Where to, from resilience?
- An exploration of post-pandemic, digital pathways towards the "distribution of freedom"

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In August 2020, well into the pandemic, McKinsey heralded the new, 'new normal', breezily asserting that the recovery will be digital.

The digital economy was already growing, rapidly redrawing the geographies of development futures, when the pandemic struck.

What is clear, today, is that capitalism – contrary to the adage – is not in crisis; and that of the neo-liberal digital variety, more resilient than we may have imagined.

Much has been said about the new moment of reckoning – the pandemic as a portal from where we can choose either to go downhill as a global community, or emerge wiser. The unfortunate truth, though, is that the digital as a potential force for radical reorganisation of social power, has proven itself to be capital's handmaiden like no other.

I divide my talk today in 2 parts, elaborating on the implications of intelligence capitalism for development in the first, and a framework for freedom in the digital age in the second.

Part 1. The human condition in intelligence capitalism

i. Accelerating economic inequality in a datafied world

Even before the pandemic, the data bargains of platform capitalism had begun to engulf leisure, communication and solidarity, opening up new markets and commodifying things that were never in the realm of market transaction.

The data rush – as the new frontier – is not comparable to any other. Here, a handful of corporations – fastidiously aggregating, obsessively amassing and wildly recombining datasets – are the new imperialists. Deploying the intelligence capital they derive from data accumulation, they rearrange the entire value chain.

Intelligence capitalism thrives on unreasonable dreams – the start-up spirit that must conquer everything. It is no surprise then that it was ready to marshal its craft with renewed entrepreneurial zeal, when the pandemic threw the world into a tizzy.

What the analysis (from the WEF) tells us is that demand grew rapidly for services ranging from e-commerce and remote working technologies to online gaming and streaming. In early January 2021, the world's five biggest tech companies represented 23% of the S&P 500 by market capitalization. Big technology players are tipped to emerge from the pandemic with stronger, more diverse revenue streams and enhanced investment power. Barriers to entry in the digital marketplace are predicted to increase at an even faster pace. And the recovery – it is expected – will also give fresh impetus to large technology companies' acquisition of start-ups, as well as their expansion into other sectors —such as retail, healthcare, transportation and logistics.

Implications also flow to smaller firms in the form of higher costs and control of critical data and digital infrastructure, and financial stability for emerging and developing markets. Regardless of geography or market type, women-owned businesses – typically small and with limited ability to bear risks – have been more affected.

Automation was already reshaping labour markets, but the pandemic impelled a digital leap that puts the work force in many countries at huge risk of irrelevance. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs report estimates that automation may displace 85 million jobs in only five years.

The unevenness brought about by the strides of intelligence capitalism in the wealth of nations was already a matter of deep concern. Where we stand today, the rhetoric of recovery has only legitimised the big at the expense of the small. Those excluded from

digital resources have little choice but to forgo educational and employment opportunities of the global digital economy.

But the exclusion narrative is just one side of the livelihoods crisis.

A creeping takeover by centralised AI and block-chain based smart businesses of traditional agro-ecological systems already threatens local economic activity in many countries of the developing world.

The march of the digital has deepened the social crisis that commodifies everything, an issue that is often misframed as the unbounded capture by capital of the private spaces of the self. A justified disenchantment with the invasive DNA of intelligence capitalism does not, however, present a theoretically sound means to deal with the intelligence economy's penchant for data.

The crisis today is in the allocative and distributive foundations of the intelligence economy. Privacy-centric data practices may be possible to achieve with stringent data governance. But this would still leave the question of a fair resource regime for data and intelligence unanswered.

The data and AI economy functions today on a 'finders-keepers' logic – first movers with enormous market power own and control the vital resource of data that they colonise. This wild west directly translates into the unrealised productive potential of the digital for vibrant local economies, alternative platform imaginaries, and the creation of social and public value. It prevents nation states and small economic actors in the global value chain from acquiring the capabilities to participate in market exchange.

Meanwhile, intelligence capitalism markets its new plans through the rhetoric of trust, innovation and opportunity. Bio-resources are being datafied in a blatant disregard of the access and benefit sharing protocols of the Convention on Biodiversity. In the early months of pandemic last year, scientists sequenced and shared more than 32,000 viral genomes, enabling researchers to trace more quickly the origin of outbreaks. Today, these contributions and many more are locked up for the benefit of vaccine manufacturers who

wield the wherewithal to monetise them. Big Pharma is already donning the clothes of Big Tech, directing digital sequence technologies towards new breakthroughs in personalised medicine.

ii. The trials and tribulations of an unfree generation

Over its short history, a parasitic data market has carefully cultivated the voluntary servitude of its infinite consumers and innumerable workers. What the pandemic prised open from within the labyrinths of the digital network is the paradox of a connected sociality – in which, to be 'connected' is not the same as being socially embedded.

