The (Geo-)Political Economy of Digital Capitalism (SOT82124)

Technical University of Munich

Term:	Summer 2025	**Instructor:**	Timo Seidl
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Course Description

The course offers an introduction to the (geo-)political economy of digital capitalism. Political economy is a subfield of political science which studies economic processes 'along the lines of distributional conflict and inequalities, contested processes of rule-making, and the power of interests and ideas (…). It implies that the functioning of an economy is always conditioned and shaped by politics' (May et al., 2024, p. 2). The prefix 'geo' points to the growing entanglement between politics and geopolitics, which is particularly relevant in the domain of technology (policy). Digital capitalism can be understood as a 'historical form of capitalism in which platform-based, data-driven, and AI-powered business models capture an increasing share of profits, directly or indirectly control an increasing share of economic life, and increasingly serve as role models for start-ups and established companies' (Seidl, 2023, p. 10).

In this module, we will explore how the conceptual and theoretical tools of the politico-economic literature on capitalism—and on the intersection of state and market, society and economy more broadly—can help us understand digitalization: the process whereby more and more of what we think, say, and do becomes mediated by digital technologies. Additionally, we will examine how traditional politico-economic conflicts—such as those between firms and workers or industry and society—intersect with conflicts between states and regions in an increasingly 'geo-tech' world. On the one hand, we will explore various approaches that seek to uncover and explain digital capitalism's 'laws of motion'. For example, often adopting a comparative perspective, we will analyze how digital capitalism intersects with politics and power—whether through symbiosis and support or through contestation and regulation. On the other hand, we will examine recent debates that seek to explain the growing entanglement of politico-economic and geopolitical dynamics, as well as the central role that digital technologies play in this process.

Learning Outcomes

The course aims to familiarize students with the social scientific literature on the (geo-)political economy of digital capitalism. At the end of the course, students should be able to: - Remember and describe key processes through which digitalization shapes capitalist societies and capitalist societies shape digitalization. - Summarize and critically assess central theoretical arguments that try to make sense of and explain these processes, in particular in light of the growing entanglement of digitalization and geopolitics. - Apply these theoretical insights in small empirical research projects of their own.

Requirements

In line with the module, the examination consists of a research paper (wissenschaftliche Ausarbeitung) accompanied by a short colloquium. The written research paper will count for 80% of students' grade, the colloquium for 20%. The research paper is intended to assess students' ability to independently design and conduct a small empirical study of approximately 3,000 words that meets the basic standards of academic work. Students may use qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods but the papers must be directly related to one of the course's main themes (e.g., a case study on an episode of digital policymaking, a politico-economic analysis of market dynamics in a particular digital sub-sector, or a comparative investigation into the societal consequences of the emergence of certain digital technologies). The colloquium will take place after (!) the submission of research papers and last for around 20-30 minutes. It is meant to ensure that students have the ability to discuss and defend their research papers in an academic setting.

Prerequisites

Students need no prior knowledge to successfully complete the course.

Course Policy

Basically, don't cheat and try to learn stuff. I'd also would—genuinely—appreciate if you regularly attend class in person, I promise I'll do my best to make it worth your while. For some more details, see below.

Feedback Policy

I want to give you as much feedback as you want—but I also don't want to waste my time writing more detailed feedback if you don't even care. So while by default you will only receive your grade, you can easily request written feedback by simply writing on your assignment or telling me directly that you would like to received written feedback (e.g., 'I want to receive written feedback on this paper.').

E-mail Policy

You can always email me if you have an idea for an assignment, if you want to learn more about a certain topic and don't know where to start, or if you have a question that you really don't want to ask in class. Please don't email me with questions that you could easily find the answer to in the syllabus or in my previous emails. I might take it badly. Two more things that make my life easier: First, please make sure to mention the course title in the subject line of your email. Second, please reply to previous email conversations with me instead of starting a new email, especially if it's about the same topic.

