International Journal of Multidisciplinary in Humanities and Social Sciences
ISSN: 3107-9385 | Volume 2 Issue 2, 5-14, April-June 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.64137/31079385/IJMHSS-V2I2P102

Received: 20/03/2026 Revised: 11/04/2026 Accepted: 26/04/2026 Published: 30/04/2026

Original Article

Algorithmic Power and the Dialectics of Humanity: Artificial Intelligence, Capital, and the Reconfiguration of Social Totality

PITSHOU MOLEKA, PhD
Managing African Research Network / Earth System Governance, Kinshasa, DR Congo.

ABSTRACT: *Artificial intelligence is commonly portrayed as a technical innovation that inaugurates a new social epoch defined by efficiency, automation, and rational governance. This article advances a dialectical anthropological critique of such narratives by situating artificial intelligence within the historical dynamics of capitalism, colonial power, and struggles over labor and knowledge. Conceptualizing artificial intelligence as a social relation rather than a neutral technology, the article draws on Marxian political economy, Fanonian analyses of colonial domination, Gramscian theories of hegemony, Polanyian insights about market disembedding, and Comaroffian critiques of contemporary capitalism. It contends that AI, through labour, epistemology, or governance, is the new hyper-driven moment of commodification and cycle of global inequalities. Meanwhile, AI creates inconsistencies that break down established value and authority regimes, laying the ground for contestation and possible other trajectories. The paper outlines new directions for a critical anthropology of AI that foregrounds historical materiality and contradictions while committing the field to decolonial epistemologies and transformative praxis.*

KEYWORDS: *Artificial Intelligence (AI), Dialectical Anthropology, Political Economy, Coloniality, Labor, Power, Gramsci, Marx, Polanyi, Fanon.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence has emerged as one of the most consequential arenas through which contemporary societies negotiate questions of power, value, governance, and human agency. Algorithmic systems now mediate labor markets, border regimes, policing practices, welfare distribution, financial speculation, and cultural production, increasingly shaping not only institutional decision-making but also everyday social life. Whether it be through the use of predictive analytics in public administration or generative systems in knowledge and culture, artificial intelligence has been deeply inscribed in our social order (Moleka 2024; 2025).

Traditional narratives of these developments have widely projected artificial intelligence as a radical technological revolution spurred by innovation, efficiency, and computational advancement. These narratives depict algorithmic systems as neutral instruments that enhance decision-making and justify social processes. In doing so, they hide the historical, political, and economic contexts that shape the development and application of artificial intelligence. Such a technocratic imaginary severs AI from social relations that constitute it, mostly rendering power asymmetries, exploitation of labor, and legacies of colonialism invisible (Couldry and Mejias 2019; Zuboff 2019).

Dialectical anthropology provides a more critical response. In line with the Marxian proposition that social forms come to seem natural by having their historical conditions of possibility concealed (Marx 1976), I argue throughout this article that artificial intelligence, as a historically created material form and a site for ongoing political struggle, can be better understood as merely an articulation of an obdurate complex of capital accumulation and colonial epistemologies. AI is not autonomous or neutral; it is rooted in relations of production, governance and meaning which have implications for its design as well as its impacts. They are labor-intensive, energy-extractive, data-glittering and institutionally power-producing; forming new orders in how we constitute labor and authority and knowledge.

The problem of artificial intelligence is, from a Marxian point of view, one that further 'entrenches capitalism's age-old tendency to abstract, formalize and commodify human capacities.' If industrial capitalism mechanized manual labour, contemporary digital capitalism increasingly positions cognition, affect, somatic feelings and judgment as domains of value extraction (Marx 1976; Postone 1993). Data-driven systems prospect human everyday life or social activity, reconstituting it as raw material for accumulation and spatially extending processes of enclosure into spheres that were previously beyond the directions of formal markets. This gestures back to earlier struggles of primitive accumulation, such as colonial extractivism and the commodification/restructuring of land bodies and knowledge (Harvey 2003).

At the same time, it needs to be situated within the historical context of colonial power. Fanon focused on forms of colonial domination that do not function solely by economic exploitation but also with epistemic violence imposed by systems of classification affecting the subjugated populations as human beings, the way certain people were treated or dealt into existence in modernity and postmodernity (Fanon 1963). As Benjamin (2019) and Browne (2015) show, today contemporary algorithmic systems reproduce and amplify such logics through means of racialized surveillance, biometric border controls, and predictive policing technologies that disproportionately affect already marginalized communities. Thus, according to this view, AI should not be seen as a new technology of efficiency but rather as a continuation of colonial methods of ordering, classification, and control in the guise of new technologies.

Gramsci's theory of hegemony gives us a better insight into how AI functions as a cultural and ideological force. The naturalization of algorithmic rationality as objective, inevitable, and above politics creates consent for governance that substitutes technical expertise for democratic deliberation (Gramsci 1971). Decisions that were previously subject to political contests are redefined as optimization, risk management, or prediction. This hegemonic approach renders invisible the normative embedding of algorithms and legitimizes technocratic authority.

This is where Polanyi's analysis of disembedding markets comes into play. When intelligence, judgment, and social relations are reduced to data that can be manipulated by the logic of the market, then there is a greater subordination of social life itself to algorithmic calculation (Polanyi 2001). However, Polanyi also pointed out that these processes elicit counter movements. The opposing force to this commodification of intelligence is found in the threat it poses to the moral and social matrix of collective life. Today, one can read current battles over data sovereignty and algorithmic accountability or the digital rights of labor as expressions of these countermovements.

