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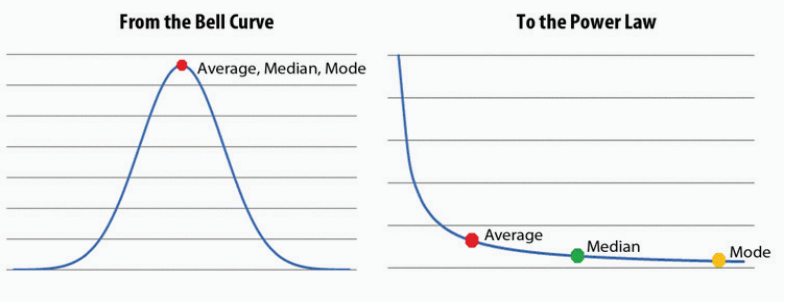
THE NOISE OF DATA: COMMENTS ON EWALD'S "AFTER RISK"

François Ewald asks, what kind of collective political imaginary comes "after risk" in the age of digital knowledge-power? How are whole-part relationships being reconstituted in the world of "Big Data"?

These are important questions to raise in times replete with globe-trotting news of "crisis" and "volatility." This is a world in which the old risk technologies for privileging the middle (e.g. the average, the norm, the middle class) have proven to be faulty, if not catastrophically wrong, in its powers of pattern recognition and response.[1] Amid crash-prone conditions, the normal with its calculative assumptions of bell curves has given way to asymmetrical visions of extraordinary highs and uncontrollable lows. In lieu of the law of averages, we now obsess over a cosmology of incalculable "black swans[2]" and lopsided "power law" distributions with their 20-80 vision of the haves and have-nots (or in the even more extremist version of the Occupy movement, the 1% to 99% split of wealth and woes).



As anthropologist Keith Hart noted several years ago, the rise of power law distributions among contemporary data crunchers fits well with the exponential growth patterns of networked economies in the digital age, which presume intrinsic inequality in the spread of social connectivity and capital (e.g. a few central hubs vs. many spokes or weak links) while aligning with market principles of "winner takes all" and "the rich getting richer" (2004: 222-223). Lest we think it is only the Bill Gates and Steve Jobs of the world that buy into this new statistical vision, Hart reminds us that "today even the radical democratic wing of Internet society—the bloggers and the peer-to-peer activists—tend to accept the fact of power-law distribution, claiming that as long as choices can be made freely (equal opportunity), this inequality is acceptable, one might say 'natural' or even 'normal' (2004: 223)."

Like Hart, Ewald senses a *new* normal in our midst, which he invokes through the figure of "Big Data." While there is much to applaud about Ewald's sketches of the world "after" risk, I'd like to tease out just two strands of his argument for further consideration in the remainder of my comments.

1. **The epochal argument of "After Risk":**

   Ewald suggests that there is an epochal shift in regimes of calculation and of knowledge/power from the world of risk to one of endlessly streaming data. Yet must this relation of risk and data be framed as *from-to* and *after*? I want to argue that there is much to gain from looking laterally at what is thinkable and operable *alongside*, *around* and *entangled* with risk.

2. **The "freedom" argument of Big Data:**

   Ewald spends some time considering the political promise of "data" in remaking the world of risk and insurance. Keeping in mind Hart's more cautionary tale above of unequal network distribution, I'd want to reconsider the question of knowledge/power beyond the usual celebrated features of the Internet's open interactivity and immediacy of flows. Instead, I ask: how might we think of the promises of digital "freedom" if we consider not only the Internet's decentralized and accessible features but also its ongoing proliferation of IT *bottlenecks*, *disconnections* and *noise*?

FROM "AFTER" TO ALONGSIDE

In my own work on the regulation of il/licit flows between Southern China and the U.S., I've been grappling not so much with the before-and-after of risk than with what perdures and proliferates *alongside* risk. For instance, I am concerned with the ways worlds of *chance* are enhanced and entangled with the

spread of risk models and statistical modes of regulation. Most recently, I've been looking at how the installment of risk management in customs inspection in China has been accompanied by proliferating interest among customs staff in fortune telling and other rituals of cosmic intervention. As part of a recent program in "reform" and "modernization" in China's Customs Administration, frontline inspectors have been undergoing constant training and reorganization into subjects of risk management. At once, they have been interpellated both as new managers of "risk" at China's borders and as "risk *factors*" themselves subject to proliferating internal controls through new computational networks of data collection, performance measures and automated surveillance. While risk management has reshaped the work lives of Customs inspection—and almost everyone at the bureau can talk about these changes in great detail—what really sparks conversation with these officers is another form of calculation altogether: the art of *suan ming* (literally, the "computation" of "life-*cum*-fate"). One of the biggest surprises of my research is how customs inspectors can't stop inquiring about the best fortunetellers and strategies of divination when they find out I have previously done work on popular religion in the area.

To further cross the wires of risk and chance, there are now diviners in Southern China who make a living by reading their clients' fortunes through computer processing programs. The computerized fortune telling program tells us less about the historical break between worlds of chance, risk or data than about the social fact of *remediation*. It reminds us that old instruments of knowledge/power do not disappear to enable more direct and transparent modes of communication; rather

their traces are carried forward and become the very embedded content and entangled qualities of new media technologies.[3] The astrological chart of the sages can turn into program code and algorithmic models of calculation and later, with the appropriate data input, can then be reformatted as computer printout for reading the future. It is hard to see the calculative logics here in terms of a singular shift from x to y or as marking a break in speculative technologies before and after some supposedly Archimedean figure like "risk." Rather what the fortune telling software demands is attention to lateral relations and resonances of the *alongside*. It points less to a neat, diagrammatic world of hub-and-spoke networks than to a meshwork[4] of entangled calculations, of old and new technologies, karmic fate and Big Data, each proliferating and insinuating itself into the existing regime of risk management.

