Prefabricated futures
AI imaginaries between elitist visions and social justice claims

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Abstract: This paper delves into the complex interplay between contemporary artificial intelligence (AI) ideologies and politics, focusing on how discourses on AI impede the prospects for social-ecological transformation. The analysis scrutinises the fabrication of the 'future' as a locus of power by influential industry actors and delineates how AI's prominent visions of the future function as a tool to reinforce the prevailing economic order while simultaneously curbing the potential for transformative struggles. To do so, I critically analyse the content and ideological backdrop of the proposed visions, as well as the discursive strategies applied. As I demonstrate, these visions not only engender exclusionary and unsustainable 'elitist futures', marked by the consolidation of power and the perpetuation of inequalities but also extend a colonial lineage of extractivist expansion, framing the future as the final frontier to be conquered. Furthermore, I argue that discursive tactics of determinism and distraction hinder both criticism and the exploration of alternatives. Observing how the visions propagated by big tech are gaining institutional traction illustrates how they are solidifying into collective socio-technical imaginaries. Hence, demystifying the industry's mechanisms of future fabrication emerges as a primary counter-strategy essential for steering toward convivial and sustainable futures.

Keywords: AI ideologies, AI imaginaries, future imaginaries, digital capitalism, digital colonialism, socio-ecological transformation

1. Introduction

Imaginaries of the future hold immense significance within emancipatory endeavours. Particularly within progressive social movements, they serve as focal points of collective aspirations and speculative discourse, often constituting the very object of struggle itself (Hawlina et al., 2020; Jovchelovitch & Hawlina, 2018; Schulz, 2016). Throughout history, the aspiration for a

better life has served as a **potent motivational force for liberatory struggles**. In contemporary social movements, the utilisation of future-oriented rhetoric is most prominently exemplified by the global climate initiative *Fridays for Future*. Their rallying cry, 'Another world is possible', encapsulates the joint mobilising power that a vision of a more just and sustainable tomorrow can unfold.

However, what happens when the future itself has become territorialised and claimed by the powerful? When our collective imagination is deeply entrenched with the imaginaries, narratives, and aesthetics propagated by influential industry actors? Where teleological determinism and a rigid adherence to notions of innovation and progress stifle alternative visions and transformative possibilities? In such a scenario, the very notion of the **future is co-opted by dominant interests**, undermining the potential for meaningful societal change.

Among those wishing to claim stakes in the years and decades yet to come, the digital tech sector plays a prominent role, offering narratives ranging from productive optimism, steady progress, and technological saviourism all the way to dystopian take-over scenarios from artificial general intelligence (AGI). Regardless of the proposed scenario's valence, the tech sector itself will always play a leading role, rendering it seemingly impossible to conceive of a future that does not involve AI or other advanced digital technologies.

This paper delves into the complex interplay between contemporary AI ideologies and politics, with a focus on how prospects for social-ecological transformation are impeded. At its core, the analysis scrutinises the prefabrication of the **'future' as a locus of power** by influential industry actors and delineates how AI's prominent imaginaries of the future function as a tool to reinforce the prevailing economic order while simultaneously curbing the potential for transformative struggles. To do so, I build on the notion of socio-technical imaginary as developed by Sheila Jasanoff (2015) and the concept of 'AI futurism' by Paul Schütze (2024), as well as contributions from decolonial studies. This research is premised on the hypothesis that being able to curate and disseminate a potent future vision, one that can become hegemonic, allows actors to **maintain or promote a particular system or favourable conditions** within it. Accordingly, imaginaries of the future that are convincingly conveyed to social groups allow actors to interpret the future's uncertainty in ways that serve their particular interests. The arising conflict is that these mechanisms of fabricating futures are not only undemocratic in their genesis but also lead to **exclusionary and**

unsustainable orders once manifested. Thus, in its broader goal, this work contributes to debates regarding strategies that aim at keeping imaginative pathways open toward convivial and truly sustainable futures. Yet, before such an imaginative reconfiguration can happen, I contend, it is imperative to dissect the current mechanisms through which influential actors fabricate future imaginaries.

