

THE EMERGING SOCIAL ORDER OF DATA COLONIALISM: WHY CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY STILL MATTERS!

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Editor's note

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In April 2019, we had the honor to host him as a speaker for the lecture entitled “The Emerging Social Order of Data Colonialism: Why Critical Social Theory Still Matters!” The article below is the paper he delivered for the lecture. He has given permission to print it in KCR. We would like to express our gratitude to him.

Shuzo Yamakoshi
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Honor to be invited to Japan and to Keio University. Want to thank my friend Professor Shuzo Yamakoshi for his great hospitality and for his wonderful work with colleagues in translating my book *Media Society World*.

I am a social theorist interested in media, and so I want to use this lecture to reflect on the *purpose* of social theory, and on whether the intensification of media's presence in the social world now makes social theory unnecessary – or possibly even

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more necessary? And if still necessary, *what sort* of social theory do we need?

A core principle of social theory is that human beings, in some sense, construct their reality, through their interactions they *make* their reality social. But there are many who ask today: *Do* human beings still *construct* their social reality? One reason they ask is because of concerns today that *human life itself* is being *re-engineered* not by humans directly, but through data, artificial intelligence, machine learning (Frischmann and Selinger, *Reengineering Humanity* 2018). This specific concern about human beings' relations to artificial intelligence builds on earlier concerns that the design of IT systems *conflicts* with human values (Mansell, *Imagining the Internet* 2012). What if the values embedded in, and driving, IT and computing systems are increasingly *diverging* from human values? Some designers even argue that they *must* diverge, because if human beings interfere in complex computing systems, they would damage them. Mansell calls this 'the problem of complexity'.

But if technological systems are too complex for members of society to intervene in, there is a problem *for society* and also for social theory. Surely we *need* social theory that can ask questions of huge information systems. So this is the key question today: Can the right sort of social theory – a *critical* social theory for the digital age – be developed, a theory that can contribute perhaps to solving the problem of complexity by giving human beings a new perspective on what is changing and how? I believe a new social theory *can* be developed, and that has been the focus of my work over the past 8 years, as I hope to explain in this lecture.

My lecture will be in two parts. In the first part, I will survey the current state of social theory, and offer some suggestions for reviving social theory by drawing, in particular, on the work of German sociologist Norbert Elias, and on the concept of social *order*. In the second part, I will apply those ideas to the challenge of understanding what is going on with *data* today. Let's start with some history.

Can critical social theory help address this problem?

For a long time, social theory seemed to pay no attention to media. So if we look at two classic texts for theorizing how societies hold together – Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) and Anthony Giddens' *The Constitution of Society* (1984) – we find that they make little mention of media. Berger and Luckmann mention television only as providing a window onto a distant world, for example, pictures of the surface of the moon. While Giddens says a little about talk on radio. But none of these authors take media seriously as part of the *order* of modern societies. And of course none discuss data. In other words, neither of these classic texts considers media and data as part of how the social world is constructed.

In my own work, I have tried to correct for this: *Media Society World* (2012,

2018 in Japanese edition, which I am in Japan to celebrate today) and most recently in my book with Andreas Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality* (2017). Both these books are an attempt to grasp the problem of complexity from the perspective of social theory.

The problem of complexity

In the 1950s, the work of social theory was to map how societies hold together by finding connections between social values and the social institutions which humans build *on the basis of* those values. That was a functionalist model of how societies hold together *as societies*. But such models do not help us today: when we think about how contemporary societies hold together, we think of our global infrastructures of connection (the internet + economic and social processes built around it: we think of what one US writer has called ‘the stack’, Bratton 2016), and the first thing we think of in relation to those infrastructures is complexity. They are vast, they operate on many levels, in highly technical ways, far beyond the ability of most people to understand, or even describe. That creates a risk for social science – its most advanced work will concentrate simply on *describing that infrastructure* (the apps, the platforms, the software, the hardware, the cloud that stores it all). Social science, and particularly communications research, is perhaps, as American journalism scholar Rod Benson put it, going through a ‘new descriptivist era’.

