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Review Symposium

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Review Symposium

Symposium on *The Ordinal Society*

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The digitalizing process

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What kind of society have we created? Or, more precisely, what kind of society have Facebook, Google, Amazon, Apple—but also your credit card and auto insurance companies—created for us? In *The Ordinal Society*, Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy bring the extensive literature on the digital world together with their commanding knowledge of social theory to offer a novel analysis of how our current social order was created and with what consequences.

It is not without irony that my first observation about a book that mourns the loss of expertise is that it is an amazingly researched and beautifully written piece of work. As I was categorizing the many sociological insights presented in the book, I was struck by the vast amount of knowledge brilliantly incorporated throughout, which describes how technology works using a variety of theoretical lenses, drawing on the works of Marx, Weber, Bourdieu, Foucault, Mauss, Nietzsche, and many others.

The book is loosely divided into two interrelated parts. The first describes the technological as well as strategic steps leading to a digital world in which we are being constantly, tirelessly ranked by advertisers, peers (as on Facebook), customers (as on Yelp and Uber), service providers (as with Uber as well as insurance companies), and by ourselves. The second part describes what life looks like in such an "ordinal society." My review follows a similar structure, while placing greater emphasis on the second part.

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The first part of the book offers a sociologically informed history of how technology that was supposed to "lift people out of the banality of everyday life" (p. 8) has transformed into a data-collecting machine and an ordinalizing mechanism. Although the story of data becoming the "new oil" (p. 136) has been told before, this book's description stands out for several reasons.

First, it was refreshing to experience Fourcade and Healy's delight in digital technology. They allowed me to once again be in awe of practices and functions I had come to take for granted. One example is how we feed Google Maps information that loops back to us, helping us avoid traffic caused by other Google Maps users. The authors also reveal hidden logics behind the organizational structure of the digital sector. For instance, they explain how users' role in "feeding" the technology is key to the monopolizing tendencies of data-reliant companies. And they remind us—and amend the existing literature—that we should not explain individuals' actions online (including all the data they give away) solely by pointing at manipulation and exploitation from above. Often, people willingly surrender this data. Moreover, those manipulating practices from above? They are sometimes developed by users themselves.

Second, Fourcade and Healy unfold history in a non-linear, and therefore indeterministic way. Data collection initially occurred almost incidentally—for mundane technological reasons. It required a somewhat desperate search for revenue sources to turn that waste into gold. In this manner—and implicitly following the maxim that "artefacts have politics" (Winner 1980)—Fourcade and Healy document the role of technology in creating modalities of power (rather than those with power devising technologies to serve their interests). But it's not only technology. Drawing on insights from organizational sociology, Fourcade and Healy also examine the diffusion of industrial management techniques to explain the dominance of certain practices in the tech sector. This discussion raises novel questions regarding work and labor in the digital universe that I wish the book had explored further. Fourcade and Healy rightly suggest that labor practices in places like Meta and Google—with their ping-pong tables and music rooms—are an integral part of how the digital economy is being developed. It would have been helpful to learn more about how employment conditions and organizational environments in which coders and developers work impact practices and their diffusion. When not playing ping-pong, coders create value from our data. Combined with improved computing power, the result is an ever-increasing collection of granular data. These data classify users. And, crucially, Fourcade and Healy emphasize that this classification is ordinal—that is to say, organized on a scale.

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So what if data classify us on a scale? This brings us to the book's crucial question: "What does it mean for computers to intervene in the business of seeing and organizing society?" (p. 108)

An early argument Fourcade and Healy make relies on a comprehensive and refreshingly written summary of the rich literature on algorithmic biases and the various ways the current digital order reproduces categorical inequalities—by which they mean inequalities based on race, class, gender, and sexuality, although these categories remain largely implicit (p. 109). Algorithmic biases result from training data sourced from an unequal, biased social world. Biases also stem from the machines' unique errors when learning from incorrect cues. While politically important, this analysis may obscure more than it reveals. In an earlier article, "Classification Situations: Life-Chances in the Neoliberal Era," Fourcade and Healy (2013) beautifully showed that credit scoring classification systems designed to bypass discriminatory categories successfully achieved greater inclusivity, but also that such differentiation through scoring technologies still allowed pricing people according to credit

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risk, thus reproducing discriminatory categories not by way of exclusion but through differential pricing. In this book, by contrast, they focus on the persistence of discrimination without considering whether and how discrimination persists despite inclusion.

The broader theoretical tension here, which runs throughout the book, is the inconsistency between the claim that we've entered a wholly new, "ordinal" society—one that should presumably give rise to novel categories of inequities—and the contention that the problem with this new order is that it reproduces, or at most magnifies, old inequities.

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This may not be an entirely fair critique. After all, Fourcade and Healy do move beyond old differentiating categories. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of capital, but finding it insufficient, they propose a new type of capital—the not-yet-real-but-emerging *single* ranking that encompasses the "totality of one's interactions with the digital economy" (p. 121). They call this single ranking eigencapital. But how convincing is their claim that this is where data collectors are heading? What incentive exists for constructing a single, totalizing ranking? This seems to contradict the logic of the granular knowledge that is a core observation in the book. Shouldn't granularity apply not only to what gets collected but also to how this knowledge is used? Why would credit card companies and university administrators, for instance, want to rely on the same metric? Wouldn't they prefer to design metrics better aligned with their tailored informational needs about us? Granted, this is an empirical question, but beyond China's social credit system, there is no much substantial evidence supporting a move toward single ranking; and China might be the exception rather than the rule, given its centralized governance, including in the digital realm.

