



How We Became Our Data
By Colin Koopman

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9.21.21 | Martin Shuster

Symposium Introduction

It is my pleasure to introduce this symposium on Colin Koopman's important book. As the effects of the corporate use of data and the age of "surveillance capitalism" (Shoshana Zuboff) becomes more and more explored within our world, Koopman's book is a particularly welcome one to the extent that it locates this notion of data in *genealogical* terms, showing how its precursors stretch back beyond where its origins are oftentimes located.

This is a useful procedure to the extent that it allows us to situate and anchor these questions in broader discussions that emerge in modernity. Where it is common to conceive the various problems raised by big data and by us becoming understood chiefly in terms of data, *How We Became Our Data* shows how these discussions in fact connect to earlier movements in modernity around conceptions of subjectivity and

agency, around the emergence of racial thinking, and around discourses of power and sovereignty. Of course, none of these multifaceted discourses have been absent, but it is incredibly useful to have them unified in the genealogical procedure that Koopman undertakes in this book. Framing things in this way also allows Koopman to develop a notion of infopower, which is meant to be located amidst other (Foucault-inspired) discourses of power.

In what follows you will read responses by Dan Smith, Jen Forestal, Corey McCall, and Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson.

	9.21.21 Daniel W. Smith
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Infopower, Formatting, and Inscription

The counterpoint to Colin Koopman’s brilliant *How We Became Our Data* is perhaps Michel Foucault’s own 1977 introduction to a never-produced book called *The Lives of Miniscule Humans*. Foucault had considered putting together an anthology chronicling the lives of ordinary people who had disappeared from history completely except for brief entries entered into the bureaucratic records of a prison, asylum, or hospital—entries that Foucault would stumble upon while working in the archives of the French national library: “Jean Antoine Touzard, placed in the castle of Bicêtre, 21 April 1701: ‘Seditious apostate friar, capable of the greatest crimes, sodomite, atheist if that were possible; this individual is a veritable monster of abomination whom it would be better to stifle than to leave at large.’” These lines are the only data that remains of the life of the unfortunate Jean Touzard, although no doubt such fleeting archival records were already a step above the fate of most humans—the degree zero in which we die without leaving behind the slightest trace of our existence.

Koopman's book reminds us how far removed we are from such a world. In Foucault's imagined book, data was produced primarily by institutions charged with caring for people considered to be "abnormal"—the diseased, the criminal, the mad. Today, in an age of information, we live in a regime of "infopower" where the data on each individual is massive ("big data") and the scourge of abnormality has instead fallen on "undocumented" people, the *sans papiers*. The aim of Koopman's book is both to analyze this new apparatus of infopower and to trace its genealogy.

Koopman's argument is that infopower is a distinctive modality of political power that is exercised through the technique of *formatting*, an operation that serves to "fasten" subjects so tightly to their data that "we have *become* our data" (ix). For Koopman, this claim means that data can now determine what it is possible for an individual to *be* or *do*. Depending on our data, a financial transaction will be approved or blocked, a college admission will be accepted or rejected, entrance to a building will be granted or denied, a job application will be successful or unsuccessful, a border will be crossed or not. Data can both "tie us down and speed us up"; it can *canalize* future possibilities (63) as much as it can *accelerate* our existence (as in the constant stream of notifications we receive "as an elicitation for ever more engagement" [13]). Koopman is one of the few philosophers who has taken the notion of formatting and turned it into a rigorous philosophical concept.

How We Became Our Data presents a history of our present, an analysis of the roots of the regime of infopower that has supplanted—or rather coexists with—the regimes of biopower and disciplinary power that Foucault himself analyzed. The information age, Koopman shows, began to appear long before the development of the World Wide Web, or the computer, or even the development of information theory in the late 1940s (Weiner, Shannon, Turing), which are the touchstones for traditional histories. Rather, Koopman shows that the regime of infopower coalesced in the beginning of the twentieth century, when "information began to precede the

person” (6) as if it were a new infrastructure, a new “historical universal” (10) into which subjects were inserted. Humans were becoming “informational persons.”

