

Digital slavery as a new form of slavery and a new paradigm of subordination in the modern world

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Abstract

Slavery as a social phenomenon has a centuries-old history, transforming and adapting to different eras and social conditions. In ancient times, it manifested in the form of physical subjugation and forced labour. During the Middle Ages, it took on an economic and feudal character, and in the era of colonialism, it became institutionalised. However, modern technological changes have led to the formation of new forms of dependence, which can be referred to as digital slavery. While slavery was previously associated with physical shackles, today it manifests as economic dependence, data manipulation and technological control. The aim of this article is to analyse the evolution of slavery from antiquity to the digital era, identify and evaluate new forms of digital slavery in modern society, and explore how technology and artificial intelligence are shaping a new system of subjugation. Special attention is given to the impact of digital slavery on Latvian society. The study employs the following methods:

Historical-analytical method—to study the evolution of slavery;

Philosophical analysis—to conceptualise the notions of freedom and dependence;

Comparative method—to compare traditional and digital slavery;

Contextual method—to analyse the impact of digital slavery on Latvian society.

Keywords

Artificial intelligence • Digital slavery • Philosophy of slavery • Slavery

INTRODUCTION

Slavery, as a philosophical and social phenomenon, is often viewed as a relic of the past; however, its underlying essence has never completely vanished. While most countries have legally prohibited traditional slavery, its principles and mechanisms have evolved, adapting to contemporary realities. Today, slavery does not manifest itself through chains or slave markets, but rather in more subtle and complex forms of dependency that impact human freedom (Digitālā verdzība, 2020). This research examines how contemporary forms of economic exploitation and digital control give rise to new manifestations of slavery, focusing particularly on Latvia within a global context.

Although slavery has been extensively examined from historical and legal angles (Slavery, 2004), there is an increasing need to analyse its transformation in the digital era. This research aims to fill this gap by offering a philosophical and socio-political analysis of how modern technologies facilitate new forms of dependency and control. Unlike prior studies that primarily concentrate on labour exploitation (Balodis et al., 2011), this paper adopts a broader

perspective, encompassing elements of digital surveillance and algorithmic manipulation.

While existing research has investigated historical slavery, human trafficking and forced labour (League of Nations, 1926), there is limited academic discourse on the role that digital technologies play in perpetuating contemporary forms of servitude (Digitālā verdzība, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND KEY QUESTIONS

This study builds on existing theoretical frameworks and poses the following key questions:

1. How do economic dependency and digital control foster new forms of subjugation in modern society?
2. What historical parallels exist between traditional slavery and contemporary mechanisms of control?
3. How does Latvia, as a digitally advanced nation, experience these transformations? The primary

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objective of this research is to analyse how modern economic structures and digital technologies promote new forms of subjugation, particularly in developed digital societies like Latvia. The study hypothesises that contemporary slavery manifests in three primary forms: economic exploitation through precarious labour conditions, financial dependency and digital control.

To achieve these research objectives, the study employs the following methodologies:

- **Historical–analytical method:** To compare traditional and modern forms of slavery and establish historical parallels.
- **Philosophical analysis:** To explore the ethical and conceptual implications of digital dependency.
- **Comparative method:** To juxtapose the Latvian experience with global trends in modern slavery.
- **Contextual method:** To analyse contemporary case studies and specific socio-political conditions that contribute to digital and economic subjugation.

By integrating these methodologies, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of modern slavery and its evolving forms, contributing to the broader discourse on human autonomy and systemic control.

PHILOSOPHY OF SLAVERY

The theory of anthropogenesis concerning human origins suggests various classifications of human (*Homo*) species members based on their developmental stages. The modern human, referred to as '*Homo sapiens*', emerged approximately 160,000–90,000 years ago. *Homo sapiens*, a bipedal primate belonging to the mammal class, is characterised by reason and consciousness (Slavery, 2004). The Latin term '*sapiens*' means 'wise', highlighting the human capacity for thought.

The root of the term 'rationality' is 'reason', a hallmark of human consciousness characterised by logical thinking and reasoning abilities oriented towards higher social goals and the pursuit of truth. As Cicero noted, "Reason is the only thing that gives us significant advantages over animals..." (Cicero, 1st century BC).