Finally, the Comaroffs' research on late capitalism points to a condition in which abstraction, speculation, and governance increasingly unfold through legal-technical systems that collapse distinctions between economy, law, and culture Comaroff & Comaroff 2020. Artificial intelligence exemplifies this conjuncture. Ships combine success Lessons Can Benefits_844a an MMSession 0715 Top10List Keynote Mon Sessions, Algorithmic systems are governed in the present according to probabilistic futures instead of empirical pasts, and this reconfiguration jeopardizes conventional forms that risk, responsibility, and authority take. Here, AI stands not as a technology of governance but rather as a restructuring of social temporality.

Inspired by these theoretical traditions, this article conceptualizes AI as a complex social formation. Capitalism has always relied on the exploitation, surveillance, and epistemic domination of bodies and minds donkeys, workers, children but modern algorithmic systems amplify this method while also revealing deep tensions within capitalism's own project to subordinate intelligence, creativity, and judgment to market logic. Such contradictions challenge existing regimes of value and authority, creating possibilities for contestation, resistance, and other ways of imagining. Such a dialectical anthropology of artificial intelligence rejects both technological determinism and cultural pessimism, insistent instead on the historical openness of social futures.

2. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND DIALECTICAL METHOD

The definition of dialectical anthropology: Dialectical anthropology starts from the assumption that social phenomena cannot be adequately conceived as closed objects or self-contained systems, but must instead be studied as historically produced relations occurring within wider configurations of power, labour and signification. Even if artificial intelligence may look technical, it is no exception. One of these ways is to take a dialectic view on AI, which would require rejection of both technological determinism and cultural essentialism, but rather insight that algorithmic systems are products of the social relations from which they arise, exist and change.

Such an analysis is anchored in Marx's critique of political economy. Capitalism, for Marx, is not simply markets or technologies but a determinate configuration of social relations in which human capacities are abstracted, commodified, and subsumed to the logic of accumulation (Marx 1976). Technologies do not produce history autonomously but rather materialize the imperatives of capital. As a result, AI cannot be understood outside of capitalism's centuries-old drive to automate living labor for surplus value. However, this process is internally contradictory, as Marx showed. Rather than freeing capital from its labor dependence, machinery only refines that dependence in both new and less-visible forms (Marx 1976; Marx 1993).

New scholarship has shown that AI systems rely on massive infrastructures of human labor, which continue to remain systematically invisible. Data extraction, annotation, content moderation, and system maintenance depend upon precariotized workers scattered across global labor markets that display highly asymmetrical characteristics (Gray and Suri 2019; Tubaro, Casilli, and Coville 2020; Moleka 2025). Drawing from dialectical analysis, artificial intelligence does not abolish labour; rather, it spatially, temporally, and politically disarticulates labor even as it exacerbates exploitation by obscuring the very social basis by which capitalism works. Thus, the false autonomy of algorithms is ideological, covering up the productive relations which form these algorithms.

This clear-cut economic analysis becomes far more nuanced through Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which shows us how artificial intelligence is not only operating through the means of economic coercion but also by scrutiny of the processes by which consent is produced (Gramsci 1971). As algorithmic systems assert their neutrality, objectivity, and technical necessity into political discourse, they sideline debate in favor of claims about what is optimized or efficient. Welfare eligibility, risk assessment, policing, and migration decisions are recast as technical problems instead of political choices with implications for matters of social justice or for democratic deliberation. This process embodies what Gramsci referred to as the naturalization of historically contingent power relations, whereby elite groups obtain hegemonic status from their ability to frame their worldview and values produced through political struggle as common sense.

The hegemony of artificial intelligence is also nourished by institutional expertise, corporate opacity and state dependence on technical authority. According to scholars of science and technology studies, algorithmic opacity is not just a technical limitation, but a political condition insulating systems from accountability (Burrell 2016; Pasquale 2015; Moleka 2025). Dialectical anthropology demands that we see this opacity relationally: as the product of legal regimes, intellectual property regimes, and ideological claims to innovation that privilege capital over collective control.

Another critical perspective is offered by Polanyi, who analyzed the process of market disembedding. The capitalist drive to subject land, labour and money to market logic sparked severe social dislocation, Polanyi claimed, provoking countermovements that sought to re-embed economic life within social and moral parameters (Polanyi 2001). AI is simply a deeper way of disembedding intelligence, judgment and sociality are stripped off the flesh and converted into data and algorithmic governance. Such predictive systems reconfigure social life in probabilistic futures, redistributing risk, responsibility and value.

Nonetheless, we also know from the perspective provided in Polanyi's framework that this process is unstable by definition. That is why every attempt to commodify intelligence meets social resistance: for it challenges the ability of legacy reproduction and threatens dignity itself. Some of the current battles around data privacy, algorithmic fairness and discrimination, digital workers' rights, and indigenous control over data can be read as counter movements against the unrestrained colonization of markets with algorithms (Kukutai and Taylor 2016; Couldry and Mejias 2019).

