The promise of access: Technology, inequality, and the political economy of hope

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BOOK REVIEW

The promise of access: technology, inequality, and the political economy of hope, by Daniel Greene, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021, 272 pages. Price: $30.00. ISBN: 9780262542333

Shedding fears of Marxist analysis, historians and sociologists of the Internet have recently centered capitalism, and named it as such. They have made a collective case that the Internet enables novel forms of capitalism, think surveillance capitalism or platform capitalism, and new modes of production, think heteromation and ghost work. This work explicates the front story of capitalist production – how data becomes commodified, how controlling code means controlling the means of production, and how technology mediates labor relations – but there are also backstage processes of capitalism, the work of social reproduction. In other words, what is the role of the Internet in enabling the conditions of early twenty-first century capitalism? Looking, as Nancy Fraser prescribes, behind the explicit boundaries of the economy reveals the "the forms of provisioning, caregiving and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds" and make up the "indispensable background condition for the possibility of capitalist production" (Fraser, 2014, p. 61). In *The Promise of Access*, Daniel Greene makes clear that Internet history is a story of social reproduction.

Greene's outstanding ethnography of Washington, D.C. takes us into the institutions of social reproduction: the public library, the charter school, and, surprisingly, the startup. There we see the ways the citizenry is trained, disciplined, and managed in order to make do in the information economy. Turning our attention to these structuring institutions, Greene explains how a social order is defined and precarity maintained. *The Promise of Access* traces the pervasiveness of "the access doctrine," the dangerous common sense that "the problem of poverty can be solved through the provision of new technologies and technical skills" (p. 5). Public institutions, overwhelmed by problems far too large and too structural to address properly with shrinking budgets, turned to the access doctrine. Not only has this approach unlocked political and economic support, but it also provided actionable strategies despite seemingly intractable problems. Greene calls this process "bootstrapping," the constant organizational restructuring around a new set of technological solutions and skills-training programs. As underfunded and therefore under-functioning public institutions reinvent themselves again and again with the latest innovation space or the most promising digital surveillance, Greene helps us understand why anyone thought this precarious way of living was a good idea. Greene's most important contribution is therefore an account of how the whole system somehow holds together: the faith placed in technology became "the cultural glue holding a deeply unequal information technology together" (p. 15).

The first two chapters present concrete origins for bootstrapping, first in the politics of neoliberal Democrats and then in the business model of the startup. Greene locates the "discovery" of a digital divide in the rise of centrist Democrats in the late 1980s and early 1990s, particularly those associated with the Democratic Leadership Council like Bill Clinton and Al Gore. On the one hand, their political philosophy buttressed a narrowing of public policy. Access to computing resources, the Internet, and skills programs became the primary means of supporting success in the information economy. On the other hand, as Greene points out, technological resources and job training were only half of the system. Lurking behind every new training program was the threat of a growing carceral system. The prison system punishes; it also teaches those not incarcerated the cost of

avoiding with job-training programs. As Greene puts it, the lesson of 1990s poverty policy was, "log on, train up – or else" (p. 34). There was a real threat resulting from a punitive approach to public policy, but Internet policy could have been different. We get glimpses of these alternative paths even tracing the history of these so-called Atari Democrats' thinking, like Al Gore's original commitment to universal service and a broader conception of government support.

On the plugged-in side of the digital divide, Greene takes us into the contemporary offices of a D.C. startup developing a business-to-business tech platform. While a startup may not typically be considered an institution of social reproduction (it is part of the explicit economy), Greene makes clear that the ideas of how to build, maintain, and reinvigorate schools and libraries are developed in the startup. Startups became "the ideal type for public service organizations under pressure" (p. 62). In the startup, Greene lays bare the practices and modes of thinking that will permeate the public sector institutions. Most striking is the constant pivot. There is a dark humor in the workers constantly reinventing their business and passionately working absurd hours while providing fairly banal services. The pivot hides all failures – in fact it prevents any meaningful assessment of the situation and sets a pace of reinvention so that original goals are never met. In the startup, and the larger innovation ecosystem of which it was a part, bootstrapping becomes commonsense.

