

studies in

social & political thought

Volume 29 Summer 2019

Articles

Critical Social Ontology as a Foundation for Ethics: Marx, Lukács and Critical Judgment
Michael J. Thompson

On the Failure of Oracles: Reflections on a Digital Life
David M. Berry

Happy Birthday Jürgen Habermas
James Gordon Finlayson

**University of Sussex Masters in Social and Political Thought
Gillian Rose Prize Winning Essay 2018**

The Production of Space Through Land Reclamation
Niclas Kern

Books reviewed

Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism & New Technologies of Power
by Byung-Chul Han

New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future
by James Bridle

Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing
by John Boughton

Adam Smith and Rousseau: ethics, politics, economics

Edited by Maria Paganelli, Dennis C. Rasmussen, and Craig Smith

New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future

By James Bridle

Verso, 2019, pbk £16.99 (ISBN 9781786635488), pp. 304.

by Neal Harris

New Dark Age seeks to 'seed the cloud' (8), that is, to make visible the material realities and contradictions of digital technologies as computational logics play an ever greater yet ever more misunderstood role in social life. In this endeavour, Bridle is highly successful: the text is politically potent, informative, and engaging. It is compelling both through subtle argumentation and frequent narrative soiree. This is clearly not a standard academic text. While published by Verso, and of substantial academic merit, Bridle's book elides genres and eschews academic conventions. It is an easy and enjoyable read and Bridle's more relaxed style does not blunt the potency of his argumentation.

A central concern throughout Bridle's analysis is the underappreciated materiality of digital technology. Big data's big footprint is slowly exposed through Bridle's psychogeography (62). The case-study of Hillingdon hospital (110) serves to epitomise many of the text's core arguments. Unbeknown to the many passers-by, microwave transmitters owned by a company called Decyben SAS sits atop this former West London workhouse. While the Care Quality Commission (CQC) voiced concerns over hospital staff shortages, and over the safety of patients and healthcare workers due to the aging premises (110), Decyben SAS were granted permission to place a state-of-the-art microwave transmitter atop the building to facilitate swift communication of sensitive financial data from the London Stock Exchange (110-1). The precise nature of the agreement reached between Decyben SAS (themselves a front company for McKay) and Hillingdon Hospitals NHS Trust remains unknown (110). For Bridle, the transmitters sit as a parasitic digital ivy which facilitates the commercial activities of an avaricious elite, whose reckless greed precipitated the financial crash, which itself functioned as the pretext for Conservative politicians to cripple NHS services. Yet the microwave transmitters remain, clinging to the older public infrastructure, continuously pinging away their encrypted data. Bridle's text must, therefore, be credited for exposing a broader unacknowledged colonisation of once public social infrastructure by privately owned hardware. Having read Bridle, I too now notice the mobile phone masts 'grafted on to old church steeples' and the 'telephone exchanges constructed in Victorian post offices' (62). His psychogeography is truly potent in raising a material-digital consciousness.

Bridle draws out how the unacknowledged materiality of the digital revolution has dire environmental implications. In 2015, across the entire world, more electricity was used for data-processing centres than was used for all tasks combined in the United Kingdom (63). A Japanese study found that 'by 2030, the power requirements for digital services alone would outstrip the entire nation's current generation capacity' (63). Regrettably, this situation is set to get exponentially worse, for there is a clear pathological social dynamic at play: much of the electricity expended by these plants is allocated to cooling. With global warming the hotter it gets the more electricity must be expended to keep the plants cooler, yet the more electricity that is produced, the hotter it gets ... ad infinitum. This is an almost ideal-typical social pathology. As Bridle comments, the environmental impact made by computational infrastructure is chronically underappreciated; it is easily comparable to that of the entire aviation industry (63). For Bridle, while state-based attempts at regulating online user-behaviour would be futile, there is a clear, yet unacknowledged, ethical injunction on the end-user to be mindful of their data consumption.