A.I. Policy

I encourage you to use large language models like *ChatGPT* to improve, speed up, or challenge your writing (be that of text or code)—I regularly do so myself. However, not only do I expect you do make this use very (!) transparent.[1] I also want you to reflect on three things: First, current large language models are not very useful if it's really important to get things right. If you see yourself working in an area where this matters, you will have to learn how to get things right. Second, current large language models are much more useful if you actually know what you're doing—much like a cheat code in a video game is much more useful to someone who is actually good at the game. So if you want to be augmented instead of replaced by large language models, keep learning stuff. Lastly, by routinely relying on AI shortcuts you relinquish, as English professor Thomas Pfau puts it, 'the experience of intellectual achievement and growth, which can only ever be the fruit of *sustained* personal effort'. Your time at university will become 'a relentless series of logistical challenges', rather than 'a process of learning and intellectual and personal growth'. So think very clearly about what you are giving up—and risking—when trying to save some time.

Grading Policy

In principle, all assigned tasks must receive a passing grade in order to pass the module. In exceptional cases, deviations from this rule may be considered, but any such decisions will be made on a case-by-case basis at the instructor's discretion. However, in exceptional circumstances, alternative assignments may be permitted as a substitute. Your final grade will be a weighted average of the above-described assignments. The resulting average will be truncated after the first decimal place (e.g. 1.94 will be 1.9).

In general terms, what is important to me when it comes to grading are two things. First, stick to the task at hand and look at the syllabus to see what is actually expected from you; and second, put a bit of effort into it. Try to write something that you yourself would like to read. Be concise and clear, or at least make it clear when you found something unclear. You don't need to understand everything, have read a ton of additional literature, or write in a fancy way to get a very good grade. Just stick to the task and try to make sense.

[1] For example, you used an LLM to help you rephrase a certain paragraph, add a footnote saying something like 'I used GPT-4o to help me improve the phrasing of this paragraph.' If you use an LLM to brainstorm or come up with potential criticisms of your main argument, add a footnote at the start of the paper where you briefly explain how you used this criticism to improve your paper.

Below you can find more detailed grading criteria, which apply, with varying degrees of emphasis, to most types of assessments. These criteria comprise: Strength and Originality of Argument, Theoretical Framework and Literature Engagement, Methodology and Empirical Evidence, Topicality and Academic or Practical Relevance, Structure and Organization, Clarity and Quality of Communication, Citation and Academic Integrity. In addition, I put some general advise on writing (a good term or response paper) on my website, which you can find here.

Very Good (1,0—1,3):

- *The argument is exceptionally clear, compelling, and thoroughly grounded in critical thinking, showcasing a high degree of originality. It demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the topic, integrating novel insights or approaches with persuasive and well-substantiated reasoning.*
- *Demonstrates an exceptional understanding and engagement with the theoretical framework and relevant literature. The research is characterized by extensive depth and breadth, critically engaging with a wide range of sources to offer new insights or interpretations. It reflects a sophisticated integration of theory with the research topic.*
- *The methodology is excellently chosen, well-executed, and thoroughly justified, with empirical evidence used effectively to support the argument. Evidence is highly relevant, accurately interpreted, and integrated seamlessly into the research, enhancing the strength and credibility of the findings.*
- *The research is exceptionally topical, engaging deeply with current questions or themes within the field. It demonstrates a high degree of academic relevance, providing insightful analysis that could inform theoretical frameworks, discussions, or future research. The paper offers thoughtful reflections on potential practical insights or implications, highlighting its broader significance.*
- *Excellently structured. Outstanding organization and clarity.*
- *Exceptional communication. Written or oral expression is clear, fluent, elegant, and highly engaging. Ideas are articulated effectively and concisely, facilitating a deep understanding.*
- *Perfect or near-perfect adherence to citation guidelines and excellent, visually appealing formatting. High academic integrity.*

Good (1,7—2,3):

