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Situating AI in social work: Notes on capitalism, technology and labour processes

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: A range of obstacles relating to a lack of technical expertise, the pace of technological development and corporate marketing hype may impede our understanding of artificial intelligence (AI). To grasp AI's implications, it is important to consider the social and economic context in which it is evolving and how its use is conditioned by the demands of capital accumulation and the relentless drive to increase profit.

APPROACH: It is helpful to look at how technology more generally has been used in previous phases of capitalism. AI applications in other fields—especially public health, military and border policing—are also influential and have potential implications for social work's labour processes.

CONCLUSIONS: It is argued that AI-inflected automation and human/machine interplay are likely to become increasing significant in the future, and it is vital that AI deployments are democratically debated and decided on.

Keywords: Social work, capitalism, technology, artificial intelligence, Marx

Arguably emerging at a scientific workshop at Dartmouth College, in New Hampshire in 1956, artificial intelligence (AI) is now, seemingly, the "hammer every messy social challenge is bashed with" (Birhane, 2021, p. 1). What is more, the mainstream message conveyed is that AI is going to revive stagnant economies and to turbo-charge growth. The government of Aotearoa New Zealand is committed to a "programme to drive" AI "uptake among New Zealand businesses" and it uncritically amplifies a statement that AI is "predicted to contribute $76 billion to the New Zealand's annual GDP by 2038" (New Zealand Government, 2024; see also Cooper & Turnbull, 2024). In the lead-up to the 2024 United Kingdom (UK) general election, the influential Tony Blair Institute (TBI) urged the incoming government to implement comprehensive AI strategies as part of a more encompassing vision to reimagine the state (Dunton, 2024). This, it was claimed, could "save government £200 billion over five years" (TBI, 2024). More recently, during the second Trump administration, the TBI (2025) championed the endeavours of the Elon Musk-led Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) to use AI to restructure the United States (US) government. Relatedly, DOGE introduced hiring freezes and intimidated federal employees (Burgis, 2025; NBC News, 2025; NPR, 2025).

Situated within the social work literature, Goldkind (2021, p. 372) observed that AI is not a:

> … single tool, rather it is a suite of algorithmic computing capacities that can perform humanlike functions across settings. AI refers to dynamic machine

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> intelligence, including facial recognition (computer vision), perception (computer vision and speech recognition), whole language processing (chatbots and data mining), and social intelligence (emotive computing and sentiment analysis), to name a few.

The British Association of Social Workers (BASW, 2025, p. 3) has voiced fears that generative AI outputs can be incorrect or misleading yet still retain the power to "hallucinate".

Critically exploring aspects of AI deployment in social work, this article is divided into five parts. First, the focus is on obstacles impeding our understanding of AI. Second, the article briefly centres on theoretical questions relating to technology. Here it is maintained that AI is being developed in societies where capital accumulation and the relentless pursuit of profit are paramount. This fundamentally conditions, constrains and channels AI research, innovation and implementation. Understanding this material reality is therefore vital to comprehending AI's trajectory. Third, the discussion examines how having regard to past technological advancements can illuminate our understanding of AI in the present. Fourth, brief comments are made on AI developments in other cutting-edge fields (public health, military and border policing) that are likely to impact social work. Fifth, the article examines issues pertaining to AI, automation and the human/machine interplay so central to this technology and the related concerns that social work jobs are at risk due to AI.

Obstacles to understanding

In assessing the impact of AI, there is a range of obstacles impeding our comprehension of what may be occurring. First, many of us may lack the necessary technical and scientific ability to comprehend this complex and sprawling topic. Nonetheless, how we arrive at an understanding, or lack thereof, happens in a context marinated in power relations within a more encompassing social totality. Indeed, a lack of transparency and of democratic discussion around AI can be attributed to structurally rooted determinants. For example, while "machine learning algorithms are debated in scientific papers, real world instances of their application are generally not subject to the grounding effect of peer review; rather, they are closely guarded commercial or political secrets" (McQuillan, 2016, p. 4). Importantly also, US-based big tech corporations dominate the field. Indeed, the combined turnover of the four Silicon Valley giants—Alphabet (Google), Apple, Amazon and Meta—is larger than the economy of Germany (McQuillan, 2022). These mega corporations perceive AI as:

> *[T]heir* (emphasis added] technology—and with good reason, for it is they who possess the intellectual property rights, the vast research budgets, the labour-time of AI scientists, the data and the centres that store it, telecommunications networks, and the ties to an enabling state apparatus that are the preconditions for the creation of AI. (Dyer-Witheford et al., 2019, p. 3)

Second, is the sheer pace of technological development given AI systems' "remarkable progress over the past decade, driven by increased computing power and algorithmic advances that enable ever-larger datasets to be fed into large-scale models" (Muldoon & Wui, 2023, p. 2). Crucially, in the field of machine learning, so-called "deep neural network architecture" is now able to "classify language, images or other symbols" more successfully than was the case with computers in the past (Aradau & Bunz, 2022, p. 11). Previous methods "struggled with the ambiguity of symbols" and what was "said in a sentence or what is depicted in an image", but newer approaches resulted in the actual meaning of symbols becoming calculable (Aradau & Bunz, 2022, p. 11).

A third obstacle when it comes to grappling with some of the issues thrown up by AI

is that the hyperbolic corporate discourse aims to sell AI products rather than to critically explain and truthfully assess them. Big tech is at the forefront of advances in AI, and their CEOs and shareholders are shaping political decision-making. Indeed, the significance of these key players was illustrated by their prominent presence on the podium at the second Trump presidential inauguration in 2025. What is also striking is the imaginary concocted by primary definers is rooted in "Californian ideology" (Mager, 2014): an oddly potent amalgam of hippie artisanship, techno-determinism and US neoliberalism. Culturally specific variations of this ideology have spread globally. For example, equivalents of Silicon Valley's tech start-ups, along with their hegemonic vibes and vocabularies, are now located in parts of Africa: Sheba Valley in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), Yabacon Valley in Lagos (Nigeria), and Silicon Savannah in Nairobi (Kenya) (Birhane, 2020).

Technology and capitalism

In contrast to the relentlessly cheery corporate presentations of AI are the more dystopian visions, long present in science fiction and popular culture, about technology and machines taking over. This is also a recurring theme in more scholarly literature with French philosopher and sociological theorist, Jacques Ellul musing in the early 1960s about the "monolithic technical world" that was coming into existence (Ellul, 1964, p. 428). For him, it was simply a "vanity to pretend" that the "technological society" could be "checked or guided" (Ellul, 1964, p. 428), yet such narratives risk obscuring the societal benefits that may accrue from technology, including AI. Examining generative AI, BASW comments: "Generative AI has the *potential* [emphasis in original] to enhance practice, reduce the administrative burden, assist social workers to be more efficient and flexible in addressing client needs, and improve the delivery of support services for those who draw on care and support" (BASW, 2025, p. 3).

In short, the "discourse of AI catastrophe" is reductively sterile (Aradau & Bunz, 2022, p. 12). While remaining sceptical of facile, upbeat pronouncements on AI, we must equally avoid succumbing to notions of unbridled woe and catastrophe. The danger is that such apocalyptic rhetoric may have the "effect of deterring any engagement in the present" and of rendering us passive (Aradau & Bunz, 2022, p. 12). Being wedded to the notion that disaster is inevitable may rob us of individual and collective agency to shape the use of AI, in and beyond social work.

Perhaps, placing AI in a broader historical context may help counter the mystification that frequently surrounds it. Historical perspectives, often astonishingly prescient, recognised the potential benefits of machine learning in health and social care. Emerging from the mechanised carnage of World War 1 in 1918, the socialist George Bernard Shaw avowed that in the clinics and hospitals of the "near future" doctors will:

> Delegate the preliminary work of diagnosis to machine operators as they leave the taking of a temperature to a nurse. Such machine work may only be a registration of symptoms; but I can conceive of machines which would sort out combinations of symptoms and deliver a card stating the diagnosis and treatment according to rule. (Crowe & Jones, 1978, p. 1)

Shaw's personal politics hints at why he may have been attracted to the use of machines and his affiliation is suggestive of some of the problems associated with the idea that technology alone can solve social complex problems. He was aligned with Fabian socialists who tended to emphasise the role of hierarchical administration and expert knowledge. In this sense, the Fabians might be criticised for marginalising the role of the wider public and those who are now often referred to as *users* of services.