Part 1 of the book—which is a stunning *tour de force*—proposes a Foucauldian genealogy of three new forms of data-based identity that constitute the informational person: documentary, psychological, and racial identity. Like Foucault’s work, Koopman’s analyses are deeply grounded in archival detail, and one might say they give a new meaning to “empiricism” in philosophy. The first chapter traces the formatting of the birth certificate, the first document that fastens individuals to specific data points, such as their race, sex, name and occupation of the parents, and even the “legitimacy” of their birth. Bookended by one’s death certificate, the birth certificate became an individual’s entry point into an ever-expanding network of informatics: social security numbers, bank statements, email accounts, drivers’ licenses, passports, university transcripts, market transactions, email accounts, genetic reporting, and on and on (44, 155).

More surprisingly, the second chapter (66–107) shows how the concept of “personality” coalesced in the early twentieth century out of the endeavor to “objectively” measure the psychological traits of humans. One result of this endeavor was an astonishing book by the primary proponent of “psychometrics,” Gordon Allport, that compiled an exhaustive list of 17,953 English-language trait names—the human psyche formatted into big data. “Intelligent” was one of these trait-names, and the early 1900s was the era in which intelligence testing came into vogue as a method of measuring the intellect. Koopman’s radical claim is that, strictly speaking, individuals did not have “personalities” until this attempt to *format* human psychology came into being, much as Arnold Davidson argued that there had been no perverts until the concept of perversion, and its corresponding mode of being, was formatted in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

The remarkable third chapter, on the seemingly mundane topic of real estate, shows how racism in the 1930s and 1940s, though officially disavowed, wound up being embedded in the

algorithms of *redlining*, which resulted in severe racial segregation in housing, banking, and education, an Eichmann-like convergence of systemic racism with bureaucratic banality. The chapter is the apotheosis Koopman's empirical analyses, since it shows that the entire structure of infopower in which the information person exists is inevitably racist. I suspect it will become a standard text in the theory of race.

In each of these chapters, Koopman shows himself to be a worthy successor to Foucault. He does not merely repeat what Foucault said, but does what Foucault did: patient, detailed, and philosophically informed historical research to which these brief summaries can hardly do justice. "The discursive deeds of grand theory," Koopman writes, "gain their force through the practical elaboration of tiny techniques" (71). Koopman has weaved an extraordinary narrative from the work of the largely unknown technicians who produced the regime of infopower by devoting themselves to the "minutiae of formatting" (161).

In part 2 of his book, Koopman then turns to the necessary question, How should we respond politically to the regime of infopower? to which the fifth chapter ("Redesign") gives a nuanced and forceful response. Infopower has opened up new possibilities, to be sure, but it has also facilitated "injustices, inequalities, and unfreedoms" (154). One is reminded of Melvin Kranzberg's dictum that "technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral." Koopman persuasively shows the limitations of theories of deliberative democracy based on communicative proceduralism (Habermas, Rawls), since such theories ignore the informatics and formatting processes upon which they rest, and without which deliberation and communication would be impossible (184–87). What we need, Koopman argues, is a more profound *politics of formats*, a politics that not only addresses the formation of information, but the ways in which formatting occurs and the means by which information is stored, processed, compared, repurposed, distributed, and so on (182). In reflecting on Foucault's notion of resistance, Gilles Deleuze noted in 1990 that the strikes

and sabotage of factory work had given way to hacking and viruses, and one wonders what new forms of resistance would emerge in a politics of formats: Alternative types of formats? A jamming of current formats? A struggle against the very activity of formatting? The lawsuits against the current tech giants (Amazon, Apple, Google, Facebook) are only the surface manifestation of a formatting politics that is spread deeply into the warp and woof of the social fabric, and we can only hope that Koopman will develop a politics of formats in more detail in a future work.

In the fourth chapter (“Diagnostics”), finally, Koopman attempts to situate his analysis in a broader philosophical context. Koopman’s empirical analyses are largely restricted to the early twentieth century, roughly the period from 1913 to 1937, just as Foucault’s early works were confined to the classical period. He takes pains to show how the regime of infopower must be distinguished from the regimes of biopower, disciplinary power, and sovereign power that Foucault himself analyzed, even if they overlap and intermingle. His discussion raises several issues that, in my mind, point to fertile directions for future research.