This paper proceeds in the following steps. First, it provides historical context by examining the practice of constructing future imaginaries and its connection to the current influence of the AI industry. Second, it conducts a critical analysis of the future visions advanced by the AI industry, scrutinising the underlying assumptions and implications that contribute to the creation of exclusionary and unsustainable 'elitist futures'. Subsequently, it explores the mechanisms through which these future visions are propagated, arguing that this process is facilitated by a deterministic view of progress and a strategy of distraction through exaggerated scenarios. It then delves into the underlying imperatives that drive future fabrication: With accumulation and growth imperatives urging the annexation of ever-new territories, the 'future' is positioned as yet another frontier to be conquered, thereby extending the colonial lineage. Finally, alternative future visions proposed by decolonial and Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) movements are briefly introduced.

2. Context

This work investigates visions and elaborations of the future within the framework of ***socio-technical imaginaries***, as outlined by Sheila Jasanoff (2015). She conceives of these as 'collectively held, institutionally stabilised, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures', influenced by common beliefs about social life and order and supported by technological advancements (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 6). This perspective underscores the co-production of imaginaries along societal, institutional, and discursive axes and emphasises their political consequences. Recent work by Paul Schütze (2024) has elaborated on socio-technical imaginaries of AI through his concept of **'AI futurism',** which encapsulates 'the socio-cultural sentiment that AI systems will inexorably shape and transform the societies of the future' (p. 1). While Schütze focuses on the impacts of AI futurism on the climate crisis, this paper utilises the concept to explore how the discursive

strategies employed by the AI industry limit the imagination of alternative futures.

Within this paper, the AI industry is understood as a conglomerate of companies and capital that jointly create digital technologies such as AI or big data systems. As critical scholars have noted, the term 'AI' itself does not encompass an exact technical definition, instead remaining malleable and plastic over time (Crawford, 2021). Accordingly, I follow an understanding of AI as a socio-technical 'megamachine' of 'large-scale computation' (Crawford, 2021), emphasising the deep entanglement of technology and its societal contexts, such as economic structures, values, discourses, and ways of relating. Within the context of this paper, the term AI is primarily used as a discursive marker.

Previous work on socio-technical futures has elaborated how *visions* – besides guiding actions, enabling communications, and identifying potentials for change – also allow actors to unfold a normative force, thereby 'stabilis[ing] and legitim[ising] existing power constellations' (Lösch et al., 2019, p. 76). The importance of power differentials and vested interests in these 'socio-epistemic practices' (Lösch et al., 2019, p. 72) has been further emphasised by Braun and Kropp (2023). They elaborate on how visions can evolve into socio-technical imaginaries through being 'institutionally anchored and shared by a variety of relevant social actors' like governments, businesses and other organisations (2023, p. 3). Publicly disseminated documents, such as policy reports and position papers, play a pivotal role in this transformation, serving as benchmarks by guiding opinions and decisions on technology-related policies. Lastly, *narratives* have been conceptualised as constituting the bridge 'between imaginaries and the present course of action' (Bazzani, 2023, p. 388), thereby combining imaginaries with hypothetical courses of action.

Tracing the fabrication of futures

To approach the investigation of fabricated futures, it is helpful to consider an example of how visions of the future have historically been utilised by industry actors to secure their interests. In her book *Overheated,* Kate Aronoff (2021, pp. 130-135) traces how the energy industry adeptly learnt to craft a narrative of inevitability. Since the late 1960s, Shell has grappled with mounting pressure from the Global South and alarming reports like the 1972 *Limits to Growth*, which underscored the unsustainability of fossil

fuels. Seeking to confront this looming uncertainty, Shell embarked on scenario planning to envision future trajectories that would safeguard its interests. The strategies they adopted have evolved over time, from funding climate change denial (e.g., Grasso, 2019) and 'greenwashing' the company with an environmentally conscious image (e.g., Li et al., 2022) to promoting the narrative that extraction and consumer demand are unavoidable (cf. Supran & Oreskes, 2021). The motif of inevitability has remained, rooted in Shell's fundamental mission to ensure its own perpetuity and profitability, along with its resulting inability to envision a future without its presence. Companies like Shell have learnt to '[sell] the public their own strain of determinism' (Odell, 2023, p. 189), thereby **shaping public imaginaries of the future to align with their own interests**.

