue comme l'articulation entre moyens, fins, énergie, matériaux et motifs humains. Le texte analyse le capitalisme de surveillance comme un système sociotechnique qui dépend structurellement du travail humain invisibilisé, en particulier de la modération commerciale des contenus. À partir du cas des travailleuses et travailleurs du Sud global, l'auteur soutient que ce travail consiste à assumer des traumatismes psychiques « pour les autres », déplaçant les normes de vie et instaurant une division du travail affectif et perceptif. À cette dimension s'ajoute la matérialité du numérique, marquée par l'extractivisme minier et l'exploitation des populations humaines et non humaines. En s'appuyant sur le concept simondonien de transindividuel, l'article affirme que penser des technologies d'avenir suppose de faire collectif avec celles et ceux qui produisent matériellement et symboliquement le monde technique.

Mots-clés : Normativité des techniques; Capitalocène; Capitalisme de surveillance; Écofragmentation; Transindividuel.

Abstract

The article examines how to define the normativity of technologies in the era of the Capitalocene and surveillance capitalism, starting from the observation that the capitalist economy is responsible for a systematic destruction of living spaces—economic, mental, social, and political. To name this process, the author mobilizes the concept of ecofragmentation,

CONTACT: Jim Schrub, Université Paris-Nanterre, lhoregttc@protonmail.com



Aion Journal of Philosophy and Science

© 2026 the Authors

This work is licensed under a

[Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License.

inspired by Baptiste Morizot, and proposes rethinking technology on the basis of what Gilbert Simondon calls *alimentation*, understood as the articulation between means, ends, energy, materials, and human motives. The text analyzes surveillance capitalism as a sociotechnical system that structurally depends on invisibilized human labor, particularly commercial content moderation. Drawing on the case of women and men workers in the Global South, the author argues that this labor consists in assuming psychological trauma “for others,” thereby displacing norms of life and instituting a division of affective and perceptual labor. Added to this is the materiality of the digital, marked by extractivist mining practices and the exploitation of human and nonhuman populations. Building on the Simondonian concept of the transindividual, the article argues that thinking about “technologies of the future” requires forming collectives with those who materially and symbolically produce the technical world.

Keywords : Technological normativity; Capitalocene; Surveillance capitalism; Ecofragmentation; Transindividual.

Surveillance and eco-fragmentation

The capitalist economy is the main agent of the unprecedented destruction of living spaces currently underway, both in the North and the South. We propose to use B. Morizot’s term, *eco-fragmentation*, to name this systematic mode of destruction. By living spaces, we mean not only the spaces of economic life, but also the destruction of spaces of mental life, social life, and political life.

This has methodological consequences: today, we are seeking new norms for political, legal, social, environmental, and economic life... All these areas of normative reflection can be brought together in what Simondon calls *alimentation*. By *alimentation*, we should understand both the supply of energy and materials, as well as the motives and purposes of human groups. In other words, in *alimentation*, we encounter the collusion between means and ends. Accepting this starting point allows us to formalize the requirements carried by the notion of “future technology”, insofar as these will not be conceivable merely as means, but must be considered as integrating the human as one of their parts¹. They must therefore take into account human normativity, that is, not damaging the future potential carried by living beings

Let’s take an example: surveillance capitalism, extensively described by S. Zuboff (2019), first corresponds to a large socio-technical system. It is produced through a four-step process of creating dependency on a service, initiated by an initial capture in an undefended zone and over the long term (in contrast to the instantaneity glorified for consumers). According to Zuboff, these steps are incursion, habituation, adaptation, and redirection; but each stage of the cycle is a gamble, an

¹ Simondon, G., 2012, *Du mode d’existence des objets techniques*, Paris, Aubier, p. 97.

objective whose success depends on a power relation where temporality is decisive². This power relation justifies Anna Tsing's characterization of capitalism as a 'joyful mess,' always chasing after itself and its own success. To operate the technical environment of this economic order, which synthesizes various technical ensembles (cables, satellites, antennas, software, and computers, for example) resulting from historical competition, the human operator is always required. A social network functions thanks to human labor, such as commercial content moderation practices, which contribute to the conditions of possibility for the proper functioning of the object. At this first level, we must add a second: the material condition of possibility of the object, namely, at the starting point, mining.

