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Facing the Dawn of the Era of Artificial Intelligence: In Dialogue with Marx and Rousseau

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Interviewee: Karl Marx, Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Interviewer: Phyllis

List of Acronyms: KM=Karl Marx, JR=Jean-Jacques Rousseau,
IN=Interviewer

[Begin Transcript 0:00:10]

IN: Good afternoon. It's a great honor to invite you both. This is Karl Marx, the great mentor of workers all over the world, and the author of *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. This is Jean-Jacques Rousseau, an outstanding enlightenment thinker, who wrote the world-famous *Social Contract*.

JR: Don't forget to introduce yourself, Phyllis. Of all the people here, only you are a participant in today's human society.

IN: Indeed, I'm the only person here involving in the present society. But

Eva, the AI stenographer¹ behind us, who is recording our conversations and transcribing them into words now (Syncedon), can also be regarded as an important member of today's society.

KM: Thanks, Eva.

IN: As you can see from heaven, artificial intelligence, or AI for short, is revolutionizing our society at a phenomenal rate. On the positive side, AI is ushering in a new era of higher working efficiency and better living quality (Makridakis). But on the other hand, as Stephen Hawking warned, it might also bring us the threat of being replaced or even destroyed (Cellan-Jones). Eva, for example, can be a nightmare for thousands of human stenographers while actually improving the efficiency and accuracy of stenography.

Kuzvile even predicted the specific coming time of the AI era in *The Singularity is Near: 2045*. It means two-thirds of humans today, including me, are still alive (劉慈欣). Therefore, in the next ten or even twenty years, in the dawn of the era of AI, we humans have to face a variety of problems. How to relieve the unemployment pressure caused by AI? How to avoid the risk of AI destroying us humans? A more general question, how to complete the social transition to the age of AI? I'd like to hear from you two wise men.

KM: I just thanked Eva, not only because it is recording this conversation now. More importantly, it frees the stenographers from the labor of stenography, which is external to them (*Early Writings* 326). The activity of

1 In 2018, Voicera has enabled AI stenographers to record meetings, transcribe audio into text, and highlight key points.

stenography belongs to another, for instance, Eva's activity belongs to us. This involuntary activity is a stenographer's loss of self, free mental cannot be developed in stenography, or to say, the estranged labour.

Phyllis just mentioned unemployment. But in my opinion, it should not be regarded as unemployment, but as a change of career path. Productivity determines relations of production (*Das Kapital*, vol. 1), any improvement of production tools will lead to changes in production relations, and so will AI. Besides stenography, AI may also make industries including finance, education, and medicine unmanned. Fortunately, as Phyllis once argued, the cultural industry based on subjective consciousness is still peculiar to mankind (Feng). Under the promotion of AI, human beings may turn to devote themselves to the cultural industry dominated by individual spirit, where there is no alienation between workers and labor, and between products of labor (*Early Writings* 327): the labor depends on the worker, and the worker relates to his own activity as free activity (331).

Additionally, the development of AI accelerates information globalization (Jain and Jain), thereby making the public ownership of spiritual means of production a reality. Furthermore, the working tool—the human brain is owned by everyone. Therefore, in the age when AI is highly developed and everyone is only engaged in spiritual work, the private ownership of production materials will cease to exist. The liberation of the society from private ownership is bound to be accompanied by the liberation from slavery (333) and employment (Marx and Engels). By then, the word “employment” itself may not make sense, let alone “unemployment”.

IN: Thank you, Marx! While listening to your speech, I was suddenly inspired to have an exciting idea: if AI comes, can communism be far

behind? I've always thought that communism is out of reach, but if AI can really complete all the work to create huge wealth, and then let the government allocate money to every member of society—no one strives for material, most of them work for spiritual satisfaction. By that time, human self-liberation and communist society are likely to be realized.

However, in Marx's analysis just now, AI seems to have been regarded merely as a tool of production. It should not be overlooked that AI is also a product of human labor. Back to the time when Marx wrote *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, it can be seen as the only possibility that if the product does not belong to the worker and be opposed to him as an alien power, it must belong to another man (330–331). Nonetheless, in the age of AI, we need to consider another case: AI, as a product of labor, might belong to itself. We cannot rule out the possibility that AI may become the alien force that rules mankind in its own name.