Fanon radicalizes dialectical inquiry further by foregrounding the racialized and epistemic dimensions of power in his analysis of colonial domination. According to Fanon, colonialism worked by establishing knowledge architectures for the classification, hierarchy, and dehumanization of colonized populations (Fanon 1963). Logics very much like these are reproduced in the logic of AI as it is formed by algorithmic classification systems algorithms for structuring vast amounts of data that encode racial, gendered, and colonial assumptions into technical infrastructures. Predictive policing, facial recognition, and biometric border controls are amongst the latest technologies to reinscribe colonial forms of surveillance into a digital space which disproportionately target racialized populations (Browne 2015; Benjamin 2019).

Framing it in line with Fanon, AI is not just something that has bias built into it but rather a structure and organization of domination extending from specific colonial rhetoric. Dialectical anthropology thus dismisses reformist strategies that attempt to "repair" algorithms while leaving intact the power dynamics responsible for shaping those very algorithms. The question is not if AI can be rendered fair in the abstract, but rather whose knowledge and values and futures are predominantly prioritized.

The Comaroffs also situate artificial intelligence in a wider analysis of late capitalism and changing forms of governance and social temporality. In their view, rather than deliver a tangible take-away of concrete wealth and security for a mass public, modern capitalism tends instead to function via abstraction and speculation by means of legal-technical regimes that dissolve the distinctions between economy, law, and culture (Comaroff and Comaroff 2020). We can see this intervening conjuncture in artificial intelligence, which governs through prediction not explanation; and whose modalities of governance work to manage populations via risk scores, probabilities, and anticipatory logics. Lives reschedule for futures that have not happened yet but have a real force on the social, literally.

When considered in aggregate, these theo-retical traditions afford a dialecti-cal representation of artificial intelligence as social totality. AI is not a technology mapped onto society; it is a historically specific constellation of power, labor, knowledge and governance. It is the very expression of capitalism solving its contradictions through technical means whilst multiplying those contradictions. Locus of Struggle: The dialectical anthropology of AI considers algorithms a contested site shaped by historical forces but capable of contestation and transformation.

3. THE COMMODIFICATION OF INTELLIGENCE

One of the major changes in contemporary capitalism is the commodification of intelligence. If capitalism, as Marx would have it (Marx 1976), consists in the systematic converting of human capacities into goods for market exchange well then AI is a decisive extension of that process, now extending deep into cognition and meaning and even judgment itself. This is about

more than task automation; it is about enclosing intelligence as a productive force that can be owned, extracted and accumulated.

Marxism too must therefore adopt a historical-logical view of this development as a consequence of the primarily abstract logic of how we come to learn from the premature deathframes and cognitive abstractions constructed by states over time (By its many, many white-knuckled fingers woven.) Labor power is the abstraction of concrete labor, that which capital renders commensurable through exchange value between qualitatively distinct human activities. AI heightens this abstraction by mathematically coding all the heterogeneous forms of social life language, affect, movement, attention into representations that can be counted. This data is then mobilized as "fuel" for algorithmic systems that produce predictive value for capital. Thus, AI is not only processing data in this regard; it is restructuring social reality based on accumulation imperatives (Marx 1976; Marx 1993).

This process resonates with what Marx called primitive accumulation not as a discrete moment in history, but as an ongoing force that mauls over, encloses and commodifies new aspects of life. Modern scholars have observed that data extraction performs a type of digital enclosure, capturing social activity once rooted inside non-market relations (Harvey 2003; Couldry and Mejias 2019). Our daily skills, the ways we interact with each other and express our culture, are turned into an archive of resources for corporate interests to extract from—to be owned and expropriated, typically without real consent or payment.

This transformation is usefully viewed through the lens of Polanyi's fictitious commodities. According to Polanyi, under capitalism, land, labour and money are produced for sale in the market like commodities, but since that is not the case, this is something where one can see a major social dislocation (Polanyi 2001). Intelligence, like labour, is never produced for the market as such: it is a constitutive part of human social life. The attempt to commodify intelligence with artificial intelligence is thus a new and perhaps more dangerous form of fictitious commodification in that it challenges the social and moral basis of life as a collective.

When intelligence is divorced from the social relations through which it acquires meaning, this threat is most vividly visible. They reduce complex forms of judgment to statistical correlations and favor calculability over interpretability. That reduction is not just an error of intelligence but a deflation of it. With social actors adjusting to the algorithmic valuation of visibility, ranking, or prediction[1], intelligence itself becomes restructured around market and bureaucratic rationality (Beer 2017; Fourcade and Healy 2017).

Intelligence commodification is inextricably linked to global inequalities. Read more: Transnational divisions of labor reflect colonial and postcolonial hierarchies embedded in data extraction and AI development. Although value is captured by corporations in a small group of countries in the Global North, most of the labor that sustains AI systems data labeling, content moderation, and platform maintenance is conducted under uncertain working conditions in the Global South (Gray and Suri 2019; Tubaro, Casilli and Coville 2020). This asymmetry contrasts with what the Comaroffs describe as the uneven geographies of late capitalism, where abstraction and accumulation coexist alongside dispossession and informalization (Comaroff and Comaroff 2020).

