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Data colonialism comes home to the US: Resistance must too

LSE's Professor Nick Couldry and SUNY Oswego's Professor Ulises A. Mejias explain how developments in the US government can be seen through the lens of data colonialism, and what can be done to resist.

Elon Musk's radical intervention in the US government through the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) has been called an "AI coup," a "national heist," and a "power grab." Various experts are concerned that it is **unconstitutional**. But beyond its legal ramifications, the parts of it that involve getting access to government data fit well within the playbook of what we call **data colonialism**.

It is only through the lens of colonialism that we can understand what is happening— not just as the actions of a **brologarch** and his cadre of young DOGE hackers, but as a data grab—the largest appropriation of public data by a private individual in the history of a modern state. Elon Musk may have zero experience in government, but he has proven adept at weaponizing a data-extracting platform, and he seems to be applying the lessons he learned at X to seize sensitive federal data, assume control of government payment systems, and even gain access to classified intelligence.

This phenomenon can no longer be explained through the rubric of 'surveillance capitalism' since the point is not merely to make money by tracking what users do. The point of DOGE appears to be to put all the data that exists about US citizens in the hands of private corporations and government employees operating outside the law. In neoliberalism, citizens become consumers; in data colonialism, citizens become subjects. If the difference is not apparent, think of how government data, down to their DNA, is used to control the Uyghur population in China. In this version of colonialism, what's being appropriated is not land but human life through access to data.

Once we view recent events in the US through a colonial lens, the disregard for legality is also unsurprising. Historical colonialism's doctrine of *terra nullius* was designed precisely to rewrite the law of new 'colonies' simply by the act of *seizing* the land, with the excuse that no one smart was

using it. Strip aside the faux democratic narrative, and that's Musk's playbook, too. As Musk ally and Palantir cofounder Joe Lonsdale put it to the *Washington Post*:



Everyone in the DC laptop class was extremely arrogant. These people don't realize there are levels of competence and boldness that are far beyond anything in their sphere.



In other words, only DOGE's data manipulators are smart enough to deserve to recognize the potential of government data.

The new alliance between Musk and President Donald Trump's government might seem shocking, seen from the perspective of recent liberal capitalism. But it makes absolute sense within colonial history where lawless individuals and corporations (from the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés in Mexico to the British East India Company) worked in ever-closer alliances with states to produce a mature colonialism that *combined* corporate and sovereign power.

Until recently, there was a prospect of the US state supporting regulations to restrain Big Tech's extractivism, in some form at least. Now, that's a distant prospect. Yet even this shift has a colonial parallel. Initially, the Spanish crown was embarrassed by the exploits of the conquistadors and looked for legal ways to restrain them. But by the mid-16th century, those attempts at restraint were abandoned, and the path of no-holds-barred colonialism was set, only to be refined further by new colonial powers, including Holland and England. Perhaps that's what the US government's transformation signifies globally: a scene-setting for generalized data colonialism, with China as the second pole, just as historical colonialism supported multiple rival powers.

Unless, that is, resistance emerges. What might resistance look like if understood through the lens of colonial history?

We should not rule out regulatory interventions outside the US having some effect. However, to have any chance of success, national governments are going to need to form some large alliances. An alliance of **Europe and Brazil**, possibly with the UK, Australia, and others, would be formidable against US power, especially if implicated in a wider trade war from which the US can expect only a pyrrhic victory.

New regulatory proposals are needed to address global data extraction as it is—an unacceptable continuation of colonial power—and to forge alternatives beyond what the US and China currently offer.

But regulation won't be enough on its own, so entrenched is the power of data colonialists. The prospects of legal challenges in the US itself are entirely uncertain, depending ultimately, in some cases, on which way the conservative-dominated Supreme Court will turn. For effective resistance, something more like a popular revolt will be needed across many countries.

What about US federal workers and, more broadly, users of US federal services? Can they kickstart wider resistance by protesting the new administration's most egregious actions? Rutgers University labor studies professor [Eric Blanc](#) recently argued Musk would be vulnerable to the combined efforts of federal workers and their unions. The history of the [indignados](#) movement in Spain following the 2008 financial crisis may also offer pointers.

However, the longer-term success of worker and user resistance will likely depend on the global resonances that US activism generates.

Current wider geopolitics will inevitably constrain many governments from challenging the vision of largely unrestrained AI and tech platforms that the Trump administration and Big Tech want to force on the world. That's why popular and worker resistance will be essential: issues such as sustainability, energy use, and the protection of workers are universal cross-border issues.

Ultimately, the businesses from which the broligarchs profit are global. The new US administration poses risks for countless nations in relation to data platforms, AI, and many other areas. That's why a long-term global historical perspective is needed. For that perspective, we can turn to the five-centuries-long combination of capitalism and colonialism that has now entered a crucial new phase.

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About the author

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Nick Couldry is Professor of Media, Communications and Social Theory in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. As a sociologist of media and culture, he approaches media and communications from the perspective of the symbolic power that has been historically concentrated in media institutions. He is interested in how media and

communications institutions and infrastructures contribute to various types of order (social, political, cultural, economic, ethical). His work has drawn on, and contributed to, social, spatial, democratic and cultural theory, anthropology, and media and communications ethics. His analysis of media as 'practice' has been widely influential. In the past 7 years, his work has increasingly focussed on data questions, and ethics, politics and deep social implications of Big Data and small data practices. He is the author or editor of 16 books and many journal articles and book chapters.

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Ulises A Mejias is Professor of Communication Studies at SUNY Oswego, recipient of the 2023 State University of New York Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Scholarship, and a Fulbright Specialist from 2021 to 2025. His new book, co-authored with Nick Couldry, is *Data Grab*. Dr. Mejias is co-founder of *Tierra Común*, a network of activists, educators and scholars working towards the decolonization of data (tierracomun.net), and he also serves on the board of Humanities New York, an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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