

Review

The Promise of Access: Technology, Inequality, and the Political Economy of Hope by Daniel Greene

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The discourse on how capitalism influences social reproduction is perhaps as old as capitalism itself. Instead, the recent literature on the subject may ask, which capitalism? Due to the rise of technological innovations and disruptive ideas, there are a few narratives to pick from. Among many, there is surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), platform capitalism (Silva Neto, 2019), and techno-capitalism (Suarez-Villa, 2001). Although these notions of capitalism(s) reflect unique perspectives, there is a common theme among the contemporary critique of capitalism, which cautions that technology will not redeem us from the transgressions that gave rise to structural poverty, racial, class, and gender inequalities. On the far end of this scholarly discourse spectrum is the techno-centric development ideology that gains legitimacy through political support. This market-oriented philosophy presents its reasoning that the future is digital, and a slow digital transition is essentially reassuring slow progress towards achieving numerous human development goals. The staggering growth of the digital technology sector is a sign to keep faith in the digital revolution - keep pursuing the goal of a highly digitally networked society, and success will follow. Scattered across this spectrum are policymakers, managers, and administrators of social institutions who gain hope from this techno-optimistic ideology, to solve complex social issues with simple technological solutions – and that’s what *The Promise of Access* is about.

In *The Promise of Access*, Daniel Greene’s ethnography research from 2012-2015 provides readers a window into the racialized construct of digital skills, technology-centered development policies, and the social determinants of the digital divide at Washington DC’s selected institutions, *i.e.*, libraries, schools, and tech

startups. *The Promise of Access* conceptualizes the techno-centric development strategies that attempt to reproduce hope to eradicate poverties by constantly shaping and reshaping institutional norms and operations. It is a process Greene labels as “bootstrapping” where social institutions’ priorities and identities are continuously restructured using techno-centric solutions and programming in the hope of solving complex inequalities with technology. However, as Greene contends, this techno-centric institutional response reproduces the same inequalities it aims to reduce. Greene uses the term “Access doctrine” to draw attention towards the mythical nature of the assumptions that access to digital technology may eliminate poverty and class imbalances. Greene reasons that the constant reinforcements within the political institutions that marginalized communities lack the “right” digital skills needed to be successful have resulted in a public policy environment where the problem of poverty is transformed into a problem of technology.

The book's first chapter establishes a historical construct of employment skills gaps phenomena, the critical gaps within this phenomena, and the systemic challenges that shift social institutions’ priorities. Greene points out how the political economy of information economy uses the human capital theory to frame the digital divide and skill gaps as the pillars of broader inequalities, and why it attracts widespread political and institutional support. Greene contends that “inequality is a feature of a capitalist economy, not a bug, and the access doctrine makes this inequality sensible and navigable” (pg. 14). The political construct of skills gaps, as Greene discusses, is central to understanding why the problem of poverty is understood as a digital divide. *The Promise of Access* demonstrates the implicit relationship between technology and poverty policy in the neo-liberal era by clarifying how the approaches to reduce the digital divide solutions often align with the coordinated reforms of unemployment insurance, criminal justice, and job training initiatives.

The following three chapters take the readers to DC’s different sides of the digital divide, where the ethnographies reveal how the access doctrine reproduces hope. On the one end is the emerging sector of tech startups, where success depends on the competence to harness value from extreme uncertainty. Here, companies constantly “pivot” to become successful, as does the entrepreneurial-minded talent that forms and conforms to the culture of these startups. Greene reasons that the political economy of technology perceives such startups as a culture that is on the “right” side of the digital divide.

The contrasting side of this digital divide is the bootstrapping social institutions, *i.e.*, DC’s libraries and charter schools that work with technology have-nots. Greene reasons that, tasked with managing complex poverties and inequalities, these institutions take the access doctrine as their mission. *The Promise of Access* explores discourses on the library's purpose and how patrons' identities and life circumstances shape the workers' professional identities. Greene points out how the tech-centric visions of libraries’ future and digital professionalization objectives often do not align with the challenges faced by the homeless crowds that populate these libraries every day. Yet, the immediate use of these public spaces and the needs of patrons are often overlooked; as Greene mentions, “the idea that preserving the hope in personal computing to change the future requires partitioning it from today’s messy needs” (pg. 107). Similarly, Charter schools, which are the hallmark institutions of the access doctrine, use data-driven digital infrastructure to provide the discipline needed to achieve a high-performance academic culture. However, this mission collides with the

hard-to-maintain social justice values. At times, the data-driven school management systems favor upgrading students' human capital over the school's racial justice values.

The Promise of Access is a valuable addition to the growing literature on the social complexities of the digital divide and the intersections of critical race theory and information capitalism, e.g. (Dyer-Witthford, 2017; Lebovits, 2019; Srnicek, 2017; Thylstrup, 2019; Zuboff, 2019). Greene makes a clear case as to why understaffed institutions, overwhelmed by the magnitude of poverties and inequalities they are tasked to address, conform to the techno-centric problem-solving narratives – hope is a powerful motivation. Still, outcomes of this change are not the same as the resource base, and the mission of social institutions is different than that of tech startups.

The use of ethnography research methods to establish a theoretical foundation for conceptualizing bootstrapping helps readers recognize how abstract capitalism theories correspond to on-the-ground realities of social institutions where the research participants such as Ebony, Shawn, and Josie use public libraries as their digital sanctuaries, and staffs struggle to enforce the ever-changing narratives of right and wrong use of technology. The vivid background information and the genuineness of interactions documented in the book make it easy to understand how Greene is comfortable with his research participants whose lives are impacted by technology in various ways. Greene makes readers understand that bootstrapping is the new institutional culture and a sub-organizational script for social reproduction that competes with the public service culture of the past. How technology is used to subvert institutions' values to meet new tech-centric missions and how corporate partnerships, grants, and external groups of philanthropists redefine these missions is a process that outlines who will be included in the future.

The concepts such as bootstrapping institutions and pivoting startups have notable similarities to the notion of disruptive innovation and the culture of disruptive innovation among social institutions (Christensen et al., 2006; Hwang & Christensen, 2008; Lepore, 2014; Nisbet, 2014). Readers may find it interesting to recognize how similar ideas from different schools of thought develop and mature side by side. Nonetheless, these similarities demonstrate how a radical reorganization of how society functions is a powerful motivation that attracts the attention of policymakers and academia, and how the lure of technology provides unrestrained optimism to reduce inequalities and promote just and equitable development practices. A challenge for *The Promise of Access* is then to distinguish the critique of technology from the critique of capitalism and proclaim the subjectivity towards the role of digital technology in contemporary society. Such a distinction appears significant in the presence of certain scholarly perspectives that demonstrate how digital technology plays a significant role in rearranging social support systems, e.g., (Lee & Wellman, 2012), and how without a just participation of marginalized groups, multifaceted inequalities remain embedded in the design of technology, e.g., (Benjamin, 2020; Mosco, 2017; O'Neil, 2016). These perspectives may insist that the access doctrine still has a valuable role in changing the system by working within the system.

About the Reviewer

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