And what does eigencapital tell us sociologically? Here, Fourcade and Healy significantly alter Bourdieu's analysis by assuming aggregation (of scores into a single unit) instead of the original insight of conversion (of one type of capital into another—for instance, when the newly rich send their children to elite schools). The distinction between aggregation and conversion prompted me to think of the capital accumulated online. Do types of capital in the digital economy overlap with the long list of capitals "in real life" that Fourcade and Healy playfully mock? What is the conversion rate across these different types, and what are the means of conversion (that is, what is the online equivalence of attending an elite school or purchasing an expansive piece of art)? And how does one convert "in real life" capital into digital capital? Rather than assuming that "in real life" capital easily translates into eigencapital, we might better examine unexpected conversions—for instance, cases where valueless "in real life" capital turns into something valuable online. Examples abound. "Influencers" are mentioned only once in the book, yet they represent an excellent example of new capital and of classificatory aspects of the Internet more generally. What "in real life" capital (if any) converts into "viral" capital? And when can influencers' popularity be converted into tangible—and "in real life"—economic capital? These questions are even more difficult to identify and address if we assume an aggregated score rather than differentiated capital.

The *embodied* form of eigencapital is one's habitus, and the same questions I raised about capital may apply to Fourcade and Healy's approach to habitus as well. The book primarily focuses on habitus that projects trustworthiness and good reputation, which facilitates online access. However, this kind of habitus largely mirrors class positions "in real life," whereas we should be interested in how the digital world allows the creation, as well as negation, of habitus. Regarding creation, consider the construction of new types of habitus in the digital world—taking us back to influencers, and also to the newly constructed

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habitus of service providers such as the constantly monitored and ranked Uber drivers. (These new forms of habitus relate to new social categories that complement or replace old ones.) As for negation, consider the Internet's role in challenging (and potentially altering) habitus. One example is "being Karen"—the habitus of some entitled middle-class White women who use their privilege to make demands—and how a viral video of a White woman calling the police on an African American bird watcher forced such women to reflect and possibly alter that habitus.

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More directly addressing the question of novel consequences, the book identifies three key arenas in which a distinctive form of *personal sovereignty* emerges, regarding privacy, expertise, and social solidarity. There is much to explore about these issues. Here, I will mention a few potential contradictions that I believe exist in the analysis.

As for privacy, the book's main insight is that individuals are being (re)socialized to surrender their privacy, because however much they want their data protected, people desire participation even more—which requires visibility. But this rational calculation of costs and benefits overlooks the fact that people are not fully aware of the cost of visibility, due to misleading or incomplete information, manipulation, and so on. Their description may be too forgiving of the data industry by implicitly accepting the premise that sharing data with some cannot be done profitably without sharing data with everyone. This framing additionally ignores the role of regulation and significant differences across judicial domains, which would have made the connection between data sharing and ordinalization appear less inevitable. (It may be worthwhile to consider the Dark Net as a domain where privacy is, ironically, heavily protected.)

We should additionally examine how the simplicity and affordability of data collection enables significant collective benefits, albeit with certain problematic consequences. Consider India's biometric ID system (Aadhaar), which allowed previously undocumented citizens to finally be seen by the state and receive welfare benefits.

Early in the book, Fourcade and Healy reject the "blanket critique of technology" and the assumption that "the world is always being made a worse place" (p. 36). However, this nuanced stance seems forgotten as the book progresses toward its remarkable concluding words: "Life in the ordinal society may well be unbearable" (p. 285). There's much in the book to support this conclusion, and there's little to suggest otherwise. I'll confess to being among those who tend to overestimate technology and I'm as prone as others to conjure dystopian images of the present and nightmarish predictions of the future. And yet, curiously, the book prompted me to consider, at minimum, the existence of alternatives. (This relates to my earlier emphasis on differentiation, because the alternatives I'm thinking about here do not affect all social categories equally.)

In regard to expertise, the main insight is the loss of expert consensus, with people choosing to do their own "research." When searching online, because of the way algorithms work, people are likely to find "evidence" that fits what they already believe or are likely to believe, creating a "post-truth" society and leading to political polarization. It is interesting to link this discussion with another insight in the book, of how researchers greatly benefit from the tools offered by digital technologies, while a "combination of personalization and auto-generated content has severely undermined the quality of search results" (p. 215). Later, Fourcade and Healy add that because tech firms control the data, they are the ones doing the social science, and outsiders who want access must work with them. This leads

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me to ask what I perhaps should not: is it possible that the loss of monopolization on expertise is somewhat justified because those claiming to hold truth are victims of the same system?

Regarding identity formation, Fourcade and Healy assert that in ordinal societies, "aspects of experience, especially those that relate to … oppression, become elements of identities that ought to be expressed, settled upon, and flagged" (p. 217). They add: "A distinctive form of micro-legitimacy emerges from speaking as a member of some precisely defined category, while keeping the views of those who cannot claim membership at bay" (p. 217). The result is individualization at the expense of group solidarity. "Insofar as shared, socially recognizable groupings do emerge, they will tend to be very fine-grained, perhaps almost absurdly so from the perspective of 'ordinary' social categories" (p. 218). Logically, disaggregation undermines group solidarity. Empirically, however, recent experiences seem to contradict this argument. Consider Incel and Q-Anon, and—with major differences—Black Lives Matter. BLM started based on the identity and experiences of African Americans, but the movement also welcomed those who could not claim membership. Even more striking is the recent Palestinian solidarity movement, in which one does not need to be Palestinian, Arab, or Muslim to legitimately belong. The participation of Jewish activists represents a particularly compelling challenge to the dynamics we tend to expect in the era of identity politics. This is not to say that the narrowing of identities does not occur, but rather that one needs to also explain how solidarity among and across these categories may emerge.

Lastly, and more generally, how exactly does this distinctive form of personal sovereignty align with the concept of an ordinal society? The discussion appears to shift from a digital economy where individuals are differentiated and ranked to one in which experiences are broadly shared across individuals and social categories.

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Weeks after reading the book, there was hardly a conversation about contemporary issues in which I didn't reference an insight or an example from the work. This is a rich, thoughtful, and thought-provoking monograph. The book compelled me to consider how the digital world not only reproduces but also creates new social categories of inclusion and exclusion, equality, and differentiation. It also pushed me to move beyond my dystopian perspectives toward a framework of contradictions. I am certain that other readers will find the book as rich and useful as I have.