New Dark Age is not short on political engagement. For Bridle, 'a close reading of computer history reveals an ever-increasing opacity allied to a concentration of power, and the retreat of that power into ever more narrow domains of experience' (34). Sensitive to the rationalities of the neoliberal order, Bridle draws out how technology responds to the race for ever-faster processing, ever quicker transmission, and ever bigger data. Yet, as with neoliberal irrationality more broadly, the inherent contradictions of the system provide possibilities for rupture. The inductive irrationality of big data - give data analysts all possible information and causation will be imputed from correlation - inevitably leads to crisis. It is epistemologically unsound, and perhaps Bridle could have taken this point further. Yet, as he clearly articulates, such crises have already started occurring. On this point, he presents the fascinating and underexplored realities of 'flash crashes' (121-123). At 14:42 on May 10th, 2010, the Dow Jones Industrial Average lost 600 points in close to five minutes. By 15:07, it recovered almost entirely (121). As Bridle states, 'in the chaos of those twenty-five minutes, 2 billion shares, worth \$56 billion, changed hands. Even more worryingly, and for reasons still not fully understood, many orders were executed at what the SEC [a government regulator] called "irrational prices": as low as a penny, or as high as \$100,000' (121). Economics is the distribution of resources within a given society and the processes which maintain and create such divisions. During such flash crashes, the economic system is not merely anarchic, but, as-yet, inexplicable. The dominance of irrational computational logics and poorly understood digital technologies at the heart of financial markets present a tension. While, on one hand, they further arm the 'nebuleuse' with resources beyond the reach of the working class (Robert Cox's term seems particularly apposite in this context), the reliance on such technologies also brings forth potentialities for rupture which remain anarchic, misunderstood and unpredictable. Similar flash-crashes have occurred in Singapore (October 2013) and Switzerland (January 2015), and it is highly possibly other irregularities remain unexposed and underexplored.

Bridle is perhaps at his best when he engages with the human cost of the dominance of computational logics (113-115). It is an underappreciated irony that the horrific caricature of communism painted by hawkish conservatives, where one organisation would provide almost all services, staffed by 'unfree' workers forced to follow the diktats of an unchallengeable hierarchy, manifests tout court courtesy of Jeff Bezos' Amazon Empire. Bridle makes this submission beautifully, drawing out how Amazon's purchase of Quidisi in 2017 enables ever-greater automation of services, 'removing the human' in every process (114), providing beta-proofing before what might one day be called 'the great redundancy'. Where labour remains, for instance, in Rugeley, England, Bridle draws out how orange-uniformed Amazon workers must follow directions from a hand-held device that leads them to various sections of the store to collect parcels, books, and DVDs, etc. These devices track the worker's progress, ensuring they cover enough ground daily (114). But beyond surveillance, these devices are essential for basic navigation of the warehouse: 'it is otherwise impenetrable to humans' (114) because the building is organised according to computer designed 'chaotic storage'. This means that Douglas Adams' books are as likely to be stacked next to knitting needles or cuddly toys as they are to the works of Richard Adams (116). Workers must follow the commands of their hand-held devices and are 'docked' wages if they fail to keep up with the edicts of their mechanical masters. Toilet break five minutes overtime? Late arrival from a meal? Less take-home pay. To work in Rugeley means constant surveillance and unquestionable obedience to algorithmic intelligence which workers cannot understand nor question. They are 'intended to act like robots, impersonating machines while remaining,

Reviews

for now, slightly cheaper than them' (116). Quidisi may soon change that. Alienated labour may be supplanted by structural redundancy.

