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## Racist Artificial Intelligence: Where does it come from?\*

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### Abstract

How did racism creep into the algorithms that govern our daily lives, from banking and shopping, to job applications? Connecting the legacy of enlightenment racism to forms of discrimination in modern day algorithms and Artificial Intelligence, this article examines what data feeds into AI technology - and how this data will shape our future, in terms of both social relations and politics.

### Keywords

Artificial Intelligence - Racism - Algorithms - Philosophy - Ethics - Bad AI

### Introduction

In a recent paper, several colleagues made the case for “decolonial Artificial Intelligence (AI)”. They introduced the theme as a viable remedy to combat some of the inherent biases that AI-based technologies display and further (Mohamed et.al., 2020). The crucial argument made here, and one that I would like to advance in this article with a particular emphasis on enlightenment racism, is the

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connection between past imperialisms and the scourge of algorithmic discrimination. The authors rightly argued that there is a structural nexus between the colonial past and racism in the present and that AI-based systems are transferring these legacies into our techno-society on a daily basis.

It is very likely that the disadvantaged social group among you – women, sexual and ethnic minorities – already suffered from the racial and sexist hierarchies that are embedded in algorithms that decide about your mortgage and credit card applications, browser history and even if you considered attractive or not. It is common knowledge by now and a bit of a cliché that the late Cambridge physicist Stephen Hawking warned about the march towards superintelligent systems. Even as practical an entrepreneur as Elon Musk, the founder of Tesla, SpaceX and other high-tech companies, has publicly expressed his worries, despite of his own active role in some of the destructive developments in AI-technology (Adib-Moghaddam, 2023). But it is not so much the onset of what I prefer to call pseudo-intelligence per se that is worrying, but the information that enters these AI machine systems. After all, our past and present is polluted with discrimination, xenophobia and prejudice. Why would we expect AI-systems to be different, if less accountable for their racism? If we don't rid our archives from the scourge of racism and other forms of discrimination, I argue, future machines will be codified and appear to us as bigoted and vile.

In fact, as I am writing these lines there are several real-world examples that can be curated to demonstrate what I have been flagging as a real threat to society with a good dose of justified hysteria. Machine learning is a subset of AI where algorithms directed by complex neural networks teach computers to think like a human while processing “big data” and calculations with high precision, speed, and supposed lack of bias. Web search and recommendation machine learning algorithms drive relevant search results and product recommendations from the likes of Google, Netflix, and Amazon. Facebook's facial recognition uses a

machine learning algorithm to automatically identify and tag friends when uploading a photo. The Finance industry utilizes machine learning algorithms to uncover credit card fraud, make predictions about creditworthiness, and identify trends in the stock market. Authoritarian states use face identification and tracker software to suppress dissent. And the criminal justice system is using machine learning to predict crime hotspots and recidivism rates. For instance, the software COMPAS has been used to forecast which criminals are most likely to benefit from parole. It was discovered that the COMPAS algorithm was able to predict the particular tendency of a convicted criminal to reoffend. However, when the algorithm was wrong in its predictions, an independent enquiry in the United States found out that the results were displayed differently for black and white offenders, with the latter being disproportionately denied parole based on prejudiced data.

There are even more disturbing trends that make the subject of such research so urgent. In early March of 2021, the US National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence headed by the former CEO of Google, Eric Schmidt, came to the conclusion that it must be a “moral imperative” to develop and use lethal autonomous weapons, i.e. killer robots (Allen, 2021). Already, the military establishment of Turkey is deploying kamikaze drones such as “Kargo” against static or moving targets. The system is based on integrated real-time image processing capabilities and machine learning algorithms embedded on the platform. It is not entirely autonomous, but the technology employed is the first step in that direction. In fact, the Future of Life Institute published a report by the Dutch Advocacy Group PAX which identified dozens of tech companies that are involved in the development of lethal autonomous weapons. The list includes household names such as AliBaba, Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google, Intel, IBM, Microsoft and Siemens. While some of these companies have best practice policies in place, they are all a part of a growing techno-military complex that is

embedded in our everyday lives in the way that the old guard, such as Boeing and Lockheed Martin, are not.

