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Rethinking The Urban in The Context of Surveillance Society and Techno-Feudalism

Gözetim Toplumu ve Tekno-Feodalizm Bağlamında Kenti Yeniden Düşünmek

Ayşe KAPUCU YAVUZ

Doktora Öğrencisi
Marmara Üniversitesi, Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi.
kapucu.a@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0002-2765-4659

Burak Hamza ERYİĞİT

Prof. Dr.
Marmara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi, Yerel Yönetimler Bölümü, Yerel Yönetimler Anabilim Dalı.
burakhamza67@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0003-4113-6812

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Abstract

The rapid advancement of technological innovations has reshaped the concept of public service delivery and expanded its scope. The liberal values of urban life have gained a paradoxical dimension, with the philosophy based on the freedom of the individual, resulting in individuals who are kept under control, monitored and isolated. The technocratic governance of the owners and intellectual capital of the companies that are at the forefront in the production and operation of these technologies has led to the formation of a new social form called the surveillance society. This study evaluates the dimensions of the techno-feudal order shaped by the surveillance society in cities. The evaluation of the surveillance dimension, which can be handled with the phenomenon of "panopticon" in the analogical framework, through the reality of the urban with techno-feudalism brings the original aspect of the study to the forefront. In the study which was prepared by choosing qualitative research method, data were obtained through literature review. The study was finalized by developing recommendations in the light of the findings.

Keywords: Surveilleillance society, urban, panoptikon, techno-feudalism, local governments.

JEL Classification Codes: O10, O18, O20, O21.

Öz

Teknolojik yeniliklerin kaydettiği hızlı gelişme hizmetlerin yayıldığı alanı dönüştürerek merkez-yerel dikotomisindeki sınırları derinden sarsmıştır. Kent hayatının liberal değerleri; bireyin özgürlüğüne dayanan felsefesi ile kontrol altında tutulan, izlenen, yalnızlaşan bireylerin ortaya çıktığı paradoksal bir boyut kazanmıştır. Söz konusu teknolojilerin üretimi ve

işletiminde ön plana çıkan şirketlerin sahipleri ile entelektüel sermayesinin ortaya koyduğu teknokratik yönetişim; gözetim toplumu diye tabir edilen yeni bir toplumsal biçimin şekillenmesine önayak olmuştur. Bu çalışma gözetim toplumu ile şekillenen tekno-feodal düzenin kentlerde ortaya çıkardığı boyutları değerlendirmektedir. Analojik düzlemde "panoptikon" olgusu ile ele alınabilecek olan gözetim boyutunun tekno-feodalizm ile birlikte kent gerçeği üzerinden değerlendirilmesi; çalışmanın özgün yanını ön plana çıkarmaktadır. Nitel araştırma yöntemi tercih edilerek hazırlanan çalışmada veriler, literatür taraması ile elde edilmiştir. Bulgular ışığında öneriler geliştirilerek çalışma sonuçlandırılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Gözetim toplumu, kent, panoptikon, tekno-feodalizm, yerel yönetimler

JEL Sınıflandırma Kodları: O10, O18, O20, O21.

Introduction

Since the invention of the wheel, humanity has produced countless solutions aimed at making life easier and improving its quality. In recent decades, developments in information, communication, and transportation technologies have marked the beginning of a new era. The global expansion of electronic communication networks has led to the emergence of a new sociological framework: the information society. The contribution of technological innovation to national economies continues to grow, positively impacting countries' gross domestic products. Companies that produce technology have become the key players in global capital markets. Capitalism has repeatedly emerged from crises by adapting its strategies to generate surplus value under prevailing conditions. One of the most effective tools in overcoming such crises has been research and development (R&D) activities. Technological progress achieved through R&D has transformed the media paradigm of the industrial society-from one based on mass communication to a more individualized model that engages directly with each person. In this new model, instead of shaping collective thought, new mechanisms are being developed to influence how each individual thinks.

Technological tools developed to such a degree that they can process every component of society individually demonstrate-from another perspective-that ideas once encountered only in dystopian science fiction are now beginning to materialize. What technology brings to or takes from the world has increasingly become directly dependent

on the intentions of those who wield it. These developments have brought back to the agenda one of humanity's most intriguing questions: whether mind reading might one day become possible. This possibility excites power centers that seek to prevent disorder and sustain authority. It is now evident that emerging technologies are being employed to transform surveillance mechanisms not just by governments, but also by capital-driven actors, hegemonic powers, and supranational organizations, particularly within the economic narrative of globalization.

With the invention of the internet, control and recording mechanisms have reached unbelievable proportions: they are now capable of conducting ambient eavesdropping without people even realizing it and transmitting the recordings to remote locations. Once, thinking this belonged to a distant future, authors produced dystopian fictions. In the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the protagonist Winston said, "We are the dead," and a voice from behind the picture on the wall replied, "You are the dead" (Orwell, 2013, p. 253). We may consider this work one of the most serious predictions in history, and it was written as early as 1949. Authority (Big Brother) was watching society through telescreens, keeping their lives under control, and imposing heavy punishments to ensure an obedience that left no room for error. This was 43 years before Foucault (1992) introduced the idea of a micro surveillance society in prisons-where inmates are continuously observed to form a compliant, submissive community, and those being observed perform all their actions anxiously, knowing they are being watched. Foucault's source of inspiration, however, was Bentham, who in the 18th century had envisioned a panopticon structure designed to monitor the maximum number of people, thus opening an entirely new door to surveillance (Bauman & Lyon, 2016).

Conceived as an apparatus of discipline and reform, the panopticon is applicable to a prison for punitive purposes, just as it can be implemented for a school in aducation, a manufactory in production, or a hospital in healthcare. In this sense, it is regarded as a control mechanism deployed by the sovereign power (Bilen & Işık, 2024, p. 422). The matrix of order and rules established by this surveillance is simultaneously perceived as a mechanism that enhances performance and productivity. Consequently, as an element reinforcing the endeavor to acquire and sustain authority, surveillance has transformed into a tool utilized across numerous domains, primarily in fields such as defense and security (Hatipler & Köksalan, 2022, p. 292).

