2 The Social Construction of Reality – Really!

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Today, in countless diverse places, a new project is under way: the project of transforming the social fabric so it becomes amenable to a new kind of rule at a distance, rule through data. A new vision of social governance is emerging in many varied forms but based around a convergent principle; that the stuff of social life, its every element, will, indeed must, be reconfigured in ways that enable the extraction of data and so new regimes of governance and value extraction. Under these circumstances, we cannot think about media's role in society (let alone social media's role) without drawing on social theory. But which social theory exactly?

The societies we inhabit today are not societies *in the same way* as the societies of fifteen, perhaps even ten, years ago. They are different types of configuration that operate on different scales and through different flows from the societies of earlier eras. Indeed, because every point in space and time now, in principle, embeds a two-way computer connection (for influence and surveillance), the non-linear patterns of social relations operate in many more dimensions than our old models of social interaction can account for. The result is new forms of technological, institutional and social power that we have barely begun to characterise, although we already know one thing for sure: that they will depend on the continuous multi-scalar tracking of human life by technologies. We can also predict with confidence that those forms, taken together, will make possible *a new type of social order*, massively more aligned to corporate goals and economic ends than previous social forms.

We need to understand this emerging social order; indeed, it makes no sense to analyse social media without theorising the underlying "social order" of which their "socialness" is part. This affects the theorists we choose as allies.

The book that follows contains many finely detailed analyses of the uneven and often strange surfaces and conflicts that characterise this new social order: conflicts over identity and status, battles for political capital, personal attacks and strategies of self-defence, the shifting patterns of contention and self-advancement in urban space. They give the reader a vivid sense of the unsettling uncertainty of the datafied social world in locations as varied as Assam and Israel, Holland and the US.

In this opening essay, I want to strike a bass note that, I hope, will resonate through what follows. I would like to capture a few more general features of the type of social order that is emerging through "datafication" (Van Dijck, 2014), when every aspect of life is under pressure to reconfigure itself in ways that allow the extraction of data. It goes without saying that this is the core rationale behind the emergence of social media platforms, even if this is never their stated mission. But – and this is important to note – datafication as a process goes much wider than social media platforms. It is transforming other areas of business such as logistics, education and

health, and it is changing business models of all sorts. That said, social media is a good place to focus analysis.

I will stop short of offering a specific theory of the new social order. There are, to be sure, rival theorisations here, and I have a stake in that debate (see Couldry & Mejías, 2019; Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). But, whatever specific theory one prefers, what matters more here is to get a broader sense of key lines of change; lines that will help, I hope, bring into focus the details of the following chapters as you read them.

2.1 The Question of Social Order: Returning to Elias

The concept of "social order" has gone out of fashion. The last major book on the topic was written a quarter of a century ago and it is now out of print (Wrong, 1994): even that book complained of the topic's neglect. Meanwhile, and less directly, much has been said about technology's role in engineering the social world, in the wake particularly of Actor Network Theory. Indeed, a whole way of thinking about the social order through technology has developed that involves, in a sense, *not* thinking about it (Latour, 2005), and rejecting the whole tradition from Durkheim onwards of analysing the emergence of social facts from human beings' efforts to construct social reality.

There are, for sure, serious problems with versions of "social construction" that paid little attention to media technologies (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). But, as I have argued elsewhere (Couldry & Hepp, 2016), these can be addressed without abandoning entirely the question of what social world emerges from processes of social construction. Indeed, at a time when, through datafication, it appears corporations and governments are intent on reconstructing social reality in ways that align with their interests, it becomes vital to pay close attention to processes of social construction. What if those processes are not metaphorical – as the term "social construction" often seems to be – but literal: actual processes of *building a different material basis* on which humans' lives together can be configured?

Some remarkable intuitions of the future expansion of corporate power and rule emerged three decades ago in the wake of Foucault's extraordinary insights into neoliberalism. I am thinking of Deleuze's short essay on "the control society" (Deleuze, 1997), on which much has been written. That essay, however, remains vague about how its predictions will be actualized, and it cannot possibly have been based on a prediction of social media platforms, which were not predicted even by the engineers closest to the developments from which the internet developed and the world wide web was invented. So, we must look elsewhere for a theory of *how* today's social world is being transformed.

The place to look is not commentary predicting the emergence of social media themselves, for the issue is not about technology or software as such, but instead an earlier tradition of thinking about social order itself that remains extremely insightful

to this day. I mean the work from the 1970s and 1980s and even before of the German sociologist Norbert Elias. Particularly useful is Elias's idea that complexity in social life emerges from interconnections between human beings, from the patterns of interaction that he calls "figurations" (see Couldry & Hepp, 2016).

