

# From Milk & Honey to Machine Masters: A Critical Assessment of the AI Paradox

## Abstract

*Is AI going to bring us to the proverbial land of milk and honey, or will our children one day be slaves to their algorithmic overlords? The intersection of AI and democracy is paradoxical. On the one hand, this novel technology holds the promise of a utopia—a world where human beings enjoy a contemplative life, freed from the drudgery of labour. On the other, its unregulated use has the potential to exacerbate the flaws of industrial and post-industrial society, entrenching hierarchies, enforcing uniformity, and engendering mass soullessness. In this context, leadership is the path a society walks. The rapid advancement and banalization of Artificial Intelligence present modern liberal democracies with both opportunities—to heal democratic wounds and deepen participation—and critical risks that could precipitate democratic backsliding or transform our institutions into something perverse. This essay explores how AI is being deployed across the Western world through a selection of current case studies. It asks if AI serves as an instrument of inclusion and empowerment, or if it is steering societies toward the abyss of moral decline and institutional erosion. To frame this inquiry, we problematize the very concepts of “liberal democracy” and “artificial intelligence,” drawing on crucial political thinkers like Montesquieu, Tocqueville, Mill, and Fareed Zakaria and key AI authors such as Joseph Weizenbaum, Nicholas Carr and Kai Fu Lee. Our goal is twofold: first, to pinpoint where we stand today in the AI-driven landscape of power, equity, and governance; second, to critically evaluate the responses of key players — including regulatory decisions such as the novel EU AI act and Canada’s 2022 AI act. In doing so, we seek to map where democracies stand at the nexus of AI and liberty to illuminate the possible futures that these changing times may hold and propose a way forward.*

## The AI Paradox

AI is all around us, from the way we find love through the way we work to the way we conduct warfare. It is the software of the future and the present. It has pervaded our culture in ways we hadn't thought possible.

Liberal Democracy can itself be conceived as a software of sorts, a social software – a system of laws, norms and institutions coded with the mission to oppose tyranny and enhance individual freedom. Depending on how humans wield it, AI may *update* democracy – enabling stronger participation and productivity – or a *virus* hitting the system's motherboard.

The future hinges on how one defines democracy, how one defines AI, and what one can expect from the development of technology and society. The future will largely reflect the decisions of the present and how decision-makers and civil society chose to think and act about AI. To think politically about AI starts with thinking ethically – It is not just about what can be automated, but what *should be* – deontology. That was the point of Joseph Weizenbaum's work: To question not just the technical, but also the moral limits of Artificial Intelligence (1976, p.x). It is also a point underlined by William Haselberger and Inês Gregório, that AI does not absolve us from the responsibility of ethical thought, of considering what is right and wrong (2024).

Weizenbaum argued that the automation of human judgement could lead to the flattening of the rich depth human reason, enabling and reinforcing repressive structures rather than freeing humanity ([Tarnoff, 2023](#)) Harari mirror this warning since he sees AI's potential to upend the ideals of liberty in democratic societies ([Harari, 2018](#)). Herein lies the tension – the promise of empowerment versus the threat of oppression – is the very heart of the AI Paradox.

Could Liberal Democracy itself be overcome, as a project, by something superior? Perhaps "Enhanced Democracy"? AI is a tool that can – and has been – leveraged to target large audiences and propagate narratives and ideas. This is particularly effective when coupled with social media. Be that as it may, if AI is to be channelled as a message spreader and a social behaviour accelerator – without heightening polarization – democratic societies must reach a minimal consensus. Can we say with certainty that such a consensus exists?

AI's increased relevance raises many challenges and concerns to liberal democracies, including the possibility it may get out of our hands, undermining democratic sovereignty. AI progresses – in the private sector and the criminal world – much faster than governments can hope to regulate it. After China's Sputnik moment in 2016 (Lee, 2018, p.89 ) the one-party regime challenged Western Democracies for technological dominance.

In this essay, we confront *The AI Paradox* by weighing these dystopian and utopian possibilities. Drawing on thinkers from Tocqueville and Turing to Weizenbaum and Harari, and comparing AI governance in the EU, Canada, South Korea, and Taiwan, we ask: **Will AI serve as an upgrade or a virus for our democracy?** The stakes could not be higher.

The following sections put forward the perspective of liberal democracy as a freedom enhancing software, outline some of the perspectives on the potentialities and dangers of AI, address some of the current positive and negative uses of AI and then explore AI frameworks and approaches in liberal democracies.

## Liberal Democracy as Social Software

To understand what the potential effects of AI on Democracy are, we must first understand what democracy is and, more specifically, Liberal Democracy. In the 1990s, Fareed Zakaria wrote a seminal essay on illiberal democracy, highlighting that what we know in the West as Democracy is Liberal Democracy, *i.e.*, a combination of Representative Democracy with Constitutional Liberalism (Zakaria, 1992).