On the other side of the coin, there is capital, which under all circumstances produces opportunities aimed at continuously expanding and preserving itself. The protection, circulation, management, and multiplication of money-as well as its monopolization and retention in the hands of certain groups-have generated new opportunities alongside technology. The advancement of technology has increased the need for it, and producing technology has become the most important activity for achieving economic growth. Cities, as the locus of economic activities, are affected positively and negatively by these processes and are undergoing structural transformations. In a process where population dynamics and economic growth have exceeded urban limits and given rise to global megacities, the key inputs that drive the new economic order are once again supplied by cities.

All these developments indicate that urban space has acquired a dimension that transcends physical boundaries. Within the six discourses on the city developed by Soja (1997), *simcities* describe the space between reality and fiction produced in the minds. The existence of the virtual world emerging with the digital transformation recalls *simcities* for today's cities, where the real and the virtual coexist. Discussions on the surveillance society and techno-feudalism establish a context between *simcities* and new cities. Following the discourses that preceded it, the *simcity* discourse contributes to the perception of the new form of visibility that the city has assumed. There is an atmosphere in which the urban image and the notion of citizenship are reproduced through the inclusion of virtual structures and digital identities. The immense scale of data generated while all this occurs transforms cities into an uninterrupted sphere of experience. The fact that accessibility takes place on a virtual plane ensures that boundaries become blurred.

The subject of this study is to question whether, in the digital age where discussions of the surveillance society and techno-feudalism are on the agenda, there exist certain parameters that can define the new form of cities. The extent reached by technology and digitalization has now compressed physical space into devices and created virtual social communities. Although the "surveillance society" has been studied in various fields in the literature, "techno-feudalism" is a field of study that has only been debated in the last few years and is newly conceptualized. Is the urban rhetoric found in classical and contemporary theories still valid today? Is there a need for a new definition of the urban? How can the impact of the surveillance society

on urban life under today's conditions be interpreted? What kind of transformation have digital tools and the capital controlling them led to in cities? This study will endeavor to answer these questions and will conclude with an evaluation of the findings obtained.

Theoretical Framework: Surveillance, Capital and The Rise of Techno-Feudalism

Given the highly complex structure of this study, in which two inherently intricate subjects are addressed together, it is essential to establish a conceptual framework in order to maintain focus and avoid diverging from the scope. In this section, the concepts of surveillance society, capital, and techno-feudalism will be examined, and an effort will be made to conduct a conceptual analysis in line with the aspects investigated in the study.

Surveillance Society and Its Digital Dimension

Throughout history, societies have been defined in terms such as agrarian society, industrial society, and information society, often based on economic transformations. Beyond this, the concept of society also serves as a tool to highlight certain social and political phenomena, marking changes experienced by communities or groups within specific historical periods. Conceptually the word "surveillance," is defined "the careful watching of a person or place, especially by the police or army, because a crime has been committed or is expected to be committed" (Cambridge Dictionary 2024). The word "surveillir" originates from French and has been adopted into English and other languages (Özdemir, 2020, p. 83). Etymologically, the Turkish term "gözetim" derives from the Arabic word *nizara*, which encompasses meanings such as observing, watching, caring, supervising, and controlling. It also has roots in the Persian word *tımar*, meaning "care" or "supervision." It should be noted that the term *gözetim* is not synonymous with other related terms involving the act of seeing, such as *gözetme* (watching over), *gözetleme* (spying), and *gözlem* (observation) (Gürdal & Kanat, 2020, p. 213). While *gözetme* implies protection or guardianship, *gözetleme* involves a sense of secrecy akin to spying or peeking, and *gözlem* refers to the value or insight gained through examination (TDK, 2024).

The initial development that paved the way for the conceptualization of surveillance society and led to the perception of surveillance as a means of pressure, functioning as a fear-laden tool of obedience,

emerged as European authorities sought to maintain public order following prolonged periods of war and social transformation (Özel, 2012, p. 23). The structure designed by Jeremy Bentham for individuals who needed to be kept under control introduced the concept of the panopticon. This system embodies a form of physical control as well as a mental dominance established over the individual's sphere of thought. As Bentham stated, "The Panopticon is a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind" (Verry, 2022, p. 7), which clearly conveys this idea. After George Orwell's (2013) famous fictional depiction of a society under surveillance through television screens, Bentham's concept advanced from fiction to architectural design, proposing a physically realizable space of observation (Bauman & Lyon, 2016, p. 22).

The term *panopticon*, meaning "a place that sees everything," originates from the combination of the Greek words *pan* and *opticon*, and has since become a powerful metaphor. Although this highly persuasive and obedience-inducing design was never fully implemented, Foucault employed the metaphor in *Discipline and Punish*, where he established profound links between penal systems as instruments of threat and the disciplining of society (Bauman, 2012, p. 53). Drawing on Bentham's inspiration, Foucault portrayed the prison as a site of surveillance and control, and, when necessary, of infliction of suffering. The design in which the observer is not seen by the observed, but whose presence is known (Foucault, 1995, p. 202), allowed the concept of the panopticon to become one of the foundational terms in defining the surveillance society.

Following its initial conceptualizations characterized by unidirectional control, the panopticon has acquired new dimensions through technological advancements and the diversification of communication elements. Particularly, electronic devices that facilitate subliminal messages and manipulation have streamlined targeted implementations and surveillance for specific audiences. The concept of the synopticon has been deployed to define this novel phenomenon. With the expanding boundaries of the internet, increasing digitalization, the era of interconnected devices—namely the Internet of Things (IoT)—and social networks, the panopticon has evolved once again. Consequently, the omnopticon, a new form of surveillance based on consent, has emerged (Özdemir, 2020, p. 84). Within the spontaneous fluidity generated by communication needs and tools that facilitate daily life practices, surveillance operates as an inevitable output. The uninterrupted and multidimensional mobility of social coexistence

can be brought under control through surveillance (Baştürk, 2016, p. 197). Furthermore, the boundaries of the necessity for surveillance to guide velocity and ensure the regulation of social flow will need to be delineated. This is because, at the current scale of digital interaction, rather than a centralized surveillance apparatus, a new system has emerged where individuals monitor one another (Yavuz, 2024, p. 2540). Being watched, rather than being perceived as a plight, has manifested a consensual and occasionally gratifying dimension.

