

Book Review

Virginia Eubanks (2018) *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police and Punish the Poor*, New York: St Martin's Press.

Insanity. That is the only word which seems to fully encapsulate the hellacious landscape of false paths and invisible avenues which author Virginia Eubanks (2018) describes as contemporary America in her recent book, “Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police and Punish the Poor”.

I think it is a word worth reflecting upon when reading Eubanks's narrative-based text on the role of algorithms and algorithmic politics in post-modernity. To me, the book is a broad indictment of the growing relationship between the everyday person and ‘the Digital’ (being a conceptual generalization of connected, digital technology). The processes and realities described, as supplemented by complex overlapping layers of automated bureaucracy, are the establishment and justification of the new underclass, what Eubanks terms the ‘digital poorhouse’. These are semi self-automated algorithms, which ultimately decide not only the everyday power relations between authority and citizen, but ultimately dictate the course of life for most of America's economic underclass.¹ They are fit to be described as insane however, as Eubanks's text moves from case study, to state, to example; weaving an almost dystopian reality which runs, most concerningly, as the political and behavioural engine of America.

Though the text does make a conscientious effort to pull these into a useful academic conceptualisation, specifically the idea of the ‘digital poorhouse’, I cannot help but feel that the author is missing the forest from the trees. And this is my primary concern with the book- the author never realizes the potential of the material which they have gathered. This is not to say that it is not a useful book, nor an interesting one, but rather that this is an issue of scope. Ultimately, I could not help but feel as if the author failed to account for the broader implications of their research. There is so much raw, rich material-both empirically and narratively. However, in all this, the focus of the book appeared to be the narrative itself- the pursuit of an engaging story – a fine purpose, but a little disappointing given the potential scope and significance of the author's work.

Which returns me to insanity. For it seems to me that what the author should be commenting on here is not only the solidification and characterization of the contemporary economic underclass, as enabled by emergent tech, but rather, that *Automated Inequality* also demonstrates what we might now consider the new American paradigm: systems of insanity.

Traditionally, the American paradigm, that being the global articulation of America's outward characterization, or personification, found inspiration in satire. Once, perhaps, it was fine and good to define America, and the American culture, as deriving from characterizations such as ‘obesity’, ‘hyper-capitalism’, or even ‘patriotism’. Those characterizations of the American society, while still relevant, are somehow less prevalent than the insanity of its structures of governance. What I speak of here is the increasing complexity associated with the public service, executive branch, government, and political arena more broadly, attempting to both ‘get-around’ and ‘get-ahead’ of technology as it emerges. The author's text is a fantastic account of this process, through the lens of the emerging tech industry, and

¹As a footnote, the author goes into sparse detail concerning the role of algorithms in other nation states. For all intent and purposes, the text is American-centric in analysis and conclusions.

now reality of society, automated algorithms. If one is to paint a nation with broad, self-evident strokes, then the American paradigm is an old, continuously reinvented one- grounded in the amorphous and consistently shifting influence of social, cultural, political, and informational markers. We may now be on the cusp of this next shift as America's global identity ebbs to match its inwards facing issues; as the paradigms of the past combine anew in the systematic unmaking of logic, reason, and free will.

To argue that America's new paradigm is these 'systems of insanity' is to argue that American society itself has fundamentally shifted so as to accept, internalize, and reproduce these systems and in doing so normalize them within everyday politics. This is certainly the thematic drive of *Automated Inequality*. In this way, the phrase 'systems of insanity' draws upon that commonly held definition: to do the same thing over and over again and expect a different result.

This was the only reality that I could comprehend when reading Eubanks's detailed account of the foundations of American society. Everyday people forced to navigate complex, invisible, automated processes, whose decisions dictate the realities of the 'political' experience, regardless of the realities of the 'lived' experience. It is like playing the most complex board game in the world, where the stakes are your life, and nobody has given you the updated rulebook.

Automated inequality is a book which describes these systems of insanity yet undersells and under-theorizes their significance outside of socio-economic factors.

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Automated Inequality

Automated Inequality begins by recounting the current state of the American political system. That is to say, highlighting the innate tension between an underclass which looks to move forward through technological progression, and an authoritarian class, or class of political elite, which looks to curtail technological innovation and advancement by way of systematic bureaucratization of algorithmic-based tech. Here, Eubanks makes a poignant comment on how an individual immersed within these political systems can be perceived, often ideologically so, as both deservingly poor, while at the same time, undeserving of social welfare (2018, p. 28).