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Varieties of ordinal societies

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In one of my frequently taught courses on economy and society, I regularly introduce students to the work of Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy through the aesthetics and storytelling of Charlie Brooker, creator and writer of the acclaimed television series *Black Mirror*. Using one of *Black Mirror*'s first and most remarkable episodes—*Nosedive*—I invite students to think about how quantifying, aggregating, and then individualizing the different aspects of our humanity—from causal interactions with airline attendants to transactional data captured and re-interpreted by credit scoring systems—can become a digital iron cage of sorts, a means for creating novel constraints that shape our actions, thoughts, and sensibilities, creating new cleavages of difference, establishing new relationalities mediated through digital infrastructures. This is not science fiction, I tell them, but rather a slight hyperbole of our increasingly scored social life.

Following two groundbreaking articles—"Classification Situations" (2013) and "Seeing Like a Market" (2017)—Fourcade and Healy present an impressive contribution in the form of *The Ordinal Society*, reinforcing their position as some of the most critical and insightful analysts of the intersections between politics, algorithms, digital infrastructures, economic structures, and culture at large. *The Ordinal Society* is an impressive accomplishment in social theory. It sits at the top of books I consider essential for making sense of our present, a rare contribution that is here to think *with*, rather than just think *about*. In offering a powerful and critical account of how transformations in information technologies interact with social dispositions built around individuation, merit, reputation, and digital legibility, it provides a convincing argument about the transformations that have redefined capitalist societies, one digital infrastructure, data imperative, and algorithmic classification at a time.

The Ordinal Society is at its core an argument about the origins and dynamics of digital capitalism, delving into the organizational logics, infrastructural trajectories, economic structures, and cultural dispositions that animate its reproduction and ongoing adaptation. Let me be explicit: the book is persuasive at both a theoretical and empirical level, offering a new conceptual toolkit for making sense of how digital data became a central pillar of contemporary governance. For this *Symposium*, however, I must step into the role of a "critic," however difficult it may be in finding disagreements and divergences with the work of two exceptional scholars such as Fourcade and Healy. I will nevertheless assume this persona, if only for some pages, with the hope of tracing directions that might query and extend this foundational contribution into further studies of digital capitalism.

I will start with the relatively straightforward yet somewhat unresolved issue of scope: *where* does the Ordinal Society exist? Here, I am thinking of two distinct scales of analysis. One pertaining to how digital capitalism operates as a phenomenon defined by transnational variations. The second involves intranational forms of differentiation that may speak to the conditions of felicity required to bring into being the most intense forms of digital capitalism along the lines of those studied by Fourcade and Healy.

A brief digression may serve to frame the first of these two points. For the last 2 years, and for reasons entirely unbeknownst to me, I've been directing the Latin American Studies program at UC San Diego. As a Latin American but notably not a Latin American*ist*, this new position has required some catching up and engaging with literatures and research quite outside my original comfort zones in economic sociology and science and technology

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studies. This includes having become much more familiar with literature on migration, development, and democratic governance, and supervising theses and projects equally distant from my regular wheelhouse, from studies of ideological shifts in Bolivian indigenous elites and neo-developmental accounts of Brazilian soccer to discussions about how gendered identities shaped recent South American electoral politics.

As I engaged in this relatively forced encounter with a different body of social scientific work, I shifted my understanding of knowledge production and scholarship toward a perspective more attentive to the distinctiveness of the "Global South." This was, perhaps, the framing that informed some of my analysis of *The Ordinal Society*. In reading Fourcade and Healy's exceptional contribution, as I underlined and highlighted pages with effusive comments of surprise and support, I also wondered about the extent to which the concept of an ordinal society, and of the modes of governance that distinguish digital capitalism, traveled across sites. Can we think of the ordinal society that is palpable in the Euro-American sphere as existing in Mexico, Bolivia, Peru, Argentina, or Chile? Are these societies ordinalized in different ways, with digital capitalism taking on distinct forms that reflect the way infrastructures of scoring, capitalist governance, economic organization, and individualized merit are configured across national spaces?

In formulating these questions, I am not invoking a naïve comparison between a cosmopolitan, airline-miles-savvy, "always online" Gen-Xer in the USA with a subjugated farmer in the hinterlands of Chiapas or the peripheries of La Paz. Rather, I refer to comparisons across similar social groups across national boundaries, between comparable individuals in the global socioeconomic class distribution, middle classes in Buenos Aires and their peers in Atlanta, Los Angeles, or New York.

Perhaps the reason for such comparison matters is in revealing how "classification situations" that emerge in Euro-American digital capitalism may be less visible, or indeed less powerful or relevant, in other settings with considerable structural similarities—that is, capitalist societies, with data-intensive institutions, and a considerable penetration of smartphones and online services. Mexico and Brazil, for example, have relatively high levels of smartphone use (around 61 per cent and 66 per cent, respectively, but notably higher for higher income groups) and possess the same kind of platformized services built on the same type of Maussian bargains that characterize digital economies elsewhere (both Mexico and Brazil have greater per capita use of Facebook than the USA, for example, and WhatsApp in both countries is arguably the *de facto* public communication system). It's unclear, however, to what degree middle classes in Mexico and Brazil experience the forms of digital capitalism of their Euro-American peers. Do they, for example, come to inhabit their synthetic "data doubles"? Does eigencapital have the same valence and exchange value that it possesses elsewhere? What is most telling about the case of middle-income countries like Mexico, Brazil, Chile, and Argentina is that, while echoing many of the features of their northern counterparts (for instance, credit scores certainly matter), individual dispositions and incentives surrounding personal data are notably different (there is no direct equivalent of Credit Karma—a multinational company that offers its users tools to track and manage their credit and personal finances—in any of these countries).