This critique is made more nuanced by considering how Fanon's analysis of colonial extraction highlights the epistemic aspects of commodification. Colonial regimes not only exploited labor and resources, but also captured knowledge, categorization, and meaning; colonized subjects were condescended to by structures of forced classification (Fanon 1963). AI makes these dynamics flesh and bone when it embeds dominant epistemologies into technical systems that pose as universal. Resultantly, the commodification of intelligence entails not just economic extraction but also epistemic domination, where certain modes of knowledge become monetized, and others are extinguished.

Dialectical analysis, meanwhile, maintains that commodification is never total. It is in unavoidably being relational, situated, and socially produced that intelligence resists any aspiration toward enclosure. Data cannot be imagined without contradiction as meaning collapse itself and with it, algorithmic power: Indeed, AI errors, biases, and failures are not merely technical problems but need to be understood as a result of the tension between lived social complexity on the one hand, and abstract market logic on the other (Suchman 2020).

This creates the rationale for resistance. Data sovereignty movements, pushes for algorithmic accountability, and critiques of extractive AI practices embody countermovements: defined by Polanyi (2001) as social forces that persevere through collective reclamation of control from commodifying trends. Quite the opposite, for example, Indigenous data governance initiatives assert a relational and collective ownership model that resists free capitalistic appropriation of intelligence and knowledge (Kukutai and Taylor 2016).

So, the ongoing commodification of intelligence is not a done deal but something still open to dispute. AI is pushing the capitalist abstraction of human capabilities to their limits, and it also exposes the limits of market rationality. An anthropology

of AI must account for these tensions, seeing intelligence as both an extractive commodity and a contested site of struggle over the shape of our social futures.

4. LABOR, AUTOMATION, AND THE CRISIS OF VALUE

AI radically reconstitutes labor in the context of contemporary capitalism, not by abolishing work but rather by changing its social, temporal, and epistemic conditions. Through the dialectical tradition, it is impossible to imagine labour as purely a compilation of discrete tasks rather, labour forms a social relation and site of value creation where its abstraction commodification thus remains central to capitalist accumulation (Marx 1976; Postone 1993). AI is both instrument and symptom of this dynamic: it reorganizes labour, re-sequences expertise, while simultaneously attacking the ground from which value springs.

This transformation is illuminated in part by Marx's analysis of machinery. Machinery assimilates the productivity of labor and yet deepens capital's reliance upon human capacities while being non-discreet from specific forms of labor (Marx 1976). Modern AI operates in the same way; it automates cognitive, administrative, and even some creative labour but continues to require at its core a vast, dispersed (and often invisible) workforce. Human livelihoods continue to play a role in the creation of training data, annotation, content moderation, algorithmic auditing, and system maintenance generally under highly unstable, low-paid, or outsourced conditions (Gray & Suri 2019; Tubaro et al.). This duality displacement alongside the necessity of human labor unveils the contradictions behind the mechanisms of digital capitalism and defies operational value as a unit strictly based on outputs, easily measured.

Moishe Postone's reinterpretation of the labor theory of value is especially enlightening in this regard. Postone (1993) also stresses that capitalist value is rooted in the social form of labor, as opposed to labor in simple quantitative terms of effort. This distinction was already very relevant in the AI-driven economy. It renders labor as an abstraction: a process comprising formalized inputs (data points, predictive models, coded rules). However, these abstractions depend on social, cognitive, and affective labor rooted in lived experience. Intelligence is being commodified, creating a structural contradiction: labor becomes both invisible and hyperexploited, decentering traditional measures of value and undermining the temporal and normative underpinnings of work.

This line of argument has been taken further by Polanyi polemically considering land, labor, and money as fictitious commodities in the social sphere. Like land and labor, which are "treated as commodities", that is to say they produce outside of the market by nature (Polanyi 2001), human capacities attention, cognition, creativity are abstracted by AI as an inordinate number of modalities with a unit value transferable via exchange. This process of abstraction elicits social dislocations, which appear as increasing precarity in laboring markets and through the growing reach of algorithmic governance and surveillance (Ong and Collier 2005), consistent with Polanyi's claims that disembedding provokes deep societal countermovements.

They are racialized and globalized dynamics akin to the colonial context of labor that characterize Fanon's critiques (Fanon 1963). Data extraction and the delivery of algorithmic labor for low pay remain largely concentrated in the Global South, recreating historical patterns of exploitative, knowledge-from-below and epistemic domination. Labour regimes driven by AI reproduce colonial dynamics, generating a two-speed economy where highly capitalized, automated outputs are located in the Global North and a globally dispersed low-waged workforce in the South (Browne 2015; Benjamin 2019). This asymmetrical relation is indeed a testimony to the persistently colonial nature of labor under digital capitalism.

At the same time, automation undermines old labor-pacification practices. Algorithmic systems continually monitor productivity, performance, and behavior through surveillance, predictive analytics, and monetary incentives that reward compliance; this process has been referred to as "algorithmic Taylorism" (Mateescu et al. 2019). Reorganizing work around algorithmic imperatives ruptures temporality breaking down tasks into micro-actions, real-time quantification of performative acts and metrics designed for maximum efficiency as opposed to provoking skill or meaning serves largely as a platform for on-demand labor extraction. However, this quantification itself reveals the limitations of labor abstracted into a formalized form: errors, bias, and emergence present challenges to algorithmic governance by revealing social and historical contingencies buried in ostensibly technical systems.