Physicist such as Max Tegmark in his best-selling book “Life 3.0: Being Human in the Age of Artificial Intelligence” have linked some of these tendencies to humanity’s dreams to acquire god-like powers. Other well known books such as Bostrum’s “Superintelligence” also argue that there is something inevitable about the overwhelming power of technology, as self-aware digital lifeforms will come to rule the word. But none of these studies have made a clear connection between enlightenment racism and the future.

The present article tells the story of a concoction of the enlightenment that is destructive, yet prevalent and therefore acutely dangerous. The monsters of today are the Frankenstein monsters of the past. Mary Shelley, in her beautifully agile mind, imagined a time when we would pass the threshold of human and post-human, when she pondered the making of new creatures. But Dr. Frankenstein’s creation was rather romantic, a sad and volatile figure whose imperfections alienated him from society. The superintelligent AI system that we will face very soon is an invention of another kind: The Supermodel beyond human creation which will dominate all catwalks.

### **1- It’s a Time of Magic**

We were told that the enlightenment was a time of magic. Bright men and women transformed into god-like geniuses whose inventions are forever inscribed in the annals of humanity. They wielded their magic stick and miracles happened. We have heard the legends. They walked around in the courtyard of Trinity College, Cambridge and invented the law of gravity. This was Isaac Newton in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. They made a pilgrimage to Loreto in Italy to thank the Holy Maria for their prophetic visions and fostered a new kind of human consciousness – cogito ergo sum - I think, therefore I am. This was Descartes in the same century. In

1831, a bearded loner, yet dedicated family man, ventured from his Georgian manor house in the Kent countryside just outside of London to the heights of the Andes in Peru, the heartland of what used to be the mighty Inca empire. From there he traversed the colourful rainforests of Brazil, and landed on the Galapagos islands that straddle the equator off the Ecuadorian coast in South America. Some serious bird-watching revealed that the different species of colourful finches flying around varied from island to island. Our origins were explained; it was argued in one of the biggest best-sellers of human history. Observing the humble finch ushered into the theory of evolution by natural selection. This was not crystal ball fortune telling. It was the science of Charles Darwin.

Despite of the social restrictions and discrimination of the age, there were revolutionary female alchemists, too. A shy, petite yet incredibly feisty scientist from Warsaw by the name of Marie Sklowoskaya Curie was one of them. Tinkering on radioactive material as if it was a block of marble drafted for a beautiful sculpture, Curie famously remarked the gorgeous faint light that the ionising radiating substances that she stored in her desk drawer emitted in the dark. The damaging effects were not known yet, so she carried test tubes containing radioactive isotopes in her pocket, with that jolly sense of confidence and exuberance that was so typical for this age. She lost her life for her scientific discoveries after receiving the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1903.

In between the geeks, there were the sparkling rock stars. A dandy bon-vivant educated at Cambridge broke the hearts of his male and female admirers alike with his powerful cantos. Lord Byron's *Don Juan*, an epic poem finished in 1824 and informed by Byron's fascination of the Levant and his Pan-European escapades, seriously challenged the sexual and social mores of Victorian Britain. On the continent equally narcissistic personalities appeared, as geniuses of music propped up in the Viennese milieu. The Elvis Presley of his age, Wolfgang

Amadeus Mozart, composed some of the world's most divine symphonies until his death in 1791. Mozart had an acute sense of aesthetics, too. Even to rehearsals, he would appear with a white wig, or accessorised with his crimson pelisse and gold-laced cocked hat. Mozart inspired the eternally unique compositions of the likes of Ludwig van Beethoven and Richard Wagner. A time for rock and roll, not only in the sciences, but in almost every aspect of life. This is the enlightenment as we know it.

Magic is all about creating the unimaginable. This was not the first period of human history when the magicians ruled the world. In ancient Greece, philosophers rubbed shoulders with gods – Socrates challenged Zeus, Aristotle mused with Aphrodite. In ancient China, almost 1000 years before the height of the enlightenment in Europe, a sage described as the yellow chi, the homeless dragon, swam the turbid waters of China's imperial dynasties and developed a lasting moral code for humanity. The life and teaching of this magician by the name of Confucius (551-479 BCE), prompted the famed Hannoverian philosopher Leibniz to proclaim in a letter written in 1697, that "I shall have to post a notice on my door: Bureau of Information for Chinese Knowledge (Quoted in Bodde, 2005: 4)."

