

**Tupasela Aaro (2021) *Populations as brands – Marketing national resources for global data markets*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 225 pp. ISBN: 9783030785789 (eBook)**

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On *Populations as Brands*, Aaro Tupasela invites the reader to dive in the complex world of marketing and branding in the particular field of biomedical research – which entails the so-called basic research, but also other forms of research dependent on data donation in a variety of forms (medical data, lifestyle data, social data, and biological data).

In this book, the author has gathered his 20 year-long research in the topic of biomedical research and population branding, recurring to many examples from biobanking activities to the data intensive society, making use of a privileged position to perform an almost permanent ethnographic-like study with data coming from different actors and scenarios.

This is a quite relevant contribution for Science and Technology studies, expanding its impact to nation studies, citizenship, and commercial practices emerging from health settings in the context of bioeconomies.

Although it might work as a summary, the book goes further in offering concrete details, and empirical data, of two Nordic countries – Denmark and Finland – that assume the role of case studies.

As the author mentions, Nordic countries are believed to act similarly in research and health arenas, being described as a paradise for researchers. However, the reader is presented with the concrete examples of how Denmark and Finland have set up different strategies for commodifying genetic and medical information, promoting biological and non-biological data

donation. Here, the empirical data presented is a clear add on, supporting not only the proposed argument, but also highlighting the different manners to capitalise existing resources, under population branding.

Also, it shows how citizenship is brought to the arena of marketing, making clear the appeal to cultural and nation values in order to serve commercial intentions. It brilliantly illustrates how samples, data donation, and data produced for health purposes are integrated in an open-ended value chain, enabling the addition of different products, transforming data, and particularly health generated data, as an important asset of a country.

The book continues, in an original and applied perspective, the argument and the discussion of tissue economies proposed by Waldby and Mitchell (2006) clarifying how they are instrumental to the contemporary notions of nation and State, under the paradigm of data-driven societies.

The chapters work independently, but together they offer a wide and multifaceted perspective. Chapter 1 starts with an overview of the main concepts and their theoretical discussion. The introductory chapter serves, as well, as a theoretical anchor for the concepts discussed throughout the book such as body commodification or the relevant relationship between citizens, institutions, and the State.

The second chapter is thus oriented to explore how biomedical research is a fertile ground for population branding and marketing. Quite

interestingly it starts with an exploration of the symbolic imagery carried by political discourse. At the same time, it introduces how the branding strategies make use of discourse to construct shared narratives of originality and authenticity. While States operate differently than GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft) companies, the model to derive value from data could be similar. However, although GAFAM could have more aggressive market approaches, the resources already at disposal, the better chance to manage the constraints in the legal field, allied to a powerful construction of narratives, promote different abilities to make nations competitive in global data markets.

Chapter 3 entails a discussion on practices of valuation, exploring the integration of the notion of Nordic exceptionalism in two case-study countries – Denmark and Finland. Departing from the symbolism of the Nordic gold mine for researchers, exceptionalism is a feature necessary to develop a coherent narrative. It is, in this context, that the ties between science, biology and the social are indissociable, with genetic research defining and circumscribing the features of national identities. This is key to establish a *cartographic gaze*, as the author mentioned, enabling to strength the surveillance society through situated data.

Deepening the argument, chapter 4 focus on the relevancy of identity construction and the factors differentiating Nordic countries. In doing that, the construction of unique nation identity and their underlying values turns easier to understand the mobilisation of historical roots and heritage in identity construction. It is also crucial to observe how scientific research assume a relevant role in the procurement of niche markets and consumers, which gains a considerable expression in the field of rare diseases.

Right before the end, in chapter 5, citizen engagement is also brought to the fore. The problem of public opinion is addressed from a market perspective, pointing that the States' approach to the public promotes market campaigns that favour branding strategies. While, in other chapters, public trust and public engagement were invoked as a central pillar for effective branding strategies, the last chapter stresses

the inherent problems brought by the public sphere when concerns arise, and how they are promptly addressed and integrated in the market campaigns. In this scenario, citizens are portrayed as being passive actors, which is not left without criticism, signalling for the possible erosion of public trust as a possible emerging problem. This topic is further debated in the conclusion, calling for a special attention in the near future.

The arguments presented are also critical to understand how healthcare has evolved in the last decades, in the direction of body commodification and product commercialisation. However, the book does not address how these population branding strategies impact the organisation and provision of health services. Also, in this sense, the mention to 'surveillance capitalism', 'cartographic gaze' or even the idea of the entire 'population as a cohort' are in line with the expansion of 'medical gaze' (Foucault, 1963) and 'molecular gaze' (Rose, 2007), which could be an argument to be explored, contributing to the debate on the entanglement of health and market fields.

As it is particularly latent on the last chapters, the challenge of public trust might change in the coming times. This issue deserves further exploration, since it might influence not only the organisation of healthcare services, but the way public engagement is addressed by public institutions, thus, conditioning the way branding strategies are put into practice.

Although the author is quite clear in presenting the book as a case study, this narrative will be difficult to transpose to many other European countries that have not reached such well-developed Welfare State or where data economies are far from being established.

Overall, this book offers an essential reflexion on how countries are defending and shaping their identities, in a global world, relying on their own cultures, capitalising them into selling products as promoting their unique nation identity. Applying the branding paradigm to populations opens the opportunity to analyse how countries are coping with new developments on science, technology, and innovation, transforming national assets into capacity to compete in global markets.

## **References**

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