The technology that the born-digital generation flaunts as an integral piece of their self presents a dense entrapment of fleeting emotions, trolls, incursions, hyper-publicity, and social policing. As our research at IT for Change with nearly 1000 'post-millennials' (born from 1997 onwards) in South India found, a shocking gender conservatism is evident among Gen Z. The young women reported having to continuously self-fashion their online presence to meet standards of social desirability. To be authentic or vocal is a transgression that can prove to be costly.

The struggle for authenticity – that the 2020 Deloitte Global Millennial Survey found – presents not only an individualistic crisis, but a collective social pathology.

The pandemic has only deepened this tragic state of affairs. Prolonged lockdown loneliness and job loss stresses have been noted to result in higher rates of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. (WEF)

With the digital leap during the pandemic, and its attendant trends in the loss of continuing education, automation, reshoring of jobs, hollowing out of local economies, and precarious contracts, young people, especially in countries of the global south, face a highly vulnerable future. Labour market exclusions – accentuated along racial, caste, income and gender lines – are predicted to carry inter-generational consequences in terms of poverty and ill-health. The role of social media in disinformation and rising right wing populism

could also mean young people not only face the challenge of social isolation, but are also at risk of falling prey to the allure of extremism.

Research by the ETUI notes how gig work in online labour platforms needs to be examined for far-reaching psycho-social impacts. Monitored algorithmically and lacking in workplace social support, young workers in online platforms face constraints in building a collective voice. IT for Change's research during the pandemic with women microworkers at AMT shows how this plays out in cementing oppressive gender relations in the household and in transnational labour hierarchies.

As a workplace, AMT demands an exacting adherence, but enjoys absolute impunity. Women must learn to manage the platform's coercive disciplining, striving to meet its unknowable metrics. With the onset of the pandemic and resultant instabilities in household income, women's work on AMT becomes non-negotiable to making ends meet, even as its harshness is even more acute – with reducing jobs, falling pay, longer hours and the risk of suspension.

The turbulent future of pandemials (between ages 15 and 24) – harks back to a present that normalises techno-utopic views of frontier technologies, the fourth industrial revolution and more, hiding human misery in the language of opportunity and labeling human coping as resilient adaptation. The rhetoric of recovery hides the realpolitik of unfreedoms, the links between agentic choice and the unjust structures of the digital. It makes rebuilding seem like a linear progression – a loss that can be compensated, rather than a radical remedy that must confront an unsustainable system.
The couching of structural marginalisation and vulnerability within glorified discourses of resilience is indeed a staple part of the political economy of development – recall the celebration of the resilient east asian workers and the jugaad innovators in the slums of Dharavi.

iii. A sociality in crisis

The post-publics of a digitally transformed communicative rationality alter our cognitive circuit in profound ways. They engender a distance in social discourse, preventing inter-

subjective positionalities. They enable an intensified othering that is deeply divisive of the social fabric.

Women who were interviewed about austerity in the UK in a research study, used the language of feminism to argue the need to be resilient and make changes to one's lifestyle and have a positive mental attitude. They were indifferent to women disadvantaged by the macro economic shifts owing to their class and race, characterising them as 'bad subjects', unable to manage, and thus, undeserving of help.

Through these months of the pandemic many countries, including mine, have witnessed a troubling lack of empathy for minority citizens facing persecution. Blame and hate circulate relentlessly on social media. A weakening of civic solidarity and social cohesion in this emerging digital context goes hand in hand with massive social behavioural engineering perfected through the miracles of data-based profiling. The digital revolution – if hypothetically abstracted from privacy concerns – offers marketing nirvana: an endless cycle of direct, tailored advertising, and, in turn, feedback on the beings and doings of each target. The nudge, based on the continuous monitoring of human irrationality, is a perfected art form today, turning the homo economicus at the centre of classical economic thought on his head.

It is no surprise that behavioural nudging has so readily been embraced by the political class for the deplorable spread of misinformation.

As Robert Epstein, senior research psychologist at the American Institute for Behavioral Research and Technology remarks (PEW research) notes:

> "In 2030, democracy might look very much as it does now to the average citizen, but citizens will no longer have much say in who wins elections and how democracies are run. [S]earch suggestions can turn a 50/50 split among undecided voters into a 90/10 split – again, without people knowing they have been influenced."

iv. Resilience as techno-individualism

Neoliberalism – predating the platform society – gave rise to a “degraded” subject whose skills of resilience and adaptability may be enhanced, but whose autonomy and agency as an individual are fundamentally impoverished.

