



Understanding our world: end or new phase of capitalism?

The global economy is undergoing a major transformation. New economic powers are asserting themselves more each day, not hesitating to enter the political sphere in a spectacular and even outrageous manner.

The analysis of power dynamics and forms of power in food systems conducted by hungerexplained [[see our thematic page](#)] has already highlighted the particularly important role played recently by intellectual property rights [[read](#)], digital development [[read](#)], and financialisation [[read](#)].

These powerful drivers of change, and many more, are at work across the entire economy, shaping the evolution of the liberal capitalism that dominated the world in recent decades towards a new form that is still the subject of debate among specialists.

It seemed important to us to refer to this debate and to models for this evolution put forward in the economic literature, as it has significant consequences on food systems. To do so, we will consider three models introduced by various authors.

Techno-feudalism ? ...

In the fourth volume of Octuor, Professor Gold¹ pointed out that the ‘**common people**’ lived in a world where they were less and less the owners of the objects they used daily and for which they paid royalties to ‘**modern-day suzerains**’ for the right to use them – ‘**software, phones, music, images, vehicles – the list grows longer every day.**’ He compared this state of affairs to a kind of ‘**feudalism**’.

Perhaps he was inspired by his conversations or readings, among which, we will never know, an article by Jodi Dean in 2020 in the L.A. Review of Books [[read](#)] or the works of the numerous researchers who have delved into the question she addresses, that of the evolution of the dominant mode of operation of the global economy.

¹ Maetz, M., Deus ex machina, Octuor Tome 4, novel, 337 p., Vérone éditions, Paris, 2020 (in French).

To provide arguments in favour of her thesis on the emergence of a technological feudalism (or techno-feudalism), Dean quotes Lanier² observing the emergence of 'peasants and lords', a phenomenon that gained importance as a 'a handful of tech companies have become ever richer and more extractive, turning their owners into billionaires on the basis of the cheap labour of their workers, the free labour of their users, and the tax breaks bestowed on them by cities desperate to attract jobs', all leading to what Morozov describes as a 'hyper-modern form of feudalism'.³



In this economy of networks, if we want to continue with the comparison with feudalism, the 'peasants' freely choose their 'lord'. The more 'peasants' he has, the more attractive he becomes, triggering a snowball effect that accelerates the concentration of 'peasants' around a 'lord', thus increasing his power.

Dean compares today's digital platforms to water mills in the Middle Ages. Users rush to them as peasants did to mills to have their grain ground. These platforms are accumulators of wealth, not so much – as Dean writes – because of the value created by the few employees operating them, but by the rent collected through a wide range of rent-extraction tools (software, smartphones...) though monopoly, accepted coercion, and the gift of 'natural resources' (data) appropriated and exploited by the 'lord'. This rent stems from the fact that what users 'pay' (in different ways) has nothing to do with the low production cost of what they 'purchase'.

Dean could have, like other authors, compared platforms to clearings and their land, and to the relative security once offered by the small group of soldiers led by the lord. She could have followed Y. Varoufakis in asserting that digital platforms, strongholds of the new 'suzerains', now replace the market, one of the typical institutions of liberal capitalism, and that 'profit, the engine of capitalism,

² Lanier, J., [You are not a gadget: a manifesto](#), Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2010.

³ Morozov, E., [Critique of techno-feudal reason](#), New Left Review, 2022.

is replaced by its feudal predecessor: rent',⁴ with the traditional holders of capital themselves becoming the 'vassals' of platform owners who may sometimes grant them and others a portion of their 'cloud' as a fief, thus 'placing rent above profit'.

... or another stage of capitalism?

However, in the ongoing debate, not everyone agrees with this model. For instance, N. Gane and J. Gilbert criticise the concept of techno-feudalism as described by Varoufakis and his rejection of other terms found in the literature: 'hyper-capitalism, platform capitalism, or rentier capitalism.'

