

Beyond the Automaton: Aristotelian Digital Socialism and the Civic Leisure Paradox in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

SANDEEP KUMAR

Ph.D. Scholar

Amity University, Noida (U.P.) India

ABSTRACT

Aristotle's observation in Politics I.4 that if shuttles wove by themselves, masters would not need slaves is cited, correctly, as a prophecy that artificial intelligence has fulfilled. The error lies elsewhere: Aristotle's counterfactual specifies two conditions, not one, for the master to become liberated: that the instrument work by itself and that it belong to the household of the person to be freed. Contemporary AI approaches the first for an increasingly broad band of tasks while moving away from the second, since the compute, data and models upon which it depends are concentrated in firms that license access rather than sell tools. Post-work political theory and emancipatory readings of Aristotle share an error I shall name the fallacy of automatic civic virtue: the assumption that time released from necessity converts by itself into political activity. Where an unconditional income is financed by and administered through infrastructures the recipient neither owns nor governs, the likely result is not Aristotelian leisure, scholē, but a technofeudal-clientelist trap – material security with political passivity, the discretionary power of infrastructure owners intact. A normative alternative follows, Aristotelian digital socialism, resting on public AI infrastructure and a data commons, an unconditional dividend from socialised rents, and sortition assemblies holding allocative and audit powers. Subsistence holds unconditional; the civic obligation takes the form of an availability duty modelled on jury service.

Keywords: Aristotle, Artificial intelligence, Basic income, Republicanism, Sortition, Digital commons, Political leisure

INTRODUCTION

A sentence from the fourth century BCE has become a fixture of technology commentary. Discussing the household slave, Aristotle pauses over a hypothetical: if every instrument could accomplish its own work, “if the shuttle would weave and the plectrum touch the lyre without a hand to guide them, chief workmen would not want servants, nor masters slaves” (Aristotle, 1984, *Pol.* 1253b33–1254a1). The passage appears in defences of automation and in critiques of it, usually as evidence that the ancient world imagined our situation and that our machines have caught up.

Something has caught up. Task-level assessments estimate that roughly 1.8% of jobs could have more than half their tasks affected by large language models used through simple interfaces, rising to just over 46% once

complementary software is assumed (Eloundou *et al.*, 2024). An experiment with 453 professionals found that access to a chatbot cut time on mid-level writing tasks by 40% while raising assessed quality by 18% (Noy and Zhang, 2023). Earlier automation left measurable traces: one additional industrial robot per thousand workers is associated with a 0.2 percentage-point fall in the employment-to-population ratio and a 0.42% fall in wages across US commuting zones (Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2020).

The political inference drawn from such findings runs as a chain. Machines displace servile labour; that labour need no longer be performed by human beings; the time released constitutes leisure; and leisure supports citizenship. Each link has been defended somewhere in the post-work literature. The last is rarely defended at all. It is assumed. That assumption deserves a name —

the fallacy of automatic civic virtue — and it is shared by advocates of a post-work transition and by readers of Aristotle who treat his counterfactual as an emancipatory promise.

The analytical core of the argument is textual before it is political. Aristotle's counterfactual contains two conditions. The instrument must work by itself, and it must stand in a particular relation to the person freed: it must be *his*, an article of property within his household, as the enslaved person was. Strip out the second and the passage says nothing about emancipation. Modern systems meet the first and conspicuously fail the second, as the compute, training data, model weights and deployment channels are inside a small number of firms whose relation to users is access-for-rent rather than sale (Sadowski, 2020; Birch and Cochrane, 2022). The shuttle weaves by itself, and belongs to someone else's household.

From this follows the central diagnostic claim, labelled below the technofeudal–clientelist trap. When the surplus of automated production returns to citizens as a transfer while ownership of the generating infrastructure remains concentrated and opaque, the recipient gains material security but not standing. Dependence on a payment whose level and conditions are set by others is, in republican terms, domination even when the payer is benign (Pettit, 2012; Lovett, 2010). Sections 5 and 6 build an institutional alternative and state its costs.