Thinking of cases that fall afar from the Euro-American context may provide insights about the social, legal, political, cultural, and economic conditions that underpin ordinal societies. Different countries, for example, may have different dispositions toward ordinalization, making the role of certain everyday technologies of ranking and classification either

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more or less pervasive. In some settings, artificial intelligence may lack the allure it holds in the USA, either because of the greater cultural distance from the libertarian discourses of Silicon Valley or because cheap cognitive labor is still readily available and more transparently controllable. The politics of reputation may also be notably distinct, making the ranking of services, products, and individuals less relevant in the public's eye. Much as we think of the varieties of capitalism as representing different configurations of state, publics, and corporations, a "varieties of digital capitalism" perspective may provide further theoretical and empirical texture to the question of how ordinal societies come into being across similar, yet essentially distinct settings.

If studying variations in digital capitalism across countries can illuminate the scope conditions that regulate ordinal societies, being attentive to intra-national variations may provide additional insights about how ordinalization comes to have stratified effects. Here, traditional analytical categories such as those given by the intersections of social, cultural, and economic capital may suggest gradients of ordinalization even within one national setting. A porter at a Cambridge college, whose work is primarily reproducing established class structures through ritualized forms of cultural work, may be a very different subject of digital capitalism than an urban service worker in Manchester in their 20s, navigating Instagram to find the latest brunch place for the weekend. How they engage with, make sense of, and depend on the affordances of digital infrastructures in relation to the cultural and economic resources they possess can lead to significant variations in their experiences of ordinalization. The forms of eigencapital that may be relevant to some across the socioeconomic spectrum (for instance, the hypothetical urban service worker) may hold less value for individuals living in other parts of the income distribution (the dispossessed, for example, or those on the right-tail-end of the curve).

Taking a step back and keeping these comparative perspectives in mind, we can possibly relocate the origins of the ordinal society. For Fourcade and Healy, the ordinal society emerges at the intersection of two broad processes. First, key transformations to neoliberal economic governance. Second, the development of discourses associated with the apparently liberatory economies and practices of the distributed web. The ordinal society results, in brief, from the invention of the "tech bros" who configured a particular kind of digital capitalism that brought together fragments of neoliberalism and the incentives of individualized click-driven screens. From this perspective, ordinal societies are tied to specific historical processes which may not necessarily reflect the modal global trajectory.

In finding the origins of ordinal societies in other settings, it may be useful to think of these as resulting from broader and more pervasive structural transformations among economic and political elites. For example, a core contribution of *The Ordinal Society* is highlighting the new public epistemology associated with the markets and affordances of contemporary digital capitalism. Specifically, in the chapter on the *Road to Selfdom*, Fourcade and Healy argue that expert knowledge was reconfigured under digital capitalism in connection to the growth of new media ecology where individuals are compelled to "search" as part of a broader incentive to produce, consume, and live in data. In a universe where all statements are possible, "doing one's research" independently of what bona fide experts may think becomes a habituated norm—eroding traditional epistemologies grounded on the legitimacy of certain institutions. This leads to an unravelling of expert authority in the broader public sphere, as seen with particular clarity during the 2020 pandemic.

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This unravelling, however, arguably predates Web 2.0 and the kind of data-intensive, click-friendly systems animating contemporary digital capitalism. Articulations between elite scientists and elite politicians broke much earlier, as seen in the collapse of big science in the early 1990s signaled by the demise of the supercollider in 1993, the stagnation of federal funding for research since the late 1980s, and he ongoing transformation of state agencies involved in large technoscientific projects e.g., NASA). In a parallel world where elite networks did not unravel, where political, economic, and techno-scientific elites remained in alignment, would ordinalization have had the same contours? What kind of digital capitalism emerges in those settings, where a version of Silicon Valley is tied and responsive to the interests of established political groups?

This leads to yet another question: was the ordinal society *inevitable*? Are we necessarily characters in the world of Adam Smith 2.0, creatures with a propensity to like, share, and measure? Or are these propensities, which are surely structured by larger cultural formations, outcomes of the kinds of capitalism that developed specifically in the USA and similar settings? Was there a critical moment where things could have gone differently, where decisions were taken that gave inertia to the kinds of ordinalization we see today? (A parenthesis: closing these brief comments with more questions than answers is a sign of its generative character). Conjuring counterfactuals is beyond the scope of this impressive book, but it may provide impetus for future scholars to investigate how digital capitalism is transforming the fabric of various societies, polities, and identities. Science fiction, like the prophetic visions of Charlie Brooker, may provide some inspiration and warning. But meticulous, forward-looking, and theoretically sophisticated studies—such as those informing *The Ordinal Society*—are essential. Let this one be the cornerstone of many.

Unbundling the ordinal society

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In their new book, Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy (2024) refer to the early days of the digital revolution as offering enthusiastic adopters "a box of delights." The phrase applies equally well to what *The Ordinal Society* offers to its readers: one delightful discovery after another. *The Ordinal Society* is bold in its conception, offering a probing excavation of the outlines of the social order created by new digital technologies. It is also highly original and deeply insightful, revealing the structure that underpins this new order with imaginative theorizing and rigorous argumentation. And no surprise, given these authors, the book is absolutely a joy to read, written with verve and energy and even a kind of playfulness that seems quite apropos to the book's subject matter ("one score that will bind them all … ") (p. 129).

Having indicated that this book is a must-read, I could stop here and simply send you off to lose yourself in the pages *of The Ordinal Society*. But my charge is to engage the book's arguments more substantively. This is a bit of a challenge, as I find myself almost wholly convinced by the arguments put forward here, such that any disagreements I might

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have feel trivial in light of what the book accomplishes. As such, I think what I have to offer is less on the order of disagreement and more a consideration of how the various arguments put forward here relate to one another and which of these arguments should receive the greatest emphasis in the overarching analysis of our digital society.

