Foucault Studies

BOOK REVIEW

Colin Koopman, *How We Became Our Data: A Genealogy of the Informational Person*, Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2019. pp. 269. ISBN: 978-0-226-62661-1.

Everybody knows that Big Data has become a significant political issue, but few of us would be able to make sense of the claim that data is *inherently* political. If data is political, one would assume this has more to do with what certain actors – governments, corporations and hackers – are now able to do with data than the actual data itself. In *How We Became Our Data: A Genealogy of the Informational Person*, Colin Koopman argues that data is not only inherently political, but that there is a profound sense in which our subjectivity has been reshaped by data. In fact, he claims that we have *become* our data.

This claim is supported by two 'corollary' arguments (11). The first argument is that there is a distinctive form of power 'that organizes a politics of informational persons' (10). According to Koopman, this 'infopower' is a distinct modality of power that is exercised through the work of 'formatting' – the various techniques that 'shape, constrain, and prepare whatever is collected, stored, processed, refined, retrieved, and redistributed as information' (12). For Koopman, the 'paradigmatic instantiation' of formatting is the checkbox-and-blank form, as it is 'among the most ubiquitous of shapes into which we regularly squeeze ourselves' (12). Such an act of formatting serves to 'fasten' subjects to their data – that is to say, that acts of formatting bound subjects to their data in a way that changes what it is possible for them to be or to do (12). For Koopman, 'fastening' is an operation of power that serves both to 'tie us down' and 'speed us up' (12). He allows both meanings to accrue throughout the book, and it becomes clear that each effect serves to intensify the other. The more tightly we are bound to our data, the more quickly data can multiply, and the more easily we are able to move through the rapidly expanding infrastructure created by information. In this way, to be an informational person is to be 'inscribed, processed, and reproduced' as a subject of data – a form of subjectivity that is enabled by techniques of formatting and constituted through operations of fastening (4).

To support this first argument, Koopman claims that the unique character of infopower is tied to a very specific historical moment, and that its status as a distinct analytic of power can only be revealed through a genealogy of the informational person (11). Consequently, the first part of the book is dedicated to showing how infopower emerged as a historically specific phenomenon. Koopman's genealogy begins in the early decades of the twentieth century, a moment when 'information began to precede the person' and it became 'possible for information to draw up persons as if out of nowhere' (6). It is the

moment just before information became a 'universal' feature of our lives – something that is 'increasingly behind, underneath, and within all that we dream to do and all that we do in fact do' (10). Indeed, the main purpose of his genealogy is to show how information came to function as a 'historical universal' in our society and culture (10).

The genealogy traces out three different 'histories of information' that are characteristic of this period. Each of these histories is concerned with new forms of identity that together comprise the informational person: documentary identity, psychological identity and racial identity. Through each of these histories, Koopman shows how information is political at the level of formatting and design, despite being presented as a technical achievement devoid of prejudice or evaluative judgment.

Koopman's discussion of documentary identity focuses on the successful attempt in the United States to make birth registration universal (35 – 65). This project was initiated in 1903 by the Census Bureau and was completed around 1935 with the help of the Children's Bureau and the American Child Health Association (58). He identifies three explicit motivations for this undertaking: the desire to track the movement of individuals, to manage public health more effectively, and to protect the legal rights of individuals and the community (41). As Koopman concedes, this set of concerns might seem to lend itself to an analysis in terms of either biopower or sovereign power (42). Whilst these forms of power are certainly in operation here, Koopman insists that infopower is also working as a distinct 'layer' of power that served to format persons and enable their participation in an emerging informational infrastructure (42). The birth certificate is the first document that fastened the informational person to the 'specific data points around which their subsequent life could be accumulated' (44). Whilst certain 'data points' like 'ascribed race' are more obviously implicated in 'enduring oppressions', birth certificates serve a more general function in fastening us to the assemblage of data that allows us to move through the world – our social security numbers, passports, driver's licenses, bank accounts and university transcripts (44, ix). Therefore, the birth certificate serves as the cornerstone of our dependency on data, allowing human life to be interpolated within the ever-expanding matrix of information.

Koopman's analysis of psychological identity is based on an inquiry into the 'informatics of psychological traits' that stabilized between 1917 and 1937 (66 – 107). Koopman traces the emergence of 'personality' as a concept in French 'abnormal psychology' during the nineteenth century through to its introduction into American psychology by William James, before detailing how the desire to 'objectively' measure personality traits entrenched the notion of personality we are familiar with today (88). In fact, Koopman maintains there is a sense in which we didn't have 'personalities' until we became our data (166 – 167). On his reading, there was no way to understand ourselves in terms like 'extroversion' or 'introversion' prior to the consolidation of these categories on the basis of empirical results obtained through personality tests (107). In this way, the very terms in which we today think about ourselves and others were established by the specific project of formatting human psychology.

Finally, Koopman's account of racial identity focuses on the emergence of 'redlining' in the 1920s and 30s – the practice of 'denying home loan applications based on the racial characteristics of a property's neighborhood' (108). By presenting race as an informational input that was ostensibly neutral, the Federal Housing Administration was able to entrench a new form of systemic oppression by claiming to adhere to objective standards of valuation. This practice was made possible by the real estate industry's decision to include the racial composition of neighborhoods on their appraisal forms (140 – 141). Once this input became part of their standardized method of valuation, it became difficult to see that the formatting of race was not merely a technical requirement, but a political choice.

