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Technology, Development, and the Competition for Supremacy

From its very first pages, Paul Dobrescu's new book *The Dragons of Development* makes its roots visible: it is built on a comprehensive literature review, and on a reflection upon progress and supremacy in contemporary societies. The author sees the development of a society as "a way to get to know ourselves" (p.10), and the ideas elaborated in the volume are based on historical and societal knowledge. To understand the development of a nation, its cultural roots and the following integration of culture in the norms of that society are a relevant object of study.

There is a suggestive metaphor in the volume describing its main topic: development. Thus, development means to be always on the move like a "grass that is running" (p.10) making Bedouins search for it in the desert. Progress is built on elites, and contemporary elites in the Western world are facing a crisis. They have become part of the establishment, and are avoiding risks. By doing so, they impair development, and, according to the present book, this is a counterproductive attitude. The author emphasizes this issue from the very beginning of the book. In the final chapter, this becomes a specific criticism of the Romanian political elites for not contributing to the development of the country.

The authors' previous research, extensive documentation, and sharp analytical perspective are serving the purpose of answering the main question: what are the factors that determine a successful development of a country or a region. Is the 'center of the world', metaphorically speaking, shifting locations nowadays?

Three relevant chains of processes contribute to the development of a country or an entire region: the monetary chain, the information chain, and the goods and technology chain. Technology and information shaped the world we are currently living in. The United States' (US) technological leadership is based on the development and the expansion of the 'big five': Alphabet (Google), Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Microsoft. We are witnessing increasingly fierce competition between US and China. The Chinese competitors, when it comes to online platforms, are quite strong: Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent are just some of the relevant names. However, when talking about platforms and algorithms, the principle behind the technology shouldn't be overlooked. Algorithms are not neutral; they are a result of software design, and machine learning is functioning based on large amounts of data. Thus, privacy

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concerns were often formulated in the Western world and, for instance, as a result, the European Union (EU), introduced the 2018 GDPR regulation.

Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) emphasized the way platforms changed our society in several fields such as news, urban transport, healthcare and health research, and education. The platforms' mechanisms allow datafication, the translation of digital behavior into data, and commodification, making use for the economic purposes of the gathered data. Even if the level of datafication is similar worldwide, the level of commodification is different among countries. In Western democracies, the discussion is focusing on how far data commodification for advertising purposes can go. Currently, online privacy concerns and privacy literacy are highly discussed topics by communication scholars (Masur, 2017; 2020). However, culture has an impact on the attitude towards privacy protection in online environments. Even among members of the EU, there are differences when it comes to how important online privacy is for young people (Balaban & Mustățea, 2021). In China, data gathered by social network sites such as WeChat and Sina Weibo are used for more than just advertising purposes. Several scholars have raised concerns about the strong surveillance dimension of data use. Even if data protection is relevant for the EU, and there have been several initiatives to regulate the field, there are only a few platforms (e.g., Spotify) developed in European countries. Technological power is concentrated somewhere else. This is an important idea underlined in the book.

The first chapter of the volume is dedicated to the topic of artificial intelligence (AI), the most important component of the technological revolution, the so-called "queen of the digital revolution" (p. 22). Tech companies such as Apple had a low value on the capital market a few decades ago. Now they overcome traditional companies when it comes to the value of their stock. They developed not only a huge financial power, but power in the global world because they shape behaviors.

Every major revolution in the history of humanity enabled the emergence of the first relevant actor that developed an advantage over the competition. This was the case of Britain at the beginning of the industrial revolution, and it is the case of the United States now. The US is a leading power when it comes to the development of AI-based technology. However, the challenger is China that invests a lot in research and development. Private initiative is the ground for the development of the tech industry in the US. In China, the state supports big tech companies.

The success of AI is based on four principles: storage capacity, computational capacity, a specific field of application, and a clearly defined purpose (p.24). AI means that computers can identify patterns in complex data. AI has a large spectrum of applicability and contributes to the convergence of the physical, digital, and biological worlds. Unfortunately, AI is strengthening the prior existing gaps in society and among countries. Those who already have power will get more powerful. AI has mostly positive outcomes for the automotive industry, or for medicine, to mention only some of the fields that were discussed in the book. H, And there are some additional good news: users develop over time algorithm awareness (Zarouali, Boerman & De Vreese, 2021). However, there are also negative consequences, such as the proliferation of fake news.