Elsewhere and at different times in global history, other geniuses appeared. In 12<sup>th</sup> century Persia, a radical philosopher by the name of Ibn Sina wrote the first canon of medicine. His equally bohemian contemporary Hafiz, produced some of the world's most beautiful quatrains which inspired the famed German poet Johann-Wolfgang Goethe who dedicated his West-Eastern Divan to the Persian sage in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. If Galapagos was the laboratory of Darwin, the tavern functioned as the field site for some of Khayyam's musings. His poetry compiled in the world-famous Rubayyat continue to inspire the School of Love and his adherents today. Khayyam's poetic style was certainly central to Jalaledin Rumi, the 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian-Anatolian dervish mystic whose universal poetry is revered by almost every celebrity that you may know.

## 2- Lucifer's Sorcerers

But the last enlightenment in human history which unfolded in the laboratories of Europe would also usher into a form of sorcery with devastating consequences for the whole world. The sanitised version that we all studied in our history classes left out some of the satanic political projects that ushered into major catastrophes for humanity. At the same time as Darwin was voyaging South America, Ibero-european empires were building colonial enclaves on the ruins of the genocidal campaigns spearheaded by Christopher Columbus's "discovery" of the "new world" and its brutal subjugation in the name of the Cross. In 16<sup>th</sup> century Peru, a Spanish conquistador by the name of Francisco Pizarro lead a brutal onslaught of the native inhabitants that would usher into a genocide of unimaginable scale, when European imported diseases such as smallpox decimated the Incan population with supersonic pandemic speed. In the wake of this unintended "biological warfare" the mighty Inca empire, one of the most sophisticated civilisations of global history was erased, certainly with the killing of one of its most legendary sovereign emperors (Sapa Inca) by the name of Atahualpa. The only major town left standing became one of the seven world wonders of humanity: Machu Picchu, the city of skies, was too high for the stampeding Spanish troops to reach, which explains why it survived the ongoing destruction.

The organising principle guiding these campaigns was a particularly European invention which would be refined in the laboratories of the enlightenment into a "science" of racism. There existed forms of racial domination during other periods of history. The great kings of the Achaemenid Empire in today's Persia and Iraq used to differentiate between *arya* and *anarya*, Iranians and non-Iranians as a mode of governance of their subject people and a source of legitimacy for themselves (Adib-Moghaddam, 2021). But these were political agendas that were not turned into a science of race, taught at

universities, pursued by professors, and digested as social formulas for the killing of unworthy “subject” people on an industrial scale. There were no Professorships in Eugenics in ancient Persia. There were no colour charts that would categorise the worthiness of humans based on the lightness of their skin as it was used in several colonial settings. The Ottoman Empire prescribed a Sunni-centric superiority for Muslims, but the sultans of Istanbul did not endow research centres measuring the skull of humans in order to find out if they are Semitic and therefore condemned to be exterminated in concentration camps.

Racism as science was a distinct invention of the European enlightenment and western modernity more generally. Lucifer’s disciples were marching on at the same time as the beauty of this period mesmerised everyone with a sense for progress and aesthetics. One year before Marie Curie passed away in 1934, a thuggish army-reject by the name of Adolf Hitler would bring these satanic legacies to the fore like no one else before and after him.

The Nazis and their race theories could have only emerged out of this period in history which was all about human perfectionism codified as racial purity. Henceforth, in laboratories stacked with skulls of homo sapiens, the idea was concocted that the “White Man” was destined to save humanity from the barbarism of the inferior creole races. In 1927, the US Supreme Court handed down a judgement to allow the sterilization of a young woman it wrongly thought to be ‘feeble-minded’ and to champion the mass eugenic sterilization of undesirables for the greater good of the country. In the thrall of eugenics, US Congress enacted several laws designed to prevent immigration by Italians, Jews, and other groups thought to be genetically inferior. In other settler-colonial settings such as Canada, Australia and Brazil, mass sterilisation campaigns were forcibly implemented in order to tip the demographic scale in favour of the White colonialists. When Hitler came to power in 1933, several professorships were endowed at German universities that furthered the ideas of phrenology and



human perfection, most infamously at the University of Kiel in the northern county of Schleswig-Holstein. Henceforth, university professors would do their anthropological “field-work” by measuring the cranium of children, in order to establish their Aryan credentials.

