

Reframing AI Governance through a Political Economy Lens

Background Note

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Organized by IT for Change and Transnational Institute

The entry of generative AI applications in the digital marketplace has intensified recent public debates about AI. Silicon Valley's 'move fast' techno-optimism is now under the scanner. Policymakers have also been tailoring their responses to this public mood. [Stanford University's 2023 AI Index](#) reveals that across the globe, 37 bills on AI governance were passed into law during 2022 alone. In the [US](#) and [EU](#), political leaders are anxious about the absence of guardrails on powerful AI systems.

Even as the mainstream narrative is moving towards tighter regulatory regimes for AI, much of this ignores the immediate impacts of AI models on the socially marginalized and more vulnerable populations. It is clear that informed concerns about technological singularity or the risks of an AI future must not distract from necessary discussions on the institutionalized power structures framing the debate.

What seems to be missing in the policy discourse is a political economy analysis that is attentive to how the interplay of financialization, dominant trade and IP regimes, and technocratic capture of democratic decision making have consolidated a neo-colonial global AI economic order. Digital corporations with unprecedented levels of market capitalization have unmatched capacity to make [fixed capital investments](#) in computing and physical infrastructures essential for AI innovation. Cross-border data flows under current trade and IP regimes enable a no-holds-barred propertization of digital intelligence and enclosure of public knowledge. And notwithstanding the innumerable AI ethics initiatives, the deployment of algorithmic intelligence – whether in the sphere of market, state, or society – is, today, based on the dogma of profit imperative and utility maximization. Thus, even as the dread of AI dystopia has spawned regulatory conversations, much of this focuses on making things just about palatable for a neoliberal social order through a nominalist rule book; the idea that you can have rights without politics. In fact, the buzz around open AI systems is symptomatic of this problem, enabling Big Tech players to free ride on public goods, while evading public scrutiny for their AI development, thus reducing openness to a shallow gesture politics.

What the Roundtable Seeks to Achieve

A humane and just AI system requires a radical restructuring of the global political economic regime of knowledge, innovation and development. In an era characterized by system-wide platformization and datafication, a reactionary clamor for a pause on AI technology development is not useful; nor will strategies for inclusive techno-design be enough.

The need of the hour is a robust structural justice approach to AI governance that is able to articulate the pathways for multiscalar institutional transformation. Through this roundtable, IT for Change and Transnational Institute (TNI) would like to bring together a small group of scholars and

activists to examine the building blocks of a transformative approach to AI governance.

We would like to unpack and examine the political economy considerations in AI governance and discuss new institutional arrangements to advance AI as a catalyst of generative and accountable economies and societies. The one-day event, planned for 28 June 2023, will bring a small group of participants in-person at Amsterdam, along with online participants, to zero-in on the current rules and regimes that act as barriers to a just AI economy.

We invite 200-400 word provocations reflecting on one or more of the following questions or adjacent debates aligned to the concerns outlined in the note:

1. From a structural justice standpoint, what are the blind spots in prevailing AI governance approaches (global, regional and national levels)? How should we challenge the hegemonic narrative?
2. To realize the vision of generative and accountable AI economies and societies, does a human rights-based AI governance approach hold the answers? Why or why not?
3. How can AI infrastructural capabilities be democratized? What changes would this entail in legal and regulatory approaches? (e.g. trade regimes, IP regimes, controls on financial capital, infrastructural financing, etc.)
4. How can AI research and development encode values of open innovation to promote just AI economies? What are the tensions in coding for the common good?
5. How can we move towards contextually-embedded ideas of AI innovation based on small data / community-controlled models?
6. How do we broaden the debate on democratic oversight and public scrutiny of AI systems in order to ensure effective balancing of competing interests and prevent adverse inclusion?
7. What would it take to build an AI economic order that preserves and promotes the development sovereignty of the majority world?