Three limits frame what follows. The argument is normative and institutional, not predictive, and empirical materials are cited for what they measure. The classical vocabulary is used reconstructively: Aristotle's polis rested on exclusions no viable modern proposal can import, and the debt concerns the structure of a claim about leisure, not the content of his politics. The model's weakest point, its feasibility against concentrated interests, is stated as such rather than resolved.

What the automaton passage claims

Aristotle introduces the self-moving shuttle within an argument about property, not technology. The household is composed of parts; among these parts are instruments; instruments are inanimate or animate; and the enslaved person is “a living possession” and “an instrument which takes precedence of other instruments” (Pol. 1253b27–33). The counterfactual works within that classification. It clarifies what an instrument is by

imagining the limiting case in which one needs no operator, and thereby places the enslaved person among tools rather than among partners in the common life of the city.

Read in place, the passage promises nothing. Aristotle offers no argument that abolishing servile labour would be desirable, and draws no inference that a technologically equipped city ought to free its slaves. Heath (2008) argues that the defence of natural slavery turns on a claim about deficient deliberative capacity rather than on the economic indispensability of slave labour — which means that removing the economic necessity would not, on Aristotle's own premises, remove the alleged natural basis. The deflationary reading locates the fallacy of automatic civic virtue at its source. An argument quoting the passage to license emancipation borrows authority it has not earned.

What the passage does offer is a conditional: certain forms of human subordination are contingent on the unavailability of substitutes, and where substitutes appear, the subordination requires a different justification. That is a real and usable claim, and a considerably weaker one than the emancipatory reading suggests.

Leisure carries substantial weight elsewhere in Aristotle. Scholē is not rest or recreation but the condition of being free from the necessity of providing for one's own subsistence, and therefore available for activities chosen for their own sake — deliberation, judgement, friendship (Pol. VII.14–15). Citizenship in the best regime requires this availability, since ruling and being ruled in turn demands time the labourer cannot command. The structure is conditional and institutional: leisure is a precondition of political activity, not a sufficient cause, and the regime must be arranged so that leisure is actually used for ruling. Aristotle worries explicitly that it may be misused.

Modern readers have found that second point easy to lose. Post-work argument tends to treat freed time as a good whose political value is self-evident, turning a conditional claim into an unconditional one. The most developed statement of the difficulty is Arendt's (1998). A society organised around labour does not become a society of actors when labour is mechanised; it becomes, in her phrase, a society of labourers without labour, in which released time is absorbed by consumption rather than converted into public action. Her diagnosis locates the danger in a cultural condition and is comparatively indifferent to ownership. The present argument locates it in an institutional relation — who owns the instrument,

who captures the surplus, what standing the beneficiary holds — and that relation is the more tractable of the two, since institutions can be redesigned while cultural conditions cannot be legislated.

From living tool to cloud fiefdom

Whether contemporary systems meet the technical condition admits a qualified answer. Exposure is wide at the level of tasks rather than occupations, and Eloundou *et al.* (2024) describe exposure rather than displacement. Autor's (2015) caution against lump-of-labour reasoning remains apposite: automation has historically displaced tasks while raising demand for complementary ones, and the net effect has depended on the balance between displacement and reinstatement. Benanav (2020) presses an alternative explanation worth stating rather than burying — persistent labour under demand may reflect long-run industrial overcapacity and stagnant output growth rather than accelerating automation. Were that correct, the distributional argument below would be unaffected, since ownership would still concentrate rents, but the claim that machines are displacing servile labour at scale would need weakening. AI approaches Aristotle's first condition unevenly, by task, with the pace unresolved. That suffices for an argument concerned with what happens to the surplus if and where substitution occurs.

The second condition asks who owns the compute, the data, the models and the channels through which capability is supplied. Industry has come to dominate the three principal inputs to modern AI research — computing power, large datasets and skilled researchers — with the result that public-interest alternatives grow scarce (Ahmed *et al.*, 2023). Korinek and Vipra (2025) analyse how the economics of scaling push the foundation-model layer toward concentrated market structures. Widder *et al.* (2024) show that systems marketed as “open” typically remain closed at the layers that matter, so that openness functions as a licensing posture rather than a transfer of control.

