

Orit Halpern and Robert Mitchell, *The Smartness Mandate*

Review by Davin Heckman
Winona State University

Halpern, Orit, and Robert Mitchell. *The Smartness Mandate*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2023.

Seemingly everyone is armed with a smartphone; networked gadgets are scattered across the contemporary home; jobs are being automated, and our “downtime” is for sale on the gig marketplace. “Smartness” is here. But as Orit Halpern and Robert Mitchell’s *Smartness Mandate* (MIT UP, 2023) demonstrates, it has been a long time coming.

Halpern and Mitchell’s *Smartness Mandate* is an important entry into our understanding of the contemporary paradigm of “smartness” and its emergence as an epistemic framework for the recontextualization of the world. Key to this study is a genealogy of the idea of “smartness” both as a practice and an ideology. Tracing the roots of this concept back to Thomas Malthus’ 1798 text *A Principle of Population*, Halpern and Mitchell weave a path from the Malthusian concept of “population” through the rise of actuarial science and into the present state of “population thinking.” The key to understanding this drift in thinking is to consider the successive refinements in managing populations for the extraction of wealth from environments, shifting from the territorial capture of raw biopower from “dumb populations” through its optimization via mass engineering and into a cybernetic phase in which raw material, manufacture, waste, recirculation, and behavior are integrated into a seamless model (that converts everything into economic material).^[1]

The highlights of this text are many, beginning with the astute observation that Malthus is a key figure in the beginning of the story. For it is Malthus’ proto-posthumanist thought on human beings as populations that initiates the first attempts at the scientifically organized campaigns of rationalized management of the masses. These systemic approaches to control proceed not from the heat of battle or from a place of fervor, but through the rhetoric of calculation, which seeks to manage humans through technocratic means. In Malthus’ case, the risk and benefit of a given population is framed by material inputs and outputs.^[2]

From here, Halpern and Mitchell provide detailed discussions of Friedrich Hayek and Ernst Mayr, framing the two thinkers as uncanny twins leading towards theories of “emergence” that continue to nurture contemporary thinking on both machine intelligence and social behavior. The innovation of Mayr and Hayek is to think of populations as engines of cognition, capable of demonstrating intelligence via collective action, but unable to “learn” in the traditional sense, to “consciously ‘know’ anything” (46). Indeed, this situation induces a kind of atemporality of being, “in which there is no verifiable ‘outside’ and no need for...the past as past or memory” (115). They continue through a discussion of Black-Scholes and the development of derivatives markets in which everything has the potential to become a resource, an insight that is key to the platforms that can analyze, coordinate, and monetize sharing. This new conception of intelligence, as not consciously driven by the individual but expressed as an accumulation of small

decisions that, in aggregate, add up to meaningful signals, is similar to the cybernetic notions of machine intelligence in which simple logical instructions can produce the appearance of intelligence when carried out at speed and scale. And that this data can be used to project the future and steer the future is a fundamentally new epistemology, as Halpern and Mitchell contend. This supplies the backbone of the “smartness mandate.”

But there is a second implication that remains in place as we enter the age of “population thinking”: that the classic eugenic practice of managing populations by the control of calories is expressed in more complex ways through neoliberal responses to disaster. A close, but more sophisticated, cousin of this applied Malthusianism can be found in 21st Century practices like behavioral economics and “nudge” theory. By simply speeding up or slowing down access to options, using carrots and sticks, we can provide tailored (or Taylorized) decision trees that can nudge humans towards desired outcomes without engaging their conscious awareness. This paternalistic method is not such a radical shift when viewed from the history of elitism, but it is fundamentally incompatible with democracy. As Halpern and Mitchell cleverly note, the *demos* as an expression of popular sovereignty gives way to “demos” that enfold publics as experimental test-subjects debugging their own perpetual disruption (85).

Halpern and Mitchell provide a detailed discussion of the intersection between this strategy and Naomi Klein’s “shock doctrine”, pointing to the myriad ways in which the discourse of smartness makes use of the predictable (and, in some cases, intentional) tragedies of disaster capitalism to accelerate the adoption of solutions.^[3] Here, wars, natural disasters, pandemics, economic disruptions, social upheavals, and ecological crises shift the responsibility for the control and maintenance of useful biopower to corporations, NGOs, and selectively competent states. In turn, housing costs, food prices, wages, and migration frame sociological disruptions as occasions for individual economical decision-making, effectively converting dispossession into a perverse exercise of personal responsibility (ie. governmentality) and relieving civil society of its duty to its people. Key to Halpern and Mitchell’s argument is the observation that the smartness mandate, rather than fixing problems, imposes provisional interventions that, thanks to the feedback systems they are built upon, lead to further research and intervention. The goal is a systemic, automated, open-ended learning, which pursues “resilience” as its goal.

In the process of describing the *zeitgeist* of smartness, Halpern and Mitchell provide a rich and fascinating history of the contributors to this discourse, weaving through evolutionary biology and cybernetics, that reads like a who’s who of 20th Century technocracy, though much of the coherence of the emerging mandate circulates around Halpern and Mitchell’s attention to a key text: The Club of Rome’s *Limits to Growth*, which is a recurring reference point throughout.