The Ghosts of the past have not been banished. They are haunting society and our algorithms because the sorcery of the enlightenment continues to spook our culture, politics and society. A famous Zoo in Hamburg, today one of the most cosmopolitan towns in Europe, is a good example. It is named after a chap by the name of Carl Hagenbeck (1844-1913) who made his money by displaying humans in cages in his infamous human zoos. Only recently have anthropologists established that the exhibition of native populations has a long history in the making of racism as a science and spectacle. So we find that Christopher Columbus returned to Spain in 1493 with seven Arawak Indians and reported that the masses of onlookers who came out to see his procession from Seville to Barcelona appeared to believe that he had returned with the inhabitants of another star’ (Rothfels, 2002: 86-87).

In the nineteenth century, racism doesn’t merely turn other human beings into a public spectacle; the “savage” becomes the site of intense excitement, an object of science and a source of income. In fact, Carl Hagenbeck would become the cause celebre of his age for his ability to contract out his animal catchers to hunt ‘a number of really interesting natives’, as he put it (Quoted in Bodde, 2005: 83). Hagenbeck would neatly configure his human zoo exhibitions at Neuer Pferdemarkt 13, the market for horses that would become the first address of the Hagenbeck Zoo. Hagenbeck had a particular fable for authenticity as he decorated the natives ‘only in their wild personalities, with their animals, tents, and household and hunting equipment.’ *The New York Times* dedicated a major report to him after he passed away describing Hagenbeck as the ‘wild animal king’ lauding his extraordinary career from a ‘humble fishmonger’s boy’ to the

main 'source of supply for zoos, menageries, and circuses' (The New York Times, 1913).

But the report fails to mention that Hagenbeck made his fame and fortune out of human zoos. In his diaries, Hagenbeck describes in great detail how he happened to import some reindeer and that he and his friend deems it most 'picturesque' to import a family of Lapps along with them. When they arrived on a ship from Norway, Hagenbeck lauded the sight of a mother with a tiny infant under deck and a dainty little maiden about four years old, standing shyly by her side. For Hagenbeck the sight had circus value as the Lapps were authentically barbaric, 'so totally unspoiled by civilisation that they seemed like beings from another world.' Hagenbeck was jolly excited as the Laplanders had no conception of commerce and business as they lingered outside behind his house at Neuer Pferdemarkt. 'All Hamburg came to see this genuine 'Lapland in miniature' (Hagenbeck, 1912: 18-19). The fact that the city of Hamburg never even contemplated to change the name of this Zoo into something more acceptable demonstrates very well, how the racism of the enlightenment continues to feed into culture without much interrogation. How then, can we expect our AI-systems that are based on current data to be equitable. The evidence shows that they are not.

Enlightenment thought in Europe tried to establish what Nietzsche so aptly called the "Übermensch". I have argued that the myth of racial superiority, that Nietzsche isn't to blame for, was codified, theorised and taught via several dangerous cob-sciences that professed racial superiority and promised to scientifically prove the domination of the "Aryan man" as a necessary progression of human kind. In this process of extremist social Darwinism all the "creole" subject peoples would be erased in favour of the pure master race. White Supremacists still believe in this nonsense. Thanks to decades of research, and certainly galvanised by Edward Said's "Orientalism", we know by now that this

pseudo-scientific racism undergirded both the imperial enterprise of Europe, that is the domination of “subject races” as a civilisational project, and more seriously Nazi ideology which led to the horrors of the Holocaust.

### **3- White AI - Dark AI**

The European enlightenment created a very particular anxiety that was specific to it: The “white man’s” anxiety with racial perfection. It is here where I connect the current social manifestations of Artificial Intelligence with enlightenment racism. Consider the killing of George Floyd which triggered the global BlackLivesMatter movement. Since then companies such as Clearview AI, that are accused of racism which feeds into forms of surveillance and the judicial system in the United States, need to be put under increasing scrutiny. Clearview is the most awesome platform for facial recognition technology ever created. It’s database has more than 3 billion photos gathered surreptitiously from social media profiles and websites. This is a database seven times the size of the FBI’s. It is increasingly used by law enforcement to identify protesters including those that demonstrated against police violence after the killing of George Floyd. The mobile app of Clearview matches names to faces with a tap of a touchscreen.

