

# AI IN HUMAN RESOURCES: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF POWER, INEQUALITY, AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

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## Abstract

*The increasing integration of artificial intelligence into human resources has generated a profound transformation of organizational practices, raising significant sociological questions regarding power, control, and inequality. This paper aims to critically examine the implications of AI-driven decision-making in human resources processes, with a particular focus on how algorithmic systems reshape recruitment, performance evaluation, and workforce management. The study seeks to contribute to the emerging interdisciplinary discourse by situating AI not merely as a technological innovation, but as a socio-technical mechanism embedded in existing institutional and structural dynamics.*

*Methodologically, the paper adopts a qualitative, theory-oriented approach, drawing on classical sociological frameworks to interpret contemporary developments in algorithmic governance. In particular, the analysis is informed by the concepts of rationalization, alienation, and surveillance, which provide a conceptual lens for understanding the transformation of labor relations under conditions of digitalization. Through a critical synthesis of existing literature, the paper examines both the functional advantages and the structural risks associated with the deployment of AI in human resources contexts. The findings suggest that while AI systems enhance efficiency, standardization, and predictive capacity, they also contribute to the opacity of decision-making processes, the intensification of organizational control, and the potential reproduction of systemic biases. These dynamics may ultimately reinforce existing social inequalities while reducing individual agency within the workplace.*

*The paper argues that the implementation of AI in human resources requires a reflexive and ethically grounded approach, emphasizing the necessity of integrating sociological insight into the design and governance of algorithmic systems.*

**Keywords:** Artificial intelligence; human resources; algorithmic governance; sociological analysis; workplace inequality

## 1. Introduction

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into human resources (HR) represents a significant transformation in the organization of work and the governance of labor processes. This paper addresses the sociological implications of this transformation by examining how AI-driven systems are reshaping core human resources functions, including recruitment, employee evaluation, and performance management. More specifically, the study focuses on the shift from human-centered decision-making to algorithmic governance and its consequences for power relations and social structures within organizations.

The importance of this topic lies in the expanding role of AI technologies in mediating access to employment opportunities and influencing individual career trajectories. As organizations increasingly rely on algorithmic systems to optimize efficiency and reduce uncertainty, decision-making processes become less transparent and more difficult to scrutinize. This development raises critical concerns regarding fairness, accountability, and the reproduction of social inequalities. From a sociological perspective, the deployment of AI in human resources is not merely a technical innovation, but a process that reconfigures institutional practices and redistributes power within organizational settings.

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In order to address these issues, the paper adopts a theoretical and analytical approach grounded in classical sociological frameworks. The analysis draws on the concept of rationalization developed by Max Weber, which emphasizes the increasing dominance of calculability and efficiency in modern institutions; the theory of alienation proposed by Karl Marx, which highlights the disconnection between individuals and the processes that shape their work; and the notion of surveillance articulated by Michel Foucault, which captures the role of monitoring and control in contemporary organizations. These theoretical perspectives provide a conceptual framework for understanding the social implications of AI-driven HR practices.

This study is situated within a growing body of specialized literature that has examined the impact of AI on organizational performance and labor markets. However, much of this literature has focused primarily on technical efficiency and economic outcomes, often overlooking the broader social consequences of algorithmic decision-making. By contrast, this paper contributes to the field by foregrounding issues of inequality, control, and human agency, thereby offering a more comprehensive sociological account of AI integration in human resources.

## 2. Algorithmic integration and the transformation of human resources practices

The incorporation of artificial intelligence into human resources marks a fundamental shift from discretionary, human-centered decision-making toward data-driven, algorithmic governance. AI systems are increasingly employed in recruitment, candidate screening, and performance evaluation, where they function as predictive tools designed to optimize organizational outcomes. These systems rely on large datasets and machine learning models to identify patterns, assess candidate suitability, and forecast employee performance, thereby transforming human resources into a domain increasingly governed by quantitative metrics and probabilistic reasoning<sup>1</sup>.

However, these systems are not neutral instruments. From a sociological standpoint, they must be understood as socio-technical constructs embedded within pre-existing institutional frameworks. As research in algorithmic governance suggests, technological systems both reflect and reinforce the social contexts in which they are developed<sup>2</sup>. The datasets that inform algorithmic decision-making are historically situated, reflecting patterns of inequality and organizational bias. Consequently, AI does not merely streamline human resources processes but actively participates in the reproduction of social structures, often amplifying existing disparities under the guise of objectivity<sup>3</sup>.