This gives rise to a true crisis of value. Capital seeks to maximize the surplus extracted from labor as its own emergent form of life through automation and datafication, yet is buzzingly rarified by material dependency on human work that cannot be completely captured or formalized. The temporal law of labor that is so crucial for the stability of capitalist value and its social recognition and legitimacy is losing rigor (Postone 1993; Fourcade 2018) — in part due to the technological transformations already discussed above. The resistance is not only an understanding of automation but the collective belief in the indivisibility of human intelligence, relationality, and expertise. Counter movements that challenge the alienation and abstraction of AI take forms such as labor movements (Kukutai & Taylor 2016), algorithmic audits (Couldry & Mejias 2019), digital cooperatives (Benkler 2002), and data sovereignty initiatives.

This means that the crisis of value produced by AI has structural and political aspects at the same time. Structurally, it lays bare the limits of abstraction: intelligence, judgment and affect cannot be completely synthesized into commodity form without generating contradictions which undermine accumulation. It creates the conditions, politically, for contestation and makes it incumbent upon the workers and communities and social movements to renegotiate the terms by which labor, knowledge, and intelligence are recognized and valorized. However, we have to fight for those spaces AI is occupying through data and automation it is not a state of things.

The AI-Driven Reorganization of Labour exemplifies capitalism coming into itself as the continually abstracting condition, whilst at the same time producing contradictions that sap value. It both hides, reproduces and remakes hierarchies, showing the inseparability of technical systems, labour relations and power hierarchies established by history. A dialectical anthropology, sensitive to such contradictions, reads AI not as a neutral productivity tool but rather as our historically-specific social formation, in which exploitation and resistance are imbricated with the ongoing reconfiguration of value.

5. ALGORITHMIC HEGEMONY AND COLONIAL POWER

Artificial Intelligence serves, not simply as a brute technology of labor and value extraction but as a mechanism for the reproduction of power (Moleka 2026) through cultural, epistemic, and ideological means. The entry point to the analysis is Gramsci's concept of hegemony, a form of power secured not only through coercion but also reliant on consent from subordinate groups, and articulated through institutions, ideologies, and everyday practices (Gramsci 1971). AI manifests as an example of modern hegemonic processes by projecting images of neutrality, objectivity and technical necessity, thereby naturalizing certain governance and social ordering.

They essentially embed the implicit norms, assumptions and epistemic hierarchies of their creators into algorithmic systems. This naturalization closes our eyes to the fact that many of these decisions who is admitted into a social welfare scheme, who is to be treated by the criminal justice system as high risk or low risk, etc. The seemingly neutral algorithmic judgment is really a sleight-of-hand device for manufacturing acquiescence to modes of power that would otherwise be politically resisted (Burrell 2016; Benjamin 2019). This is what AI does, in the Gramscian sense of hegemony: it reproduces authority by engineering knowledge, meaning or justice and technocratic legitimacy.

This critique is amplified in Fanon's analysis of colonial power. All colonial domination was ultimately not simply material; it needed epistemic hierarchies which told who spoke, who was recognized to know, and whose knowledge mattered (Fanon 1963). These hierarchies are inherited and reproduced by algorithmic systems. Even modern applications such as predictive policing, algorithm-based sentencing, and surveillance technologies overwhelmingly target racially marginalized populations in a continuation of their historic targeting for subjugation (Browne 2015; Gangadharan 2017). In this way, AI is not merely a governance tool but the new form of colonial epistemic power, reframed in a neutral-efficient mode.

AI systems are, at an abstract level and in the context of late capitalism, just conditions of speculation and governance, as elucidated by the Comaroffs' analysis. By reducing uncertainty into statistical predictions, algorithmic decision-making renders social existence an arena for anticipatory governance (Comaroff and Comaroff 2020). Social actors are assessed, regulated, and controlled through risk models rather than direct observation or causal histories. Its restructuring enables spatial and temporal reordering: the surveillance, monitoring, and anticipatory categorization of populations according to algorithmic metrics which reproduce inequalities in the guise of technical rationality.

These processes echo Polanyi's notion of fictitious commodities. AI, by abstraction, distills intelligence, attention, and social behavior to spreadsheet-friendly data points and then disassembles social life from collective norms, moral frameworks, and human judgment (Polanyi 2001). However, as Polanyi reminds us, disembedding engenders countermovement. This response is situated in a rich field of scholarship that challenges this assumption of an a priori universality of algorithmic knowledge, including work on indigenous data governance (Kukutai and Taylor 2016) and movements for algorithmic accountability (Taylor et al. 2023).

For this reason, algorithmic hegemony is simultaneously material and symbolic. This works by way of systems, but it also shapes what passes for knowledge, rationality and legitimate authority. Importantly, though, this power is not neutral: rather, it is regionally and historically uneven, thus cementing a global hierarchy built on colonial and postcolonial realities (Fanon 1963; Comaroff and Comaroff 2020). Automated judgment is the continuation of the colonial administration logic into today, with populations who have been historically pushed to the margins being the subject of predictive surveillance, risk scoring, and data extraction.

Recent studies in both ethnographic and critical STS have provided empirical accounts of these processes. Research into border management systems and algorithmic hiring platforms, as well as digital surveillance infrastructures, demonstrates the double bind of AI production of consent and coercion in multilayered and often unobtrusive ways (González 2022; Choudhury

et al. 2023). These works show how algorithmic governance is already (1) a raw fact of existence and (2) well taken in social hierarchies: it mixes with and reinforces existing processes of exclusion, dispossession, and epistemic marginalization.