The proliferation of electronic surveillance tools and the advancement of technology have diversified surveillance methods and transformed the panopticon, which had previously been imprinted in collective memory as a metaphor. It has moved beyond being merely a model, evolving into a historical yet modern apparatus that operates through voluntary participation and possesses a decentralized rather than centralized structure (Bauman & Lyon, 2013, pp. 11, 12–50). At the center of surveillance today are not states, but corporations, digital platforms, and technological actors. Zuboff approaches this new process from an economic perspective and defines it as "surveillance capitalism." There is no doubt that economic factors play the most significant role in social transformation processes. Surveillance capitalism treats human life as raw material and uses the data extracted from individuals' experiences for commercial purposes (Zuboff, 2021, p. 11). A portion of society can now be kept under surveillance without the need for guards or watchers (Kavut, 2023, p. 23). In modern life, individuals consider self-disclosure as a form of expression; to be visible is to assert one's existence. Consequently, individuals are constantly opening themselves up to information flows, and governments or systems are gathering this information (Giddens, 2000b, pp. 59–60). In the modern era, collecting information based on an individual's life and experiences allows the surveillance society to be easily shaped. Meanwhile, privacy is undergoing a transformation, acquiring a new form that blurs the boundary between public and private spheres.

Today, when we consider urban life, it becomes evident that surveillance and data recording are possible in every aspect of daily regulation. More than 64% of the global population is online, that is, using the internet (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2024, p. 10). Individually used communication tools have become intertwined with those employed by states, sovereign powers, or hegemonies, leading to a new dimension of surveillance within the information society. In addition to people owning technological devices, it is now possible for these

devices to communicate with one another and to be accessed remotely over the internet. This development, introduced into life as the Internet of Things (IoT), is expected to result in over 30 billion interconnected devices worldwide by the year 2030 (Vailshery, 2024, p. 1, para. 2). Given the growing demand in this field, one might ask whether society is now living in an era of voluntary surveillance. Undoubtedly, in every era, it is the positive, life-easing aspects of technological progress that generate demand in the first place. Individuals do not initially consider that the device they purchased to vacuum their home might transmit conversations to other computers. However, sovereign powers or the oligarchy of capital within capitalism may, driven by a deep hunger to obtain and exploit all available data, indeed attempt to do so.

The secure maintenance of public order and the healthy progression of urban life render monitoring policies imperative. Identifying traffic congestion through real-time notifications, selecting alternative routes, or accessing navigation directions have become indispensable for metropolises where velocity is experienced at its peak. On the other hand, applications developed to maintain public safety are actively utilized by law enforcement agencies. For instance, the Urban Security Management System (KGYS-Kentsel Güvenlik Yönetim Sistemi) in Türkiye stands as a necessary and appropriate implementation for bringing suspicious situations under control and taking precautions against potential adversities. Yet, conversely, it also incorporates various features ranging from license plate recognition systems to facial recognition via artificial intelligence tools. It is not difficult for such digital platforms and systems to concurrently transform into panoptic apparatuses. This process converts the development of renewed and multi-layered security measures against threats like cyber-attacks into a prerequisite. Events that left traumatic marks in different regions of the world, such as America or Britain, ensured the endorsement of increased security measures by the public in these countries, resulting in a subtle choice made between freedom and security (Canyurt, 2020, p. 205).

Capital and Its New Power

Given the scope of this study, it is necessary to define the framework within which the term *capital* is used. In the process where surveillance society shows a tendency to evolve into techno-feudalism, the most significant parameter is the pursuit of new production fields and markets, triggered by the desire of capital to expand its domain. Being

the owner or holder of capital is thus equated with being wealthy. From this perspective, the concept implies accumulation. In both the Cambridge and Oxford dictionaries, the first meaning of the word is "capital city," i.e., the principal city of a region or country where government is administered. In both dictionaries, its association with money appears only in the third or subsequent definitions. In this context, the Oxford Dictionary defines *capital* as "assets or property owned by a person or business that can be used to invest or start a business," including the amount of such money (Oxford Dictionary, 2024). Similarly, the Cambridge Dictionary defines it as "a large amount of money or property used to create more wealth or to start a business" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024).

The concept is also associated with the property rights approach of John Locke, one of the key figures who laid the philosophical foundations of liberalism (Tunç, Kurtağzı & Ekici, 2021, p. 512). Before the Age of Enlightenment, capital was a value held exclusively by the elite. Later, as the middle class and bourgeoisie began to demand greater participation in social life and political representation, capital became a pivotal concept that contributed to social rupture (Batal & Kapucu Yavuz, 2022, p. 1050). This process, in which the notion of property rights also played a role, led to a shift in capital ownership, the rise of the bourgeoisie, and an acceleration in commercial activities.

With globalization, capital has acquired a new dimension-extending its presence to the international sphere, establishing transoceanic commercial ties, and seeking resources in other societies-resulting in the emergence of corporations, and thus capital itself, as a supranational structural form. With the transition to an industrial society, enterprises that initially emerged on a national scale gradually evolved into international, transnational, multinational, and even stateless forms. This evolution has reinforced the globalization process and transformed such entities into pressure groups whose power surpasses that of nation-states, regional supranational forces, and even states that have established global empires. The nature of capital has increasingly changed in ways that empower it, and with the diversification of communication channels and technological development, the expansion of the service sector alongside trade has facilitated the growth of economic volume (Castells, 2014, p. 369). Wallerstein, who defines capital as accumulated wealth, emphasizes that capitalism, as a concept, is derived from *capital*, and thus capital plays a central role within this economic system (1993, chap. 1, paras.

2-3). According to him (1993), accumulation only truly qualifies as capital when it is used to further expand existing capital, because the capitalist system is inherently driven by an unceasing aim for growth.

