

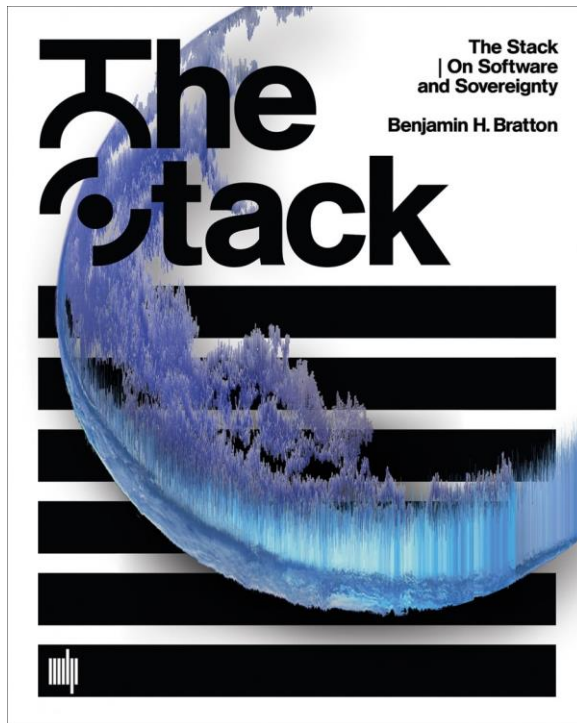
Book Review

BEING GOVERNED THROUGH PLATFORMS: BETWEEN TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM AND ITS CRITICISM

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Bratton, B.H. (2015). *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*. Cambridge: Massachusetts, London: England: The MIT Press. 502 pages. ISBN: 978-0-262-02957-5

From McLuhanesque hyper-optimistic gaze on the speed-of-information-based determination, to cybernetic theories from both the USA and former USSR, the aftermath of technological determinism has been reached at the present day any way at all, despite all kind of severe but fair criticism. When looking at recent personal data scandals of Facebook and customized and both centralized and decentralized mass surveillance with AI of China through the technological determinism perspective, it can be argued that argumentative strength of the criticism on technological determinism



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Date Of Submission: 24/04/2018 Date of Acceptance: 14/05/2018

has been melting, so new kind of approaches are needed for both advocating every aspect of human subjectivity and deconstructing the transformed objects that technology determine. Therefore, we can properly include technological inquiries into media studies. Thus, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* (2015)¹ by Benjamin H. Bratton is worth reviewing by its way of evaluating the human- technology relations and the implications of their transformative effects on politics, media theories and also every aspect of digital humanities in general. This also provides a historical and social approach onto recent media theories.

The Stack is an essay that basically argues the structures of planetary scale computing model that works for governing which also brings its utopias and dystopias. Highly comprehensive and recent characteristics of this study combine design theory, software studies, political philosophy and -in Bratton's own words- "even science fiction" (p. xvii). What *the Stack* offers in the very first phase is a contribution to political philosophy by its evaluation of how sovereignty has been transformed from Schmittian state to platform state. Despite its political contribution in the main scale, *the Stack* also offers philosophy of communication a new set of vocabularies and an evaluation of subject-object relationships.

Before reviewing this contribution, one point deserves a strong highlight: Technological determinism and its basic expectations, either optimistic or pessimistic are disregarded but Bratton's study seems compelling this towards a moderate location for the sake of the model of governing through platforms and software. This provides a critical approach as the major aim of the book which has been structured around a kind of evaluation of 'computation' which has a form of 'planetary-scale', as logic of culture, design, architecture, governmentality and politics. Another main offering of *the Stack* is that a new set of vocabularies. Bratton (2016) suggests: "Today we lack adequate vocabularies to properly engage the operations of planetary-scale computation, and we make use of those at hand regardless of how poorly they serve us" (p. xviii). Therefore, *the Stack* allows us a discussion through philosophical inquiries unlikely it has been formerly done by deterministic approaches. Therefore, Bratton's study also provides us a new kind of approach on new-media-theory (the theory of new media, or rather new media theory), while suggesting a multi-layered reading towards both design theory, media theory and also politics by philosophical manner. This also affirms that how

¹ Bratton's book is abbreviated as *the Stack* throughout this text. G.Ö.

design theory, politics, technological inquiries, and media theories have all been intertwined.

