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Tales of light and darkness: a response to comments on *The Ordinal Society*

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ABSTRACT

We respond to four reviews of The Ordinal Society. We argue that traditional (and, as our critics point out, much-needed) forms of resistance and collective action are difficult to mobilize against ordinal systems, for two reasons. First, people often find these systems irresistible in use. Second, they operate in a decentralized manner, bypassing subjectivity (and thus the need for persuasion) to directly mold individual behavior. We also agree with our critics that the concentration of power among wealthy "self-organization men" who can manipulate these systems and mobilize armies of followers may facilitate highly personal, authoritarian forms of political rule.

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In today's intensely competitive intellectual marketplace, it is an immense privilege to get one's book reviewed anywhere. But it is an even greater honor to see it debated by four of the sharpest minds working at the intersection of digital technology and society. We are enormously grateful to Liz McFall, co-editor of the Journal of Cultural Economy, and Elif Doyuran reviews editor, for putting together this symposium, and to the four reviewers, for engaging so productively with our work.

Michelle Jackson evaluates our book against a long tradition of utopian writing in social science, a tradition that inspires her deeply (Jackson 2020). The reason is that *The Ordinal Society* presents itself, particularly in the final pages of the book, as a thoroughgoing critique of the economic structure and political imaginary of digital capitalism. The implication, familiar since at least Karl Marx, is that there must be some way to make things better, to 'support, rather than impede' human flourishing. But *The Ordinal Society* is stubbornly mute about prescriptions for the predicament it describes. Jackson helpfully suggests a few responses to our failure to provide remedies. She argues that we have essentially two choices. We can reform or revolt. We can work within the system to mitigate its alienating effects on our psyche, for instance by using it to manage our own weaknesses; or, in good old Marxist fashion, we can strive to alter the power dynamics embedded in data ownership and algorithms and 'seize the means of computation', as Cory Doctorow (2023) puts it, by redistributing the profits they generate. Then again, it was not the external imposition of power but rather the power of the gift, expressed in both sociability and software, that propelled us much of the way down the road we are on.

That is why our instinct is to look at the ordinal society as a total social fact. And it is to blame for our eschewal of a more normative position. All four reviewers praise our emphasis on the many

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delights of the ordinal society – the convenience, the speed, the information, the sociality, all within reach in one's pocket. The ordinal society is as irresistible as it is unbearable. This is, in fact, what makes it a *society*. But is that sufficient? Hatim Rahman, too, wants to hear more about resistance, about the ways that the tools of ordinality can be repurposed to 'restore power … to individuals and marginalized groups.' Certainly, and other scholars have both described in depth and imagined how that might happen. Rahman's excellent book (2024) is a prime example of how this kind of agency practically expresses itself within the most controlled systems – the 'invisible cage' of work platform algorithms – while Ruha Benjamin's *Imagination* (2024) offers a more aspirational approach to confronting oppressive institutions. Yet as we acknowledge in the book, if specific systems are frequently objects of contestation or even abolition, at a more general level '*les dés sont pipés*. … The sheer ubiquity [of ordinal regimes] across all domains of social life makes a unified challenge difficult to envision' (Fourcade and Healy 2024, 252–253). As people are increasingly pressed to focus on their own individual position and optimize their personal behavior in various ways, collective action and solidarity become harder to imagine, let alone build.

Following an approach we proposed long ago (Fourcade and Healy 2007), we set aside the urgency of moral indignation and the fine grain of policy recommendations in favor of an examination of how algorithms churning out behavioral data *produce* moral intuitions about deservingness that obscure all kinds of structural inequalities, and treat each and every one as monads that perform or underperform, and whose *particular* situation in some specific domain is always a kind of market opportunity. Juan del Nido understands this preoccupation very well. He recognizes that it is, like Foucault's, about identifying the latent political rationality of the system before us. But unlike Foucault, this rationality is not simply of the 'disciplining' kind. Rather, it is a species of control (Deleuze 1992). It bypasses subjectivity to mold behavior directly, through infrastructural pathways and carefully designed nudges. The segmented, targeted nature of control, its claim to govern in the name of freedom, makes it quite difficult to manage, and hard to identify as a source of oppression. After all, as Del Nido (2021) argues in his superb study of the taxi market in Buenos Aires, can you really outlaw something – like Uber – that 'the people' demonstrably want, very badly in fact? The neoliberal answer is to say: no, of course not. Drivers and clients should be free to choose. And the fact is, they feel the same way as the abstract neoliberal.

In an ordinal society, technology organizes and frames individual freedom and competition. Individuals are 'obliged to be free,' 'constrained only by the amount of time, effort or capital they [are] prepared to invest in achieving [autonomy]' (Rose 2017, 306). In our book, we describe how this logic of individual autonomy tends to prop up a strange combination of epistemic detachment (from traditional mediators of knowledge and the elites that support them) and emotional attachment to identity-boosting symbolic universes. The political implications of these shifts are starting to fully come into view. Rogers Brubaker has already described 'the ecology of hyperconnectivity,' specifically the apparently immediate and volatile connections between influencers and followers forged through social media, as a natural ingredient that supports the modern 'logic of populism.' (2022, 151) In his deeply generative review, Julien Migozzi goes further and rightly asks whether the rise of the ordinal society might prefigure the 'cultural descent into fascism' that presently overwhelms much of the democratic world. The hierarchical relations and self-reinforcing power dynamics enabled by the ordinal society matter as much as the lateral connections and the algorithmic mobilization of the masses that are characteristic of modern populist movements.

The mechanisms of ordinalization concentrate power in several ways. The fiction of a free and open playing field tends to give way to an economy of 'premiums,' as Migozzi aptly names it, where money rules over participation in digital systems. Benefits are carefully metered to the tiered contributions users can afford, as they strive to boost their own visibility and position. From dating apps to chatbots, platforms rely heavily on increasingly detailed and steep subscription schedules that limit or augment the capabilities of their services. Those we identify in our book as 'self-organization men' – typically very wealthy individuals in a position to manipulate the rules of ordinal

systems to their advantage – are busy creating the conditions of their own perpetuation at the apex of the social structure. They invest in electoral contests, lobby or wholly capture governments, and buy up media outlets (including social media). As with much of what we cover in the book, efforts to establish control over the state and the means of mental production have deep roots. But as Migozzi points out, perhaps the particularity of our era is that their tendrils now reach into us in much more variegated, more personal ways. The ability of technology to scale this effort in cultish support of a charismatic authority figure, to mobilize armies of followers behind a providential leader who promises civilizational regeneration, has many precursors but few historical equivalents in scope. Seen from the United States in 2025, not to mention from Xi Jinping's China, the future of the ordinal society may be darker, indeed, than we imagined just a year ago when our book was published.

Disclosure statement

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