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It's the Economy, Stupid: Comment on Fuller's "Is the Metaverse the New Metaphysics."

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<https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-6p7>.

Though the question posed by Steve Fuller’s latest essay (2021) appears to be metaphysically minded, it turns out to be much more aligned with either Thomas Kuhn’s paradigm shifts or James Carville’s famous quip about the economy.<sup>1</sup> After discussing Facebook’s latest transformation into “Meta” (perhaps this is the meta-physics Fuller is pointing to here) and the ascendance of Wikipedia as the standard-bearer repository of second-hand knowledge (aggregated, filtered, and edited rather than produced), and after suggesting how his own notion of the emancipatory power of the post-truth era (where opponents displace or even replace the establishment), Fuller poses the following question: “Does the power of the scientific establishment (and other authoritative forms of knowledge) depend simply on its ability to enroll members and sideline opponents as it relentlessly pursues its default trajectory?” In other words, can “the scientific establishment” copy the power plays of high-tech behemoths?

### **Dominant Realities**

“My point here,” answers Fuller, “is that all dominant modes of reality start life as an alternative reality that acquires dominance over time by expanding its own terms of engagement, while ignoring—if not crowding out—those of its potential rivals and opponents.” This quasi-Kuhnian answer with a tint of positive-inductivist confirmation bias is both frightening and naïve. And when attributed to the Zuckerbergian “Metaverse” (“The Metaverse is the most ambitious project along these lines yet,” says Fuller), the so-called metaphysical turn is not Hegelian at all but fundamentally neo-Marxian.

Jettisoning the abstractions of philosophers, Shoshana Zuboff (2018) frames the digital (metaphysical?) shift into what is now named Metaverse in financial terms, moving us from the pretentious discourse of knowledge production, aggregation, and consumption to the painful realities of high-tech companies whose extraction practices in what she calls Surveillance Capitalism are more pernicious and invasive than anything Karl Marx could have envisioned in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (and much more aligned with what Zuboff’s teacher, B. F. Skinner, has outlined in the 20<sup>th</sup> century). Unlike the more intentional soft-capitalist Craigslist platform, which does not monetize every exchange transaction, social media giants, from Google to Facebook, are exclusively mindful of their profit margins and their appeal to corporate advertisers.

What is at stake for them is neither knowledge per se nor any sense of freedom and democracy. Instead, Zuboff sees in their sophisticated algorithmic conduct old-fashioned market-capitalism. She argues that they extract obscene profits by exploiting voluntary personal data that, with the aid of sophisticated AI machine learning algorithms, not only satisfy our desires instantly and conveniently but actually fabricate and induce them in us as

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<sup>1</sup> From [Wikipedia](#): “‘The economy, stupid’ is a phrase that was coined by [James Carville](#) in 1992. It is often quoted from a televised quip by Carville as ‘It’s the economy, stupid.’ Carville was a strategist in [Bill Clinton](#)’s successful [1992 presidential campaign](#) against incumbent [George H. W. Bush](#). His phrase was directed at the campaign’s workers and intended as one of three messages for them to focus on.”

if they were ours all along. The Metaverse is actually a Metapurse that becomes fuller and fuller with every click and tap, with every “like” and wink exchanged on social media platforms.

### **How Do We Gain Dominance?**

To say, then, that “all dominant modes of reality start life as an alternative reality” is obviously true: any beginning differs from what already exists and is by definition an alternative, unless it is a derivative or byproduct. Likewise, any shift towards “dominance” necessarily occurs by “expanding its own terms of engagement,” “crowding out” its “opponents,” or, simply put competing with existing modes of reality.

What is less trivial is *how* dominance is accomplished, *what* specific market instruments are deployed to bring about expansion and crowding out. We know Hegel’s and Marx’s alternative answers as well as Popper’s and Kuhn’s competing models. Now we may similarly surmise the different answers given by Fuller and Zuboff: for him, a moral valence retroactively justifies the alternative “mode of reality” however mysteriously it becomes dominant, while for her, surveillance capitalism’s dominance is accomplished by enlisting the State (to reduce privacy protection, for example) and by viciously exploiting the might of financial capitalism to create a virtual mode of reality we are supposed to believe is both materially sound and value neutral (it’s consumer demand, stupid!).

The Metapurse cares only about the concentration and accumulation of wealth, not about knowledge, enlightenment, or justice. And there is nothing metaphysical about this process unless one thinks of reducing the entire onto-epistemological framework of humanity into financial spreadsheets and cryptocurrency.

### **References**

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- Zuboff, Shoshana. 2018. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: Public Affairs.