

A Turn to Gandy From Inside *The Panoptic Sort*

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The top shelf of my bookcase is reserved for canonical texts only. On that shelf, I keep Marx, DuBois, Goffman, Fanon, Arendt, Deleuze and Guattari, and a slender yellow volume from Westview Press called *The Panoptic Sort* by Oscar H. Gandy, Jr. The text is less known in the popular imagination, less cited than some of its comrades on my shelf, perhaps, but no less rigorous or important. While some fields have already canonized the text, as the value of information increasingly influences nearly every facet of social life, all social theorists have cause to sit with Gandy's incisive and carefully theorized work. *The Panoptic Sort* is an important entry point to a larger oeuvre that I argue is best digested as a whole. What Gandy has accomplished across his career is a robust theory of how value is produced by the information commodity.

In his earlier work on information subsidies, Gandy (1976, 1982) described the way state subsidies made information and communication technologies ubiquitous and indispensable. He followed this work to the accompanying automation of surveillance and analysis of individual behavior these technologies made possible (Gandy, 1989). Gandy predicted that a new social structure was starting to take shape that the existing regulatory apparatus was ill equipped to manage. In 1990, the same year Gilles Deleuze would address these changes to power and social relations by expanding on the work of Foucault in his now well-known "Postscript on the Society of Control" essay, Gandy was at work on his own Foucault-inspired text, *The Panoptic Sort*.

The Panoptic Sort emerged from an important moment in Gandy's career, authored as it was shortly after he had returned to communication studies full time following an extended period teaching and administering in applied communications (Jackson & Brown Givens, 2006). The book managed to offer a theory of an at-the-time encroaching totality, validated by comprehensive mixed-methods empiricism and supplemented by pointed policy prescriptions attuned to the urgency of addressing the changes as they were underway. In a sense, it is too late to read *The Panoptic Sort* because the world it attempted to forestall has already come to pass and we are reading from the rearguard. But there is still great utility for contemporary readers, especially those looking to genealogize how value was being codified as neoliberalism congealed into form.

To understand the text requires a comprehension of ideas Gandy was responding to and a sense of the larger constellation of his work. Because Gandy does such a thorough job of attending to the former in his introductory chapter, borrowing elements of Marx, Weber, Ellul, Foucault, and Giddens, I will instead turn my attention to where *The Panoptic Sort* fits within his larger corpus. I contend that we are today in need of a more comprehensive "turn to Gandy" in order to understand the (re)production of disparity along various categorical axes. Gandy's work offers a template for interpreting the still calcifying

categories of differential value that allows capitalism to segregate its winners and losers. While terms such as "control society" (Deleuze, 1992), "reputation silos" (Turow, 2011, p. 118), "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff, 2015), and "population racism" (Clough, 2018, p. 125) have been adopted to describe similar ideas, they are retreading much of the same conceptual ground as *The Panoptic Sort* and so should be read through and alongside Gandy's work. A frequent descriptor for *The Panoptic Sort* is "prescient," but in 2021, a reader is left with an eerie sense of unease at how thoroughly it describes some of the signature issues of our time.

What Does *The Panoptic Sort* Predict?

The book does not so much predict as draw attention to the integration of a surveillant apparatus, at the time already in formation, that portended an eventual totalizing process of social reorganization. Gandy (2021) warned that "a discriminatory process that sorts individuals on the basis of their estimated value or worth has become more important today and reaches into every aspect of individuals lives in their roles as citizens, employees, and consumers" (p. 15). This process was the result of the aggregate ethics (or lack thereof) of state and corporate systems of capture, processing, and sharing of personal information. "The poor," Gandy (2021) holds, "and especially poor people of color, are increasingly being treated as broken material or damaged goods to be discarded or sold at bargain prices to scavengers in the marketplace" (p. 16). To identify this codification of marginalization, Gandy offered a critical theory of information that explained the way power was determining social value in a number of technical systems. This rationalization of human worth was derived from prior consumer and political behavior interpreted by statistical models that approximated identity and existence. Gandy argued that because prior findings may be transitory and unstable in nature, they do not represent a fair standard by which to make such weighty judgments. His recovery of the temporality of data suggests a fatal problem for the utility of all predictive analytics. In effect, prediction amounts to a new instantiation of rational essentialism, accomplishing through datafication the same cultural and biological reductions as racialization (Chun, 2012). Gandy (1998) turns at length to this topic in his next book, *Communication and Race: A Structural Perspective*.