This vignette is more than a loose analogy; it attests to a shift in power dynamics in the recent past. In terms of profits and influence, AI companies are increasingly assuming the powerful positions previously held by the fossil industry over the course of the last century. This development has also gained attention under the business narrative of 'data being the new oil' and has been addressed by various governmental reports and scholars (Ben-Shahar, 2019; Szczepański, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2011).[1] This shift in influence becomes particularly palpable in shaping public opinion and policymaking. In the United States, for instance, tech giants have recently outrun the fossil industry in **lobbying spending**, setting new records in 2023 (Birnbaum, 2023). Similarly, in the EU, they have been fiercely advocating against the regulation of advanced AI systems and successfully influenced the content of the EU AI Act (Vranken, 2023). This growing institutional manifestation of AI industry agendas is explored further in Section 4. As the AI industry's visions gain public influence, it becomes paramount to scrutinise their impact on co-opting collective imaginaries of futures to align with corporate interests.

3. Elitist futures

Having established the role of future imaginaries as tools for consolidating power and the rising influence of the AI industry, in the following, I turn

1 Critical scholars have emphasised that digital capitalism extends rather than replaces fossil capitalism, stressing that, in fact, both industries productively cooperate and co-depend (Brevini, 2022; Taffel, 2023; see also Greenpeace, 2020).

toward a critical examination of future visions the AI industry propagates, particularly their underlying assumptions and implications.[2] As I argue, these visions are embedded into an **ideological tradition of social exclusion** that disregards vast shares of the planetary existence.

To begin, it is necessary to understand how a certain 'techno-utopian' vision of the future lies at the heart of the tech milieus in which AI is predominantly developed and funded (Torres, 2023) and is deeply entangled with the mindset and bundle of ideologies permeating these spheres. For instance, the tech elite's narrow and self-interested understanding of the future has previously been analysed quantitatively, revealing a dominant framing in 'meritocratic, self-affirming, or even self-serving terms' and discussing topics that centre around tech companies and entrepreneurs (Brockmann et al., 2021, p. 21).

The tech elite, most prominently exemplified by Silicon Valley, is becoming increasingly represented by and interwoven with the AI industry. In an investigation of the ideological underpinnings prevalent within these realms, Gebru and Torres (2024) coined the acronym **TESCREAL.**[3] This conceptual framework amalgamates a bundle of ideologies, tracing their shared origin from transhumanism toward the more recent incarnations of singularitarianism, effective altruism, and longtermism. Gebru and Torres offer a critical assessment of how these ideologies engender exclusionary worldviews, perpetuating systemic issues such as racism and even legitimising eugenic practices. While certainly the entirety of the AI industry does not hold these beliefs, they argue that these views are nonetheless emblematic of big tech circles (see also Daub, 2021). Notably, TESCREAL ideologies not only coincide with prominent AI industry representatives' beliefs but are posited as the driving impetus for companies like OpenAI and DeepMind to devise AGI in the first place (Torres, 2023). Aspects of these ideologies have further been criticised from various angles, such as their totalitarian character (von Redecker, 2023, p. 61). While a thorough elaboration of these critiques would go beyond the scope of this paper, it is necessary to understand the outlook into the future these ideologies compel.

2 An exhaustive analysis of AI's future visions, their common motifs and aesthetics, and how they manage to appeal to different groups, is highly promising but goes beyond the scope of this work.

3 Acronym for transhumanism, extropianism, singularitarianism, cosmism, rationalism, effective altruism, and longtermism.

