



Data Power: Radical Geographies of Control and Resistance

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Data Power *Radical Geographies of Control and Resistance*

JIM E. THATCHER AND CRAIG M. DALTON

Critical cartography has not only come a long way since J. B. Harley “deconstructed” the map in the late 1980s, but also since Jeremy Crampton and John Krygier offered their own account of the “one-two punch” of critical mapping practice and theoretical critique in the mid-2000s. Faced with the demise of capital C cartography, and also arguably of geographic information systems (GIS), those working in a critical cartographic vein have had to seek alternative paths to offering spirited critiques of spatial technologies. In *Data Power: Radical Geographies of Control and Resistance*, Jim E. Thatcher and Craig M. Dalton find a way, through a critique of the “role of data and technologies in culture and society” (p. 3).

The book offers a series of “new and creative ways to enact a radical political praxis with new spatial technologies” (p. 3), largely in opposition to what they call “data capitalism” (p. 3). Or more evocatively, to resist what Thatcher and Dalton describe as the “near-theological, faith-based relationships modern society has with data” (p. 7). In this the authors draw largely, but not exclusively, on situationism to offer various “off-ramps” out of the “data spectacle” (Gregg 2015). In the following, I consider what these off-ramps look

like, and what exactly they are meant to be leading us away from.

Thatcher and Dalton’s previous work (both individually and together) has pushed beyond the borders of geography. Although both are part of the critical tradition within the discipline, their seminal contribution to the nascent field of critical data studies also bears mentioning (Dalton and Thatcher 2014), providing the seeds of the book to come. As someone acquainted with both traditions, for me, *Data Power* is familiar as well as strange: familiar in that some case studies have cropped up in critical cartographic work before (e.g., Surveillance Camera Players, an informal antisurveillance camera activist group,

formed in New York in 1996), but strange in how the cartographic element of them is often elided. Swapping out “cartography” for “data” sometimes works. Sometimes it does not. Regardless, it tends to provoke a real sense of the uncanny.

These cases are still incredibly evocative—another, the feminist collective *Precarias a la Deriva*, explored the quotidian lives of precarious workers in Madrid in the early 2000s—but they have the unintended effect of neutering the radical praxis underpinning them. If situationist-inspired dérives were such reservoirs of riotous, critical practice, why do they linger only so specifically in the (geographic) academy? This is not to call out Thatcher and Dalton’s formulation of the “data dérive,” or situationist theory more generally, but to examine why that might be, or how “dérive-style” praxis might have bled, or morphed, into new forms of collective resistance altogether.¹ Indeed, it is to consider how and whether data dérives differ at all from less critical modes of “data walking” (van Es and de Lange 2020).

Conversely, in speculating on the possible form of “data détournements,” they gloss over how meme cultures operate similarly, besides a brief mention of Black Lives Matter’s use of “images, short videos, and memes,” and the “power of repurposed, remixed, data in building a popular movement” (p. 109). Again, this is not to pick bones, but to provide some more avenues to practicing that “one-two punch” against the data spectacle. Where they do provide a crystal-line contemporary example, in the form of Inside Airbnb, it is not entirely clear why referring to the countermapping project as a data détournement adds any further analytical value. The rather traditional cartographic form of Inside Airbnb—data points on an interactive map—does not exactly scream situationist prank.

There is also the question of what exactly these “off-ramps” are meant to be leading us away from. In “Life in the Age of Big Data” (chapter 1), Thatcher and Dalton consider how “our UberEats orders are linked to our Tinder matches which are tied to our Facebook accounts that in turn advertise us products from our Amazon wishlists” (p. 40). Here, although the rhetorical force of the statement serves to convey what life on the “expressway of the modern capitalist world” (p. 90) generally feels like, knowing where to position the off-ramps (practical or theoretical) is a little trickier. Keeping with the vehicular metaphor, in reading *Data Power* one has the vague sense of where we are driving, just less idea whether we have taken the right exit—or perhaps even more problematically—any exit at all. The authors’ conceptual “routes of escape” (p. 26) via Heidegger, Debord, and Herbert Marcuse, “abhorrent,” “provocative,” and “earnest” (p. 26), respectively, are not especially primed for this diagnosis work either. The effect is a general sense something is up with data capitalism, without knowing precisely what.

This matters, I think, because of the way in which practice, or “informed daily use” (p. 122) of digital technologies is at the heart of Thatcher and Dalton’s thesis. In this, as they contend, “users operate within a margin of maneuver between how they want to employ a piece of hardware and software and what is possible given its designed material structure” (p. 70). Thus, “under the right circumstances, within that margin of maneuver” (p. 70) everyday resistance to data capitalism might become possible. A typology of responses is handily provided, in which examples of “acceptance,” “active resistance,” “making present,” and “escape” do the best job of laying out what these “margins of maneuver” actually look like, from turning off location services to paying with cash. Yet despite the centrality of everyday resistance to the thesis, these examples are generally hard to find throughout the book.

Thatcher and Dalton also spend time articulating what they refer to as “A New Wild West” (p. 50). Drawing an analogy with the colonization of North America, they suggest that the “spaces the internet came to fill were not empty” (p. 50). Here, with the help of Mattern (2017) and Beller (2012) they signal to both the practice of laying new infrastructure (fiber-optic cables) along old (rail lines), as well as the lived experience of having one’s “bodily movements” (p. 51) cast as “empty spaces to be colonized by slipping data-generating practices into our daily lives” (p. 51). In this, there is a sense in which Thatcher and Dalton try hard to establish a more embodied, rather than merely metaphorical, connection between contemporary data capitalism and colonialism. The idea of the Internet as a “new frontier” (p. 50), however, was not about the infrastructural underpinnings of it (“colonial-ish,” perhaps), nor about “colonizing” other people, but about cultivating new pioneers, as the subtitle to Rheingold’s (1993) *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* suggests. Indeed, the metaphor of the fastidious homesteader seems more apt for users of apps and platforms than the idea of people carefully, and willingly, crafting their online presence somehow being “dispossessed” of their data.²

These critiques aside, Thatcher and Dalton write optimistically, at a time when optimism is in short supply. “Ultimately, this book asks: what are the liberatory ideas and actions, the politics of emancipation, that can or might occur *with* new spatial technologies?” (p. 122). Here, Thatcher and Dalton are swimming against the tide, neither submitting to data capitalism nor advocating for a data-less world. Instead, “to push towards wider-scale radical political change” (p. 123), Thatcher and Dalton offer off-ramps to other worlds in which “our daily device use” is infused with a “radical praxis” (p. 123). Although it is certainly no easy task, Thatcher and Dalton do at least move beyond calls for “better regulation” or “more competition,” where the solution to data capitalism so often appears to be fewer big Googles and more mini-Googles, rather than none at all. Reading *Data Power* optimistically, then, I share the hope that some of these off-ramps might be taken sometime soon, too.

Notes

1. The various playful components of the antiglobalization movement also in the early 2000s spring to mind here, from Pink Bloc to *Tute Bianche*.
2. Offering a similar critique of the dispossession argument, Morozov (2022) considered how tech platforms still sell commodities (albeit “experiential”

ones), rather than merely making their money from data extraction.

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