An alternative perspective, highlighting the need to ensure technology was placed under democratic control, was summarised in Lenin's (2020) famous phrase: "Communism is Soviet Power + Electrification of the Whole Country". Science and technology (in this instance electricity) had to be deployed in a way that remained subject to popular control. In more recent times, the now largely forgotten Project Cybersyn, an early computer network developed in Chile during the socialist presidency of Salvador Allende (1970–1973), was also underpinned by the understanding that technology could, if subject to popular control, contribute to the common good and help manage the complex transition from capitalism to socialism (Medina, 2006). Unsurprisingly, this experiment in cybernetic socialism was terminated by Pinochet's US-tutored, fascist junta.

References to Shaw, Lenin and Allende may appear abstract, yet their perspectives speak directly to contemporary debates about AI and social work. The central question is one of control: who governs this technology and what imperatives drive its use? Ultimately, we must ask whether AI will serve the common good across social work, wider social formations and the planet, or whether it will serve oligarchical interests.

Currently, technology is developed in a world that is economically ordered and structured by the dominant mode of production and distribution: capitalism. Keeping capitalism to the fore in any analysis of AI is vital because, as the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2021) recognised, it is an economic and social system that is inherently dysfunctional.

> … [the] current inequitable global capitalism has to be transformed into a new sustainable global financial system that bans exploitation of both people and planet that is based on solidarity, fairness and the betterment of the whole society and environment. Social workers will continue to promote social change and social development, standing against exploitation of people and nature and against unjust structures that allow for wealth concentration in the hands of the few.

The harms generated by capitalism have been "compounded by neoliberal economic policies" during the past 50 years (IFSW, 2022). The key point here is that technology, such as that associated with AI, inevitably develops *within* prevailing power relations and hegemonic values so its evolution cannot be easily disentangled from neoliberal capitalism (see also Brockmann & Garrett, 2022; Garrett, 2019). To refer to this dialectical enmeshment, some use the term *AI-infused capitalism* (Dyer-Witheford et al., 2019, p. 8). Certainly, in a capitalist social formation, technology, albeit in often complex even contradictory ways, tends to mostly serve the interests of the ruling class.

Looking backwards to better understand the future

Almost two hundred years ago, Andrew Ure (1778–1857) (1835, p. 369), who may be described as a prototypical business consultant, avowed that "when capital enlists science in her service, the refractory hand of labour will always be taught docility". Around the same time, Charles Babbage (1791-1871), generally regarded as the inventor of the computer, observed that 'one great advantage which we derive from machinery is the check which it affords against the inattention, idleness or the dishonesty of human agents' (in Schaffer, 1994, p, 209). In contrast, he viewed trade unions as wholly "injurious" to the workforce (McQuillan, 2022, p. 25). Today, Jeff Bezos confides that workers are "inherently lazy" and this belief has spurred his development of the "AI-driven worker control that pervade Amazon warehouses and delivery operations" (McQuillan, 2022, p. 25). In short, instead of bringing about its emancipation, technology is mostly weaponised against the working class.

Oftentimes imposed on workers, new workplace technology prompts greater rates of exploitation, job losses, the re-shaping of roles, and—what we are now likely to refer to as *competencies*. Depending on the scale of the changes rippling through workplaces and into the private sphere of the home, this can also be psychologically destabilising and, at some moments in history, this is likely to more emphatic and pronounced than at others. In the late 1840s, Marx and Engels (2017 [1848], p. 10) referred to the incessant

> … revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air.

