

Timcke Scott (2021) Algorithms and the End of Politics: How Technology Shapes 21st Century American Life. Bristol: Bristol University Press. 198 pages. ISBN 978-1529215328

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In *Algorithms and the End of Politics* (2021), Scott Timcke offers a Marxian analysis of digital technologies and politics in U.S. society. Although the title of the book suggests an interrogation at the intersection of critical data studies and politics, Timcke's wheelhouse - as a comparative historical sociologist studying race, class and technology - is squarely in political analysis. The result is a blistering deconstruction of American democracy to demonstrate his overarching point that advancements in artificial intelligence and other data-driven technologies do not reconceptualise politics but are instead "a new kind of communication that preserves an old kind of polity" (p. 148). To be sure, the old kind of polity is one rooted firmly in capitalism.

Timcke begins with a scathing assessment of an American political system overrun by capitalism. Using examples across the political spectrum, Timcke argues that American democracy "has only been acceptable as a management style for capitalism" (p. 3). It is against this socio-political backdrop that Timcke extends the framing of "unfreedom and class rule" to the "digital realm" (p. 3). Moreover, he argues that the capitalist ruling class has captured computational resources and is using them to drive their self-serving global agenda.

Timcke argues that this asymmetrical application of increasingly complex digital technology has led paradoxically to a simplification of the social world, with datafication a prime example.

Using a rendering of the term similar to Van Dijck's (2018) notion of 'dataism,' Timcke defines datafication as an ideology that advocates for the "implementation of computational reason to oversee human life" (p. 4). Drawing on the work of Fuchs (2021) and Srnicek (2017), Timcke concludes that datafication has weakened U.S. democracy.

Although Timcke's class-conscious approach to datafication is an important contribution to existing debates in STS, he frequently loses threads salient to critical data studies in his dense and discursive political analysis. For example, in tracing the conditions of growing inequality and voter disaffection that gave rise to the Trump presidency, Timcke rebukes the Democratic Party's commitment to a neoliberal economic system that elevates Facebook/Meta, despite CEO Marc Zuckerberg's dubious mantra 'move fast and break things.' He calls the Democratic Party's emphasis on performative respectability to mask its commitment to the socially ordered status quo a 'sterile' ideology unable to foster human flourishing (p. 10). Though Timcke's conclusion has merit, he misses here an opportunity to link the notion of sterile governance back to applied datafication/dataism. Given the book title's invocation of 'algorithms,' a more impactful example might have been the Democratic embrace - at a minimum through persistent regulatory inaction - of predictive and surveillant algorithmic tools and the business opportunities that are built around them. Predictive policing and judicial sentencing,



algorithmic screening for social services, and predatory applications of data-driven marketing are all potentially more illustrative examples of an applied ideological sterility that systematically obstructs human flourishing, than the abstraction of Zuckerberg's mantra. Nevertheless, Timcke's critique of the larger political system is well-taken: the Democratic Party can't address the forces that gave rise to the Trump presidency because it is a wholesale subscriber to those same forces which exist to serve the capitalist elites. His assessment that the American public has, at present, no developed mechanism of resistance to counteract rapidly intensifying datafication regimes is central to Timcke's arguments on how to move forward.

Chapter One builds on the illusion of an American two-party system by examining the role of algorithms in either reifying or threatening public conceptualizations of political legitimacy. Invoking the work of Beer (2017) as well as Ruppert et al. (2017), Timcke echoes the need for a thick description of algorithmic encodings to understand how authority is expressed algorithmically, but adds that an analysis of the mode of production (i.e. who is creating the value vs. who is accumulating the capital) is needed in scholarly considerations of algorithmic regulation. The goal of this, in Timcke's view, is to encourage scholarship that offers a pathway for the data subject to consider participation in data politics as an avenue for revolutionary social change. In other words, rather than prioritizing research that ensures algorithms can recognise and potentially exploit Black female faces as accurately as white male faces, researchers should instead strive to achieve technologies of liberation for the data subject.

Following a Chapter Two that describes Timcke's notion of datafication as mentioned above, Chapter Three explores communication technology in Gramscian theory, especially its role in winning the active consent of subordinate classes. Billionaires not only rationalise their self-interest in the media but also "demand veneration as exemplars of moral virtue" (p. 64). Leaning into a portrayal of benevolence, billionaires have invested heavily in the news sector and are often lauded for what is perceived as a nearly philanthropic pursuit. Timcke makes the point that such investments are not philanthropic but instead

allow "digital men of power" access to levers that effectively control "the means of mental production" (p. 71) – that is, targeting criticisms of their accumulating wealth, no matter their political origins.