But description is not criticism, it is not evaluation. So we must do better than that. But what theoretical concepts can help us towards more critical analysis? We could think of *Power* – and attempt to understand the power of platforms, their relation to economic power, and their relation to state power. That is important, but it is very hard to understand contemporary change just by studying business models and platform design, since that does not tell us how what platforms do connect with the role that we, as human beings, play in the organization of everyday life. Or we could think of *Identity*, our projects as individuals to make sense of the world, to find agency. But this is not enough, unless we also understand how individuals’ *possibilities for action* are today being shaped by the landscapes that digital platforms are building. We need concepts that help us grasp the *relation* between large-scale power and the lives of individuals. The founders of the internet said that this relation would be one of *freedom*, that the internet would *empower* individuals. But today that feels too simple.

What is the relation today between our senses of identity and large-scale power? This is confused, or at least very complex, as a recent survey reported in the Wall Street Journal brings out which showed that almost 75% of people do *not* accept that to use the services of the internet, they should be required to give up detailed data about their online behaviour. And yet that is the deal which internet businesses very often say we must accept, because that is how the internet works.

And just a few days before the Wall Street Journal reported a survey by marketers Gartner, which shows that 52% of people in the US and UK did not want their faces analysed by Artificial Intelligence (although much marketing is now investing in interpreting emotions). And 63% did not want artificial intelligence to be used to listen to them, and yet digital personal assistants like Amazon's Alexa or Gatebox's Hikari do just that. Right now, the relations between power and identity in everyday life are deeply confusing.

Perhaps then we need a different type of concept. A concept that thinks about complexity in a different way. And one way to find this is to return to the work of a social theorist who has been neglected in recent years in the UK and the US (though not in some countries): the German sociologist Norbert Elias (1978, 1994). Elias was deeply opposed to the functionalist models of society and social order that were developed in the US by Talcott Parsons. Elias was interested instead in *human relations*, and in particular the *relations of interdependence* between people and institutions that become ever more important as societies grow more complex. For Elias, instead of thinking about power as something outside and above relationships, he wrote that 'power is an attribute of relationships' (1978: 116). Which means that any *order* that does emerge in society emerges *through* relationships, *through* how relationships are organized. Elias applied this approach to many historical aspects and phases of society from sport to the medieval system of European government, to the life of royal courtiers serving the French or British king. Elias's key concept for thinking about social order and social complexity was the concept of *figuration*.

I will come shortly to why the concept of figuration was so original and why today it is so important to understanding contemporary societies, but let me start by explaining what it means! Here I am drawing on my book with Andreas Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality*.

To give you a sense of what is special about this concept, let me contrast it with two other concepts which are much used today in social theory, *network* and *assemblage*. These concepts all have different strengths. Turning, to figurations specifically, we can see plenty of examples of figurations today in the digital world. A figuration could be, for example, a chain of exchanging photos on Flickr or Pinterest, a debate thread on Twitter, or a set of messages on Instagram. But let's consider the differences between these concepts too. Figurations are interesting not only because (like assemblages) they contain many varied elements, not only because (like networks) they are composed of many links between elements. Figurations also tell us why these links matter *for human beings*: they tell us about the relations of interdependence and the tensions that emerge from those links, and from the connections to other figurations.

Let's look a little more at how Elias *explained* the concept of figuration. At its most basic, a figuration for Elias is a 'model of processes of interweaving' (Elias, 1978, p. 130), such as a game of football or cards: the people involved form a

figuration as their interactions are oriented to each other in playing the game. The game is the 'outcome' of all the interdependent practices of the individuals involved and their process of playing, it is the outcome of the *network* that is constituted by the figuration. But it is 'more' than just the linking of those individuals, it is more than just the network.

A *figurational* approach means considering the power-relations and the roles that the members of a figuration play, and the meanings that are produced through those power-relations.