Gane believes that Varoufakis' analysis is too schematic and overlooks what differentiates the current situation from feudalism. One key difference is that the large companies of the 'lords' are now publicly traded, and the 'serfs' can freely choose their 'suzerain' and change if they wish.⁵ Varoufakis paradoxically sees this possibility as a source of opposition, resistance, and change through 'cloud mobilisation' and other means, all arising from mechanisms typical of liberal capitalism (such as investment or disinvestment of capital, or consumers changing their consumption choices) [\[read\]](#).

In any case, what may be most important for us, 'ordinary people', is that the economy is changing, as is increasing the scale and speed of financial resource accumulation.

Just remember that the massive development of digital platforms was enabled by the extraordinary flow of financial resources created following the 2008 financial crisis through the central banks' quantitative easing policies.⁶ This influx allowed these new companies to invest without risk, free from the normal profitability requirement. In fact, their stock value increased based solely on the projection of future profitability as their user base grew, gradually making them able to capture a rent (profits?) through an increasingly detached economic model from actual production processes.⁷

This made it possible for these new firms to use the cloud for implementing a system based on

- connecting 'traditional' production companies with potential buyers (primarily consumers), and charging for it,

⁴ Varoufakis, Y., *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism?* London: Bodley Head, 2023.

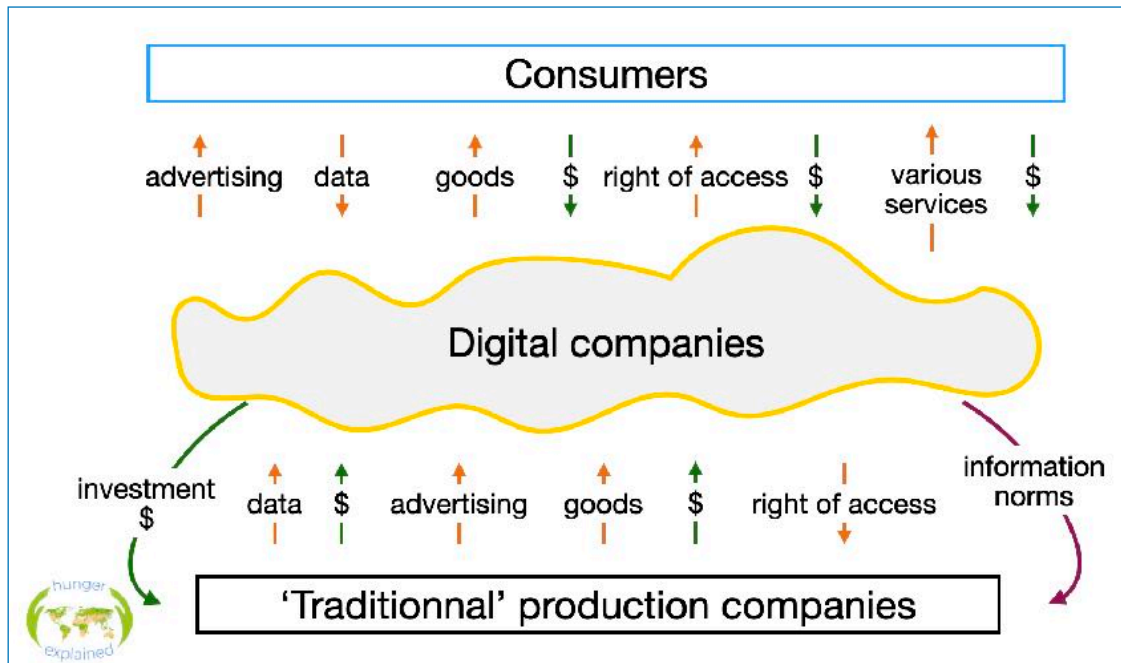
⁵ While having, however, to face some unpleasant consequences, as our readers will not fail to say.