The existence and development of capital are, in a way, prerequisites for bourgeois domination (Marx & Engels, 2017, p. 63). The freedom and boundless expansion space that globalization has granted to capital have enabled not only the regulation of production and distribution relations, the domination of the economy, and the free circulation of goods across the globe, but also the emergence of new markets and sectors within the service industry. Companies that achieved significant growth in logistics, communication, accommodation, advertising, and media have transformed into international conglomerates alongside their production sites. These conglomerates, which have integrated developing technology into their structures in real time, have also started to produce technology and form monopolies on a global scale. Companies like IBM, which once believed that personal computers would not attract demand, witnessed how a personal computer developed by two young people in a garage took over the world, and were forced to respond quickly (Drucker, 1995, p. 31).

Kodak, emblematic of industrial giants that resisted technological renewal, serves as a cautionary example of how failure to evolve in a competitive global landscape leads to decline (Aytemiz, 2015, p.15). The rise of a globalized capitalist structure has placed production, distribution, and consumption under the command of powerful transnational actors. The historical agent that once dissolved feudal order is capital incarnate. In this context, capital has over time come to be utilized to denote the sum of the power possessing it, rather than signifying merely the commodity and accumulation itself. Here, the term 'capital' refers specifically to transnational firms and the bourgeois class that orchestrate the global flows of finance.

Techno-Feudalism: Digital Industry and Users

Feudalism is a concept rooted in medieval Europe and associated with agrarian societies. It broadly refers to the totality of governance and production-distribution relations arranged in favor of landowners over those who worked the land-namely, the serfs. In this system, where central authority is weak, landowners hold power in military, administrative, economic, and even legal domains, and the system persists through a structure resembling slavery (Öksüz, 1980, p. 81). The Cambridge Dictionary defines feudalism as the social and land

ownership system of medieval Western Europe, or more generally, as any society organized by hierarchical rank (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024).

The Oxford Dictionary also refers to medieval Europe in its definition of feudalism, describing it as a system in which people were protected by a noble and granted a portion of land in exchange for working and fighting on behalf of that noble (Oxford Dictionary, 2024). According to Seignobos (1960), the term derives from the word *feu* or *feodum*, which passed from Germanic into Latin and originally referred to the fief. The term *feudal*, related to feudal lordship, originates from this root. The tradition of fief allocation (*tımar*) is believed to have first emerged in France (Seignobos, 1960, p. 116), which supports the claim that the term was first used in French. As previously mentioned in Section 2.1 on surveillance, the etymological roots of the concept of surveillance are also associated with the Persian-origin word *tımar*. This linguistic overlap further establishes a conceptual link between the historical practice of *tımar* and the evolving meaning of surveillance. Additionally, the term *vassal* etymologically refers to a person bound in service to a feudal lord.

In the feudal system, those who worked the land and harvested its produce were considered the slaves of landowners; their identities, freedoms, possessions, families, and entire existence were also regarded as belonging to their lords (Smith, 2006, p. 473). These slaves were expected to show loyalty to their masters, who could demand anything from them in both war and peace. The feudal order rose in a period marked by the absence of sovereign authority, widespread internal unrest and instability, a profound sense of insecurity, and a near-total decline in trade and everyday civil life (Ülgen, 2010). With the advent of the Enlightenment and the adoption of liberal philosophy, mercantilist policies began shifting economic systems toward non-agricultural domains, leading to the increasing prominence of capital. The development of industry gave rise to industrial society, and economic resources expanded international trade relations. Modern industry, fueled by capitalism, enabled the vast advancement of maritime and land transportation, thus facilitating the spread of industry and the creation of international markets (Marx & Engels, 2017, p. 51). As sea and railway routes expanded, industry and commerce proliferated, and capital grew in tandem.

The integration of the internet into human life brought about major

transformations in both commercial and industrial domains. Capital, steering this transformation, aimed to expand the service sector and maintain control over the emerging digital marketplace. Wallerstein (1993, p. 25) argues that technological advancement should be viewed not as a trigger but as a consequence of capitalism, as each innovation signifies profitable new commodities and labor-saving mechanisms. In response to change, the action taken is often the monopolistic control of new inventions, a strategy that serves to further capital accumulation (Wallerstein, 1993, p. 25).

The digital world constitutes a boundless field of innovation with an expansive product market. Beyond the tangible production of devices, it encompasses an enormous market of intangible and even virtual commodities that have spread globally. In order to control this market, multinational and transnational corporations accumulate and expand their capital primarily in urban areas. These corporations constantly refine their analyses to determine where to direct their investments. The dominant actors who govern technological developments in the marketplace have, much like the bourgeoisie of the Middle Ages who shaped state authority and governance systems, established lobbying structures capable of influencing state policies. Major technological transformations generate strong investment demands for public administrations, leading to substantial infrastructure expenditures for governments. In this context, the desire of state authorities to appear attractive to technology markets becomes highly significant, as corporations aim to externalize much of these costs to the public in the regions where they intend to invest (Strange, 2014, p. 160). This dynamic results in a pattern of relations that consistently evolve in favor of the corporations.

Digital technology-or more precisely, the digitization of technology-has brought about a profound transformation in which virtually everything, whether in public or private spheres, has become digitized. From libraries to bank accounts, the ability to convert every detail of human need into digital form has enabled the proliferation of intangible yet problem-solving applications that now shape social life. The diversification of digital methods used for producing, storing, processing, and updating information also facilitates the transformation of knowledge across various communication channels and media (Thompson, 2014, p. 303). As a result, international corporations developing digital products have gained the capacity to store and control information from across the globe.

Capital, which has the capacity to direct communication tools and access mass audiences more rapidly than any other actor by controlling both personal and public data, has gained substantial power in relation to political authorities. Within the framework of an increasingly internationalized economy, the technology and digital market has acquired the capacity to govern vast cultural domains, often surpassing national borders and state authority through virtual means. Under the strong influence of neoliberal policies, governments maintain close relations with the elites who dominate the technological economy. On the other hand, the emergence of new digital sectors requires highly skilled personnel equipped with technological knowledge and competencies. As capital continues to expand, individuals, companies, intermediary firms, and executives around the world are learning, growing, and integrating themselves into this new technology-based economic system (Castells, 2014). Governments, firms, and individuals all recognize that participating in this cycle and embracing innovation serves as a mechanism for securing future interests.