By this book, Bratton basically promises a new vocabulary and a context approaching sovereignty in the world that is governed by planetary scale computation. This form of governing is increasing its concern over the world in which both central and decentral massive surveillance has reached what were the worst scenarios of the dystopian narratives. Over the last couple of years, China structured its massive central surveillance system that implements face-recognition system and runs with AI, that is known its algorithms have been jet-black. The way that *The Stack* is used for governing in the planetary scale makes it multi-layered. One of the philosophical manner that *The Stack* contains is multi-layeredness, which includes historicalness located in the background, is worth underlining. This provides both different readings onto it and a methodological structure. One of the founding arguments that Bratton uses is that The Stack is a model that being used for governing (p. 7). This gives the way for discussing the stack in the context of subject and object relationships. Despite his disregard of early portrayal of state-machine analogy of Weber, later Western Marxists and Foucault, Bratton argues this concept as “the machine as the state” that governing also controlling humans not through discourse but information as a form of human being which flows into designable platforms.

A strong underlining of designable character of the platforms has been structured for recent kind of sovereignty that brings us planetary-scale computational governing. This is because of the fact that the design is not only a former geopolitical problem as argued by Bratton but also a matter of constructing social subjectivities. These subjectivities are located in the six-tier-layered structure of The Stack: Earth, Cloud, City, Address, Interface and User. The way of gathering these is from the most physical to the culturally most complex (p. 66-72). What is attributed for designability can be more than what the book offers, instead of this, Bratton (2015) argues that “The Stack may represent an epochal enclosure of the planet under an absolutist regime of algorithmic capitalism, or the fragility of its totality may force new breaks, [...] even emancipatory programs of disenchantment, discovery and design.” (p. 72). This may be because of the political aspect of the relationship between design and creativity as long as they can be deconstructed.

I do not intend to introduce each layer individually but rather evaluate “City, Address and User” layers for underlining their interwoven structure and their

relevance to subject and object relationships. Even though, each layer is introduced separately, evaluating the most relevant layers, I believe, enables us to properly understand their interdependently pre-designed characteristic among these three. This would also be applicable for stressing how *the Stack* constructs the subject.

The city layer as a kind of urban space which information is flowing is structured around media, entertainment and control regimes. By referencing *The Overexposed City* by Virilio (1985) and *Postscript on the Societies of Control* by Deleuze (1992), disciplinary mode of society has been disregarded but control mode of society is operating. By *Postscript on the Societies of Control*, Deleuze (1992) basically argues the transformation from discipline to control has been because of the mutation of capitalism into socio-technologically evolved informational capitalism. Foucauldian manner of former disciplinary society has been disregarded for the sake of platform capitalism because of its characteristics that do not allow to escape (p. 157). The city which also encapsulates networking through apparatuses, has User (both the layer one and the using-agent one) who has “multiple process of subjectification” (p. 164-5) by referencing Foucault’s concept of *dispositif* and Agamben’s *apparatus*. In this context, Bratton emphasizes these two concepts as a procedure of subjectification. From this point of view, *the Stack* allows subjects, subjectivities and subjectifications but this allowing also brings regulation and limitation, also a kind of determination, for the sake of software’s architecture. It can be argued that ruling and resistance are both located within the certain level of this determination. The user layer therefore is the most subjective and speculative layer. As Bratton introduces this, “[a]ll these [layers] are put in motion for *Users*, as *Users* are put in motion for them” [italics are used as given by the original text] (p. 256). This chapter is aimed at theorizing the user, positioned between cybernetics and subjectivities in order to seek a universal user in post-human form. Its universal characteristic of user’s political subjectivity is originated from the idea of quantitatively optimization of our carbon footprints and economic values of personal data in the state of platform capitalism. The last layer that I would like to mention is Address which seems the most applicable for stressing the intersection set which includes governing relations and technological determinism because of its designation as “a medium of communication” (p. 192). What makes the Address layer crucial is identification strategy that communication uses. A term called deep address is derived from the need for things to be known by *the Stack* (p. 197).

In conclusion, it can be argued that Bratton's study, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*, is a recent theoretical contribution that seeks new vocabularies and models to explain how politics has been transformed in the state of platform capitalism. Planetary-scale computation, in this context, is one hand is continuation of universalistic suggestion, but on the other is in search of a moderate location between technological determinism and its criticism. Therefore, *the Stack* can be considered as a strong contribution on recent and the next media theory.

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