Importantly, the futuristic discourse emanating from these spheres does not reflect a universal outlook that respects the plurality of human (and more-than-human) lived realities. Instead, concerns that imperil the sustenance, conviviality, and survival of the majority of humankind, such as the climate crisis, biodiversity loss, and escalating inequality, become peripherical or even disparaged (Torres, 2023). While there is little evidence to suggest that proponents of these ideologies are adequately engaging with these pressing real-world threats,[4] their immense wealth furthermore serves to insulate them from effectively experiencing any existential threats to their own bodies and livelihoods. This phenomenon has been debated as constituting an epistemic deficit in gaining access to shared worlds (von Maur & Slaby, 2024). This is further evidenced by the fact that 'prepping' for a civilisational collapse with supplies such as gold or even extreme-weather-resistant high-tech bunkers is a common practice in Silicon Valley and wider tech elite circles (Friend, 2016; O'Connell, 2018; Osnos, 2017; Rushkoff, 2022).

TESCREAL ideologies serve as the moral backdrop to legitimise such elitist positions. Most noteworthy, longtermism develops a moral theory through which harms experienced in the present or near future are relativised by the potential existence of hypothetical conscious beings in the far future, which scale beyond comparison to today's population (Bostrom, 2017). Transhumanism perpetuates a narrative of human development with racist undertones of 'liberal eugenics' (Agar, 1998), thereby rendering parts of the human population disposable. Additionally, cosmism contends that humanity's destiny is to be an interplanetary species (Goertzel, 2010), thus diminishing the urgency to maintain Earth's climate in liveable conditions. Consequently, the ideological tradition permeating big tech and AI circles is not in alignment with an inclusive, convivial, and sustainable existence. Instead, it propagates what can be termed **'elitist futures', catering primarily to a small cohort of the super-rich** and influential, predominantly consisting of white males.

4 For instance, in tweet posted in 2022, Elon Musk, a prominent figure in this realm, postulates that declining birthrates are 'a much bigger risk to civilization than global warming' (Musk, 2022).

4. Mechanisms of fabricating the future

In the following section, I explore the mechanisms through which these future imaginaries are propagated. I focus on two discursive strategies: a deterministic view of progress and a mechanism of distraction through exaggerated scenarios.

a) Narrowing future corridors through a deterministic view of progress

Contemporary futuristic AI debates are commonly framed against a backdrop of technological and historical determinism. In his investigation of AI futurism, Schütze (2024) contextualises the importance of notions such as tech-solutionism and tech-futurism in these discourses, which view technology, epitomised in recent years by AI, as the primary catalyst for societal progress.

However, I would like to take a step back and scrutinise the motif of determinism more broadly within the construction of inevitability and the future outlook it compels. This perspective hinges on a specific conception of temporality that portrays **history as a linear progression** while simultaneously narrowing the space in which conceivable trajectories for the future can unfold. Such a determinism views history as 'a unidirectional and inevitable march of progress that can never be questioned or redirected' (Odell, 2023, p. 184).[5] This belief in human history as primarily one of progress has been expressed by a number of leading figures in the AI industry, including former OpenAI manager Zack Kass (Fulterer, 2023). Further, Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI, has conjectured that AGI does not redirect how the future unfolds but simply accelerates it along a supposedly predetermined path (Altman, 2023). Similarly, economist Robin Hanson contemplated how long a small group of post-apocalyptic survivors would take to 'return to our current level of development' (Hanson, 2008, p. 12).[6] In Hanson's narrative, history is read as a sequence of different phases of growth, with each phase accelerating the productivity of the previous through new kinds of 'capital'. While extreme circumstances like earthquakes and wars might 'set back' this progression, the implied hierarchy of societal stages already indicates the trajectory of development after

5 See also Hartley, 2016.

6 For a more extensive critique, see Mitchell & Chaudhury (2020).

a potential collapse: back to a US-/Euro-centric imaginary of 'Western civilisation' as the universalised pinnacle of human organisation. Such a view disregards a substantial part of humankind globally, as well as any previous societies, and degrades contemporary indigenous peoples with hunter-gatherer economies.