The concept of techno-feudalism emerges in response to these developments in the digital world, where, under the influence of globalization and neoliberalism, capital has expanded extraordinarily, while class structures within the capitalist sphere have begun to resemble the relationship between serfs and lords. The ever-circulating nature of money in the globalized world, along with capital's capacity to control this circulation in constructing the global economy, sustains a dynamic akin to feudalism in the information society. As previously argued (Batal & Kapucu Yavuz, 2022, p. 1051), this process reproduces a feudal-like structure in the digital age, wherein capital owners assume the role of modern-day lords, and those integrated into the digital economy perform functions akin to serfs. These transformations have given rise to new conceptualizations such as neo-feudalism, digital feudalism, and techno-feudalism. Jodi Dean is one of the prominent scholars who conceptualize neo-feudalism and argue that capitalism has evolved under the technological paradigm. Similar to Castells's notion of informational capitalism, Dean introduces the rhetoric of communicative capitalism. She also asserts that, beyond European feudalism, many forms of feudalism have existed across the world, and now the globe is confronted with a new one as capitalism reaches its terminal stage (Wansbrough, 2021).

Neoliberalism's entanglement with the global expansion of communication has generated a distinct pursuit of freedom-one that

seeks to bypass state authority, evade control, and draw governments into the logic of market competition (Dean, 2020). According to Dean (2020), in the digital marketplace, the revenues derived from intellectual property rights by large corporations-those that produce technology, develop media content, and manage social media platforms-have surpassed those generated by physical goods. In response, governments, in search of resources, attempt to develop attractive policies for these corporations, which in turn fosters monopolization and worsens capitalism beyond its prior forms. Colonialism has assumed a new dimension: while the world believes it is becoming more liberated and individualized under neoliberal policies, resources, cultures, and ways of life are steadily being depleted. Capital now determines the very scope of available choices in the name of freedom, turning into a structure that monopolizes democratic alternatives. Everything has fallen under the control of capital (Dean, 2019).

Harvey (2022) argues that one of the key parameters sustaining the continuity of capitalism is land rent and land ownership, claiming that land markets, much like capital markets, enable the generation of income without the creation of value, with labor playing a crucial role in this process. According to him, just as high income generated by capital transforms into rent, land markets also serve this function and thus produce rent (2022, p. 143). Several approaches suggest that a capitalist economic order has emerged in which land rent has been reconfigured and labor has been weakened. The process of intellectual property rights-where production centers and factories become secondary-has evolved in ways that resemble this new understanding of rent. Elites who expand their wealth through control over such rights without actual production have come to display attitudes that are significantly more passive, detached from innovation and effort, compared to the earlier industry-based growth models. In this regard, Morozov (2022) questions whether a form of feudalism could exist in which labor and effort are entirely excluded. He contends that before addressing techno-feudalism, one must focus on the critical features embedded in historical feudal systems and seek dynamics or criteria that can be meaningfully compared to today's conditions. Accordingly, he prefers to evaluate the idea of *digital feudalism* rather than *techno-feudalism* (2022). The collective contribution of these thinkers lies in rendering visible the increasing complexity of capitalist transformation at the intersection of technological surveillance, digital dependency, and the diminishing democratic sphere.

Whether examined from a sociopolitical or economic perspective, feudalism ultimately reveals notable similarities with the digital processes into which contemporary capitalism has transformed. In digital capitalism, Fordist production methods are no longer necessary; the creation and development of assets based on copyright ownership, social media, or digital communication platforms are, in fact, increasingly driven by users themselves. In such a context, it seems more appropriate to speak not of capitalism per se, but of techno-feudalism-where communities produce data passively, without exerting effort to maintain the continuity of the "lord." According to Elmacı (2023), it is important not to overlook the fact that capitalist economic systems and the relations they sustain have not disappeared entirely, but rather coexist with techno-feudalism in a transitional phase.

The concept of techno-feudalism was first introduced by Zuboff in 2018 in her work emphasizing how digital algorithms operate to create new opportunities for capital owners (Elmacı, 2023). The capacity of digital platforms to influence societies reinforces-rather than refutes-the fact that their owners have become powerful pressure groups occupying politically, economically, and even in terms of security, a privileged position. One of the key figures advancing this conceptualization is Yanis Varoufakis, who argues that the global economy underwent a profound transformation after 2008. While central banks, by exercising their ability to print money, have sought to dominate the global economy not through profit but via newly issued money, digital platforms-functioning like feudal estates-have increasingly claimed ownership over value (Varoufakis, 2022). Digital capital has now reached a new dimension, as the emergence of non-state-based currencies has ushered in an era of digital money and Bitcoin (Varoufakis & Morozov, 2022). In recent years, the commodification of virtual assets has become even more visible, especially with Bitcoin's disruptive impact on economic discourse. According to Varoufakis, Bitcoin can never truly replace fiat currency, but if it ever does, it will bring about immense suffering. Behind this rhetoric lies the reality that states have not yet been able to regulate digital currencies in economic or legal terms, and are instead forced to develop adaptive strategies in response (Varoufakis & Morozov, 2022). As can be seen, diverse perspectives have been developed regarding the concept. The current economic order governs the virtual world as a novel domain of growth. This concept has been preferred in the study owing to the fact that the process has been brought to this point by all technological

advancements through a comprehensive projection, rather than merely by the digital sphere, and because techno-feudalism encompasses the entirety of production relations.