If it seems surprising to return today to a concept (figurations) developed 40 years ago, remember that Elias introduced his concept of figuration to *change completely* the social sciences' ways of speaking and thinking. Sociology's older language, Elias said, explained social order in terms of *things* (such as 'norms and values', 'structure', 'society', the 'individual' (Elias, 1978, p. 113)) rather than in terms of processes. But the figuration concept enables us, Elias argues, to grasp 'the *special kind* of order associated with processes of *social interweaving*', which means 'start[ing] [...] from the connections, the relationships, and work[ing] [...] out from there to the elements involved in them' (1978, p. 116, added emphasis), and to the order that they make.

Elias wrote that 'the behaviour of many separate people *intermeshes* to form interwoven structures' (1978, p. 132, added emphasis). The term 'intermeshing' means that as in a wire fence each person is pulling on everyone else, trying to get what *they* want, and through this a structure is created.

But if we want to use the concept of 'figuration' to understand large societies, we need to go one step further, and extend it to higher levels of complexity. We can do this through the idea of 'figurations *of* figurations.' In this way, through the concept of figuration, we can build up an account of how very high degrees of social complexity are sustained, through many relations of interdependency and across multiple levels . . . What matters most are the tensions that result from the force that one figuration exercises on another, as within a larger pattern like in a fence. So we can understand Facebook as a very complicated *figuration of figurations*, full of competing networks and their forces, a figuration of figurations where wider tensions emerge from the overall balance of interdependencies in which Facebook the corporation is involved (economic forces, commercial forces, political, social).

Advantages of Elias's approach to social order

So, let me summarise, the advantages of Elias's approach to social order. First that it takes account of technological complexity – the many levels of pressure and interdependence that make up a social order, including today's social orders which result from our dependence on large-scale systems of connection and information flow based on computers. The second advantage is that the concept of figuration

takes seriously the position of *human beings* in this order, it foregrounds the perspective of human beings *entangled* in this complexity, the questions of *meaning* that arise for human beings as they try to live their lives within this order. So Elias grasps that the social world is always *both* full of meaning *and* built like an environment, so it is double in nature (as American social theorist William Sewell (2005) once put it).

Elias' approach therefore solves the problem that I earlier called descriptivism, the problem of focussing only on the technical infrastructure, and ignoring the human beings entangled within it. Even more remarkable, Elias *anticipated* 40 years ago our contemporary problem of descriptivism, when towards the end of his last book he reflected on the ethics of social research: 'If no consideration is given to *what happens to people* in the course of social change – changes in figurations composed of people – then any scientific effort might as well be spared.' (Elias, *What is Sociology?* 1978: 172, added emphasis)

And yet that does not mean Elias is naïve about the complexity of the modern world. Instead, he acknowledges the *force* of the interdependencies that emerge in complex societies, eg today through our relations with digital platforms. Which takes us to the challenge I want to consider in the second part of my lecture: how can we use social theory to think about our relations *to data* in society, a problem, for sure, that Elias could not have anticipated!!

New question

This is becoming one of the most controversial issues in the social sciences today: how to interpret the social consequences of our relations to data, to Big Data, artificial intelligence and machine learning? In other words, what is going on with data today – from the perspective of social order and human beings? Answering this question requires a further step in critical theory that can address the following features of our digital world:

- Increasing *dependence* by human beings on the social infrastructure that digital platforms provide
- Increasing *intersection* of social processes with economic processes, when places where we hang out socially are sold as businesses . . .
- New forms of *corporate power* (platforms) in new relations to state power (governments)
- The *extraction* of economic value from human life through data relations, involving . . .
- Continuous *surveillance and influencing* of human life by corporations so as to produce more data

We talk about Big Data, but data is not just big in terms of volume; data is 'big' because something is happening through data *that is transforming society*. And *that*

is why we need a new approach in critical social theory that addresses this. In the second part of my lecture, I want to draw on my forthcoming book with the Mexican/US scholar Ulises Mejias called *The Costs of Connection* which attempts to provide this new theoretical approach.