Let's start with content moderation. The Kenyan workers at Sama, who need no introduction. What is the role of these workers? What does it concretely mean to recruit "web cleaners"? I propose the following definition: the function of Sama workers, and of all the people who do this job³, is to traumatize themselves for others. Commercial content moderation consists of taking care of someone else's perceptions, but at one's own expense. In this sense, philosopher J. Dean is right to criticize the illusory space of universal communication that Web 2.0 would represent: it is mainly about organizing the division of perceptual labor (of violence). Yet such a "division of perceptual labor" is not a matter of perception: the division of the experience of violence is indeed a matter of norms of alimentation because the experience of violence shifts the norms of life. One could even speak of this job as affective rather than perceptual work (without, however, providing the salary, psychological support, or the necessary equipment and health apparatus for these activities). The shift in life norms is this: intrusive thoughts, nightmares, increased propensity to consume drugs or alcohol, increased risky behaviors, desocialization. What consequences does this have for what we are trying to think about, the definition of a "technology of the future"?

First, that a *technology* of the future must be a normative philosophy that does not separate technical reflexivity, environmental reflexivity, and the lessons of the sociology of work. Technical networks and contemporary digital objects rely, for their continued proper functioning, on permanent human participation. The gigantic private digital platforms have their underpaid staff.

Thus, anyone who builds a technology that ignores its *human conditions of possibility*, which are just as material, would be on the wrong track. What is at stake here are our conceptions of technology *and* the future. The future is what carries another: this is the real compatibility (defined negatively by a non-destructive relationship) with a living environment, of which "nature" and humans are part.

² Here, the legal timeframe *for responding to the incursion* is incompatible with combating the cycle of dispossession, unless its outcomes make it possible to lock in adaptation and redirection.

³ Roberts, S. T.; Casilli, A. A.; Renaut, S., 2020, *Derrière les écrans: Les nettoyeurs du Web à l'ombre des réseaux sociaux*, Paris, La Découverte.

The transindividual, the possible, and the required

Let us now turn to the material conditions of existence of the technical network serving surveillance capitalism, which begin with the mining sector. Systext reports inform us about the (disastrous) ecological impact of mining—but we still need to integrate the human “into the loop”. Pascal suggested conceiving the human species as a single old man. Today, this old man is the one whose story Simondon tells elsewhere: a man who would have sold an eye to benefit from a restorative operation on his leg. The leg? The non-negotiable lifestyle of rich countries. The eye? The miners whose rights are trampled—as documented by S. Kara in *Cobalt Red*. The eye? The workers of the Crolles Valley, where STMicroelectronics sustains residents through wages while draining the valley, depriving humans and other living animals of water. The eye? The populations of the Atacama Desert, whose way of life and millennia-old tradition of transhumance are gravely endangered by Western desires for electric cars (Chile does not extract its resources for itself nor to equip its own populations, who risk displacement)⁴. In short: eco-fragmentation, the destruction of living spaces, is the destruction of life.

It so happens that Simondon developed a (rather famous) concept to think about the constitution of a living space⁵, both individual and collective: the transindividual. It consists of the encounter between affective-emotional experience and action. Every meeting between affective-emotivity and action produces a Collective, not necessarily composed of humans, but of which humans are a part. Do we today form a collective with those who manufacture and handle *our* world? This is not a matter of representations or visibility, but of acts and axiology: to say that this collective is missing is to say that *we do not begin by thinking or acting with them*. Nor do we begin by thinking with technical reality, for that matter. Overwhelmingly in the social field, none of these realities of world production are taken into account in our relationship to technical objects. Yet this is a condition for distinguishing what is merely possible from what is required, from what can be considered as “future-oriented”.

For *all this is possible* without being required. What is required is axiological, and its open determination involves mobilizing political economy and the sociology of work to rethink the redefinition of collectives that exist materially without existing symbolically or politically, and which are technical and human collectives. This is

⁴ Blair, J. J. A.; Balcázar, R. M.; Barandiarán, J., *et al.*, 2023, “The ‘Alterlives’ of Green Extractivism: Lithium Mining and Exhausted Ecologies in the Atacama Desert”, *International Development Policy – Revue internationale de politique de développement*, no. 16, <https://journals.openedition.org/poldev/5284#quotation> (last consultation: 26 February 2024).

⁵ In this sense, the living space is a broader notion than that of a territory to be defended.

something akin to an extension of class consciousness at play here, and it justifies—borrowing A. Monnin’s expression—the need to politicize renunciation.

Dismiss infinity

Defining our time through the search for norms of alimentation means questioning the link between the technical and the human in terms of the requirement for reciprocal compatibility, extended to the entire biosphere. Simondon saw in the atomic bomb a matter-energy relationship that could only lead to destruction: at this level, the use and functioning of the object converge in a pathological relationship to existence. If convergence is possible in destruction, we can imagine compatibility in openness. This compatibility implies a temporal axis, corresponding to a requirement for durability that allows us to move beyond a spatial, synchronic imaginary of communication between machines and with humans in the technical domain.

