



PROJECT MUSE®

The Depth Conditions of Possibility: The Data Episteme

Ekin Erkan

Theory & Event, Volume 23, Number 2, April 2020, pp. 496-500 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/752734>

The Depth Conditions of Possibility: The Data Episteme

Ekin Erkan

Colin Koopman. *How We Became Our Data: A Genealogy of the Informational Person.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. 272 pp. \$30.00 (pb). ISBN: 9780226626611.

According to Colin Koopman, there is a politics endogenous to data and information itself, and Koopman locates this politics in the formats of data. Drawing from Foucault's methodological orientation and, more specifically, Foucault's conception of genealogical historical inquiry by emphasizing complexity, contingency and critique, Koopman asks what are the conditions that make it possible for us to *be* our data? Koopman does not argue that we are *nothing* but our data but that, given our epoch of informational culture, data comprises a significant facet of our "being."

Koopman's thesis rests on the historical development of data formatting, illuminating how in the development from older analog technologies to more neoteric digital technologies, we have been molded into socio-politically malleable denizens. Koopman's political analysis of technics regards personality metrics and informatics as the project of measurable-amenability, a para-communicative category that Koopman identifies as valuable for political theory because it allows us to genealogically examine algorithmic culture. Koopman achieves this by drawing attention to the data structures, or "formats," that are crucial for any kind of algorithmic operation whatsoever (which means that Koopman treats the algorithm transhistorically).

When did we become our data? Bridging research concerning informatics qua intelligence testing with the bureaucratization of paperwork vis-à-vis the universalization of standardized birth certificate forms, Koopman traces an arachnean genealogy that weaves together the datafication of birth, personality, and race. Excavating the informatics of documentary identity alongside stabilizing mechanisms (e.g., the enforcement for birth registration through laws, bureaucratic requirements, and commercial practices), Koopman's survey of "testing" and data-capture formatting begins with the early twentieth century, examining emergent platforms of informational identity and collection technologies. Koopman's research is stilted upon three categories: documentary, psychological, and racial identity; Koopman maintains that both the "possibilities for, and limitations of, our selves are today deeply informed by bureaucratic paperwork, psychology, and race" (20). Scouring and citing primary text documents including mid-twentieth century reports on assessment, lending, and underwriting, Koopman illuminates the entrenched mechanics of redlining and other racialized operations of normative informational technologies. Koopman examines administrative and social technology such as "check box-clad printed blanks, filing systems, processing protocols, and computational analytics" (155) from the mid-1910s to the mid-1930s, noting how these produced the functional foundation for contemporary state-sponsored surveillance, consumer and voter dataveillance, data-driven financialization, and the production of informational congeries of psychographic data.

Koopman, in the tradition of Foucauldian media archeology (albeit also influenced by the Jürgen Habermas's and John Dewey's theories of pragmatist communicative democracy) utilizes a highly historical analysis that, *prima facie*, evades metaphysics and prioritizes transitional turnings. In turn, Koopman widens "programming" into an epistemic category that occupies the historical practice of formatting informational technology. With contemporary informational personhood under the duress of social media, metadata analysis, and the Foucauldian apothegm of the "conduct of conduct," Koopman begins with the recomposition of the contemporaneous datafied self by following data's accoutrement. In appropriating Foucault's genealogical method while divorcing it from disciplinary (bio)power, Koopman is indebted to Foucault's genealogical analytics of the present. Notably, while Foucault was certainly not a de-ontologist, his philosophical concern with historical particulars rather than necessary "transcendental" conditions meant that Foucault was not, primarily, an ontologist. This is precisely why Koopman's use of Foucault relates to political questions such as *how* and *which* data are important for the political and epistemic strategies through which we conduct ourselves.

Koopman asserts that the uptake of information theory in the 1940/50s is in need of explanation as it has been overlooked in political analyses of informational practices. Koopman delineates that today's "informational person" is not determined by the spatio-temporal and statistical embodiment of disciplinary biopower but by "infopolitics," or the data sets around which conduct accumulates. Although Foucauldian biopower is still operative today, it does not exhaustively account for the politics of Facebook, Google, or the NSA. According to Koopman, "infopolitics" cannot be simply reduced into biopolitics and while he accepts that "inchoate tactics of information can be located within these predecessor exercises of power" (163), Koopman's argument presents "infopolitics" political gravity as conditioned by the relationship between format and subjectivity. Credentials such as our Facebook login, email address and login, frequent flier accounts, credit card data, PayPal data, bitcoin wallets and so on, there are endless streams of data through which we effortlessly transact our daily affairs. Therefore, rather than negating biopower, "infopower" is layered upon other enactive modalities of power; instead of suggesting a negation, "infopolitics" produces addition and stratification.

