Biopolitical Informatics: Subjugated Data

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Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* makes a very well received call for a refiguring of subjectivity with the ironic political myth of the cyborg. But the molar social vision this call arises from has largely been neglected. The informatics of domination that she describes, a world where the distinctions upholding a slipping humanist social order and site of political agency have sprung leaks, is what makes the cyborg a crucial form for survival in this new, harsh climate. She phrases this new subjectivity, which has to be recognized more than willfully taken up, as a mythology for the set of practices of subjugation that, by their foreclosure, grant us agency. Judith Butler describes this process,

> I am clearly born into a world in which certain limitations become the possibility of my subjecthood, but those limitations are not there as structurally static features of my self. They are subject to a renewal, and I perform (mainly unconsciously or implicitly) that renewal in the repeated acts of my person. (Salih, 334)

Because you have to get a cell phone, because it would be crazy not to get a PET scan when a doctor advises it and you feel like shit, because you and your car are so close. You are trapped in a world of technoscience and escape is ridiculous, politically irresponsible.

"The cyborg is not subject to Foucault's biopolitics; the cyborg simulates politics, a much more potent field of operations" (Haraway 1991, 163).

For the *Manifesto*, this is all a rejection of bio-politics. The death of the clinic, the transduction of power into communication sciences and biology, the post-Fordist reality of a homework economy, the simultaneous development of machines "made of sunshine" (153) all depending on "a vast substructure of old-fashioned material production" (Bey): this is the informatics of domination.

Foucault's concept of bio-power appears forcefully in the concluding chapter of *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*, where it characterizes the shift from a society that would kill in the name of the sovereign towards one that fights wars "on behalf of the existence of everyone" (Foucault 1978,137). It is a disciplinary power's administration of life.

> For the first time in history, no doubt, biological existence was reflected in political existence; the fact of living was no longer an inaccessible substrate that only emerged from time to time, amid the randomness of death and its fatality; part of it passed into knowledge's field of control and power's sphere of intervention. Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself' it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body. … one would have to speak of bio-power to designate what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life (142-143).

Including life in the dominion of the forms of power Foucault references here secretes a new object of scientific and political concern: life itself. Where once life could be counted upon to exist as a constitutive outside of a knowledge/power formation, in bio-power it had to be actively guaranteed, with its production monitored and enforced. However, "it is not that life has been totally integrated into techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them." What is bio-political is not life's actual subsumption to techniques of power, but that life is a target, a primary effect, a named and materialized subject of power's operations. That "the life of the species can be wagered on its own political strategies" (143).

Pastoral power works as a later reformulation of the nature of bio-political power. From the tradition of pastors in Christianity we get the contemporary legion of inspectors, officers, secretaries, forms, superiors, and professionals whose aggravating job it is to care about the dark interiors of your life, details 'about' ourselves which we joylessly provide everyday. Pastoralism tried to leave no stone unturned, inquiring into all aspects of life through confession, trusting conversation, and edict. The stakes were nothing less than the salvation of the individual's immortal soul, and that of the flock. Sacrificing oneself for the flock was not beyond the call of duty for the pastor. Moving into disciplinary society,

> the officials of pastoral power increased. Sometimes this form of power was exerted by state apparatus or, in any case, by a public institution such as the police. (We should not forget that in the eighteenth century the police force was not invented only for maintaining law and order, nor for assisting governments in their struggles against their enemies, but for assuring urban supplies, hygiene, health and standards considered necessary for handicrafts and commerce.) … Finally, the multiplication of the aims and agents of pastoral power focused the development of knowledge of man around two roles: one, globalizing and quantitative, concerning the population; the other, analytical, concerning the individual. ... instead of a pastoral power and a political power, more or less linked to each other, more or less rival, there was an individualizing "tactic" which characterized a

> series of power: those of the family, medicine, psychiatry, education, and employers. (Foucault 1982, 309)

The Church, once a direct link between pastoral and political power, is no longer the centralizing force of the formula. The individualizing tactic, exercised by more agents than just the country priest, ensures that the human, and not the animal or machine, is subject to caring inspection and maintenance, of body and soul.

> Communications sciences and biology are construction of natural-technical objects of knowledge in which the difference between machine and organism is thoroughly blurred; mind, body, and tool are on very intimate terms. (Haraway 1991, 165).

