

Book Review

Bernard Harcourt, *Exposed. Desire and Disobedience in the Digital Age*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2015, Pp. 1+790, ISBN: 0674504577, E-pub format.

At almost 20 years after John Perry Barlow declared the independence of cyberspace through a very persuasive manifesto, Bernard Harcourt published *Exposed* to analyze not only how much the internet has changed over time, but also how a digital kind of self emerged. Barlow's manifesto speaks to us exactly because that kind of a digital universe is now pure fantasy and, if one reads Harcourt's book, dwelling on that ideal is no longer possible. From the simplest forms of our digital life, like social networks and numerous mobile apps, to advanced recommendation algorithms and methods of tracking online activity, the internet became the greatest data collector of individual preferences, political options, desires, location at all time, etc. The author clears the conceptual ground for a new kind of metaphor, the expository society, that can encompass both the perils we are aware of when we immerse in the digital dimension, and our readiness to let ourselves seduced by social media connections who round up exposing us as subjects of surveillance, data mining, monitoring and profiling.

The book aims to achieve three main goals: firstly, "to trace the emergence of a new architecture of power relations throughout society, to excavate its antecedents, to explore what it is constructing" (63) through a thoughtful analysis of the most controversial disclosures regarding the digital environment, like those concerning the PRISM program; secondly, "to document its effects on our political relations, on our conception of self, and on our way of life" (64); last, but not least, "to explore how to resist and disobey" (65).

The book is organized in four parts, each providing a useful framework in analyzing the implications of all kind of interactions on the internet that involves giving up a part of your analog self's private information and letting the digital self expose it. Part I, *Clearing the Ground*, parts ways with some unfitting metaphors like Orwell's Big Brother and Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. Harcourt supports the idea that metaphors play a constitutive role in how we understand and interpret certain features of reality and therefore we can draw the right conclusions and analyze the implications of an action only if we operate with the most appropriate and far-reaching concept/metaphor. Orwell did a great job in describing the mechanisms of oppression, but he could not foresee the one ingredient that Harcourt thinks to be the core of the digital, namely "the role that desire would play in enabling digital exposure today" (81). If in Oceania the authorities were concerned with spreading hatred and distrust among citizens, in the distinct world of social networks desire is preserved as the core drive of our digital activity. The author of *Exposed* invokes Facebook's refusal to introduce a dislike button, exactly because this gesture would go against what we all settled for when we befriended the internet. Adding desire to the old pile of ingredients associated with oppressive societies is drastically reshaping the paradigm of discourse regarding surveillance. Harcourt's work is, even from this point of view, an attempt to draw attention on the fact that we can no longer talk only about the surveillance state in this equation, but also about private actors like corporations driven by economic stimuli and individuals craving for public confirmation. This is why he considers that the metaphor of a surveillance state must also be abandoned.

By invoking Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity" (165), Harcourt argues in favor of the thesis that modern institutions no longer have time to solidify and therefore we live in a world where the structure of power is more fluid than ever. Lastly, however complex and terrifying Foucault and Bentham's Panopticon would be, it is unfit for the age of spectacle that goes hand in hand with surveillance, like two dialectical forces that shape behaviors, attitudes, desires, institutions and governments. The prisoners of a panoptic structure internalize the disciplinary practices to the point that the actual act of surveillance is no longer required. While it was a useful metaphor for catching something about the distinctive nature of power and knowledge in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, maybe even more recently- Harcourt is never questioning this particular idea- he believes that perpetuating it would convey an inexact message. It would be more appropriate to talk about a *cryptopticon*, a term that could capture more than one attitude toward surveillance- ignorance, fear, even delight.

The second part of the book, *The Birth of the Expository Society*, provides the readers with a more appropriate metaphor – a mirrored glass pavilion – that can capture the true dimension of our expository society. He takes the work of Dan Graham, "Hedge Two-Way Mirror Walkabout", to be the archetype of generic glass structures that he calls into question: "part crystal palace, part high-tech construction, partly aesthetic and partly efficient, these glass and steel constructs allow us to see ourselves and others through mirrored surfaces and virtual reflections" (236). Harcourt's proposal seems to capture many, if not every dimension of our digital rendition: the desire for participation, the need for appreciation, the ease with which individuals subject to questionable terms and conditions for a greater, digital advantage, all with the promise that everyone else's showcase is also available in this hazy environment. The author thinks that the reason why we immerse with ignorance in the digital life is that we abandoned the *humanist mind-set* that valued and preserved privacy and autonomy and, in turn, transitioned to a *rational choice framework*, associated with the commodification of privacy and the like. When people started to perceive privacy and autonomy as commodities, they lost their value: "In the digital age, we are more likely to hear about the cost of privacy, not its virtues or even its value. We are far more likely to hear about trade-offs and opportunity costs." (382). Here Harcourt makes a dangerous and partly unconvincing move trying to correlate the rise of the neoliberal approach with the creation of submissive individuals in the digital sphere. If the basic tenets of economic neoliberalism are truly internalized, this would not lead to a devaluation of the idea of privacy, but quite the opposite. If individuals perceive privacy and autonomy as commodities, then this would be the strongest case in favor of the privatization of data. Nonetheless, little reaction was registered after a chain of revelations about personal data being sold, misused and instrumentalized in the most illegitimate ways, as the author himself admits. If the logic deployed in this chapter would be bulletproof, then a massive stir was in order. The neoliberal doctrine does not shape passive and compliant citizens, at least not properly understood.

