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Data Mining the Body of the Socius

In a recent article about whether it is possible to “excavate” the new logic of capital, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson make a distinction between “extraction” and “extractivism.”¹ On the one hand is extraction, described as “the historical and contemporary processes of forced removal of raw materials and life forms from the earth’s surface, depths, and biosphere”; on the other hand is extractivism, outlined as a means of identifying the wider characteristics of economic, political, and social formations that are predicated upon an expansion and dominance of extractive activities.² The distinction between extraction and extractivism is then further qualified. Extraction can be seen to assume different forms, some older and literal, some more recent and metaphoric. For example, beyond mining for salt, coal, oil, coltan, and other minerals, new forms of agribusiness such as intensive soy cultivation for the biofuel market can also be defined as extractive in an expanded sense, while in the case of “mining for Bitcoin” or “data mining,” the term “extraction” is used metaphorically. Literal extraction, then, seems to refer to the ways in which “the operations of capital plunder the materiality of the earth and biosphere,” while metaphorical extraction refers to the moments “when they encounter and draw upon forms and practices of human cooperation and sociality that are external to them.”³ Overall, however, extraction seems to imply some kind of relation with something that is “given” before and outside the operations of capital—even when it is capital itself which constructs it as being “external” and “outside.” On this basis, it is possible to identify extractivism as the specific logic of “extractive capital,” or a mode of capital that operates by means of literal or metaphorical extractive processes. Extractivism, however, as Mezzadra and Neilson specify, should not be identified with *the* new dominant logic of capitalism as such, because “any definition of contemporary capitalism predicated on the primacy of a specific sector of economic activity can be misleading.” It is true, then, that it is politically necessary to be “attentive to the continuities and ruptures that characterize the relations between literal extraction and extraction in the expanded sense,” and “to the prevalence and strategic role of extractive operations in contemporary capitalism.” However, what remains crucial for them is the “relevance of the articulation of extractive operations with other operations of capital, which involve heterogeneous forms of labor and exploitation.”⁴ In this brief essay, on the other hand, I am interested in the specificity of what might be defined as the metaphorical extractivism of data capital and its external referent or outside—what Marxists call social cooperation—but which, from the point of view of data-mining technologies, might be also be referred to as the social as energetic body or socius.

The “forced removal of raw materials and life forms from the earth’s surface, depths, and

biosphere,” of course, has played a pivotal role in the genesis of capitalism, from the moment in which it took over the prerogative of the sovereign command over the earth and its reaches—a command that was exercised primarily on precious metals as reservoirs of value. Capital connected the scientific knowledges and techniques, the machines and technologies necessary to accomplish such forced removal to the abstract machine of financial capital, to the cruel networks of colonial trade, and to the disciplinary mechanisms of the industrial society. Literal mining extended the violent despotic machine into the capitalist business of mining the earth, connecting it to the division of labor automaton of the assembly line, where workers, as Marx observed, acted as organs of a heavily metallic mechanical machine. Capital thus released into circulation in the world market not only commodities abstracted from the muscular labor of workers organized by technologies produced by the mental work of scientists and engineers, but also forces that used to be stored in the body of the Earth. It therefore caused the surfacing of tellurian strata and reservoirs compounded by mechanical and chemical forces acting on inorganic and organic molecules across the long duration of nonhuman time.

The “metaphorically” extractive nature of data mining, however, while also involving science, technology, capital, and labor, introduces a number of different elements. Data mining, that is, presupposes, connects to, and feeds off earthbound mineral mining and the industrial automaton, but its outside is not the stratified body of the Earth but the intensive body of society or *socius*. It does not involve a forced removal but a voluntary yielding. It replaces violence with seduction, and scarcity with overabundance. It mobilizes not the repetitive movements of the muscular body but recursive feedback loops that weave together nervous systems, affectable brains, symbolic labor, and algorithmic intelligences. Data mining does not establish itself in continuity with the ferocious despotism of sovereignty but with the soft power of governance—it is turned towards the modulation of conducts and behaviors. It does not work through a heavily metallic mechanical automaton but through light machines intertwining logical circuits with conductive materials—a nervous, intelligent, and nonconscious automaton.