Koopman commits the beginning of his study to the genealogical analysis of identity's datafied subjectification qua the "infopolitical" present, beginning with documentary identity, moving through psychological identity and then racial identity; according to Koopman, "infopower" deploys techniques of formatting/formats in order to fasten and speed up its "informational persons" – while this logic precedes digitality (e.g., birth certificates and auditing), it has become *ubiquitous* through digital platforms. Unlike other philosophers and political theorists who have developed or amended Foucauldian biopower alongside Deleuze's development, Koopman rejects the precedence of Deleuze's late work on "control society" (or "control power"). This is primarily because Koopman insists that Deleuze's conception of ceaseless control-through-modulation "does not look at the past with the empirical rigor of genealogy" but, instead, is steeped in the future and oversaturated "in a mode of eschatological prediction" (169).

Koopman's research on various historical endeavors concerning analysis, interpretation and public distribution as it relates to the decisive project of

informatics is erudite due to its empirical rigor. Consider, for instance, when Koopman examines the Children's Bureau Project, an early example of the informational audit and the assembly of identity. Detailing a critical instrument of measure, Koopman scours the period between 1913–1917 to examine the birth registration test's slow rise before it was eventually appropriated by the Census Bureau. The technology of the birth registration, which sought to identify what proportion of babies in specific locales or years were registered with the Bureau, demonstrates the rise of comprehensive informational systems (52).

Koopman chronicles how the development of data technologies is a political project that trivializes certain groups, enlightening the politics of data management. For instance, despite the efforts performed by a force of volunteer women and directed by Etta R. Goodwin and Julia Lathrop (the first female director of a federal government agency), the Census Bureau made no mention of these women's critical contributions or Lathrop's agency to the establishment of the Birth Registration Area project. While this is merely one detail of Western history's squelching of female intellectual contributions amongst many, "[t]his silenced conflict over data management leadership indicates that not only was there a politics of the information itself, but also a much more familiar politics of information control" (54).

Koopman recalls chief statistician Cressy Wilbur's remarks in 1915 concerning the birth certificate's "increasing importance to protect the rights and insure the privileges of the individual" (58), citing examples of school enrollment, limits on age of child labor and the fulfillment of pensions for widows with children. Prognosticating practices such as the "old age pension project," these coercive measures of datafication inputting, processing, and outputting instantiated an articulation of datapower that "conducts our conduct" (159). As Koopman keenly outlines with the formation of the Social Security Board and Social Security Numbers, by the early twentieth century information was increasingly becoming a legislatively and state-engineered statistical system of "dividualization." "Dividualization," a term originally popularized by Gilles Deleuze, refers to the decomposition of the individual into a variegated series of numerical attributes and dimensions (e.g., scores, ranks, or features) that are relevant and useful for the production of profits by data industries and financial networks. Today, "dividualization" transpires via risk-ratings, credit scores, consumer profiling and other operations purposed for algorithmic prediction. The challenge, in 1915, was the lack of data—beginning with the consequent development of information theories and cyberneticians' research, the eventual development of digital technologies would solve this through the management of complex data sets, or what is, today, colloquially termed "Big Data." Today's "data episteme" is an epistemology where "the need for more and more data is the spawn of data itself" (160).

In Foucauldian fashion, Koopman does not identify epistemic breakages so much as he does *rifts*, where increased complexity is mediated by ideological contiguity. One marked example of this is the SSN as an informational marker of identity that was made to operate without leaning in any way on forms of biometric certification to externalize its function; the SSN realized a sociological-cum-political possibility that the birth certificate had announced but not realized:

[p]assports had relied on photographic resemblances, signatures on unique motions, of the hand, fingerprints on the physics of our digit. Birth certificates began the process of a more minimal endocumentation of living data: parentage, data date of birth, sex (the original standard forms did not even measure length and weight). The SSN inaugurated the next step of a purely informational identification: the use of identifiers that do not refer to anything other than the unique information that they are (63).

