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Governing Without Norms: Algorithmic Governmentality

Antoinette Rouvroy

According to the hypothesis of algorithmic governmentality the “profiles/scores/matches” through which individuals are classed, assessed, recompensed or sanctioned, and through which the merits, needs, opportunities or dangers contained in life forms are assessed, are based on the numerical signals arising from trajectories, relations and interactions of individuals rather than on norms resulting from prior deliberative processes.

Never before have interactions between people and bureaucracies, whether public or private, been individualised to such an extent thanks to algorithmic profiling. This phenomenon of individualisation, however, has nothing to do with taking the singularity of persons into account. It is only a matter of substituting opaque, implicit, impersonal and indisputable profiles for *a priori* categorisations and qualifications which are always too general and abstract, always politically debateable, ideologically contestable, culturally biased. These profiles arise from statistically predictive correlations between impersonal behavioural variables automatically detected in the mass of available data. The twofold indifference not vis-à-vis what makes individuality but vis-à-vis the singularity of a life and what inscribes it in collective contexts and favours the links which statistically relate singularity to predictive impersonal profiles. And this is what gives to these algorithmic processes their aura of objectivity while rendering them literally unjustifiable.

This strange impersonal ‘solicitude’ for the individual presupposes a numerical capture which bypasses social masks, assumed roles and positions, to the benefit of a principle of the permeability of the individual psychic space exposed to an algorithmic ‘vision’ no longer limited by any principle of separation between psychic space and public space (‘social veneer’, ‘modesty’, ‘politeness’...), nor deformed or informed by the *persona*, i.e. the social mask – that which of the person is edited and addressed consciously to others. Free from any justification, the regime of algorithmic optimisation is *not* a regime of *truth* that would compel

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subjects to speak in the mode of confession, testimony or avowal, but rather a regime of *indistinction between numerical signals, non-signifying but calculable, and the world*.

In brief, this would be the end of our 'fictions', of our regimes of administration of procedures of proof and testing, since we would not have to re-join a world from which we would be separated: from now on we numerically form one body with the numerical world, immersed in and traversed by fluxes. This regime of indistinction between signals and things disqualifies the only thing that would perhaps be really unpredictable and incalculable about a person: the always singular manner according to which that person accounts for himself and to himself. The person accounts for himself, re-joins himself through his own gestures, in accounting for 'what he has done'. If the subject, like the people, is always lacking to himself, if the only freedom we have is to do voluntarily what we want involuntarily, then *counterfactual* enunciation, rationalisation after the fact, is the mode according to which we can 'be worthy of what happens to us'¹, the mode according to which the person can 'give a shape to his destiny'².

The algorithmic optimisation of interactions between the individual and his surroundings appears to be a rationalisation of the forms according to which we govern ourselves, substituting these forms with profiles (correlations between data) which are eminently evolutive and extremely plastic, preceding individuals in their behaviours, trajectories and choices – moulds that do not retain the fixity of traces – behaving rather like footprints that would precede our steps, or like shadows, never entirely adequate, which would always be in advance of the movement of their prey.

This 'being in advance' is the *speculative space* opened by the algorithmic vision in which it acts in advance on what bodies can do. These non-figurative – and in this way disfiguring³ – oracular visions of opportunities and dangers, are not liable to being either true or false; they only exist to immunise the actual against the virtual, the probable against the excess of the possible, the inorganic impassibility against organic events – in brief, *against the body*. Algorithmic governmentality thus presents itself as an *immune system* of numerical reality against any incalculable heterogeneity, against all thought of the unassimilable outside⁴, irreducible, non-marketable, non-finalised, unorganisable, sovereign⁵, that is to say, also, *against the world*.

Algorithmic governmentality is not a regime of *normalisation*, it is a regime of *neutralisation*. Dismissing the world and its representations for

a reality made of numerical fluxes⁶ with watertight joints unaffected by events, it neutralises the power of subjects: their capacity for counterfactual enunciation (which is also the capacity to erase one's traces, to lie, to pretend), their capacity for reticence (of not doing everything of which they are capable), their capacity for decision (of deciding on grounds of undecidability rather than obeying the results of calculation), and their capacity to collectively project possibilities.

This algorithmic governmentality exposes us to a series of unprecedented challenges. Faced with the algorithmic liquidation of the forms through which we govern ourselves, how can we keep open – as snags in the fluid weft of the real – the possibility of the *political* 'project' and the survival of *subjects*? How can we oppose, heterochronic animals that we are, being taken into account simply as temporary aggregates of data liable to mass exploitation? Faced with optimising hyper-individualism, how do we revitalise the public space as a space of deliberation about the communal thing, irreducible to the concurrence of individual interests alone, and as a place for exposing the limits of representability, that is, as a place for opening new political possibilities? Can we govern ourselves without norms without dissolving ourselves in fluxes?

1 Deleuze, G., Last Course at Vincennes, Anti-Oedipus and Other Reflexions, class of 3 June 1980.

2 Camus, A., "The Myth of Sisyphus", in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, Vintage, 1991.

3 "Déchirer la représentation, le tissu de la transcendance, (...) est la condition nécessaire pour faire face (sans pourtant jamais faire face) à l'inimaginable." (Boyan Manchev, "Persistance de l'image et devenir-sensible du sensible. Georges Bataille et la surcritique de la représentation", *Le Portique*, No. 29, 2012, document 9.)

4 Michel Foucault, "La pensée du dehors" (1966), *Dits et écrits*, I, 1954-1975, texte No. 38.

5 Juliette Feyel, "Le corps hétérogène de Georges Bataille", Actes du colloque international "Projections : des organes hors du corps" (13-14 octobre 2006).

6 "soit l'abolition de toute substance-sujet et de toute substance-objet: il n'y a que des ponctualités subjectives et objectives, des pauses momentanées dans la production indéfinie des flux." (Frédéric Neyrat, *Clinamen. Flux, absolu et loi spirale*, ère, 2011, p. 25)