For those of a Critical Theory bent, Bridle's comments on the impact of computational logics on consciousness may be of particular interest. Algorithmic logics necessitate a 'reification' of social consciousness, both of the present and of the past (142). It is essential for big data to reify the past, because, by definition, big data originates from things that have occurred, or, when oriented toward the future, big data engages with past predictions (even when that future is yet to occur). Thus, our consciousness of the present, in a society ruled by big data, will be dangerously reliant on past values and attitudes. Bridle quotes Paglen: "The past is a very racist place. And we only have data from the past to train Artificial Intelligence" (144). One must immediately expand Paglen's quote to incorporate 'classist', 'casteist', 'gendered', 'ableist', and 'anthropocentric'. As Bridle states, 'examples of encoded biases are easy to come by' (142), be it Nikon cameras failing to recognise non-Western eye shapes (142), or, alarmingly, Wu and Zhang's (2016) paper, which engages with the idea that AI could 'tell the difference between criminal and non-criminal faces' (140). From Facebook back to Phrenology in three easy steps. Adorno and Horkheimer's (1972: XVI) assertion that 'Myth is already Enlightenment, and Enlightenment reverts to mythology' thus seems ever-present.

Furthering the theme of the technological impact on consciousness, Bridle writes that increasingly 'reality itself takes on the appearance of a computer, and our modes of thought follow suit' (43). This is a very important assertion, for a Boolean, quantitative, game-theoretical, target-driven instrumental rationality has exploded with the arrival of computational societies. Even this review, which, following Bridle, is explicitly critical of neoliberal, instrumental rationality, will nonetheless be judged on the basis of its almost certainly negligible 'impact factor'. There are various submissions here. On the one hand, debate and discussion is limited and restricted by the increasing incursion of simplistic, Boolean logics into complex discursive interactions. While Facebook previously only allowed my political choices to be listed as 'conservative' or 'liberal', I remained a 'socialist', even when that identity was replaced by the natural binary of computational systems. The quality of the information one could determine was thus severely restricted. For instance, most London-residing socialists would probably struggle to determine which was a closer antonym to their political persuasion. As a result of such epistemic deficiencies, communication suffers. But there is a second point that remains somewhat latent within Bridle's analysis: the alliance between computational logics and instrumental, subsumptive rationality. By this, I mean the failure of computational logics to engage with the mimetic and erotic aspects of human existence. While Bridle powerfully asserts that 'reality ... takes on the appearance of a computer', this secondary feature, the impoverishment of subjective experience and of affective, multi-dimensional, phenomenological realities, could perhaps have been further developed.

While this is an overwhelmingly positive review of Bridle's text, I will conclude by critiquing one central limitation of his work. Namely, his position that technology is not to be feared, and, that a future, more communal relationship between technology and humankind should be held up as an ideal. Or, put differently, for Bridle, human-machine cooperation is the best possible outcome. I, however, find this position, which is undeniably a central thematic of the text, unconvincing. Further, I am not convinced that Bridle himself agrees with it. My critique, a critique I imagine Bridle would be sympathetic to, is that the future relationship that exists between humankind and technology will be substantially

determined by the broader political-economic system. In neoliberal economies, technology will almost inevitably be used to further repress and surveil the structurally disadvantaged. The darker rationalities and contradictions of digital technologies will not be sublimated through an encounter with an open-hearted precariat. The possibilities for the relationship Bridle desires necessitates substantial political and socio-economic transition. Having read Bridle's text, I emerge more afraid, rather than less, of the powers of big-data. While I enjoyed Bridle's text and learned much from it, I remain less convinced that a democratic human-techno collective can be convened while the world remains ravaged by neoliberal rationalities.

Neal Harris is a doctoral tutor and guest lecturer at the University of Sussex and a visiting lecturer at the University of Brighton. He is a Ph.D. student at the University of Sussex, where his research in critical social theory is supervised by Professor Gerard Delanty and Dr. James Hardie-Bick. His research interests include Critical Theory, ecology, and cosmopolitanism.

References

Adorno T. and Horkheimer M. (1972) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Translated by John Cumming. New York: Herder and Herder.

Wu, X., & Zhang, X. (2016) *Automated Inference on Criminality using Face Images*. ArXiv, abs/1611.04135.