The book's main argument, elaborated in great detail, is straightforward. Fourcade and Healy suggest that the fundamental logic of the social order constructed by the digital revolution is *ordinal*: that is, we live in a society increasingly organized around measurement, and in particular, measurement in service of the elaboration of comparative rankings and scores constructed from the behavioral data made available by vastly enhanced computational power. In an ordinal society, we are willing or unwilling participants in the perpetual rank ordering of organizations, commodities and services, and most critically, ourselves. This "engine of social differentiation" (p. 103) reflects a relentlessly marketizing logic in two senses: first, it delivers outsize profits to organizations in a position to capitalize on the stream of data that forms the "substrate" of the ordinal society; and second, it constitutes an emergent subjectivity among individuals who are increasingly oriented to comparison and competition. Did my Duolingo lesson place me on the leaderboard? Am I ahead of my friends and family in "steps" today? How does my Google Scholar citation count compare with others? We are intimately familiar with such metrics, and largely take them for granted, but Fourcade and Healy suggest that we ought to consider the proliferation of scores as profoundly reworking how our society functions in every aspect, from the accumulation of profits, to the exercise of citizenship claims, to the construction (or deconstruction) of the self.

Of course, as Fourcade and Healy are quick to point out, there is nothing especially novel in the exercise of ordinal judgment. Ordinal systems of classification have existed at least as long as formal bureaucracies, and some of the most important ordinal technologies in insurance and credit markets were developed long before digital computing was widely available (Bouk 2015; Lauer 2017). In this sense, the digital revolution has amplified existing social practices rather than invented new ones. But we should not underestimate the importance of this process of amplification. Fourcade and Healy argue that the large amounts of data made available by digital technologies, the speed with which these data are integrated into decisions, and their circulation across organizational boundaries have resulted in a social system different *in kind* from anything that preceded it. We are living, the authors suggest, in the midst of an unprecedented social experiment, in which scores and rankings have reorganized social life in profound ways, remapped social relationships, and, most pernicious of all, drilled into our psyches. While resistance to ordinalization is possible, Fourcade and Healy suggest it is largely futile: "[The] increasing ubiquity [of ordinal regimes] across all domains of life makes a unified challenge difficult to envision, let alone organize," they write (p. 253).

Here is where I might introduce a small quibble with Fourcade and Healy's characterization of the transformations in our society brought by the digital revolution. While no one could deny that systems of scoring and ranking driven by digital technologies are increasingly prevalent in our society, the book's argument does have a somewhat totalizing feel to it, as though the "ordinal society" that Fourcade and Healy describe has fully displaced any alternative mode of social life. In particular, what has been displaced are social orders formed around what Fourcade and Healy call "nominal"—rather than ordinal—systems of judgement. Nominal classifications specify "what kind" rather than "more" or "less." They

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are oriented to "naming" rather than "ordering." As such, nominal classifications are categorical rather than gradational, although they may nevertheless indicate priority or hierarchy (Fourcade and Healy 2024: 106; cf., Schmidt 2013; Brubaker 2015: Chapter 1). In an older sociological language, nominal classifications reflect "statuses" of the kind that produce solidarity or organize exclusion—e.g., gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, etc. One reading of the argument presented here is that under the inexorable force of digital technologies, these "old" structures of social relations have given way to the logic of the score.

To be clear, it is not the case that Fourcade and Healy suggest that nominal systems of classification have been fully eclipsed by ordinal systems. As Fourcade and Healy repeatedly observe, in ordinal societies *ranking* often involves sorting into *types*, although these types no longer coincide with established social categories that have long organized access to power and resources in society. Indeed, one of the most salient features of new digital technologies is the proliferation of categories that do not map on to sociologically legible social groups and instead mark new ways of organizing social difference (which Fourcade and Healy, channeling Weber, refer to as "classification situations"). Additionally, even as categorical distinctions organized around gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and so on are occluded by new digital technologies, the data that ordinal classifications operate on nevertheless transmit these more traditional forms of social inequality, albeit in forms that are not easily recognized compared with the overt discrimination of the pre-digital world (see Poon 2012; Krippner 2017; Norris 2023). Nominal categories have not been eliminated as much as they have gone underground, hidden in the hardscapes of social life that are scoured by data sensors. Accordingly, Fourcade and Healy note that their interest is in observing "the fusion of socially fundamental processes of naming and ranking" as new digital tools become available (p. 108), operating together to reproduce (or more rarely, reorder) the patterned inequalities of social life. But if naming and ranking operate in tandem, ranking is clearly given pride of place in this account, as indicated in the book's title.

What concerns me here is the possibility that rather than fusion, there may be *friction* between these two modes of social organization, preventing scores and rankings from gaining a toehold in some domains. Take insurance pricing as a case in point. Fourcade and Healy make frequent reference to the "personalized pricing" that is well-known in insurance markets: you install a telematic device on your dashboard, and then your auto insurance company calculates a score based on your braking and cornering to determine your unique price, or so the advertisements would have you believe. Or your health insurer asks you to wear a tracking device, continuously monitoring your steps, sleep patterns, heart rate, and offering you a premium that reflects your virtue (or vice) compared with other policyholders. Notwithstanding the hype around the use of such metrics, insurance pricing remains largely organized around groups formed from categories such as gender, marital status, and age rather than from scores constructed from the unique behaviors of individuals (Krippner 2024). While insurers are certainly intrigued by the new pricing models afforded by digital technologies, they've yet to implement them fully (or in many instances, even partially), largely because it is difficult to integrate ordinal and nominal systems of classification (Meyers and Van Hoyweghen 2018; McFall 2019; Barry and Charpentier 2020; Cevolini and Esposito 2020; Jeanningros and McFall 2020; Cevolini and Esposito 2022; Francois and Voldoire 2022). While insurance may be a rather idiosyncratic case (insurers are committed to nominal categories for cultural as well as technical reasons), I discern a broader tendency here to overlook instances where the implementation of scores

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and rankings underpinned by digital tools has been limited, partial, and uneven—or has failed altogether. As such, I think we need a bit more attention to the places ordinalization doesn't—and perhaps can't—reach.

