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Book Review

Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy, *The Ordinal Society*, (2024). Harvard University Press. 384 pages.

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Major societal transformations fuel sociological inquiry. As industrial capitalism displaced feudal economies, for instance, early theorists sought to understand the new forms of authority, labor, inequality, and social cohesion that emerged in its wake. We may now be living through another such transformation—one driven not by industrial production or bureaucratic governance, but by data, metrics, and algorithmic systems.

The Ordinal Society builds on—and in key ways redirects—Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) claim that we are witnessing the rise of a new economic formation: surveillance capitalism, in which human experience is mined as "behavioral surplus" and turned into data to predict and shape behavior, and to generate profits. But where Zuboff focuses on extraction and surveillance, *The Ordinal Society* asks what comes next: how that data is used to classify, rank, and sort people in ways that structure access to opportunity and power.

The stakes of this question are high. Authoritarianism is on the rise in democracies around the world. Generative AI is reshaping who counts as an expert, what counts as knowledge, and how value is produced—displacing not only jobs, but entire systems of authority, as companies like OpenAI monetize user data at massive scale. The challenge for sociologists is to make sense of a social world increasingly shaped by digital infrastructure. It means treating the ordinal turn, as the book does, not just as a technological shift, but as a social transformation that needs to be situated in relation to power and inequality.

At the center of *The Ordinal Society* is a question posed explicitly midway through the book: "What does it mean for computers to intervene in the business of seeing and organizing society?" (p. 108). The authors argue that what is distinctive about the current moment is not just the scale of data or the speed of computation, but a shift in how people are categorized and acted upon, as individuals are increasingly slotted into ordinal rankings using difficult-to-interpret methods (p. 115).

Visibility, Fourcade and Healy argue, is a prerequisite for participation in the ordinal society. To be ranked, individuals must first be legible to the systems that govern access and allocation. This produces what they call "eigencapital" (p. 117): a form of capital based on visibility derived from others' visibility in a recursive, dynamic web of rankings. Social value is no longer anchored in credentials, wealth, or networks alone, but in one's position within constantly recalibrated systems of algorithmic evaluation. The result is a new form of inequality: one of legibility to algorithmic processes that remain largely invisible to those affected by them.

To be seen by institutions—however incompletely or inaccurately—isn't new. The state has long collected population data to (imperfectly) govern, as James C. Scott critiqued in *Seeing Like a State* (1998). High-modernist state-sponsored schemes, Scott argued, relied on *techne*—scientific, abstract knowledge

—while disregarding what Scott refers to as *metis*, or practical, contextual knowledge. Today's systems may reject the standardization Scott (1998: 8) described ("homogenization, uniformity, grids") in favor of bespoke classifications and personalized services. But despite their complexity and scale, these individualized systems still rely on abstract, disembodied representations; a "fragility of reference" that undermines their usefulness as a guide for action (Hayles 2022).

Scott's point was not anti-data but pro-context. Practical knowledge—how to whistle, ride a bike, or sail a ship—emerges from embodied experience and constant calibration. A weather app might help a captain, but it can't replace the feel of an approaching storm. Indigenous farmers planted corn "when the oak leaves were the size of squirrel's ear"—a precise local knowledge born of practice, not abstraction (Scott 1998: 311). Data may support such knowledge, but alone, it cannot substitute for it.

This is in part why algorithmic systems, with all their granularity, often fail. As Fourcade and Healy put it, the computational mode of perception "does not seek to replicate the structure of the world but instead generates its own way to see, understand, and value" (p. 251). That can be powerfully, productively alien (Evans and Foster 2024). Yet states and technology companies continue to repeat the same mistake made by high-modernist authoritarian regimes: they privilege abstract systems over situated understanding, and in doing so, often produce distorted outputs that fail to improve lives—or don't work at all.

These often ineffectual outputs aren't isolated failures, and herein is the core argument of the book. As data-driven systems become embedded in institutions, they reshape core domains of collective life: economic coordination, political identity, and social cohesion.

In the economy, the old idea that markets coordinate decisions through the "invisible hand" under conditions of imperfect information begins to unravel when everything becomes visible (p. 139). Rather than simply making markets more efficient, this visibility (re)individualizes risk, calling into question the market's foundational logic. What logic replaces it? The book equivocates.

A parallel shift plays out in politics. Where parties once organized broad coalitions around shared class or group identities, individuals are now "expected to explicitly locate [themselves] within a universe of highly differentiated, externalized, socially recognized categories" (p. 217). Coalition-building becomes more difficult, as politics fragments into overlapping, narrowly defined positions. Will "pure sovereignty within the market" (p. 224) indeed erode the legitimacy of the nation-state itself? Again, the book equivocates.

The final domain is society itself. Here, the core sociological question—following Durkheim—is about solidarity. What holds people together in an individualized, personalized, microlegitimized society? What replaces the shared rituals and institutions that once helped produce collective identity and mutual obligation? If "each individual lives within their own world while being assisted by a service or a device that claims to know exactly who they are [And] [s]ocial pressures toward joint participation are reduced, as everyone gets an experience tailored to themselves alone" (p. 225), then where do the conditions for shared understanding come from?

This is the terrain where *The Ordinal Society* raises important but unresolved questions. Social trust is fraying, political discourse is fragmenting, and authoritarian movements are stepping into the vacuum. The erosion of common experiences and shared reference points may make collective action harder, and perhaps makes societies more vulnerable to populist and authoritarian appeals. And this is the heavier weight behind the book's questions: not only what this new order is, but whether we can develop the social infrastructure to hold together under it.

Like many recent books grappling with the rise of algorithmic systems, *The Ordinal Society* tries to pin down what is truly new about this moment. But, as with any period of transition, the outlines remain blurry. We are still deep in the fray—no owl of Minerva has taken flight. The book offers a compelling analytic lens, but it stops short of offering a fully systematized account of the new social order. At times, its account feels more like a patchwork of incisive observations than a fully integrated framework. What it does provide is a useful set of throughlines: across the economy, politics, and society, the authors show

how processes of datafication—and more specifically, ordinal ranking—are reorganizing how people are seen. If the new order is still emerging, this book gives us some of the tools to begin to see it.

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