
TURN OF AN ERA. CORONA, BIG DATA AND THE CYBERNETIC FUTURE

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Andrea Komlosy. *Zeitenwende. Corona, Big Data und die kybernetische Zukunft*.
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The Wide Angle

The current coincidence of business, hegemonic and evolutionary cycles is reflecting the transition from the industrial to the cybernetic principle of production. Following the scheme developed by Leonid Grinin, Anton Grinin and Andrey Korotayev (2017, 2022), it represents a major turning point in the history of humankind, comparable to the Neolithic and the Industrial Revolutions. The book refers to economic history and world-system literature on accumulation and hegemonic cycles (Joseph Schumpeter, Immanuel Wallerstein, Giovanni Arrighi *et al.*), which form the background for identifying the pattern of the Cybernetic Revolution, unfolding since the 1950s and most likely reaching its final phase in the second half of the 21st century. The lead sectors of the forthcoming Kondratieff-cycle (K 6) are already taking shape in the ongoing fifth Kondratieff-B-cycle, consisting of medical, pharmaceutical and biotech sectors in combination with IT, robotics, artificial intelligence and nanotechnology. The Corona lockdown and health control regime is considered a driving force for accelerating secular change.

Komlosy is confronting the linear progression of business cycles and production revolutions with utopian and dystopian perspectives on revolutionary technological innovation, reaching back to 19th and early 20th century endeavors to overcome death (Nikolaj Fjodorovich, Aldous Huxley), socialist utopia of the new (wo)man (Maxim Gorkij, Alexander Gastew *et al.*) and behaviorist overcoming of emotions and free will (B. H. Skinner *et al.*) until the latest efforts of data and social scientists to overcome the homo sapiens type of mankind by establishing a symbiotic relation between humans and machines, i.e. trans- and posthumanism (Ray Kurzweil, Yuval Harari, Donna Haraway *et al.*). The author critically examines the proposals of major world-economic think-tanks and their representatives, like Klaus Schwab (WEF) or Jeremy Rifkin, pleading for “disruption”, paving the way for what they call a sharing economy, AI-based global governance and green capitalism, at the same time abandoning state-based democratic procedures of political decision-making and social participation. Values and terms are turned upside down in order to let green capitalism shine attractive for the masses. Cyber-optimists are confronted with critics of technological solutionism (Günter Anders, Robert Jungk, Evgenij Morozov, Vandana Shiva, Shoshana Zuboff *et al.*) and the anarcho-libertarian Silicon Valley philosophy (Alvin Toffler, Hal Varian, Eric Schmidt *et al.*).

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In a Nutshell

The first part of '*Zeitenwende*' ('*Turn of an Era*') engages in a macro-historical debate on the prospects, and limits, of the capitalist world-system to overcome the ongoing crisis by a new cycle of accumulation, based on a hegemonic shift from the United States (and Western Europe) to a follow-up coalition of emerging nations from the Global South, today promoted by the Chinese Road and Belt Initiative. The second part focusses the impacts of the Corona control regime from 2020 to 2022 on pace and outcome of the transition of the cybernetic production principle. The distance and tracking requirements during the lockdowns created a momentum to accustom people to new patterns of work (home office, video meetings), communication (social media, home schooling and teaching), trade (online services, online shopping, home delivery) and movement (Corona apps, health IDs, Green Pass), hence promoting the techniques and technologies of the cybernetic age. Tech, communication and health companies faced high growth rates of turnover and profits during the pandemic, cross-investing in a branch that is placing the body as the target of new products, aiming at health improvement and optimization, designed on the grounds of permanent data appropriation from internet users' online communications.

In the empirical section of the book, the author builds up on public policy announcements in various states during the Corona years 2020 to 2022, media analyses and scientific literature from the social sciences and the humanities. She observes a dense wave of advertisements, publicity and propaganda, carried on by a cooperation of private enterprise, media and think tanks, state officials, government advisors and selected medical specialists and data scientists, propagating not only the Corona regulations, but praising digital technologies for keeping distance as the future to overcome any crisis or problem. Based on fear by presenting Sars-Cov-2 against all evidence as a killer-virus, Corona regulations were enforced without admitting critical voices and debates. More over critical physicians, medical scientists and law-makers were marginalized for not being part of the Corona consensus. Human rights and constitutional laws suffered and it did not help, when they were nullified by constitutional courts in the aftermath. The broad public followed, willingly or not obliged to make use of the new techniques of communication and proving one's identity as a precondition for social participation in periods of lockdowns. Against this background the introduction of the new lead sectors of the medical-pharma-biotech complex unfolded, enthusiastically applauded by company CEOs, branch analysts and politicians.

A Close Up

Special emphasis is given to the role of digital data, delivered by any internet user to ICT-companies and their clients, advertising companies and public authorities in charge of tracking health status for travel, border-crossing and entry conditions to public spaces. Introduced as an emergency measure, data exposure and transfer are likely to survive the pandemic, getting people accustomed to any kind of optimizing control, putting at risk the personal integrity of citizens, civil rights and freedom of movement.

Data acquire a pivotal role in digital capitalism, as Shohana Zuboff points out in '*Surveillance Capitalism*' (2018). They provide information about users' minds, behaviors, wishes and experience. Transformed into behavioral data they are sold for publicity, product development and the stimulus of consumer demand. They feedback on social norms, values and aims in private, public and professional contexts. Data become commodities. Against the background of diminishing possibilities of surplus value realization

from employing human labor because of robotization, data appropriation is increasingly replacing the appropriation of surplus labor. It goes without saying that income from gainful employment (or public transfer income) is still necessary to consume, dividing the people along their purchasing power within and between states; shrinking middle classes of the developed countries becoming replaced by expanding upgrading middle-classes of emerging countries. The conflict between capital and labor that shaped the societies of the Global North during the industrial era, will turn into new conflicts between those who collect and manipulate data and those who provide them, requiring new theoretical approaches.

Lastly

Corona lockdown and distance orders are losing relevance, once this pandemic is over. In many states the special laws and regulations are being abolished in the course of 2023. Health tracking, travel and entry controls will remain a means of monitoring citizens, transforming them into interfaces between human behavior and AI-gearred organization of human life – from prenatal optimization to post-mortem transhumanist existence, if we are taking recent developments and forecasts of AI applications seriously.

Do we have to accept the cybernetic transition as an inevitable path of development? What kind of variations is it likely to take? Every development is causing contradictions, mobilizing resistance, counter-movements and regional adaptations. And it may reach limits, be it the dysfunctional character of many innovations that do not meet ends, or be it the limits of investment capital and/or raw material and energy resources in order to implement smart technologies in all related fields. These questions are left to the readers' assessment and evaluation in Komlosy's book.

P.S. After the book manuscript was finished, the German chancellor Olaf Scholz used the term '*Zeitenwende*' (turn of an era) to characterize the watershed from a peace-oriented to an armament approach in German foreign policy, justified by the obligation to support the Ukrainian army against the Russian invasion in spite of a strong opposition in opinion polls. This watershed triggered rising military spending and arms production in Germany, delivery of – more and more heavy – weapons to Ukraine, training of Ukrainian soldiers, contributing to an escalation of a regional war – until the German foreign minister's acknowledgement in January 2023, that Germany in fact is 'in war with Russia'. The meaning of '*Zeitenwende*' in this book points into a completely different direction, on the one hand restricted to the socio-economic and socio-cultural transformation of the global economy, on the other hand conceiving the cybernetic future from a *longue durée* perspective.