- *The argument is strong and well-founded, displaying a good level of original thinking and critical engagement with the subject matter. It presents a coherent and convincing case, supported by evidence, with some innovative perspectives or methods.*
- *Shows a thorough understanding of the theoretical framework with a good engagement with pertinent literature. The research covers a broad spectrum of sources, providing a solid grounding in the field and contributing to the topic with some new perspectives or critical reflections.*
- *The methodology is mostly appropriate and well-executed, with good use of empirical evidence that supports the main argument. While mostly relevant and well-integrated, there may be minor issues in execution or interpretation that do not significantly detract from the overall strength of the research.*
- *Shows strong topicality and relevance, connecting well with contemporary scholarly debates or issues. It makes a notable academic contribution, with implications that suggest possible avenues for further investigation, theoretical development, or practical considerations in a more general sense. Practical insights are offered in a way that enriches the academic discourse.*

- *Well-structured. Good organization that supports the content.*
- *Good communication. Mostly clear and engaging, with minimal errors or distractions. Ideas are effectively conveyed, and the overall expression supports comprehension.*
- *Only cosmetic mistakes in citation or formatting. Generally adheres to academic standards.*

Satisfactory (2.7—3,3):

- *The work shows an adequate argument that is reasonably clear and supported, featuring some degree of originality. The argument has merit and is founded on appropriate reasoning, though it may occasionally lack depth or fail to fully persuade.*
- *Provides an adequate review of the theoretical framework and engages reasonably with relevant literature. The research demonstrates a sufficient depth and breadth, identifying key theories and sources, though it may lack in offering substantial new insights or critical analysis.*
- *The methodology is adequate, with some issues in choice or execution. Empirical evidence is used, with some relevance and support for the argument, but the integration and interpretation of data could be improved to strengthen the research outcomes.*
- *Adequately addresses current topics and demonstrates relevance to ongoing academic conversations. It offers some practical insights, presenting a grounded perspective on how the findings might be applied or considered in broader contexts. The paper contributes to academic understanding, albeit with more limited scope or depth.*
- *Adequately structured. Generally clear with some organizational issues.*
- *Adequate communication. Generally clear, though minor errors or awkwardness occasionally distract or impede immediate understanding. Ideas are communicated sufficiently but could benefit from improved presentation.*
- *Some smaller issues with citation or formatting, but generally correct.*

Sufficient (3.7—4,0):

- *There is an attempt at arguing a thesis, but the argument often lacks clarity, depth, and convincing evidence. Originality is limited, with the work showing minimal innovation in thought or approach. The argument is weak and not particularly persuasive.*
- *Exhibits a basic understanding of the theoretical framework with a limited engagement with relevant literature. The research scope is somewhat narrow, with gaps in the depth and breadth of literature reviewed, offering minimal new interpretations or critical engagement with existing theories.*
- *The methodology shows a basic level of appropriateness and execution, but lacks in thoroughness or precision. Empirical evidence is present but limited or flawed, with issues in relevance or integration that weaken the argument and research findings.*
- *Exhibits basic engagement with topical issues, with some relevance to the academic field. It hints at practical insights or implications, though these are not fully developed or are only tangentially addressed. The work provides a modest contribution, with potential areas for further exploration identified but not deeply explored.*
- *Acceptably structured. Some effort at organization but lacks clarity.*

- *Acceptable communication. Understandable overall, but frequently awkward, unclear, or disorganized. Errors or unclear expression frequently interrupt or complicate comprehension.*
- *Acceptable adherence but with some sloppiness or minor errors.*

Insufficient/Fail (4,3—5,0):

- *The argument is poorly structured, unclear, or largely absent, with no evidence of original thinking or critical engagement. It fails to make a convincing case, lacking both in strength and in the presentation of any novel insights or perspectives.*
- *Shows poor understanding and engagement with the theoretical framework and literature. The research is significantly lacking in depth and breadth, with little to no critical engagement with relevant sources or theories, failing to adequately support or contextualize the research topic.*
- *The methodology is poor or inappropriate, with significant flaws in execution. Empirical evidence is poorly used, irrelevant, or largely absent, offering little to no support for the argument or findings. This level reflects a fundamental misunderstanding or neglect of sound research practices.*
- *Lacks significant topicality or relevance, with minimal engagement with current academic or practical concerns. The paper offers little in the way of practical insights, failing to connect findings to broader discussions, potential applications, or theoretical implications.*
- *Poorly structured. Disorganized and difficult to follow.*
- *Poor communication. Frequent errors, unclear wording, disorganization, or a lack of coherence make understanding difficult.*
- *Poor adherence to citation and formatting. Major errors or ethical issues.*