Eubanks spends considerable time and effort establishing historical context. This is to go right back through American history and clearly highlight the paths to innovation and, in some cases, corruption and self-serving interests which develop into the book's principle focus- systems of inequality. I can see the benefit of establishing this for all audiences, both those who live in America and deal with such systems, and those such as myself, an international reader who perhaps might not have as clear an insight into the American political underclass. However, I cannot help but feel that, in this space, the book misses its opportunity to establish and unpack these issues in a more interesting frame. In many ways, the book does a fantastic job in painting a vivid picture of how algorithms have come to define economic stability and political movement in America. In this way, one can leave reflecting upon these systems and find similarities in numerous international case studies.

In many ways *Automated Inequality* is the 'every persons' guide to the complexities of post-modernity. This is both the book's main strength and weakness. Texts of this quality are important within the study and understanding of such systems and structures. They provide significant and cornerstone contextual and historical information which allows for further analysis. To this end, *Automated Inequality* will serve

as an excellent introductory text which highlights, in an accessible manner, the overlapping complexities of this digital era.

With that said, *Automated Inequality* misses a fantastic opportunity to go further than its American-centric focus and engage in more in-depth critical analysis of its findings in relation to emerging research and through this, speak volumes to the systematic political shift of the world's most powerful nation.² Ultimately, any meaningful engagement in this sense is inherently curtailed by the book's own American focus. This is not to criticize the author on decisions of scope, but rather to lament the limitations of the book's structure.

Due to the complexity of the subject itself, the author has found it necessary to situate the historical context as its leading contribution. Significantly, if historical context and a clearer understanding of these processes is *Automated Inequality's* only meaningful contribution to the emerging field of algorithmic politics, then it is a sound contribution. While such texts aren't necessarily useful in their limited critical analysis, they are significant in their telling of the everyday story. And to this end, *Automated Inequality* truthfully and successfully navigates the complexities of technology, society, and politics, to create a grand narrative, spanning context and history in compelling narratives of systematic inequality- one which is both terrifying to reflect upon and, ultimately, insane.

Conclusion

"Poverty in America is not invisible. We see it, and then we look away."

Eubanks (2018), *Automated Inequality*, p. 175.

The author's conclusion rests in her conceptualization of the 'digital poorhouse', and, in this, inverse denial. The concept and notion of the 'digital poorhouse' is intriguing, and perhaps useful. Indeed, the text functions as a series of in-depth case studies analyzing the prevalence of the notion, highlighting its worth and significance in American culture and society. However, the book's final and most 'academic' chapter asks: what could be done? Unfortunately, it returns with the most disappointing of answers: denial. That is to say, the 'digital poorhouse' continues to exist, in no short way, due to everyday denial- of both its existence, and its growing impact on people.

In many ways, the book uses denial as a strawman from which to help rationalize the complexities and inhumanities that have emerged from the compiling of algorithmic-based politics. Such a reductionist approach is perhaps disingenuous of the realities that such systems force on individuals. An excellent example of this is the author's story of encountering a homeless man struggling with mental illness in downtown Los Angeles. Here, the author describes the process of a society ignoring an individual with mental illness; perhaps trapped in his own lifestyle, as has been described by the book so far. Here, the author focuses on denial as the root cause, building an argument that such issues in society stem from an individual's recognition, and rejection, thereof.

In many ways, this is a neoliberalist argument, indicative perhaps of the culture which it considers-individualistically-centered. Rather than problematize, and thus politicize, this American paradigm, responsibility is once again shifted to those individuals which find themselves bound to it. It suggests that agents are somehow able to influence those largely invisible structures of inequality through recognition

²Here I use the term 'political' broadly as indicative of power relations, rather than within the confines of formal, arena based politics.

of the inequalities which it creates. There is certainly some merit in awareness-raising campaigns, and in this, the merit of eroding systematic inequality through societal recognition. Here, being in denial is portrayed as a strawman which somehow paints the prison-like environments that the political underclass and everyday citizens find themselves in. I honestly do not think that this is Eubanks intention, as the text is powerful, and the stories of unending hurt paint an emotionally invested author. Yet despite this, I cannot help but feel that the author has stumbled slightly in their assessment of blame; heaved squarely back on the shoulders of the everyday person. Another layer perhaps to this, the new American paradigm.

Considering its purpose and the context in which it was written, *Automated Inequality* provides an excellent insight into the development of the American underclass- an underclass now bound in digital handcuffs and thrown-away to rot in a digital poorhouse. The concluding chapters are the text's weakest, with its conceptualization feeling forced and conclusions limited. Yet, despite its shortcomings, the book is perhaps the most effective recent study to fully capture the grim contemporary America through narrative-style. And in this way, it forces us to consider a new American paradigm, one defined by everyday people traversing increasingly complex automated structures, bound by the realities shaped by such systems, and in endless pursuit of the rectification of irrational, ad-nauseum outcomes. These are truly systems of insanity.