Although capital appears to be gaining strength in this context, capitalism is, in fact, heading toward collapse. A new economic system and ruling class are taking over both the state's currency and the mechanisms through which a small minority makes the majority work for its own benefit. As a result, new techno-lords are emerging, rent forms are diversifying, and the masses are beginning to resemble techno-peasants (Varoufakis, 2022). Scott (2018) emphasizes that the international reach of social media and digital platforms, along with their vast data infrastructures, has established a new form of feudal system. In his article, where he metaphorically symbolizes how the data ecosystem has evolved into a kind of Middle Ages, Scott identifies social media users as serfs, corporate partners, influencers, and data-processing companies as vassals, and places the owners of digital and social media companies at the top of the pyramid as lords (Scott, 2018). When we examine the massive industries developed for data collection, storage, processing, and reuse-along with the human resources and labor forces involved, as well as the digital users who produce data in the course of their everyday lives-it becomes evident that the functioning of the current economic system is not far removed from the metaphor it evokes.

Rethinking The Urban In Light Of Recent Developments

The globalization process and the urbanization-driving dynamics of industrialization have led to the concentration of populations in industrialized regions. The accumulation of people in urban areas has created a need to organize daily life in order to meet the demands for housing, transportation, infrastructure, environmental sustainability, and social needs. As the authority seeks to maintain this order, the diversification of control tools for the sake of public order and the need to facilitate individuals' daily lives have mutually reinforced one another. Surveillance has become so normalized that it has taken on a form that meets the need for observation through its data-collecting and recording functions. This is because the authority must observe human behaviors and relationships in order to ensure security. Cameras are installed throughout the city for purposes such as crime prevention, traffic regulation, and public lighting. This situation evokes the image of a society monitored by thousands of eyes. The state of

being watched and watching, which has become normalized in urban life, is at times even perceived as a desirable practice. The expansion of public administration's service areas within the city has necessitated the establishment of various administrative bodies in fields such as employment, social security, insurance, health, education, migration, infrastructure services, tax administration, cultural spaces, and even recreation. Each of these institutions keeps records.

When the conceptualizations and discussions concerning the city up to the present are evaluated, it becomes apparent that economic relations have always been at the central axis. The interdependence among individuals, along with the necessity for craftsmanship and production evolving from differing capabilities, constitutes the foundation of collective life. After the fulfillment of basic needs, the desire for self-realization and the enrichment of one's social and cultural accumulation has emerged. New sectors have arisen, and specialization within the city has fostered rationalization, demands for rights, and a democratic attitude (Weber, 2024, pp. 14–18). On the other hand, the necessity for regulation brought about by urban coexistence has transformed the city step by step, with each step being economically significant. Organization was ensured through guilds, associations pursued economic interests, and the city evolved accordingly (Pirenne, 1991, p. 87).

Throughout the course of history, the city has become a concept that has been defined with a focus on different dimensions depending on the political, economic, and social developments of the time. While it has been described as a space of collective life, togetherness, and sociability (Wirth, 1938; Mumford, 2007), it has also been defined through the holistic relationship between human beings and space where the intertwining of sensory dispositions and culture shapes one another (Sennett, 2008). Later, it has been depicted as a center where institutionalization and organization emerged, specialization was triggered (Saunders, 1986), and early signs of rational viewpoints and democratic attitudes were introduced (Pirenne, 1991; Weber, 2024). In explaining the city, the ecological approach, pioneered by Park and Burgess, has gained prominence by suggesting that cities emerge and adapt in a natural flow akin to living organisms adapting to life conditions (Duru & Alkan, 2002, p. 12). The way industrialization generated new lifestyles within cities has prompted interpretations of the city from an economic perspective (Lefebvre, 2015; Castells, 2020), viewing it as a space of production and consumption that influences

daily life and is employed by dominant economic systems to perpetuate themselves (Harvey, 2022). Within this process, the diversification of urban lifestyles has led to the formation of highly disparate groups (Harvey, 2006, p. 41), framing the city as a space where class divisions and conflicts take place.

Cities, as shared spaces where social culture is produced, have turned into factories of transformation. In the digital age, any innovation emerging in one location can rapidly spread across the globe, particularly under the influence of social media. An urban society has emerged one that desires novelty, adapts quickly, and focuses not on cultural background but on how popular something is. All cities are in competition to become "global cities," as discussed by Sassen (2008), seeking ways to attract capital through the conveniences they offer. The easiest way to integrate into the global economy and benefit from its advantages is through alignment with capital (Keyder, 1992). Capitalism, always promising gain, has allowed capital to penetrate societies worldwide, transforming cultures, settlements, and habits across the globe.

Throughout history, the city has consistently remained the central space of transformation. Cycles related to human life, governance, and production have found their expression in the urban environment. Today, a person can charge their smart device in the subway and simultaneously perform banking operations or pay taxes during their commute. While not at home, they can remotely turn devices on and off, check their refrigerator, and even send health data to their doctor via smart medication embedded in their body. According to World Bank data, 57% of the global population was living in cities as of 2023 (World Bank, 2024). More than 78% of this population are internet users (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2024, p. 28). The number of people connected to the internet increases every day, and individuals generate an infinite amount of data within the flow of daily life. One of today's most significant advancements is the ability to process individual data through mathematical models and distill functional insights from an enormous data dump. Through this method, capital can identify the most efficient and ideal techniques in its field of production and expand its capacity to develop services or products. Nearly all of this data originates in cities, as they are densely populated, vibrant in terms of working life, and serve as the centers of socio-cultural activity.

The six discourses developed by Soja (1997) to emphasize the

importance of a macro-urban approach highlight the changing aspects of cities. These discourses are categorized as **Flexcity**, **Cosmopolis**, **Exopolis**, **Metropolarities**, **Carceral Archipelagos**, and **Simcities**. Soja describes them as follows (1997, pp. 4–5):

- **Flexcity**: The restructuring of the political economy of globalization and the flexible specialization required to construct the post-Fordist industrial metropolis.

- **Cosmopolis**: The globalization of urban capital, labor, and culture, and the emergence of a new hierarchy of global cities.

- **Exopolis**: The reorganization of urban form and the transformation of the metropolis from the inside out and from the outside in.

- **Metropolarities**: The reshaped social mosaic and the emergence of new polarizations.

