

Jathan Sadowski, **The Mechanic and the Luddite: A Ruthless Criticism of Technology and Capitalism**, Oakland: University of California Press, 2025, 296 pp., \$24.95 (paperback), \$95.00 (hardcover).

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A few decades ago, in the early days of critical digital and Internet studies, many a political economic analysis of the promises and perils of computer technologies expressed great hopes that these new technologies could bring about a better world by democratizing access and distributing wealth (Benkler, 2006; Castells, 2001; Shirky, 2009). It was an exciting and optimistic time that now feels far behind us. The networked, digital technologies that emerged and grew throughout the 21st century have not distributed power, but radically centralized it. Grappling with this requires abandoning that old technological optimism and instead undertaking a clear-sighted examination of the systems we have, the harms they do, and the fundamentally unjust groundwork upon which they are built.

In ***The Mechanic and the Luddite: A Ruthless Criticism of Technology and Capitalism***, Jathan Sadowski provides a materialist analysis of the political economies of new digital technologies to reveal how their harms do not stem simply from their design or implementation, but from the very principles at the heart of those systems. He captures the more prescient critiques of past techno-optimists and hones them into a sharp knife with which he peels away the layers of hype, distraction, and technical obfuscation that tech oligarchs use to amass their wealth and entrench their power.

Throughout, Sadowski insists on how these mechanisms may look shiny and new but really are just modern iterations of textbook capitalism. He moves the reader past the popular anxieties about how technology is ushering in a new, more sinister, post-capitalist age. Instead, he demonstrates how we do not need to imagine that we face novel forms of inequity and struggle when we already know these forms well. What is new are the tools by which that struggle is imposed on and resisted by the people. This book is a densely researched “capsule primer,” with each chapter focusing on a different theme in modern digital systems. While the book works as a cohesive whole, each chapter also functions as a stand-alone.

Sadowski insists that a critique of capitalism must be a fundamental aspect of how we critique technology; we cannot truly understand technology without understanding the capitalist systems, logics, and concepts within which that technology is funded, built, and applied. To this end, he offers a succinct but precise explanation of Marxist analysis as it applies to critical technology studies. This overview, presented in chapter 2, is thorough enough to position the book within the field of Marxist thought for those in the know, but also selective and descriptive enough to make basic Marxist analysis accessible



for those who are not.

In chapter 3, Sadowski demystifies the seemingly unimpeachable concept of “innovation” by showing how it is not a timeless and unchanging force but rather a profoundly historical, political, and cultural force, driven today by an oligarchic and self-serving venture capital class. Venture capitalism further concentrates wealth by providing already wealthy investors with tax-dodging instruments that present themselves as the best and only means for technological progress while actually being completely unaccountable for their nearly absolute failure to deliver on that promise.

Chapter 4 focuses on data, which Sadowski argues is not simply a source of capital but also a form of it. This is evident in the ways that data have become “essential to the production, extraction, and circulation of value by digital systems” (p. 81), to the point where it is no longer a means to an end, but an end in itself. Companies pursue data even when they admit they have no current or anticipated use for that data—the point is not to use data but to maintain the never-ending process of data creation. These powerful data-gatherers are also fanatically opaque about their data-gathering mechanisms, so when problems with these systems inevitably arise, we are not able to understand or respond to them. Despite how valuable data creation is said to be, data *itself* has been cheapened. Sadowski notes how the people who create models are the ones who enjoy prestige, while the people who clean and prepare the data for the creation of these models remain largely unrecognized.

Chapter 5, on labor, challenges popular framings of emerging automated technologies, particularly those driven by artificial intelligence. Although they appear to be “perpetual value machines” (p. 122), Sadowski demonstrates how nearly all the promises of automated systems are premised on the existence and exploitation of human labor behind the scenes. Technocapitalists push the rapid adoption of these (largely untested) systems not only to create value for their rarified class but moreover to reinforce systems that keep them at the top. The Marxist analysis of the book is most evident in this chapter, serving not only as a trenchant critique of AI but also as a handy crash course in Marxist thought.

The title of chapter 6 is “Landlords,” but it is really interested in how rent and rentiers are appearing across the technological landscape as technocapitalists seek to capture more and different parts of our lives. Sadowski argues that Silicon Valley companies are not the leaders in value *creation* they claim to be but are structured to generate profit through value *capture*. They do this by utilizing a number of modern legal and financial contrivances, including “x-as-a-service” models, onerous terms of service agreements, and new forms of digital enclosure. However, this has not created a brand-new rentier class but rather emboldened the existing landlords and rentiers that have always been central to the functions of capitalism.

Chapter 7 follows this analysis by examining finance and insurance, particularly as emerging technologies have transformed their approaches to risk. Sadowski notes the decades-long shift from public conceptions of risk to the privatization of risk—recasting risk from a collective consideration to an individual issue—through seemingly desirable methods like optimization. In reality, these methods trap the disadvantaged in systems that reinforce their disadvantages. This is increasingly concerning as risk models are developed by machine learning systems that simplify reality into probabilities and weights but do not make those decisions available for scrutiny. In this way, technology has objectivity-

washed risk assessments, making them seem like neutral arbiters of the future when they are really biased and incomplete.

Sadowski ends the book on chapter 8 with a foray into futures and futurisms, both those that technological capitalism uses to perpetuate its systems as well as those proffered by activists seeking to dismantle them to build anew. Over the last several decades, multinational enterprises have wielded visions of the future to shape the world to their current and future benefit. Through this, futures became another commodity to sell, a way of “render[ing] the future as a colonial frontier” (p. 199), and allowing only those utopian imaginaries that still rely on technocapitalism as their engine of progress. Sadowski advocates instead for the radical possibilities of already nascent utopias by rejecting the technocapitalists’ claims that equitable utopias are impractical and instead embracing our ability to choose which future we will inhabit.

Given the book’s subtitle—“A Ruthless Criticism of Technology and Capitalism”—it is unsurprising that it has a strong normative stance. Sadowski is no shrinking violet, and so much the better. He writes with casual, if cutting, ease as he diagnoses the societal ills that modern technologies reflect and reinforce. For some readers, this informality could occasionally chafe, especially in places where the snarky asides feel more like Sadowski letting off steam than furthering his analysis. Sadowski also writes in broad generalizations, recognizing that many digital technologies stretch across national borders but rarely taking the time to acknowledge how those technologies manifest locally. Moreover, given his thoughtful references to other researchers and fields throughout the book, it is occasionally disappointing for him to hew so closely to analytical Marxist theory without reflecting on its weaknesses. While he seems to acknowledge that the political economies he traces are largely built and sustained by white men, he underutilizes the ample literature from feminist science and technologies studies (STS), decolonial STS, or disability studies that could have helped reveal the sexism, racism, imperialism, and ableism that prop up those systems. And though the ebullient optimism of the final chapter is a welcome way to end an otherwise grim book, this book is intended to be readable as a set of stand-alone chapters—having all the hope concentrated in one chapter leaves readers of the others with little to feel optimistic about.

All said, this book is an excellent resource for readers looking to critically examine the technocapitalist systems around us, with their feet firmly planted in the material world that those systems impact. Individual chapters will also be productive teaching tools for instructors exploring any of the book’s topics with students seeking to understand what Marxist analysis could look like in a technologically complex world.

### References

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