The resulting relation between firm and user is not that of seller to buyer. Sadowski (2020) characterises platforms as landlords whose revenue derives from controlling access to infrastructures others must use, and Birch and Cochrane (2022) distinguish forms of digital rentiership through which value is captured without corresponding production. Varoufakis (2023) pushes furthest, arguing that cloud capital has displaced markets with fiefs and profit with rent. That strongest version is

contested — critics hold that it misdescribes a still-capitalist accumulation process and imports juridical relations of personal unfreedom that do not obtain (Morozov, 2019). The argument here needs only the narrower claim on which the rentiership and market-structure literatures converge: these infrastructures are concentrated, access is licensed rather than owned, and value is captured at the point of access.

A second failure sits inside the machine. The self-moving shuttle is supposed to work by itself; these systems work by means of human labour kept out of view. Gray and Suri (2019) documented the on-demand workforce performing the classification and moderation tasks automated systems depend on. Miceli and Posada (2022) analyse data production as an apparatus that imposes meaning from above while distributing annotation to workers with little control over the categories they apply. If the appearance of autonomy is produced by concealed precarious labour, the claim that servitude has ended is partly inverted: some labour has been redistributed toward workers holding less standing than those displaced. It does suggest that “the machine does it by itself” describes an interface rather than a production process. Republican theory characterises the resulting relation precisely. Unfreedom consists in subjection to another's capacity for arbitrary interference, whether or not exercised; the dependent person is unfree even under a kindly master, because the kindness is discretionary (Pettit, 2012; Lovett, 2010). Users of foundation models depend on terms of access the provider may alter, on model behaviour it may change without notice, and on continued provision it may withdraw — a dependence structural rather than contractual, since alternatives are few and switching costs high. Lazar (2025) extends the analysis to what he terms the algorithmic city, in which private intermediaries exercise powers over communication and access that were formerly public. Zuboff (2019) reaches a compatible conclusion by a different route. Aristotle's counterfactual therefore fails where it matters most: the shuttle weaves by itself, and the household is not the citizen's.

Why income alone does not produce civic leisure

The proposal that displacement be met with an unconditional basic income has a serious pedigree and should be stated at strength. Van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017) ground it in real freedom for all, extending the case into financing and political strategy. Danaher (2019)

treats automation as an opportunity for flourishing. The most relevant defence is Pateman's (2004), which is democratic rather than welfarist: basic income supports self-government by supplying the independence that makes non-servile relations possible, weakens the compulsion binding individuals to unfree work, and unsettles the sexual division of labour restricting many citizens' capacity to participate. That connects income to standing directly, and it is the strongest reply to what follows.

A transfer distributes purchasing power; it does not distribute control. Where the surplus originates in infrastructures that remain privately owned and largely unauditably, and where the transfer is set, financed and administered by institutions the recipient does not govern, an improved material position coexists with an unchanged political one. What the citizen lacks is standing: a recognised capacity to take part in decisions about the instrument, the surplus, and the terms on which both are managed. A benefit held at another's discretion leaves the beneficiary dependent (Pettit, 2012). An income financed from general taxation and legislated by an accountable parliament is less exposed to this than one financed from the contributions of a few firms; exposure remains wherever the rent-generating assets stay outside public control.

Comparative evidence on cash transfers and political behaviour is mixed, and the mixture should be reported rather than selected. Clientelism research documents that distributive relations can be organised to produce dependence and electoral compliance (Hicken, 2011), and studies of conditional transfers in Latin America find effects favouring incumbents (De La O, 2013). Countervailing findings exist: Hunter and Sugiyama (2014) report that Brazil's Bolsa Família is associated with gains in recipients' sense of citizenship rather than clientelist capture, suggesting that rule-based eligibility and minimal discretion condition the outcome. Jones and Marinescu (2022) find that Alaska's unconditional dividend, financed from resource rents, produced no aggregate decline in employment, though their study addresses labour supply rather than civic activity. Two inferences are warranted — that transfers do not by themselves produce passivity, and that design affects whether they produce dependence. A third is not: neither programme sits in the configuration under discussion, so the argument here is conceptual rather than predictive.