Chapter Four builds on the notion of billionaires in media to unpack the neoliberal response to the challenge of credible, socialist-leaning U.S. presidential candidate, Bernard Sanders. In Timcke's view, the rise of Sanders reflected a populous fatigued by financial and other crises, who saw a Sanders presidency as a plausible path to winning power. As a result of the threat his movement posed to entrenched capitalist interests, Sanders was met with cultural mechanisms enforced by a "willing and compliant media" to smear him as sexist (p. 78). Ultimately, Timcke concludes that the nomination of Biden over Sanders in the 2020 Democratic primary demonstrates that "the party decided" against inclusive political economic reform espoused by Sanders and employed communication technology under control of threatened billionaires to facilitate its preferences (p. 95).

In Chapter Five, Timcke draws heavily on the work of Reed (2002), Roediger (1999) and others to conclude that markets depend on racism and sexism to reproduce themselves. He suggests that notions of race arise from modernity to embody a relationship to authority and, by extension, to capital. Timcke concludes that capitalist polity is deeply committed to perpetuating both sexism and racism because each acts as a compelling externalization used to justify political failures and contradictions (e.g. the explanation that Trump was elected in 2016 because of sexism against Hillary Clinton, as opposed to the failure of her policy platform).

In Chapter Six, Timcke expands the role of Marxian contradictions as applied to misinformation. He argues that although modern technology may spread misinformation more readily, misinformation itself is a longstanding tool relied upon by capitalists to mystify and deflect inevitable contradictions (e.g. between labour/capital, commodity/value, etc.). Timcke says:

"Put simply, American political parties must distract citizens from the primary causes of oppression and alienation... Misinformation is not

an engineering problem or a social problem, but the active avoidance of a social question” (p. 126).

Chapter Seven closes out Timcke’s argument with an analysis of algorithmic processes (e.g. artificial intelligence) in U.S. state security initiatives. Here, he summarises his approach to the entire book: to explore how surveillance cultures combine elements of hegemony (consent) and domination (coercion) to shape digital society. This encapsulates Timcke’s call for a shift in scholarly mindset towards a macro view, while simultaneously eschewing typical lines of argument about ethics and equity found in critical data studies pieces.

Timcke’s tone and Marxist analysis resemble that of Srnicek’s (2017) work on platform capitalism. Whereas Srnicek has focused on deconstructing the socio-cultural personas of Big Data enterprise to reveal its vile profit-seeking core, Timcke similarly pulls back the curtain on the digital ecosystem of modern political enterprise (which is now a two-way street between corporations and politicians operating in broad daylight). Timcke’s conclusion that class dynamics within our social hierarchies have remained static over the long arc of capitalism echoes Couldry and Mejias’s (2019) assessment of ‘data colonialism’ as the manifestation of an unchanging social structure of domination and exploitation which emerged during historical colonialism and continues through to this day. Moreover, in the way that Benjamin (2019) has drawn academic attention to the persistent harm of entrenched racism in the co-production of digital spaces while inspiring us to readjust the default paradigm, so too is Timcke attempting to do here for class subordination. Too bad, he doesn’t quite meet the bar. While his political analysis is revealing, this book lacks the empiricism and ethnographic detail that we have come now to expect from prominent scholars of algorithmic overreach, for example Zuboff (2019) or Eubanks (2017). Accordingly, *Algorithms at the End of Politics* reads much more like a political manifesto than the average STS scholar might prefer. Nevertheless, Timcke’s message for researchers in the field is important:

class dynamics cannot be omitted from sociological interrogations of algorithmic technology and political economy. This is a particularly timely message given the resurgence – after two to three generations of dormancy – of American labour unions, which in some ways is being led by employees of Big Data companies (Bose, 2021). In the time since the book’s publication, a fledgling workers’ union has sprung from the grassroots at an Amazon facility in New York, with additional organizing efforts ongoing. The distribution warehouse, known for its inhumane conditions and high worker turnover, has become the material site of resistance against a digital capitalist giant – who spent more than US\$4 million to convey misinformation about the perils of unionization to captive worker-audiences during their organizing campaign. For as advanced as Amazon’s technology is, the current strife between the company and its workers feels distinctly twentieth century. Here, Timcke’s primary argument plays out: rather than change conceptualizations of work and social class relationships, technological advancements appear only to provide a more powerful vehicle for entrenched capitalism to do what it has always done – exploit labour.

As STS scholars, it’s tempting to frame technoscientific research in ways that reify the existing legal, financial and social hierarchies, even as we openly confront ethical matters of race and gender equity. Unfortunately, supremacy of the economic ruling class is just as invisible, pervasive and consequential as white and cis-gendered male supremacy in academic spaces. The dawning of a class-conscious labour movement in the United States reaffirms Timcke’s concluding optimism and it is from here that the subfield of critical data studies might also take a cue: “There is no sociological law that stipulates that algorithmic life must be inherently discriminatory [to members of subordinate social classes] ... I think there is much heart to be taken from resurgent broad-based socialist politics in the U.S. When [digital] democratization does come, it will emerge from this venue” (p. 155).

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