Governments across the world have turned to digital technologies to produce ‘self-reliant’ citizen subjects. Our collaborative research, ‘Voice or Chatter?’ in 2017 showed how The New Social Contract proposed by the Dutch government in the early days of egovernment in fact defines the “good citizen” as one who is able “to cope” by herself, and avoids placing “claims, demands and appeals against the government”, committing herself instead to “societal self-organization and initiatives.” ICTs were supposed to enable this shift to “active citizenship”. (Delia Dumitrica, Voice or Chatter).

Fast forward to the age of big data wizardry, and citizen ID projects, and we see a normalisation of the individuated citizen – sorted and marked.

Today, citizen scoring is not just the dark truth of the much-cited Chinese social credit system, but as the work of Data Justice Lab has shown, a bureaucratic tool deployed widely, including by local government in the UK. The use of drones and facial recognition technologies for clamping down on dissent has intensified the disciplining of citizens, emboldening governments, especially in the context of the pandemic, to legitimise rights violations.

Yet, the disciplined citizen must trust the state; especially its entrepreneurial decisions to privatise governance, datafy processes and automate decisions that dispossess and disempower.

Resilience and trust emerge as sought after value propositions – a social imagination modelled on cybernetics, reduced invariably to self-care and hygiene in the marketplace, and dutiful obedience in civic-public life.

Further, practices of the quantified self valorise the self-fashioning subject. Fitness tracking devices are an instantiation of a ‘biopolitics of the self’, nudging the self-quantifier to conform to pre-given standards of health and wellbeing. Truth is what is normalised

through a number – 10000 steps or some such fixed category – that attaches the subject to an identity that she must recognise and which others have to recognise in her. Rather than as explicit coercive discipline, biopower here follows a neoliberal modality of free choice and the promise of reward. Idealising data for the sake of data, it encapsulates the Socratic maxim; the unexamined life, or as in our context – the unmeasured life, is not worth living.

Rosalind Gill and Ngaire Donaghue reflect on how the neo-liberalisation of universities and increasing stress on academics, for instance, has seen a roll out of wellbeing services over apps for 'academics in crisis'. Academic labour is thus sought to be locked into a profoundly individualist framework for coping with the strains of the neoliberal academy, rather than aspire to systemic change or collective politics.

What we have seen through the pandemic is a reinforcement by the state and the market of this existential frame – a techno-economistic subjectivity that must rise up to the demands of neoliberal adaptability.

This certainly is not the resilience we are looking to.

And even as a cherished value, resilience cannot replace wellbeing, happiness and social thriving as civilizational drives.

The question is, can the digital deliver? Or as Gen Z would ask – is justice under techno-economistic subjectivity even a thing?

Pew research centre's report about democracy in the digital age, released just before the pandemic, carries the future gazings of leading scholars: It cites Mark Andrejevic, Professor of Media and Communication:

> "I see the forms of hyper-customization and targeting that characterize our contemporary information environment (and our devices and mode of information 'consumption') as fitting within a broader pattern of the systematic dismantling of social and political institutions (including public education, labor unions and social services) that build upon and help reproduce an understanding of interdependence

> that make the individual freedoms we treasure possible… These trends predate the rise of social media and would not have the purchase they do without the underlying forms of social and civic de-skilling that result from the offloading of inherently social functions and practices onto automated systems in ways that allow us to suppress and misrecognize underlying forms of interdependence, commonality and public good. I am not optimistic that anything short of a social/political/economic disaster will divert our course."

Here we are, in the midst of a pandemic, and our course in large parts remains unchanged. I am no pessimist, and I do see the silver linings – encouraging court orders and regulatory advances for gig workers, a groundswell of activism and organising, political shifts in electoral verdicts and more. But it does look like we need more than just disaster optimism.

Part 2. A framework for freedom in the digital age

So where do we go from here? How should the prowess of digital technologies be harnessed for human wellbeing and planetary sustainability?

I turn to Amartya Sen.. and his inspiring and prolific work on capabilities-as-freedoms.

In his famous conception of the capabilities approach, Amartya Sen argues why freedoms – as a person's ability to acquire the valuable functionings to realise a life that she values – constitute the right basis to assess human well being.

Through his famous formulation – "equality of what?" – Sen shows how when people across the world agitate to get more global justice, they are not clamoring for some kind of "minimal humanitarianism." He asserts that a theory of justice based on fairness should be directly and deeply concerned with the effective freedom – or capability – of people to achieve the lives they have reason to value.