Furthermore, viewing history as continual linear progress, smoothing out struggles and contestation, results in a form of futuristic thinking where any **resistance appears futile** against the mechanical model of deterministic progress.[7] As Antti Tarvainen (2022, p. 1) underscores with reference to Walter Benjamin (1990), such visions of progress are 'founded upon a culture of amnesia that serves those in power', in which 'pasts of the oppressed become repressed and appropriated while the pasts of the rulers become fetishised into "universal" destinies'. Benjamin's (1990) analysis reveals how the ruling classes utilise the allure of industry and technology to perpetuate their hegemony, projecting a mythic future of peace and abundance. In this teleological reading of progress, the future becomes the primary casualty, subjugated to the dictates of an automatised and deterministic narrative.

This mythic future of peace and abundance finds embodiment in the concept of singularity. For the AI industry, it serves as the endpoint toward which the deterministic trajectory of progress converges. Yet, within this narrative, moments of disruption do emerge: For instance, Kurzweil prophesied that 'within a few decades, machine intelligence will surpass human intelligence, leading to The Singularity — technological change so rapid and profound it represents a *rupture in the fabric of human history*' (Teuscher, 2004, p. xx, emphasis added). Although disruption appears as a potent counterforce to determinism, the notion of the 'fabric of human history' nonetheless implies a universal and continuous trajectory whose redirection requires a force so powerful and rare that it is envisioned as *singular*. This stands in stark contrast to recognising history as a **non-linear, pluralistic, and dynamic** interplay of struggle, adaptation to crises, and regeneration, as BIPOC temporalities suggest (cf. Mitchell & Chaudhury, 2020).

7 Aptly summarised by this prediction attributed to Kurzweil: 'Though the Luddites might, at best, succeed in delaying the Singularity, the march of technology is irresistible and they will inevitably fail in keeping the world frozen at a fixed level of development' (Sephiroth, 2016).

b) Distraction through exaggerated scenarios

AI imaginaries of the future come in various shapes, yet they are found largely on an axis between saviourism and doomerism, with each of these extremes encompassing a cluster of proponents. The fields of AI-solutionism and **saviourism** feature shiny promises about how AI's vast possibilities will usher in a golden age, for instance, by **curing diseases, guaranteeing economic prosperity, and solving climate change** (Fulterer, 2023). Such futuristic speculations serve to keep radical demands and subversive potentials at a far enough distance. In this promised land of a singularity-like future, the full imaginative potential, which is currently kept at bay, is eventually unleashed. According to AI executives, we will have jobs we cannot yet imagine, may no longer need to work at all, and could even discard capitalism entirely (Fulterer, 2023). Conveniently, in the powerful narrative of AI futurism, boundless opportunities are realised *through* – and not *against* – the interests of the industry: There is no need to strive for collective liberation and wealth redistribution in the present, as the elimination of all scarcity is already nearing. Thus, these speculative, transformative pursuits are already territorialised within the greater AI futurist imaginary.

While certain applications of AI, such as its use in healthcare, may indeed hold some potential, critics caution that these grandiose claims not only tend to be dangerous exaggerations but also serve as part of a **larger distraction scheme**. For example, Naomi Klein (2023) contends that such promises serve as 'powerful and enticing cover stories' for what she perceives as potentially the 'largest and most consequential theft in human history'. In her critique, she refers to how big tech entities are seizing control of the entirety of human knowledge available in digital, scrapable form and enclosing it within proprietary products.

This strategy further diverts attention from AI's currently existing detrimental environmental toll and reliance on **inhumane labour conditions** (Schütze, 2024). AI's functionality and performance heavily rely on human workers to provide annotated training data, fine-tune models, and moderate results. A vast share of this labour is outsourced to the Global South and is facilitated by underpaid workers in precarious conditions (Miceli & Posada, 2022; see also van Doorn, 2017). These realities, also debated under the term 'Ghost work' (Gray & Suri, 2019), starkly contrast with the industry's vision of a labour-free future. Upon closer inspection of the industry's own forecasts, further discrepancies become apparent. For instance, recent research from Google projects a substantial increase in

third-party annotation workers, reaching into the billions (Wang et al., 2022). Consequently, given the dependencies of AI systems on human feedback, the envisioned AI future without labour does not seem like a universal reality but rather appears attainable solely by a privileged minority. Likewise, the lofty promise that AI will solve climate change has been under heavy scrutiny by scholars studying the intense planetary impact of these systems, which intensify extractive mining practices, water scarcity, and carbon emissions (e.g., Brevini, 2022; Crawford, 2021).