NONKNOWLEDGE/POWER IN THE WORLD OF "BIG DATA"

Ewald's title "After risk" does not have to be an argument about the disappearance of risk. In fact, it is better read as an argument about the *reformatting* of risk in terms of new data technologies in the digital world. But what can we make of "data"? What exactly is "data" in a world of digital knowledge-power? The world of risk, after all, has long had its own claim on data; its aesthetic and epistemic distinctions rely on the figure of "data"—its collection, its analysis, its display—as a key feature of the system. What I think Ewald is suggesting is that data in the digital world has now surpassed the threshold of being simply "content" or "feature" of risk management to becoming something like a general operating principle for

knowledge-power. Data, particularly in its digitally celebrated form of Big Data, now saturates and reorganizes social life according to the logics of its own incessant flow. In its most messianic (or apocalyptic) guise, Big Data has even been touted as the "end of theory" (Anderson 2008).

Among the many important shifts in the ontology of data in the digital world which Ewald addresses (e.g. from formation of categories of risk to differentiated profiles), what most interests me is his attention to data's new abundance and accessibility, which he argues, holds the promise of political freedom. As he notes, "the digital power gives citizens the means to a kind of reversal of power, in which the supervisor eventually becomes the one being monitored. So one might think that the more digital power develops the more it will empower citizens." This optimism is somewhat tempered by Ewald's caution that "there is nothing inevitable about empowerment" through digital flows of data. Ewald does not pause long enough, however, to make this statement into more than a caveat within an argument weighted towards the liberating possibilities of digital power. Yet I think this is a caution worth elaborating and taken more seriously if we are to grapple truly with the politics of Big Data.

There is, after all, perhaps no better counterpoint to utopic visions of the free flow of digital data than the very computer program called "Freedom"—a software which promises to enhance productivity by locking the computer user out of accessing the internet altogether. Here "freedom" is framed as respite from the onslaught of data and instant online connections, where one can easily become distracted and paralyzed by too much access to too much data. One thing "Freedom" the

software highlights is how the political promise of data may be less about connecting to open and abundant flows of information so much as finding productive *disconnections* and pockets of insulation from the governing logics of Big Data and their digital devices.

As flows of bytes moving across electric sensors to underwater cables to pixels on a screen, data cannot necessarily be conflated with "knowledge" in the digital world. Mined, repacketed and streamed in abundance, data can also flow less as signal of knowledge than as an onslaught of *noise*. It can be a burden and an intrusion, more junkmail than email; an endless stream of chatter too fast and too much to become legible or useful as information.

Writing of the new fascination with zombie apocalypse in American popular culture today, the journalist Chuck Klosterman (2010) has suggested that in the unending inundation of the senseless undead in which the only response is to delete, there is an anxious parable of data overflowing and consuming people's everyday lives. He writes, "zombie killing is philosophically similar to reading and deleting 400 work e-mails on a Monday morning or filling out paperwork that only generates more paperwork, or following Twitter gossip out of obligation, or performing tedious tasks in which the only true risk is being consumed by the avalanche." Here abundance and access to data do not lead to freedom so much as such information surplus devours the person, breaking the human subject into digital mincemeat for zombified bots and parasitic algorithms there to "mine" data from the captured clicks and marketable bytes of online interactions and recombinant profiles.

Ultimately, I want to suggest that political promise here might be in thinking and working not so much *through* the digital devices of information processing and transmission as much as via the enabling gaps, disconnections and even errors in the production of a data-centric world. If growing state networks of dataveillance are about tuning into the digital signals of our movements and interactions, perhaps it is through the unprocessed noise and weak links of these networks that political hope lies. In this case, we may also want to rethink the salient links between the whole and its parts not only as a relation of knowledge/power in the digital world but also of *non*-knowledge/power proliferating in the fuzzy margins and unprocessed aporias of information.[5]

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NOTES

1 This was perhaps most dramatically demonstrated by the implosion of all those Gaussian financial models in the derivatives market, based as they were on statistical assumptions of market patterns moving along normal bell-shaped curves.

2 "Black Swan" is a very popular term coined by Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2010) to describe surprising, hard-to-predict events that have high profile and very consequential effects on social life. As extremely rare yet high impact events, they tend to defy statistical computation and prediction. Taleb argued that the unpredictability and generally incalculability of black swans made conventional probabilistic models of risks useless since such models typically were based on assumptions of Gaussian or normal distribution. In other words, black swans destroy "bell curve" visions of the world.

3 This is an old insight that Marshall McLuhan (1964) among others (e.g., Bolter and Grusin 2000, Kittler 1999) have made about media.

4 I draw this term "meshwork" from Timothy Ingold's work (2007).

5 The importance of data as *non*-knowledge/power can be gleaned from Pat O'Malley's paper, "From Risk to Resilience," that was part of the same conversation on "risk" with Francois Ewald (2011). In this piece, O'Malley points to the importance of data derivatives as a form of abstraction based on *absence* and "what is *not* known" [italics my emphasis].