In their closing chapter, they see a hopeful possibility to “measure all things” according to “nonprice metrics” through the wisdom of distributed cognition (223). Beyond capitalism, they envision a world in these technologies will be used to facilitate learning and foster resilience, opening a new era of “care and participation.” As is often the case with critical texts, a descriptive masterpiece ends on a speculative note, which yearns for hope against the evidence. Ultimately, in reflecting on the vast and rich compendium of materials Halpern and Mitchell have pulled together in this text, it is hard to fault Halpern and Mitchell for succumbing to this tendency. A single book, no matter how expansive, can only do so much. And a conclusion can gesture towards something else, but to define that something else with detail would be to ask them to write a second book altogether.^[4]

The Smartness Mandate provides an excellent macro-level perspective on the rise of smartness as expressed by the Western, especially American, institutions most responsible for its implementation. What's missing is a phenomenology of smartness in the context of the everyday. Though Halpern and Mitchell touch on the connection between smartness and "governmentality," provide a useful discussion of the racial politics of red-lining and subprime lending, and devote serious attention to environmental justice and globalization, the text tends to cohere around the history of the idea of smartness and its macro-level implications that circulate around the hegemonic perspective of its key proponents.^[5]

At a deeper level, as Halpern and Mitchell note, the conversion of the *demos* into "demos" is designed to incorporate dysfunction (or disaster) into the process itself. Indeed, a key feature of smartness is institutional immunity from responsibility, as its pool of data is trained on the public who becomes responsible for the conclusions it draws. In its place, the institution behaves as the rent-seeking "steward" who fixes the failures that our labor provides in the perpetual beta-test of the world. Its calculations grow ever more complex and tend to rule in ways that have no intuitive interpretation. The significance of this shift is that it simultaneously saps agency by turning the public into "subscribers" and shirks responsibility by framing versional obsolescence as "care." When questioned on the idea of "responsibility," Jacques Ellul's comment from *The Betrayal by Technology* is relevant:

In a society such as ours, it is almost impossible for a person to be responsible. A simple example: a dam has been built somewhere, and it bursts. Who is responsible for that? Geologists worked it out. They examined the terrain. Engineers drew up the construction plans. Workmen constructed it. And the politicians decided that the dam had to be in that spot. Who is responsible? No one. There is never anyone responsible. Anywhere. In the whole of our technological society the work is so fragmented and broken up into small pieces that no one is responsible. But no one is free either. Everyone has his own, specific task. And that's all he has to do. (qtd. In Van Boeckel)

In the case of smartness, and the model of cognition it offers, there is no one responsible. Our actions are, to reference Herbert Simon, like those of ants, reacting in the moment to what is in front of us (Halpern and Mitchell 146). Stiegler's comments on "smartness"^[6] offer a stern warning for the social milieu such thinking generates: "Digital automata have succeeded in bypassing the deliberative functions of the mind, and a systemic stupidity has been established between consumers and speculators, functionally based in the drives, and pitting each against the other" (Stiegler, *Nanjing*, 16). Smartness, to function seamlessly, depends precisely on exhibiting a kind of cognition that is antithetical to the care and attention necessary for the formation of the political itself.^[7]

And though Halpern and Mitchell are keenly critical of the financial and consumer practices that have led us to the "smartness mandate," I fear that their desire to move beyond its paradigm misses a key point: Alternatives to price for the mediation of difference *have* been sketched out in a variety of iterations—some utopian (like Kant's hope for reason or Habermas' notion of the public sphere) and others less so (see Trotsky's critique of the Soviet weaponization of food under Stalin or in the prospect of "social credit scores" for obedience to authority). In short, we should be reminded of what Capitalists and Marxists seem to have forgotten, but behavioral economists know: There are a whole host of differential mechanisms that can be leveraged to produce behaviors in a given population. In our networked era, where all manner of things can be digitally captured, analyzed and monetized with high degrees of complexity, everything is hypothetically fungible with the correct schematic crosswalks. With the correct balance of carrots and sticks, it is possible to exert power over populations at a large scale, often in ways that are totally obscure to the subjects they dominate. And, while, technically, it is an alternative to price as the measure of all things, it is hard for me to find optimism in the idea that machine-readable metadata sorted by esoteric algorithms would make power more transparent or accessible. Smartness is to everyday psychosocial existence, what commodities are to nature.

In fairness to Halpern and Mitchell, *the Smartness Mandate* is a fantastic achievement. Taken on its own terms, I cannot think of another book that provides such thorough insights into this new epistemology. Indeed, my small criticism of their text is enabled by its significant merit, which highlights the utility of their work and makes it a critical contribution to what we can only hope will be an ongoing and robust debate on “smartness.”