On the other side of the spectrum, AI doomers paint a daunting image of the future. Yet, rather than addressing the grim questions of environmental and social justice, they caution against the **existential risks emanating from an unbound AGI** that sees humans as mere ends to its means (e.g., Yudkowsky & Bostrom, 2018). Understanding their broader approach within the framework of 'criti-hype', a term coined by Lee Vinsel (2021), is insightful. Essentially, such critiques mirror the exaggerated hype surrounding the topic through excessively dramatized scenarios or doomsday predictions, thereby inverting the enthusiasts' messages while maintaining the narrative of grand transformation. As a result, such narratives act as a smokescreen, diverting public attention and research resources away from AI's contested political grounds toward hypothetical realms such as AGI alignment (Bordelon, 2023; Clarke, 2023).

In conclusion, both saviourism and doomerism surrounding AI can be understood as discursive strategies that serve as flashy distractions, ultimately hindering the articulation of alternative futures. The allure of saviourism often manifests through the depiction of shiny yet unrealistic and exclusionary futures. These captivating promises overshadow the critiques of present-day harms, with proponents suggesting that these issues will be resolved once the systems have matured sufficiently. Conversely, doomerism amplifies concerns about the existential risks posed by AI, **diverting attention from more nuanced critiques**. In both cases, the focus on polarising scenarios obstructs urgent discussions about the ethical, social, and environmental implications of AI development and deployment and has been strategically wielded to fend off regulation (Marx, 2024). The two strategies I have investigated, a deterministic view of progress and the propagation of exaggerated scenarios, go hand in hand. Whereas the former strategy envisions the certainty of a given path, the latter builds onto it and fills the vision with content.

Gaining institutional traction

The agendas described above have recently gained increasing institutional traction. Embedded within a growing network of philanthropic organisations and think tanks, AI futurists administer considerable financial resources, amounting to billions of dollars in scale. Their lobbying efforts have wielded significant influence in **aligning national AI policies** in Britain (Clarke, 2023) and the US (Bordelon, 2023) with doomerist concerns of 'existential risk', as well as impeding regulations in the EU (Vranken, 2023). Tech companies have also enjoyed growing leverage in academia. For instance, the administration of research funds and dual affiliation positions **steers AI research in favourable directions** while keeping critical contributions at bay (Whittaker, 2021). By framing AGI as 'a natural progression in the field of AI', researchers and practitioners are mobilised into the field, employing the resulting 'veneer of scientific authority' to further legitimise their agenda (Gebru & Torres, 2024, p. 21). Analysing EU strategy papers on AI, Brevini (2021) found that the industry-aligned myths of inevitability, as well as the image of AI as a solution to humanity's greatest challenges, are already represented in policymaking discourses and are being further reproduced there. Expanding upon Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, Brevini explains how these industry-serving positions contribute to the consolidation of hegemonic structures, thereby rendering the 'conception of alternatives virtually impossible' (2021, p. 145). What Gramsci (1999, p. 630) termed 'folklore of the future', denoting a relatively rigid phase of narratives widely accepted as facts, underscores the profound impact of potent myths on the imagination of alternative futures. Observing how the AI industry's visions are becoming institutionally anchored in both policymaking and research marks their transformation from a discrete vision to a wider-ranging socio-technical imaginary (cf. Braun & Kropp, 2023). The successful construction of a hegemonic discourse thus enables the industry to exert a profound influence on shaping a widely accepted understanding of futures that safeguard its interests while diminishing environmental and social justice claims.

