Social Forces, 2025, **103**, e1–e2
https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soaf006
Advance access publication date 21 January 2025
Book Review

Review of "The Ordinal Society"

By Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy
Harvard University Press, 2024, 384 pages, price: $45.00 (cloth). https://www.hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674971141

Reviewer: Barbara Kiviat, *Stanford University*

In *The Ordinal Society*, Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy take on a pressing topic—how social life has been upended by previously unimaginable amounts of data collection and computational know-how. This much-anticipated book, which builds on the authors' influential earlier scholarship, offers a theoretically rich yet eminently readable look at our emerging world of data-driven governance.

The story starts in Silicon Valley in the 1960s with the personal computing revolution that would ultimately lead to smartphones, social media feeds, and the Internet of Things. This technological advance went hand-in-hand with a libertarian ethos that justified the free flow of personal information that the Internet and subsequent devices captured, as well as the use of data to customize how people are treated. Yet as Fourcade and Healy show, behind the innovation and ideology, a more fundamental social process was taking root. The mass collection of digital data enabled organizations to classify, rank, and value individuals in novel ways and at unheard-of scale. This is the "ordinal" in the title of the book, a society built around measuring people and ordering them from best to worst.

At times, this new world is a pleasant one to live in. Fourcade and Healy argue that critics of technology often overlook the pleasurable aspects of data-fed, personally tailored interactions. People are lured into a "Maussian bargain"—a gift exchange of data for services—that speaks to both our innate desire to be socially connected and the modern project of individualistic expression. But make no mistake, extraction lurks in the background. Data are assets, and there is big money to be made in using personal information to both predict behavior and shape it. Whether through risk scoring, reputational ranking, or some other type of algorithmic ordering, companies differentiate consumers to optimize outputs in line with corporate goals, profitability most of all. The result is that people get different opportunities, prices, products, and levels of service. The market no longer simply reproduces inequality, but creates new forms of it, as well.

The Ordinal Society toggles between the people who have created this world—those at Google, Amazon, OpenAI, venture capital firms, and so on—and the everyday individuals experiencing it. The view from the top casts light on how tech titans see data aggregation as its own virtue (even companies don't always at first know the usefulness of what they've collected), idealize monopolistic rather than competitive markets, and work to instill the notion, both politically and culturally, that personal information is rightly a commodity. Indeed, one of the major accomplishments the authors point to is the naturalization of the idea that anyone with digital traces—from payments processors to grocery chains—ought to be monetizing their data. Field work sits behind some of these observations, though the book's main contribution isn't original

Received: December 2, 2024. **Accepted:** January 8, 2025

empirical research, but rather connecting the dots at a theoretical level. The authors give us concepts for understanding the changes that are afoot, from the "data imperative" companies conform to, to the "classification situations" people get sorted into as a result.

The ground-level view is, in some sense, simple. People whose data lead to bad scores face worse life chances: less opportunity and more hassle. More generally, though, the onslaught of measuring, ranking, and behavioral prediction—perfected by industry and increasingly adopted by the state—manifests a particular version of the self. Individuals are "sovereign but not private," and "emotionally alert" but resistant to "conventional mechanisms for generating social solidarity." The proliferation of ordinal reason thus has ramifications far beyond the market, for how citizens relate to the state and to one another. A key component of this lived experience is the illusion that data-fed decisions neatly give everyone what they deserve. Understanding data as behavioral, and computational methods as dispassionate, helps legitimate the stratification that results. But what has really happened is a systematic obscuring of the fact that structural disadvantages—such as those linked to race, class, and gender—and simple bad luck can give rise to outcomes just as easily as a person's deliberate and freely taken actions.

In recent years, a number of authors have set out to holistically capture the changes wrought by big data, algorithms, and artificial intelligence, and in this group *The Ordinal Society* holds its own. I imagine it will quickly become a hit, sitting on bookshelves alongside the likes of Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Cathy O'Neil *Weapons of Math Destruction*, Oscar H. Gandy Jr.'s *The Panoptic Sort*, Virginia Eubanks's *Automating Inequality*, and Ruha Benjamin's *Race After Technology*.

What is distinct about *The Ordinal Society* is its perennial return to social theory. This is a book about stratification, capitalism, power, and organizations, and we get healthy doses of Weber, Marx, Hayek, Deleuze, neoinstitutionalism, and other classic thinking. This grounding in fundamentals reminds the reader that even in moments of great change, much stays the same, and we don't always need entirely novel frameworks to understand what's going on. Indeed, the idea that nothing which has been true applies anymore is the exact rhetoric Silicon Valley uses to delegitimate efforts to regulate and rein in its efforts. Fourcade and Healy theorize what is radically new, but they also show that old-fashioned capitalistic impulses to extract and dominate still sit at the center.

This makes *The Ordinal Society* a great option for sophisticated readers, such as those in graduate-level courses on data and algorithms, markets, organizations, stratification and inequality, and the contemporary political and moral economy. At the same time, the book is written in an accessible enough way for undergraduates or a general audience. Chapters foreground colorful examples and storytelling, and while the reader does learn, for example, how layered neural networks work, following the larger argument of the book doesn't depend on internalizing technical details.

One final point is that the exposition of *The Ordinal Society* is more analytical and less polemical than some critical treatments of these topics. Still, in the last chapter, the authors do turn to a more normative take on the social order they've been describing. Clearly, they're worried. The ordinal society is one in which people are atomized into behavioral subcomponents and then managed from above by powerful actors falsely professing allegiance to autonomy and self-actualization. The result: "public goods and collective goals are being dissolved in the acid bath of individualization and competition, leaving us increasingly alone in a hyperconnected world." As it turns out, the ordinal society isn't really much of a society at all.

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