However, dialectical anthropology argues that such hegemony is not total nor inevitable. The errors, biases, and opacity found in algorithmic governance expose both conflicts within the governance process itself and limits on technocratic control (such as emergent social behavior) (Burrell 2016; Suchman 2020). Such contradictions create spaces for resistance, struggle, and other kinds of social knowledge. Countermovements to algorithmic hegemony, such as movements for greater algorithmic transparency (Wang 2019), community-based design of AI (Friedman and Nissenbaum 1997; Gangadharan 2017) and decolonization of digital infrastructures (Couldry and Mejias 2019), provide examples that can illuminate the interplay between power and resistance at the heart of a dialectical perspective.

In conclusion, AI is the perfect case of a technical system that is entwined with historical power, colonial legacies, and ideological consent. It serves as a machine for organizing work, a mechanism of value abstraction, and finally an instrument to synchronize the conditions under which knowledge and culture are produced. By contrast, a dialectical perspective situates AI within these interrelated time-space layers, showing how it is both reconstituting global systems of hierarchy whilst holding onto continuities through which the multitude may resist confrontation.

6. CONTRADICTIONS AND COUNTERMOVEMENTS

As a social formation, artificial intelligence is characterized by one or more fundamental structural contradictions at the core of dialectical analysis/marxist epistemology applied to contemporary forms of capitalism. These contradictions arise from the parallel expansion and abstraction of labor, the commodification of intelligence, and the consolidation of algorithmic hegemony. If AI produces more exploitation, inequality, and epistemic domination, it simultaneously opens opportunities for resistance, contestation, and reconfiguration of social power. what dialectical anthropology theorizes as countermovements (Polanyi 2001; Postone 1993).

Marxian analysis foregrounds the inner contradictions of capitalist production. As AI abstracts and quantifies intelligence, new forms of surplus value extraction emerge, but this process relies on human labor that is still socially situated and historically contingent (Marx 1976; Marx 1993). The invisibility of digital labour from content moderation to data annotation, which results in the capture of immense value by AI-powered platforms, reveals a contradiction between the abstract formality of intelligence and actual lived experiences of labor (Gray and Suri 2019; Tubaro et al. 2020). This tension threatens the coherence of value under capitalism and signals the limits to algorithmic governance.

This insight, in turn, has been extended into the social and moral space of a worldview using a Polanyian framework. AI thus takes human capacities for intelligence and social behavior outside the relational and ethical frameworks that would historically have been recognized as regulating social life (Polanyi 2001) and treats them instead as fictitious commodities. The return of dislocation of precarity, surveillance and stratification spurs countermovements against legitimizing abstraction. These social forces are represented in indigenous data governance initiatives, labor activism, and civil society calls for algorithmic transparency, all of which insist on the importance of collective control, accountability and relational knowledge (Kukutai and Taylor 2016; Taylor et al. 2023).

Fanon dissected the colonizer, colonized relationship, and his presentation of epistemic contradictions forms another understanding in which we can see the racialization of such contradictions. AI gives rise to a pattern of surveillance, classification, and marginalization orderly with colonial hierarchy, reinscribing the relations of epistemic domination but also generating points of resistance. Dissent against discriminatory predictive policing or algorithmic sentencing and unequal access to AI-mediated services provide cases in point for the contestation of ingrained power relations (Benjamin 2019; Browne 2015). Resistance is therefore not just counterpolitics but also a practice of epistemic repolitics, re-appropriating knowledge, interpretation and social meaning from algorithmic abstraction.

Gramsci's idea of hegemony sheds light on how these contradictions are resolved or at least why AI retains its authority. Consent in algorithmic governance is obtained by naturalizing technical rationality, making structural inequalities seem neutral or unavoidable (Gramsci 1971). However, internal dysfunctions in AI (bias, error, opacity and emergent behaviors) agonize this monopoly and thereby open spaces for countermovements. Public controversies about data sovereignty, ethical AI design and algorithmic accountability are representative of legitimacy and consent over the making-out of algorithmic societies (Burrell 2016; González 2022; Choudhury et al. 2023).

Though the Comaroffs do not speak of late capitalism, this theorization highlights certain temporal and spatial aspects of these contradictions. The anticipatory logic of AI is reordering social life around futures that, though probabilistically modeled, are enacted in material practice as the present (Comaroff and Comaroff 2020). This predictive governance further abstracts value and labour whilst generating social dislocations that in turn, or at the very least together, energize forms of countermovement.

Resistance, then, is not simply resistance-reactive to specific forms of exploitation done at a given moment in time-but instead is a challenge to the temporality of logic by which capital attempts to preempt social and cognitive life.

More critically, these contradictions prove that AI does not act neutrally or independently. It is a social formation located in history, one where exploitation and abstraction and hegemony share the stage with potentiality, agency, and transformation. For dialectical anthropology, this tension is not viewed as a distortion from the ideals of capitalist abstraction that need to be corrected, but instead speaks in both a revealing way about the limits of capitalist abstraction and points toward the possibility for an emancipatory intervention.