But what does this collective mean on the individual level, and what are the consequences of these proposals for the relationship between the transindividual and the future?

For Simondon, anxiety is affectivity without action—a polarity that leads nowhere. Does the reverse exist? Action without affective-emotivity, without individuation of a collective. In 2022, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* by D. Kan and D. Scheinert illustrates this with a character: Jobu Tupaki. Without recounting the film: Tupaki is omnipotent, navigating an infinity of possible worlds and versions of herself. She loses all sense of meaning. Classic problem: if everything is possible, then nothing makes sense. Infinite capacity faced with infinite possibilities deprives Tupaki of anxiety and the possibility of meaning, but not of distress. She objectifies this in the “bagel”, which absorbs all worlds so that they exist simultaneously in the same place: a full version of chaos. How to escape? One must choose the finite. In this case, the character’s mother, Evelyn, prevents the absorption of everything into the chaos-bagel by restoring her relationship with her daughter and choosing her own world.

This is the transindividual. “Forming a Collective” is a necessary condition for the individualization of the subject; it is the *metaxu*⁶ of its affectivity within emotion-action:

Affective universes, or rather emerging affective universes, only lead to distinct and uncoordinated subsets as long as action—or the analogue of action in its aspect of interiority—does not intervene. The coordination of primary affective dimensions cannot be accomplished within the subject without the intervention of the collective, because the col-

⁶ The link.

lective is necessary for emotion to be actualized⁷

In the transindividual, the encounter between action and affective-emotivity corresponds to the collusion between causality and finality—between alimentation (including motives, “the analogue of action in its aspect of interiority,” which is decision) and action, as they produce a collective. This collective is a passage from the infinite to the finite: the collective cuts through the infinity of possible relations with the world—this is incompatible with the promises of capitalism. And for us, forming a collective with these technical and human agents in this way means refusing the morbid delegation of psychic traumas associated with life on Web 2.0, and refusing the exploitation of living humans in the mode of contemporary slavery to guarantee the continuity of our services “while we look for something better than the electric car”.

15. Our double eco-fragmentation—the destruction of living spaces (biological, social-mental)—first seemed to challenge our perception (destruction of perceptual experience by hot media) and action (imprisonment in a mechanistic-behaviorist conception of humans and capture by the attention hunt for which capitalists compete). Yet thinking about future technologies requires moving beyond this prism in favor of questions of alimentation—these invite us to transform the contours of our own conception of technical objects and networks, and with them, of ourselves and human groups. It is an invitation to form a collective with those who *make* our world, human and technical beings we mostly ignore. This completely redraws the map of our social relations and makes much more evident and bearable—indeed absolutely desirable—the renunciations and struggles that accompany the fight against the Capitalocene and its drive toward infinity. For infinity is not the future, and the future is not a technical category, even though it demands compatibility among the ensembles formed by humans, technical objects, and their networks. Thus, accepting finitude is an urgent cultural task, which will transform our relationship to technology and our consumption practices. And we can also say that redefining the possible through what is required, which shapes and limits it, is just as urgent, however painful the consequences of such a proposal may be *for us*.

Bibliography

- Simondon, G., 2012, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*, Paris, Aubier.
Simondon, G., 2005, *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*, Grenoble, Jérôme Millon.
Zuboff, S., 2019, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, New York, PublicAffairs.

⁷ Gilbert SIMONDON, 2005. *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*, Grenoble, Jérôme Millon, coll. « Krisis », p. 252.

- Roberts, S. T.; Casilli, A. A.; Renaut, S., 2020, *Derrière les écrans : les nettoyeurs du Web à l'ombre des réseaux sociaux*, Paris, La Découverte.
- Kara, S., 2023, *Cobalt Red: How the Blood of the Congo Powers Our Lives*, New York, St. Martin's Press.
- Tsing, A. L., 2015, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Pascal, B., 1670, *Pensées*, Paris, s.n.
- Guillén, R.; Peyret, V., 2023, "Ces puces électroniques qui accaparent l'« or bleu » des Alpes", *Le Monde diplomatique*, s.n., s.p.
- Blair, J. J. A.; Balcázar, R. M.; Barandiarán, J., *et al.*, 2023, "The 'Alterlives' of Green Extractivism: Lithium Mining and Exhausted Ecologies in the Atacama Desert", *International Development Policy – Revue internationale de politique de développement*, n. 16, s.p., <https://journals.openedition.org/poldev/5284#quotation> (último acesso: 26 fevereiro 2024).
- Kwan, D.; Scheinert, D., 2022, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, film, États-Unis, A24.