

### *Book Review Forum*

**Jim E. Thatcher and Craig M. Dalton**, *Data Power: Radical Geographies of Control and Resistance*, London: Pluto Press, 2022. ISBN: 9780745340074 (paper); ISBN: 9780745340081 (cloth); ISBN: 9781786805560 (ebook)<sup>1</sup>

Data Power. Two terms often thrown together uncritically, signifying monoliths of knowledge and struggle. We know, by now, that the ever-emerging datasphere or dataverse (or some other impressively encompassing term) is a space of exploitation and loss of agency. We know, too, that we are insufficiently equipped with the political tools and frames to challenge issues of data creep, or even outright data colonialism, that impact communities and individuals in everyday, as well as exceptional, contexts. In *Data Power: Geographies of Control and Resistance*, Thatcher and Dalton do not shy away from dealing with both terms—data and power—directly, and with a persuasive political and theoretical edge. Yet they avoid the mistake of over-conceptualising, keeping hold of practical examples and context—this is neither a theoretical flight of fancy, nor an argument in which the theoretical framing is little more than a literature review tacked on to cherry-picked examples (as can often be the case with geographical work about the problems posed by data).

Though situated within current geographical debates, *Data Power* also engages cultural, sociological, and critical theoretical frames to bring together a (mostly) complementary array of positions on areas like everyday life, value, labour, and technology. There is an echo of critical geography's prior investments in questions around capitalism, representation, political praxis, and dialectics through figures such as Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, and Guy Debord and the Situationists. The approach is interesting, in that the focus on power doesn't fixate on companies and corporate greed, eschewing a kind of hopelessness about our contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> Available open access here: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv249sg9w>

datafied and commodified present, while also remaining focused on problems of ownership, exploitation, and risk to vulnerable communities.

Thatcher and Dalton's approach doesn't necessarily see the ubiquity of data as always already signifying lost power—nor does it frame a kind of preternatural sense of the supremacy of data, obscuring the contours of what is actually happening on the ground. If we are to fully engage with the issue of technological blackboxing that enables the syphoning of data without users' knowledge, we must—as *Data Power* makes clear—avoid uninformed quasi-magical descriptions of data as if they operate mystically and of their own accord, possessing and defusing power without systems, software, designers, or users. Instead of arguing that data are bad and must be controlled, Dalton and Thatcher's rationale is both more and less instrumental at once—the authors are modest in their suggestions to live in the cracks, engaging in resistance through simple intentionality, but they are also clear that education and collective data access have the same powers of demystification that prior eras attributed to anti-capitalist movements. In making the claim for everyday users, data subjects, or data collectors to contest the extreme scale of data by making our data our own, *Data Power* lays bare the fundamental power dynamics between data capitalism and data sovereignty.

There is much to appreciate about way in which Thatcher and Dalton reveal the sheer absurdity of data vastness and wild aggregation without check, which they describe as a “spectacle”, following the work of Guy Debord and the Situationists, among others. Building on the Marxist leanings of their call to confront the political reality of our commercially valuable—but invisibilised—data, Dalton and Thatcher's inclusion of Walter Benjamin's work on the political purpose of art in relation to rupture and fragmentation provides a refreshing reading of Benjamin's theory, in particular. Taking in the increasing link between data and commodification, the authors rightly point out that Benjamin's writing on the work of art was never just about mass production, but also about the politics of mass consumption, distribution, and scale. Claims to novelty and newness; repetition; systems of accumulation: these are all capitalist modes, but also media modes—and now, as *Data Power* describes, data modes. Benjamin's discomfort with the totalising tendency of capitalism (and fascism) was always

counterposed with the glimpse of possibility and redemption made possible in critical resistance. This book takes on this position and works it through consistently, building to a final argument that technological empowerment is a something of a myth; but collective action and ownership is not.

Despite all of the deep criticality in this book, there are times in the final chapters when it becomes evident that some of the most hard-hitting points could have been advanced earlier, but were obscured somewhat by descriptive or contextual arguments. To some extent, these contextualising elements make the book far more accessible to a wider audience (actioning the political call that the authors make); but the reader is also left with a sense of almost-but-not-quite in terms of executing the theoretical promise of this piece. In particular, the section on “Already-Existing Politics and Techno-Utopianism” is reasonably short (p.125-126), and hints at a richness and complexity that is only partially expressed. Here, the authors make an excellent case for rupture as the space where radical alternatives to the status quo can be productively pursued. This strikes me as the most fundamental argument to *Data Power*: to push against and through the co-opting of both data (generally) and of our personal, datafied experiences, by intentionally seeking and pursuing the gaps, disjunctures, and fractures where data power—the power of data; the data that undergird power relations; data-as-power—can be wrested from the control of elites, corporations, and institutions, and be made to work for a personal, public, or community use. Indeed, the collaborative public repository is—in name and content—both a call to action, and an exemplar of the kind of resistance and alternative forms of data dwelling that are proposed in this book.

In this way, *Data Power* strikes me as somewhere in between a manifesto and a method. On the one hand, it calls for an ideal of what our data are and can be—an ambitious imaginary of collective possession against corporate ownership and exploitation. On the other hand, the authors carefully set out steps and resources to undertake critical and active research on the data spectacle, to collaborate and organise across groups and institutions—a practical, rather than flighty, contribution to the contested and quickly evolving collection of data that represent us, past, present, and future.

A Radical Journal  
of Geography

# ANTIPODE

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