⁶ **quantitative easing:** Policy that consisted in central banks massively purchasing public debt and other financial assets in order to inject money into the economy and stimulate growth.

⁷ In just a few years, as early as in 2018, seven out of the ten largest companies quoted at the stock exchange were digital corporations [\[read\]](#).

- advertising revenue generated from the traffic resulting from the brain time that these new companies were able to capture among internet users (including through methods like the zero-price effect)⁸, and
- the valuation of their assets, particularly the huge volume of data they are able to collect and analyse [[read pp. 5 and 6](#)] for informing and influencing the activities of production companies (see **diagram 1**).

Diagramme 1: A new stage of capitalism



In other words, these new companies are some kind of meta-corporations creating a new layer capable of dominating ‘classic’ capitalist companies (from the heights of their ‘cloud’ – aptly named) and extracting what can be likened to a form of rent from their intermediary role. In fact they are like massive virtual supermarkets, where each consumer moves in isolation within their own bubble (the bubble effect being particularly pronounced in the case of individual consumption of music through headphones, films and series, or virtual reality).

This extractive layer situated above pre-existing production companies places them in a position of dependence in their interactions with an increasingly individualistic clientele whose consumption is shaped by ‘influencers’ operating in cyberspace. Moreover, this layer is able to collect and capitalise on information circulating within society.⁹

⁸ The **zero price effect** : his effect comes from the fact that demand for a good or service whose price is very low, increases significantly if it is made available for free (at zero price), because consumers perceive the benefit drawn from this good or service as much higher than the savings they make [[read](#)]. Such goods or services therefore strongly attract the attention of consumers and boost site traffic, thus raising the value of the firm managing the digital platform.

⁹ Wark, M., [Capital Is Dead, is this something worse?](#) London. Verso, 2019, 2021.

It seems, therefore, that we are rather facing in this model a new stage of capitalism that fits into a historical evolution that has seen the emergence of supermarkets and takes advantage of technological development (digital) to create and exploit platforms, than a technological neo-feudalism, even though some of its characteristics may remind analysts of those of the feudal era.

J. Gilbert characterises this stage by ‘a number of very wealthy corporations accumulating vast quantities of capital by virtue of their control of platforms enjoying a near-monopoly position in their respective domains, and exercising a particular capacity both to accumulate capital and to influence the behaviour of users through their deployment of data-gathering algorithmic technologies’ [\[read\]](#).

The capitalism of finitude

Based on a historical and more geopolitical reading of the various shapes assumed by capitalism since the 16th century, the French historian and economist A. Orain distinguishes in his book ‘Le monde confisqué – Essai sur le capitalisme de la finitude (XVIe–XXIe siècle)’ [\[read in French\]](#)¹⁰ an alternation between phases of liberal capitalism and so-called ‘capitalism of finitude’.

He characterises **liberal capitalism** by the perspective of ‘the advent of universal material well-being resulting from the free market’, which is manifested by a worship of competition and competitiveness, innovation, and progress. Orain identifies two main periods when this capitalism reigned supreme: between 1815 and 1880, and between 1945 and 2010 (labelled neoliberal after 1980, with its advanced movement of liberalisation and privatisation, its independent central banks, and almost total dismantling of tariffs). In the first of these periods, the dominant power, ensuring inter alia freedom of movement on the seas, was Great Britain, while in the second, it was the United States.