First, Koopman seems to have opened the door to a broader understanding of the history (and even prehistory) of infopower. He approvingly cites Lisa Gitelman’s declaration that “new inscriptions signal new subjectivities” (6), and her concept of inscription is perhaps one manner of approaching that history.

Nietzsche, for instance, had argued that the inscriptions that initially documented our identity were made *directly on the body*: a circumcised penis, a scarified forehead, or a tattooed body marked one as a Jew, a Nuer, or a Maori (mnemotechnics). Are these marks, which are inscribed directly on the surface of the body, any less a form of infopower than marks that are inscribed on a piece of paper? With the invention of *writing*, inscriptions were externalized and able to be “captured” by states and their bureaucracies. Moreover, teaching the techniques of inscribing marks and interpreting them (literacy) became one of the fundamental purposes of educational institutions, to the point where

being “illiterate” implied that one is both uncivilized and unintelligent. Money, or capital, is itself a form of inscription, pieces of data added to or subtracted from the accounts of banks and firms. The practices analyzed by Koopman obviously presuppose these “prior” forms of infopower, and recent books have analyzed how inscription has been further transformed by the advent of digitalization, such as Cathy O’Neil’s *Weapons of Math Destruction* (on the role of automated algorithms) and Seth Stephens-Davidowitz’s *Everybody Lies* (on the human psychology revealed in Google data).

Koopman himself points to the work in media studies (Kittler) and elsewhere that has started to assess the continuities and discontinuities of this prehistory of infopower, with all its singularities (writing, literacy, printing, computers, etc.).

Second, although Koopman adopts Foucault’s method of genealogy, for instance, one might argue that what Bergson once called the “retrograde movement” of knowledge is also at play.

It is often said that, in the modern world, there have been three ages of machines—mechanical, energetic, and information machines—and each of these machines has been used as a model for comprehending nature, or objects in nature. In the seventeenth century, the idea of mechanism arose in part from the model of the watch: the world is like a machine with internal mechanisms that explain its functioning. The same happened in the nineteenth century, when the invention of the steam engine led to the development of the science of thermodynamics, and workers came to be seen as human motors with an energetic capacity or “labor power” that could be quantified and optimized (Taylorism, Fordism).

Today, the computer seems to have become a model for almost everything, from genetics (the genetic “program” or “code”) to the mind (our brain is the hardware, and the mind is the software, running different programs in different modules). These are not mere metaphors or analogies. Nature is an organization of matter, and technical artifacts (machines, motors, computers)

are ways in which *we* have learned to organize matter. Since we have a “maker’s knowledge” of our artifacts—a knowledge from the inside, as it were—we use that knowledge to comprehend the organizations found in nature, including human organizations.

Yet once technical models such as mechanism, energetics, and information emerged, it was inevitable that they would be used, in a retrograde movement, to understand the past. In his essay “Kafka and His Precursors,” Jorge Luis Borges catalogues a number of earlier writers whose works exhibit Kafkaesque elements but otherwise have little else in common. But such authors can begin to look Kafkaesque only once we have read Kafka himself. “The fact is that each writer *creates* his precursors,” Borges concludes, “his work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.” The same would seem to be true of information: the advent of informatics has modified our conception of the past. Koopman rightly suggests that the informational “precursors” he analyses were on the cusp of achieving consolidation or stabilization (176–77). But might it be equally the case that their “conditions of appearance” (26) lies in the fact that we *retrospectively* recognize them as informational precisely because of the later consolidation and stabilization of informatics?

Third, this leads to a last point about historicity and temporality. Koopman rightly rejects an analysis of the relation between infopower and biopower (or any other formation) in terms of simple succession or “temporal eras” (171). Succession is itself a form of temporality that derives from sovereign power, since it measures time in terms of the succession of sovereigns (“in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar”). For Koopman, it is not as if infopower succeeded biopower, disciplinary power, or even sovereign power; rather, infopower inserted itself into these formations. He adopts a suggestion of Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson that replaces succession with “interpenetration and superimposition” (172). But this seems to presume a conception of temporality in which time is not successive but rather coexistent. In *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*,

Deleuze and Guattari proposed the provocative thesis that archaic states such as Babylon and Egypt could not and did not form from simpler “primitive” societies; rather, such social formations existed side-by-side in a single *field of coexistence*, which alone can account for their intermingling and interpenetration.

