

Digitisation and the Fickle Finger of Fate

The Consequences of Information: Institutional Implications of Technological Change. Jannis Kallinikos. Cheltenham, UK/Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar, 2006, 224 pp. £49.50, ISBN 978 1 84542 328 5.

The problem that Jannis Kallinikos sets for himself in this hugely admirable text is how to understand ‘the organizational and economic implications of the new technologies of information and communication’. This is not a particularly original one. It is a question dealt with both explicitly and implicitly in all manner of contemporary commentary, from journalism to high theorisation, occasionally via the odd empirical salvo. However the weakness of much of this writing is not that the problem it sets itself is the wrong one to attend to. Rather it is that its object of interest is, in the main, attended to extraordinarily poorly and superficially. The result being that the object ceases to be of much interest at all. We either suffer the breathless gasps of those who feel themselves to inhabit a world that is utterly changed or we endure the equally tedious ramblings of those that would have us believe that it has changed very little, with that little change being an increase in the efficiency with which we can perform those tasks that we always performed. For both sets of protagonists the change, or lack thereof, can be for better or worse. The former is the domain of the technoboosterists, the latter that of prophets of the end of freedom. But such judgement comes too often at the price of purchase on that which it judges. Perhaps our reactions to and difficulties in apprehending the new have ever been thus. And whilst simple yes/no appreciations of change, with subsequent good/bad bifurcations of each, may well function beautifully to animate the conversations of the bar, they do little to aid our understanding of the present and our orientation to the future. To get beyond such either/ors we of course need a mode of thinking that is pliable enough to deal with continuity and change in the same breath. It just such a mode of thinking to which Kallinikos treats us, with both nuance and aplomb.

The set up of Kallinikos’s approach to his unoriginal problem is simple and elegant. To escape the twin idiocies of both over agential and ahistorical accounts of technological transformation, of the Scylla and Charybdis of freedom and constraint, Kallinikos ploughs an institutional furrow. This is of sufficient breadth and depth to richly prepare the ground for an extremely fertile analysis. The ‘formal organization’ of bureaucracy and the ‘codifications of social experience and struggles’ that it carries is the key institution to be interrogated here and under the author’s subtle but insistent probing it coughs up a great deal. Relating this seemingly banal beast to modernity’s motion yields some beautiful insights into the contemporary understanding of information and its implications. We are reminded of the sympathy between formal organization and technology, indeed of the virtue of seeing the former *as* the latter. But that is far from all that we see. The formality of organisation - its boundedness - creates and partly insulates a space. This limits the complexity to be admitted from the outside so that the inside can then be filled with the organisation of technology; technology that is able to develop and expand through the benefits thus afforded, enacted and embodied by what Luhmann termed *functional simplification* and *closure*. The ‘instrumental enclosures’ of the systems of industrial technology and formal organization are thus seen to be mutually implicated and sustaining. Against such a foil the technologies of information and communication are able to appear as both different and same. The same in that they clearly carry forward ‘the legacy of the

industrial tradition of work transformation and rationalization'; different in that their 'unambiguous cognitive (computational) orientation' offers escape from the constraints of physicality. So long as that physicality can be held sufficiently at bay, it offers an escape to a land without limits. The disintegration of reality entailed by computerisation, its reduction to bits, *in extremis*, of the same (but still of the bare sufficient variety to capture ur-difference: 0, 1) enables endless permutation: reconstructions and recombinations, practically partially trammelled, but theoretically infinite in their extent. Software and technological information's inherent, essential, interrelatability; information growth as increasingly self-referential process, but one with a history, a present and a future that still on occasions feeds off and is fed by another. Hence we see the mass of technological information with which we are currently confronted both as rooted in our recent, restricted past and as opening to a future to be lived *in part* within and through a new and ever expanding digital environment. Information becomes a habitat. A useful appendix on 'Indicators and Patterns of Information Growth' is included by way of illustration. Narrow, constricted bounded orders come together to form massive, exploding bounded orders; perhaps even *one* gigantic flowing bounded order. A future of the different and the same.