Analysing the "constant advance of technology" in the workplaces of the mid-19th century, Marx argued that that "machinery" was not to blame for the hardships of the industrial working class (Marx, 1990 [1867], p. 560). It "took both time and experience before the workers leant to distinguish between machinery and its employment by capital, and therefore to transfer their attacks from the material instruments of production to the form of society which utilizes those instruments" (Marx, 1990 [1867], pp. 555–556; see also Binfield, 2004). Here, the point that Marx was making is that technology does not possess intention or a will to act; rather it is used as a tool to advance the interests of the ruling class and their incessant endeavours to control and discipline workers and to dictate the rhythm of work to increase the rate of exploitation and to propel capital accumulation. Thus, it was viewed as an "alien power" imposed on workers to undermine them and erode their craft and bargaining power in the workplace (Marx, 1981 [1957–1958], p. 692).

Fascinatingly, Marx's contribution dwells on the displacement of human labour within processes of production and he hints at what was to be later referred to as *automation*. Hence, he identifies a trajectory in which "living labour" may transform into a "mere living accessory" of increasingly more sophisticated forms of machinery (Marx, 1981 [1857–1958], p. 692). This is a scenario where the worker "superintends" the production process by acting as a mere "watchman and regulator" (Marx, 1981 [1857–1958], p. 705). Today, some commentators, alert to developments relating to AI, suggest that such processes could actually be accelerated to facilitate a transition from capitalism and into, what Bastani (2020) termed, "fully automated luxury communism" in which people devote less of their lives to work and are able to draw on "basic" or "citizen" income schemes to flourish in their "free time". Perhaps the chief promise of AI is that it will "'lead to a life of ease" and will swiftly morph into a "tool that can take over 'dirty, dull, or dangerous' jobs" by undertaking work that people do not want to do (Cave & Dihal, 2020, p. 698). Such an interpretation may, however, be misguided in that the prime reason for the movement toward more automated forms of working is to boost productivity, maintain the fluidity of capital—value in motion—and to increase the velocity of market transactions.

In a capitalist society, the "general intellect" or collective ingenuity that has led to technological advances is appropriated to benefit a small minority (Marx, 1981 [1857–1958], p. 706). At the same time, it can be acknowledged that, even in a capitalist society, science and technology can improve lives; for example, new consumer products for the home (vacuum cleaners, fridges, washing machines and so on) probably made housework a little easier, but these items did nothing to disturb the dominant gendered distribution of tasks associated with social reproduction within the home (Gimenez, 2019; Vogel, 2013 [1983]).

Moreover, the introduction of labour-saving devices did not produce a significant reduction in housework. It has also been pointed out that the period of neoliberalism as one of "domestic stagnation in technological terms" with only the introduction of the microwave oven appearing to diminish the time spent in the kitchen (Hester & Srnicek, 2023, p. 33). More generally, despite vaunted promises that new workplace technologies will increase the amount of leisure time, this invariably fails to occur. As Marx (1981 [1857–1958], pp. 708–709) wryly observed, the "most developed machinery" forces workers to work longer than was the case when they used the "simplest, crudest tools". Following this analysis, we might also assume that the deployment of AI may also increase, as opposed to decrease, the length of the working day for most people including social workers and educators.

Today we find remarkably different circumstances to those prevailing when Marx was writing, but some of the same dynamics remain readily identifiable. We can still witness capital's tendency to replace humans with machines—and today machine learning—to discipline labour and to maximise profit. Hence, the scramble by top corporations to accrue patents for AI technologies. More generally, technology is an "instrument of power, and corporations almost always use technology to gain competitive advantages, maximise profits, and control global governance, not advance the sustainability of communities and the planet" (Dauvergne, 2022, p. 699). As mentioned earlier, this is also often accompanied by a good deal of hyperbole about what can be achieved by technology. Even though a significant segment of corporate capital is wary about the assertion that massive profits will accrue from AI (Balevic, 2024), many governments and powerful lobbyists appear overly keen to implement AI-driven policies and practices.