Whether or not their solution is adequate, Koopman’s work has renewed the question of how to think of history in terms other than succession.

No doubt these are metaphysical issues of the type of Koopman rightly eschews (10, 236n84). But they point to the fact that, in its focus on the concrete practices of infopower, the implications of Koopman’s outstanding work, like all great works, goes far beyond its stated intentions.



9.21.21 | Colin Koopman

Reply to Daniel W. Smith

I am grateful to all four respondents who have assembled these engaging responses to *How We Became Our Data*. A number of crucial themes criss-cross between their pieces as they pose challenging questions central to both the book’s account of the power of data and the background methodology operative in that account. I would like to begin with a few thoughts in response to Dan Smith’s very welcome provocations as I believe this will help establish a useful frame for the three exchanges to follow with Jennifer Forestal, Corey McCall, and Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson. Smith’s response also offers a welcome introduction in its concise summary of the book’s main

claims and arguments. I have nothing to disagree with in his summary and find it a helpful description of what I was attempting in the book.

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In the course of the summary portion of his response, Smith pays me two enormous compliments, though I am not sure he intended them as quite as significant as I take them. The first is his observation that the book “does not merely repeat what Foucault said, but does what Foucault did: patient, detailed, and philosophically informed historical research.” Foucault’s genealogy is indeed my major philosophical orientation in the book, but Smith is right that I use Michel Foucault the way a novelist uses George Eliot or an essayist uses James Baldwin. The serious writer uses the writers that precede them as a model for what, with great effort and even greater luck, they themselves just might be able to pull off in some other form. But there would be no point in attempting to state again (at least at the length of a book, leaving to the side the scholarly task of the exegetical article) what Foucault has already said about discipline and biopower, just like it would never occur to any serious novelist to simply reproduce the iconic characters in *Middlemarch* or any serious essayist to merely rehearse Baldwin’s penetrating insights in “Nothing Personal.”

This brings me to Smith’s second compliment. He claims that my book’s analyses “give a new meaning to ‘empiricism’ in philosophy.” This is significant because genealogical philosophy is not often labelled empiricist. And yet one reason I go to it is because of its empiricist ambitions. Smith is right that an empirical genealogy would require a new conception of empiricism, that is one no longer beholden to a simplified view of knowledge as an automated accumulation of sense data. Perhaps it is the empiricism worked out, to mention in passing a philosopher Smith and I both admire, Barry Allen, and his new book *Empiricisms* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

To give a sense of why I think an empirical-genealogical orientation matters when it comes to any pressing present issue, consider a further comment of Smith’s later in his response. He notes

as a key theme of the book its “conception of temporality in which time is not successive but coexistent.”

Smith’s point about temporal coexistence is framed by him through the Deleuzian idea that “social formations” are never totalities but rather always exist “side-by-side in a single *field of existence*.” The cartographic correlative to Smith’s chronometric observation is that space, like time, is coextensive. Said differently, when philosophy analyses its fields, it should not assume as its methodological postulate that there is a totalizing system that exhaustively saturates any given space. The political philosopher should not assume that a given space is completed saturated by a single political system. The epistemologist should not presume that a given field of rationality is exhaustively characterized by a single epistemic formation. Every space is already a conjunctive association of a multiplicity of coexisting formations. I take it that this, in part, is what Deleuze and Guattari were focused on with their signature concept of *agencements* (often translated as “assemblages”), Latour with his notion of *associations*, and Foucault with his concept of *dispositifs*.

The glue that holds this methodological approach together is not the internal rationality in a unified social totality that waits for a philosopher to intuit it. The approach holds because of the “empiricist” commitment discerned by Smith in which there is an unceasing ambition to inquire ever further into the heterogeneity that is the political. Multiplicitous time and space can be countenanced only by the energetic empiricist. The rationalist by contrast insists on a unity and totality that can be smoothed into a beautiful idea.