Against bio-power, the *Manifesto* points out three faltering, but not yet dead, distinctions which uphold the possibility of population and individual as objects (or subjects) of power relations. First, the human has become another animal, unable to distinguish itself with consistency. ("Because there is an overlap between the capacities of human and nonhuman animals, there is no way of drawing a line that will leave all human beings above the line, and all nonhumans below it" (Singer, 60).) Second, human-animal and machine. The machine has been built on organic models, and the organism is understood in terms of machine principles. Convergent evolution demonstrates the rationality of different engineering solutions to the same environmental challenge. "Life was theorized as essentially a military/game problem, in which the organism became a complex cybernetic device characterized by its communications functions" (Haraway 1981, 249).

Finally, physicality itself comes into question as hyperreality subsumes the difference between what is corporeal and not into a fragile detail in the process of coding that might easily be forgotten. The physical/non-physical. "Our best machines … are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a spectrum, and these machines are eminently portable, mobile – a matter of immense human pain in Detroit and Singapore". Or, again, "the 'hardest' science is about … the realm of pure number, pure spirit, C^3I" (Haraway 1991, 153). What is physical has to be authorized in its materiality by the non-

physical, but what is non-physical (data, theory, concept, ideology) has a physical location that must be guarded and backed up, a physical reality which has to be distributed (like music or computing power).

In each of Haraway's connections across divides, it is by the arrival of informatics as the generative principle of (representation of) reality that the one term mixes with the other. Humanity has been processed in terms that let it not only be parsed and compared to animals (as in dissection, where the animal must confess it is not bestial but a transparent system of causality[1]), but the human is not free to leave the terms of comparison. Again, the organism fails to retain any meaning but that of a fragile semi-self-sustaining communication device, which quickly becomes the name of a region enclosed by a vulnerable and permeable membrane, through which meaningful things pass. Though the relation between the two terms has not been defied, and humans still eat animals and most machines are not mistaken for organisms, the distinction's integrity has been neutralized. Leftover in all the oppositions, and not coming into question itself, is data. The thing which feeds on the unfixing of other categories.

> [D]ata does not just exist – it has to be generated. Data creators have to collect data and organize it, or create it from scratch. Texts need to be written, photographs need to be taken, video and audio need to be recorded. Or they need to be digitized from already existing media (Manovich).

Though the entry of data is an active process, data's main job, as a special form of recorded information, is to sit and look neutral. Francis Hallé, describing the elegance of plant's responses over the typical animal reaction of crawling away writes: "Since plants cannot move in a desired direction or flee that which would do them harm, they must find mechanisms that compensate for their immobility. … For the most part, plant inventions are biochemical. They are linked to respiration" (Hallé, 150). Information in a database, just to maintain the

[1] "Animals must be made to say that they are not animals, that bestiality, savagery – with what these terms imply of unintelligibility, radical strangeness to reason – do not exist, but on the contrary the most bestial behaviors, the most singular, the most *abnormal* are resolved in science, in physiological mechanisms, in cerebral connections, etc. Bestiality, and its principle of uncertainty, must be killed in animals." (Baudrillard 1981, 129)

appearance of fixity, has to be checked over, moved around, converted to new formats and over to new file systems, updated and shared with the right parties, all to be interpreted and manipulated by different front-end systems, algorithms, and user bases. Alternatively, the data can lose its virtues of neutrality and constancy, just by having nothing done to it. Falling out of date, sitting at the far end of a permanent backlog, corrupting slowly, and holding out-of-date or misentered data.

Bio-power has not, as the *Manifesto* proclaims, passed. It is alive but mutating on the operational system of an informatics of domination. The *Manifesto* argues,

> It is time to write The Death of the Clinic . The clinic's methods required bodies and works; we have texts and surfaces. Our dominations don't work by medicalization and normalization any more; they work by networking, communications redesign, stress management. Normalization gives way to automation, utter redundancy. Michel Foucault's Birth of the Clinic (1963), History of Sexuality (1976), and Discipline and Punish (1975) name a form of power at its moment of implosion. The discourse of biopolitics gives way to technobabble, the language of the spliced substantive; no noun is left whole by the multinationals (Haraway 1991, 245).