The risk acquires specific form when a transfer is

administered automatically. Eubanks (2018) documents how automated eligibility and risk-scoring tools produced errors the affected person could neither see nor contest. Australia's income-compliance programme supplies the clearest instance at scale, where an automated averaging method generated unlawful debts against several hundred thousand people (Whiteford, 2021). Automated administration multiplies the asymmetry the transfer was meant to relieve: the recipient confronts a procedure opaque in operation and expensive to challenge, while the administering authority holds discretion it need not justify case by case. A generous payment delivered through an unaccountable payment system produces a well-supported subject of administration, not a citizen.

Released time is not released into a vacuum. It enters an environment organised by firms whose revenue depends on capturing attention, and the organisation is deliberate. Williams (2018) analyses the attention economy as a structural threat to the capacity to form and pursue one's own ends. Seaver (2019) shows through ethnographic work that recommender systems are conceived by their builders as traps, captivation being the objective rather than a side effect. Capability loss compounds this. Vallor (2015) argues that delegating morally significant tasks to machines risks deskilling the practices through which character is formed, and extends the analysis to generative systems that reflect existing patterns back to users and narrow the space of imaginable alternatives (Vallor, 2024). Coeckelbergh (2024) presses the political version: the capacities democracy requires are exercised capacities, and systems substituting for judgement erode what they replace.

The elements assemble. Rents from concentrated infrastructure flow to owners who set the terms of access. A portion returns as a transfer that relieves insecurity without altering ownership. The transfer is administered opaquely. The time it releases enters an attention environment designed to absorb it, while the civic capacities that might have been exercised decay through disuse. The result is stable rather than merely unfortunate: dependence lowers the incentive to contest, inertia lowers the political cost of concentration, and concentration funds the transfer sustaining dependence. By the measures of income poverty the arrangement performs well, which makes it defensible in the vocabulary of welfare policy. What it does not supply is the good the automaton passage was invoked to promise. If what is missing is standing rather than money, the response must

distribute standing, in a form requiring exercise rather than merely permitting it.

Aristotelian digital socialism

Three things must be held by citizens if automated surplus is to become political agency: a share of the surplus, a say over the instrument producing it, and a regular occasion on which the say is exercised. Existing proposals supply one of the three. The combination is what the diagnosis requires, since each element alone is vulnerable to the failure the others prevent. The label carries two commitments. It is Aristotelian in holding that leisure is a precondition of citizenship and that political capacity forms through exercise, not in adopting Aristotle's account of who is fit to rule. It is socialist in placing the principal means of automated production under public and common ownership, not in proposing comprehensive planning.

Public infrastructure and data commons

The first pillar addresses ownership: publicly financed compute available on non-discriminatory terms, publicly provisioned models maintained as an option alongside commercial offerings, and a statutory framework placing training corpora and public-service data into governed commons. Ostrom (1990) established that common-pool resources can be governed by institutions that are neither markets nor bureaucracies, given specified boundaries, collective-choice arrangements and monitoring. Verdegem (2024) applies the commons framework to AI directly; Prainsack (2019) develops the case for treating data as public value from which exclusion is the central harm; Delacroix and Lawrence (2019) propose data trusts through which groups exercise collective control, their emphasis on plurality a corrective to schemes assuming a single national repository. Muldoon (2022) supplies the broader political-economic case. Proposals to treat data as labour and establish markets in which individuals sell their contributions (Posner and Weyl, 2018) leave the dependence relation intact and individualise a good that is relational in structure, since the value of data about one person derives largely from combination with data about others. Costs attach: frontier compute is expensive, public infrastructure can itself dominate if the state operating it is insufficiently accountable, and public provision may ossify around early technical choices.

