

## Lessons From *The Panoptic Sort*

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On the occasion of the publication of the second edition of Oscar Gandy's (2021) *The Panoptic Sort*, I went back to my dog-eared and faded-yellow original copy. I first bought this paperback when I was a graduate student in Australia and carried it with me when I moved to the United States over a decade ago. It is a well-loved book, with many penciled notes in the margins. Yet, whenever I reread it, there is a predictable moment of confusion that leads me to turn to the copyright page. When was this first published? Surely, it is a more recent vintage than I recall? But there it is, a first-published date of 1993 with Westview Press, five years before Google came into existence, 11 years before the birth of Facebook, 16 years before ImageNet was assembled, 17 years before the *Citizens United* case, and 20 years before Edward Snowden revealed the surveillance practices of the intelligence agencies in the Five Eyes.

To call Gandy's book prescient is not enough. It captures the underlying structures that would later become the defining features of the current extractive era of information capitalism. It is that rare thing: a blazing book, offering both light and heat. It illuminates what Gandy (1993) calls a "discriminatory process that sorts individuals on the basis of their estimated value or worth" that "reaches into every aspect of individuals lives in their roles as citizens, employees and consumers" (p. 1). But it is also fired by a deep sense of the injustice produced by a system that "identifies, breeds, cultivates, and reproduces failure . . . and each cycle pushes us further from the democratic ideal" (Gandy, 1993, pp. 228–230).

The book constellates the work of Karl Marx, Jacques Ellul, Max Weber, Michel Foucault, and Anthony Giddens and draws from them a new way of understanding surveillance—across the core processes of identification, classification, and assessment—that together becomes the panoptic sort. This system of institutionalized power that Gandy described in the 1990s would be supercharged by the kinds of machine learning that would be popularized in the 2010s, commercialized by the big tech platforms, and entrenched across government agencies and social institutions. While the focus of much public debate about artificial intelligence centers on the latest horrors, from Facebook incentivizing anger and misinformation to Amazon's punitive worker surveillance systems, *The Panoptic Sort* reminds us that the underlying power structures were, in fact, materializing decades prior.

It is Gandy's work on classification and prediction that foreshadows much of what would happen later with machine learning, and he underscores why these systems are inescapably political. "There are no objective standards," Gandy (1993) wrote, "classification always includes an assessment, whether expressed or not" (p. 17). But at that time, there were real computational and infrastructural limits to how much data could be retained and how fine-grained the classification of individuals could be. There were administrative, financial, and technical hurdles, forms of friction that slowed the gears.

Gandy uses examples that can seem quaint now: from clunky expert systems for transaction analysis to assessing employees with lengthy questionnaires and printouts that compared their effectiveness to other colleagues. Now there is widespread use of cheap algorithmic bossware that surveils and compares workers in real time, and emotion recognition systems that claim to be scanning microexpressions for signs of sadness, anger, or distraction on the job (Harwell, 2020). The underlying motivations are the same, but the technological mechanisms have changed, and the pandemic has only accelerated their extensive adoption. *The Panoptic Sort* is a compelling reminder that the forms of technology are less important than the kinds of power they represent and magnify.

The book ends with a truly horrifying image of the future, described by Jacques Ellul (1964) in another book that had a preternatural sense of what was to come, *The Technological Society*:

It will not be a universal concentration camp, for it will be guilty of no atrocity. It will not seem insane, for everything will be ordered, and the stains of human passion will be lost amid the chromium gleam. We shall have nothing more to lose, and nothing to win. Our deepest instincts and our most secret passions will be analyzed, published and exploited. We shall be rewarded with everything our hearts ever desired. And the supreme luxury of the society of technical necessity will be to grant the bonus of useless revolt and of an acquiescent smile. (as cited in Gandy, 1993, p. 230)

It is the last block quotation of *The Panoptic Sort*, and it leaves no doubt in the reader's mind as to the seriousness of what is at stake. So, what is Gandy's answer to the question of whether these technological systems of control can be transformed to serve more democratic goals? He offers one of the most succinct critiques of this idea, equally applicable to "Data for Good" initiatives as it is to the more recent attempts to "democratize AI":

It has been and remains my view that the panoptic sort is an antidemocratic system of control that cannot be transformed because it can serve no purpose other than that for which it was designed—the rationalization and control of human existence. (Gandy, 1993, p. 227)

Instead, he suggests that critical scholars should raise doubts, give voice to unspoken concerns, and speak to the engineers who are designing these systems (Gandy, 1993, p. 230). Almost 30 years after these words were written, with the cathedrals of algorithmic power rising all around us, a hard lesson we have learned is that this will not be enough.

## References

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