Moreover, the use of AI in human resources introduces a reconfiguration of organizational authority. Decision-making power is increasingly delegated to algorithmic systems, which operate through complex and often opaque mechanisms. This opacity—frequently referred to as the “black box” problem—limits the ability of both employees and managers to fully understand or challenge the outcomes generated by these systems<sup>4</sup>. As a result, accountability becomes diffused, raising critical concerns regarding responsibility in cases of discriminatory or erroneous decisions.

This transformation also redefines the role of human resources professionals, who transition from active decision-makers to overseers and interpreters of algorithmic outputs. Their function shifts toward monitoring system performance, validating data inputs, and ensuring compliance with organizational goals. While this may enhance efficiency, it simultaneously reduces the space for human judgment, empathy, and contextual evaluation in decision-making processes<sup>5</sup>.

Furthermore, the increasing reliance on algorithmic systems contributes to the standardization of organizational practices, privileging measurable indicators over qualitative dimensions of human performance. This shift may lead to the marginalization of candidates or employees whose profiles do not conform to dominant data patterns, thereby reinforcing existing hierarchies within the labor market<sup>6</sup>.

In this context, the integration of AI in human resources should not be understood merely as a technological upgrade, but as a structural transformation that reshapes how organizations define merit, evaluate individuals, and distribute opportunities. The sociological significance of this shift lies in its capacity to institutionalize new

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<sup>1</sup> World Economic Forum, *The Future of Jobs Report*, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Tarleton Gillespie, “The Relevance of Algorithms,” *Media Technologies*, MIT Press, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, NYU Press, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Pasquale, *The Black Box Society*, Harvard University Press, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, PublicAffairs, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Harvard University Press, 1984.

forms of inequality while simultaneously obscuring them through the perceived neutrality of algorithmic systems.

### 3. Rationalization and the expansion of algorithmic governance

The integration of artificial intelligence into human resources can be conceptualized as an advanced stage of rationalization, a process extensively theorized by Max Weber<sup>7</sup>. In Weberian terms, rationalization refers to the increasing dominance of calculability, efficiency, and formalized procedures in modern institutions. Within human resources, this process is intensified through the adoption of algorithmic systems that transform decision-making into a data-driven, standardized, and ostensibly objective procedure.

AI-driven human resources systems exemplify what can be described as algorithmic governance, wherein organizational decisions are delegated to automated systems that operate according to predefined rules and statistical models<sup>8</sup>. Recruitment, for example, is no longer based primarily on interpersonal evaluation or professional intuition, but on the identification of patterns within large datasets. This shift reflects a broader movement toward the quantification of human attributes, where complex social and psychological characteristics are reduced to measurable indicators.

While rationalization enhances efficiency and predictability, it also produces unintended sociological consequences. As Weber himself noted, the expansion of rational systems can lead to the emergence of an “iron cage” of bureaucracy, in which individuals are constrained by impersonal rules and procedures<sup>9</sup>. In the context of artificial intelligence, this “iron cage” takes on a digital form, where algorithmic systems impose rigid evaluative frameworks that limit flexibility and contextual judgment.

Furthermore, algorithmic governance introduces a new form of authority that derives its legitimacy from technical expertise rather than traditional hierarchical structures. Decisions produced by AI systems are often perceived as neutral and objective, which can obscure the normative assumptions embedded within them<sup>3</sup>. This perception reduces the likelihood of critical scrutiny and may discourage individuals from questioning outcomes, even when they appear unjust or discriminatory.

The reliance on algorithmic systems also contributes to the depersonalization of organizational processes. Human interactions, which traditionally played a central role in human resources decision-making, are increasingly replaced by automated evaluations. This shift may undermine relational aspects of work, such as trust, empathy, and informal negotiation, which are essential for organizational cohesion<sup>10</sup>.

Moreover, the expansion of rationalization through AI can lead to a narrowing of what is considered valuable within organizations. By privileging measurable performance indicators, algorithmic systems may marginalize qualities that are difficult to quantify, such as creativity, emotional intelligence, or social skills. This dynamic reinforces a technocratic logic in which only data-driven attributes are recognized and rewarded<sup>11</sup>. In this sense, AI does not simply enhance existing rationalization processes but transforms them into a more pervasive and less visible form of control. Algorithmic governance operates not only through formal rules but through embedded computational logics that shape organizational behavior in subtle yet powerful ways. As a result, the expansion of AI in human resources represents not only a technological shift but a fundamental reconfiguration of how authority, evaluation, and legitimacy are constructed within modern organizations.

### 4. Algorithmic bias and the reproduction of structural inequality

One of the most significant and widely debated challenges associated with the integration of artificial intelligence in human resources is the persistence—and in some cases amplification—of algorithmic bias. Although AI systems are often presented as objective and neutral decision-making tools, a growing body of research demonstrates that they are deeply embedded in the social and historical contexts from which their training data are derived<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, University of California Press, 1978.

