

Ola Söderström and Ayona Datta (eds), *Data Power in Action: Urban Data Politics in Times of Crisis*, Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2024. ISBN: 9781529233544 (paper); ISBN: 9781529233551 (ebook)<sup>1</sup>

### Data Power between Residue and Rupture

*Data Power in Action* provides us with a really important set of interventions in what is an emerging cross-disciplinary field of digital and data geographies, urban studies, and science and technology studies. The book's specific focus on the *politics of data and data's power* is particularly instructive. Much has been written on the ubiquity of data and data infrastructures—and the increasingly central role that data and their infrastructures play in the geographies of the urban—and the book contributes to this existing body of work in two interrelated ways. First by developing a series of analytics on the *politics* of data in the city, of the multiple ways in which technological and ideological systems “torque” with existing social and political conditions of the city.<sup>2</sup> And second by attending to the role of crisis in shaping contemporary urban data politics.

Beginning with the latter, “crisis” across the book refers both to the lodging of technological transformation within a conjuncture defined by uncertainty and disruption, and of course crisis is also understood as *the* central animating logic of new technological development—of data-driven inference, prediction, sorting and decision-making which are all in part geared toward the management and postponement of uncertainty. And so the book's chapters thoroughly explore the strangely productive and yet contradictory trap of “crisis talk” implicit to technological development in the contemporary moment. As Orit Halpern, in her contribution to the book, notes: “Every crisis is a reason for more computing ... [the] relationship between crisis, technology and automating decision-making (or at least imagining doing so) has subsequent bearing on how we understand human agency and political action” (p.228).

The book's chapters implicitly conceptualise new urban data infrastructures and decision-making processes as embodying a politics of anxiety that both justify rapid alteration of pre-existing ways of state-seeing and also state-doing, and utilises new forms of

---

<sup>1</sup> Open access version available online at <https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529233551>

<sup>2</sup> See Bowker and Star (1999) for more on “torque”.

inductive inquiry to smoothen over undesirable uncertainties, screen out un-indexable ways of being, to square the circles that were—at least within the tradition of urban studies—an ineluctable component of urban life.

In this regard, the book's engagement with a data politics exceeds an analysis that would position new technological systems within an already established and overdetermined historical, social and political domain—an epistemology and ontology of "urbanism" settled by mid-20<sup>th</sup> century modernity, now placed in a digital vernacular. Rather, the various chapters of *Data Power in Action* expand upon a ruptural set of processes at the heart of a new urban politics. No doubt the history of urban modernity is intimately intertwined with the project of data (creation, management, action), a project that as numerous historical geographers have argued finds its genesis in colonial and imperial city-making endeavours. And yet this older itinerary of *urban data politics*—organised through zoning maps, lists, scores, racial categorisations, property records, and so on—is only partly determinative of the kinds of technological system we find today. As the chapters of the book explore, urban data today is organised, stored, understood and actioned through fundamentally distinct methods, logics and of course means, and it is precisely this distinction that signals its potential to fundamentally revolutionise the grounds upon which we give meaning to, value and contest urban knowledge and practice in the world today.

This focus on the transformational potential of data does not come at the cost of historical or geographical analysis. To the contrary, the book is explicitly focused on pluralistic global urbanisms that carry with them the trace of historically distinct relations of power, inequality, violence, community and social organisation—the very lifeblood of new data-driven systems. That is, the various chapters of the book reckon with the imbrication of contemporary data infrastructures with residual logics and geographies of 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalism and colonialism. As the book's introduction notes, a focus on the Global South not only allows an interrogation of the politics of data in the places it most abundantly distributed, experimented with and struggled over, but also accounts for the conditions of contingency, incompleteness and alchemy that characterise data politics in the majority world. The infrastructures covered in the book—from COVID war rooms in India, apps in peripheral Jakarta, sensors in urban China, platforms in Nairobi, civil society in South Africa, to name a few—are all practised in contexts in which projects of modernist standardisation and

categorisation have been perhaps most intensively experimented with, and yet where such projects remain compromised, disrupted and frayed by the pluralistic and strategic informality of post-colonial political life (see, for example, Chatterjee 2000).

These are all contexts, on the one hand, over-determined by the afterlives of colonial extraction, anti-imperialist struggle and post-colonial global financial discipline, and yet are, on the other hand, engaging in a data politics on their own terms, with altogether new structures of power, agency and technological principle.

Reflecting on my own work on projects of property digitisation and platformisation in contemporary India—a study of the politics of property’s datafication and recoding as a tool for a new platform citizenship—has required me to first reckon with the pluralistic and discontinuous character of property relations in India—where to this day private property systems and the entire ambit of bureaucratic systems that govern them are misaligned, lack fulsome hegemony and are picked away and fractured by post-colonial resistance, reform and compromise (see Cowan 2023). The stakes here for scholars of *data power in action* is how these conditions of plurality are shaping the ways data is generated, distributed and actioned in ways that not only reinforce some previously accorded process of colonial dispossession, but might equally be changing the very foundations of what data is, what it means and what it can do.

The multi-scalar crises that technological transformations are hedged within in the present conjuncture (no matter how beneficial they might be for tech-boosterists) also in this regard convey a sense of historical discontinuity at the heart of data power—expressing a certain technological interregnum in which, to borrow from Antonio Gramsci, “the old is dying and the new cannot be born”—and it’s this political tension between the old and the new that frame some of the analyses of data politics and infrastructures throughout the book.