An unconditional dividend from socialised rents

A universal individual payment is financed not from taxes on wage labour but from returns on publicly held compute and model assets, licence fees on commercial use of commons-held data, and levies on access rents. Alaska is the nearest precedent (Jones and Marinescu, 2022). The payment stays unconditional, and this is where the model departs from stricter formulations. A more demanding version would tie income to demonstrated participation, on the reasoning that unconditional transfers produce passive recipients. That reasoning fails on its own premises.

Conditioning subsistence on approved conduct recreates the discretionary power the model exists to remove, placing the citizen at the mercy of whoever certifies participation. De Wispelaere and Stirton (2007) show, against Atkinson's (1996) participation income, that contribution categories are contested and expensive to verify and that verification generates arbitrary exclusions — a burden that counts heavily where verification would be automated. Welfare conditionality has expanded across welfare states for three decades with poor results for its behavioural goals and substantial costs to those subject to it (Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018). The civic tie attaches instead to a separate layer: above the unconditional baseline sits a portion of the rent pool, its size fixed by statute, whose *allocation* is decided by citizen assemblies. Everyone receives the baseline regardless. What assemblies decide is how the discretionary portion is spent. The tie is structural without being coercive.

The demarchic civic commons

The third pillar supplies the occasion: sortition-based assemblies with allocative authority over the discretionary portion, statutory audit authority over publicly provisioned models and over private systems used in public administration, and a consultative mandate with published reasons on deployment. Burnheim (1985) supplies the structural idea of governance by randomly selected bodies with functional jurisdictions. Smith (2009) provides the comparative analysis of democratic innovations against criteria of inclusiveness, popular control and considered judgement; Landemore (2020) makes the theoretical case for open democracy built on sortition. The model sits deliberately at the high-authority end of the design space, because consultative bodies whose conclusions can be ignored reproduce the standing problem they were meant to solve. Practice has run ahead of theory: Ireland's

Citizens' Assembly fed directly into constitutional referendums (Farrell *et al.*, 2019), and the OECD (2020) documents the spread of representative deliberative processes across member states. Participatory budgeting is the closest analogue for the allocative function, and the evidence is encouraging and qualified in equal measure — Touchton and Wampler (2014) find Brazilian municipalities adopting it increased health spending and recorded improvements in social well-being, while Baiocchi and Ganuza (2014) caution that the practice travelled internationally by shedding the features that made it redistributive. Three design specifications follow. Selection is by lot, stratified, because open participation reproduces inequalities of resource and confidence that translate into unequal policy responsiveness (Gilens and Page, 2014). Service is compensated with protected leave, on the jury-service model. Terms are finite and rotating. The audit function demands its own apparatus: external auditing has unearthed systematic performance disparities in deployed commercial systems and prompted correction (Raji and Buolamwini, 2019), and a citizen board would commission evaluation, set its terms and hold statutory power to require response — the arrangement distinguishing oversight from consultation.

The connection to Section 2 is specific. Pillar two supplies the freedom from necessity that scholç names; pillar one puts the instrument within the household of those to be freed; pillar three draws released time into ruling and being ruled in turn. Pateman's (1970) educative argument supplies the second element: participation develops the capacities participation requires, so institutions cannot presuppose an engaged citizenry but must produce one. Neither claim is established with the confidence a causal finding would have, and the deliberative evidence comes mostly from single episodes rather than sustained institutional membership.

Objections

Public ownership would retard innovation, on the libertarian argument, by replacing competitive discipline with bureaucratic allocation and taxing the returns motivating investment. Mazzucato (2011) documents the state's role in financing foundational technologies later commercialised privately, which weakens the general claim; it does not show that public provision matches private laboratories at the frontier, and the model does not require it, since the public option exists as alternative and benchmark. Rent capture is harder. Levies reduce

expected returns and may reduce investment, and Korinek and Vipra (2025) indicate the relationship between concentration, investment and outcomes is unsettled. The optimal rate is an empirical question left open here, and a levy set too high would produce the outcome the objection predicts.