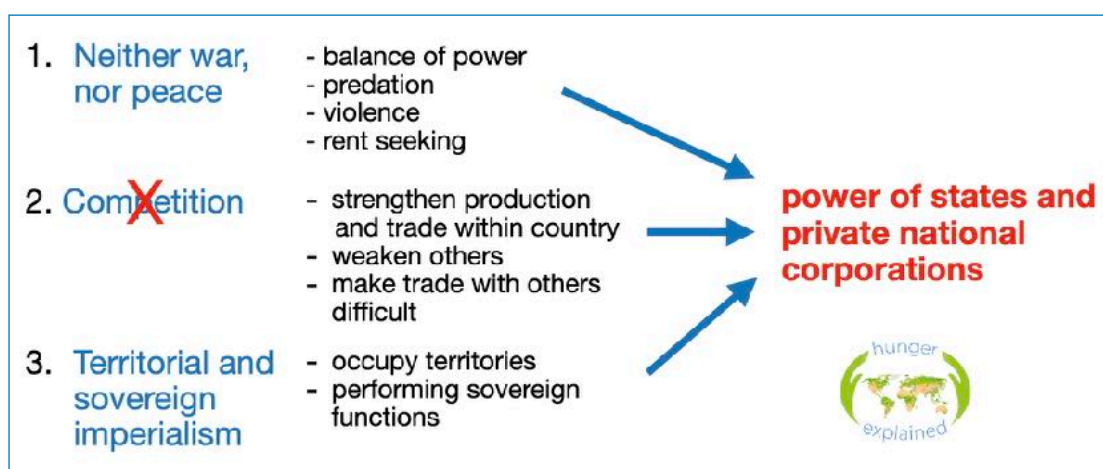
According to Orain, the capitalism of finitude is based on the recognition of a world with limited resources that require states and businesses to quickly lay claim to as many of them as possible, much like the adventurers and trading companies of the age of great discoveries or like the colonial powers of the 19th century. Nowadays, ‘the limitation and scarcity of living organisms, minerals and metals... lead to one main conclusion: engaging in unbridled competition to seize the last available lands and oceanic plateaus’, propelling the world into a new age of capitalism of finitude. The development of this type of capitalism is also a result of the collapse of the current politico-economic system (threats to the hegemonic military-economic dominance of the United States, dormant World Trade Organization, emergence of a multipolar world, etc.).

¹⁰ The Confiscated World; Essay on the Capitalism of Finitude (16th-21st century).

For Orain, this capitalism is based on:

- (i) 'a situation that is neither war nor peace' where power dynamics, predation, violence, and rent-seeking are omnipresent and must ensure 'preserving or increasing the power of states and private companies';
- (ii) 'a rejection or abolition of the principle of competition'¹¹ and a decision to 'coordinate production and trade... by making trade outside imperial silos very expensive';¹² and,
- (iii) 'a territorial and sovereign imperialism' by way of the occupation of territories (land, sea, space, and cyberspace) by large corporations using networks of warehouses¹³ and exercising 'sovereign functions (armaments, submarine cables, satellites, information manipulation)' (see diagram 2).

Diagramme 2: The capitalism of finitude



based on [Orain, 2025](#).

These characteristics, geopolitical as much as economic, give a particular meaning to the actions and statements of the new US President, Trump,¹⁴ which are too often and wrongly portrayed as inconsistent and surprising. They also provide an explanatory framework for the presence around Trump of a group of billionaires holding quasi-monopolistic multinational companies with a strong digital component.

¹¹ For Peter Thiel, founder of PayPal and Palantir, 'Capitalism is based on the accumulation of capital. In a context of perfect competition, however, all profits are eliminated by competition'. For him, accumulating capital means having resources to finance innovation and envision long-term programs [\[read\]](#).

¹² In total violation of the rules of the currently stalled World Trade Organisation and with the view of securing essential supplies from 'friendly' countries and reduce a potential dependency on other 'imperial silos' formed by other countries.

¹³ In a recent book [\[read\]](#), Q. Slobodian highlights the proliferation of enclaves and economic zones (from 176 in 1986 to 5,400 in 2018) where laws of the states in which they are located are not respected, democracy is disregarded, and companies are ruling.

¹⁴ Threats against competitors (but also traditional allies), imposed financial and trade sanctions, declared territorial claims, etc.

