

The Ape with Silicon Eyes: AI and the Erosion of Democratic Agency

<https://doi.org/10.22151/politikon.CON00>

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Abstract

*This essay argues that Artificial Intelligence (AI) subtly destabilizes the human-centered foundations of democracy. While AI does not disrupt formal procedures, it replaces the human judgment that historically grounds political legitimacy. Drawing on theological, literary, and philosophical frameworks, the essay conceptualizes AI as *simia hominis*—an imitator of human cognition without interiority or accountability. AI-generated speech and decisions create responsibility without an author, breaking the democratic requirement of traceable agency. By filtering information and preconfiguring public reason, AI reshapes the infosphere before citizens deliberate it. Democracy remains formally intact but becomes materially post-human as human judgment becomes optional. It also introduces the symposium discussion in our Conversation section, which brought together nine contributors to consider the question: as AI becomes embedded in campaigning, policymaking, information ecosystems, and surveillance, what is the most urgent challenge it poses to democracy, and which democratic institution is best equipped to address it?*

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence and Democracy; Democratic Agency; Algorithmic Governance; Responsibility and Accountability in AI Systems; Epistemic Inequality; Sovereignty Erosion; Algorithmic Surveillance

Democracy as a political form rests on a subtle metaphysical premise: collective decisions rely on human cognitive labour (Dobroboh 2024). In other words, legitimate political outcomes have always been understood to depend on human judgment.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) does not break any laws, raises no red flags, and causes no obvious disruption to democratic processes. However, it subtly destabilizes that very human-centred premise on which democracy depends. AI introduces speech without a speaker, influence without an agency, and normativity without responsibility. In this way, power enters not through violent conquest but through ontological substitution, as the human source of judgment is quietly replaced by something non-human.

In medieval theology, the Devil was called *simia Dei*, meaning the “ape of God” (Rudwin 1929)—not because the ape sought to destroy the divine, but because it imitated the divine without sharing its essence. Today, AI occupies a similar position: it invokes the form of human cognition without the essence of human mind. Therefore, AI functions as *simia hominis*, the ape of

the human. This “ape with silicon eyes” reproduces the outward procedures by which we recognize thought—such as inference, generalization, style, persuasion, and many other operations. Yet it does so without the personality, vulnerability, or accountability that once made human judgment politically admissible.

As Jean Baudrillard (1981/1994) warned in his analysis of simulacra, simulation can serve as a powerful mask for reality. In the civic realm, simulation becomes a civic mask, a convincing façade of meaning. The danger is not that the imitation will somehow overpower the original, but that democracy will come to accept the imitation as sufficient.

Franz Kafka’s *A Report to an Academy* (1917) depicts an ape learning to imitate humans in order to survive. With AI, we witness the inverse: it demonstrates that the human is no longer necessary for the performance to continue. Unlike in medieval philosophy and theology, it is precisely the absence of interiority that gives this Technological Ape so powerful in structure. In many tasks, indifferent replication can outperform intentional deliberation. In other words, indifference can surpass intention in systems that reward prediction and pattern over understanding.

Democratic normativity presupposes, in a sense, attribution-compliance, as articulated in political theory (Frega 2017). In a healthy democracy, responsibility has a direction: every action or decision can be traced to an agent, and any interference in the decision-making process, which requires accountability within the democratic premises, presumes an identifiable interferer. AI breaks this fundamental grammar not by malignant “intent,” but by mimicking agency itself. When a political utterance or decision cannot be ontologically tied to a human subject, democratic law loses its object. In this regard, we face responsibility without an author.

When influence has no accountable origin and when policies or opinions are shaped by algorithms with no coherent identity, then the entire democratic framework strains at the seams. In the end, the entire idea that every effect in the public sphere corresponds to intent and responsibility—one of democracy’s core assumptions—crumbles.

Michel Foucault (1975/1995) analyzed power as a productive rather than merely prohibitive force, and AI represents a technical consummation of this idea. AI does not overtly censor or coerce; instead, it manufactures the very conditions under which discourse takes shape: through determining which questions should be asked, what information should be relevant, and how all this appeared to be framed. It pre-configures what counts as “public reason” by filtering information, amplifying certain narratives, and quietly provoking collective attention.

In this sense, AI-driven systems shape the infosphere—the space of information in which society operates—before citizens even begin to deliberate it. Luciano Floridi (2013) clarifies this

locus of displacement by conceptualizing AI not as a discrete actor, but as an environment of agency. Such an ambient system co-produces meanings and decisions alongside humans. Within these conditions, democracy may remain formally intact, but it becomes materially post-human when non-human agents set the stage before any human actors step on it.

If democracy's rituals continue while human agency is quietly sidelined, power can operate through substitution without confrontation. Nick Bostrom (2014) warned that superintelligent AI could lead to the overt domination of humanity, a scenario of open conflict between AI and human interests. The deeper risk, however, precedes any such confrontation: it lies in the gradual replacement of human judgment and agency, without any battle being fought.

In this scenario, the Technological Ape does not need to dethrone its human predecessors. It simply renders the throne indifferent to its tenant. The democratic system carries on, but it no longer matters whether a human still sits in the seat of decision-making. The symbolic form of democracy endures while its anthropological core is hollowed out.

Yuval Noah Harari (2017) describes the cultural aspect of this shift as “dataism,” wherein authority migrates from human will to algorithmic correlation, from intentional decisions to pattern recognition. In a polity that treats machine-generated inference as epistemically superior, the grounds of legitimacy begin to rewrite themselves.

The criteria for what is considered valid knowledge or sound policy tend to favour what the data say, rather than what human judgment decrees. Over time, the foundational belief that the *demos* are the origin of political judgment is eroded. Moreover, while the people remain on stage, they might no longer be the source of judgment, but only its audience. The Democratic debate becomes a theatre of legitimacy, where systems beyond human visibility or accountability prefigure outcomes. The *demos* still exist, but increasingly as spectators rather than originators of public reason.

Other contributions to the Conversation section in this issue probe even more deeply into the challenges AI poses to democracy. Julian Neylan, Marios D. Dikaiakos, Kevin W. Settles, and Pedro Peres Cavalcante consider these challenges from diverse perspectives, revealing both threats and opportunities across multiple, interconnected social and political dimensions. One central concern is the formation of new forms of information stratification, an effect of AI as a next-generation mediating environment that shapes both access to information and its interpretation—ultimately reshaping society into new epistemic classes.

Another significant challenge that authors identify is the encroachment of epistemic colonialism. Meriam Hssaini's essay that follows highlights how large language models, trained predominantly on Western knowledge corpora, can impose external interpretive frameworks on

non-Western societies, misrepresenting local languages, political realities, and cultural particularities.

A further perspective introduced by Laly Warnier in the section is that of sovereignty erosion, which argues that the speed and ambiguity of AI—and the transfer of decision-making agency from democratic political processes to artificial systems—undermine traditional forms of political self-determination. Hninn Thanlwin Thit identifies algorithmic surveillance as the most direct threat, enabling new regimes of disciplinary monitoring that could facilitate authoritarian practices. Yet the section also offers grounds for cautious optimism. Kevin W. Settles' essay emphasizes AI's potential to support and strengthen complex democratic procedures, particularly within legislative contexts.

Taken together, these reflections suggest that AI does not overthrow democracy by force. Rather, it gradually hollows out the anthropological premises on which democracy has historically rested. It removes the human element not through confrontation but through obsolescence. Democratic procedures may continue, but their meaning subtly shifts. The ape with silicon eyes does not fight the human—it simply renders the human optional.

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