The algorithmic error rates of such technology is set at anything between 5% to 50% which makes quite a difference when your parole hearing depends on it or when you are arrested for a crime that you didn’t commit. In fact, when Apple released it’s FaceID, which allows your Iphone X (and onwards) to be unlocked by identifying your face, the algorithm used couldn’t differentiate the facial features of Chinese users. More dramatically, in 2019 teenager Ousmane Bah sued Apple for US\$1 Billion after he was falsely arrested for several robberies at Apple stores in the United States. In fact, the company’s facial recognition software wrongly identified him as the culprit. The actual perpetrator really had nothing in common with Ousmaneh which makes this story even scarier. In fact,

any of us could be mistaken by one of these algorithms and indicted for crimes that we never committed. These technologies have been exported to authoritarian states, where they are used to police and oppress without much scrutiny.

There are even more nefarious, systemic effects of this racist technology. In 2007, a little known hacker from Australia by the name of Ton-That moved to San Francisco. Within a very short period of time, he made a name for himself among hacker communities by unleashing a computer virus that phished the login details of Gmail users. By 2015, Ton-That had joined forces with White Supremacists groups who were plotting to install Donald Trump as president. Ton-That contributed to the facial recognition boom spearheaded by Clearview AI which would deliver, according to Alt-Right enthusiasts, algorithms to ID all the illegal immigrants for the deportation squads.

In fact, all the major political events of the last years have been affected, if not determined by algorithms, in particular in support of anti-immigration causes on the wide spectrum of right-wing policies, especially in Europe and North America. The UK-based AI start up Faculty is another example. The company was instrumental in winning the Brexit vote for the current UK government as it used targeted advertisement for political purposes. In this case Faculty used their AI know-how to flood Facebook users with pro-Brexit messages that took the UK out of the European Union after the vote in 2016. In the same year, Cambridge Analytica was accused of amassing the data of millions of Facebook users without their consent and using it in political campaigns, in particular to support Donald Trump in the presidential election. Algorithmic politics, therefore, are clearly benefitting right-wing agendas which are always also imbued with racialised policies, if not outright racism. It is inevitable, therefore, to shed light on the past, present and future of our global techno-society and the racist data networks feeding into it.

I have argued that the social and cultural legacies of enlightenment racism

continue to haunt us and that they are polluting the data sets of our technosocieties. Examples abound in contemporary Europe: Until today, France struggles with racism and it seems that advanced technologies don't mitigate a deeply anchored cultural aversion to "immigrants." For example, despite of the integration of body-cams into the police force, i.e. small individual mobile cameras mounted on the uniforms of the French police in order to record their actions, the 'baseless' ethnic profiling of Arab and Black youths as young as 10 years old continues to be flagged as human rights abuses by prominent organisations (Jeannerod, 2020). The reasons are historical, too. The most exalted French thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were also buying into the idiocy of racism. For example, in his *Essai sur l'Inégalité des Races Humaines* published in 1853, the famed Count Arthur de Gobineau defined 'Semites' as a white hybrid race bastardised by a mixture with 'Blacks'. The legendary Palestinian polymath Edward Said showed, that Ernest Renan in his *Histoire Générale et Système comparé des Langues* introduced a comparable classification, opposing 'Semites' to 'Aryans'. Renan was particularly sceptical about the 'racial power' of Muslims (Said, 1978, especially 133 ff).

The current Director of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen, Peter Van der Veer, has added additional material explaining how during the enlightenment 'craniometry', the measuring of skulls and 'phrenology', a scientific method that links the size of the skull to individual's mental faculties, became the empirical focus of race science (Van der Veer, 2001: 145-146). In England, race theorists even came up with biological explanations of foreign policy that 'explained' scientifically that the 'English Overman' was destined to rule the world due to his racial superiority (Arendt, 1958, p. 180). In more recent scholarship, my perceptive colleague at Sheffield University, John Hobson, has added further truth to the matter. 'For the first time in world history', Hobson comments on the enlightenment period, 'the

development of societies was assumed to be founded on permanent racial characteristics ... Special emphasis was placed—again for the first time in world history—on the importance of skin colour and genetic properties’. The section speaks to my repeated emphasis on scientific racism being a novel, and uniquely European invention. ‘This was now conceived of as a permanent hierarchy and for some, though not all, scientific racists justified the subjugation of the Other (the Yellow and Black races) by the self (the Europeans)’ (Hobson, 2004: 237).