The forms and scopes of countermovements are diverse. These include digital cooperatives grown from the grassroots, algorithmic auditing efforts, interventions by labor unions in tech platforms, some initiatives in setting policy best practices, and epistemic decolonization work. Together they demonstrate the ability for social actors to exercise some form of relational authority over intelligence, knowledge, and algorithmic infrastructures (Couldry and Mejias 2019; Mateescu, Nguyen and Veale 2019) in contrast with a state-course deficiency of control resting on capital and technical rationality. As a result, the countermovements open up a window to the dialectic of power and resistance, abstraction and objectification, automation and human action.

This might be because the contradictions generated through AI between labour and automation, between abstraction and lived experience, between algorithmic authority and social legitimacy are perhaps the most important site of struggle in a digital economy today. Dialectical anthropology can help here, too, giving us a way to understand these processes not as linear technologies of development but as contradictions based on history and social context. It is out of these contradictions that the counter movements arise, and open up space for different reconfiguration possibilities against their contestation and human, social, and epistemic agential reassertion. In this sense, AI is both a locus of power and a medium to imagine new social, ethical, and political life.

7. CONTRADICTION, RESISTANCE, AND PRAXIS

Dialectical anthropology never ceases to insist that domination is never absolute, for it generates resistance. The extension of AI as labour abstraction, epistemic governance, and predictive control generates just such antagonisms. While these algorithmic systems can be designed to operationalize profit efficiently, they also create friction-points (e.g. labor disputes over AI-mediated work conditions, accountability debates over algorithms, digital and epistemic sovereignty movements) that make the exercise of exploitation contingent rather than singularly absolute (Polanyi 2001; Postone 1993; Benjamin 2019).

The resistance to domination by algorithm manifests in a series of registers. Within the labor domain, digital platform workers, content moderators, and AI annotators have mobilized to fight back against exploitative conditions, asserting ways of exerting agency on the infrastructure designed precisely to discipline and abstract their labor (Gray and Suri 2019; Tubaro, Casilli and Coville 2020). Epistemically, activists and academics challenge the racialized, gendered, and colonial biases of algorithms by calling for transparency in algorithmic systems; fairness whose standards must be transgressed; and culturally-embedded knowledge frameworks (Browne 2015; Choudhury et al. 2023). Such resistance illustrated Gramsci's definition of counter-hegemonic practice: more than simple oppositionality, they serve to construct "new structures of legitimacy, knowledge and social authority" (Gramsci 1971).

This is particularly instructive here, given Fanon's critique of the realities of coloniality. The replication of minimalistic epistemic hierarchy and control (through AI) iterates the same techniques of resistance (by definition entails some modality of epistemic decolonization). That is, movements resisting predictive policing, biased credit scores, and the unequal global distribution of algorithmic work are all collective refusals to accept the legitimacy of pretextual neutrality; these movements lay claim to cognitive, social, and political agency occupied by the machinery of domination (Fanon 1963; Comaroff and Comaroff 2020).

Polanyi knew enough about the social limits of market extension to explain why these so-called countermovements are not anomalies but have become structurally required. The disembedding of labor, intelligence and social activity into differentiated quanta that are incorporated within algorithmic processes is to elicit a particular kind of social reaction: the very facts that would render relational, ethical and moral forms-of-life amenable to commodification (Polanyi 2001) prompt resistance precisely because society seeks to protect them. Precisely for this reason, AI is a control apparatus as well as a field of battle: it is an arena where the dialectical struggle of domination and resistance is playing out.

Dialectical anthropology is not simply critical but a practicised exposure to historical power relations, material conditions, and global hierarchies that make visible both regimes of domination and possibilities of resistance in relation to AI. It also opens up a horizon for scholarship, not futures defined by data or algorithmic authority but rather by human imagination through the collective struggle over labor, knowledge, and social reproduction (Couldry and Mejias 2019; Taylor et al. 2023).

8. CONCLUSION

Compared to how microeconomics often portrays artificial intelligence (AI) itself as a historic break or technological singularity, dialectical analysis reframes it as an intensification of existing capitalist, colonial, and epistemic relations. AI heightens the abstraction of labor, commodification of intelligence and surveillance infrastructures, simultaneously creating contradictions that tear apart regimes of value, authority and knowledge. It is an agent of power and instrument of oppression, but also a site for human agency, resistance, and social change.

Imagine then an AI Anthropology a dialectical anthropology of AI where AI is open to be considered an epistemic and ontological trench, not a finished battlefield. The trajectory of these institutions will be determined by clashes over labor relations, whose nature or form is their own epistemology, the question of governance, and finally the role they play in social reproduction. Understanding the contradictions enables scholars to document nascent forms of resistance, reveal inequities in algorithmic authority, and envision liberatory alternatives.

When all is said and done, what happens with AI will depend on human work and societal struggle. The role of anthropology is not to predict technological imperatives, but rather to clarify the history and materiality and politics of AI itself the conditions under which it has been produced, challenged, and possibly made otherwise. Dialectical anthropology recognizes the continued feasibility of creating a more just, accountable, and socially situated human/machine/society relationship by bringing these struggles into view.