Sen is concerned with injustice. He builds from an understanding of vulnerability that focuses on the deprivation of the opportunity to choose. Capabilities contribute directly to

making a person's life richer by extending the opportunities of choice or giving her more "effective freedom".

Effective freedom is about the real options that are accessible to the individual. It is less concerned with what the individual actually chooses.

Capabilities as effective freedoms are a powerful epistemic frame, admitting a non-idealised view of justice and accounting for the fundamental differences between human beings. Justice is only as important as the real possibilities for social realizations in the actual lives people are able to lead.

Sen urges a focus on the ***equity in the distribution of freedom***. This, he argues, is a more solid basis for what really matters than, say, a focus on just the distribution of incomes, which are merely means to other things. Quoting Marx, he concludes, "It is not surprising that Marx was so attracted by the social objective of – as he put it – "replacing the domination of circumstances and chance by the domination of individuals over chance and circumstances""[1]

In his repeated exploration of famines, Sen shows how the moral status of the market mechanism has to be related to the consequences of the market.

The hugely unsustainable planetary scale operations of intelligence capitalism reproduce structural injustice. The value deficit and institutional vacuum that legitimise this injustice are coercive – they present the subject of inequality no option other than to simply change their capacity to be resilient, to adapt. As data scholars have repeatedly shown, the corrective to overcome the excesses of the surveillance state and the impunity of data enclosures is not about individualised consent or digital literacy.

A cartography of change at this point must offer a pathway that leads us out of the techno-deterministic, empirically negligent, profit maximising, and socially and environmentally destructive digital paradigm.

1 D.McLellan, ed.,Karl Marx: Selected Writings, Oxford University Press,1977, p.190)

How can the capabilities approach, rooted in the equitable distribution of freedom, support the rebuilding of digital society? How can being and becoming in the digital paradigm bring social realizations that people have reason to value?

A transformed digital society that furthers ‘effective freedom’ for all must be attentive to three axiomatic points at this historical conjuncture.

1. The need for global digital justice principles.

In his critique of Rawls, Sen holds that the pursuit of ideal theory “inhibits comparative judgments of relative justice and injustice” (Yilmaz 2016). But he also admits that an ideal theory can help to bring out clearly the underlying principles involved, and this can, suitably adapted, ultimately help in practical decision-making as well (Sen, Values and Justice 2011).

The search for world justice according to Sen is a central challenge today “not merely because our lives are interconnected, but also because the very presence of our interconnections makes us inescapably interested in and involved with each other”.

The imperative for articulating the fundamental principles of global digital justice upon which institutions of digital society must be built is urgent. A patchwork of laws exist today at national levels, coexisting with another such patchwork of ethical frameworks, private standards and voluntary protocols. The multiscalar digital phenomenon that encompasses all aspects of public policy and social life needs global principles for a democratic, multilateral reality. This does not preclude the development of national and subnational principles, or the evolution of national institutions appropriate to the equitable distribution of freedoms in the digital age. Yet, as Sen argues forcefully, the distribution of the benefits in a global economy depends, among other things, on a variety of global institutional arrangements.

A non-negotiable starting point for any exercise in principles development for global digital justice is the assessment of the current state of injustice.

The ability of developing countries and their citizens to participate in and benefit equally from the digital economy and society is constrained hugely. This is not only on account of the lack of shared political control over critical digital infrastructure. Innumerable barriers exist - trade agreements on ecommerce that squelch the market prospects of small, local economic actors; a fundamentalist ‘data flows’ rhetoric that fuels data colonialism, preventing the use of data for local development; the lawless appropriation of public and social data by the private sector in humanitarian and development projects; the destabilisation of older rules in a new data context, such as the Access and Benefit Sharing framework under the Nagoya Protocol; the absence of an effective tax regime for digital corporations, the lack of financing for technological self-determination; the inability to enforce rules on Big Tech; and so on.

The role of global principles and a new international institutional design for the digital therefore cannot be overemphasised. As Sen argues, a market system can generate very distinct results depending on various enabling conditions (the distribution of physical resources, how human resources are developed, what rules of business relations prevail, what social-security arrangements are in place, and so on). But these enabling conditions themselves depend critically on economic, social, and political institutions that operate nationally and globally.

Senian thought would also urge that principles development for digital justice, like any other normative process, be based on public reasoning. The digital conjuncture presents incredulous affordances for democratic deliberation and critical scrutiny. It is of course vital that this potential is not romanticised, but seen as emerging through the very process of institution development for digital justice, ensuring the participation of the socially marginalised.