#### **4- Black is Beautiful**

Racism is a powerful residue of European, US and to a lesser extent Japanese modernity. We should not be surprised, therefore, that an algorithm by a software company called COMPAS caused several mistakes based on a racially charged calculus in the process of being used to predict the particular tendency of a convicted criminal to reoffend, as I mentioned also in the introduction. The algorithm devastated the lives of those at the receiving end of this racially charged calculus. When it was wrong in its predicting, it was revealed that the results were displayed differently for black and white offenders, as black offenders were flagged as particularly unworthy of probation. For instance, an African-American offender by the name of Robert Cannon was given a medium risk (6) ranking having one petty theft and no subsequent offense on his profile. A white offender by the name of James Rively was categorised as low risk (3), with prior offenses such as domestic violence, aggravated assault, grand theft, petty theft, drug trafficking and another subsequent offense in grand theft. In another example, “black” Brisha Borden was deemed “high risk” (8) with four counts of juvenile misdemeanour and no subsequent offenses, while “white” Vernon Prater was considered low risk (3) with prior offenses such as two armed robberies, one attempted armed robbery and one grand theft as a subsequent offense – truly staggering and shocking discrepancies here.

The data sets feeding into AI-systems will be prejudiced and discriminatory, as long as modern racism is accepted as a part of our social reality which is, of course, distinctly multicultural and mixed, now. But going back to the more specific theme of desire and racism: Scholars in Black Studies have presented dozens of outstanding books and research articles which magnify the colonial roots of the sexual fetishization of Black Women whose rape, it should be noted, was legalised and at times recommended as an act of racial “purification”. Recent studies into racist AI algorithms that link black women to porn suggest that this insidious link between desire and race feeds into the data of our current systems: ‘As a result of the lack of African Americans and people with deeper knowledge of the sordid history of racism and sexism working in Silicon Valley, products are designed with a lack of careful analysis about their potential impact on a diverse array of people’ (Noble, 2008: 66).

Search engines are a very good reflection of this legacy which threatens to destroy all the potential benefits that inclusive algorithms under the supervision of minorities could bring about in Europe and especially in the racially charged atmosphere of the United States. Try Google on any term that is laden with forms of racism that we are all aware of: Jew, Arab, Black, Chinese, Italian, Pakistani, Irish, Turk, Hindi, Muslim, Chinese, Russian, Gay, Basque, Traveller etc., and the worse racism and bigotry is just one click away. No wonder, then, that social media sites such as Facebook and Telegram have been indicted for fermenting social unrest. We are beginning to understand why now: We have not managed to overcome the stupidities of our past.

History as we encounter it in our archives is a culprit, then. Many of the older generation of so called “great thinkers” that created much of the modern world that we inherited were anti-humanistic from our perspective today. This cultural illiteracy permeating Europe still in the nineteenth century and early-twentieth century is full of the lore of racial superiority, exactly because of the ignorance

permeating those societies at that time and in many ways before. In the mainstream they displayed a lack of a stock of shared humanistic knowledge that ancient civilisations in China, Persia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Peru, Mexico and elsewhere held on to over several generations. In cultural terms and measured in accordance with truly humane ideas that are inclusive, enlightenment Europe was surprisingly primitive and barbarian. Almost all biographies of the main engineers of European modernity are tainted by various forms of racism and sexism.

It is no accident then, that in his bestselling book about his travels through western Asia, the Tory Aristocrat, Mark Sykes (1879-1919) presented a kind of comparative ‘raciology’ of the peoples he encountered, their ‘puzzling faces’, and their indistinguishable physiognomy. Although a ‘Hill Kurd can be as easily distinguished from a Bedawi as a negro from an Englishmen’, Sykes established in all honesty during his travels in and around Mosul (today’s Iraq), ‘the intermediate races present every combination of the two types. I have seen men known as Kurds’, he elaborated, ‘exhibiting every Arab characteristic, and Egal-wearing village Arabs so coarse-featured as to make one doubt whether the Arabs are a handsome race. How is it that, now and then’, Sykes wondered ‘amid a group of roundstomached brown-skinned little rascals, tumbling in the dust of a Fellaheen village, you will see a flaxen-haired, blue-eyed child with a face that Millais would have been glad to catch a glimpse of?’ (Sykes, 1904: 177-178).