The so-called "reimagined state", promoted by the TBI (2024) and those with similar political concerns is one that is increasingly dependent on private sector expertise "maintenance and updating beyond initial development and implementation" (Aradau, 2023, p. 305). Unsurprisingly, AI and associated IT strategies also enable "solution-focused" corporate consultants and private sector organisations to infiltrate public sector organisations. Moreover, as "technologies circulate, they enable the creation and expansion of new tech markets globally" (Aradau, 2023, p. 305). Because of this public/private enmeshment, the culture of public sector work is increasingly prone to mirror that of the private sector. Already taking place over the years of neoliberalism (Hall, 2011), this continues to be reflected in changing vocabularies and lowered expectations that public sector workers, including social workers, are groomed to tolerate.

Looking sideways: AI developments in other fields impacting social work

Three additional, interlinked fields are also likely to impact the evolution of AI within social work: the innovative fields of medical, military and border policing. Social work does not occur in a silo and deployments of AI in other sectors are likely to shape labour processes more pervasively. Furthermore, it is frequently apparent that the same Big Tech corporations are introducing *innovations* and *solutions* across a wider and more fluid landscape of operations.

First, developments in the field of public health, and new forms of health surveillance, are likely to drive the introduction of AI. Even prior to the global coronavirus pandemic declared in March 2020, new modes of AI-aided surveillance were impacting within the sphere of public health and disease prevention. With the outbreak of the pandemic there occurred a tremendous upscaling of measures aimed at monitoring and tracking individual disease cases, recording occurrences of the disease for statistical analysis. As commentators, including Klein (2020), observed at the time,

there was always the risk that AI surveillance technologies introduced on an "emergency" basis might become the new "normal". Informed by the work of Foucault (2009), it is not difficult to see how such an expansion might be interpreted as patterning new modes of AI-assisted *governmentality* (see also Garrett, 2020).

Second, developments within military and intelligence fields are also significant because AI is "at the heart of contemporary capitalism and its violence" (Aradau & Bunz, 2022, p. 10). According to McQuillan (2022, p. 119), AI has an "irrevocable entanglement with various registers of violence" and this has been especially apparent given the facilitating role of US-based big tech in supporting settler colonialism, apartheid and genocide in Gaza (Abraham, 2024a; Newman, 2024; Sainato, 2024). For example, AI software systems, such as Lavender and "Where's Daddy?", rely on predictive analytics to identify potential "targets" to eliminate (Abraham, 2024b; see also Garrett, 2025a, 2026a).

Third, as with military and intelligence, the border policing field is a significant testing ground for innovative AI ventures. Palantir, a US-based "data mining company founded with seed money from the CIA's venture capital fund" (Winston, 2018), has been central to the detention and tracking operations of the increasingly militarised US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency. In this evolving context, AI corporations stress that they now possess the technical capacity to "expand, augment and intensify border control" (Aradau, 2023, p. 303). Such arrangements evidence the fact there is an inclination on the part of states to experiment with untested technologies on people who are vulnerable and occasionally scornfully regarded (Arora, 2019). Reflecting the expansiveness of the US corporate tech sector and its tendency to make inroads across disparate sectors and fields, Palantir was awarded a £480m contract to run the UK NHS data platform in 2023 (Armstrong, 2023).

In the foregoing themes, it is possible to try to make the connect with social work in a variety of ways. In what follows, however, the focus will simply be on questions relating to AI and some of the consequences for the *work* in social work.

The impact on social work jobs?

A few years ago, an editorial in *The Guardian* newspaper (2018) feverishly claimed that:

> Between a tenth and a third of the jobs in Britain are at risk of being automated away … Should social workers be among them? It might seem that the particular and personal skills of social work are of a nature that could never be replaced by a machine, but from the point of view of an economist they are part of the machinery to provide help in the most cost-effective way.

Mindful of historical discourses on the coming of AI-assisted full automation echoed by *The Guardian*, some commentators exhibit scepticism in the face of what they perceive as the hype associated with AI. Astra Taylor (2018) referred to "fauxtomation" and aims make the very "idea of automation itself obsolescent". At root, her perception is founded on the idea that most media coverage associated with AI is part of an intimidating ruse that capital uses to make workers accept worse terms and conditions of employment because, believing all the hype, they are fearful of losing their jobs to AI; any job, in this light, is preferable to no job.