Here, as a way of thinking with Fourcade and Healy's argument, I might suggest "demoting" ordinalization from its position as the master concept characterizing the nature of the society remade by digital technologies and instead consider it simply as one (crucial) process operating in the service of this remaking. If we need a master concept in its place, I might "elevate" the imagery that Fourcade and Healy offer in their chapter describing the organization of the digital economy. In that chapter, Fourcade and Healy invoke the notion of a "great unbundling" to refer to the manner in which digital technologies allow firms to commodify data streams and trade them as new kinds of products liberated from their concrete instantiations in the physical world. As an example, firms may "unbundle" the ownership of a physical commodity from the software embedded in it, enabling a continuous extraction of data (and profit) beyond the point of sale. You purchase the vacuum cleaner, but subscribe to the service, surrendering your personal data to have access to the full functionality of the vacuum. The notion of a "great unbundling" could also apply to Fourcade and Healy's discussion of "layered financialization" in the following chapter, in which they emphasize how digital technologies render assets more abstract, hence amenable to being disaggregated and sold off in ever smaller units. "The great unbundling" describes equally well the transformation of individual subjectivities as the extraction of data from individuals effectively hollows out liberal personhood, "securitizing the soul" as Fourcade and Healy so aptly put it (p. 186). Even practices of citizenship have been unbundled with the advent of digital technologies, as broad and durable categories separating those "deserving" and "undeserving" of state support have dissolved into more fine-grained assessments of moral worth, calibrated to microscopic behavioral choices.

Thinking across these various instances, what uniquely defines digital society, whether we believe that society is primarily organized around "types" or "ranks," nominal or ordinal classifications, is the mobilization of vast quantities of personal data that overflow the organizational, institutional, and psychical structures of pre-digital society. The broad tendency produced by aggregations of data that flow outside of the bounded units of modern societies—state, market, community, person—is to break social units into smaller and smaller pieces. Granularity and "miniaturization" are the order of the day. Sometimes, this serves the purpose of ever more intensive extraction and commodification; at other times, it works to constitute novel forms of social connection in ways that might perhaps rekindle the techno-optimism of the early internet days. One need only consider the "unbundling" of gender identities enabled, at least in part, by the open architecture of the internet, as a more hopeful possibility of what the proliferating social forms of digital capitalism may produce: alongside the dark vision of the alienation of the self under the weight of the score, there is also the promise of emancipation from the oppressive social categories that governed mass society in the pre-digital era (Krippner and Hirschman 2022).

In short, I like the imagery of a "great unbundling" not only because I think it captures well the variegated landscape of digital capitalism but also because there is an appealing ambiguity here that allows room for hope alongside more familiar feelings of despair. Arguably, there is also room for ambiguity in theories of ordinal measurement, with some accounts of self-tracking technologies pitched between increased potentialities for surveillance and control and enhanced opportunities for self-knowledge (Schull 2016). But I think

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the notion of a "great unbundling" is especially amenable to such multivalent readings. "Unbundlings" involve taking things apart, but they may also involve reassembly: old structures are displaced and new structures are built.

An additional advantage of the "great unbundling" is that this metaphor does not presume that major shifts in our society and culture are fully endogenous to technology—an implication I detect more fully in the logic of the score. That is, if processes of unbundling hold the key to societies reorganized by digital technologies, these processes are not wholly dependent on these technologies. In this regard, from the perspective outlined here, the companion volume to Fourcade and Healy's *Ordinal Society* is most certainly historian Daniel Rodgers' (2011) *Age of Fracture*. Rodger's book documents the tendency toward fragmentation across social domains as varied as the state, economy, and sexuality, telling the story of the "unbundling" of these various social institutions through the lens of larger cultural shifts wrought in the wake of the Reagan revolution. Notably, Rodger's account precedes the arrival of the internet, and new computing tools do not even make an appearance in his narrative. Despite the fact that Rodgers doesn't treat digital technologies, the argument in *Age of Fracture* aligns extremely well with Fourcade and Healy's *Ordinal Society*, grasping what appear to be convergent lines of social development. The symmetry between these two accounts offers a necessary reminder that digital tools did not carve the social landscape unaided but fit in grooves already prepared by other social and cultural changes, some quite distant from digital technologies.

As we look out at the landscape of digital societies, the terrain is vast and complex, and the only thing we can say for certain is that we're going to need some good maps in orienting ourselves to this constantly evolving social system. In this regard, I'm very glad that we have the map Fourcade and Healy have provided, a briskly written masterwork of sociological analysis, which I believe will stand as the definitive treatment of the social world constructed by digital technologies at least until some different configuration emerges. Given how quickly these technologies are changing, that may not be as far in the future as we think, so I suggest you grab a copy of this terrific new book and get reading!

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Keeping score

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We are deeply grateful to Nitsan Chorev, Juan Pablo Pardo-Guerra, and Greta Krippner for their insightful and generous engagement with *The Ordinal Society*. Each of their discussions challenges us to clarify the scope and stakes of the book. They also encourage us to question whether we have gotten things right, both on matters of detail and in the broad sweep of the argument. Every author hopes for this sort of response from their critics, and it is a privilege to receive it. We appreciate that each reviewer treats the book as a serious and productive intervention in the sociology of capitalism and that they recognize both the ambition of the project and its generative potential. In what follows, we respond to the main queries about and criticism of the argument. There is a fair amount of overlap across the contributions to the symposium, so we will proceed thematically. We begin with the very idea of "the ordinal society." We then move on to some specific points of clarification and disagreement. We close by returning to some of the bigger questions raised in the critiques, especially those focused on the historical origins and likely future trajectory of the social formation we are trying to describe and understand.

The first question is whether we are justified in using the term "The Ordinal Society" at all. Perhaps it is too general, too sweeping. As Krippner puts it, "the book's argument does

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have a somewhat totalizing feel to it, as though the 'ordinal society' that Fourcade and Healy describe has fully displaced any alternative mode of social life." Pardo-Guerra also raises a similar issue when he asks, "*Where* does the Ordinal Society exist?" Chorev makes yet another related point when she asks, "What incentive exists for constructing a single, totalizing ranking?" We should say immediately that nowhere do we argue that we are headed for a world where every single person is uniquely and inescapably scored and ranked on a single, explicit scale. (We return to this point below in our discussion of eigencapital.) We do, however, think the term "ordinal society" is a meaningful and useful term that describes something real.