<sup>8</sup> Karen Yeung, “Algorithmic Regulation: A Critical Interrogation,” *Regulation & Governance*, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Frank Pasquale, *The Black Box Society*, Harvard University Press, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*, W.W. Norton, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> David Beer, *The Data Gaze*, Sage, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> World Economic Forum, *The Future of Jobs Report*, 2023.

Algorithmic bias emerges primarily from the reliance on historical datasets that reflect pre-existing patterns of inequality. In human resources contexts, such data may encode discriminatory practices related to gender, ethnicity, age, or socioeconomic background. When these datasets are used to train machine learning models, the resulting systems may reproduce and even legitimize these biases by embedding them into formal decision-making processes<sup>13</sup>. Thus, rather than eliminating human subjectivity, AI can transform implicit biases into systematic and scalable mechanisms of exclusion.

From a sociological perspective, this phenomenon can be understood through the lens of structural inequality and social reproduction. As argued by Pierre Bourdieu<sup>14</sup>, social hierarchies are maintained not only through overt discrimination but also through institutional practices that appear neutral while privileging certain forms of capital over others. Algorithmic systems in HR operate in a similar manner, favoring candidates whose profiles align with historically dominant groups, thereby reinforcing existing distributions of economic, cultural, and social capital.

Moreover, the perceived objectivity of algorithmic decision-making contributes to what can be described as the legitimization of inequality. Because AI-generated outcomes are often framed as data-driven and scientifically grounded, they may be less likely to be questioned or contested. This creates a paradox in which discriminatory practices become more difficult to identify precisely because they are mediated by technology<sup>15</sup>. As Safiya Umoja Noble argues, algorithms do not simply reflect reality but actively participate in shaping and reinforcing systems of power and exclusion<sup>16</sup>.

Another critical dimension of algorithmic bias is the issue of opacity. Many AI systems function as “black boxes,” meaning that their internal decision-making processes are not easily interpretable, even by their designers. As highlighted by Frank Pasquale<sup>17</sup>, this lack of transparency undermines accountability and limits the ability of individuals to challenge decisions that affect their employment opportunities. In HR contexts, this can result in a significant asymmetry of power between organizations and applicants or employees, who are often unable to understand why they were rejected or evaluated negatively.

Furthermore, algorithmic bias operates at scale, which distinguishes it from traditional forms of discrimination. While human bias may be inconsistent and situational, algorithmic systems can systematically apply the same biased criteria across large populations. This scalability amplifies the social impact of discrimination, transforming isolated instances of bias into structural patterns of exclusion<sup>18</sup>.

In addition, the reliance on predictive analytics in HR introduces a temporal dimension to inequality. AI systems often evaluate candidates not only based on past performance but also on predicted future behavior. These predictions are inherently probabilistic and may disproportionately disadvantage individuals from marginalized backgrounds, whose trajectories do not conform to dominant patterns encoded in the data<sup>19</sup>. As a result, algorithmic decision-making may limit social mobility by reinforcing expectations based on historical inequalities.

In this context, algorithmic bias should not be understood as a technical flaw that can be easily corrected, but as a structural issue rooted in broader social dynamics. Addressing this problem requires not only technical solutions, such as improved data quality or fairness metrics, but also a critical examination of the social assumptions and power relations embedded within AI systems.

Ultimately, the integration of AI in HR raises fundamental questions about fairness, justice, and the future of work. If left unexamined, algorithmic systems risk institutionalizing new forms of inequality while simultaneously obscuring them under the appearance of objectivity and efficiency.

## 5. Surveillance, control, and the digitalization of organizational power

The integration of artificial intelligence into human resources has significantly expanded the capacity of organizations to monitor, measure, and regulate employee behavior. AI-driven systems enable continuous data collection through digital platforms, including productivity tracking, communication analysis, biometric

<sup>13</sup> Cathy O'Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction*, Crown, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge University Press, 1977.

<sup>15</sup> Virginia Eubanks, *Automating Inequality*, St. Martin's Press, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, NYU Press, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Frank Pasquale, *The Black Box Society*, Harvard University Press, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology*, Polity Press, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> European Commission, *Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI*, 2019.

monitoring, and behavioral analytics. These developments mark a qualitative shift from traditional managerial oversight to a pervasive form of digital surveillance that operates in real time and at scale.