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Notes

1. In “your visit will leave a permanent mark,” Heckman and O’Sullivan note the difference between *logos* (with connotations in natural, metaphysical, and/or essential law as understood through rational understanding) and *nomos* (with connotations in the partitioning of land and legislation as expressed by sovereign power) in relation to *oikos*, as the roots of *economy* and *ecology*, which we use to describe complex systems:

Thus, deprived of a world in which “human nature” and “human spirit” play their parts, Media Ecology is an incorrect term for post-digital ecosystemic approaches. There is no transcendental law of the world to which one appeals. Instead, we refer to the declarative law of “nomos.” Nomos identifies the juridical power of code and structure without recourse to the metaphysical status of logos (and the understanding of ecology and nature). Hence, “economy” is the appropriate term for the programmed *oikos*. And against this economy, the question of poetics is reframed. (110)

While Heckman and O’Sullivan’s work here is primarily focused on digital poetic practices that subvert the industrialization of the everyday, these tactical responses to the “smartness mandate” can explore liberatory alternatives to the candy-coated treachery of contemporary hegemonic futurism.

2. In his own writings, Malthus took aim at the Poor Laws, which provided assistance to the poor, as he believed that hunger could be used as a check against overpopulation by undesirable populations. Critical geographer, William Moseley notes that Malthus’ work contributed to British Imperial policies in Ireland, India, and Nigeria, and connects this impulse to contemporary attitudes about the SNAP Benefit program in the US and the global food system.
3. I would be curious to know, in 2023, if the authors felt differently about their critique of Klein’s claims that the COVID crisis was used for “shock doctrine.” As the dust has settled, and we have now been able to take in the opportunistic use of COVID to advance the “Fourth Industrial Revolution,” “4IR,” or “Industry 4.0” (the leadership crowd’s brand names for the “smartness mandate”) and examples of crass profiteering and gangster capitalism, Klein’s assessment seems to have been correct. Even a cursory web search for “Fourth Industrial Revolution and COVID” finds reams strategy documents from a wide range of organizations (WEF, UN, OECD, World Bank, IMF, IFC, CFR, Rand, Club of Rome, Cato, ASEAN, FAO, UNESCO, Brookings, APEC, etc.) as well as corporations, universities, consulting firms, and government agencies (DOD, DNI, USAID, Commerce Department, Homeland Security, etc.) all making use of the public health emergency to advance unrelated goals in public life (without democratic participation).
4. Perhaps this second book already exists in the form of Bernard Dyonisius Geoghegan’s *Code: From Information Theory to French Theory* (Duke UP, 2023), which connects cybernetics and eugenics. Geoghegan is listed as the third author with Halpern and Mitchell in a 2017 article entitled “The Smartness Mandate: Notes towards a Critique,” suggesting mutual awareness across the two projects.
5. Parallel to these high-level narratives, there is a lower story: The everyday accounts of working class, dispossessed, and displaced populations, who constitute the majority of the world’s population, and for whom smartness presents a wall of indifferent interfaces, coerced adoptions, and targeted shocks—for instance, the experience of refugees assigned to carry smart phones for monitoring in an overtaxed immigration system, the impact of “cash free” services that exclude urban homeless populations by default, automated customer service portals that torment less affluent consumers with stupid options and endless loops of disservice, or remote rural populations for whom this wouldn’t even be a discourse—all of which are experienced as perks (cell phones, cash free, and automated 24-hour service) by white collar populations who have historically been well-served by innovation.
6. Stiegler offers many such observations, spread across several books, *States of Shock* (2015), *The Automatic Society* (2016), *The Neganthropocene* (2018), *The Nanjing Lectures* (2020), etc. While Stiegler tends to work in the tradition of French critical theory, which speculates against American cultural hegemony from an outsider perspective, these works could be included among the seeds of a growing reading list on critical approaches to smartness. A key strength of Halpern and Mitchell’s text is the degree to which it cleaves closely to its task of documenting the emergence of “smartness” in the networks, places, and contexts where it was conceptualized and developed. To be more completely understood, however, we require companion approaches that describe the prevailing episteme from the outside, the margins, and below. By virtue of their alterity, such approaches

will always seem intrinsically deficient in their apprehension (precluded, occluded, excluded, secluded), which is a revealing aspect of any potent discourse.

7. One could imagine Hannah Arendt thinking through “smartness” from the perspective laid out in *The Human Condition*. Ewa Płonowska Ziarek’s, “Against Digital Worldlessness: Arendt, Narrative, and the Onto-Politics of Big Data/AI Technologies” presents an interesting entry point to this consideration. While industry (backed by state investment) has been a key driver of the development of “smartness,” an important question is the ultimate cause of destructive cultural tendencies. A common argument is that the capitalist origins of AI are the cause of the platform culture’s negative trajectory and that a change in the ruling ideology would create different results. To be fair, pointing the technology at a goal other than profit would alter its process in some respects. A deeper question is what its chief utility is? Is smartness about enabling people to think and engage each other freely or about converting social and psychological process into biopower for the expression a larger organizational logic? Arendt’s work suggests that social health is produced through inter-relational social processes, and it is “Because disintegration damages human plurality at scale, digital worldlessness makes struggles for emancipation much more difficult to conceive” (Ziarek). Nevertheless, at a time when the humanistic disciplines are in freefall and Big Tech offers patronage (or at least the hope of relevance) by way of fields like STEM and Digital Humanities, there is a powerful (perhaps even irresistible) temptation to reconcile these competing tendencies.

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