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## **REVIEW: Automating Inequality: How high-tech tools profile, police and punish the poor**

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**Eubanks, V. (2017). Automating Inequality: how high-tech tools profile, police and punish the poor. New York: St Martin's Press. ISBN: 978-1-1250-07431-7**

The publication of Virginia Eubanks' latest work coincided with the uproar over social media and data collection, who owned it and what it was being used for. A sense of powerlessness spread across global communities as people felt they were being manipulated, their data traded and their exposure to news being managed by nefarious groups of corporate greed or invasive international governments. In *Automating Inequality*, Eubanks presents research into the everyday experiences of automation increasingly embedded into the infrastructure of welfare in the United States. Rather than mysterious international conspiracies played out in the indecipherable complexity of massive data ecologies, Eubanks identifies real case studies in how technology is exercised in everyday life.

I was reminded of her earlier work in *Digital Dead Ends* (2011) and the importance of recognising, and resisting, 'magical thinking' (Eubanks, 2011, p. xv), a concept in which merely thinking something leads to its manifestation. Such a delusional concern with the power of technology to solve societal ills was prevalent in Eubanks' research a decade ago, and came with a recognition that rather than 'lift all boats' (p. 5), a high-tech life was likely to perpetuate social inequality, not solve it. While the response then was a call toward a critical popular

technology based on active and participatory resistance, this research indicates a pervasive and destructive over-reliance on technology as a means of disassociating and alienating the poor. Eubanks reflects on the decade between the research and asks, '*how has the digital revolution become a nightmare for so many?*' (p. 10). A strong argument is presented for the shift from poor houses on the street to digital poor houses being created through algorithms and technology-mediated processes of vital resources. The high-tech tools in the titles sub-text suggest a futuristic techno dystopia. While the dystopic is certainly evident throughout Eubanks' accounts, this is technology rooted in the unremarkable, in the daily existence of poor and working-class individuals and communities faced with automated processes where once people existed.

At the heart of book are three research case studies, welfare reform in Indiana, an automated approach to homelessness on Skid Row in Los Angeles and a screening tool for child welfare in Allegheny County. Each offers a rich account of lives affected by Orwellian bureaucratic farce, such as welfare recipients that have their card payments scrutinised so social workers can see where they shopped and what they bought, Skid Row homeless ex-prisoners scored too low for housing because they had recently had accommodation as inmates.

The detail of the systems employed in each of the three scenarios is accompanied by a history of the ways that welfare systems, and America generally, has viewed the poor over the preceding centuries. This concern with a thorough outline of policy and its enactment in these states might seem only partially relevant beyond national borders. Certainly, the discussion around policy and activism to change policy, public-private partnerships and the structuring of welfare systems is often state and nation specific. I had to look up '*Hoosiers*' (people from Indiana) and yet while a few terms and policies are specific to their context, the overall concern of the book is familiar and clearly linked with experiences we see in the UK, Europe and increasingly globally. Eubanks refers to a discussion with a previous research participant describing surveillance of her spending on a welfare card, she tells Eubanks, '*You should pay attention to what happens to us. You're next*' (p. 9).

The 'us' in question relates to the working class, the socio-economic status of those most at risk of brutal, cold automation. In this context the 'You' refers to a safer, while increasingly at risk middle-class, although history suggests that mitigation often comes to the aid of the

wealthy as often as it fails to materialise for those lower down the economic spectrum. These 'us' and 'them' patterns are being enacted through ever broader categorisations, Eubank claims, from the individual under scrutiny to a classification of categories based on colour, location, income and family context. Algorithms seem to offer a neat processing plant that manages whole societies based on generalised and politically constructed concepts.

