

Dan McQuillan, **Resisting AI: An Anti-Fascist Approach to Artificial Intelligence**, Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2022, 190 pp., \$149.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

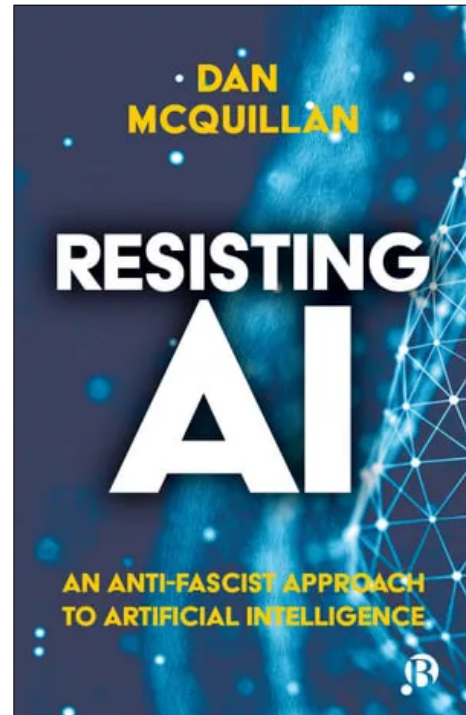
Florencio Cabello Fernández-Delgado
University of Málaga

Since 2019 I have faithfully fulfilled a New Year's resolution to follow Rodney Brooks's promise to self-certificate his predictions on self-driving cars, artificial intelligence (AI), and space travel every January 1 until 2050. Although the process' origins trace back to the piece "The Seven Deadly Sins of Predicting the Future of AI" (Brooks, 2017), I only embraced it after reading his "Dated Predictions" (Brooks, 2018) on the following New Year's Day. Increasingly frustrated by the current hype around AI, Brooks went further than anyone I had read before: He formulated several predictions about those three major areas over the next 32 years and attached dates to them in three different ways: BY (a year), NET (no earlier than), and NIML (not in my lifetime).

Among the stimulating reflections of this AI pioneer and prolific entrepreneur (to the point of boasting about his *necropolitical* developments, namely, military mobile robots), I especially cherish those where he debunks the purported novelty of so-called breakthroughs, as he recently did with generative pre-trained transformers (GPTs). Thus, I could discover Joseph Weizenbaum's (1966) pioneering ELIZA chatbot and, above all, his subsequent lifelong angst about how "the will to believe in the innate superiority of a computer model" (Brooks, 2022, para. 50) permeated society already in the late 1960s:

Important decisions increasingly tend to be made in response to computer output . . .
ELIZA shows, if nothing else, how easy it is to create and maintain the illusion of understanding, hence perhaps of judgement deserving of credibility. A certain danger lurks there. (Weizenbaum, 1966, p. 42)

The anti-fascist approach to AI Dan McQuillan offers in **Resisting AI: An Anti-Fascist Approach to Artificial Intelligence** is not only free from the ludicrous analytical sins Brooks warns about but also represents a politically vigorous and intellectually rigorous confrontation with dangers that today are very certain and not just lurking: "The threat of AI states of exception is the computational production of the virtual camp as an ever-present feature in the flow of algorithmic decision-making" (p. 86).



Drawing on Roger Griffin's (1993) abridged definition of fascism as "palingenetic ultranationalism" (p. 6), the author hastens to qualify that his call to action by no means brands AI as inherently fascist. Rather it is an alert that AI "lends itself to 'fascization'" (p. 7) due to the current arrangement of its technical, institutional, and ideological operations.

Regarding the computational layer of this *apparatus*, McQuillan devotes the first chapter to a praiseworthy explanatory effort that seems today more needed than ever to conjure the analytical mirages anticipated by Weizenbaum (1966) seven years before Arthur C. Clarke's third law:

It is said that to explain is to explain away. This maxim is nowhere so well fulfilled as in . . . artificial intelligence . . . Once a particular program is unmasked, once its inner workings are explained in language sufficiently plain to induce understanding, its magic crumbles away . . . The observer . . . moves the program in question from the shelf marked "intelligent," to that reserved for curios. (p. 36)

Especially remarkable in this sense is his examination of how most of the data that is fed into the intolerably polluting and privatized AI infrastructure is "amputated" (p. 13) from context or embodied experience and ultimately processed through crowdsourcing:

Signing up to AI as we know it means deepening a commitment to labour practices that most of us aren't even aware of, that are gendered and racialized, and that come without any collective negotiation of fair conditions or remuneration. (p. 24)

However enviable I find this incisive intersectional approach, it raises some questions. First, regarding training data, I cannot subscribe to McQuillan's dismissal of the potential of the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) for curtailing the patterns of carelessness and extractiveness he denounces, as well as their subsequent implications for "climate precarity" (p. 52). As I write this, for instance, Meta has not launched its new platform Threads in the EU yet, due largely to fear of the litigation undertaken by the organization None of Your Business (noyb, 2023) in the wake of the Snowden disclosures to maximize the impact of the GDPR (not to mention the EU's Digital Markets Act, enforceable from 2024). I could not agree more with McQuillan's acknowledgment that what AI often exposes is "the comprehensive failure of the law to address real injustice" (p. 39), but for me, the activism of noyb fits in well with the author's urge to turn the ethics of care and relatedness distinctive of "Post-Machinic Learning" (chapter 5) into tactics (in this case, into *collective tactical litigation*).

Second, although McQuillan explicitly eludes the "philosophical questions about the meaning of intelligence and whether it can be artificial" (p. 2), his unmasking of how AI taps into invisible crowdsourcing calls into question not just the abovementioned shelf marked "intelligent" but also the one labeled "artificial." Indeed, this ghost work has been a constant in the history of computation ever since Leibniz's and later Babbage's quest for *the automation of reasoning* through their respective calculating engines (Mattelart, 2003, pp. 5-47), and more generally in the early industrialization, where "*the human body and not the steam engine, and not even the clock, was the first machine developed by capitalism,*" according to Silvia Federici (2004, p. 176; emphasis in original).

All of this makes me wonder whether we should ultimately challenge (may I say abandon?) the use of the term “artificial intelligence” as fundamentally misleading. Most likely, a call to action against this or that brute-force computational model, or against philosophical frameworks such as Foucault’s (2008) “governmentality” or Deleuze’s (1995) “societies of control” (pp. 177–182) would not be so compelling. At the very least, I suggest we could shift our resistance toward the “artificial intelligentsia,” (i.e., the technological elite that weaponizes computing with the purpose of “rationalizing, supporting, and sustaining the most conservative, indeed, reactionary, ideological components of the current *Zeitgeist*” [Weizenbaum, 1976, p. 250]).

Having said that, I must highlight the ambition and coherence with which McQuillan masterfully disassembles AI as an epistemological, social, and political paradigm, extending well beyond its more technical operations. Even if it is possible to find most of the criticisms included in the first part of the book scattered through various scholarly publications and/or hacktivist projects, I venture to regard this book as almost encyclopedic by its erudite and all-encompassing summary of them.

On the one hand, AI is depicted as a scientific pattern-finding technology whose opacity and indifference to causality reinforces social inequality and discrimination to the point of enabling algorithmic apartheid: “Rather than misunderstanding AI as . . . a distorted or cracked mirror, we can reformulate it as a mode of diffracting reality, as a way of producing differences that become sedimented as fixed realities” (p. 111).

On the other hand, a series of contradictions help characterize the threat that the current overlapping crises induce opportunistic fascist responses fueled by an algorithmic shock doctrine: automation of rationing (and not of reasoning) to manage (artificial) scarcity; futuristic platform work to push back labor conditions by a century; actuarial systems to manage (and not to eliminate) social risk in order to create “a fluctuating market in citizen futures” (p. 56); predictive algorithms to enable organized neglect toward minorities during the pandemic instead of anticipating it; (green) AI to optimize fossil fuel extraction; or algorithmic states of exception to substitute computational processes for due process.

All of these arguments should suffice to persuade the readers that to me this is a truly unique and timely contribution to major contemporary debates across many critical fields. But the best is yet to come: the three final chapters deploy a profusion of virtuous intellectual challenges and carefully elaborated proposals to demonstrate that *Resisting AI* involves an alternative arrangement of technology, institutions, and ideology: an ethics of care and relatedness (rooted in feminist standpoint theory, new materialism, and situated knowledge); a tactic of mutual aid and solidarity (as practiced by workers’ and people’s councils); and an anti-fascist AI (which is also anti-enclosure) whose institutional renewal is inspired both by the classic reflections of Langdon Winner and by the latest democratic experiments of commoning.

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