
Book review:
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BOOK REVIEW

The costs of connection: how data is colonizing human life and appropriating it for capitalism, by Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2019, 352 pp., £22.92 (paperback), ISBN: 9781503609747

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Our everyday digital practices (posting social media updates or buying stuff on Amazon) make profits for Big Tech and can understandably be viewed as capitalistic, but are they also colonial? This question is precisely what Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias consider in *The Costs of Connection* where they repeatedly establish the notion that data extraction and exploitation typify a capitalist iteration that not only bears semblance to history colonialism but also signifies its highest exemplification in the form of data colonialism. Conceived as a decolonial project, the book draws from different research fields, including critical data/information studies, philosophy, political economy, legal studies, sociology, and communication, making useful contributions to each of them in turn. The authors further utilise Western and non-Western contexts, particularly those from China and South America, building on the works of decolonial thinkers like Aníbal Quijano. This underscores the diverse and interdisciplinary frame within which the book is written for a broad audience encompassing research, policy, and industry experts.

The book starts with a preface, after which it is divided into three parts. The first part titled "Extracting" (Chapters 1—3, plus an interlude), shows how data-driven capitalism can be seen as colonialism. Part two labelled "Ordering" (Chapters 4—5), examines the implication of data colonialism for society and human autonomy. The final part, "Reconnecting", contains Chapter 6 and a postscript, and outlines how a social reality different from data colonialism might be imagined.

In the preface, Couldry and Mejias introduce us to key concepts such as data colonialism, defined as "an emerging order for the appropriation of human life so that data can be continuously extracted from it for profit" (p. xiii). There is also the social quantification sector, a term which allows for a concise description of what is commonly seen as Big Tech, widening the inclusion criteria for actors involved in data-driven capitalism. These actors correspond to the *who* involved in the *how* (data colonialism), a phenomenon that has become so pervasive that the authors argue that everyday social relations are becoming increasingly colonial. Colonialism, in this sense, is realised in the way that human life through data is captured and exploited as was done to colonial raw materials by company-states like the East India Company. Couldry and Mejias further add that data colonialism implicates not only the former colonies, but also the developed world given that "colonialism's sites of exploitation today include the very same West that historically imposed colonialism on the rest of the world" (p. x). On this basis, the book provides a remarkable acknowledgement of the global reality of data colonialism, where scholars tend to assume that only the Global South is affected (see Kwet, 2019; Tuzcu, 2021).

Building on the preface, Chapter 1 expands on how data colonialism is bent on appropriating all of human life through data. This is made to seem inevitable, even natural, through data relations. For Couldry and Mejias, data relations are what "enables data extraction to seem both valid and beyond challenge" (p. 27), by making data sharing and provision the everyday routine for people. Hence, data relations entrench data colonialism for the long-term. The authors use this to present a useful contribution to what we know as Marxism, suggesting that Marx's idea of labour relations has been replaced with data relations. Capitalism is no longer just about exploiting labour conditions; it now implicates human life itself. After laying out the *who* (social quantification sector) and the *how* (data colonialism), the authors introduce the *what* in Chapter 2. This is the Cloud Empire, the

infrastructure and organisation that makes data colonialism possible. The Cloud Empire, as a concept, shows that the social quantification sector is interested not in territory or natural resources (as in historical colonialism), but cloud, or better put, human data in the cloud. The big five Cloud Empire corporations are listed as Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google, and Microsoft. Chinese corporations like Alibaba are also included, indicating that the battle for global dominance over the Cloud Empire is being waged between the US and China. Ultimately, China, with its pervasive state-corporate authoritarian surveillance practice, embodies the most advanced illustration of the Cloud Empire – a chilling signpost for where the world is headed. Following Chapter 2, Couldry and Mejias provide an interlude to define terms such as colonialism, neo-colonialism, postcolonialism, and decoloniality. This is a useful background for Chapter 3, where the authors demonstrate how data colonialism can be seen in relation to historical colonialism. They do this by discussing the 4X's of extractivism – Explore, Exploit, Expand, and Exterminate – practices that find expression in both historical and data colonialism. In this way, the book shows how data colonialism, whilst not as physically violent as historical colonialism, can be seen as its parallel, given its destruction of the social space as we know it.

