Book Review/Compte Rendu

Anthony Elliott. *The Culture of AI: Everyday Life and the Digital Revolution*. New York: Routledge, 2018, 258pp., paper (9781138230057).

Sociologists wary of engaging with concepts like machine learning, Big Data, neural networks, robotics, and the Internet of Things—do not be alarmed. Anthony Elliott's *The Culture of AI* is very much a book about people, not robots, and about the place of digital technology in many of the social and cultural changes that we are facing in the twenty-first century. The specific mechanisms behind artificial intelligence and other technologies can be left to other disciplines, but a lack of expertise in digital technology, Elliott argues, should not prevent scholars in the social sciences and humanities from deeply engaging with the social and cultural consequences of AI, which are well within our purview.

Likewise, Elliott argues that it would be a serious mistake to delay this engagement any further, viewing AI as something "out-there"—a matter of speculation for a still-distant future—rather than something that is shaping human lives *right now*. We may still be far away from achieving "strong AI" (think Data in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* or other human-like machines), but smart environments, responsive/inter-active technologies, and computer-generated algorithms are nevertheless structuring many of our daily experiences, as well as restructuring con-temporary institutions. The culture of AI is already here.

This book begins with a helpful and accessible overview of some of the basic issues and debates around AI, but it is not a technical manual. For social scientists who know little-to-nothing about AI or related tech-nologies, this primer is a good place to start. Drawing from scientific de-bates, policy approaches, history and philosophy, as well as popular sci-ence fiction, Elliott provides both a strong argument for the necessity of bringing greater awareness of the consequences of AI into social science research and a solid foundation from which to begin this engagement.

Subsequent chapters take on several broad themes in the study of society and culture, as Elliott considers how each could be/is being trans-formed by digital technologies. The central themes are work, the self and personal identity, social relationships, and automobility (and its life-or-death consequences). For researchers interested in issues that fall within

one or more of these broad themes, each chapter stands alone. The final chapter, which is the most speculative, also considers how AI could have implications for intimacy, healthcare, democracy, and more.

Considering this broad scope, *The Culture of AI* is tightly written and accessible; it is dense but does not aim to be comprehensive. Elliott chooses a handful of perspectives through which to consider each theme, interlacing familiar classical and contemporary sociological theory with new, unfamiliar, or alternative approaches, highlighting central debates without rushing to choose a side. The culture of AI, he argues, is both new and not new; it grows out of the analog world that preceded it, and so do the theories and ideas that help us to make sense of it. Marx, Giddens, Goffman, Latour, and many others serve as touchstones for readers who may be comfortable with social theory but less so with AI and digital technologies.

Elliott's central thesis is that digital technologies are already in the process of transforming people, relationships, institutions, and societies in important ways, and this fact should not be ignored by the social sciences. But he makes few claims regarding the nature of these transformations, emphasizing instead that they are inherently neither good nor bad; rather, human actions and responses to these technologies will determine the shape they take in the coming decades. Thoughtful public engagement with the myriad social issues that result from the reorganization of daily life caused by technologies is essential. Those working in the social sciences and humanities should be well-positioned to guide these necessary conversations on ethics, justice, policy, social relationships, and human well-being in light of technological developments. Elliott is evidently concerned that social research is not keeping up with these demands.

As a wake-up call to sociologists, therefore, *The Culture of AI* makes an extremely valuable contribution. However, despite Elliott's own wide-ranging expertise as a social theorist, he only has room to discuss a limited number of thinkers or topics within each of his major themes; some of his choices seem arbitrary, and he leaves many interesting stones unturned. For students and early-career scholars, this presentation of a handful of ways one might begin to engage contemporary cultural issues through the lens of technology could provide valuable food for thought. More experienced researchers, on the other hand, would be wise to take up Elliott's call for engagement with AI's transformational role in human cultures, but they may find less value in the substantive content he provides.

The book has much to offer anyone in the social sciences or humanities who is interested in thinking about the social implications of AI,

especially as it exists currently, and not as speculative futures, utopias or dystopias. Such outcomes, Elliott emphasizes, are contingent on the human choices being made here and now. Digital literacy is a critical skill, both for researchers and the public, in the twenty-first century. This does not mean that we abandon our current interests in favour of Big Data and digital policy research; rather, Elliott asks that we recognize AI and digital technology as structuring features of contemporary society and bring this understanding into our research. Social science has an essential role to play in navigating this uncertain future, but it demands our engagement today.

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