But digital affordances for building new public agoras are also not merely a pie in the sky.

While the European municipalism movements have held us all in awe and hope, closer home for me, the citizen-government collaboration during the pandemic in the state of Kerala shows that in very different contexts, the institutions of democracy can come close to addressing unfreedoms, aiming to remove individual deprivation through deliberative

and collaborative methods. As the rest of the country helplessly watched hungry migrants take to the road in the first wave, and more recently, allowed the laws of randomness to take over, Kerala used frugal technological measures – using civic partnerships, local businesses and academic institutions – for informing and educating, and patient and disease tracking and management. A large pool of local coders were able to build an AI based search engine that filters out unscientific content and misinformation (Sarkar 2021). A forceful narrative around valuable functionings emerges in this case that exhorts us to explore further the content and process of techno-political principles development in local contexts.
This brings me to the second axiom.

2. The need for a governance framework to distribute data value.

Data and AI are key cornerstones for the capability of individuals and societies – resources without which valuable functionings cannot be achieved in the digital age. However, the materialities of intelligence capitalism generate profound unfreedoms in the economy.

The injustices of data enclosures have increasingly prevented market participation of small actors; for instance, retailers, small traders and vendors – not only because creeping digitalisation has pushed consumers online, but also because Big Tech has systematically cannibalised small start ups, diversifying into new territories and killing competition and local innovation through vast arsenals of preemptive patents.

Weighing in on global justice, Sen eloquently argues how it would be incorrect to go with global arrangements that are simply better for everyone than no cooperation at all would be. The clinching question for him is whether there is a fair division of the benefits. This assumes significance given that global digital cooperation today is synonymous with market capture by Big Tech, and a predatory takeover of public institutional data for private profit. Thus, preserving the non-excludable use of data and socialising data value are preconditions for the distribution of freedom in a digitalising world order.

Governance of data value chains is also a vital priority at the national level. State policy needs to be responsive to how the tectonic shifts in the digital economy changes – as Sen

underlines – the subjective wellbeing of less powerful citizens. This entails policy thinking along multiple lines – focussed on the possible ways to enhance the equitable distribution of livelihoods freedom on a society-wide scale that can radically alter the outcome of local and global economic relations, including for those performing unpaid care work.

Data value chains also need deep democratic debates on the limits of data as a commodity and the lengths to which AI applications can go in commodifying human experience – both, principle level issues for digital justice.

3. The need for a new social cognitiveness.

Techno-structures penalise, reward, nudge and effectively orchestrate social behaviour. Their impacts have led to a subterranean shift in social cognitiveness – the connection between thinking or consciousness and various biological/psychological and socio-cultural and linguistic aspects.

We noted earlier a societal scale crisis of authenticity, and the worrisome faultlines of the governmentalities unleashed by intelligence capitalism. Personal identity in this paradigm is but the residue of technoeconomistic constructs – behavioural economics optimised for disciplinary ends – that is then reified in a multiplicity of registers. The individual and the group are derivatives – the amalgams synthesised and summoned through machines. This suggests a breakdown at the level of identity formation and inter-subjective interaction.

There is thus an urgency to reexamine techno-structures for an ethical evaluation of their specific operations. Such an assessment is crucial for a fuller realisation of individual digital functionings.

Underpinning Sen's notion of capabilities is an ontological conception of a relational society. An individual's capabilities emerge from the intertwining of individual-level capacities and the individual's relative position vis-a-vis social structures that provide reasons and resources for particular behaviors. Scholars have argued that it would thus be fair to say that the entire capabilities-as-freedoms framework depends on the one central freedom or capability of being able to sustain a personal identity.

In so far as techno-structures undermine individual agency for reflexive self scrutiny and self expression, they interfere with the very basis of the individual's social identity and its independence.

Worldover, scholars and activists are calling for algorithmic transparency, explainability and accountability. They have argued the outlawing of specific technologies – including FRTs, predictive modelling in credit markets and classrooms. Citizens have mobilised around state excesses and brought pressure on social media platforms for wider social accountability.

The enduring freedom to sustain a socially engaged personal identity is predicated on how global to local actions can rescue our collective cognitiveness from the unfreedoms of digitality.

The task is cut out, but the road is long.

To conclude..

Our assessment of digital society in the pandemic perhaps confirms many things we already knew. But it also allows us to be informed about the shifting ground of social power and the structures that sustain inequality.

In these months, we have seen distress and felt inspiration.

As we contemplate upon rebuilding, it may therefore be worthwhile asking – Where to, from resilience?

That would give us the power to dream beyond recovery, into the zone of the more elusive but life-giving experience of freedom.