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Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy. The Ordinal Society. Harvard University Press, 2024. 384 pp. $45, hardcover.

Who now watches ''The Prisoner''? In this late 1960s television series, a British intelligence agent is abducted to an inescapable coastal village immediately after quitting his government position. Here, the villagers are identified by numbers instead of names, constantly surveilled, and bounced down by a killer balloon if they try to flee. Disorienting and Kafkaesque, the show reflects the fears of the time: loss of individuality, the alienation of the Organization Man, normlessness in a changing Cold War world. ''I am not a number! I am a free man!'' our protagonist—Number Six—fruitlessly exclaims at the beginning of each episode.

How prescient. How quaint.

As *The Ordinal Society* makes chillingly clear, the quantification of our lives—and the dangers that accompany it—has subsequently undergone an industrial revolution-like intensification. The digital age has created virtual doppelgängers of us all, data doubles that are ''the representation of you, your tastes, and your actions that can be reconstructed in whole or in part from the records and traces you leave behind'' (p. 103). These doubles—which companies and governments can buy, sell, kidnap, dissect when it suits their needs, and then re-piece together like so many Frankensteins—develop an existence of their own. They become quasi-independent entities that shape the opportunities and life chances of the real people they were designed to reflect, determining what we can buy, how we can travel, the way others view us, and so on.

The *Ordinal Society* provides an extensive analysis of the historical conditions that set the stage for the rise of these data doubles, the processes through which these doubles are sorted, and the consequences—financial, social, and personal—that ensue from their proliferation. Readers learn a great deal about the multitude of technological, organizational, and institutional developments that made our particular form of digital capitalism possible. The book ranges easily from the origins of Social Security numbers, to the imprinting schematics of early networks, to the libertarian ethos of designers, to the development of credit scores, to the growth of financialization. It is also very insightful about how and why algorithms are constructed out of our personal data, how these algorithms are put to use, and the various ways in which they have created powerful new forms of social classification and inequality.

Needless to say, the book covers a lot of ground, coming at this virtual elephant from all directions. Rather than offering an overarching theory or explanation of the ordinal society, Fourcade and Healy introduce an abundance of insightful conceptual tools to help us understand how we got here, as well as the nature and consequences of our current datafication. They describe, for

instance, the ''Maussian Bargain'' (p. 43, based on sociologist and anthropologist Marcel Mauss's work on gift exchange) that constitutes one of the pillars of digital capitalism. Users are given the so-called gift of free social networking sites, search engines, or other useful apps without always being fully aware of what they are giving back in return, its value, or how it is being traded, sold, or shared on various markets. A market exchange is misperceived as a giveaway, much to the benefit of data harvesters.

Another productive concept, eigencapital, clarifies how we are sorted (i.e., our classification situation) and to what effect in the ordinal society. Eigencapital is ''A vector of information that summarizes your situation and value across many features—something that compactly represents your position in the multidimensional space of classification situations'' (p. 117). This individualized score or rating is a resource that, like other types of Bourdieusian capitals, becomes manifest in embodied, objectified, or institutionalized forms. While an individual's eigencapital is opaque to them, it matters a great deal. It can be used to determine ease of access (think boarding airplanes and crossing borders) and quality of service (e.g., premium memberships and special benefits). It is especially pernicious as it circulates across institutions and is consolidated into other indexes, necessarily becoming more abstracted (and more prone to misrepresentation) as it moves further away from its original context.

Organizational scholars will appreciate the book's engaging descriptions of organizational adaptation spurred on by the rise of digital capitalism. In the early stages, even large technology companies often engaged in data collection ceremonially, having little idea how to manage the excess of data they were amassing or how to glean value from it. Now, data collection, bundling, and sale is standard practice for companies of all types. Companies traditionally known for producing and selling goods (John Deere is a featured example) have found new revenue streams by gathering a wide range of data about their customers that can be managed and sold. This transition, whereby ''every producer of goods becomes a service provider, and every useful service becomes a stream of data that can be turned into an asset'' (p. 161), is a ripe topic for organizational research.

Fair warning: One does not come away from this book with feelings of optimism. Taking a page from Weber and *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Fourcade and Healy slip away from their disinterested tone in the final sentences of the book:

> As the ordinal society extends its reach, the insistence on formal equality under the eye of the market eclipses the struggle for substantive equality in the shadow of the state. It blinds us to what we all share and chips away at solidaristic feelings and institutions. Public goods and collective goals are being dissolved in the acid bath of individualization and competition, leaving us increasingly alone in a hyperconnected world whose social ordering is precisely metered and, in its factitious way, inarguably ''right.'' Life in the ordinal society may well be unbearable. (p. 285)

The end. The stakes are high and the prognosis is bleak. Like Weber's iron cage, there seems little hope for escape from the bouncing digital balloon that threatens to absorb us all: ''I am not an eigenvalue! I am a free person!''

It is a dramatic conclusion to a thoroughly researched book full of thought-provoking interpretations. I wish I could find a flaw in their final assessment.

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