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POSTSCRIPT: DOING DATA DIALECTICALLY:
BETWEEN ALIENATION AND DEMOCRATIC
URBAN RENEWAL

Callum McGregor

One way to reflect on this collection is to understand each contribution as part of a broader analysis of the contradictory dynamics of urban datafication. By contradictory dynamics, we mean dynamics in which 'seemingly opposed forces are simultaneously present' (Harvey 2014: 17). This definition of contradiction is useful because it encourages us to think dialectically, rather than dualistically, about urban datafication. In other words, it stresses the undecidability and ambivalence of unfolding processes of datafication: processes which, being neither intrinsically 'progressive' or 'regressive', simultaneously hold potential to enrich and impoverish the fabric of democratic life. Whilst many chapters focus on practices of critique, resistance and refusal, some discuss emerging practices of democratic datafication. Moreover, some chapters offer cogent articulations of what the right to the datafied city could yet be – articulations that are based on careful readings of ambivalent practices and policies. The right to the city, understood as the radical demand framing this collection, is fundamentally about reclaiming urban democracy, and with it, control over our futures. In other words, the right the city is the '*unalienated* right' of 'those who build and sustain urban life . . . to make a city after their hearts desire' (Harvey 2012: xvi, emphasis added). Two points are worth stressing here: first, 'the future' must be understood as a living, material, contradictory potentiality that exists in the present. Second, this conceptual focus on alienation (from our labour, from our urban environments, from ourselves and each other) is necessary for understanding the contradictory potential of datafication.

In the diverse contexts of welfare, education, labour, art and activism, contributors have astutely illustrated the ways in which urban datafication simultaneously forecloses and facilitates the future. Pragmatic yet

utopian, this book is an illustration of what it means to 'do' data dialectically by working in and against datafication and mapping emancipatory futures through a sober analysis of the current conjuncture. This approach might frustrate some readers because the book is neither a wholesale denunciation of 'Big Data', nor a parochial insistence that datafication is the vanguard of social change – a master signifier for democratic renewal, as it were. If the book overemphasises practices of critique, resistance and refusal, this is rooted in our editorial instinct that too often the datafied city – along with its attendant 'Californian Ideology' of neoliberal, high-tech disruption (Barbrook and Cameron 1995) – is taken as a *fait accompli*. From this perspective, what makes datafication and the right to the city such a combustible pairing is obvious: whilst the right to the city demands 'participatory parity' in urban economic and public policy making, there is a patent democratic deficit at the heart of the urban policy fetish for data-driven governance, innovation and growth. Authentic citizen participation means having the opportunity to question and, if necessary, reframe economic and public policy agendas by questioning their assumptions and presuppositions. Take, for example, Zehner's analysis (this volume) of the Edinburgh and South East City Region Deal (CRD) where he argues that 'local communities were not involved in crafting Edinburgh's economic futures. One high-ranking third sector representative describes the emergence of the CRD as "like a spaceship that landed". This observation was confirmed by an Audit Scotland report (2020) which concluded that communities have had very limited direct involvement.'

To be clear, it is not that concerns around data justice are completely absent in data-focused urban policies such as CRDs. The more subtle point is that data justice itself is an ideologically contested concept. Just as social justice has been historically co-opted and recast as 'progressive neoliberalism' (Fraser 2016), data justice will more than likely become a vehicular concept, inflected by various ideological configurations as it is operationalised through policy. Whereas a shallow vision of data justice might represent the problem to be addressed as lack of inclusion and unequal opportunities within the dominant narrative, the right to the city necessitates a deep vision of data justice, which is about the need to redistribute 'projective agency' (Zehner, this volume) – the agency to shape imagined futures – to city dwellers in contexts where the state–corporate nexus hegemonises the urban imaginary and thereby forecloses the realisation of alternative futures. To include

citizens as ‘makers and shapers’ of urban public policy rather than as mere ‘users and choosers’ (Cornwall and Gaventa 2000) is to recognise that their analyses of the social problems affecting their everyday lives may not be data-centric at all. On the contrary, they may require us to decentre data, to disrupt disruption, as if it were a natural and inevitable phenomenon rather than a socially constructed economic project.

Thus, to understand how datafication might facilitate the realisation of unalienated urban futures we must first understand how alienating practices of datafication foreclose the future by monopolising the urban imaginary. The first way of understanding this is through a political-economic analysis of the ways in which data-centric urban growth strategies intersect insidiously with municipal social services and welfare: data analytics companies and platforms are part of a social policy rationality that combines neoliberal economism with dataism. The familiar rationality of neoliberal economism is that the private sector and its tech start-ups are more agile and efficient at delivering services than the bloated, bureaucratic public sector. Dataism is a particular species of technological solutionism (see Morozov 2013) that recasts complex social phenomena as ‘solvable’ data analytics models. A number of recent critical social policy studies have highlighted precisely how alienating these increasingly widespread regimes of datafication are, as their algorithms and models perpetuate the misrecognition and objectification of ‘problem’ groups and communities, even as they are conceivably positioned as vehicles for distributive justice via narratives of efficient and fair resource allocation based on data-driven needs assessments (e.g. Dencik and Kaun 2020; Edwards, Gillies and Gorin, 2021). Even if data analytics experts can genuinely claim to spot empirical patterns, correlations and connections pertaining to social injustices that might otherwise remain unseen or misunderstood, the principle of participatory parity at the heart of the right to the city poses an intrinsic challenge to what Fraser (2008: 414) presciently termed the ‘scientific presumption’ of ‘justice technocrats’:

Under conditions of injustice, . . . what passes for social ‘science’ in the mainstream may well reflect the perspectives, and entrench the blind spots, of the privileged. In these conditions, to adopt the scientific presumption is to risk foreclosing the claims of the disadvantaged. Thus, a theory committed to expanded contestation must reject this presumption. Without denying the relevance

of social knowledge, it must refuse any suggestion that disputes about the 'who' be settled by 'justice technocrats'. (Ibid.)

Note that this position doesn't discount the use of data analytics to empirically identify, and evidence, social injustices experienced by city dwellers. However, it does require that data analytics, when used, must be brought to bear alongside the experiential knowledge and critical deliberation of citizens in order that social problems are not misframed and the citizens who experience them are not misrecognised. In addition to the ways in which datafication forecloses the future through this maldistribution of 'projective agency', there is an additional philosophical argument to be made here that Big Data, 'not differing from statistical reason in any fundamental way', is 'blind to the event' (Han 2017: 76). As Han (ibid.) argues, '[n]ot what is statistically likely, but what is unlikely – the singular, the event – will shape history, in other words, the future of mankind'. Dataism then, is the overarching policy fetish which obfuscates this point by positing a simple correspondence between social reality and data models. In so doing, dataism forecloses alternative futures rather than facilitating them, through its structural inability to reflexively interrogate the ideological parameters of its own models.

Since this coda has so far explained and justified our 'pessimism of the intellect' (critique, resistance, refusal), to paraphrase Gramsci, our 'optimism of the will' must be nourished by positive visions and enactments of the right to the datafied city. If dataism summarily describes the fetishism 'from above' driving urban policy, then we must also caution against a corresponding fetishism 'from below', in which the human desire for the *unalienated* right to the city slides carelessly into a reactionary demand for the *unmediated* right to the city. Srnicek and Williams (2016: 18) have attempted to name this fetish from below 'folk politics', by which they mean 'a collective and historically constituted common sense that has become out of joint with actual mechanisms of power'.

The relationship between alienation and mediation is complex and tightly bound up with the history of socialist political philosophy and its emphasis on positive freedom and social rights. Social rights to a basic level of economic security and welfare, to education, to housing, to health care and so on, provide the necessary material basis for ensuring that citizens have the resources and the capabilities to exercise their

political and civil rights. In today's context, data resources must also be considered social rights essential for exercising political and civil rights. In other words, urban data infrastructures, reconceptualised as part of the urban commons, must be reclaimed as a condition of positive freedom, and thus, as a condition of unalienated democratic renewal. Folk politics, for Srnicek and Williams (2016), is characterised by a populist fetishisation of the local and the immediate, a voluntarist conception of political agency and an epistemological populism that is sceptical of mediation and abstraction. The result is reactive episodes of community resistance and direct action lacking a cogent analysis of the wider structural determinants of the social symptoms that they oppose.

In this analysis, purely voluntaristic and populist approaches to the right to the city are alienating, while a sociological imagination facilitated by democratic data use can be empowering for at least three reasons. First, democratic control over data allows citizens and diverse communities to build political solidarity and common cause through co-constructing evidence-based claims that cut across militant particularisms to highlight endemic injustices. Second, horizontal voluntarism propagates its own myths about democratic participation whilst obfuscating the material impediments to participation. It is well documented that community organisations and prefigurative leftist social movements are over-represented by particular social demographics with the required time and economic, social and cultural capital. Finally, populist conspiracy theories act as poor substitutes for people's ontological need to make sense of their social milieus, to develop a sociological imagination. This 'separation between everyday experience and the system we live within results in increased alienation: we feel adrift in a world we do not understand' (Srnicek and Williams 2016: 14).

From this perspective, emerging positive enactments of the right to the datafied city give us reasons to be cautiously hopeful. Take the oft-cited example, by authors in this volume, of Barcelona's 'City Data Commons' and the way that it goes beyond liberal privacy laws (i.e. GDPR) to a commons-based framework of data sovereignty (Bria 2018). However, this developed out of a particular political culture and context. In a majority of cases, struggles for the right to the datafied city will be messy and contradictory, since they exist in and against reality as we find it, not as we would like it to be. This is why, as we struggle to enact urban futures through the right to the datafied city, it is not enough to merely do data democratically, if by that we merely mean

the right of ordinary people to participate in the data-centric visions of ‘justice technocrats’. Instead, we must critique, resist and refuse, if necessary, by doing data dialectically. This means interrogating its own contradictions in the context of a broader ecosystem of human concern.

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