The third section of the book, *The Perils of Digital Exposure*, is an attempt to illustrate how multinational technology companies, like Apple, took over the function of censorship that not so long ago was associated entirely with the state. The author uses the example of Josh Begley, who created a mobile app called 'Drones+' and submitted it to Apple, but got rejected on the grounds that it was not useful enough and that the content provided by the application could be found largely objectionable by the audi-

ence. The fact that we live in a world where so many private actors are willing to oversee our every move, to influence our preferences through recommendation algorithms, to buy private information or to sell it for the sake of profit, leads Harcourt to deploy Goffman's *mortification of the self* as a key concept that can capture the way in which our daily digital practices detach the self "from its former identity" (484). These structures of power, specific for the digital era, produce moral experiences or, even more accurate, „a phenomenology of the analog carceral experience that may shed light on our digital condition" (482). It is a new way of perceiving ourselves, a fundamental dimension of the human existence that loops back and forth from real to virtual dimensions. This is not in itself a very troubling fact. What counts as problematic is the impossibility of telling them apart at times and the abusiveness of the digital environment combined with the interests of private actors. Harcourt subscribes to Foucault's attempt to conceive a genealogy of the perpetual game of reconfiguration that various relations of power entail. He finds the general foucauldian conceptual framework useful in the respect that all digital practices are in themselves a *dispositif* which enhances the amassment of knowledge and power over individuals and particular events and decisions with percussive effects over the social body. If those digital practices, often undemocratic and dishonest, produce moral experiences, they have a transformative role. This reconfiguration of subjectivity implies a major shift in attitude towards algorithms at the expense of one's sense of self-reliance. Anxiety, depression and an overwhelming sense of lack of control are tolerated foes, an uneasy and corrosive consequence of giving up control over one's extended self. In this section, the mirrored glass pavilion turns into an asylum where humiliation and degradation go hand in hand with a pervasive satisfaction. It is, as Harcourt puts it, a new world that emerges from under Kafka's literary metaphor – the bureaucratic behavior of abuse and indifference that we inhabit, a genuine *cryptopticon*.

In the last part of the book, Harcourt succeeds in doing a *tour de force* starting from those philosophical ideas that resiliently support the idea of resistance, even though they do not entail with necessity a realistic commitment, but rather a pragmatic one. This is the most philosophically substantial part of the book and also the most intriguing, because it highlights the perks of making sense of a new conceptual grounding regarding the exhibitionist self as a product of scanty democratic practices. Just as Tocqueville forewarned in „*Democracy in America*," paternalistic tendencies who materialize end up having the most dramatic consequences- citizens are infantilized to the point that they become unable to access all forms of resistance. For these reasons, a philosophy of resistance must be aware of the way in which the expository society is redefining the democratic practices, including electoral campaigns, the voting process and the making of truth standards for information.

Virtual democracy is a cyber-utopia. Only by stepping outside of it one can see the dangers that surround our democratic regimes. Harcourt uses Deleuze's concept of *societies of control*. He maintains that any society of control has some associated machines, from rudimentary forms – levers, pulleys, clocks-to infinitely more advanced forms, with a much more subtle *modus operandi* – a network of computers and an army of two-faced algorithms. Just as Deleuze, Harcourt is an optimist; he believes that any society of control has its cure. He analyzes possible forms of resistance, from minor gestures like the use of proxy websites, to the whole phenomena of whistle-blowing. Assange's WikiLeaks is a form of institutionalized resistance that is given as example of complex and efficient counteraction. Nonetheless, there are more subtle and acces-

sible forms of coping with the mechanisms of a virtual democracy, like designing and implementing educational programs in schools in order to raise awareness of the lesser known sides of the digital trade-offs, the use of sophisticated encryption software and the like. Furthermore, he points to the fact that political philosophers had neglected to talk about some policy proposals that could be just the answer we are looking for: digital taxation and the privatization of data. By privatizing the data we would give the owners the ability to cash in on whatever information they choose to disseminate.

Harcourt's book, *Exposed*, is definitely a thought-provoking work, providing its readers with a conceptual framework that goes from various transformations of the self, the rise of a new political and economical paradigm in which the state is no longer the only agent who is posing a threat to the individual freedom and a thorough deconstruction of the metaphors that help us shaping and making sense of the present. With an inciting empirical background, this book is an excellent reference for anyone concerned with the philosophy of the internet, ethics, philosophy of law, or simply searching for further lectures on digital and surveillance studies. Harcourt aims at establishing the main research directions concerning privacy and means of resistance, and he succeeds in doing just that. *Exposed* is not just the work of a legal theorist, but also the philosophical product of a man who teaches and writes about spectacle and surveillance, techniques of torture and confessions – they all play a part in making this book one of the most comprehensive and well written works on this subject.

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