Chapters 3 and 4, ethnographies of a library and a school respectively, are the most important interventions. These chapters simultaneously offer a parable about the dangers of techno-solutionism and a rich portrait of public institutions struggling to exist in the political economic regimes enabled by techno-solutionism. Both sites are defined by strict moral codes. In the classroom computers are good, but phones are bad. In the library, patrons watching pornography are the recurring moral conundrum for the librarians. But morality, as the logic of the pivot dictates, is never stable. Students, teachers, librarians, and patrons are all struggling to keep up. They are exhausted. In turn, Greene shows how weakened public institutions with exhausted staff are susceptible to the allure of bootstrapping and yet another pivot. He traces the demographics of wealthier helping-professionals who overvalue their own skills training and bring expertise from the tech sector. Most of all, institutions, asked to do more and more with fewer and fewer resources, have lost their mission. By the end of each chapter, it has become unclear to the professionals what exactly a library or a school is supposed to do.

In less skilled hands, the characters in these institutions could have become clichés – and indeed the startup bros at the pseudonymous InCrowd do at times, perhaps inevitably, resemble HBO's *Silicon Valley* ensemble eager to "make the world a better place." In the school and the library, Greene is able to draw out the ambivalence of his interlocuters and the balancing acts of midlevel staffers trying to preserve their institutions. Greene does not speak for library patrons or charter school students, instead you can feel his affection for those living under the access doctrine. Ethnographic conventions of anonymizing actors and blurring biographic details somewhat mutes the richness of these exchanges. His strength as an ethnographer is a guiding respect for interlocutors' political literacy. It is easy to imagine Greene at ease in the library with patrons talking Pokémon or breaking the dress code with students to show off new sneakers. It is a reminder that serious scholarship does not require stultifying self-seriousness. An institutional critique of capitalism and its technological features still functions best with human actors. They all exist in one city, bumping against each other as neighbors who share, embrace, and resist, the access doctrine.

These sources underscore that neither capitalism nor the Internet made the world flat. Despite a period of intense globalization, Greene has helpfully bounded his story within the borders of one city, Washington D.C., and the domestic concerns of one nation, the United States. In doing so, he demarcates a period when U.S. science and technology

policy was not driven by Cold War or neo-Cold War frameworks. As U.S. STEM policy increasingly figures China as the great competitor, it is striking to recognize the recent past with not only no Sputnik event driving science education, but also no invocation of Chinese threats to U.S. business. Instead, localized questions push through. The politics of city-wide elections, the donor pressure to renovate the library, and the charter school movement, all give structure to distinct features of the political economy. Greene makes a compelling case that the engine of this social order is not fear of an external threat or global competition, but the reproduction of hope. This consistently rejuvenated faith in meaningful progress, technologically aided of course, may become a useful feature for marking a distinct period of capitalism.

By locating his study in Washington, D.C., Greene makes clear that anti-Blackness gives shape to this period of capitalism. The digital divide has always been a racialized trope, predominately of Black technological deficiency (Fouché, 2012; Nelson, 2002). Greene does not center anti-Blackness, but a reader will recognize the connections between the so-called Chocolate City without electoral representation in Congress and the ways his actors are disenfranchised in organizational decisions. In Green's account the symbolism of techno-solutionism runs especially thick in America's capital. It can fix libraries and schools named (pseudonymously but likely also non-pseudonymously) for Black Civil Rights icons. Technological promise is a mode of controlling Black people. A library patron like Shawn, a Black Washingtonian in his twenties, makes clear he was "always a computer man" who built his identity through ease with technology, but digital-divide logic defines him as non-technological, on the other side of the great divide. His behavior would require policing by well-intentioned white librarians. In Washington, the racialization of the access doctrine becomes common sense. We are barely surprised when Black teachers are told by their principal that their patience with the newest pivot to the latest student surveillance technology is akin to Martin Luther King's perseverance in a Birmingham jail cell. As such, Greene's work will be read alongside other efforts to bring racial capitalism into studies of the Internet (see for example the synthesis proposed by McMillan Cottom, 2020).

The Promise of Access joins a striking lineage of work that critiques digital divide thinking. Over and over again, historians and sociologists have begged policymakers not to recast poverty as a technological problem (Eubanks, 2011; Light, 2001). Despite these warnings about problem framing, a lingering challenge remains: how did efforts to close the digital divide fail even on their own terms? Put more prosaically, why does President Biden still have to argue that broadband is infrastructure and task his Vice President with bringing every American online? Greene offers a potential answer: hope is always reproduced. In his telling, social policy is organized to be in permeant beta, never committing to any goal or theory of change long enough to see it through. The promise of access is defined by pivoting away from the real problems towards the glimmers of hope. The horror Greene describes is not that policymakers have defined problems too narrowly, but that the access doctrine secures consent to living in an unacceptable state of precarity. By foregrounding the mechanisms by which this consent is secured, Greene asks us to refuse to grant it.

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