Haraway's prophecy anticipates the translation of conflict into management and substantive nouns into strange words that, while they sound like technobabble, are, in fact, central to contemporary orchestrations of power. But bodies and works are not gone, texts and surfaces not autonomous; "a multiplication and complex imbrication of rationalities continue to exist" (Rabinow, 245). Technobabble is still, also, discourse. The power relations of management are not without resistance and failure. They are not just working in a network, but also writhing in an entanglement. That confusion is not reducible to the level of theory or society, but subsists in the ongoing discursive navigations across particular practices, of architecture, medicine, data mining, surveillance, bureaucratic websites, military C^3I (communications, command, control, intelligence), and everywhere else "mechanisms of power, at a given moment, in a precise conjuncture and by means of a certain number of transformations, have begun to become economically advantageous and politically useful" (Foucault 1980, 102). What we see in the interplay of communication sciences, biology, and bio-politics is how "relations of power-

knowledge are not static forms of distribution, they are ‘matrices of transformations’”(Foucault 1978, 99). This kind of transformation accounts for the production of psychoanalysis out of interest in monitoring children’s sexuality, and for the message of technoscientific media and practices today. The vector of knowledge/power relations produced by gesturing about brain scans, blogging about YouTube, or posting in forums about Java libraries.

The mechanisms of power/knowledge have changed from the archive to new information media. “Writing itself, before it ends up in libraries, is a communication medium” (Kittler, 5). The importance of writing, its universal role for storage and transmission, has been replaced with the software engineer’s snappy toolkit of database structures. “Regardless of whether new media objects present themselves as linear narratives, interactive narratives, databases, or something else, underneath, on the level of material organization, they are all databases” (Manovich). Databases might not always be ‘visible,’ but they hardly lurk. Just by interfacing with an algorithm, a person “gradually discovers the rules which operate in the universe constructed by this game. She learns its hidden logic, in short its algorithm” (Manovich). This encounter in software finds a real founded in interactivity, getting comfortable with how it responds. But this reality should not be mistaken for similarity to everyday experiences we call real. “Virtuality is not simulation, imitation, mimesis of reality, but the access, so to speak, to another ontologically different dimension” (Perniola, 30).

The technoscience that calls for a cyborg subject seems to bear a greater faculty for direct (impersonal) exercises of power than the disciplinary regimes whose reticulated specifications it implements. “Felix Guattari has imagined a city where one would be able to leave one's apartment, one's street, one's neighborhood, thanks to one's (dividual) electronic card that raises a given barrier; but the card could just as easily be rejected on a given day or between certain hours; what counts is not the barrier but the computer that tracks each person's position--licit or illicit--and effects a universal modulation” (Deleuze). Feedback systems and everything. The physical and non-physical, the organism and machine, seem so easily

transcoded, linked together, or converted between formats that maintaining the integrity of either on a regular basis is a low priority for information processing. Knowing your position, it's not very important what your position means as a presence.

In the same way, the individual and population lose their privileged position as founding territories for power. Where the genome's buried now, where the individual used to be, a two meter lump of flesh. "[T]he human genome will be known in such a way that it can be changed" (Rabinow, 236) With this,

> the new genetics will cease to be a biological metaphor for modern society and will become instead a circulation network of identity terms and restriction loci, around which and through which a truly new type of autoporoduction will emerge .. nature will be modeled on culture understood as practice. Nature will be known and remade through technique and will finally become artificial (Rabinow, 241-242).

Neither a member nor a case history, the body and its genetics will circulate as part of a community with similar genetics, to be sorted according to a new eugenics. Likewise, *the* population becomes one of many, connected in a related database, by key variables. No longer does population mark a crucial sector, "as an economic and political problem: population as wealth, population as manpower or labor capacity, population balanced between its own growth and the resources it commanded" (Foucault 1978, 25). A population is one set of results generated from a database which knows far too many things about its contents to ever tell just one story of their unity. Deleuze writes of the fate of the individual that is no longer a signature (herself) or a number (a member), "what is important is no longer either a signature or a number, but a code: the code is a *password*" (Deleuze). A signature, or a name, a unique identifier, or a social security number. Identity is not just about uniqueness, which can be accomplished by a combination of non-unique factors (age, weight, sex, race, eye color, location last seen, first and last name), but about security. Securing connected variables against confusion or loss in the crush of information. Securing privacy for a unique user by their unique ID. Securing identities against theft, making the dividual match 'its' body most of the time

(credit card fraud protection, genetic evidence in the courtroom). Finally, securing the system against rogue users, by recording, along with significant actions taken, the user ID that acted.