- **Carceral Archipelagos** (Prison Society): The rise of fortress cities and surveillance technologies.

- **SimCities**: Reconstructed urban imaginaries and the increasing hyperreality of daily urban life.

These processes represent an urban transformation and reconfiguration. They are not independent of one another but are rather interconnected and mutually reinforcing. These six-discourse-based processes provide a composition that first illustrates the structural transformation of urban space, then the experiential spatial and social effects of this transformation, and finally the reactions to this restructuring. In the face of the rise of modernism and capitalism, cities have taken on new forms. Soja seeks to contribute to the adaptation of urban sociology and theory to changing realities, and proposes a structural transformation of traditional conceptualizations (1997, p. 7).

The emphasis on **Simcities**, or cities of resemblance, reflects a new kind of society shaped by perceptions situated between dream and reality, within a transformed urban world. These imaginaries seize symbolic representations of the city and manage perceptions and behaviors accordingly (Soja, 1997, p. 9). Soja's perspective illuminates the discussions necessary for today's digitized "smart cities." With the impact of globalization, cities that once served as sites of cultural production have become spaces where reality is not experienced but

rather simulated. Virtual identities created through social media build virtual relationships and generate an artificial form of sociality. From political preferences to dietary routines (Soja, 1997, p. 9), urban society is now shaped by invisible pressures and influences. Today, even an absurd trend that starts in one part of the world can be imitated in distant cities on the very same day, creating an illusory global experience.

Machine learning possesses much greater speed and superior qualities compared to the human process of learning through repeated individual practice and errors. Through algorithms and digital memory, it can correct an error in a single instance and prevent others from repeating the same mistake, thereby transforming individual learning into a collective process (Zuboff, 2021, pp. 506–509). This dynamic leads to the transformation of collective consciousness, which is shaped by both individual and social behaviors. This new mode of learning enables the analysis of predictable outcomes. Products that can be reintroduced to the market, suggestions for emerging needs, and behaviors capable of dominating the market can all be planned through these analyses. The fundamental resource for this process is data obtained from lived experiences. As the most intense centers of interaction, cities are the first to react to changes in behaviors and attitudes. For this reason, cities present themselves as attractive sites for algorithmic calculations. The surveillance of urban experience facilitates access to comprehensive and comparable data from individuals to the collective, thereby easing the process of analysis.

Soja's discursive framework for interpreting the structural transformation of cities also reveals the sociological and economic dimensions that must be considered when reinterpreting cities within the axis of digital capitalism. The ever-evolving form of the city, with its dynamic and living structure, continuously generates new societal forms. As in the past, the future is no longer distant; today, the city has become a space of change and data. What were once walled cities or fortress towns have now transformed into multi-layered, borderless urban forms. Therefore, it is essential to reinterpret the city in light of today's shifting values. It is necessary to approach the city -viewed as a space of data accumulation and transformation- through both economic and sociological perspectives.

Conclusion

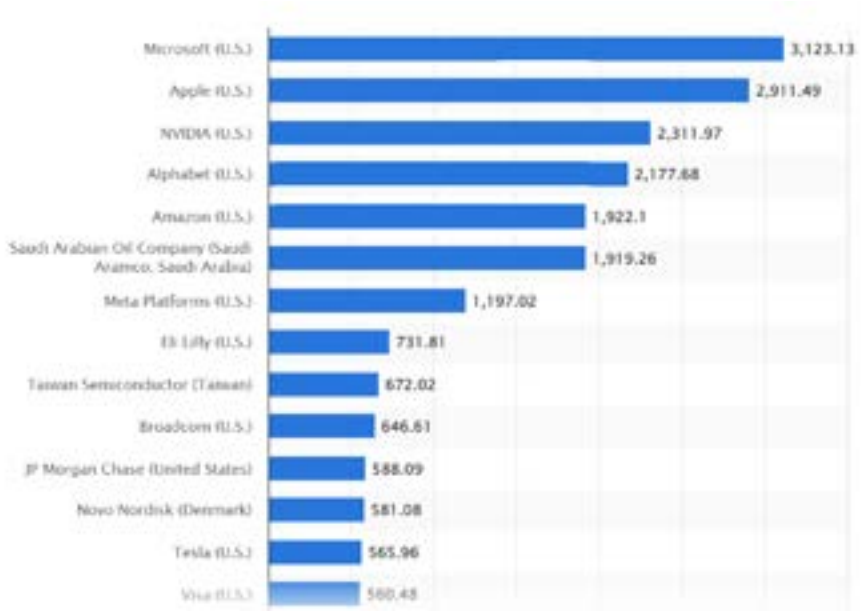
While the aspect of technology that facilitates human life has increased its popular appeal, it has also granted immense powers to the dominant actors who control technological production and surveillance mechanisms. From fulfilling basic needs to operating defense industries, the necessity of communication tools at every level has turned into a mechanism through which those in power can guide and govern the masses. The digitization of knowledge presents a dichotomy: while it enables access to information more easily than ever before, it also obscures the question of who controls that information. Today, holding companies and international corporations possess a resource that is just as valuable as money-data, which exists beyond conventional temporal limits. Competition is no longer solely centered on production. In addition, the development of marketing techniques has become a critical tool for surviving in global markets, and alternative services are being designed under the framework of value creation (Kaplan & Norton, 2014, p. 16). As a result, intangible assets are increasingly becoming sources of material income. For instance, curated music playlists are now sold through monthly subscription models. The fact that personal devices can "communicate" with one another, and that users generate data across all aspects of online behavior-from the websites they visit to the topics they engage with-has opened the door to a world in which even ambient listening can translate spontaneous thoughts into algorithmically delivered suggestions. These developments, which anticipate potential consumer demands in advance, have normalized the transformation of every kind of data into monetizable resources.