While Gandy (2009) names his following book, *Coming to Terms with Chance*, as the sequel to *The Panoptic Sort*, *Communication and Race* is concerned with the same issue of how media industries foster perceptions that shape and are shaped by the social structure (Gandy, 1998, p. viii). The theme of the effects on life chances is underscored by the cover art, which features a roulette wheel. It is one of the earliest monographs to offer a comprehensive overview of the production and reification of race by mass media, but it can be best understood as the ideological counterpart to the material analysis found in *The Panoptic Sort*.

Gandy was writing as much to a gap in literature as to the politics of racial framing that characterized the dismantling of affirmative action and the welfare state in the 1990s. Where discrimination had been rationalized and continued as a de facto system through panoptic sorting, media representations maintained an ideological apparatus that constrained perceptions of black people while narrating a right to status and material benefits primarily for whites.¹ At the conclusion, Gandy is concerned with how the media system might be used to instead incentivize the rejection of racial privilege. In a moment when any attempts to do so are popularly

¹ I do not capitalize black or white so as not to reify racial categories as markers of essential difference.

derided as “woke” (an absurdist misuse of the term) or when critical race scholarship has been subjected to nationwide McCarthyite hearings, Gandy’s words on the stakes of privilege seem ever more prescient.

What Can We Draw From *The Panoptic Sort*?

There is an acknowledgement that the use of personal information could be more just in Gandy’s work. It would be a mistake to dismiss *The Panoptic Sort* as cynical technophobia. As Gandy notes, there is utility in targeting advertising, but it is the involuntary nature of it and the inferences people draw from the targeting process that are corrosive to democracy. He predicts a hollowing of the public sphere into “a ghostly afterimage that will appear in different forms to different individuals according to their profiles” (Gandy, 2021, p. 17). This segmentation, he held, would lead to cultural siloing and overall diminished intercultural communication, a concern that resonates with the debates over social media and misinformation today.

Social media are technologies of the social, but increasingly incentivize identity signaling and homophilous grouping of users. Much of the conflict researchers sometimes fret over may be better understood as privatized sermons to the choir in what only appear to be public spaces because they have extractive value (Deibert, 2019). For social media companies, a greater quantity of discourse brings greater prospects for informational commoditization. Conflict tends to increase opportunities for differentiated data, which can be mined for information about identity, affinity, social networks, and likelihood to click on a particular type of advertisement (Benkler, 2006; Faucher, 2018, pp. 39–59). In addition, as Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) show, information that is unconcerned with veracity is cheaper to manufacture and spread on social media as a means of bringing in an audience carrying sellable data. These panoptic media become a vehicle for assigning value to people and categories of people, which can be understood as an expansion of the logics of racialization to the entirety of the captured population. While the impact at the early stage has been disproportionately felt by those already burdened by cumulative disadvantage, the social order that results is premised on avoiding risk, which entails stabilizing categories of classification and methods of filtering out those deemed undesirable (Gandy, 2009). For Gandy, it is not privacy that is most pressing, but how surveillant practices sort individuals into categories from which it is difficult or impossible to escape. As he explains elsewhere, “the notion of categorical vulnerability, where membership in the constructed class is neither voluntary nor cognized by the persons so objectified, represents a special problem of critical social theory” (Gandy, 1995, p. 43).

The Panoptic Sort has been influential in a number of areas of critical communication research, from political economy to surveillance studies to critical data studies. Recent scholarship has worked through Gandy to excavate the automated biases that reproduce offline disadvantages in digital technologies (Browne, 2015; Eubanks, 2018; Noble, 2018) and the ways behavior prediction and modification have coalesced into forms of social control (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Nadler & McGuigan, 2018). In his Afterword to the new edition of *The Panoptic Sort*, Gandy invites readers to consider how social media, algorithms, and the aggregation of big data have intensified the effects he originally described, and reclassified individuals into groups that fundamentally limit one’s ability to satisfy their material needs. He offers some hope in the form of a policy agenda focused on algorithmic governance and voluntary forms of identification. While he doubts that we can prevent the expansion of these pernicious logics, he reminds us that we still have agency to collectively resist the antidemocratic society that will be their result. The popularity of television series such as Netflix’s *Black Mirror* (Blackwell, 2018) or HBO’s *Westworld* (Nolan & Crouse, 2020), both of which portray dystopian visions of

surveillance and social categorization, suggest that these anxieties are very much a part of the contemporary cultural landscape. It is time for a comprehensive turn to Gandy, so that we can excavate the urgently needed theory and political program that may someday free us from the panoptic sort.

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