Elsewhere, Sykes’ puzzlement turned into disgust of these seemingly ugly people that Britain was about to rule: According to him, the inhabitants of Mosul were ‘eloquent, cunning, excitable, and cowardly ... one of the most deplorable pictures one can see in the East diseased from years of foul living. ... With minds of mudlarks and the appearance of philosophers.’ Ultimately, ‘they depress and disgust the observer’ (Sykes, 1904: 177–178). Such were the attitudes of the man who co-invented the map of the modern “Middle-East”, who together with his



French counterpart Francois-George Picot, a comparably destructive individual, carved up the Ottoman Empire during World War I. The results of their idiotic and infamous “lines in the sand” can be felt until today, as the arbitrary borders they promoted are the source of many conflicts besetting the region, blowing back to Europe in terms of terror campaigns and refugee waves.

The colonial gaze that seduced Sykes into that problematic racial typology and comments about the unattractiveness of some of the tribes he encountered can be connected to so called “beauty algorithms” such as Qove’s tool, that are used for various purposes today, including facial recognition software used to police minorities. In this short article it is my concern to connect today’s AI systems to the residues of the European enlightenment. So it is rather more important to point out that the beauty algorithms are distinctly racist. In 2016, for instance, the world’s first international beauty contest judged solely by an algorithm crowned 44 winners. You will not be surprised that almost all of them were white as there were only a handful of women with an “Asian” background crowned “Miss Algorithm” and only one with a darker complexion (Mahdawi, 2021). It is almost as if Mark Sykes was on the jury.

Such racist beauty scoring is not confined to relatively innocent beauty contests. Social media platforms use it to identify “attractive” faces in order to highlight their profiles. The trend is global now. For instance, the moderators of the most successful social media site at the time of writing, TikTok, owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, were told to actively suppress videos from poor, physically challenged or seemingly “ugly” users. *The Guardian* of London revealed in 2020 that a ‘content moderation memo demanded that videos were excluded from the for You feed if they featured users with “abnormal body shape (not limited to: dwarf, acromegaly)”, who are “chubby ... obese or too thin” or who have “ugly facial looks or facial deformities”’ (The Guardian, 2020).

*The South China Morning Post* revealed further that social media filters, for

instance on Facebook's Instagram, have had a profound impact on demands for plastic surgery. This "selfie dysmorphia" is meant to bring the filtered image, closer to the unfiltered reality. In fact, a survey by the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery in 2017 found out that 55 per cent of surgeons revealed they had consulted patients who asked for surgery to improve the way they look in selfies – an increase from 42 per cent in 2015 (South China Post, 2019). This trend has been compounded, too by the Covid-19 pandemic leading to a "Zoom boom" in plastic and cosmetic surgery. We have antidotes to the idiocy of racism. We just need to inject them into our social fabric which frames the data feeding into the AI algorithms that are increasingly constituting us, in terms of our desires, looks, identities and even our sexual preferences.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Everything I have said should not validate the rather comical depiction of AI as an inevitable Orwellian nightmare where we will face an army of super-intelligent "Terminators" bound to erase the human race. Such dystopian predictions are too crude to capture the nitty gritty of AI, and its impact on our everyday existence. So societies are set to benefit from AI, if they integrate its usage into a wider discussion about the merits in terms of sustainable economic development, social justice and human security. The confluence of power and AI, for instance investment into systems of control and surveillance, should not substitute for the promise of a humanised AI, that puts technology in the service of the individual, and not the other way around.

The obsession of some dominant "western" thinking with perfection and "hyper-efficiency" has had a profound impact on human relations, even human reproduction as people live their lives in cloistered, virtual realities of their own making. For instance, several US and China-based companies have produced robotic dolls that are selling out fast as substitute wives. One man in China even

married his cyber-doll. A woman in France married a robo-man advertising her love story as a form of “robo-sexuality” and campaigning to legalise her marriage. The very existence of the human race is therefore challenged from various directions: hyper-warfare, environmental degradation and/or robotic wives and husbands (see further Millar, 2021). To develop a sustainable future that renders AI-systems useful for our individual security is the battle of the future. The outcome will define the sustainability of life on this planet - To my mind, this battle of our generation is as hyperbolic and grandiose as that.

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