

Jaron Lanier, “Intellectual Property” and Parasitism on the System of Violence

William Gillis

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Over-35s seem to love nothing more than being told that the Internet — and the rapid cultural developments that have paralleled it — have been a terrible mistake with huge downsides that will surely doom us. And there’s no end to the opportunistic hacks lining up to dress this generational reactionary spasm as the contrarian voice of reason.

We’re told that we need elites, that people talking about injustice in their own online communities has gone on long enough, that decentralized systems are surely too complicated to figure out, that Chelsea Manning and activists who care about a free Internet are a false front for the Koch brothers, et cetera. The arguments are inevitably as preposterous as they are haughtily presented. But Jaron Lanier’s recent declaration in the pages of *Quartz* really takes the cake.

Lanier, a dreaded former software engineer who made a pretty penny from “intellectual property,” now rakes in cash telling elitist yuppies the Internet was a bad idea. In this latest piece he argues that the solution to capitalism’s refusal to spread the wealth from automation, as well as to the loss of privacy we’ve suffered under closed-garden platforms like Facebook, is — wait for it — for us to more strongly embrace “intellectual property.”

In addition to blaming the loss of privacy engendered by tools and laws built to defend IP — as well as the gargantuan centralized wealth from IP that underpins closed-gardens like Facebook and Google — on us not protecting IP, Lanier also claims that as we’ve bypassed middlemen in the flow of information we’ve permanently lost the jobs that comprised the bulk of the middle class and thus have ordained the failure of classical American democracy.

But frankly, good riddance. As someone whose family was homeless while I was child I’ve never understood pearl-clutching appeals to the sanctity of the middle class. The horrors of those in poverty are surely more pressing. But it makes sense in a twisted sort of way if your primary goal is the stability of our society’s existing atrocities. If your highest priority is the sort of large sedate voting bloc that made America’s dystopian 50s possible. If you prefer the stability of power relations over alleviating the suffering of those impoverished and held back by systematic constraints on and barriers to information.

Still, Lanier’s appeal to the mid-twentieth-century class system’s foremost goal of making sure everyone has full-time jobs rather than a proportional share of the increasing wealth being

generated by the system is so dated and putrid it's shocking he can find an audience wistful for it.

The problem responsible for our dramatic advances in efficiency not being reflected in part-time gigs or projects paying better than full-time jobs used to is the ridiculously huge concentrations of capital distorting the market and trapping profit among the upper echelons. Intellectual property and systematic barriers in knowledge have played a major if not defining role in the creation of our oligarchical system. Lanier's proposal might — in a non-corrupt world — secure some additional stability for a select few, but in every world it would throw gasoline on the fires of oligarchy ravaging our economy.

Every last human being is intellectually creative in ways beneficial to us all if we'd let them have the time and space for it. We will always dream and discover wonderful arrangements of concept, art and mathematical description. Rather than empower a select elite to pursue these passions full-time by scurrilous means we should secure a world of flat market relations where everyone is paid enough for less labor that they might pursue their creative passions. And anyway who on earth would prefer to live as one of Lanier's "middlemen?" Doing explicitly unnecessary work, a parasite on the system of violence, censorship, and surveillance that underpins "intellectual property?"

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