Constitutional Liberalism results from a piecemeal evolution in the West, a certain Anglo-American Tradition of Liberty (Espada, 2016) whose immediate roots are the Dutch Republic (Zakaria, 2024). It is the Tradition espoused by the likes of Montesquieu, Tocqueville and Madison, whose main concern, it can be argued, was – and for us still is – the avoidance of Despotism and the defence of Liberty.

This is key to understand, modern democracy is not meant to reflect the results of the unfiltered popular will. It is a social technology meant to ensure that no one can tyrannize the rights of others. If we understand Liberal Democracy as a social technology to prevent despotism and promote individual liberty, then it's only fair to ask whether AI can upgrade this technology, effectively acting as a software

update for Liberal Democracy. Or – keeping with the same analogy – if it is a virus, a Trojan Horse of sorts that will shut down democracy byte by byte (pun intended).

For John Stuart Mill, *“[t]he only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good, in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it.”* (1859, p.19)

If democracy is a freedom-enhancing software, then any use of AI that limits human freedom – beyond what is necessary – can be deemed anti-democratic. Conversely, any AI which results in an expansion of human potential is to be welcomed as a democratic enhancement.

Of course, Viktor Orbán defends his illiberal system as democratic, and so does the Chinese Communist Party with what they call the whole-process-people's democracy. Still, neither of these systems could, in good faith, be called freedom-enhancing. They represent a flawed populist idea of majoritarianism that disregards the rights of individuals and eschews any checks on the ruler's power.

Tocqueville saw clearly that democracy had in itself the seeds of its own negation. The democratic spirit, if taken to an extreme of a passion for equality, can lead to the denial of liberty itself. Yet this isn't Liberal Democracy's only fault – it focuses too much on electoral legitimacy instead of performance legitimacy. It is shortsighted due to term limits, and well-organized lobby groups can have a disproportionate influence on policymaking compared to the common citizenry.

In the Communist Manifesto (Marx, 2021, p. 80), the word despotism is also used to highlight the reactions of production under capitalism. In this sense, modern democracy is not complete because labour is still exercised under the despotism of capital and capital's lieutenants. Think of call-centre workers with set intervals of time to use the washroom – as if such a basic human need could be timed. Or Amazon delivery drivers forced to urinate on their job posts, in plastic bottles ([Reuters, 2021](#)). Or yet the arrogance with which labourers are compelled, in many economies, Portugal included, to do off-the-books overwork. This is a crucial problem that modern democracy has thus far failed to address. Could Artificial intelligence solve it? Could algorithms, to put it bluntly, democratize democracy and help it answer its critics?

## AI's Utopias and Dystopias

Encyclopedia Britannica – which already has its own chatbot – defines AI as “*the ability of a digital computer or computer-controlled robot to perform tasks commonly associated with intelligent beings*” ([Copeland, 2025](#)). Indeed, Humanity has traditionally been defined by its particular relation with that quality. The very scientific name we choose for our species – *Homo Sapiens* – highlights its social importance. But is that all that a human being is, a reasoning being? Paraphrasing in the words of the acclaimed singer Grimes<sup>1</sup>: Is biology superficial and intelligence artificial?

Alan Turing had a hunch about what lies at the heart of our humanity, and that wasn't cognition but intuition. He wrote in his PhD thesis that mathematical reasoning – one could just as well say any reasoning – hinges on both intuition and ingenuity. The former consists of the “making of spontaneous judgments, which are not the result of conscious trains of reasoning”, while the latter is made up of arrangements of propositions meant to prove intuition's validity (Larson, 2021, pp.11,12). If this is true, humans may delegate to AI how to do something – which AI may do infinitely better, but it will always be a human agent that writes the prompt or that takes the first step to trigger the AI's “thought process”.

More than a decade ago, Nicholas Carr (2013) wrote about the perils of AI-driven deskilling: “*The way computers can weaken awareness and attentiveness points to a deeper problem. Automation turns us from actors into observers. Instead of manipulating the yoke, we watch the screen. That shift may make our lives easier, but it can also inhibit the development of expertise.*” According to this view, AI would be a threat because its employment would gradually diminish our capabilities. Perhaps to the point seen in Disney's 2008 animated movie Wall-E, where humanity has suffered from robot-care driven degeneracy.

In *Homo Deus* (2015, p. 425-427), Yuval Noah Harari explained that the increasing use of algorithms could very well undermine the key liberal belief in the sovereignty of the individual, thereby shifting authority to AI. Additionally, Sarah Kreps and Doug Kriner (2023) consider that AI poses three different threats to

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<sup>1</sup> Grime's hit song *We Appreciate Power* is about our putative algorithmic future. [Grimes - We Appreciate Power \(Lyric Video\)](#)

democracy – the erosion of representation, accountability, and trust – stemming from its **use** in *misinformation*.