Requiring participation is coercive, and a theory invoking non-domination cannot coherently compel what it recommends. That would be decisive against the stricter version, which is why Section 5 rejects it. Subsistence is unconditional and no one loses income by declining to serve. What remains is an availability duty of the kind jury service already establishes: selected by lot, compensated, protected. The compulsory-voting debate maps the terrain, and Lever (2010) argues that such reasoning misconstrues the relation between compulsion and liberty. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) present the strongest empirical challenge — many citizens prefer that decisions be made competently elsewhere — and Achen and Bartels (2016) supply broader evidence that voters' capacities fall short of what participatory theories assume. A duty triggered by lot, compensated and finite imposes far less on such citizens than continuous expected engagement, and selects them without the self-selection that skews open participation.

Why change ownership at all, when regulation can constrain the harms concentration produces? Regulation and ownership address different problems: regulation constrains use, while the argument here concerns distribution of the surplus and the standing of the citizen with respect to the instrument. A well-regulated but privately held infrastructure can satisfy every safety requirement while leaving the dependence relation intact. Himmelreich (2023) raises the sharper version from within the democratic camp, arguing that "democratising AI" covers incompatible proposals, some undesirable. The model meets this by specifying which decisions are democratised — allocation of a defined pool, audit authority, deployment mandates — rather than asserting general democratic control over technical development. Erman and Furendal (2024) press the legitimacy question at the global level, where infrastructures are transnational and the assumption of a national demos is least secure. That assumption is a genuine limitation.

Two objections remain, and the second is the strongest. Participation in AI governance has an unhappy record: Sloane *et al.* (2022) document how participatory methods frequently extract legitimacy from communities

without transferring power. The design specifications above are addressed to this, though the objection warns that such specifications are the first casualty of implementation. The feasibility objection is more difficult. A model transferring rents and authority away from the most heavily capitalised firms in the world requires political conditions its own diagnosis suggests are unlikely to obtain, since concentrated economic power translates into disproportionate policy influence (Gilens and Page, 2014). No resolution is offered. What can be observed is that the model is decomposable, and each pillar has partial precedents in operation: publicly financed compute programmes, sovereign wealth funds socialising resource rents, and citizens' assemblies with real remits. Whether incremental construction is achievable against organised opposition is a question about political conditions rather than institutional design.

Conclusion

Aristotle's self-moving shuttle has been made to carry an argument it does not contain. The passage tells us what an instrument is; it does not tell us that instruments working by themselves will free anyone, and Aristotle drew no such inference. Read carefully it returns a conditional: servitude is contingent on the unavailability of substitutes, and where substitutes appear, the question of who owns them opens rather than closes.

Contemporary AI satisfies half that condition. Systems increasingly accomplish tasks without a hand to guide them, while the compute, data and models they depend on sit in private holdings to which citizens have licensed access rather than ownership. An unconditional income financed from that arrangement, administered through systems the recipient cannot inspect, relieves insecurity while leaving the dependence intact. The fallacy of automatic civic virtue is what makes the trap invisible to its designers — an assumption Arendt questioned, that Aristotle's own account of leisure contradicts, and that the evidence on attention markets gives no reason to accept.

What follows is an institutional agenda rather than a technological one, and each pillar carries costs stated rather than minimised: fiscal exposure, uncertain innovation effects, the burden of civic time, the risk that participatory forms are hollowed out, and a feasibility problem the diagnosis itself predicts. The argument would be disconfirmed in its central claim if assemblies holding genuine allocative and audit authority were found, over

sustained operation, neither to improve the standing of participants nor to constrain the discretion of infrastructure owners.

Debate about AI governance has organised itself around safety, bias and accountability. Those are necessary and not sufficient. A system may be safe, unbiased and accountable in every respect a regulator can specify, and still leave its users dependent on powers they cannot inspect, enriched by a surplus they do not govern, and free in the sense of being unoccupied rather than in the sense of ruling and being ruled in turn. The measure the automaton passage suggests is whether the instruments that work by themselves belong to the households of those they are said to be free. On that measure the current settlement fails, and the failure is a matter of institutional design rather than technical capacity — which is the one encouraging thing that can be said about it.

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