This framework also gives a strong meaning to the expansionist tendencies of the other major 'imperial silo', China, with its Belt and Road Initiative, its ports and warehouses, with its aspirations to control the area delimited by the 'U-Shaped Line' (sometimes referred to as the Nine-Dash Line) delineating a portion of the South China Sea through which a significant portion of international trade transits, or even with the crossing of another crucial commercial point – the Suez Canal, controlled at least partly by the Houthis – by Chinese merchant ships protected by the Chinese navy based in Djibouti, as well as with the quasi-monopoly exercised by China over certain fish reserves which the United States considers a threat to ocean security.

If, as Orain believes, we are entering a new period of capitalism of finitude – and many indicators suggest this – we can expect the worst in terms of peace, inequality, and welfare of the majority of the world population (with consumer interests coming after those of monopolistic companies), as well as with respect to our environment.

What are the consequences of the ongoing evolution?

It is still too early to measure the impact of current transformations. However, some signals suggest that it will be significant if current trends continue. It is therefore necessary to be vigilant and track changes as they occur and grow in magnitude.

In the field of politics

One of the effects that can already be observed is that people's behaviour can be modified in various areas, not only in terms of consumption, but also in the political arena where it leads to a spectacular rise in what is generally referred to as 'populism', a movement that exploits inequalities created and frustrations of the poorest. This could result in dramatic and sometimes paradoxical political changes.

This concern is well illustrated by the election, by a majority of voters including the poorest population groups, of the wealthiest pro-rich government in the history of the United States (and the world), with its 13 billionaires [[read](#)]. But this is not an isolated fact. Just remember the election of the Argentine president in 2023 who, since then, has implemented radical anti-social policies that have plunged the majority of the population who elected him into poverty.

In the domain of food and agriculture

Hungerexplained has already had the opportunity to reflect on certain consequences and risks for food systems brought about by growing digitalisation [[read here](#) and [here](#)] and financialisation [[specifically read pp. 11 to 13](#)]: increasing dominance of the private sector, exclusion of the weakest and poorest, and short-termism in particular.

Besides this, the emergence of influencers in cyberspace is acknowledged by both companies and observers as a more effective (and perhaps less costly) way of advertising. The talks made by influencers – often perceived as close to the population, living like them, and more sincere and credible than the companies that finance them – are better received than traditional advertising. They have become part of the daily experience of social networks users and they rely on a wide range of tools (videos, images, sketches, humour, etc.) and are often seen as advice being given by a ‘friend’, as they are communicated in a culturally and generationally proximate manner, and include an element of entertainment [\[read\]](#).

Conclusion

The answer to the title question is clearly: **no, capitalism is not dead**, it is evolving, entering a **new phase that, in some respects, resembles the feudalism of the past and mercantilist and colonial capitalism of nearer times**. This new phase is probably some kind of a combination of the three models we have reviewed.

This mix likely reflects the diverse objectives and contradictions among the people in charge in major countries, chiefly the US.

It will be important to remain vigilant about the direction this evolution will take and what impact this will have on food systems.

Primarily, it will be necessary to monitor particularly the likely strengthening of private sector influence, the new forms that digitalisation could take (especially artificial intelligence), as well as the role that finance and... politics will play in these changes.

[Materne Maetz](#)
(February 2025)



To know more :

- Orain, A., [Le monde confisqué – Essai sur le capitalisme de la finitude \(XVIe–XXIe siècle\)](#), Le Présent de l’histoire, Flammarion, 2025 (in French).
- Gilbert, J., [Techno–feudalism or platform capitalism? Conceptualising the digital society](#), European Journal of Social Theory, 27(4), 561–578, 2024.
- Gane, N., [Capitalism is capitalism, not technofeudalism. Journal of Classical Sociology](#), 0(0), 2024.
- Dean, J., [Neofeudalism: The End of Capitalism?](#) Los Angeles Review of Books, 2020.

Selection of past articles on [hungerexplained](#) related to the topic

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- [Private economic power in food systems and its new forms](#), 2022.
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