From a sociological perspective, these dynamics can be understood through the concept of disciplinary power developed by Michel Foucault<sup>20</sup>. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes how modern institutions exercise control through mechanisms of observation, normalization, and examination. AI technologies extend this logic by embedding surveillance within everyday organizational processes, creating what may be described as a digitally enhanced “panoptic” environment. In such contexts, visibility becomes a central mechanism of control, as employees are aware that their actions are continuously monitored and evaluated.

Unlike traditional forms of supervision, which are often episodic and localized, AI-driven surveillance is continuous, automated, and data-intensive. This transformation reduces the need for direct managerial intervention, as control is increasingly exercised through algorithmic systems that classify, evaluate, and rank employee behavior<sup>21</sup>. The result is a shift from hierarchical supervision to what can be described as infrastructural control, where power is embedded within technological systems rather than exercised solely by individuals.

Moreover, the normalization of surveillance practices contributes to the internalization of control. Employees may adjust their behavior in anticipation of algorithmic evaluation, engaging in self-monitoring and self-discipline. This process aligns closely with Foucault’s notion of governmentality, in which individuals regulate themselves according to institutional expectations<sup>22</sup>. In AI-mediated workplaces, performance metrics and scoring systems function as instruments of normalization, shaping behavior in subtle yet pervasive ways.

The expansion of digital surveillance also raises critical concerns regarding autonomy and privacy. The collection and analysis of large volumes of personal and behavioral data create asymmetries of information between employers and employees. Organizations gain unprecedented insight into workers’ activities, while employees often have limited knowledge of how their data are used or interpreted<sup>23</sup>. This imbalance not only reinforces organizational power but also challenges traditional boundaries between professional and personal life.

Furthermore, AI-driven surveillance contributes to the intensification of labor. Continuous monitoring and performance optimization may increase pressure on employees to maintain high levels of productivity, leading to stress, burnout, and reduced well-being<sup>24</sup>. The quantification of performance transforms work into a series of measurable outputs, potentially neglecting qualitative aspects such as creativity, collaboration, and emotional labor.

In addition, the integration of surveillance technologies into HR systems reflects broader transformations associated with digital capitalism. As argued by Shoshana Zuboff, contemporary organizations increasingly rely on data extraction and behavioral prediction as sources of value<sup>25</sup>. In this context, employees themselves become sources of data, and their activities are continuously monitored to generate insights that can be used for organizational optimization.

Importantly, the expansion of surveillance through AI is often justified in terms of efficiency, security, and performance improvement. However, these justifications may obscure the broader implications for power relations within organizations. By embedding control mechanisms within technological systems, AI makes power less visible yet more pervasive, operating through continuous data flows rather than explicit authority structures.

Ultimately, the digitalization of organizational power through AI-driven surveillance represents a fundamental transformation in the nature of work. It redefines the boundaries of control, reshapes employee subjectivity, and introduces new forms of inequality based on access to information and the capacity to monitor others. From a sociological perspective, these developments highlight the need to critically examine not only what AI does, but how it reorganizes power within contemporary organizations.

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<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Vintage Books, 1977.

<sup>21</sup> David Lyon, *Surveillance Society*, Open University Press, 2001.

<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> European Commission, *Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI*, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, University of California Press, 1983.

<sup>25</sup> Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, PublicAffairs, 2019.

## 6. Alienation and the erosion of human agency in algorithmic systems

The increasing reliance on Artificial Intelligence in Human Resources not only transforms organizational processes but also reshapes the subjective experience of work. From a sociological perspective, this transformation can be critically examined through the concept of alienation, as developed by Karl Marx<sup>26</sup>. In classical Marxist theory, alienation refers to the estrangement of individuals from the products of their labor, the labor process, and ultimately from their own human potential. In the context of algorithmic management, this concept acquires new relevance.

In AI-mediated workplaces, decision-making processes are increasingly externalized and embedded within algorithmic systems that operate beyond the direct control or understanding of employees. Recruitment outcomes, performance evaluations, and career trajectories are often determined by opaque computational models, reducing individuals' ability to meaningfully engage with or influence the conditions that shape their professional lives. This detachment reflects a contemporary form of alienation, in which workers are no longer subordinated solely to managerial authority, but to impersonal technological systems<sup>27</sup>.

A central dimension of this transformation is the erosion of human agency. Agency, understood as the capacity of individuals to act, make decisions, and exert influence within social structures, is increasingly constrained by algorithmic governance. When decisions are framed as the output of objective systems, opportunities for negotiation, interpretation, and contestation are diminished. Employees may find themselves subject to evaluative criteria that are not only externally imposed but also largely unintelligible<sup>28</sup>.

