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**Remappings and visibility:
How power circulates and the conditions of
resistance in the digital world**

Rebecca Mignot-Mahdavi*

Review essay of Claudia Aradau and
Tobias Blanke, *Algorithmic Reason: The New
Government of Self and Other* (OUP, 2022),
288p. \$100.00, ISBN: 9780192859624.

Digital modes of governance participate in the remapping of the international legal order. This remapping takes place, on the one hand, around transnational processes, institutions and infrastructures (Kingsbury, 2019 and 2023; Valverde, 2022). From border security infrastructures (Bigo, 2022), to infrastructures of digital economy, the constellation of actors who matter in global and transnational governance involves private entities, including global digital corporations and new international institutions (de Londras). This new constellation of actors designs, shapes and governs digital modes of governance alongside more traditional players of the international legal order such as states

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and governmental international organizations. The remapping could be defined as the rearrangement of markers and lines of demarcation of the international legal order around new maps and networks of actors.

Digital modes of governance, on the other hand, also rearrange our cartographies around the metamorphosis of individuals into data points or, more precisely, around “transient clusters of attributes and data points within transient clusters of attributes and data points” (Gordon, Mignot-Mahdavi and Van den Meerssche). In addition to a new constellation of actors that enacts a remapping of the international legal order beyond the sole grid of the nation states, algorithmic modes of governance, from digital security to marketing practices are characterized by the objective to anticipate. This anticipatory objective, in cosmoi that are composed of digital and non-digital networks that are not only mapped around state-based boundaries, participates in the reduction of bodies, behaviors and societies to data points and saturates our maps with such data points.

Aradau and Blanke’s *Algorithmic Reason* reflects on the conditions of possibility of algorithmic modes of governance and makes explicit as well as visible the materializations and new cartographies of algorithmic governance. The book traces, in a granular and meticulous manner, how algorithmic modes of governance – used in multiple settings from crime management, counter-terrorism, border control, security practices in general, to market economy, humanitarianism and democratic governance – “reshapes power relations between the governing and the governed” and brings to bear “a new government of self and other” whereby one’s language, body and actions form clusters of data points that can be (and are to be ineluctably) processed by algorithmic systems. This new mode of government of self and other, the authors argue, by promising some sort of infinite, boundless and simultaneously precise knowledge transcends orthodox binaries between individual and population, or between domestic and international.

Claudia Aradau and Tobias Blanke, in *Algorithmic Reason*, talk about algorithmic modes of governance and their “rebordering the domestic and the international”. Instead of the rebordering, I prefer to talk here about the remapping of the international legal order, to avoid giving the impression that the latter has been or can ever be borderless. This terminological preference aligns, in my view, with Aradau and Blanke’s own demonstration of the proliferation and dispersal of borders (187) and with their interest in tracing sociotechnical reconfigurations rather than continuities or discontinuities (5). Indeed, when interested in tracing reconfigurations and not necessarily abrupt changes or discontinuities, acknowledging that the type of cartographic markers that compose the international legal order evolve is compatible with the idea that borders, markers of delineation, traces and techniques of compartmentalization (which, in turn, affect bodies, behaviours and societies) are inescapable.

Regardless of the terminology chosen, by bringing to light multiple *materializations* of algorithmic reason, by making readable, audible and visible cartographies of global algorithmic governance, Aradau and Blanke – just as I do by commenting their endeavour – participate themselves in this mapping or remapping exercise. Inspired by Rancière’s metaphor or, rather, method of the scene (Rancière and Jdey, 2018), Aradau and Blanke draw the contours of multiple sites, events and networks through which algorithmic modes of governance – what they call algorithmic reason – deploy themselves (p.12). This use of Rancière’s method of the scene throughout the book is far from incidental and encapsulates what is, in my view, one of the book’s key added values. While many have thought about infrastructures and networks global algorithmic governance conceptually, *Algorithmic Reason* gives sites, events and networks of algorithmic governance thickness and density.

Aradau and Blanke even very literally draw the contours of sites, events and networks of algorithmic modes of governance and create visualizations thereof. By doing so, Aradau and Blanke populate our imaginary of the contemporary international legal order with representations of networks and infrastructures.

The figure below, for instance, eloquently depicts the service connections they have traced in refugee apps (110).

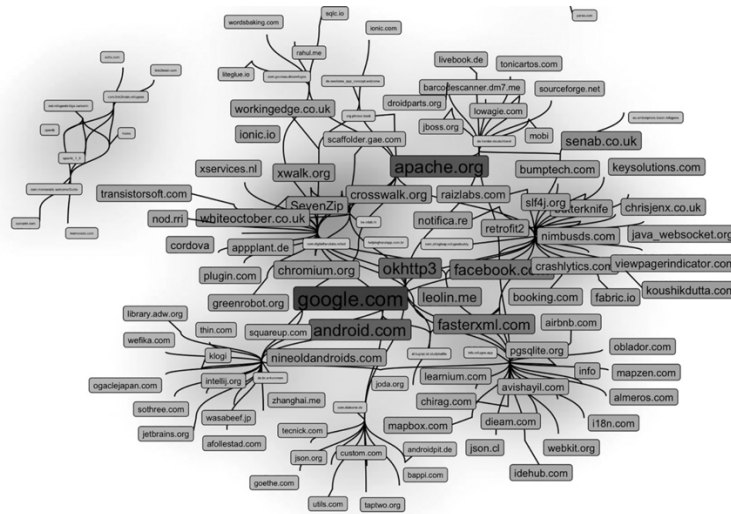


Fig. 4.1 Network visualization of APIs
 Source: Aradau, Blanke, and Greenway, 'Acts of Digital Parasitism'