It is immensely difficult to assess just how many jobs will be "automated away" because of AI-assisted technologies in any field, including social work. According to McQuillan (2022, p. 4), the "roll out of AI across swathes of industry" does not so much lead to a "loss of jobs as to an amplification of casualised and precarious work". Some question Taylor's rather conspiratorial framing and perceive it as "deeply ahistorical" (Dyer-Witheford et al., 2019, p. 5). As mentioned earlier, certainly

in the past capital has prompted the scientific invention and the deployment of machinery to "let go" of workers and, more strategically, to fragment and atomise them to dilute their collective strength and bargaining power. Generations of workers, "from hand-loom weavers to assembly line auto-workers and cold metal print-setters would testify that there is nothing 'faux' about capital's tendency to replace humans with machines" (Dyer-Witheford et al., 2019, p. 5; see also Malm, 2016). Indeed, "computer" used to refer to a human being responsible for reckoning; similarly, "typewriter" referred to an actual person, rather than the machine that replaced them (Schaffer, 1994, p. 203).

Although not entirely successfully, AI *carebots* have appeared in Japan and parts of Europe, such as Finland (Florek, 2023). Meanwhile, over a decade ago in the US, experiments to replace therapists had begun with the appearance of so-called on-demand virtual counsellors (OVICs) and embodied conversational agents (ECAs) (Lisetti et al., 2013). In 2024, it was reported that hundreds of social workers in England were using an AI system called 'Magic Notes' that recorded conversations, drafted letters to doctors and proposed actions that "human workers might not have considered" (Booth, 2024). Certainly, the use of such 'tools' could have a considerable impact and may lead, as some employers hope, to a reduction in practitioner numbers. Because of this possibility, BASW (2025, p. 6) maintains that if the "potential of GenAI to reduce the administrative burden is realised, the extra capacity should be directed towards relation based social work and not used to justify increased caseload or the cutting of posts". However, this might be perceived as a naïve form of wish fulfilment because, at the present juncture, a reduction in the administrative burden seems highly unlikely given the forces that are politically dominant.

A fascinating strand of the research literature examines the "historical dynamics of complementarity rather than substitution" in the relationship between human labour and—fixed capital—or machinery (Tubaro et al., 2020, p. 1). In this context, it is argued that human labour does not contract or disappear as is often predicted; rather, it is transformed in its processes and character. Ekbia and Nardi introduce the neologism *heteromation* to illuminate the fact that what is taking place is a dynamic configuring and re-configuring of the capacities of humans and machines. This analysis has implicitly informed analyses and commentaries on the shifting role of workers within, for example, AI production and its supply chains. Hence, Tubaro et al. (2020, p. 11) argued that AI is not the "end of human labour, but is depriving it of the quality, meaning and social status that it acquired over time". Managers' jobs might be most at risk, since algorithmic systems can potentially perform their oversight functions more easily than they can replace direct public-facing work. Uber and Deliveroo drivers are algorithmically managed and it may be that social work could move in a similar direction.

Historically, to make "machines look intelligent it was necessary that the sources of their power, the labour force which surrounded and ran them, be rendered invisible" (Schaffer, 1994, p.204). This aspect is also apparent in relation to AI given that "corporate narratives" are often "completely abstracted from the physical reality of its operation" and the role that human labour continues to fulfil (Muldoon & Wui, 2023, p. 8). However, as the more critical literature discerns, AI technologies do not in fact "replace the repetitive labour that some humans are called to do, but they are intensifying the repetitive and machine-like labour" which has come to be known as "micro-work" (Aradau & Bunz, 2022, p. 14).