Our new book's main point is that what's happening today in digital societies, where data harvesting seems such a natural, such a basic, feature of everyday life is *not just*, as many writers have claimed, a development of *capitalism*, or even a new phase of *capitalism*. It is something *even bigger*: a genuinely new phase of *colonialism* that will, in time, provide the fuel for a later stage of capitalism, whose full shape we cannot predict yet. This is what we start to see if we shift the time-scale from the past 30-40 years when, for sure, capitalism has become embedded into ever more sectors of daily life, to the past 500 years, over which the relations of capitalism to *colonialism* have played out.

This means thinking about colonialism, not so much in terms of its terrible violence, but in terms of its fundamental historical function: I mean the appropriation of *resources* on a vast scale. In 1500 and for the next 500 years it was *territory* that was appropriated, it was the resources of the *land*, and of course the *bodies*, for a long time those of slaves, needed to extract value from those resources. Today the resource being appropriated by a *new* colonialism is *us: human life* in all its depth and variety, extracted as value through the medium of data. This possibility, that we are entering a genuinely new phase of colonialism where *human beings* are the target, is the bad news. But there's also some good news: first, that this cycle of colonialism is only just starting (by 'just' I mean in the past 20 years); second, that today we have a memory of what historic colonialism did and how over centuries it fuelled industrial capitalism, and in today's debates we should listen to those whose memory of colonialism's impact is sharper than ours. And third, we certainly know, all of us, what capitalism is, having lived much or all of our lives under it. The initial victims of historic colonialism did not have those last two advantages.

Data's present seen through a colonial lens

To give you a sense of what we might gain by interpreting what's happening with data on this longer time-scale, let's think back to last year and a key moment in our realization that something big is going on with data. I mean the Facebook/Cambridge Analytica scandal which broke in mid-March 2018. This scandal prompted many to check what data was being routinely collected about them via platforms such as Facebook, via search engines such as Google, and via the many apps that link to Facebook. Many were shocked, though many already had some understanding of this. As the scandal grew, Christopher Wylie, a former employee of Cambridge Analytica, commented on Twitter on Cambridge Analytica's plans for expanding its operations to India: 'this is what modern colonialism looks like', he

wrote.

But, you might say, that's too easy a comparison to make! Yes, the legacy of older colonialism lives on in the geography of global capitalism, in the dominant power to this day of American culture, in the racial divides in the US, Brazil, and many other countries. Almost *every* form of power imbalance today can, in some way, be related back to the legacy of *historic* colonialism. And the sort of power that Facebook has sought to exercise, for example, in Africa through its Facebook Free Basics platform is *surely* best understood as a neo-colonial move, benefiting from the historic imbalance between the African and American economies. Surely, you might say, that doesn't mean what is going on with data today is a *new type* of colonialism.

And you would be right. It *is* too easy to use the word 'colonialism' as a metaphor. But Ulises and I, when we talk about data colonialism, do not mean it as a metaphor. We are claiming instead that what is going on with data today represents potentially *as* far-reaching an appropriation of resources as the conquest of gold and land in historic colonialism, a capture of digital territory that is likely to have as huge implications as historic colonialism did – a new colonial *reality*, not a metaphor, of which we must become aware.

Think of the Terms of Service to which we sign up every time we install an app, every time we join a platform. In normal times, no one reads them. We just click 'accept', because we want to get on and use the app or the platform. Sometimes, we are under pressure to do this: perhaps our employer encourages us to use a Fitbit or Apple Watch to monitor our health (which requires us to accept *that device's* terms and conditions, whether we like them or not). Or we may be required to accept terms and conditions of data extraction by an insurer or by the supplier of a 'smart' appliance in our home (such as a fridge), assuming we *want* the insurance or the appliance to work for us. But by that act of acceptance (actual or implied), we enter into a whole set of 'data relations' that unfold in ways we only very partly understand. These data relations are an important contemporary example of 'figurations', the concept that I introduced earlier from Elias.