Paul Dobrescu elaborated the chapter on AI in a perspective close to technological determinism. "Who has the control over the data holds the keys to the future" (p.49) - this is one of his main predictions. China is using its advantages over the US competitors. For example, a large number of users of the China-based platforms enabled the development of accurate

face recognition technologies. Besides, the legislation allows data collection and data use in a manner that is to some extent incompatible with Western practices.

The second chapter of the book deals with the development of leading countries over the last decades, since the end of the Cold War. The different speeds of development influenced the balance of powers on the international stage. The author delivers in this chapter a critical overview of the historical development of globalized capitalism with its crises, among them the 2008-2009 financial crisis, and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. The author's perspectives and ideas are accompanied by information about leading economic powers - USA, China, South Korea, and Germany.

As already mentioned, in the introduction of the book supply chains are deemed important to the development processes. The third chapter of the book is dedicated to this topic. The essence of the US - China competition is the battle "to control some of the leading positions in the global chains" (p. 124). Not only superpowers are competing for supplies, but every single country in the world is doing that. The US dollar is an important asset for global competition. It has been challenged by crypto-currencies. In addition to all private initiatives in this field, China is planning to launch its crypto-currency. Adding to the different facets of the global competition for tech supremacy, the chapter presents a case study on Huawei, the Chinese company that developed 5G technology. The company faced major obstacles when it intended to penetrate not only the US markets, but also the markets of US allies, some of them being EU member states. Concerns were raised again that China will have control over sensitive data.

The last sub-chapters of this section are dealing with the mediatic challenge in a global world. The highly discussed phenomenon of fake news, and its implications are discussed in this part. Fake news mimics the format of classic news and intentionally provides inaccurate information intending to deceive. They mimic authentic news in form, but not in editorial rigor (Lazel et al., 2018). The proliferation of fake news was identified as a vulnerability for democratic societies (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Once again the author illustrates important concepts with relevant examples.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to the geopolitical development of Eurasia. Scholars' prediction for the next years is that China, India, Japan, and Indonesia will have substantial economic growth so that Eurasia will be the region with the largest economic growth. Once again, the focus is on China. Its ideological identity is based on its tradition that underlines the importance of the state, the abandonment of Marxism, and the introduction of private initiative in the economy. China builds its global expansion on economic development: silk road, reloaded, or "one belt, one road approach" (p. 178). Under Donald Trump's presidency, the US embraced the "America first" ideology that brought some tensions in the relationship with the traditional allies, among them some of EU members, and Japan. Meanwhile, China was very active in developing economic ties with the above-mentioned countries. With the presidency of Joe Biden, this approach was abandoned, and starting with the first days of the new administration, the US worked on reinforcing alliances with EU member states such as Germany and France, and with Japan.

In the context of Russia's and China's efforts to discredit liberal democracy and its values, in the final paragraphs of the chapter, the author raises concerns about a dangerous phenomenon: young people "who do not give as much importance to living in a democracy as to living prosperously" (p. 226). Thus, their motto is "development first, democracy later."

The final chapter is dedicated to the developments from the last three decades in Romania. The author criticizes the lack of a consistent project around which to focus the efforts of the local political class. The national unity is considered by the author as a project that attracted several generations. Paul Dobrescu pointed out some of the most important problems faced by the Romanian contemporary society: the demographic collapse caused both by emigration and low rates of natality, the lack of interest in the development of agriculture, the export of raw materials instead of value-added products, and the excessive imports. The chapter ends with a criticism of the Romanian elites and the neo-liberal development of the country. The final pages are written in a pessimistic tone. Even if the transformation process that the Romanian society was undergoing in the 1990s was not an easy one, the author overlooks the positive impact of Romania becoming an EU member state. Besides, the living standards of the Romanian population (especially of the people living in the large Romanian cities) are higher now than they were three decades ago.

The Dragons of Development presents the image of a dynamic and complex world, a world in which we witness the competition for the global supremacy of the two superpowers, US and China. The present volume is well documented and abounds in examples. It is a pleasant reading not only for those interested in international relations, geopolitics, economic development, but also for a large educated public. The book urges reflection because it raises many questions about the future of the world we live in.

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