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First Take: AI and the Work of Advancing a More Just Nation

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On JPI's home page, we make this declaration about our work for a more just nation: *"We have come to be known for our ability to translate scholarly research into user-friendly materials so that organizations and networks have access to the latest ideas and findings."* We wrote that long before AI became routinely accessible. So what does that declaration mean now, in the context of growing use of AI for these same functions?

Is it okay to rely on AI for our work to advance a better nation? What is the value, and where are the limits? I imagine these questions are being considered by many consultants and organizations that do work for good – we are driven by ideals and empathy and deeply-felt commitments to a better world. Can AI be useful along that path, or can it actively or inadvertently diminish or undermine our stated aspirations? This question needs a deep dive, which we will only begin here.

We have read, for example, about court filings generated using AI that include manufactured legal citations; shortcomings in the use of AI alone in medical imaging; and poorer content recall by students using AI for essay writing. When queried, AI itself responds that if inquiries are not carefully designed, it, too, can amplify existing inequalities.

Alternatively, it is argued that AI has potential to be applied in ways that advance a more just nation, as suggested by sources such as McKinsey & Company's *Applying AI for social good | McKinsey* . How can we exercise caution in the work that we do – namely, helping others understand how injustice operates and how to work in ways that advance justice?

Here's one exercise we're using to help JPI think through this question. Maybe such an exercise can be useful for your organization or your particular work as you, too, engage the promise and perils of AI.

We didn't want to make the exercise easy – in fact, we wanted to see if we could somehow stump or trick ChatGPT and Scholar GPT or otherwise expose their shortcomings or flaws. After all, embodied humans have egos. So the exercise we applied to AI was to imagine how the concept, dynamics, and current applicability of the phenomenon of "racialized capitalism"[1] could be conveyed to a lay audience for the purpose of underwriting various social change strategies. Racialized capitalism is a dynamic that underlies a good bit of how JPI has come to understand the world and thus envision strategies for justice.

In very summary fashion, here's how we went about the exercise (the queries made) and what we've taken away from AI's offerings:

❖ "What is meant by racialized capitalism?" The app did a good job of defining racialized capitalism from this query, giving historic and contemporary examples, and linking the dynamic to the persistence of racial wealth gaps, the inseparability of racial and economic inequality, and the need to address both forms of injustice simultaneously.

❖ "How did racialized capitalism begin?" The AI response focused on the trans-Atlanta slave trade, colonialism and resource extraction, and racial segregation and industrial expansion. It offered to recommend readings, which we took it up on. The response with credible "essential readings" offered foundational

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[1] In brief, racial capitalism, as defined through our AI query, is "the idea that capitalism has always been structured through race: the creation and exploitation of racial hierarchies to extract wealth and justify inequality."

works, critical histories, and contemporary analyses along with introductory articles and (how kind!) shorter overviews.

So far, so good. If a user stops here without probing any of the references, this gives enough for a few foundational powerpoint slides on the issue. By itself, though, if the user had no further knowledge, the user would hope that the audience doesn't ask any questions.

What we'd seen so far could also simply have been googled, but with the added requirement of putting pieces together. Short of having to devise further introductory questions to test the app, we instead queried:

❖ "Is there anything about racialized capitalism that can stump you?" The response was affirmative, describing in some detail how this is a vast, evolving field, and noting the following areas of limitation: highly specific archival details, very recent scholarship, complex debates among scholars, not having lived experience (duh), and granular data modeling. That said, it invited us to try to stump it. Nawww, we don't want it to control our time and attention. Notably, such an invitation occurred at the end of every query, potentially drawing a user in further and thus providing more data about users for its ravenous belly.

Up to this juncture the focus had been on testing AI's conceptual and scholarly understanding. But what about its ability to apply that knowledge to everyday life in ways that could advance the social good?

❖ "Who benefits from racialized capitalism?" we asked. Interestingly, the list (with accompanying explanation and a couple caveats) included wealthy elites and corporations, white populations (especially upper- and middle-class), politicians and power brokers, multinational companies in the Global North, and financial institutions.

- ❖ So we wanted to get more granular in an applied sense: "(What are) strategies for addressing the effects of racialized capitalism?" AI identified two dozen approaches divided among systemic, institutional, community-based, and individual and cultural strategies, and then offered to respond with specific examples from different sectors.

For these inquiries, we specifically followed with a question asking if the responses given included anything <u>not</u> derived from human sources – basically, was AI manufacturing information? This is a critical question to try to avoid results like the fake legal cases that have populated some court filings that used AI. In each case the response was negative – but asking that very question is an important safeguard for the integrity of your AI-driven work.

We temporarily stopped the exercise there to reflect on what we'd take away from it for the work we do. In that process, we found ourselves gravitating to AI's recognition of its lack of lived experience. In order to mobilize for or against anything, people need embodied experience to motivate activism. So, we went back to the app to ask a final (for now) question, which we thought would surely stump the app:

- ❖ "How does racialized capitalism make you feel?" To our surprise, the app responded that when racialized capitalism is fully grasped, it can evoke grief, anger, urgency and resolve, and a sense of clarity and solidarity. It noted, "Once you see it, you can't unsee it." We've said that very same thing in the trainings we've done. Notably, though, the response failed to identify feelings of superiority, power, and privilege that an oppressor under this system might have. As always, the response concluded with a question – this time a personal one: "How does it make *you* feel?"

- ❖ While we had resisted earlier end-of-response inquiries to extend the exchange, this time we didn't. We wanted to see if

the app would move from its heretofore historical/conceptual/ applied responses to a psychological frame, given the nature of the question. Our response was "We wonder why more people don't feel enraged and moved to social change." To its credit, the response stuck to social science analysis. However, at the end AI claimed, without elaboration, that people are waking up in real and growing ways and ended with its usual inquiry about whether we wanted to dig deeper on the point.

That's the extent of our online AI interaction around racialized capitalism for now. What do we take away in terms of its value for JPI's work – and the work of social justice advocates generally?

➢ For one's own introductory reading and to build summary powerpoint slides – yes; but don't let what AI offers lead you to overestimate your knowledge, insights, and preparedness for analysis and application that connect well to your audience and its communities. Nothing substitutes for one's own in-depth knowledge, experience, and informed reflection around a topic pursued over years of your own reading, application, action, and learning. One lap around a high school track gives you a sense of what a 10k involves, but that alone doesn't enable you to run it immediately.

➢ AI information is not embodied knowledge or communal communication. Nothing substitutes for people exploring analysis and struggling together around actions needed. Social change is just that – social. Insofar as AI-based learning is a solitary undertaking, it cannot substitute for the proverbial town square. Further, insofar as our aspirations seek to engender empathy and a sense of shared fate, our work must be attentive to human interactions and their many nuances.

Where does that leave the opening question about

JPI's web description in the context of AI? That description, again, is as follows: "We have come to be known for our ability to translate scholarly research into user-friendly materials so that organizations and networks have access to the latest ideas and findings." We will leave this on our website as is for now. AI can certainly lead us to new references and new ways of consolidating our decades of experience. It can provide some introductory framework for those new to an idea and its history. Down the road we could inquire about the utility of an AI agent for consolidation of vast amounts of information that would enable shared expertise across consultants. For now, we are proceeding with caution and care so that technology does not get in the way of or supplant any particular proven strategies for mobilizing human care for one another and the critical quest for justice.