Figurations for Elias are "processes of social interweaving" that have a "special kind of order" that "starts ... from the connections, the relationships, and works ... out from there to the elements involved in them" (Elias, 1978, p. 116). His most simple example is a game of cards or football or a dance in which everyone plays their part by being in relations with each other person playing. As he says, "the behaviour of many separate people intermeshes to form interwoven structures" (1978, p. 132). In Elias's approach to social order, by contrast with Durkheim's, two things are very important. First, he grasps the role that *material* infrastructures play: today, that means software, computer code, servers for storing data, the cloud. But second, Elias insists on thinking about the consequences of that material infrastructure, of technology, from the point of view of the human beings entangled within them and their *human* goals. This was a point Elias made eloquently towards the end of his life: "People often seem deliberately to forget that social developments have to do with changes in human interdependence [...]. If no consideration is given to *what happens to people* in the course of social change – changes in figurations composed of people – then any scientific effort might as well be spared" (Elias, 1978, p. 172, added emphasis).

There are many worries today about the role of social media platforms in politics, in government, in family life, in the lives of children, concerns that run through this volume. Those worries are important, but they do not get to the most important issues that datafication raises for social space and power: the problem of how social order is being put together. Right now, that debate is emerging in multiple places.

Think of the intense debate today in the US about the consequences of automatic data collection on the lives of the poor, which in the US disproportionately means the lives of black people. As the legal theorist Patricia Williams (2019) recently commented, "many of us imprison ourselves with ... technology by choice – the smart watches we wear on our wrists, the GPS tracking on our cell phones or car-location apps, the ... reassurances of Siri. They aren't perceived as disciplinary tools; instead they are marketed as ways to connect." Yet that, she suggests, is what they are: disciplinary tools of social order operating through processes of datafication. The most dramatic example of this new vision of social order through connection, through datafication, comes from China. In China there are the most socially integrated digital platforms: in effect "super-platforms" like Alibaba or Tencent which combine social media (something like Facebook and Twitter and WhatsApp), with sites for e-commerce (like Amazon) and with sites for personal finance. Unlike in the West, none of these platforms are securely encrypted and the government has a close relation with the owners of those platforms (it helped finance their building). Think of China's emerging "social credit system," whose general framework and key mechanisms were

established by 2020 and which gives a score to every citizen depending on the data gathered about them online –their score for social responsibility.

In an important policy document outlining this new system, the Chinese government used an interesting phrase to describe its significance: "a market improvement of the social and economic order" (China Copyright and Media, 2014). So, we are brought back here to the question of social order, but this time not as a theoretical concept, but as vision of government, a practical plan for the management of society. A vision that, for the US, Patricia Collins (2019) goes so far as to call "the civic practice of nothing less than totalitarianism."

What these two rather dramatic perspectives on the forms of social order emerging in datafied societies – the US and China – bring out is that the concept of social order is not an academic detail, still less a theoretical extravagance, but rather a highly practical term for registering how social worlds are, on the largest scale, being transformed through the interlinking of all we do on social media (Elias's insight), and the systems of social governance, explicit and implicit, that are emerging to manage them.

We cannot, in other words, *do without* a concept of social order. In the next section, I want to address the question of what is distinctive about a datafied social order.

2.2 Managing Social Order Through Data

It might, initially, seem implausible to argue that a new type of social order is being made through the processing of data. This is, indeed, an extraordinary and epochal development. In explaining this a little further, let's remember Elias's key insight that new norms and what he called "social pressure" (Elias, 1987, p. 145) emerge without anyone exactly intending them, as a complex and, if you like, higher-dimensional side-effect of countless individual, group and institutional actors doing what they intend to do. The "special kind of order" Elias was interested in emerges *through* the continuous interweaving of many interrelationships and connections, their progressive impact, as social actors try, successfully or otherwise, to live their lives *through* the web of interrelations in which they have largely no choice but to be entangled.

In Elias's view, there is absolutely no need to imagine a vast corporate conspiracy to build something like a social order. It would indeed be deeply implausible to claim that what is emerging today through data processes was all, from the outset, planned to occur in particular boardrooms (so, for example, Zuboff's (2019) account of the emergence of surveillance capitalism allows for plenty of contingency along the way, as for example when Google discovered its ability to predict human activities in great detail from crunching the vast datasets about people's online activities that it had, indeed, intended to amass to fuel its search algorithm). Acknowledging that, however,

is very different from denying that corporate intention becomes a major factor once the advantages of an emerging datafied social order become clearer to corporations. We are now more than a decade into the era of social media and taken-for-granted fast internet connection in many parts of the world, and we are now in a very different phase in the evolution of datafied social orders.

