

The Tyranny of Algorithms: Freedom, Democracy, and the Challenge of AI

Miguel Benasayag

Rome: Europa Compass, 2021. 128 p.

ISBN: 9781609456627

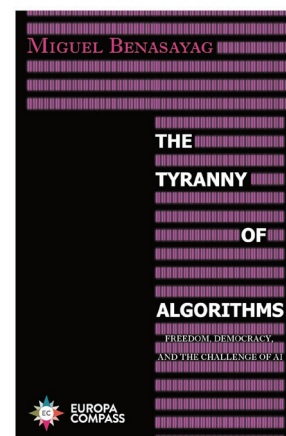
BY IGNASI GOZALO SALELLAS

Professor of Information and Communication Sciences and Humanities

Universitat Oberta de Catalunya

igozalo@uoc.edu

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9058-8036>



How to cite:

Gozalo Salellas, I. (2023). The anthropological condition of algorithmic man [Book review of *The Tyranny of Algorithms: Freedom, Democracy, and the Challenge of AI*, by Benasayag, M.]. *Quaderns del CAC*, 49, 87-88. doi: <https://doi.org/10.34810/qcac49id420674>

The anthropological condition of algorithmic man

The Tyranny of Algorithms (Europa Compass, 2021) is a short volume, no more than 120 pages, originally published in French, with the only translation into English being by Steven Rendall for Europa Compass. It is a rich but chaotic dialogue between the Franco-Argentine philosopher and psychoanalyst Miguel Benasayag (who is listed as the author) and the French anthropologist Régis Meyran. It is the basis for another work by Benasayag, published in Spanish, called *¿Funcionamos o existimos?* (Prometeo Libros, 2021). Both titles are philosophical-anthropological approaches to the era of the algorithm, focusing on the production of artificial intelligence and the impact it has on contemporary human subjectivity.

Throughout its three sections (1. *The failure of Western rationality*; 2. *Post-democracy*; 3. *The theory of action*), the work claims that singularity is the element that differentiates humans from machines, relying on a whole host of bibliographical references for this (from Heidegger to Badiou, Descartes to Lacan, Newton to Einstein, Spinoza and Leibniz to Marx, Turing to Deleuze and Guattari...), rich dialogues between periods and authors, and a wide range of examples. The result is a unique, wide-angle reflection that moves away from the current presentist fever while addressing cases ranging from the Holocaust to Nagasaki; from the Valladolid controversy (1550-1551) to the Stock Markets or Silicon Valley.

The first chapter, where the author's central ideas are discussed, points to the central debate between the human model and the technical model (p. 16): to exist (the human) or to function (the machine), the dilemma framed by the title of the other book that has been referenced (*¿Funcionamos o existimos?*). Thus, for Benasayag, man and his body are a type of analogical thought, which fails and cannot be controlled because it is real (“the

real with bodies”). The first section continues with Benasayag affirming that the prominence of technological rationality in our lives is, for practical purposes, the end of the modern project that reached its climax in the 18th and 19th centuries with Kant and Hegel—which the author defines as “the age of the spirit”, p. 25). For Benasayag, what characterised the modern project was a relational rationality, in eternal dispute, quite the opposite of the current technocratic project, based on technical-digital hyperrationalism—a rationalism that leaves no room for error, as it is nothing but a sum of quantitative correlations (p. 26).

Even so, the author shows the circular nature of history and, in his eagerness to make a genealogy of the project of modernity, in the book, he concludes that it is precisely modernity that, in different periods and with different methods, has created the measure of the world: from Galileo's mathematical method to the rise of automata in the 18th century as perfected models of man, passing through the equation between the human organism and the clock in the Cartesian era. The final conclusion regarding the errors of ancient methods of calculation of the world (“not everything is possible”, p. 22) is the strongest argument that Benasayag offers to criticise the faith in contemporary technical rationalism, which leads to the traps of the cybernetic promise—the fact that technology will free humans from work and the difficulties that life presents.

The second section of the book, *Post-democracy*, should have more of a tone of contemporary political analysis, however, despite specific moments where it tries to address the concept of *post-democracy*, it continues to delve deeper into the implications of technology in our lives and in the ways of articulating society. It offers just a few truly illuminating passages on post-democracy: in an interpretation that goes away from the hegemonic one, the author considers that democracy is

characterised by its conflictual character (“conflictuality”) with what is different (or “the Other”) (p. 65). Therefore, the denial of alterity and conflict is what characterises the post-democratic model that, according to Benasayag, has successfully managed neoliberalism and its capacity to deterritorialise and destroy links. From this management model, the post-democratic subject would have emerged, fundamentally individualised and relativistic - a condition that the author summarises in the concept of “hypernominalism” (p. 68). In this world, understood as “aristocracy without aristocrats”, the future is subject to mass prediction, which minimises the random and uncontrollable character of destiny to the extreme. In a way, our post-democratic era denies *futurability*, as Franco Berardi theorises, and turns it into an extension of the programmed and monitored present.

All in all, in my opinion, the most interesting reflection that the book offers about our era is the inability of humans (and their rationality) to control the consequences of their actions. In summing up a rich presentation of cases of modernity, the author concludes that the catastrophes to which we expose ourselves with digital technology are nothing but the last chapter in a series of disasters produced by the technical avant-garde in the West, with Auschwitz and Hiroshima/Nagasaki being the two key examples, and figures such as Hitler, Stalin or Pol Pot the most recognisable figures.

Faced with this scenario, the author proposes a re-politicisation of the social field and a rethinking of political action, neutralising the current delegation of politics to machines (p. 74-75), but assuming the key handicap of the most immediate future: the inability to invade physical space as in the past. In the example of the Winter Palace as a great symbol of the conquest of public space, Benasayag contrasts the offices of Google or IBM as the iconic spaces of contemporary power. In this sense, it may be useful to think about Elon Musk's entry to Twitter and the media attention given to his symbolic arrival at the company's *headquarters* in San Francisco, as an example of who has the ability to conquer today.

The reflections of the final chapter, The theory of action, focus on strategies of human action in the future, largely based on Foucaultian theories about power and forms of governmentality. Under the hegemony of algorithmic governmentality (p. 79), according to Benasayag, individuals are depersonalised and communities are annulled. The avatar would therefore be the figure that stars in our time in history. The path proposed by the author is to open our minds to other forms of existence and other forms of action that are not only conscious but also alive. In a world dominated by complex non-linear systems, Benasayag calls for singular solutions, avoiding Tabula Rasa fantasies that come from both the far left and the right, and returning to a more extended time scale that avoids the great sins of the digital world: constant feedback, immediacy and promises of the infallibility of mechanisation.

In conclusion, *The Tyranny of Algorithms* is an uneven critique, but it is full of brilliant and non-catastrophic diagnoses of the

algorithmic era, which will likely have more resonance and unanimity in the not-too-distant future. Although it contributes some central theses, it suffers from the risks of a poorly delimited and apparently improvised conversation, resulting in the structure outlined in the index remaining an unfulfilled promise. In any case, the book fulfils its initial function: to be a launcher of ideas for more systematic reflections in the future.

References

Benasayag, M. (2021). *¿Funcionamos o existimos?: una respuesta a la colonización algorítmica*. Prometeo Libros.

Berardi, F. (2017). *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*. Verso Books.