This transposition is critical because, contra biometrics, with the SSN we see “infopower” as concerned with identifying information in a kind of “pure” and nonrepresentational form, rather than indexing human morphology. In contrast to the prosthetically-tethered and phenotypically-externalized relationship between data and anatomy, with the SSN we see the emergence of a non-indexical relationship between the “self” and their data.

As Koopman notes, the success of the birth-registration project, until 1935, rested upon the ingenuity of collection and storage technologies (e.g., copying subsets of previous data by soliciting files from earlier publications, standardizing filing systems and auditing for accuracy). Not only does the SSN solidify a non-representational correlate to identification but, in turn, it also implemented a “universal technology that all (eligible) workers would be registered into” (64). Previously, no insurance company had imagined such universality possible. Approaching selfhood genealogically, Koopman examines subjectification’s location within a complex series of apparatuses, practices, machinations and assemblages whereby the production of psychological selfhood is conducted through an arrangement of techniques centered around the crucial technology of “the test,” whereby we see modern techniques for governing human individuality recruited.

Taking a marked interest in *functional* processes of production vis-a-vis selfhood qua personality rendered measurable, Koopman follows in the genealogical-archaeological tradition of Arnold Davidson (and his studies of nineteenth-century notions of perversion) and Nikolas Sose’s sociological approach to individuation. With “careful genealogical attention to the operative techniques and functioning concepts of psychological science,” Koopman argues that “becoming our personalities” involves, at least in part, also “becoming out data” (70). Koopman genealogy traces a direct line from Francis Galton’s IQ intelligence tests to the development of personality tests with the Personal Data Sheet Psychoneurotic Inventory in 1918, explicating how this led to the development of psychographic metric inventories such as those processed by Cambridge Analytica, which were heavily employed by the 2016 United States presidential candidates’ consulting teams.

In his chapter on the informatics of racialized credit, Koopman examines specific techniques funding government redlining from 1934 onwards, which involved real estate-specific technologies such as the “racialized appraisal” (127). Alongside factors such as “swamp odors” and “traffic exhaust,” it had been common practice in residential appraising to factor racial valuation into an appraisal algorithm until the 1937 edition of *McMichael’s Appraising Manual*. By reformatting social acts of racialization into scientific processes of datafication, race was made additive – as Koopman remarks, “[t]he infopolitics of race

is thus layered on phenotypes, biologies, bodies, and more. The result is that racialization thereby became different, more multiple, more heterogenous, and therefore more complicated to track" (147).

Uncovering the informatics of race, real estate appraisal, and residential segregation/redlining, Koopman demystifies congeries of contemporary datafication. Examining Gordon Allport's work on trait theory and trait nominalism (where Allport argued that traits could be understood as units of personality), Koopman shows how, as early as 1928, the mechanics of algorithmic analysis grafted personality psychology upon an enactment of formatting techniques. Excavating algorithms as information-processing technologies embedded in wider assemblies of formatting, Koopman's approach emphasizes the historical use of algorithmic analysis through the aperture of broader data assemblies, as these techniques of data-based formatting had been used for nearly a century prior to their contemporaneous deployment. Examining the science of measure through the vantage of intelligence testing, Koopman examines how the adoption of an informatics apparatus colonized domains previously thought sacrosanct.

Koopman's erudite trans-historical analysis underscores format as a functional and political operative that transmogrifies informationalized persons, or "users," into abstract data points. Koopman concludes that data, therefore, does not simply facilitate forms of communicative interaction but "functions as locales for a politics of fastening that is irreducible to a politics of communication" (188). Koopman's genealogical approach to algorithmic data qua public health and knowledge practices demonstrates that "surface politics" such as human welfare projects and official policies are, in fact, brimming with politically dormant exigencies.

#DIFFERENTIATE #SPECIATE: On Jairus Victor Grove's *Savage Ecology*

Chase Hobbs-Morgan

Jairus Victor Grove. *Savage Ecology: War and Geopolitics at the End of the World*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019. 346 pp. \$28.95 (pb). ISBN: 9781478004844.

Georges Bataille began the first volume of *The Accursed Share* as such: "No one can say without being comical that he is getting ready to overturn things. He must overturn, and that is all."¹ Whatever else it does, Jairus Victor Grove's *Savage Ecology* overturns many things without comically announcing as much. The result is a darkly explosive work.