5. The future as the final frontier: extending a colonial continuity

Which underlying forces drive the AI industry's claims to the future? Crucially, the imperative of growth stands as a fundamental pillar of con-

temporary AI capitalism, mirroring broader trends within the capitalist system at large (Verdegem, 2022, p. 1). Sustaining this growth necessitates the continuous expansion into new domains to perpetuate itself, resulting in a relentless **pursuit of accumulation**. This drive for accumulation is also reflected in transhumanist endeavours. For instance, pursuits such as body modification through implants or the quest of mind uploading can be interpreted as efforts to surpass mortality as the ultimate barrier to accumulation (cf. Heffernan, 2020). Overcoming mortality, as Eva von Redecker (2021, p. 899) argues, drawing upon Arendt, becomes imperative in the pursuit of perpetual accumulation.[8]

The logic of accumulation is further interconnected with **colonial rationality** (von Redecker, 2021, p. 900). This connection has garnered recent attention under the terms of *data colonialism* (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Thatcher et al., 2016) and *digital colonialism* (Coleman, 2019; Kwet, 2018).[9] While both concepts are inherently interwoven, *data* colonialism specifically highlights the framing of data, particularly personal data, as a fresh and exploitable resource. At the heart of this mechanism lies the process of 'capitalist accumulation by dispossession', as posited by Thatcher et al. (2016), wherein big data serves as a potent tool for perpetuating 'continual growth' within the capitalist machinery (p. 3). A central aspect of their critique is the increasing commodification and privatisation of various aspects of life, which has given rise to a new wave of frontierism. With ever more frontiers to be expanded and conquered, this relentless pursuit also does not recoil from temporal limitations. As one AI enthusiast put it, 'Replace the roar of rockets with the crunch of data, […] "boldly going" not to space but to a new final frontier: predicting the future' (Siegel, 2015, p. 23). Consequently, in adherence to the logics of continual expansion and accumulation, it becomes apparent that even the **future itself is subject to siege**.

Once-unattainable realms, whether distant planets like Mars or the nebulous terrain of the future, are now coveted as **territories ripe for appropriation**. As von Redecker (2023) argues, they become subject to colonisation and exploitation in pursuit of capitalist expansion, thereby being reduced

8 Arendt theorises a different way of transcending the individual's mortality in order to enable ceaseless accumulation. Looking at Hobbes' *Leviathan*, she argues that the establishment of the state serves this particular function in the emerging proto-capitalist order (von Redecker, 2021, p. 899). However, as AI futurists notoriously reject the state, it can be argued that technology assumes this role in its stead.

9 Digital colonialism emphasises Western powers' maintenance of dominance through digital technologies, such as communication networks.

to 'empty dead proto-property' (p. 64). With futures being framed as final frontiers, it is crucial to examine which subjects are envisioned to be on either side of the frontier. This entails understanding how certain bodies, characterised as 'white' and 'male', are commonly associated with attributes like reason, creativity, and 'future-making capacity', while others are depicted as the antithesis of these qualities (Tarvainen, 2022, p. 9). For example, Nick Bostrom's idealised future of 'post-humanity' (2002) aligns with mainstream norms of white masculinity: 'deeply disembodied, unattached to place, and dominant over, or independent from, "nature"' (Mitchell & Chaudhury, 2020, p. 316). Additionally, it is important to note that the underlying colonising logic stretches beyond the symbolic and discursive and rests upon an ongoing material and violent practice of **dispossession and exploitation** (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2017; Tarvainen, 2022, p. 3). This includes the continuous production of a precarious labour force, as discussed in the previous section, to uphold AI's façade of excellence. The future, as it is being propagated by the AI industry, thus reveals itself as the relentless **extension of an exclusionary and violent past and present**.

6. Building counterimaginaries

A key criticism in this paper focuses on the exclusivity of individuals or small groups shaping futures rather than embracing co-design through collective, pluralistic processes. Accordingly, this paper does not aim to propose an improved alternative vision for the future. However, in exploring alternative technological visions of the future and their contrast with elitist perspectives, **BIPOC futurism and decolonial approaches** emerge as noteworthy examples. It is necessary to note that the limited scope of this paper does not fully capture the depth of their visions, claims, and complexities.