The recent UK film *I, Daniel Blake* (Lavery, Loach, Johns & Squires, 2017) offers a powerful narrative based around similar experiences. An increasingly automated and digitally defended welfare system is becoming part of our cultural narrative and shifts from 'the computer says no' comedy sketches to alienating and brutal automation. The way in which the homeless and those in receipt of Medicaid and welfare are depicted in the book provides intense stories of struggles against bureaucracies that revise what we mean by digital literacy, including what education and learning should include in the twenty first century. In the Introduction, Eubanks describes her own experiences of being 'red flagged' following an attack on her partner at a grocery store. A refusal to pay medical insurance seemed based on several high-risk factors where only Eubanks' expertise allowed her to identify, challenge and ultimately reverse the decision. The book hums with anger, and with many examples of human activism, struggles for survival and resistance to machine-led decisions that are always significant, and in some cases deadly. You cannot read this book without feeling that something has changed and that established means of fighting for social justice must likewise change in response.

I was struck by some of the arguments Eubanks makes that resonate with George Orwell's frustrations about an earlier machine age, in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (Orwell, 1937). Eubanks updates Orwell's call for change through revealing a number of deep-seated social issues at the heart of the current concern with algorithms and data. Like Orwell, Eubanks identifies a universal political malaise; the right concerned with exposing malingers, fraudsters, and creating an idle, undeserving poor while the left '*hand wring about the poor's inability to exert agency in their own lives*' (p. 176-77). For Orwell, it was the English class system that allowed for multiple lives to co-exist along lines of crass inequality. In *Automating Inequality*, Eubanks reports on techno-social systems that promise shiny new futures of efficiency and equanimity in decision-making, while masking the extent to which the algorithms harden social stratification '*embedded in old systems of power and privilege*' (p. 178).

Yet the book goes beyond any hand wringing of its own and manages to avoid being lost in localised interest alone, despite the detailed contexts provided around Indiana and Allegheny County. Partly, this is down to Eubanks ability to present compelling human narratives at the thick end of algorithm based social policies. More than this, however, the significance of *Automating Inequality* comes through a recognition of the ways that social structures continue to unfairly target the poor and working class while simultaneously allowing an as-yet unaffected middle class to look away and do nothing. How American society sees itself is woven throughout, highlighted by a nineteenth century view of the poor as something to be obliterated (p.20). However, it appears this obliteration is being replicated in contemporary political rhetoric and the embedding of inequality within techno-social systems. The normalisation of poverty and its alignment with struggles with the system permeate the case studies. Eubanks highlights how poverty lives cheek by jowl with wealth and requires a *cultural denial* (p. 175) to allow the poor to become hidden in plain sight. One of the participants in the research describes trying to get to a Senator at a public meeting, and the shocked surprise of the Senator when faced with such immediacy. As the participant reflected, the Senator needed layers of people between him and the public. What Eubanks provides is a detailed, often alarming and frequently anger-inducing portrayal of how technology offers such layers that cut off the poorest in society and create increasing layers of alienation, scrutiny and sanction. These do not feel uniquely American concerns and we do not need to be familiar with Allegheny County to see what is at stake here.

Some of the book is deeply depressing, and we are warned that the digital poorhouse is hard to understand, massively scalable, persistent, and eternal. It also includes us all. Chillingly, Eubanks tells us that the digital poorhouse also kills people (p. 214).

However, Eubanks also has a powerful voice of social activism and is proponent of action and participation, not representation. In this work, as in *Digital Dead Ends*, the solution lies with the people themselves. Challenges begin with raising empathy and understanding and a coalition of working class and poor communities. From here, coalition would also need to go beyond middle-class representative activism to real participatory activism that allows the marginalised to speak for themselves. Eubanks provides two useful questions that might begin our own response to the algorithms shaping our communities: '*Does the tool increase the self-determination and agency of the poor?*' And '*Would the tool be targeted at non-poor*

*people?*' (p. 212). In answering these questions, the creators of algorithms, the designers and implementers of systems would need to move beyond concepts of efficiency or resources alone. Eubanks' subsequent '*Oath of non-harm for an age of big-data*' (p. 212) poses additional questions and acts as an updated social and economic version of Asimov's law of robotics. Automating Inequality exposes how our data is already being used to define us within our societies and makes a compelling argument that while the technology is new, the ancient struggle remains the same.

## References

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