On the one hand, chapters focus on the recursive character of new data-driven systems of urban power, agency and community—wherein urban data infrastructures are over-determined and mediated by their situated “analogue” histories and pre-existing social-ecological and economic dynamics. In these accounts the politics of data are weighed down and informed in particular by modernist conceptions of urbanity and modernist systems of urban state power (such as ocular vision, classification, social sorting, administration, etc.). In these accounts, for example, pre-existing racial prejudices embedded into urban criminal

justice, education or labour markets are relayed through digital infrastructures such as the platform or “command and control centre” to digitalise given racial prejudices. Here the core epistemic logics of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity—saturated as they are in colonialism, imperialism and increasingly parasitic modes of capitalism—are deepened, given new life, new markets, new hosts through a kind of technological data fix. Rob Kitchin, for example, in his chapter in the book, notes that new forms of social and spatial sorting “results in those that are already marginalized in society experiencing a double form of data colonialism ... [which] amplifies historical forms of colonization and practices of social and economic exclusion” (p.25). This recursive character of data politics is elaborated across numerous chapters of the book from their differing historical and geographical conjunctures.

On the other hand, a separate analysis runs through the chapters of the book—that speaks more definitively to the ruptural quality of data power, emphasising the truly transformational impact of data power on urban society. In this account emerging data-powered systems of distribution, organisation, extraction and surveillance not only mimic their analogue forebearers, but represent a fundamental break in ways that alter the very epistemological and ontological foundations of urban life. As Petter Törnberg suggests in their chapter, the “rising use of data power ... is driving a shift in ... [the] epistemic foundation of modernity” (p.50). The question then that the book begins to ask, is what geographical relations, knowledge systems, social relations, ideological formations, what kind of data politics, are emerging within this rupture? And how might we untether ourselves from full fidelity to the old, while soberly working with the new?

Here I am reminded of Thao Phan and Scott Wark’s (2021: 1) writing on “racial formations as data formations”, in which the authors argue that unlike older bureaucratic systems, new regimes of social sorting and administration “rely on structures that ... operate through proxies and abstractions” inductively approximating patterns and clusters of data—in ways that *are fundamentally rewriting core social subjectivities and cultural forms*. Building on Paul Gilroy’s (1998) writings on the “end of race”, Phan and Wark (2021: 1) posit that the changes in computational process implicit within algorithmic systems hold the potential to completely rewrite processes of racialisation—generating what they call “racial formations as data formations”. Here race emerges not (only) in traditional imperialist and white supremacist pseudoscience, but is commonly inferred indirectly through imbricated patterns

of other racialised data, smashed together to produce inferred racialised people. The authors argue that “the power to classify, to differentiate and, crucially, to determine context produces a wholly novel capacity to racialize” (Phan and Wark 2021: 4). The useful question Phan and Wark pose for scholars of data power would be, what happens to urban relations and forms when the core processes that mediate them fundamentally change? What might a data politics look like when set on entirely different epistemic grounds?

With this in mind, there are four areas of rupture that the various chapters of the book draw out that I want to draw attention to. First, the reconfiguration of received ethico-political values of liberal urbanism—of the political subject, the sovereign, of desert, will, and liberty—that have framed much of our understanding of urban politics. How might attention to *data power in action* elaborate on a reconfigured urban political subject? And what are the implications for our shared conjuncture defined by climate crisis, rising ethnonationalism and its expression in increasingly authoritarian and revanchist urbanism? Second, the reorganisation of the conventional space and scale of “the urban” as have come to know it. Following instruction from critical urban geographers (Brenner and Schmid 2015), how are the litany of urban data infrastructures, and the political-economic relations that constitute them, altering the received geographies of the urban as we know it? This is a subject which the book’s co-editor, Ayona Datta (2024), has explored in her work on emerging “informational peripheries”. Thirdly, and in line with the discussion of this review, to what extent are new computational methodologies and modes of analytical enquiry, as they break from the methods of their modernist predecessors, altering the epistemological terrain of politics and governance, and thus correspond to an altering terrain of counter-hegemonic struggle? And finally, returning to the core focus of *Data Power in Action*, as data-infrastructures push and pull the received socialities, spatialities, and epistemologies of the urban out of shape, what kinds of political urban subjectivity and indeed collectivity are being generated in the process?

*Data Power in Action* is a generative read, a wonderful collection of intellectual engagements with questions of data politics in the urban age, and a benchmark for collaborative scholarship on digital geography going forward.

## References

- Bowker G C and Star S L (1999) *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*.  
Cambridge: MIT Press
- Brenner N and Schmid C (2015) Towards a new epistemology of the urban? *City*  
19(2/3):151–182
- Chatterjee P (2004) *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of  
the World*. New York: Columbia University Press
- Cowan T (2023) *Subaltern Frontiers: Agrarian City-Making in Gurgaon*. New Delhi:  
Cambridge University Press
- Datta A (2024) The informational periphery: Territory, logistics and people in the margins of  
a digital age. *Asian Geographer* 41(2):125–142
- Gilroy P (1998) Race ends here. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21(5):838–847
- Phan T and Wark S (2021) Racial formations as data formations. *Big Data & Society* 8(2)  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/205395172111046377>

*Tom Cowan*  
*School of Geography*  
*University of Nottingham*  
*tom.cowan@nottingham.ac.uk*

*February 2026*