Course Outline

Part I: General Introduction

Week 1, May 8, 2025: Introduction

no readings for this session

Week 2, May 15, 2025: Theorizing Digital Capitalism

Required Readings:

Törnberg, P. (2023). How platforms govern: Social regulation in digital capitalism. Big Data & Society, 10(1), 205395172311538. https://doi.org/10.1177/20539517231153808

Seidl, T. (2023). Commodification and Disruption: Theorizing Digital Capitalism. Weizenbaum Journal of the Digital Society, 3(1), 1–35. https://doi.org/10.34669/wi.wjds/3.1.2

Optional Readings:

Boyer, R. (2022). Platform capitalism: A socio-economic analysis. Socio-Economic Review, 20(4), 1857–1879. https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwaa055

Sadowski, J. (2025). The mechanic and the luddite: A ruthless criticism of technology and capitalism. University of California Press.

Week 3, May 22, 2025: Politics & Power in Digital Capitalism

Required Readings:

Culpepper, P. D., & Thelen, K. (2020). Are We All Amazon Primed? Consumers and the Politics of Platform Power. Comparative Political Studies, 53(2), 288–318. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414019852687

Thelen, K. (2018). Regulating Uber: The Politics of the Platform Economy in Europe and the United States. Perspectives on Politics, 16(4), 938–953.

Optional Readings:

Kemmerling, M., & Trampusch, C. (2023). Digital power resources (DPR): The political economy of structural and infrastructural business power in digital(ized) capitalism. Socio-Economic Review, 21(4), 1851–1876. https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwac059

Valdez, J. (2022). The politics of Uber: Infrastructural power in the United States and Europe. Regulation & Governance, rego.12456. https://doi.org/10.1111/rego.12456

Week 4, May 23, 2025: The Ideology of Digital Capitalism

Required Readings:

Nachtwey, O., & Seidl, T. (2023). The Solutionist Ethic and the Spirit of Digital Capitalism. Theory, Culture & Society, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764231196829

Utrata, A. (2023). Engineering Territory: Space and Colonies in Silicon Valley. American Political Science Review. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423001156

Optional Readings:

Karpf, D., Turkle, S., Malhotra, N., Hyman, L., Kneese, T., Brunton, F., Farrell, H., Swartz, L., Farrell, M., & Ahmed, S. (2023, November). The Ideologies of Silicon Valley. A Crooked Timber Seminar. https://crookedtimber.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/svseminarfinal.pdf

Farrell, H., & Fourcade, M. (2023). The Moral Economy of High-Tech Modernism. Daedalus, 152(1), 225–235. https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01982

Week 5, June 5, 2025: Public Opinion & Digital Regulation

Required Readings:

Lee, J. (2024). Luddite or technophile?—Policy preferences for governing technology-driven economic change. Socio-Economic Review, mwae025. https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwae025

Hemesath, S., & Tepe, M. (2024). Multidimensional preference for technology risk regulation: The role of political beliefs, technology attitudes, and national innovation cultures. Regulation & Governance, 18(4), 1264–1283. https://doi.org/10.1111/rego.12578

Optional Readings:

Ehret, S. (2022). Public preferences for governing AI technology: Comparative evidence. Journal of European Public Policy, 29(11), 1779–1798. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2094988

Part II: Policy Areas

Week 6, June 12, 2025: Data Protection

Required Readings:

Kalyanpur, N., & Newman, A. L. (2019). The MNC-Coalition Paradox: Issue Salience, Foreign Firms and the General Data Protection Regulation. Journal of Common Market Studies, 57(3), 448–467. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12810

Jang, W., & Newman, A. L. (2022). Enforcing European Privacy Regulations from Below: Transnational Fire Alarms and the General Data Protection Regulation. JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies, 60(2), 283–300. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13215

Optional Readings:

Li, S., & Newman, A. L. (2022). Over the shoulder enforcement in European regulatory networks: the role of arbitrage mitigation mechanisms in the General Data Protection Regulation. Journal of European Public Policy, 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2069845

Week 7, June 26, 2025: Platform Governance

Required Readings:

Gorwa, Robert. 2019. What Is Platform Governance? Information, Communication & Society 22 (6): 854-871. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1573914.