Moreover, the abstraction inherent in algorithmic systems contributes to a sense of disconnection between individuals and the meaning of their work. Performance is reduced to quantifiable indicators, and complex human activities are translated into data points that can be measured, compared, and optimized. This process aligns with Marx's notion of the commodification of labor, wherein human capacities are transformed into calculable units of economic value<sup>29</sup>. In algorithmic environments, this commodification is intensified, as workers themselves become sources of data to be analyzed and exploited.

The experience of alienation is further deepened by the standardization of evaluation criteria. AI systems often rely on generalized models that prioritize conformity to predefined patterns, thereby limiting the recognition of individual differences and contextual factors. Employees who do not fit these patterns may be systematically disadvantaged, reinforcing a sense of marginalization and exclusion. In this way, algorithmic systems not only regulate behavior but also shape identities, defining what is considered valuable or acceptable within the organization<sup>30</sup>.

Additionally, the opacity of algorithmic decision-making contributes to a form of epistemic alienation. Individuals are excluded not only from decision-making processes but also from the knowledge required to understand them. As noted by Frank Pasquale<sup>5</sup>, the "black box" nature of many AI systems creates barriers to transparency and accountability, making it difficult for individuals to challenge or even comprehend the criteria by which they are evaluated. This lack of visibility undermines trust and reinforces asymmetries of power between organizations and employees.

At a broader level, the integration of AI into HR reflects a shift toward what may be described as a post-human organizational logic, in which human judgment is increasingly subordinated to computational processes. While this shift may enhance efficiency, it also raises fundamental questions about the role of human values in organizational life. If decision-making is delegated to machines, the space for ethical reflection, empathy, and social responsibility may be significantly reduced.

Ultimately, the application of AI in HR does not simply automate existing processes but transforms the very conditions under which work is experienced and understood. Alienation in this context is not merely a byproduct of technological change, but a structural feature of algorithmic systems that mediate human activity. Addressing this challenge requires a reassertion of human agency within organizational processes and a critical engagement with the social implications of AI-driven management.

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<sup>26</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Progress Publishers, 1959.

<sup>27</sup> Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, PublicAffairs, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> David Beer, *The Data Gaze*, Sage, 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*, W.W. Norton, 1998.

<sup>30</sup> Frank Pasquale, *The Black Box Society*, Harvard University Press, 2015.

## 7. Conclusions

This paper has critically examined the integration of Artificial Intelligence in Human Resources from a sociological perspective, emphasizing its implications for power, inequality, and the transformation of labor relations. By situating AI within broader processes of rationalization, surveillance, and alienation, the study has demonstrated that algorithmic systems are not merely technical tools, but socio-technical mechanisms that actively reshape organizational structures and social dynamics.

The main findings highlight a fundamental tension at the core of AI-driven HR practices. On the one hand, these systems enhance efficiency, standardization, and predictive capacity, enabling organizations to optimize decision-making processes at an unprecedented scale. On the other hand, they introduce new forms of opacity, reinforce structural inequalities through algorithmic bias, and intensify mechanisms of surveillance and control. In doing so, AI contributes to the reconfiguration of power relations within organizations, shifting authority from human actors to algorithmic systems whose internal logic often remains inaccessible.

A key contribution of this paper lies in its integration of classical sociological theory with contemporary analyses of algorithmic governance. By mobilizing the insights of Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Michel Foucault, the study provides a conceptual framework for understanding how AI transforms not only organizational practices but also the lived experience of work. In particular, the analysis has shown that algorithmic systems may erode human agency, depersonalize decision-making processes, and institutionalize new forms of inequality under the appearance of objectivity.

The expected impact of these findings is twofold. First, they contribute to the growing body of interdisciplinary research that seeks to critically assess the social implications of AI beyond its technical functionalities. Second, they highlight the necessity for organizations, policymakers, and developers to adopt a reflexive and ethically grounded approach to AI implementation in HR. Without such an approach, there is a risk that algorithmic systems will reproduce and legitimize existing inequalities while obscuring them through technological complexity.

Future research should move beyond theoretical analysis and focus on empirical investigations of AI-mediated workplaces, particularly examining how employees experience and respond to algorithmic management. Additionally, there is a need to develop robust regulatory frameworks and ethical guidelines that ensure transparency, accountability, and fairness in the use of AI in HR contexts. Interdisciplinary collaboration between sociologists, technologists, and legal scholars will be essential in addressing these challenges.

Ultimately, the integration of Artificial Intelligence in Human Resources represents not only a technological shift but a profound social transformation. Understanding and critically engaging with this transformation is essential for shaping a future of work that remains equitable, transparent, and centered on human values.

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