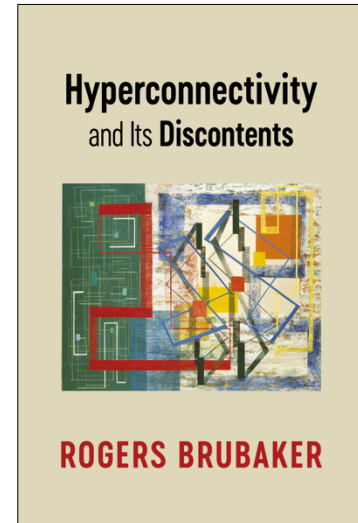


Rogers Brubaker, **Hyperconnectivity and Its Discontents**, Hoboken, NJ: Polity, 2023, 288 pp., \$24.95 (paperback).

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Digital connectivity goes back decades, along with the computer technology that makes it possible, but *hyperconnectivity* is a relatively new development distinguished by the ubiquity of smartphone usage and the Internet. Modern life is so immersed in hyperconnectivity that the experience of reading this text is reminiscent of the oft-paraphrased adage about the fish unaware of water; Gen Z readers such as myself—who can scarcely remember a world without the Internet or smartphones—are the fish, and hyperconnectivity is the water. Despite this generational idiosyncrasy, all readers are likely to find value in the methodical account in this text, which analyzes how hyperconnectivity reorganizes all aspects of life from the quotidian to the profound.



Author and professor of sociology at UCLA, Rogers Brubaker, locates the advent of hyperconnectivity in the first half of the 2010s, when social media and smartphones were becoming widespread, which led to an increase in digitally mediated activities (p. 3). Most readers will have some idea of what hyperconnectivity is, but Brubaker offers the following definition:

Digital hyperconnectivity is not a ‘thing’... it does not directly cause things to happen. It is an environment, a terrain, an ecology of communication; a web of humans, machines, protocols, practices, and data; a complex sociotechnical assemblage comprising communication networks, computational procedures, material artifacts, social practices, embodied habits, organizational forms, economic incentives, and legal frameworks. (p. 6)

The author argues this hyperconnected environment has ushered in the digitalization of all spheres of life, rendering it a “total social fact” of late modernity (p. 2). Hyperconnectivity reorganizes consumption, work, education, medicine, therapy, entertainment, and—beyond everyday life—it has also transformed selves, interactions, culture, economics, and politics. These latter categories compose the five core chapters of ***Hyperconnectivity and Its Discontents***.

Hyperconnectivity tends to accelerate or exacerbate existing social phenomena, which is frequently the case in the first chapter on selves. Brubaker states that hyperconnectivity has furthered the postmodern experience of self, which essentially consists of selecting from a vast storehouse of different possible selves; furthermore, multiplying the occasions for social comparison enabled by hyperconnectivity introduces the problem of choosing who to become (p. 24). This experience falls under the rubric of abundance mentioned earlier, and it can be overwhelming for the individual. But it can also be liberating. The many paradoxes of hyperconnectivity stem from its giving and taking, such as curtailing freedom in some respects but

expanding it in others. For example, Brubaker argues how the sociotechnical phenomenon has furthered the capacity for emancipating the self from its immediate circles of community, ergo the smartphone is simultaneously both an individualizing technology, by circumventing communal surveillance, and collectivizing, by facilitating the emergence of alternate communities (p. 26).

Another tendency of hyperconnectivity is the quantification of selfhood, which refers to using data to inform areas of life such as health, fitness, and productivity. Similarly, digital interactions can be used to regulate the self, like consuming certain content to alter mood, bodies, or physiological states. This regulation is not exclusive to hyperconnectivity but is made more convenient and frictionless by the immediate access to content that hyperconnectivity affords. Hyperconnectivity has a unique tendency to untether digital consumption from any temporal and spatial constraints. Always on, all the time, anywhere. And all the while, Brubaker reminds the reader, tech corporations are incessantly collecting data to inform their algorithms about what the user enjoys, and to predict relevant content to display to them. Thus, hyperconnectivity both furthers the neoliberal privileging of choice and goes beyond it: Through its data, the postneoliberal self will no longer require the discriminatory faculty of choice to construct the self, but instead will be "disciplined by those powers, drawn into their administrative routines, habituated into yielding data to them, and conscripted into providing labor for them" (p. 48).