Denyer Willis, G. (2023). 'Trust and safety': Exchange, protection and the digital market–fortress in platform capitalism. Socio-Economic Review, 21(4), 1877–1895. https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwad003

Optional Readings:

Gorwa, R., & Veale, M. (2024). Moderating model marketplaces: Platform governance puzzles for AI intermediaries. Law, Innovation and Technology, 0(0), 1–51. https://doi.org/10.1080/17579961.2024.2388914

Week 8, July 3, 2025: Blockchain & Web3

Required Readings:

Miroshnichenko, A., & Birch, K. (2024). Constructing digital assets through blockchain technologies? Unpacking the techno-economic configuration of non-fungible tokens. Social Studies of Science, 03063127241286447. https://doi.org/10.1177/03063127241286447

Olk, Christopher, and Louis Miebs. "A Credit Theory of Anti-Credit Money: How the Cryptocurrency Sphere Turned into a Shadow Banking System." Review of International Political Economy, April 8, 2025, 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2025.2476738.

Optional Readings:

Becker, K. (2022). Blockchain Matters—Lex Cryptographia and the Displacement of Legal Symbolics and Imaginaries. Law and Critique, 33(2), 113–130. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10978-021-09317-8

De Filippi, P., Reijers, W., & Mannan, M. (2024). Blockchain governance. MIT Press, Introduction.

Week 9, July 10, 2025: Artificial Intelligence

Required Readings:

Krarup, T., & Horst, M. (2023). European artificial intelligence policy as digital single market making. Big Data & Society, 10(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/20539517231153811

Paul, R. (2023). European artificial intelligence "trusted throughout the world": Risk-based regulation and the fashioning of a competitive common AI market. Regulation & Governance. https://doi.org/10.1111/rego.12563

Optional Readings:

Veale, M., Matus, K., & Gorwa, R. (2023). AI and Global Governance: Modalities, Rationales, Tensions. Annual Review of Law and Social Science, 19, 55–75. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-lawsocsci-020223-040749

Gray Widder, D., West, S., & Whittaker, M. (2023). Open (For Business): Big Tech, Concentrated Power, and the Political Economy of Open AI. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4543807

Part III: Geopolitical Economy

Week 10, July 11, 2025: The Rise of a Geo-Tech World?

Required Readings:

Rolf, S., & Schindler, S. (2023). The US–China rivalry and the emergence of state platform capitalism. Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space, 55(5), 1255–1280. https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X221146545

Bradford, A. (2023). Digital empires: The global battle to regulate technology. Oxford University Press, Introduction.

Optional Readings:

Seidl, T. (2024). Charting the Contours of the Geo-Tech World. Geopolitics, 29(5), 2033–2045. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2024.2333358

Week 11, July 17, 2025: Chip Wars

Required Readings:

Beaumier, G., & Cartwright, M. (2023). Cross-Network Weaponization in the Semiconductor Supply Chain. International Studies Quarterly, 68(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqae003

Farrell, H., & Newman, A. L. (2019). Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion. International Security, 44(1), 42–79. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00351

Optional Readings:

Miller, C. (2022). Chip war: The fight for the world's most critical technology. Scribner.

Schindler, S., Alami, I., DiCarlo, J., Jepson, N., Rolf, S., Bayırbağ, M. K., Cyuzuzo, L., DeBoom, M., Farahani, A. F., Liu, I. T., McNicol, H., Miao, J. T., Nock, P., Teri, G., Vila Seoane, M. F., Ward, K., Zajontz, T., & Zhao, Y. (2024). The Second Cold War: US-China Competition for Centrality in Infrastructure, Digital, Production, and Finance Networks. Geopolitics, 29(4), 1083–1120. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2023.2253432