Corporations developing, selling and maintaining AI software rely on:

> … globally dispersed, unpaid or underpaid labour of data cleaning, categorising and featurising …There is no

> AI without training data, and as training and testing datasets become increasingly massive, they need to be cleaned, curated and improved. This work is done by millions of micro workers, mostly in the Global South. (Aradau & Bunz, 2022, p. 14)

Frequently rendered invisible, these workers reside in what we might term the *hidden abode* of AI and their onerous labour is entirely at odds with the corporate AI imaginary (Tubaro et al., 2020, p. 10). Drawing on the theatre analogy of Goffman, Newlands (2021) referred to the organisational *backstage* in which this labour occurs.

Clearly, AI is a form of production in which human labour is indispensable at various moments in the labour process; highly qualified engineers and computer scientists design new algorithms, but less esteemed and less well remunerated are the *micro workers* who "produce, enrich and curate data" (Tubaro et al., 2020, pp. 1–2). Aside from those micro-working in the US, the countries with the largest concentrations of such workers are based in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines (Muldoon & Wui, 2023). Their work is sourced via, for instance, Amazon Mechanical Turk, Appen and Clickworker and it entails flagging inappropriate web content, labelling images and transcribing or translating text. These platforms "supply and manage cheap labour so that the AI companies who are busy developing advanced tech need have nothing to do with them" (McQuillan, 2022, p. 24). As Jones (2021) noted, "the magic of machine learning is the grind of data labelling" (in Muldoon & Wui, 2023, p. 12).

Big tech is dependent on micro-workers given they can perform tasks "more efficiently than computers" and thus corporate and shareholder profits are increased (Tubaro et al., 2020, p. 2). The "very existence of micro-work suggests that today's AI industry is in fact labour-intensive, although under less-than-ideal working conditions—poorly paid and lacking job security" (Tubaro et al., 2020, p. 2). This work undertaken by humans is a structural feature of AI production rather than a mere passing input because the vital tasks of "AI preparation", "AI verification"—the human cognition required to evaluate the decisions that machine-learning systems have reached—and "AI impersonation" are unlikely to disappear. Technological progress has "not eliminated the need for micro-tasking, but transformed it, integrating humans and computers more tightly" (Tubaro et al., 2020, p. 6). Perhaps AI impersonation is especially illuminating; as the phrase implies, this occurs when human labour does the tasks that are described as having been undertaken by AI; when workers routinely intervene to "plug the gaps" and correct the deficiencies of AI-powered systems and services. Tubaro et al. (2020) discussed the case of "Julie Desk", a supposedly AI secretary and diary planner created by a French start-up. In reality, it was human workers, doing much of this work, who were required to "masquerade as the AI assistants" even though the existence of their ongoing efforts, receiving and replying to emails, were not revealed to the company's clients (Newlands, 2021, p. 6). Similarly, chatbots "remain incapable of making sense of nuance, meaning or social relationships" and so the activity these AI powered systems must be supplemented by humans (Newlands, 2021, p. 9).

Informed by this critical literature and turning to social work, AI deployment may begin to magnify trends that have been present for decades relating to shifts in the labour processes in the profession (see also Garrett, 2005, 2014, 2022a). Historically, the profession's *techno-habitat* (Dyer-Witheford, 1999), has never been fixed. At various times in history, the introduction of new transportation (for example, the bicycle, then the automobile) and telecommunications technologies (for example, the landline telephone, then the mobile/smart telephone) have transformed labour processes and recalibrated previously accepted ideas

about time and space (Ferguson, 2004). The ubiquity of screens has transformed how social workers document and describe their practices. Narrative accounts and face-to-face client engagement, formerly central to the profession, are being superseded by database information, which now serves as the privileged form of expression. Seeming to contain no mysteries or occlusions, information is different from narrative because it is "produced in a much shorter time span and, therefore, leaves little time for reflection … Every item of information is isolated in its self-sufficiency" (Aas, 2005, p. 153).

Developments such as these produce systems that foreclose alternatives. A key feature of AI software design is managerial control, which is achieved by "limiting the access of certain groups to introduce alternative types of knowledge and language that do not correspond with closed-ended formats and classifications" (Aas, 2005, p. 153). Consequently, users of social work services, once enclosed in specific classifications, risk being robbed of their human complexities, contradictions and ambiguities. Steered by new forms of technology, new social work trends increasingly tend to *thingify* individuals by forcing them into reductive classifications (Fanon, 1988 [1964], p. 14). Indeed, AI may well extend such reifying practices. Moreover, the idea that certain boundaries and differences must be conceived as "fixed, natural and irrevocable" is disturbingly a "common factor in far-right and fascist ways of understanding the world" (McQuillan, 2022, p. 110).