The careful, piercingly clear, consideration of the formal organization also allows Kallinikos to steer an eminently sensible path through over-dramatised distinctions between networks, the 'formal organization' as isolated site, and the connection of 'the market'. Such imprecision and impoverishment in the mobilisation of the notion of formal organization will not be allowed to stand by Kallinikos. He has found too rich a vein here to simply give it up to those who would banish it to a past of stasis from their dynamic presents and futures. In sympathy with his account of the functioning of boundaries and their enabling of simplification, Kallinikos finds a way to rescue bureaucracy both from those who seek to damn it to death and those who would so celebrate its idealness as to put it upon a pedestal forever out of reach. He does so by capturing its specificity in terms of the incompleteness of the way in which persons relate to formal organizations, 'the non-inclusive way of modulating the individual-organization relationship'. By insisting, in short, that persons, *qua* persons, do NOT involve themselves in formal organizations, rather they do so only in and as *part* through the occupation of 'role' (an argument Kallinikos first put forward in this journal in 2004). Locating the essence of bureaucracy in the non-inclusive role allows Kallinikos to escape that mode of grasping the bureaucratic that would render it and its dimensions as variables. If formal organization is sustained by an institutional order there must be some specificity that lurks within variable modes of expression of that formality. If not there is nothing to be instituted beyond an "it doesn't all change at once", which is such a limp formulation as to not be worthy of either the effort or the name. But as always in this text, there is more at stake in this precision than the technical niceties of desiccated classification. For if we judge the presence or absence of bureaucracy on the basis of the presence or absence of non-inclusive role, then armed with *this* forced distinction we are able to resist that between the tired old separate organization and the shiny new network. And thus once again we are liberated from an either/or of the implications of technological information. We are free to think the consequences of information with sharp, lively, sensitive rigour rather than blunt rigor mortis. We can see networked forms as intensifications of an earlier, industrially rooted, logic. This logic, which draws upon the selectivity, mobility and reversibility that are entailed by the non-inclusive role, mirrors at the

level of the organisation, the permutation of information enabled by digital technologies. We can see contemporary chills such as cultural management as re-traditionalizations that exist in intriguing tension with the orders underlying other aspects of the forms that they inhabit. And we can also see the potential for strange admixtures of normative and rational-legal orderings attendant upon the confluence of deregulation and flexibilization. Organizations that involve combinations of orders currently 'impossible, unthinkable or inconsequential.' There certainly seems to be a great deal of re-regulation going on at the same time that deregulation is being endlessly proclaimed. And this is not only regulation of the normative type. There is also a profusion of legal-rational laws, of which their sheer increase in number is surely incontrovertible indicator. As Kallinikos closes more broadly on the relations between technology and institutions he claims: 'As always, perhaps, the ultimate outcome will be a compromise between future possibility and current actuality'. There is no simple over-arching uni-directional trajectory to be discerned, only tools of interpretive articulation to be constructed in the hope of allowing understanding to be not utterly out of step.

Regrets? I have a few. And given this is a review they are never going to be too few to mention. I'd have liked to have seen Simmel grace the pages of the text – the links between rationalization and modernity, and the formal organization and bureaucracy, seem to me to be much more elegantly played out in his writings than in those of the Weber with whom he had such a complex relationship. I'd also have liked a little more specificity in places. This is not a complaint about the writing of the text, which is exemplary in its precision. Rather I refer to its pointing outside, to the worlds of the empiricist and that of other theorists. I understand the reticence with the former – so much of the empirical treatment of information and its impact is so riven from the institutional context by agent centric assumptions as to make it virtually unusable for a novel journey such as this one. But I'd like to have known more often precisely the location of the point in the work of others that was being invoked in the referencing. On many occasions of course the allusion is to the thrust of the text as a whole and thus such critique is unjustified. On other occasions however it would have been nice for the author to better facilitate close, quick engagement on the part of the reader with those whose work has inspired the text currently being read. This would have enhanced the efficiency with which sources could be followed up and enjoyed in their specificity. These are of course minor concerns, at least one of them perhaps just a foible of my own – Kallinikos is far from alone in not paying Simmel what I consider to be his sufficient due! Indeed, one of the places in which I saw most potential virtue for Simmel's insights to be brought to bear was in terms of drawing on his reflections on quantification as part of a broader thinking through of the ways in which an increasingly digitised world is one in which escalating dynamics of information growth become essentially 'out of control'. But this is a task towards which chapter 3 of Kallinikos's text bends itself with both huge care and huge originality through use of the notion of self-referentiality. Such criticisms thus in no sense detract from the magnificent achievement of the text as a whole. This achievement is to deliver a consideration of the consequences of information in both their persistent and novel incarnations at one and the same time. It is no easy feat and an achievement that I, for one, have not seen better executed anywhere else.

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