

Business Standard

Being human is so yesterday

Late 20th century capitalism had made human identity unstable and unsustainable

Sayandeb Chowdhury April 07, 2017 Last Updated at 22:41 IST

In the very second stanza of *The Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) — her game-changing thesis about feminism and identity politics — American feminist philosopher Donna Haraway claimed that the boundary between social reality and science fiction is an *optical illusion*. Late 20th century capitalism, she contended, had made human identity unstable and unsustainable and pushed humans — in life as in labour — into a war with machines. Her counteroffensive was in bringing forth the idea of the cyborg — “creatures simultaneously animal and machine” — a species without gender, without history and without an originary mythology. Not that this idea was entirely new to science fiction; Karel Capek’s *Rossum’s Universal Robots* (the source of the “robot”) did venture into this possibility much early. Ms Haraway politicises the possibility, infusing the cyborg with an entrenched radicalism than seeing them merely as placid humanoids.

In three decades since, cyborgs seem to have arrived. But from a different register. The new book from Yuval Noah Harari, whose *Sapiens* was a global phenomenon, calls itself *Homo Deus* or godmen. In this book, Mr Harari predicts a supra-wired future. In Mr Harari’s future world order, humans will agree to give up meaning in exchange for power and a few extremely powerful techno-tsars — godmen — will control 99.9 per cent of others by controlling the information they generate. In short, we will be equal parts cyborgs, but as is the rule, some cyborgs will be more equal, way more equal, than others.

And the process is well underway. At Stockholm’s a high-tech office block Epicenter — a deeply meaningful name if there ever was one — employees are inserted with a rice-grain sized Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) chip on the fleshy parts of the their palm, at the bottom of their thumb. At the moment the chip eases things that a biometric card will otherwise do — open the door at the wave of a hand, run the photocopier, get you a coffee and give you access to other, similarly-chipped smart machines which seem to know what you want from them before you do. But it will only get more controlling from here. Thus chipped, you will become available for surveillance every nanosecond you are alive, while the chip records and sends real-time data to a server buried in the Arctic. You are slowly little more than a cyborg. You are a cyborg slave.

This happened last year. And last year is another country. Last month, the formidable Elon Musk announced he was backing Neuralink, a company that hopes to develop a close merger between “biological intelligence and digital intelligence”. Be under no illusion that this new company is a playground for a billionaire who wants to squander some dollars on a fancy start-up. Given the success of PayPal, Tesla and SpaceX, Musk will make a case of the new company too, and before you know, an innocent and colourful headphone that promises to connect your brain straight to a computer might be on offer, first and exclusively, on Amazon. You will thus be twice wired — first through your flesh and then through your cerebrum. Whatever you call it, it is no more in the realm of being human. Precisely what Mr Harari predicts.

Epicenter and Mr Musk represent growing, predatory corporations that cannibalise on bio-data. This is not the bio-data of your education, schooling, experience or salary. They are so yesterday. We will individually and together generate an ocean of big data, available for mining and controlled, *Matrix*-like, from the new information Swiss banks — which will then sell them to a handful of companies for astounding profits. This is the data of your being a human, a record of your life as a living organism. Led by Facebook, all social media thrive on an ever-hungry global industry of big-data mining, which, when put through a complicated mathematical process, can predict human behaviour and political outcomes sufficiently enough to manipulate them. In other words, the more sophisticated and connected a society is, the more readily it compromises freedom and choice, individuality and liberty. It is actually quite simple. The more you reveal yourself through the binary codes that make up our digital world, the less you are capable of working outside the

prophesy of data. This is exactly how Donald Trump won the US presidential elections, backed by Russian hackers and a company called Cambridge Information Group. If under monopoly capitalism, you were reduced to being just a placid and aphasiac consumer, under cyborg capitalism you are as good as the data you are able to generate.

This is the new biopolitics — a state of supreme control of your body and mind from surface to spleen — that is deeper than the predictions of French philosopher Michel Foucault and way more precarious than that of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. This is posthumanism. What Anthropocene is to climate, posthumanism is to being human. And if you still think it is an optical illusion, you may want to change your Google Glass.

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