Part two is specifically devoted to the "hollowing out" of this social space and the threat to human autonomy; in other words, the problems that data colonialism engenders. To examine these problems, Couldry and Mejias start in Chapter 4 by highlighting the way that data-driven capitalism creates a new social order defined by platform executives, who are inevitably becoming social theorists. The chapter draws from the work of the historian Karl Polanyi to show that data colonialism is premised on the transformation of not just the market, but also the social – it extends what we know as neoliberalism and seeks to turn social relations themselves into markets. This manifests in the insatiable drive for human data as the basis for social knowledge aimed at producing maximum economic value. Hence, the authors describe data colonialism as the violation of the minimal integrity of the self, since it annexes human life to capital, a reality that bears implication for the social sciences which are also being hollowed out.

Chapter 5 examines in greater detail the notion of the minimal integrity of the self. Here, Couldry and Mejias pay particular attention to the concept of autonomy as opposed to freedom based on the philosophical writings of Hegel and Dussel. For the authors, autonomy is the thing that constitutes the self as a self, the space which data colonialism invades by requiring that people submit to tracking and surveillance, a reality more consequential for those who are economically vulnerable. Ideology also comes in through the notion of the Quantified Self where people are encouraged to track themselves and share their lives online. The consequence, the authors note, is that an illusion of autonomy is presented even though continuous data extraction for capitalist ends means that people cede their ability to self-regulate themselves. Couldry and Mejias further examine data privacy legislation in the American, Brazilian, Chinese, and European contexts. They describe the General Data Protection Regulation as the most significant legal challenge to data colonialism but add that it fails to address the underlying capitalist-colonial practice that makes data colonialism an assault on human autonomy.

After laying out in near-faultless fashion what data colonialism means and its implication for human and social life, the authors attempt in the final part of the book to point the way forward; this is where they struggle, and understandably so. There are no easy solutions. Couldry and Mejias highlight the fact that whilst options such as media literacy, regulation/legislation, and civic activism are good, they remain inadequate, except if they can be used as part of a decolonial project. A decolonial vision for data, therefore, is what Chapter 6 centres on – a vision that starts with rejecting the order imposed by the social quantification sector. Two strands of this vision are outlined in the Chapter. One is Janet Vertesi's concept of *seamfulness*. This involves "insisting on boundaries to the continuous flow of data" (p. 200) so that data and data transfers are responsible and accountable to the people on which they are about. Second is the concept of the *paranodal* (developed by Mejias) – a space that lies in opposition to the nodocentric, which seeks to define social reality through network nodes and lines, imposing a singular understanding of the world as determined by the

network. Paranodality, according to the authors, can then be used by people as a strategy of invincibility to evade surveillance and network hegemony and to reimagine an alternate social reality.

Taken together, the authors' vision relies on collective buy-in to renounce the state of being imposed by data colonialism. It also depends on making the tools of critical research available to everyone, not just academics, so that data subjects can speak for themselves. This points to a bottom-up, all-hands-on-deck approach to facilitate critical engagement and user agency. However, as useful as this is, I note that it falls short when we try to map it to the scale of the challenge aptly set out in earlier chapters. One thing Couldry and Mejias could have considered as part of their vision is the need to extend ideas of a systems-based approach to internet regulation (Wood, 2021) to data colonialism and the social quantification sector. This would likely mean dismantling by regulation the foundational premise of data-driven capitalism, making it such that data extraction and exploitation no longer form business models for platforms. No doubt, this will be costly, representing a radical transformation of the global economy. To carry on as usual, however, with the march towards the Internet of Things portends far greater *Costs of Connection* for humanity as a whole – a point that Couldry and Mejias make excellently well in the name and substance of the book.

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