Digital footprints are constantly being dispersed across the globe. Information about individuals-where they go, how often and at what times, what they like, what they eat, whose content they read or listen to-is continuously recorded and processed, covering all aspects of life. People's conversations, locations, eating and clothing preferences, future plans, interests, relationships, work life, earnings, expenditures, and health conditions are known at every moment. While this information strengthens the digital marketplace, it also provides the production sector with remarkable projections for creating new markets. New needs are being manufactured, and these needs can be directed toward the most suitable consumers. Needs articulated directly by consumers are developed into products, or new products can be delivered directly to those most likely to require them. Moreover, regardless of

a product's actual quality or function, it can rapidly become an object of desire for everyone through the networked influence of social media users. A global control network now possesses access to the full personal data of individuals and families. The mere fact that Google is connected to almost every digital tool and that the digital identities on this platform are processed in virtual space just like real identities in the physical world illustrates the immense informational power held by such corporations. In capitalist economies, the uppermost status of the ruling class has historically been defined by economic power derived from property ownership (Giddens, 2000a, p. 120). In this regard, ownership today may be equated with access to data and the capability to process it. Whether virtual or physical, those who control digital technologies will continue to hold dominant positions at the top of the hierarchy. The figure below presents 2023 data on the highest-valued global companies by market capitalization, clearly showing that technology firms have surpassed even oil-producing conglomerates in value.

Figure 1.

Largest Companies by Market Capitalization in 2023 (in Billion USD),



Source: *(Statista, 2024).*

The convergence of capitalism's support for digital processes and the freedoms it affords capital has produced the landscape described above. However, claiming that techno-feudalism will become the future form of the system is different from asserting that the system has already transformed. Morozov (2022) argues that it is not yet appropriate to speak of feudalism in a strict sense. In contrast, Varoufakis (2022) asserts that the necessary conditions for the end of capitalism are beginning emerging and that the techno-feudal era-ruled by techno-lords-is already beginning. For corporations that still benefit comfortably from the mechanisms of capital accumulation, the current situation may not yet reflect full feudalization. Within the framework of contemporary urban theory, the strategy of sustaining consumption in cities and channeling it back into production-only to convert it once again into consumption-demonstrates the continuity of capitalist modes of production and distribution. Yılmaz (2023) notes that the concept of techno-feudalism highlights the monopolistic structures enabled by software systems used by digital capital managers, which limit and weaken access to social and political spaces for individuals. However, he also emphasizes that this process has not yet surpassed capitalism. For this reason, he argues that referring to the current dynamics as *digital feudalism* rather than *techno-feudalism* would be more appropriate (Yılmaz, 2023). Ultimately, the term techno-feudalism aims to conceptualize a new order by focusing on how capital has come to possess power that surpasses even that of international institutions. The emergence of new elites who weaken state authority and narrow the space for competition through monopolization reflects a market structure in which this very small elite uses the entire world to sustain its existence-transforming everything immaterial into commodities.

In conclusion, the world today has become a vast panopticon, producing a type of society composed of individuals who live with the awareness that they are being watched, even in the absence of an actual observer. The visibility offered by social media is materially reinforced, and the culture of adorning visibility with fame has created a new dialectical structure in which these forces mutually strengthen one another. In this era-where the boundaries of privacy are blurred and individuals willingly expose their private lives to the public-every detail of life, along with human emotions and behaviors, has been transformed into a commodity, giving rise to a new perception of communication. Just as serfs in the feudal era accepted bondage in exchange for subsistence, today, millions voluntarily offer their private lives as commodities in exchange for fame-an uncanny but undeniable parallel. What remains

unchanged is ownership: the establishment of a hegemonic order through the concentration of control in the hands of a small elite. This supranational development, which weakens the authority of nation-states, mirrors feudalism, where governance is no longer in the hands of governments, but instead is exercised through capital-by digital lords, digital vassals, and digital serfs.

Although the urban approach found in classical and contemporary theories persists today, it is acquiring new dimensions. For instance, while Sassen's (2008) global city incorporated an interaction that transcended its boundaries into the theory, it maintained the identity of the city within its own borders. The processes of the surveillance society and techno-feudalism introduce a further element that transforms the city by blurring its boundaries and sovereignty. The new state of surveillance, nourished by consent, has uncovered a bidirectional volunteerism in cities. On one hand, there is a willingness, driven by various rationales, toward the monitoring of the public sphere by the sovereign. On the other hand, while the surveillance of the private sphere is facilitated through social media platforms and device interactions, it converts visibility into a means of gratification. This situation gives rise to a new urban commonality that eliminates the distinction between the private and public spheres in cities. The fact that socialization initiates more easily and transpires rapidly on a virtual ground and via virtual identities shifts the commonality over space onto a virtual plane as well.

The city is both the space where digital products and innovations first emerge and where they are most widely used. Hosting high population density -the driving force behind digital data production- it becomes the very locus of data. As the service sector expands in urban areas, it develops new networks to generate markets for itself. The city, as the space of connectivity, has turned into a global arena of competition through the management of connections. Naturally, the qualified human capital required by the digital sector resides in cities and continues to serve as the marketplace for its own production. Urban areas, where population size and density are continuously increasing, are producing innovations to adapt to the digital age and to transform its positive aspects into opportunities. Urban administrations, through the smart city approach and by leveraging the Internet of Things, employ digital tools to plan urban infrastructure, services, and livable environments. They integrate digital processes into policies aimed at enhancing the quality of life. While technological development

facilitates urban living, it also produces a dichotomy in which both the citizen and their data are commodified. Lefebvre (2015, p. 55) argues that urban knowledge is not limited to the past or what has been lived, it also encompasses future possibilities. Any understanding that aims to build what is functional for the city must include a vision of the future. Drucker (1995) asserts that managing the age of transformation is only possible through developing theories that respond to it -rather than denying it- warning that collapse is not far off otherwise. Capturing the language and spirit of the time requires the capacity to manage change. And that, in turn, necessitates an intellectual perspective capable of reshaping both governance and scale in response to transformation.

Considering the innovations that will persist in this field in the future, how local governments might transform along the axis of techno-feudalism, alongside the nascent nuances emerging in urban services, can be made the subject of distinct research. Discussions can be initiated wherein the changing perception of the phenomenon of locality and the center-local dichotomy will be brought back to the agenda.

Declaration

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