Koopman's treatment of the early twentieth century doesn't claim to be exhaustive, but it does seek to highlight three important ways in which our subjectivity continues to be shaped by these moments of 'stabilization' (177). In this respect, Koopman's discussion of 'redlining' is especially interesting. He argues that the practice was facilitated by an 'informatics of race' that 'reformatted long-standing racial differences as distinctions in data' and installed a unique form of 'technological racism' (110, 113). For Koopman, this sort of racial data is 'doubly political' – that is to say, there is a political dimension to racial data that exceeds the way in which race is 'ineluctably political' to begin with (114). With this in mind, Koopman argues that 'racial identity has been made to depend at least in part on data' in a way that is distinct from more easily recognizable forms of racialization (11). This specific act of formatting enabled the possibility of a data analytics that 'can simply (and accurately) infer a person's race' (165). Whereas racialization previously revolved around the 'visibility of race', the technique of formatting 'coded histories of phenotypical difference into differential data categories' and in the process facilitated new forms of discrimination like redlining (145, 165).

The second part of the book draws on these historical insights to bolster his overall account of infopolitics. In addition to fleshing out concepts like 'formatting' and 'fastening', Koopman defends the idea that infopower should be classified as a distinct analytic of power. Whilst there is an obvious temptation to think the politics of information in terms of disciplinary power or biopower, Koopman insists that 'contemporary informational assemblies exhibit a modality of power' that needs to be understood on its own terms (14). A great deal of chapter four is dedicated to distinguishing infopower not only from Foucault's own analytics of power (disciplinary, sovereign, bio-) but also 'other powers of data' such as Deleuze's 'control power' and Harcourt's 'expository power' (161 – 167). In short, Koopman's argument relies on the suggestion that formatting is a specific 'technique' of power that is exercised through the 'operation' of fastening. Whilst this process is clearly related to other modalities of power, he maintains that this specific technique and operation belong to a 'layer' of power that is irreducible to any other layer (42).

Against competing theories of power in media studies, Koopman argues that we must resist the pervasive 'avant-gardism' that treats our current politics of data as emerging only with the advent of new media (169). According to Koopman, this misconception is based on a failure 'to confront the scale at which we have been invested by information

for more than a century' (169). In reality, the basic dynamics of infopower were established long before concerns were raised about social media and state surveillance (169).

Whilst Koopman's overall account of infopolitics is compelling, his claim that we are living under a 'data episteme' is more controversial (160). According to Koopman, this data episteme has transformed information into a 'formidable mode of rationality by which entire domains of knowledge are made possible' (160). On this view, we are beholden to an 'epistemology' that treats information as 'a sufficient premise for other information' and under which 'the need for more and more data is the spawn of data itself' (160). It's plausible to say that infopower is characterized by a distinctive mode of rationality that grants an unwieldly epistemic authority to information. However, Koopman doesn't offer us much reason to think that our *episteme* has been transformed – at least, not in the sense that Foucault uses the term. For Foucault, the *episteme* is not merely the way knowledge is circulating and being produced, but refers to the historical conditions of possibility that determine the intelligibility of statements as truth claims.[1] It is one thing to say that data is shaping the production of knowledge, and quite another to say it has altered the *episteme* itself. Koopman's claim seems especially contentious when we consider Foucault's insistence that

> In any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one *episteme* that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice.[2]

If there really is a new *episteme* that has emerged through our informational practices, this would constitute a significant transformation of the conditions of possibility that defined knowledge in the modern *episteme*. It appears unlikely that Koopman would want to make such a strong claim and, consequently, one suspects he is using the term rather loosely. However, this makes it difficult to determine the precise extent to which he thinks knowledge has been transformed by data. In any case, it would be interesting to see him develop this concept in more detail.

The book's final chapter focuses on the deficiencies of both 'information theory' and 'communicative theories' of democracy in understanding the politics of data (173 – 195).

Koopman argues that the tradition of information theory inaugurated by Shannon and Wiener 'was in actuality a theory of communication that simply assumed information as its given starting point' (181). This leads Koopman to declare that 'information theory is really communication theory' and that it desperately needs to attend to the history of information if it wants to provide a satisfying account of the relationship between information and politics (181, 184). Similarly, he argues that the theories of democracy put forward by Habermas and Dewey 'presuppose' information as the basis of communication and are therefore unable confront 'the functional role' that information plays within a modern democratic society (181).

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[1] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, (2002), 211 – 212.

[2] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, (1973), 168.

At the end of the book, Koopman briefly considers what it would mean 'to mount resistance to a politics of information' (193). He argues that meaningful resistance will require attention to information as a political problem in its own right. Whilst he doesn't offer many concrete suggestions for how this resistance might be carried out, he argues that it will involve reformatting the data and redesigning the technologies that constitute us as informational persons (194). This, in turn, will require us to investigate how these 'forms and formats' have developed historically in order to diagnose their contingent features and flaws (195). Therefore, his hope is that the kind of historical work he does in this book will serve as a starting point for 'a resistance of occupation, contestation, and transformation' (193).

Koopman's book represents an early confrontation with a new frontier of power – although, as he would insist, one that is much older than most of us would have imagined. Rigorous, well-argued and incisive, *How We Became Our Data* should be considered essential reading for anyone interested in media studies or the politics of data. It also serves as an impressive model for how we can use genealogy to uncover new modalities of power and, in doing so, avoid the trap of just regurgitating Foucault's insights, paying lip service to his methods and appropriating history to reinforce our existing beliefs.

References

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