Conclusion

This brief article has a narrow scope. Several themes that I explore in related contributions on social work and AI are not addressed here, including AI and social work ethics; AI, big tech and sustainability; AI, predictive analytics and social inequalities; and AI as a potential factor contributing to neo-colonialism (Garrett, 2025b, 2026b).

Increasingly, on account of a hegemonic "AI common sense", "the question of whether AI is appropriate risks becoming 'unthinkable'" (Aradau, 2023, p. 304). Relatedly, drawing on the perceptions and vocabulary of Marx, it can sometimes appear that AI is evolving into a "virtuoso" possessing "a soul of its own" (Marx, 1981 [1857–1958], p. 693). Nonetheless, created by collective human ingenuity, it can remain subject to human control. In this sense, AI is best perceived as a "matrix of possibilities, rather than a promissory note" (Dyer-Witheford et al., 2019, p. 8). Capitalism is a chaotic, grossly inefficient and wasteful system. However, if approached through a critical lens, the ability to better collect, organise and speedily analyse data could potentially enhance collective wellbeing (Gillingham & Graham, 2017). If the ownership of evolving AI were socialised, it might immensely benefit people and planet. Indeed, Adorno's comments—made in the late 1960s—still provide theoretical foundation for interrogating themes at the core of this discussion:

> [W]e should not blame technology, that is to say, the forces of production, or succumb to a kind of theoretical Luddism on an expanded scale. It is not technology that is the catastrophe but its imbrication within the relations that embrace it. We should merely remind ourselves that it is the concern for profit and domination that has canalized technological development: on occasion it coincides in a disastrous way with the need to exercise control. (Adorno, 2003, p. 118)

At present, a key struggle for social work practitioners and other workers, is to ensure that we can exert leverage to try and control the introduction of AI technologies. This dimension appears particularly important given that many economic and social hegemons appear intent on embedding AI without the necessary debate across workplaces and more generally in society. In this context, Unite, the trade union, took a motion to the UK Labour Party

annual conference in 2023 on the topic of "Technology and AI in the workplace". Formally agreed by the conference, the motion called on the Labour Party to introduce a "comprehensive package of legislative, regulatory and workplace protections" to ensure that the "positive potential of technology is realised for all" and not simply the few. This package, it was resolved, ought to include: "protections of workers' data, human characteristics, acquired knowledge and experience, as the intellectual property of the worker, as well as a legal right for all workers to have a human review of decisions made by AI systems that are unfair and discriminatory". Furthermore, there was a need to introduce amendments to the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Equality Act to "guard against discriminatory algorithms". Additionally, there needed to be a programme of re-skilling and up-skilling existing workforces and support for the creation of new training and apprenticeship schemes reflecting transforming job roles. Conference delegates also called on any future Labour administration to place a legal duty on employers to consult trade unions on the introduction of "invasive automated or AI technologies in the workplace" and to work with trade unions to combat the "unscrupulous" use of technology (all quotes from Neame, 2023, np).

All these elements appear vitally important at present. AI, is certainly beginning to impact on and reshape the habitus of individual practitioners and educators (Bourdieu, 2003 [1977]). However, AI cannot be abstracted from the assortment of factors discussed in this article. In this sense, it would be misguided to perceive AI merely as a technology that practitioners and educators must get to grips with. This understanding relates to one of the core mandates articulated by the IFSW (2014), which stresses the need for social workers to develop "critical consciousness through reflecting on structural sources of oppression and/or privilege" (see also Garrett, 2018, 2021, 2022b, 2024). In short, we are encouraged to comprehend AI within our particular social worlds at specific historical moments. This article can therefore be read as a contribution to this critical exploration.

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