Social theory (and particularly the concept of figuration) may help us understand the *consequences* of entering into data relations, yet it is not enough to explain *why* we enter into these relations. This is where the historical perspective of *colonialism* is important. Let's think back to a document used in the early days of the Spanish conquest of Latin America, called the *requerimiento* or demand. Almost exactly 500 years ago (the document was drafted in 1513 at the Spanish court), conquistadors would ride on horse to one or two miles outside a village whose gold they wanted, and read out this document in the middle of the night, in Spanish (a language they knew the locals did not understand). Here is a little of it: "if you do not [submit], I certify to you that, with the help of God, we shall powerfully enter into your country, and shall make war against you in all ways and manners that we

can, and shall subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church and of their Highnesses; . . . we shall take away your goods, and shall do you all the mischief and damage that we can. . .”. The next morning, having read this, they would ride into the village and take the gold they wanted, using whatever violence they needed to do so.

You’ll notice, immediately, a difference from our relation to apps and data today. Today we really do click accept, and so no violence is needed to take our “gold”, as we use the platform or app whose terms are presented to us. I’ll come back to why in a moment, but first let’s recall the key features of historic colonialism and try to map them, more precisely, onto data colonialism today. The fundamental moves and historic function of original colonialism can be understood in terms of four levels: the appropriation of resources, the creation of new social relations to stabilise that appropriation, the extreme concentration of wealth that flowed from that appropriation, and finally the ideologies that were used to tell a different story of what was going on, most notoriously, the ideology of ‘civilization’.

We see these same four levels at work in data colonialism. First, there is the appropriation of resources: human life itself, human experience and action, become a direct input to capital (this is often told to us as cliché, the idea that data is just human “exhaust”, something that is just there to be taken, which forgets the mechanisms needed to gather, format, extract, and process this supposedly “natural” resource). Second, social relations are being colonized by data processes, as social relations increasingly take the form of “data relations” that maximize data extraction for economic value. Developing Karl Marx, we suggest in our book that these new data relations will, in time, become as important for the sustaining of capitalism as ‘labor relations’. Third, the economic value that’s extracted is hugely concentrated in the vast wealth of new colonial corporations, what Ulises and I call “the social quantification sector” (Facebook, Google, and so on). And finally there are new colonial ideologies that seek to disguise what is going on: not the idea of ‘civilization’ yet exactly, but the idea that we must always stay connected, that everything must be put into data form (datafication), so that we can get more *personalized* messages and products, and finally the idea that all of this, including the tracking, is somehow *inevitable*, a way to advance the future of humanity, and even a necessary step towards humanity’s greater self-knowledge.

So we can see all four dimensions of historic colonialism at work in our life with data today, but there is one crucial difference. Unlike in 1500, when colonialism emerged *without* the background of two or three centuries of capitalism, today’s new colonialism builds *on top of* the already existing social order of capitalism. That is why data colonialism does *not* generally need violence to be effective. Data colonialism can instead rely on key changes being introduced today to *industrial capitalism’s* social order. Until recently, that was based on labour relations (the work contract), and our deep relations to commodities which make our labour relations

seem natural. But Marx's theory of capitalism *as a social order* allowed the possibility, that capitalism might *at some time in the future* be built on *other* forms of abstraction than labour relations. Perhaps the same *data* relations that, as I just explained, we already enter into, every day of our lives.

So the most important thing going on with data today is so big that it is invisible, *unless* we look at it from the perspective of social theory. At the heart of data colonialism is a new corporate strategy, a new commercial dream of

- *annexing* to capital every point in space and time
- *reproducing* social relations on digital platforms and elsewhere so that this annexation to capital seems natural, inevitable, and
- through this, *building* a social order that capitalizes human life without limit.

Data colonialism – the new order of social life in the digital age – means the annexation of human life – our lives – to the forces of capital, a capture of resources with only one precedent in human history, the emergence of original colonialism.

So now you can see why I think that critical social theory still matters – because it is a tool to help human beings to resist this coming social *and economic* order, the order of data colonialism.

The importance of a colonial perspective on data

As I near the end of my lecture, I want to reflect a little more on why the perspective of *colonialism* is so important in making sense of what in my book with Andreas Hepp we already called the age of 'datafication'.