How do we think about the emergence and eventual dominance of the complex of information technology and social organization that we label "the ordinal society"? As our critics note more than once, we begin by emphasizing both the delightful character of much information technology and the degree to which people seized upon it of their own accord and for their own social ends. The pulse of social life is, we think, both incorrigibly plural and constantly tending to overflow whatever institutional or organizational bounds seek to contain or control it. In the early days of the web, companies found they had access to this "flood tide of sociality" (65). For the first time at this scale, modern information technology made huge new swathes of ordinary social interaction visible as real-time digital traces. Moreover, this technology was not just a means to *observe* social interaction from the outside, like a security surveillance camera. It provided a new environment in which social life could take place, generating data about it as it took place. Propelled by the Maussian bargain of free access in exchange for data, and coupled to the astonishing diffusion of the modern smartphone, this mode of social organization became all-pervasive, and in that sense "total."

As we note in the book, however,

> It is a mistake to think that just because it is pervasive, a mode of social organization is also therefore automatically "totalizing" in the sense of relentlessly subordinating every last shred of action and experience to a single template. Rather, social life tends to overflow the organizational and institutional matrix imposed on it, even when those institutions provide a powerful basis for coordination and control. People's experience does not quite fit the mold; ongoing situations are messy; circumstances require adjustment; events spin off in unexpected directions. The relevant question is, What are the criteria for legitimate action in any particular setting, what tools are at hand to engage in it, and who benefits from their use? (260)

Thus, the totalizing aspect of an ordinal society is not that it has "fully displaced any alternative mode of social life" or rendered everything everywhere the same. Nor is it that people and organizations are now everywhere scored and classified, though that is a central feature. Rather, it is that measurement and scoring has become a pervasive and often invisible infrastructure of allocation and decision-making, increasingly the first and most legitimate choice of firms, governments, civil society organizations, and individuals in many aspects of their personal lives. That is what is totalizing. It is also why, as Krippner notes, "ranking has been given pride of place" in our argument.

Now, that does not mean that everyone, everywhere, and everything is going to be looked at in the same way. Chorev describes the idea of eigencapital as a "single ranking" that wants to exist as a number everyone has. But nowhere do we assume that such a single, aggregated score is the only, nor even the most relevant, way that eigencapital manifests

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itself. Certainly, something like a credit score is a single number, and we use it frequently as an example of a technology that is used to rank and price offerings to people. But we also recognize that it is an inflexible and coarse reduction of all the ways that a person could be measured and positioned in a multidimensional digital space. Even within the narrow space of credit, there are many such "single numbers." Just as China harbors multiple social credit scoring systems, many competing credit scoring systems exist in the USA too. How these scores are interpreted socially and valued economically depends entirely on who is using them and what they are trying to achieve. So even though credit scores are unusual in that they have achieved widespread use across institutions, they do not represent a one-size-fits-all approach to how people should be ranked and evaluated.

This is why we need a flexible concept like eigencapital. Eigencapital represents a digital distillation of who you are—a data-driven *profile* that captures your standing in the metrics that technology companies and technology-reliant institutions (like banks, or insurers, or the state) care about. It reflects how algorithmic systems—from credit checks to border control to hiring platforms—may perceive and categorize you based on your digital footprint. We call it "capital" because authenticated, measured data about oneself operates, indeed, as a kind of resource: it determines how easily you can access services, opportunities, and favorable treatment from the automated gatekeepers that govern our lives. But in the same way that a single diploma is a poor representation of the idea of cultural capital, a single credit score is a poor representation of the idea of eigencapital (even though it is a *part* of it).

Chorev is absolutely right, however, to point out the convertibility, "in real life" of different kinds of capital — for example, with respect to influence online and the possibility of cashing that out into something more tangible. Again, the interesting issue here is not that there is only a single score rather than different measures across different settings or markets. What is especially intriguing with respect to the question of convertibility is the way that indicators of, e.g., influence will, in fact, now be *metrics*. That is, they will be numbers generated from within the social field and used by and upon the people actually doing things inside it. This has historically not been true of most of the other forms of capital identified in the Bourdieuian tradition. Their value has been ascribed or inferred from the outside, by social scientists, and attempts to turn them into measures (like diploma level, or network ties) have been resisted by those who theorize that, for instance, cultural or social capital is built over the longue durée of a person's life. But eigencapital is different. By nature, it is already quantified outright. That makes it more immediately convertible, particularly into another measured quantity—money. Therefore, the questions that arise about the *de facto* convertibility of such numbers by participants and brokers in such fields are tantalizing, akin to a move from the imputation of shadow prices to the analysis of exchange rates.

Our discussion of a "totalizing" perspective has thus far been, as it were, "vertically" oriented, from the overarching social system down to the individual. Pardo-Guerra raises a number of important "horizontal," comparative questions about the scope of the book's argument. He notes both international and intra-national variations in the scope and extent of ordinalization. We agree with the core point he makes about the need to understand variability. While within the scope of a single book, we could not address these questions with anything like the attention they deserve, the two main examples we discuss—the USA and China—are very different polities. "Different countries," Pardo-Guerra suggests, "may

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have different dispositions towards ordinalization, making the role of certain everyday technologies of ranking and classification either more or less pervasive." We agree. It's certainly the case that, in lower- or middle-income countries, commercial targeting through advertising is much less likely to be as pervasive or focused as in the USA. But, as Pardo-Guerra notes, the diffusion of the smartphone is a global phenomenon. This opens up non-market routes for ordinalizing processes, notably in the sphere of politics. Relatedly, we also see many countries in the global South leapfrogging traditional institutions to deliver services and benefits by way of ordinal and direct payment systems. As for the other interesting, variation-focused questions Pardo-Guerra raises—about the relative exposure of various demographic and sub-national groups to aspects of digital capitalism—we can only agree that these are indeed important empirical questions to which we would not try to give confident answers *ex ante*. But what we *can* say is that their higher reliance on public benefits has made the poor, *generally speaking*, more vulnerable to intrusive and punitive forms of data surveillance and social sorting by the state. The same is true of Black people within the penal system (Eubanks 2017; Browne 2015). The most privileged are also subject to specific forms of algorithmic ordinalization, of course, but these tend to have a different flavor. One recent example comes from the world of higher education. In spring 2025, eight top colleges in the USA announced that they would start screening student applications for evidence of civility in peer-scored debates on controversial topics, using online portfolios from the peer-tutoring platform Schoolhouse.world (Sparks 2025).