The initial records of slavery trace back to the era when Semitic tribes conquered Sumer (circa 2330 BCE), indicating the subjugation of captured individuals (Slavery, 2004). Earlier instances of slave states in Mesopotamia appear at the start of the third millennium BCE (Slavery, 2004). Biblical sources document slavery predating the flood (Slavery, 2004).

What constitutes slavery? It is the socio-legal condition of individuals considered the property of another entity and used for labour in specific sectors of the economy or for designated tasks (Slavery, 2004).

Over time, philosophical perspectives on slavery have significantly evolved. Some philosophers have justified slavery as a natural state, while others have condemned it.

Heraclitus identified war as the primary source of slavery (Heraclitus, 6th century BC). Socrates equated slaves to animals and suggested keeping them hungry to ensure obedience (Socrates, 5th century BC). Aristotle maintained that natural slaves were born to serve (Aristotle, 4th century BC).

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Stoic philosophers such as Zeno of Citium, Chrysippus of Soli, Cleanthes, Cicero, Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus viewed slaves not merely as instruments of labour but as equals deserving of respect (Zeno of Citium, 3rd century BC; Epictetus, 1st century AD; Marcus Aurelius, 2nd century AD). In the Middle Ages, slavery morphed into serfdom, binding peasants to the land and limiting their autonomy (Slavery, 2004). Philosophers like Montesquieu became early advocates against slavery (Montesquieu, 1748).

Attitudes towards slavery gradually reflected changes in religious prescriptions and customs, ultimately leading to written legal protections (Slavery, 2004).'

ABOLITION OF SLAVERY AND SERFDOM

The first attempts to reform labour relations in wage labour contexts emerged during the Industrial Revolution in 19th-century England and France (Slavery, 2004).

French revolutionary Gracchus Babeuf articulated early labour rights in the late 18th century (Baběfs, 1795).

The right to work and the prohibition against slavery were first enshrined in the French Constitution of 1848 (France, 1848). Subsequent international agreements, such as the Paris Treaty (1856) and the Berlin Treaty (1878), reinforced antislavery commitments (Paris Peace Treaty, 1856; Treaty of Berlin, 1878).

In 1926, the first international convention against slavery was established through the League of Nations (League of Nations, 1926).

TRANSFORMATION OF SLAVERY: FROM CHAINS TO ALGORITHMS

Is Modern Freedom Truly Freedom, or Merely an Illusion?

The evolution of slavery from ancient to modern times reflects a continual transformation of control mechanisms (Linkova, 2012). Cicero posited that human reason and the capacity for independent thought distinguish us from animals (Cicero, 1st century BC). In ancient societies, slavery relied heavily on physical force; during the Middle Ages, it evolved into a more institutionalized system of serfdom (Slavery, 2004). The Industrial Revolution introduced new forms of economic dependency that, while ostensibly preserving human freedom, practically produced modern exploitative practices (Margene, 2024).

Today, this evolution has entered a new dimension. Physical chains have given way to algorithms, and direct control has morphed into data collection and analysis, leading to a digital economy in which human attention and personal data are commodified (Digitālā verdzība, 2020). This shift from physical to digital control creates new forms of oppression that, while less visible, prove equally effective. Present discussions surrounding AI underscore a concerning point—that AI could impede our independent thought (Margene, 2024).

In this digital age, individuals may simultaneously experience three forms of slavery: digital control, financial dependency, and economic exploitation (Digitālā verdzība, 2020). Many fall prey to algorithmic manipulation, where their choices, opinions, and emotions are swayed by digital platforms. Social networks and search engines curate opinions, collect behavioral data, and subtly manipulate user actions, effectively rendering them part of an invisible labor force generating profit for corporations.

In the context of Latvia, this transformation holds particular significance. As a nation that recently emerged from the constraints of Soviet control, Latvia now encounters fresh challenges in the digital age. Rapid digitalization is embraced alongside opportunities but brings forth risks of digital manipulation and dependence. Influences from major tech corporations, the proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI),

and the growing reliance on algorithms in decision-making raise critical concerns regarding personal liberties (Digitālā verdzība, 2020).