In its current form, data mining has been made possible by the coming together of smart phones and social networking services—a convergence that has opened the floodgates of a data deluge, turning the social network into the hypersocial: that is, the social as infrastructural medium and real time computational model of society. Thus, the inter-network absorbed into itself the abstract diagram of the social network—the point and lines diagram that injected the mathematical tools and methods of graph theory into the science of mapping the invisible structure of society.⁵ As personal articulated networks are made visible on social networking services that require you to declare your friends and

your interests, the social acquires a new affective conductivity—it becomes less a society or global community and more something like a *socius*—an energetic body that allows for various kinds of conjunctions and disjunctions. If mineral mining unleashed the energies stored in inorganic matter by tellurian time, data mining also seems to draw out its own specific kind of energy—the energy of desire solicited by its seductive and pleasurable feedback loops. For Deleuze and Guattari, society is “a dissipative structure” entertaining a determining tension between attractors or poles.⁶ As Brian Massumi pointed out, the *socius* for Deleuze and Guattari is torn in “an endless tug of war” between the “two virtual poles” that together constitute “Desire”: “the cancerous limitative body without organs of fascism-paranoia” (a type of becoming-the-same, connecting only to those who are like you and fighting those who are not) and “the viral nonlimitative body without organs of anarchy-schizophrenia” (that is, becoming-other, connecting with that which is unlike you and arouses the stranger in you), as “cosmic principles.”⁷ Thus for Deleuze and Guattari, a social formation is “identified by its particular mix of becoming-other and becoming-the-same, schizophrenia and paranoia, fascism and anarchy.”⁸

While literal or mineral mining, as Mezzadra and Neilson suggest, has accumulated a large archive of struggles, resistances against data capital, on the other hand, have formulated the notion of “data commons”—that is, the idea that if we could put “big data in our hands” then it could be put to uses other than those expressed by the giant conglomerations of data capitalists.⁹ And yet, as Karin van Es and Mirko Tobias Schäfer have remarked, the promises of “objectivity” of data analysis, encoded in their colorful visualizations, in their “dashboards, info-graphics and charts,” seems to belie an epistemological fear of subjectivity. The muscular body of industrial abstract labor fueled by heavy mineral mining evoked in the nightmares of capital and in the dreams of radicals the specter of revolution—which the Taylorist factory and the Fordist society in a way tried to pacify and rationalize away. Struggling for the data commons, therefore, might mean to embrace the fear that “the world is too labyrinthine to be threaded by reason; fear that the senses are too feeble and the intellect too frail; fear that memory fades, even between adjacent steps of a mathematical demonstration; fear that authority and convention is blind.”¹⁰ Fed with entropic or incompressible social data, even Artificial Intelligence threatens to turn alien on us.¹¹ As the social gets mined, we flounder, caught by the unbearable tension of impending catastrophe between the paranoid becoming-the-same and the schizophrenic becoming-other of the world.

1 Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, “On the Multiple Frontiers of Extraction: Excavating Contemporary Capitalism,” *Cultural Studies*, 31:2–3 (2017), pp. 185–204.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 185.

3 Ibid., p. 190.

4 Ibid., pp. 190 and 198.

5 John Scott, *Social Network Analysis* (Los Angeles, London, New Dehli, Singapore, Washington DC: Sage, 2013).

6 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: The Athlone Press, 1988).

7 Brian Massumi, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1992), pp. 119–20.

8 Massumi *A User's Guide*, p. 116.

9 “Big Data in Our Hands,” *Berliner Gazette* (2015) [<https://projekte.berlinergazette.de/big-data-in-our-hands/>].

10 Dalston and Galison cit. in: Karin van Es and Mirko Tobias Schäfer, “Introduction: New Brave World,” in *The Datafied Society: Studying Culture through Data* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), p. 18.

11 L. Parisi, *Contagious Architecture: Computation, Aesthetics, Space* (Cambridge, Mass. and Sydney: The MIT Press, 2013).