On a more positive note, a recent article in Foreign Affairs (Manyka & Spence, 2024) states that AI “holds the potential for a digitally enabled surge in productivity”. The idea that if we augment productivity, we will not have to work goes back to Karl Marx’s understanding of the shift from Capitalism to Socialism. It can still be further traced back to the Aristotelian insight that slaves wouldn’t be needed if machines worked on their own. AI seems to put us on the verge of that utopia.

But what of the common trope that AI would steal our jobs? Has it materialized? Fareed Zakaria seems skeptical (2024, p.272). And in fact, if we assume, as Carl Menger – the founder of the Austrian School of Economics – does, that human needs are not static but increasingly evolving, then we shouldn’t fear the AI Revolution. As technology advances, new human needs would be created that in turn call for novel economic activity. This seems to be the opinion of Sam Altman (2024) when he argues that with “limitless energy” and “abundant energy” humanity will be able to do quite a lot. For him, “[p]eople have an innate desire to create and be useful to each other, and AI will allow us to amplify our abilities like never before”. If this is so, if AI can enhance our capabilities, it would fit well with humanistic and democratic values by keeping the human in the proverbial cockpit.

China’s Deepseek allegedly trained itself on ChatGPT, a process known as *distillation* (Kruppa & Seetharaman, 2025). This means, AI, or at least large language models, may increasingly lack one of the key properties essential for economic goods, their scarcity. If AI models can be trained on other AI models for a fraction of the cost, then proprietary models will not be able to gate-keep AI – someone, somewhere, will always democratize a proprietary AI by creating an open-source, free-to-use clone.

Clearly then, AI has both the potential to dehumanize us and undermine our societies or to enhance our lives and optimize boring, daunting and repetitive tasks. Humankind, at a crossroads, needs to choose between a future of degeneracy and one of empowerment. That is why it is important to investigate how AI is being used *now* and what governance structures are in place. That’s precisely what the following two sections deal with.

## AI Now

AI is already being used to empower disadvantaged groups. A new algorithm is promising to help patients and hospitals appeal health insurance's rising coverage denials, which were, in turn, themselves driven by AI ([Schreiber, 2025](#)). According to a World Economic Forum publication ([Mazhari, 2024](#)) AI helped a Thai woman suffering from muscular atrophy to secure remote work, earn a living and support her family. It also enhanced the life of a Japanese woman, afflicted by auditory process disorder, a disease that renders it difficult for the brain to interpret words - utilizing AI - powered speech -to -text apps. Harari's warning that AI would destroy the sovereignty of the individual seems to have a mirror opposite, the empowerment of previously disadvantaged people.

Another way AI is empowering people is in the workplace. Labour Law - at least in Civil Law countries - traditionally recognized the principle of *favor laboratoris*, meaning that in interpreting statute and convention alike the most beneficial result to the worker would be preferred. It did so because the worker and the employer did not have the same bargaining power, and they continue not to have it. Today, workers are using AI to shift the balance of power just a little more in their favour, by helping them identify violations, generate legal documents, contact lawyers and file lawsuits ([Datta, 2025](#)).

Besides empowering disempowered demographics and social classes, AI is enabling people in Canada to stay informed and safe in cases of extreme weather emergencies ([Patell, 2024](#)). These services are provided by Google, which can pose sovereignty concerns, as critical tech often does, especially when coupled with Trump's 51st State's nefarious threats.

The threat to democracy is real, especially the threat posed by misinformation. In Slovakia's election, internet trolls, supercharged by AI tools, spread fake news, including through deepfake generated voices of politicians and videos. This manipulation was made all the more easy by apps like HeyGen and the pusillanimity of Silicon Valley in curbing it ([The Straits Times, 2024](#)). Indeed, Slovakia's election won by Órban-like populist Robert Fico may well be the first swung by deepfakes ([Conradi, 2023](#)). Liberal Democracies, because they hold real elections and not just rubber-stump ceremonies, are in a vulnerable position to the use of this new form of sharp power on steroids. Indeed, one of the dangers of

uncontrolled AI is the weaponization of black-box algorithms by autocracies that – having a strategic advantage in the field of AI – use them as a means to spread their ideologies to the West.

How may the Western world respond to this challenge of the autocrats? How can we avoid dystopic scenarios and move closer to a form of Enhanced Democracy? Part of it goes through AI Governance and effective Leadership.

## AI Governance in the West

The Western world has slowly but surely started to address the issues posed by Artificial Intelligence. The EU has a history of regulating new technologies, arguably to the benefit of its citizens. Think of the General Data Protection Regulation ([GDPR](#)) approved in 2016 to protect individuals' data privacy or the Digital Services Act (DSA), approved in 2022 which tackled the spread of disinformation as well as illegal and harmful activities online ([Commission, 2022](#)). The AI Act is the latest technological regulation coming out of Brussels.

