

## Philosopher says digitalization leading to new totalitarianism

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Markus Gabriel (Asahi Shimbun file photo).

Noted German philosopher Markus Gabriel believes the the novel coronavirus pandemic has opened a greater possibility of allowing technological development to push the world toward a new form of totalitarianism.

In an interview with The Asahi Shimbun, Gabriel was asked how digitalization could lead to totalitarianism and what can be done to bring about a bright future through improved technology.

*Excerpts from the interview follow:*

**Question: Before the spread of COVID-19, a popular point of debate was whether the development of artificial intelligence technology would fundamentally change humans and society. What are your thoughts on that?**

**Gabriel:** It is a terrible mistake to believe that scientific and technological progress by themselves have any kind of emancipatory value that makes the world a better place.

The new kind of totalitarianism that is a serious possibility on the current horizon is a digital form of authoritarian, non-democratic government.

### GOVERNMENTS NO LONGER MAIN SURVEILLANCE AGENT

**Q: What do you mean by a digital form of authoritarian government?**

**A:** I believe one characteristic of totalitarianism is the loss of a differentiation between a public sphere and a private one. Looking back on 20th-century history, including the case of Japan, nation-states destroyed the private sphere as totalitarianism progressed. The private sphere in more common terms can be called an individual's conscience. Through control measures, the state tried to look into that conscience and control it.

But it is different today. The main agents of surveillance and control now are not governments, but major technological companies, such as Google and Twitter.

We are now transmitting voluntarily private information to social media and the technology companies are strengthening their control based on that collected information. And we are now providing that information out of our own free will. While nations are trying to restrict such

companies, they are not taking aggressive measures. In other words, technological progress is being decoupled from moral progress.

A small number of technology companies that have not been democratically legitimated now control a larger portion of the society and economy. And citizens have become more accustomed to providing those companies with information. This situation is what I refer to as a “new totalitarianism.”

## **DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE BECOMES REALITY**

### ***Q: What relationship does that have with the global spread of COVID-19?***

**A:** There are a number of points to keep in mind. Almost all nation states have seized the opportunity to push through policies and geopolitical strategies that would have been unthinkable six months ago.

One example is the development and implementation of apps designed to restrain the spread of infections. Leaving aside whether that is a good idea or not, these measures all involve technology. However, a technological answer is not possible for deciding how to differentiate between the private and public spheres.

Moreover, as the economy in general moves toward a contraction due to the novel coronavirus pandemic, a huge part of our socio-economic transactions--including business meetings, university seminars, etc.--have moved online to spaces exploited by big data companies. While this problem existed from even before the pandemic, the situation has become more obvious since the spread of COVID-19.

### ***Q: But isn't that unavoidable as a means of restraining the spread of infections?***

**A:** We no longer have a strong resistance to having our freedom of travel and conscience restricted as we had believed important in the past.

When we use the term authoritarian regime, many people imagine the regime of Vladimir Putin in Russia or Xi Jinping in China. I myself consider those two authoritarian regimes to be totalitarian. As has been often pointed out, China has created a digital surveillance state by combining technology with capitalist development. They are the full-blown realization of the good-old dystopian stories of the 20th century such as “1984,” which was written while having the Stalin regime of the former Soviet Union in mind.

In other words, totalitarianism cannot be brought about solely by a nation-state, but a major role is played by the bad possibilities brought about by technological development. That is why technology must be handled in a democratic manner.

### ***Q: Do you feel that is not what is happening right now?***

**A:** Google, Facebook and more recently Twitter are very dangerous anti-democratic weapons of mass manipulation. They moved from the collection of behavioral data used for predictions to the production of behavioral patterns, as we all know from our everyday lives. They strongly determine where we eat, shop, sleep.

This is a huge geopolitical security disaster basically for all countries except for the United States, which stores the incredible amounts of wealth produced by their tech monopolies. The forms of inequality and non-democratic superpower in a handful of companies produced the political nightmare of the Trump administration, which is the most dangerous attack ever on the value system underlying America's dream of being a moral leader.

**Q:** You have painted a very pessimistic picture. But the economic development triggered by technological improvement has, from a global standpoint, raised the standard of living of not only advanced nations, but also developing nations. Even if the rosy picture of a better future through technology may have been mistaken, isn't there still the possibility of technology improving society?

**A:** It is possible and even necessary that we develop a radically innovative way of being together on planet Earth, a humanity that overcomes asymmetries and hegemonies, which in the last 200 years have led to the biggest outbreaks of violence and mass murder of all times.

**Q: *Can morality change the direction of technological development?***

**A:** I am very optimistic that solidarity will increase in the long run. Think of the billions of euros for the EU agreed upon by the very different nation states, the aid for Lebanon, the exchange of scientific knowledge for the creation of an effective vaccine, etc. We will need an even higher level of solidarity and cooperation in order to counter the biggest threats to human future existence yet: the climate catastrophe, which is much more dangerous than the current viral pandemic.

**Q: *One of the topics to be discussed at the Asahi World Forum 2020 this autumn is the future of the new totalitarianism that you have highlighted. What do you intend to say at that forum?***

**A:** Japan is very open to radical transformations in the face of global challenges. As one of the first countries in Asia to effectively enter modernity it adapted to its local needs in a very impressive way. To be sure, this led to a catastrophe but after World War II to a creative and sometimes even leading economy and society. My hope for the future is that Europe and Japan will be able to cooperate in the development of a sustainable and ethically thought through future. We need to combine our strengths.

Japanese people tend to be incredibly good at mind reading, which is part of the huge business successes of Japan's recent history. This kind of attention for other minds could be combined with new forms of universalist moral philosophy.

In order to re-create democracy for the 21st century, we need to overcome various borders including the one allegedly separating Asia and Europe. This is difficult due to complex historical processes, traditions, etc., but it has to be done simply because democracy is based on universal values that must not discriminate between so-called "cultures."

(This interview was conducted by Jun Takaku.)

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*Markus Gabriel was born in 1980 and is currently a professor of philosophy at the University of Bonn, where he also heads the International Center for Philosophy. He is one of the leading thinkers of a branch of philosophy called new realism and in recent years has also addressed such topics as populism and brain science.*

*The Asahi World Forum will be held online between Oct. 11 and 15. The main theme is "Five Days for a New Future." There will be more than 20 sessions, including panel discussions, on topics ranging from the U.S. presidential election to climate change and the U.N.'s sustainable development goals.*

*The sessions will be livestreamed from a studio at The Asahi Shimbun's Tokyo Head Office. Panelists from abroad will join in through a videoconferencing system. The sessions will be interactive, allowing participants to ask questions or make comments. An English channel to*

*promote further discussions will be available for the session at 11:30 a.m. on Oct. 12 on radically changing capitalism and democracy, the session at noon on Oct. 13 on working toward a circular economy and the session at 4 p.m. on Oct. 14 on authoritarianism in the 21st century.*

Registration in English can be made at (<http://t.asahi.com/awfen>).

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