JR: There's no denying that it sounds scary. If this power is completely free and not in chains (Rousseau 71; bk. I, ch. 1), no one can predict what is around the corner. With the development of AI in more and more fields, traditional roles played by humans are being replaced at an alarming rate—the establishment of a new social contract between humans and AI is urgent. Humans should place AI and its power under the ultimate guidelines of the general will which includes the will of AI—let AI, like humans, be an inseparable part of the whole (82; bk. I, ch. 6). Once humans and AI are united in a body, a violation of any member is an attack on the whole, which will all the members resent the same enemy (84; bk. I, ch. 7). In this way, AI and humans have no choice but to support each other. That's exactly what we want to see: when humans are no longer imprisoned by the anxiety of

AI, instead of restricting the development, new areas of AI application for social progress can be explored securely.

Moreover, just in case, even on the day when AI really wants to destroy human beings, the social contract with AI, which aimed to conserve the contracting parties (96; bk. II, ch. 5), is still our umbrella. Similar to the death penalty imposed on criminals, if AI attacks social rights and even threatens human survival, then “it is expedient [for the society that AI] should die (96; bk. II, ch. 6)”. It is stipulated at the time of signing the contract—AI should be sentenced to death when attempting to destroy humans, which is the condition for humans to guarantee the survival of AI (96; bk. II, ch. 5). Note that the nature of AI is absolutely rational (Xu and Wang), so the establishment of treaties can be seen as a determination of principles for them. Therefore, once the treaty is made with AI, the probability of AI breaking the contract is zero in principle. Based on its rational characteristics, AI may even become one of the legislators for the fact that AI can be free of any emotions and be able to behold all human passions (Rousseau 101; bk. II, ch. 7) with the advancement of simulation technology (Mao *et al.*).

IN: That’s really instructive, Mr. Rousseau. In fact, about half a year ago, Pepper, a Japanese AI robot, appeared in the British Parliament as an AI “member” for the first time (Times Now Digital). Pepper successfully discussed the impact of AI on the labor market and the future of education with human members of parliament—this validates the possibility of adding AI’s will to the general will. Nevertheless, there’s still something that cannot be ignored. Recent psychological studies have shown that AI does not satisfy the structure of moral practice at least for now, it can only

abide by utilitarian moral norms (Brožek and Janik). That is to say, AI only regards actual efficacy or benefits as ethical standards (Skelton). Due to the fact that AI, with strict utilitarian morality, is far more rational than humans, although it might be possible to discuss factual issues such as the intellectualization of the education system and labor market with AI, I am not sure what will happen if human rights, democracy, and justice are involved in the discussion.

Besides, since the exchange and sharing of information between AI can be easily achieved (Proctor), we cannot assert that there won't be a partial society of AI. This makes it hard to judge whether each AI makes up its own mind, then the good articulation of the general will might not be ensured (Rousseau 92; bk. II, ch. 3).

KM: Regardless of whether the era of AI is really socialist or not, AI is bound to bring us a new social form while improving productivity and changing modes of production (Engels). Faced with the new social form, patching on the original social contract may be far from enough. What humans need to do might be to jump out the framework of the original treaty and explore a new social contract suitable for the AI era—after all, it's a contract between humans and non-humans.

JR: You have a point there, Marx. The social contract I suggested in *The Social Contract* was to help the French people oppressed by the ruler in the eighteenth century to defend their rights. Now, to protect human rights in the new world of AI, humans need to contribute their courage and wisdom to create a brand new social contract meeting the requirement of the new century. Phyllis, the responsibility for building a new contract lies with

your young people. However, if you want we two old men's opinions, you are always welcome.

IN: Thanks a lot, Mr. Rousseau, and of course Mr. Marx. Two hours with you have made me more confident about the transformation into the era of AI. Eva has recorded our interview and compiled the text, I will share this transcript with everyone living in the dawn of the Age of AI. Once again, express my thanks to both of you.

[2:15:05]

IN: Eva, can you swear that you have not tampered with the transcript?

[End Transcript 2:30:00]

Stenographer: Eva

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Teacher's comment:

FENG's work demonstrates the ability to identify a topical problem that has far-reaching implications on world knowledge and the meaning of humanity. She covers multiple and specific grounds, and has delineated a realistic and viable scope of inquiry. Her engagement with ideas of thinkers from the past is of a prospective nature, situating them in an emerging and complex paradigm. Readers end up being challenged to radically question where and how we are in the development of technoculture in its multiple manifestations. The autonomy she has accomplished by building insight across disciplines manifests a transformative potential that is to be emulated in all intellectual inquiries. (YEUNG Yang)