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Let me now situate Smith’s insight (or at least my adoption of it) in the landscape of contemporary political philosophy. There is a crucial methodological question facing the political philosopher through which we can refract Smith’s point. Is political philosophy about the totality of the system or is it about regional operations of power?

The former approach is represented by much of classical political theory, and is more recently clearly exhibited in John Rawls's theory of justice, which takes as its object of scrutiny what he calls "the basic structure of society." The idea, and it is not at all unintuitive, is that society itself is held together as a single system by a political core that forms its "basic structure" in such a way that this structure represents the total universe of a society's politics. This approach can also be fairly attributed to Jürgen Habermas, for whom the totality is focused more temporally rather than spatially, and is construed in terms of the political trajectory of "modernity" construed as a systemic whole. It is crucial to such views that the total system can be rationally apprehended. Rawls was well aware of this in positioning his own view as "ideal theory."

But not everyone accepts this approach. It is already clear from the above that formations of political power are construed regionally by Foucault, Deleuze, and Latour (and one certainly sees something similar at work in political agonists such as Laclau, Mouffe, and Connolly). In more analytic anglophone political philosophy, a serious challenge to Rawls's systemic approach has been on the agenda at least since Michael Walzer's pluralism in his *Spheres of Justice* (Basic Books, 1983). And we have recently witnessed what is probably the most forceful challenge to the presumption of unified totality as it operates across German critical theory. I refer to the work of Rahel Jaeggi, specifically her *Critique of Forms of Life* (Belknap/Harvard, 2018 [2014]), in which "the evaluation of forms of life opens up a broad and inclusive field of practical questions that cannot be subsumed under the narrower domain of questions of relevance for morality or justice" (5). (It is an interesting further question whether rationalism furtively redoubles in some of these projects, for instance in Jaeggi's argument that segmented practices are always subject to an "organizing principle" [62] in virtue of which they, in good Hegelian fashion, can be determinately subsumed under their "concept" [118ff.])

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In the context of a critical inquiry into present and contemporary informatics, the need for a non-totalizing mode of inquiry is particularly pressing. This is because the object of inquiry itself, information, would have us accept that it is a universal. Information today travels so well that we are bound to want to see it anywhere, literally anywhere, that we can go. In *How We Became Our Data*, I adopted an approach that does not seek to refute this common conception of information as a universal, but nor does my approach intend to affirm it. Rather I aim to interrogate its genealogy—I aim to ask how it came to be true.

The universality of information romps wildly across the terrain of the contemporary. It roams nearly everywhere. But it does not roam and romp in the same way in each of its domains. It does not operate identically across high-tech genomics research laboratories and lower-profile civil service recordkeeping operations. Thus do we need an empiricism that can track its many movements and motions. Information may be a universal of our contemporary. But precisely for that reason we cannot sustain the fantasy that it is an idealization. Forms of political inquiry rooted only in idealizations, for instance those that interrogate only the conceptual dimensions of a certain idea of information, leave to the side so much of what is of interest when practices manage to mobilize nearly everywhere.

When something like information manages to universalize itself, what is being distributed across so many regions of social practice is not just a tiny idea, but rather a multitudinous melange. This melange includes concepts, to be sure, but also much more, such as technical, infrastructural, somatic, and aesthetic conditions for practice. These elements can be mobilized across multiple segments or regions of social practice. Thus can, for example, the melange of infopolitics both chronologically and spatially overlap with disciplinary anatomopolitics in a way that does not rely on a classical conception of a singular sequential time.

The more rigorously-empirical approach of the genealogist is appropriate for, indeed necessary to a serious regard for, the melange of politics. This is not to say that idealism is useless. It is rather to say that its utility is restricted, and perhaps most especially when it is trained on that which (like information) is unrestricted. But political philosophy ought to be useful for making sense of politics, which is almost always constituted of a heterogenous and rowdy mangle that only a brisk empiricism can keep up with.



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