

Book Review: Algorithms and the End of Politics: How Technology Shapes 21st-Century American Life by Scott Timcke

In Algorithms and the End of Politics: How Technology Shapes 21st-Century American Life, Scott Timcke explores how digital technologies are impacting US politics and society today. With a timely and original main argument, this book will be particularly suited to those well versed in political and philosophical discourse and interested in Marxist critique, the logics of capitalism, technocracy, post-politics, data and new technologies, finds Juan M. del Nido.

Algorithms and the End of Politics: How Technology Shapes 21st-Century American Life. Scott Timcke. Bristol University Press. 2021

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In author Scott Timcke's own words, [Algorithms and the End of Politics](#) is concerned with 'the unfreedom and class rule in contemporary American capitalism as seen in the digital realm' (3). From Facebook to deep fakes, new and emergent technologies of information, mediation and calculation are not simply entrenching capitalist exploitation. They are also destroying the terms and frames through which we can even begin to imagine alternative answers to 'the social question': how we are to organise our lives. Progressive neoliberal social theory has shown itself unable to grapple with these changes, Timcke argues, examining them instead through a canonically Marxist concern with value.

The first chapter analyses how algorithms extend the processes of capitalist valorisation and extraction to newer spheres of social relations by collecting data. It is known that data is collected in opaque circumstances and often below our threshold of awareness. Regulation framing data collection as a private issue to be solved through informed consent is not really protecting users who cannot fully grasp what they are consenting to. Instead, it protects the extractive and privatising logics of capitalism from actual contestation.

Chapter Two analyses how econometrics transposes political disputes into technical abstractions, consolidating quantification as a viable and desirable approach to social problems. Chapters Three and Four, 'Reactionary Tendencies in The Ruling Class' and 'Platforms of Power', examine how elites across an increasingly depoliticised ruling class in the US stave off class struggle from below. This endeavour involves alliances with Big Tech and billionaire donors deploying digital infrastructures (news, social media, data harvesting) to ensure conflict never really threatens the logics of extractive capitalism.

The fifth chapter, 'The Whiteness of Communication Studies', looks at how the systematic construction of *civic* ascription based on race, which frames social groups' experiences of public life in mostly racial terms, has sustained capitalism's political economy. In losing the *class* experience of race, public discourse has lost the means to ask the question that actually matters: whether those included actually 'have a say and the resources to shape the structure of and relations in' specific spaces (99).

Analysing the discursive construction of the public concern with [Russia's alleged interference with US elections](#), Chapter Six argues that the ruling classes use misinformation to mystify and iron out capitalism's internal contradictions, lest these present a real threat to the established order. Lastly, Chapter Seven, 'Testbeds for Authoritarianism', revisits the technological determinism that naturalises international competition on the artificial intelligence front.

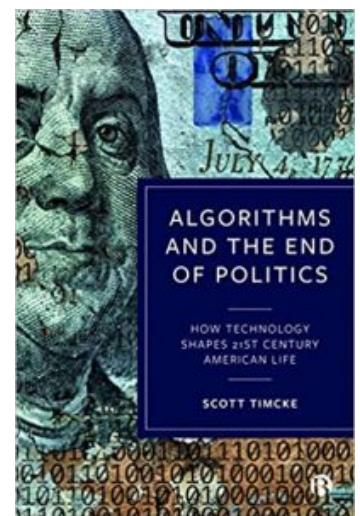




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The book's main argument is timely and original. A popular strand of scholarship debates how to make better algorithms or make better use of data, and a rapidly growing chorus asks them what 'better' means and to whom. In contrast, Timcke joins a much smaller group of scholars, such as Kate Crawford and most contributors to the recently published [Your Computer Is On Fire](#), arguing that the sheer fact of inhabiting social relations through algorithms and data is changing our lives in ways still unaccounted for. In Timcke's view, these ways are urgent but not unfamiliar: new technology is only intensifying and normalising age-old logics of extraction of value.

If social scientists have long known technological devices are often deployed to depoliticise relations as well as the terms through which we understand those relations, the originality of Timcke's contribution hinges on a rigorous and unremitting attention to Marxist analysis. This is a relatively unexplored route into the workings of antipolitical, post-political or depoliticising processes and reasoning. The first chapter is particularly strong and compelling, especially its analysis of a certain cynicism (my term) guiding the discourse of data ownership and privacy as a solution to conflicts in data use (23-27).

The first chapter is also, however, the one that most closely resembles what the book claims to be about in two senses. In a strict and literal sense, the title is misleading: 'algorithms' go unmentioned and unproblematised for most of the book and the term is not indexed. Relatedly, 'politics' here seems to point to a capacity for critical and genuine disagreement that is increasingly lost, but the reader is left to flesh out this sense on her own.

In a broader, contextual sense, one identifies a we're-missing-the-point clarion call common to all chapters. Still, while interesting and rigorous, 'The Whiteness of Communication Studies' is harder to situate in the progression of the book's stated argument, and 'Platforms of Power' is more of an inquiry into recent US presidential elections from the Democratic side. These are not the only chapters that struggle to forward a narrative arc about technology other than in a very broad sense of the term.

The narrative is also held back by a particular approach to topic framing. When seeking in the first chapter to intervene in 'algorithms, computation and data', for example, Timcke clarifies he does not 'intend to survey the huge literature in these very active fields' (23). Other chapters are prefaced by similar disclaimers: Chapter Two, on how econometrics flattens complex social and political problems, does not engage the vast work in this long and well-established tradition. These fields are indeed huge, and no author is obliged to survey or even build upon them. However, if readers were able to position Timcke's arguments with respect to this literature, his claims would gain in strength without jeopardising their originality or their commitment to Marxist analysis.

At times a genre between political commentary and manifesto takes over, as with the examination of the Democratic line-up behind Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden in 2016 and 2020 (75-96) or the implicit framing of the study as a way to figure out how to 'retake' 1,000 seats lost by the Democratic Party recently (9). Slightly dogmatic, such enthusiasm brings a Manichean view proper to the activist ethos and the simplifications and imprecisions that invariably hold that ethos together.

To give an example, Timcke speaks of 'unfreedom' (3, 13), claims that Silicon Valley forges an infrastructure for 'reactionary populism' (67) and that the US is 'the leading exporter of the machinery of Western fascism' (5). Even in the insularity and self-referentiality of US political discourse, 'unfreedom' and 'populism' (never mind 'reactionary') are immensely vague signifiers used in contradictory and incompatible ways by different factions, and 'fascism' has often been inflated into meaninglessness. Similarly, 'progressive neoliberal analysis/critique' is often mentioned as a crucial vector in the foreclosing of the political (34, 80, 125, among others). This phrase could have worked to pin down those imprecisions, but its content is never fully fleshed out. More broadly, even if one agrees with the spirit of the critique and Timcke's ideological positioning, such deviations detract from the author's otherwise impressively rigorous theoretical scaffolding.

Algorithms and the End of Politics is a hard read in terms of its prose and its use of theory. It will most meaningfully reward advanced readers well versed in political and philosophical discourse and interested in Marxist critique, the logics of capitalism, technocracy, post-politics, data and new technologies.

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