First, a colonial perspective captures well the huge *scope of change* that our relations with data represent: a reorganization of human life, from social media to workplace surveillance to new marketplaces like Uber and Airbnb to internal business processing of data. Second, a colonial perspective helps us see what is happening with data over a long-time scale, as indeed Norbert Elias's work aimed to do. The time-frame of not just the past 40 years, but the past **500 years** during which the relations between capitalism and colonialism have been evolving. If we interpret Big Data *without* the perspective of colonialism, we miss the long-term roots of today's data extraction in the centuries of colonial rule, as well as in the building of the internet and the emergence new forms of data management over the past 40 years, including logistics – and we also miss the implications of today's transformations for the long-term *future* of capitalism.

Third, a colonial perspective helps us think about the impacts of data practices on human beings, on human *subjects*, on their conditions of life, and on the terms of power to which they are forced to submit: a colonial perspective helps us see the damage done to human freedom done by the continuous surveillance and tracking that is required to generate the data that capitalism now needs as its fuel. This new colonialism does not, certainly, involve the degrees of physical violence that historic

colonialism did; nor does it involve the slavery that became such a key tool of historic colonialism. But, as I have argued, such violence is not necessary now to draw people into relations of subjection (what the philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls ‘*subjectification*’), to draw them into data relations which treat their lives as raw inputs to capitalism and to the extraction of economic value.

The value of a colonial perspective becomes even clearer when we think about the overall social order that is being built through our increasing *dependence* on large-scale IT infrastructures. This order is being built step-by-step, across many linked institutions and domains of life – from insurance to the workplace, from health to education; from fashion shopping to sport, from mainstream politics to social activism. All these are domains where human beings are becoming increasingly compelled to take on the role of data providers. The result is new forms of rule, as well as new forms of interdependence.

For sure, all this is happening not just within the West but also within the West’s main rival for global power, China: so this new colonialism has two global poles and it will be a process that has profound effects on global power relations between the very rich countries where control over the IT and data extraction infrastructure is based – especially the USA, China, to a lesser extent India – and other countries that become net data sources. But this colonialism is as much internal as it is external, because it operates on colonialism’s home populations too, in the US, China, UK, Japan and elsewhere.

There is another reason too why our relations to data must be understood within a colonial framework: because they represent a continuation, in new form, of the colonial relationship *to knowledge* that was so fundamental to historic colonialism. What was once the West’s goal of imposing one single model of knowledge and rationality on the world is now the goal of data colonialism’s rival powers, US and China. Interestingly the values which shape the uses of such data knowledge are in these two countries something different. But the idea that knowledge should be generated through artificial intelligence and the deep mining of data – not by other means – has a deep continuity with the colonial projects of the past.

Finally, what is being taken from us through our data can be seen as part of a longer history of resistance to colonialism and the defence of *human freedom* on a global scale. In our new book *The Costs of Connection*, Ulises Mejias and I argue that the continuous tracking of human beings by external institutions whose goal is the economic value of the data that can be extracted from the flow of their life. This tracking interferes not just with our specific freedoms, but with the *space of the self* that is the very basis of freedom as Hegel put it, that is, ‘the freedom to be *with oneself*’ without external interference. Data colonialism therefore represents a fundamental challenge to the nature of humanity, just as historical colonialism did.

Conclusion

So let me bring the threads of this lecture back together. The new social order of datafication which I have described *needs* critical theory: we need not only theories of capitalism, but also theories of colonialism; we need concepts that grasp technological + social complexity *but* from perspective of human beings; this is pushing us towards a new convergence of critical theory. These are exciting times indeed for critical theory. Elias is important, as I have explained, but also Marx who wrote that ‘communication and information are dialectical instances of the same social activity, *the social construction of reality*’ (Mosco 2009: 44) and we need Berger and Luckmann, the main 20th century theorists of the social construction of reality. We need also to draw on decolonial theories of power and knowledge to help us grasp today’s battles not just for social and economic justice but also for cognitive justice, justice over the terms of knowledge and information. We need all this in order to understand the conflicted and fast-changing world of digital platforms and big data. And *all this* is a project where, in the end, the work of social theory converges, I hope, with the struggles of citizens and social activists too. Thanks for listening!

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