BIPOC and decolonial futures explicitly diverge from elitist futures by prioritising human and land rights while vehemently opposing extractivism and historically grown domination (Ricaurte, 2019). With the ontological separation and hierarchisation of culture and nature being fundamentally called into question, the AI futurist aspiration to **wield technology for dominion** over nature becomes crucially challenged. Conversely, decolonial movements endorse technologies that cater to community needs and adapt to **local contexts** (Lehuedé, 2024) in contrast to pre-set solutions aimed at

universal scalability, a position that is also echoed by degrowth movements (Vetter, 2023).

The motif of **technological sovereignty** is also central in defying AI elitist futures, envisioning a world order without single hegemonic powers dictating technology, infrastructure, and data governance (Lehuedé, 2024, p. 10). Rather than endorsing singular and homogenous scenarios, BIPOC and decolonial approaches embrace the possibility of multiple futures. Founded on notions such as co-dependence, conviviality (Illich, 1973), and pluriversality (Escobar, 2018), they emphasise the importance of 'diverse, plural subjectivities and forms of agency' rather than homogenised views of humanity (Mitchell & Chaudhury, 2020). Movements like the Zapatistas in Mexico aim toward 'a world in which many worlds coexist' (Mignolo, 2011, p. 273), ultimately embodying a struggle against hegemony and extractivism, and for the 'flourishing of political, epistemological, and ontological systems' (Lehuedé, 2024, p. 3). The ***AI Decolonial Manyfesto*** (Krishnan et al., 2021), signed by various academics and activists, espouses a relationship with AI that acknowledges epistemic expertise stemming from lived experience and compels historically marginalised communities to 'build their own dignified socio-technical futures'. While 'creation, art, stories, and sensitive experience' can open pathways for such decolonial imaginations, it is also essential to address the necessity of reparations for historical and ongoing dispossessions (Krishnan et al., 2021).

7. Conclusion

> *'[A]s neoliberalism took hold, writing new futures got harder and harder for all but the world's wealthiest'.*
> — Kate Aronoff, *Overheated*

In conclusion, this paper has explored how the AI industry disseminates potent visions of the future to secure and enforce its advantageous position. As demonstrated, their propagated **visions are crafted with self-serving agendas**, employing discursive tactics of determinism and distraction to deter criticism and inhibit the exploration of alternatives. These visions are gaining institutional traction and being adopted by policymakers. As a result, they are solidifying into collective socio-technical imaginaries that increasingly influence the path we are steering toward.

Dissecting the mechanisms of future fabrication employed by the AI industry thus emerges as a **primary counterstrategy** essential for paving

the way toward inclusive, equitable, and sustainable futures. It is crucial to remain alert about how AI actors perpetuate powerful myths that narrow collective imaginations of the future to align with their interests. Critical analysis of AI discourse is indispensable, particularly when discussing options for addressing the climate crisis and advancing social justice. For AI practitioners, this entails questioning whether proposed solutions constitute mere technological fixes or require paradigm shifts (Klein, 2023) and critically interrogating the underlying idea of 'progress' inherent in AI-driven visions of the future.

Moving forward, the strategies employed by the AI industry must be investigated further, as they are **likely to adapt to the shifting discourse**. Additionally, there is potential to explore how prominent AI futures affect the imaginative capacities of different groups, as well as their effects on subjects, such as the experience of powerlessness or defeat. Efforts should be directed towards articulating and strengthening visions of the future that are not hegemonic but represent a **polyphonic and ever-evolving collective imagination** (Jovchelovitch & Hawlina, 2018). In light of the intensifying climate crisis and rising social inequality, it is imperative to (re-)imagine alternative lifeways beyond capitalist, fossil fuel-dependent, and growth-oriented paradigms (Hosseini & Gills, 2020, p. 1), fostering pluralistic approaches that emphasise collective and participatory decision-making, such as those offered by BIPOC futurism and decolonial approaches. Amplifying and furthering such critical visions remain crucial strategies in challenging and confronting elitist and other exclusionary fabricated futures.

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