While slavery is oftentimes perceived as a historical concern, its essence has persisted, adapting to the demands of modernity (Slavery, 2004). Latvia, part of Europe and the global digital economy, actively experiences these transitions. The rise of digital technologies engenders a fresh paradigm of subjugation, wherein individuals may unknowingly become part of a system that stifles their autonomy.

Financial dependency poses another critical challenge. The gig economy, while perceived as offering flexibility, frequently leaves workers in precarious conditions—devoid of stability, benefits, or protections. Digital platforms, like ride-sharing services, impose stringent conditions, perpetuating cycles of economic insecurity among workers. Furthermore, economic exploitation has transitioned from overt physical labor to a form of digital servitude. The commodification of personal data allows corporations to profit substantially from users without compensating them. Every online interaction—be it through social media engagement or e-commerce—aggregates wealth for tech giants, leaving individuals with only the facade of free services (Digitālā verdzība, 2020).

AI itself exists as a neutral tool; the challenges arise when individuals forgo critical thinking in favor of unexamined reliance on AI (Margene, 2024). We must guard against allowing AI to supplant our critical thinking. Instead, it should serve as a tool that enhances our capacities rather than diminishes them (Cicero, 1st century BC).

As the mechanisms for digital control become increasingly robust, it is vital to reevaluate the concept of freedom in modern society. While traditional forms of slavery were marked by overt oppression, contemporary digital systems cultivate dependency in subtler ways that render recognition and resistance difficult. Latvia, akin to other states, must confront these issues by advancing digital literacy, safeguarding data privacy, and reassessing the ethical implications of algorithmic governance.

The transformation of slavery is not complete; it merely adapts. The pressing question remains: how can we reclaim our autonomy in a world where control is exerted not through chains, but through invisible, yet equally binding, digital mechanisms? In the end, is modern freedom truly freedom, or merely an illusion?

CONCLUSION

Is modern freedom truly freedom, or merely an illusion?

Cicero posited that human reason and the capacity for independent thought distinguish us from animals and

empower us to analyse, articulate and achieve our objectives. He pointed out that knowledge and understanding are accessible to all, but their application wholly relies on the individual.

Present discussions surrounding AI underline a concerning point—that AI could impede our independent thought. This analysis of digital slavery reveals how algorithms and digital environments increasingly shape our cognition, information processing and decision-making, establishing a new form of subordination. This leads to the inquiry: Does reliance on AI undermine our Ciceronian advantage over animalistic instincts?

AI itself exists as a neutral tool; the challenges arise when individuals forgo critical thinking in favour of unexamined reliance on AI. While Cicero asserted that thought encapsulates human essence, yielding our thinking to AI could jeopardise this intrinsic quality. Within the framework of digital slavery, AI might emerge as a tool of control that constrains our ability to make autonomous choices.

We must guard against allowing AI to supplant our critical thinking. Instead, it should serve as a tool that enhances our capacities rather than diminishes them. True human freedom begins with the ability to think independently, distinguishing a free individual from a slave, in both antiquity and the digital epoch.

Traditional forms of slavery have evolved, giving rise to new mechanisms that ensnare individuals within systems from which escape becomes increasingly challenging. Latvia, integrated into the global digital landscape, contends with these transitions—both in economic exploitation and digital control.

Whereas slavery once signified physical constraint, it now manifests as economic dependency, data manipulation and digital governance. In this context, freedom emerges as a philosophical query: Is a person incapable of governing their economic and digital existence genuinely free? This article encourages contemplation over whether we have genuinely attained freedom or instead succumbed to a new, invisible form of slavery. And if that is the case—are we equipped to liberate ourselves or to assert control over these mechanisms?

Recommendations

- Develop programmes aimed at improving young people's digital literacy so that they can better understand the risks associated with technology and privacy.
- Create public campaigns to raise awareness about the issues of digital addiction and encourage people to use technology responsibly.
- Establish organisations or groups that provide support to those who feel addicted to digital technologies or face challenges brought about by technology.

- Conduct research on the impact of digital addiction on Latvian society in order to better understand the extent of the problem and the need for action.

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