The challenge of AI Governance is to strike a balance between safety and innovation ([Pernot –Lepay, 2024](#)). According to the EU's own High-level summary of the AI Act<sup>2</sup> ([EU, 2025](#)), it established four levels of risk. Unacceptable risk, High-Risk, Limited risk, and Minimal Risk. The highest risk level is prohibited – though it remains to be seen how that can be enforced – and corresponds to social scoring systems like those employed by China and manipulative AI. High risk AI is regulated, limited risk AI is subject to transparency obligations so that consumers are cognisant that they are engaging with artificial intelligence and finally, minimal-risk AI is left unregulated. The focus seems wholly on the risk side and not on the side of innovation. The piece of legislation has even been called “a bureaucratic fever dream disguised as ethical oversight” ([Durmus, 2024](#)). Perhaps it is indeed true that the US innovates, China replicates – and increasingly innovates as well – and the EU regulates. To be sure, regulatory certainty and risk protection are essential but they should not come at the expense of undermining future progress, innovation and entrepreneurship. On a positive note, The EU's AI Act offers a unified legal framework for AI development based on the respect for

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<sup>2</sup> The AI Act can be of significant impact, not just internally, but also externally through what Columbia Professor Anu Bradford called the “Brussels Effect” ([Stappers, 2024](#)). In other words, the ability of the EU to shape global regulation, as it recently did with USB type-C.



fundamental rights. Nonetheless, the current AI Act is more than 100 pages long of very complex legalese highlighting the high cost of compliance.

In Canada, the *Pan-Canadian Artificial Intelligence Strategy* started in earnest in 2017, aiming to encourage the adoption of AI across the Great White North ([OECD, 2024](#)). The Canadian Government's strategy has three pillars: Commercialization, Standards, Talent and Research ([Government of Canada, 2024](#)). Sure, Canada's proposed Artificial Intelligence and Data Act ([AIDA](#)) stalled following Justin Trudeau's resignation as PM, but essential provincial regulatory framework and AI principles for the public sector are still being advanced from British Columbia through Ontario to Quebec. This can work to ensure a transparent use of algorithms whenever governmental political power is deployed ([Arai, 2025](#)).

Canada's approach is more flexible and more pro-innovation than the EU's. It is home to thousands of AI startups and it is trying to encourage EU startups to move to Canada, enticing them with support and less demanding regulations than in Europe ([Criddle & Cornish, 2024](#)).

Yet another example, and one that is very instructive is that of South Korea. The East Asian country was able to limit the impact of AI in its 22nd National Assembly elections. It achieved that because its private and public sector made an effort to protect the elections integrity. A public-private collaboration emerged. The Korea Communications Standards Commission blocked a deepfake video of then President Yoon admitting corruption and companies like Naver, Kakao and Deepbrain AI collaborated with authorities ([Lee, 2024](#)).

If South Korea is instructive when it comes to fighting-back AI driven misinformation, Taiwan - a bulwark of democracy against autocracy - is helpful to illustrate how AI can be employed to strengthen democratic trust. Audrey Tang, Taiwan's Minister for Digital Affairs has been promoting Deliberative Pollings that use AI and the internet including a recent poll where 400 people were able to deliberate online. The Taiwanese Model is based on open-source software and in a democratic vision of AI as a listening tool to help reach consensus and fight polarization ([Chen, Wang, 2024](#)), in other words its a digital upgrade on James S. Fishkin's proposals in *"Democracy when the people are thinking"*.

## Conclusion

Humankind's lot will depend on how we decide to write the next chapter of our history. We can create AI systems that serve us and serve democracy, or we can surrender our autonomy, individuality, and humanity to the rule of algorithms.

The question of whether AI will deliver us to a land of milk and honey or enslave us to our algorithmic overlords cannot be answered through technological determinism alone.

The conflict at the heart of the AI Paradox is of a political and ethical nature. AI amplifies whatever social forces it happens to touch. Left unchecked and absent decisive action it will tend to magnify biases, empower the few and erode public trust, the very life force of democracy.

This short analysis reveals that AI's impact on democracy is neither inherently positive or negative - it is profoundly political.

Democratic countries can and should actively learn from good practices in AI governance elsewhere. The path forwards requires rejecting both naive techno-optimism and dystopian fatalism. Ideally all countries should be able to mitigate risks, encourage and be open to innovation, support civil society's efforts, cooperate with the private sector to address misinformation and use all the potentialities of AI to deepen democracy. The Choice is ours. Decision-makers and civil society can opt between a future of algorithmic or elitist despotism or one where society works together to *update* the good old software of liberal democracy - Churchill's "worst form of government except for all others" - into something new. Into *Enhanced Democracy*.

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