REFERENCES

[1] D. Beer, "The social power of algorithms," Information, Communication & Society, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 1–13, Aug. 2017, doi: 10.1080/1369118x.2016.1216147.
[2] S. Fazelpour and D. Danks, "Algorithmic bias: Senses, sources, Solutions," Philosophy Compass, vol. 16, no. 8, pp. 1–16, June 2021, doi: 10.1111/phc3.12760.
[3] S. Browne, "Dark Matters," Sept. 2015, doi: 10.1215/9780822375302.
[4] J. Burrell, "How the Machine 'thinks': Understanding Opacity in Machine Learning Algorithms," Big Data & Society, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 1–12, Jan. 2016, doi: 10.1177/2053951715622512.
[5] D. Gritsenko and M. Wood, "Algorithmic governance: A modes of governance approach," Regulation & Governance, vol. 16, no. 1, Nov. 2020, doi: 10.1111/rego.12367.
[6] S.-J. Cooper-Knock, "Beyond Agamben: Sovereignty, policing and 'permissive space' in South Africa, and beyond," Theoretical Criminology, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 22–41, Jan. 2017, doi: 10.1177/1362480616680704.
[7] N. Couldry and U. A. Mejias, The Costs of Connection. Stanford University Press, 2020. doi: 10.1515/9781503609754.
[8] Mbembe, "Necropolitics," Public Culture, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 11–40, 2003.
[9] M. Fourcade and K. Healy, "Seeing like a market," Socio-Economic Review, vol. 15, no. 1, p. mww033, Dec. 2017, doi: 10.1093/ser/mww033.
[10] M. Fourcade and F. Johns, "Loops, ladders and links: the recursivity of social and machine learning," Theory and Society, vol. 49, no. 5–6, pp. 803–832, Aug. 2020, doi: 10.1007/s11186-020-09409-x.
[11] X. Minocher and C. Randall, "Predictable policing: New technology, Old bias, and Future Resistance in Big Data Surveillance," Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies, vol. 26, no. 5–6, p. 135485652093383, June 2020, doi: 10.1177/1354856520933838.
[12] S. Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," Journal of Communication Inquiry, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 5–27, June 1986, doi: 10.1177/019685998601000202.
[13] R. Dorschel, "Reconsidering digital labour: Bringing tech workers into the debate," New Technology, Work and Employment, vol. 37, no. 2, Jan. 2022, doi: 10.1111/ntwe.12225.
[14] J. Glassman, "Primitive accumulation, accumulation by dispossession, accumulation by 'extra-economic' means," Progress in Human Geography, vol. 30, no. 5, pp. 608–625, Oct. 2006.
[15] T. Kukutai and J. Taylor, Indigenous Data Sovereignty. ANU Press, 2016. doi: 10.22459/caepr38.11.2016.
[16] D. Harvey, "Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction," The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, vol. 610, no. 1, pp. 21–44, Mar. 2007, doi: 10.1177/0002716206296780.
[17] M. Postone, "Time, Labor, and Social Domination," Apr. 1993, doi: 10.1017/cbo9780511570926.
[18] D. Stark and I. Pais, "Algorithmic Management in the Platform Economy," Sociologica, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 47–72, 2020, doi: 10.6092/issn.1971-8853/12221.
[19] "OSF," Doi.org, 2026. https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/f3scj (accessed July 11, 2026).
[20] J. Auernhammer, "Design Research in Innovation Management: a pragmatic and human-centered approach," R&D Management, vol. 50, no. 3, pp. 412–428, Apr. 2020, doi: 10.1111/radm.12409.
[21] P. Moleka, "A Foundational Science of Intelligence Beyond the Human," SSRN Electronic Journal, 2026, doi: 10.2139/ssrn.6012054.
[22] C. Tagliapietra, "Doing Theology Creatively in a Scientific Age: Tradition, Reflexivity, and Second-Order Cybernetics," Religions, vol. 17, no. 2, p. 242, Feb. 2026, doi: 10.3390/rel17020242.
[23] P. Moleka, Ed., "Empowering Africa: Harnessing Inclusive Innovation for Sustainable Development," Feb. 2026, doi: 10.3726/b23110.
[24] F. Pasquale, "The Black Box Society," Harvard University Press, Jan. 2015, doi: 10.4159/harvard.9780674736061.
[25] "Wolfgang Streeck, How Will Capitalism End?, NLR 87, May–June 2014," New Left Review. https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii87/articles/wolfgang-streeck-how-will-capitalism-end (accessed July 11, 2026).
[26] Moishe Postone, Time, Labor, and Social Domination. 1993. doi: 10.1017/cbo9780511570926.

[27] L. Suchman, “Algorithmic warfare and the reinvention of accuracy,” Critical Studies on Security, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 1–13, May 2020, doi: 10.1080/21624887.2020.1760587.
[28] S. R. Carroll, D. Rodriguez-Lonebear, and A. Martinez, “Indigenous Data Governance: Strategies from United States Native Nations,” Data Science Journal, vol. 18, no. 1, p. 31, July 2019, doi: 10.5334/dsj-2019-031.
[29] P. Tubaro, A. A. Casilli, and M. Coville, “The trainer, the verifier, the imitator: Three ways in which human platform workers support artificial intelligence,” Big Data & Society, vol. 7, no. 1, p. 205395172091977, Jan. 2020, doi: 10.1177/2053951720919776.
[30] S. Zuboff, “Surveillance Capitalism and the Challenge of Collective Action,” New Labor Forum, vol. 28, no. 1, pp. 10–29, Jan. 2019, doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/1095796018819461.