Why in particular, you might ask, should new ways of collecting data generate a new type of social order? Data, of course, has always been collected by governments, though on a massively smaller scale and intensity than today's everyday forms of corporate data collection. The link between data and social order derives not so much from the collection of data as from its use. As Oscar Gandy (1993, p. 15), a pioneer of research into corporate data collection back in the 1980s, noted, the *point* of gathering data is to make discriminations, to treat this entity or person differently from that entity or person. In the early states of datafication, it was discriminations between the customers of credit card companies and airline companies, to offer differential pricing for linked purchases. But now the principle of discrimination-through-data (that is, automatically harvested data from online activities) has spread right across the social terrain, including the actions of government.

Also spreading fast is the principle that institutional *rationality* now depends on the continuous gathering of data on human subjects so more discriminations can be made about them. Although this will vary depending on employee status (with higher status jobs being likely to be exposed *less* to continuous surveillance), many jobs today involve not just regular monitoring of key outputs, but continuous tracking of every dimension of an employment's activities and the generation from this of data-driven interventions to modulate and regulate the employee's behaviour. Similar principles apply to governments' regulation of those citizens who are dependent on state benefits or are in other ways subject to close management (for a useful recent survey, see Sánchez-Monedero & Dencik, 2019). Once again, the point of data gathering is not just to gather data, but to continuously manage behaviour through data uses.

While there might *seem* to be a huge distance between the explicit regulatory intent of state authorities and the business models of social media platforms that track their consumers, what is emerging across many different social and economic domains is a shared rationality of changing behaviour through data, based on continuous tracking and the constant modulation of signals and incentives.

The language of marketers is an instructive entry-point to this emerging rationale for the social order of datafied societies. Listen, for example, to Price Waterhouse Coopers (2014) speculating about a future where consumers will wear embedded chips that monitor their bodily and psychic mood continuously: "brands could even tap body cues to tailor messages … sensor revealing that you're thirsty? Here's a coupon for smart water." Or listen to AT Kearney (2014), leading consultants in the insurance industry, commenting on the advantages of the so-called Internet of Things not for consumers, but for *insurers*: insurers, they say, could "use IoT-*enriched* relationships to connect more holistically to customers and influence their

behaviors." These are not random remarks, but early signs of a shift in business rationalities summed up recently in a report by Wharton Business school professors in the authoritative *Harvard Business Review,* which recommended the adoption of "four effective connected strategies, each of which moves beyond traditional modes of customer interaction and represents a fundamentally new business model. We call them respond to desire, curated offering, coach behavior, and automatic execution" (Siggelkow & Terwiesch, 2019).

Once again, we are looking less here at a conspiracy to dominate and influence and more at a rationality for ordering the world. Which leaves a final question: how do those tracked participate in this order? The short answer is that they are induced in countless different ways to enter into what Ulises Mejías and I call "data relations," relations that configure social life on a basis designed to optimise the generation and extraction of valuable data (Couldry & Mejías, 2019, Chapter 1). Data relations can be seen as a leading form of "figuration" in Elias's term for the era of datafication.

Such data relations can, however, have many different gradations: from the definitely voluntary choice of someone who wants to track their fitness or health and so uses a tracking app which sends data to a third party; the less voluntary "choice" of an employee encouraged by her employer to use a health app as a condition of obtaining work-related health insurance; the definitely *not* voluntary decision of welfare claimants or borrowers whose activities online are comprehensively tracked by state agencies or finance companies to generate a stream of information on their reliability and creditworthiness. And then there is the barely voluntary submission to tracking of users of social media platforms who may calculate that the seeming necessity of being on the platform such as Facebook – so as to connect with everyone else who is there for various practical purposes – makes it worth paying the price of being tracked by the platform. What is much less clear is how platform users calculate the bargain in relation to all the other uses of data relating to them gathered by and through Facebook and used by multiple parties unknown to them.

In these various ways, data relations work and the forms of power established through them come to stick. As we enter into ever more intermeshing data relations, something like a social order emerges.

2.3 Conclusion

In this short essay, I have only been able to give a bare outline of how a social order is being built through data processing, an order that is gathering a depth and intensity unrivalled by previous forms of governance and social power.

It is worth emphasising, however, that this order remains under construction; it is certainly not complete. Its eventual shape cannot at this stage be fully predicted. Indeed, to the extent that this order is resisted by social actors, it will not unfold exactly as I outline here. That is the point of analysing datafied societies from the

point of view of social order; to alert readers to what is under way and help them imagine what resistance might feel like. This demonstrates again that the concept of social order is not a trivial addition to social theory, but a practical tool for analysing the world that corporations and governments are building for us.

In this essay, however, I have chosen to focus on general features of the emerging datafied social order, abstracting from the local complexities and tensions that are the subject of the essays which follow. A more complete picture can, of course, only be formed by reading them all together.

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