Pardo-Guerra's discussion also touches on wider issues about the role of expertise and the possibility of alternative paths based on the technologies that gave us the ordinal society. Similarly, Chorev offers a pointed interrogation about the decline of expert authority, in the context of the rise of what we call "the searching disposition": "This leads me to ask what I perhaps should not: is it possible that the loss of monopolization on expertise is somewhat justified because those claiming to hold truth are victims of the same system?" This is to say that all the good data is in private hands now, so is it any surprise that former experts are in some ways reduced to the same condition as anyone else? We do not have a simple answer to this question. In the social sciences, at least, the past decade has seen the simultaneous rise in attention to questions of reproducibility and open science, on the one hand, with a remarkable rise in the volume of rich but completely private data, on the other. A few lucky or perhaps well-connected researchers may get glimpses of these private troves, but most do not. As Pardo-Guerra asks, both with respect to the unravelling of expert authority and the rise of the ordinal society in general, was this inevitable?

Of course, the answer is no. Things could have been different and might be again. In our account, the key moment in the development of the modern web was the move to advertising as the primary basis for revenue generation. Once that happened, the template for the modern software-as-service company was established, and venture capital provided the means to offer people the Maussian bargain we describe in the book. Things were not fated to turn out like this, but that is what happened. It is a testament to how dominant this model has become that it is now, at least in the USA, very difficult for people to even imagine alternatives. In particular, the possibility of any kind of public provision of many of these services (e.g., search, LLMs) seems simply inconceivable today, at least among policymakers, despite the fundamental role the state and other publicly funded entities played in inventing the infrastructure that underpins the entire enterprise. Governments have also

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had limited success in curbing the tech companies' extraordinary power through antitrust enforcement or regulation.

Finally, Krippner raises related questions of possibility and foregone opportunities. She focuses on the possible tension between nominal, unordered categorizations of people and ordinal, or ranked classifications, using the case of insurance pricing. She argues—and has made the case in much greater detail elsewhere—that "insurance pricing remains largely organized around groups formed from categories such as gender, marital status, and age rather than from scores constructed from the unique behaviors of individuals," and she worries that we exhibit "a broader tendency here to overlook instances where the implementation of scores and rankings underpinned by digital tools has been limited, partial, and uneven—or has failed altogether." She suggests we should pay more attention to the idea of "unbundling" that we discuss in the book, which might lead us to think of society as a mosaic of granular and fundamentally unordered categories. This, in her view, is not just more empirically satisfying but also carries with it more room for possibility and the emergence of new categories:

> One need only consider the "unbundling" of gender identities enabled, at least in part, by the open architecture of the internet, as a more hopeful possibility of what the proliferating social forms of digital capitalism may produce: alongside the dark vision of the alienation of the self under the weight of the score, there is also the promise of emancipation from the oppressive social categories that governed mass society in the pre-digital era.

There is a lot to be said for this argument, but we think it misses two fundamental points. First, our view is not that nominal classifications have been displaced or overridden by ordinal ones. It is that *nominal judgments about the categories people belong in are being made by way of ordinal technologies*. This, by the way, is not new and not specific to the digital era. Throughout history, continuous scoring systems have often created nominal classifications by setting thresholds—think of the "gifted" category in IQ tests or Alfred Kinsey's sexuality scale (Fourcade 2016). But it is also true that digitization has dramatically amplified the power of ordinal methods to define categories and fit people within them. Today, whether someone fits into a traditionally "big" category (male/female, ethnicity, age group) may be predicted from data, rather than from self-identification or casual observation. Similarly, the pattern detection capabilities of modern statistical methods have generated new classification systems that cut across traditional boundaries in unexpected ways. These capabilities can indeed be tremendously liberating, as Krippner suggests. Or they can be terribly constraining—imagine being labeled an undesirable immigrant because an algorithm sifting through your social media and communication patterns decides you pose a security risk. In other words, whether the categorical outcome is emancipatory or oppressive does not flow from the technology being a scoring technology. It depends on how the algorithm has been designed and trained and on the purposes of those who deploy it in the wild. Those are all empirical questions that must be studied on their own terms, situationally.

The case of insurance is a little tricky because of the existing legal provisions that allow insurers to remain with the status classifications that they have long based their pricing on. This means the incentive to move to behavioral measures and rankings has not been quite as strong in these markets. (That said, the industry is catching up fast, see, e.g., Barry 2024.) But more importantly, there is no fundamental difference between a set of categories

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with different prices attached (e.g., based on that group's risk of an accident) and a set of individual scores attached to demographic or behavioral features. They are two sides of the same coin. (We discuss this in more depth, in dialog with Krippner and Hirschman [2022, 2025], in Fourcade and Healy, forthcoming.) Thus, the question is not simply which aspect of this process we choose to focus on or emphasize. The complex of technical and social forces that we want to understand is not just about fragmentation or unbundling, even though that is one of its features and pre-conditions. The hierarchical aspect of these processes is built-in: they fragment as a precursor to ranking, they include as a prelude to stacking.

All societies have distinctive ways of sorting subjects into positions and categories. In the ordinal society, both are about keeping score.

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