Foucault wrote of the two poles of bio-power, with the individual at one end and the population at the other. The global term stored and processed in the informatics of domination is no longer a population, or the population of everyone everywhere, but the global planet Earth. In spaceflight, NASA renewed that message "that a male American body as a scientific device could dominate the most severe and inhospitable physical environments" (Bloom, 116). With photographs of Earth from space, difference finds an ultimate reference of continuity and limitation in the sacred/positivist image of our planet as "unlimited-finite" (Rabinow, 234). "The space-off perspective transforms Earth into a small, and apparently easily manageable, visual object, which can be taken in at once glance" (Bryld & Lykke, 4). Or, as Haraway describes informatics of domination: "From one perspective, a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet" (Haraway 1991, 154). But this is only one perspective, taken in a certain way. Probably "to reduce the position of the camera-eye exclusively to the totalizing, objectifying and god-like gaze of the omniscient and omnipotent subject of science is in a sense to confirm the epistemological illusions of positivism" (Bryld & Lykke, 5). There is more to this pole than the technicist style suggests. There is also sacrality and belonging.

> With the help of highly sophisticated visualization techniques, Nature is being reinterpreted and transformed from object of material consumption to virtual-reality object of worship, awe, and aesthetic-spiritual consumption. The multi-billion-dollar photo of the Blue Planet, born out of advanced technological apparatus, undoubtedly performs as such a virtual-reality icon, displaying the Sublime Beauty of Sacred Nature and Sacred Mother, welcoming her cyborg-sons back to their 'natural' home after their dangerous voyage in the extraterrestrial wilderness of (cyber)space. (6)

Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism (Haraway 1991, 176).

The particular historical movement at which an informatics of domination starts to take a disciplinary society into something more like one of control is not complete on its, not a

headquarters for a new power, and not an order waiting to express itself more fully. ""Information" is a chaos; knowledge is the spontaneous ordering of that chaos; freedom is the surfing of the wave of that spontaneity" (Bey). First, the cyborg and information society need each other. Kittler exaggerates when he writes that "[a]n automated discourse analysis has taken command" (Kittler, 263); he wants to accuse humans of becoming "Turing's correspondent" in the "transfer [of] the age-old monopoly of writing into the omnipotence of integrated circuits" (19). But we know the machines regard us as the communication sciences do, the political question is how to regard ourselves on the basis of that foreclosure. Second, information systems will never be able to do more than forces that already overdetermine us. "What's missing is what is *more than information*: the qualitative dimension of experience or the continuum of analog space in between all those ones and zeroes… this surplus is nothing at all … if it did exist, it could easily be coded, quantified, and informatized, to any desired degree of accuracy" (Shaviro 249-250). Third, despite Deleuze's useful future to discipline, society of control (Foucault on life support), only some parts of information systems will allow a form of power that can exercise itself. The identity card is a good example where this will work, but urban planning and economics are examples where it won't be so automatic. "Neo-liberal rationality … involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player" (Brown, §7). The extension of these concepts is no guarantee of their success. In this way, orienting politics around an informatics of domination risks looking somewhere too ethereal, forgetting the other perspective, where instead of a grid of control we also face "lived social and bodily realities, in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (Haraway 1991, 154). Last, becoming objects of knowledge, at the same time we are its disavowed outside of labor (and labor's supplements), affords us new powers of agency as data. Rather than a population, which many were once

administered as, we can't but be encoded as part of a mass. A mass *becomes* data sets, results, evidence, something to work out.

> The mass realises that paradox of being both an object of simulation (it only exists at the point of convergence of all the media waves which depict it) and a subject of simulation, capable of refracting all the models and of emulating them by hypersimulation (its hyperconformity, an immanent form of humor). (Baudrillard 1983, 30)

Informatics provides a style of power relations that still also implements bio-power. But only software thinks hardware's only role is as servant of whatever software commands.

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