

Techno Racial Capitalism

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Techno Racial Capitalism *noun*

Machine learning has grown into a multibillion dollar global market, but at whose expense? Racial capitalism posits that the nonreciprocal extraction of socioeconomic value (e.g., labor and resources) from racialized groups fuels the ever expanding accumulation of capital.¹ The racial capitalist system is readily seen in the machine learning industry. Machine learning systems are centralized and monopolized largely by racial capitalists, and billions of racialized people across the world have no say as their livelihoods become increasingly interdependent with machine learning paradigms.² Consequently, techno racial capitalism is deeply interconnected with techno colonialism, including digital colonialism and data colonialism.

The quintessential resource for machine learning money making is data capital. However, the extraction of data from billions of people across the globe is obtained by “accumulation by dispossession”³—big technology companies ransack ever growing amounts of data from human experience (often without informed consent or knowledge). Moreover, the framing of Africa as a “data rich continent”⁴ is directly in line with the ongoing white supremacist capitalist-imperialist extraction of natural and human resources out of the African continent. More broadly, this white supremacist imperialist expansion a lá techno racial capitalism benefits both states and corporations. In particular, corporations provide artificial intelligence enhanced weapons to white supremacist imperialist states, commodifying racialized imperialism and selling the lives of racialized groups for the accumulation of capital.

Even more so, machine learning companies commodify racial oppression through the production of carceral and surveillance technologies, reverberating a legacy of eugenics and racialized criminalization. Carceral technology fits seamlessly into the racial capitalist paradigm by commodifying racialized criminalization in order to swell the prison population for expropriation and capitalist accumulation through slave labor.⁵ In a similar vein, techno racial capitalism enables data capital accumulation through cheap racialized labor sources. In particular, ghost workers, many of whom are racialized and some of whom are prisoners, are paid slave wages to be the human intelligence behind the artificial intelligence, making sense of data on behalf of machine learning algorithms.

Ultimately, the machine learning economy is only made possible through racial capitalism, particularly the exploitation of and pillaging from oppressed racial groups.

¹Cedric J. Robinson. 1983. Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition.

²Danielle Coleman. 2018. Digital Colonialism: The 21st Century Scramble for Africa Through the Extraction and Control of User Data and the Limitations of Data Protection Laws.

³Jim Thatcher, David O’Sullivan, and Dillon Mahmoudi. 2016. Data Colonialism through Accumulation by Dispossession: New Metaphors for Daily Data.

⁴Abeba Birhane. 2020. Algorithmic Colonization of Africa.

⁵Zoé Samudzi. 2019. Bots Are Terrible at Recognizing Black Faces. Let’s Keep it That Way.