The ways that the hyperconnected environment has altered selfhood overlaps with the category of interactions. Just as hyperconnectivity can transport the self outside the immediate constraints of time and space, social interaction is no longer bound by context. Hyperconnectivity erodes the boundaries of "socially defined places and times," thus public spaces are becoming increasingly colonized by privatization as people are transported by their devices to a digital elsewhere (pp. 53–54). One example is the proliferation of microsociety, which stems from communicative abundance and results in the miniaturization of social interactions (p. 57). The author also attends to social surveillance, both among users and by platforms, and the capacity for platforms to engineer certain social interactions. But it is worth noting that Brubaker does not shy away from discussing more normative questions of value: he wonders whether efficiency is itself always a good thing, discusses the danger of making life more transactional, and the risk of losing touch with the embodied condition of humanity (pp. 72–76). This positions his account as critical, and Brubaker himself acknowledges his critical leaning from the outset, but the text still reads as a balanced and nuanced exploration of hyperconnectivity's numerous ambivalences.

Many of those ambivalences can be observed in the realm of culture. Gone are the gatekeepers of taste, something that celebrants might argue has allowed for the redistribution of cultural power. The promise of hyperconnectivity is the promise of culture's democratization, a decentralized and participatory cultural landscape where anyone can Tweet, make content for YouTube or TikTok, become Instagram famous, and countless other avenues of potential Internet celebrity (p. 78). Brubaker explores what it means for culture to become content, like how cultural artifacts fragment and proliferate in increasingly smaller bits (p. 77). The miniaturization of digital cultural goods makes them susceptible to "blur together in the continuous flow of content" (p. 83). Emphasizing another ambivalence of hyperconnectivity, Brubaker states: "We encounter more culture than ever, but we engage it more superficially. We surf on the cultural froth" (p. 83).

In the chapter on economics, Brubaker scrutinizes the platforms where hyperconnectivity takes place, first by drawing attention to the term “platform” itself, which may suggest equality and mutuality. Platforms exist in an asymmetrical power relation with users, primarily because of the data collecting that can be considered foundational for the development of surveillance capitalism. Increasingly, platforms play an infrastructural role by positioning themselves in between users and desired ends or goods. This relationship results in increased monetization that “may be a market utopia,” Brubaker writes, “but it is a social dystopia” (p. 104). Platforms also contribute to miniaturization of labor by taskifying jobs, making possible the purchase of smaller and smaller bits of labor (p. 115). The asymmetrical power that platforms enjoy is highlighted when considering how digital infrastructure is becoming increasingly crucial for all aspects of life (something that the pandemic also emphasized). Rather than the equanimity of power relations that the term “platform” may suggest, power has now become concentrated and consolidated by a select few tech corporations.

In the chapter on politics, the author reiterates that hyperconnectivity is not a force, but an environment, arguing that—while it is not the cause of epistemic issues about truth—social media platforms can exacerbate these epistemic issues by reinforcing suspicion and eroding institutional trust through the abundance of online information. This abundance allows competing truth claims to proliferate and appear side-by-side on, say, YouTube or Twitter (pp. 129–133). The terrain of hyperconnectivity may lead people to inhabit radically different public worlds. Brubaker also argues how the logic of hyperconnectivity has “deep affinities with the logic of populism” (p. 151). The cultural currency of hyperconnectivity is popularity, and what seems to become popular is content that is, in Brubaker’s words, “raw,” “crude,” and “unrestrained” (p. 151). The explanation is simple yet intuitive: In the infinite abundance of digital content, what becomes popular tends to be what is more attention grabbing, as these “low styles” of content may be considered more emotionally charged (p. 151).

In the conclusion, Brubaker considers how reality and fiction are mutually illuminating. Regarding the former, he discusses the pandemic as a moment in time where platforms became crucial and redefined the meaning of social life, citing the massive audience for digital happenings such as Fortnite’s live concert events (p. 157). He then meditates on the dystopian, but plausible, future possibility of a digital divide:

The poor will suffer from digital excess, while the rich frequent curated enclaves of digital scarcity. The poor may be relegated to digital entertainment, virtual experiences, AI-powered therapy, and robotic companions, while the rich will continue to enjoy the varied and gratifying in-person experiences that only they, as the “reality-privileged,” can afford. (p. 161)

Some could argue this is already the case.

This text is dense with more examples than can be alluded to here, but they are always presented in an order that is clear and easy to follow. The book would serve as a helpful reference for any of the areas of inquiry that title the chapters. When read as a holistic text, it provides an informative and engaging overview of digitally intertwined life that does not sacrifice breadth for depth.