

academics or already familiar with his interlocutors. This work would serve as a valuable resource in a political theology graduate seminar. Lastly, the book boasts an excellent bibliography and index.

LINCOLN RICE  
*Independent Scholar*

*Poor Technology: Artificial Intelligence and the Experience of Poverty.*  
By Levi Checketts. Fortress Press, 2024. xxxvi + 281 pages. \$46.00  
hardcover.

Although there are exceptions—Mark Coeckelbergh’s *AI Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), for example—the ethics of artificial intelligence (AI) generally ask how we can make moral use of the AI that we have. By contrast, Levi Checketts’s readable, detail-packed volume explores the class-biased design decisions that drove AI’s invention, use, and integration into our capitalist economy. Checketts argues that AI developers assume that “intelligence is good and what is good is intelligent” (xxx)—intelligent according to a computational rationality aimed at the efficiency demanded by capitalist competition. This logic further shifts resources and work—not to mention social dignity—from laboring people to the bourgeoisie and upper classes. What might be the effect, Checketts asks, if AI design “took seriously the perspective of the poor” (55) from the very beginning, including their contrasting values and epistemologies?

The introduction and chapters 1–3 set up the contribution of chapters 4–5. Checketts begins by warning that current AI will never fulfill its promise to create a universally flourishing society because 1) cybernetic logic by definition cannot deliver human-like general intelligence and 2) it necessarily, systematically excludes poor people from its benefits. Chapters 1 and 2 show that AI’s founders embraced computational logic ontologically, methodologically, and epistemologically, enshrining a universal standard of knowledge and a deductive method of knowledge production (19), steamrolling all other “forms of understanding and knowledge into a straightforwardly simple mathematical model” (46). Chapter 3’s Marxist analysis reveals that well-off AI developers (63) who benefit from the market and seek to maximize efficiency by reducing the need for labor (74) bias AI’s supposedly neutral, universally true calculations in favor of this aim.

It is impossible to do justice here to chapters 4 and 5, the heart of Checketts’s argument. He makes a social materialist case that precarity entailed by “scarcity or insecurity of necessary resources” to flourish in society (92, 96) shapes poor people’s vision of the world, tastes, survival mentality, spending habits, patterns of extraordinary generosity, wariness toward the bourgeois and upper class,

epistemology, and more. The moneyed classes in turn blame these “ignorant” tastes and survival mechanisms for the poverty that is actually the product of their own industrial efficiency, making the poor necessary foils to their own “intelligence” and virtue. Participatory design in which the poor install their own logics in AI could subvert these patterns, Checketts says. Yet both Catholic social teaching and liberation theology discourage this dynamic by speaking to, for, or about the poor from a privileged perspective without asking what the poor say of themselves when they are not talking to the rich. (Black, womanist, and *mujerista* theologies might have eased his pessimism in this regard.) The conclusion draws these themes together, arguing that the insights of poor people and Christian eschatological tempering of the hubristic promise of AI solutions to social problems can break the capitalist patterns that current AI reproduces and exacerbates.

Throughout, Checketts self-consciously attempts what he admits is an impossible task: thinking “as poor while also speaking to the bourgeoisie” (181). This entails fidelity to both the ontology, epistemology, and ethics of poverty with which he grew up and the standards of academic argument and citation demanded by an intellectual elite that embraces bourgeois and upper-class ontologies, epistemologies, and ethics. Viewed from this direction, the book is a project in translation using AI as a case. Capitalism’s grip on AI and other structures can be broken only when poor persons tell their stories to members of the upper classes, who learn truly to listen in silence without deceiving themselves “that finally listening to *some* poor will grant [them] a full picture” (184, italics added): “True conversion—true faith—entails a recognition of our own ignorance, [and] the failings [and futility] of our rationality” (190–191). However, he does not address the likelihood that some poor people would articulate and even embrace bourgeois values or the danger that he has simply returned us to Pope Leo XIII’s appeal to capital to treat labor better.

Checketts includes telling examples and smoothly engages sources from myriad disciplines; the footnotes are a gift to scholars wishing to plunge more deeply into the topic. The index is spartan, but curious readers can search an electronic version. The book is appropriate for a graduate seminar on economic ethics, religion and technology, or liberation or decolonial theologies. One could assign individual chapters in an undergraduate class. Chapters 1 and 2 are excellent explainers on AI’s history, ontology, methodology, epistemology, and implicit values.

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