Mapping exercises that consist, not only in the description, with words, of sites, events and networks of algorithmic governance but also in the creation of visuals gives a concrete sense to the reader of the cartographies of algorithmic reason. These visuals, these maps, almost constitute evidence of the fact that algorithmic governance occurs in realms that cannot be described according to the traditional dichotomy of the domestic and the international. As a result of these mapping exercises, the reader's mind is populated with images, for instance, that allow them to locate and record the operational routes and modalities explaining why refugee labour largely remains unpaid. Indeed, when visualising digital networks as the one reproduced above, one can make sense of the complexity for refugees to navigate their professional digital universe.

Algorithmic modes of governance, however, do not fully escape the grip of the nation state. Aradau and Blanke explain that some digital payment mechanisms might not operate in the refugees' host countries due to international sanctions on financial transactions, refugees themselves may either lack the documentation to verify their identity, etc. This illustration is telling of the imbrication of state-based logics and private-public infrastructural logics beyond the state. Practices

of so-called global algorithmic governance are in fact neither fully global, nor national (Sassen, Eslava, Walker). The complex cartographies of digital governance networks also emerge from Aradau and Blanke's scene of Facebook and its workers remappings of the digital world.

The mapping exercise performed by *Algorithmic Reason* and the visibility it gives to the tissues of algorithmic governance is part of broader reflections that the book undertakes on visibility and invisibility dynamics of data-driven practices. One aspect of the visibility-invisibility question lies in the idea that, contrary to our poor human minds, "computers do not need visualizations and crime maps to support algorithmic decisions" (59). This fantasy of the algorithmic system going beyond the realm of the visible obscures the fact, in my view, that algorithmic governance precisely builds on a belief in visibility defined as perceptibility, on a belief that we can all be understood, and our essence can be captured from the datafied operations we are involved in (36-40). As the authors show themselves, the capturable data we produce render us and our environments "hyper-visible to police surveillance and intervention" (58), or at least cultivate the idea that we are hyper-visible in the digital world.

On the contrary, and this is another aspect of the visibility-invisibility questions that discretely permeate the entire book, the imperceptibility or opacity of algorithmic processes, trajectories and modalities of decision-making (50, 51) crystallise the unequal access to vision between the governing and the governed. As a result of the opacity and unpredictability of algorithmic systems, their entanglements with human operations and decisions to maintain this opacity (64), inequality in the access to vision in the digital world is arguably enhanced. In their different sites of exploration, Aradau and Blanke expose the illegibility of algorithmic decisions, the difficulty to trace their negative impacts on bodies and societies, and to make their errors visible (162). This difficulty to make algorithmic systems' errors visible, the authors argue, explains "their materializations eschew both accountability and responsibility" (87).

The difficulty to map violence produced by data-driven practices is another and final main facet of the visibility-invisibility issue of algorithmic modes of governance. Although Aradau and Blanke do not frame them as attempts to rectify the unequal access to vision, they look at moments and techniques of friction, refusal, resistance which consist, in one way or another, in investing the realm of the visible and creating counter-visuals, counter-evidence and, thereby, counter-narratives. These moments and techniques of friction, refusal and resistance create democratic scenes, they argue, that “enable the political formation of algorithms as public things” (217). Such moments and techniques include the reinstatement of the otherwise *invisible* figures of citizens and workers through moderators’ class action against Facebook for instance (199), or else consist in making the violence of algorithmic governance perceptible, or even finding new pathways to detect algorithmic discrimination (150).

While Aradau and Blanke talk about how algorithms “encounter resistance” in these moments of friction and refusal (12), I would say that algorithms simultaneously produce modes of governance and resistance. Resistance does not come from outside power, before or after it, and is not necessarily built against power and the modalities of power circulation. Rather, resistance coexists with and can even look like power, share its characteristics and procedures. As such, resistance and governance do not exist in a dialectical or oppositional manner but infinitely interact. What scenarios of resistance can do, however, is to further reveal the procedures and techniques that characterize power relations, modalities of “truth saying” (*dire-vrai*) and practices of veridiction at a certain point in time, in certain sites and locations of the digital world (Foucault, Rancière).

In the same way as algorithmic modes of governance rest on the visible broadly defined as perceptible and algorithmic systems’ promise of enhanced capacity to capture, perceive and know the world, counter-narratives and counter-conducts can only powerfully exist if they enter the register of the visible or the audible. “Donner à voir” (*lit. give to be seen*) concrete, grounded, embodied experiences of violence, in response to oppressive algorithmic modes of

governance, is inescapable to survive in the digital world. In a very banal and modern way, power circulates around techniques and procedures of the visible.

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