



Technologies of Government
Politics and Power in the “Information Age”
By Benjamin Baez

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One of my requirements as a first-year faculty member is to participate in a new faculty course requiring bi-weekly class sessions and a range of assignments focusing on improving instruction. As I began my new position, my feeling was that this course would function as more or less of a mentoring program for new faculty to receive support both from their own departments and from university administration. However, as I began the course, I soon realized that the requirements would be much more pervasive and evaluative. Once a semester, each new faculty member is formally observed and evaluated by a university administrator according to a pre-determined rubric. At the same time, the faculty member's students complete a similar rubric of the teaching “performance” for that particular class session. Though I am well aware of, and in agreement with, the numerous criticisms of reducing the phenomena of teaching and learning to isolated techniques and quantitative data, I found myself anxious to know the results of my first evaluation. As I perused the student's and administrator's responses, I began understanding my teaching in terms of the constructed categories that were part of the evaluation and in terms of quantitative data. I wondered to myself, “How many responses characterized my teaching as ‘needs improvement,’ ‘meets expectations,’ or ‘exceeds expectations’? Are there more ‘exceeds expectations’ responses than ‘needs improvement’ responses? What is my overall average score and how are the responses spread out relative to this average?”

Reflecting upon this experience later, I began to recognize the power that such information and data hold upon professional practice. Though I am unaware if or how this information may be used in the overall evaluation of my own or my colleagues' job performance, the possibilities certainly exist for such information to be stored, analyzed, and compared to statistical norms. The aura of objectivity presented by this tangible “evidence” of teaching produces opportunities for administrative governance and for holding faculty members accountable to constructed criteria. Perhaps more distressing, such a reduction of teaching and learning to numerical data about isolated practices has the power to shape how practitioners understand themselves. As mentioned previously, soon after my first evaluation, I thought of teaching only in terms of numbers, data points, and pre-determined categories rather than through my own intuitive judgments, my interaction with students, and a higher moral imperative of making content applicable to students' experiences. Thus, the logic of understanding the individual through a mass of collected information, which can be turned into data, analyzed statistically, and used to hold practitioners accountable, creates productive (and dangerous) possibilities for both external governance and self-governance.

I began to understand these personal experiences through the notions of governmentality and its corresponding techniques after reading Benjamin Baez's new book, *Technologies of Gov-*

ernment. In this work, Baez examines a series of distinct, yet connected, “technologies” which shape contemporary politics. These technologies, he argues, function within neoliberal rationalities to create a particular reality in which individuals’ lives are understood primarily in terms of economic efficiency, risk management, statistical probabilities, and other logics which depend on information, databases, statistics, and accountability. Though clearly critical of the neoliberal rationality which pervades political and educational discourse, Baez’s (2014) analysis seeks to move beyond mere critique by illuminating how these technologies make “reality thinkable, and consequently, governable” (p. xviii). More precisely, he attempts to disrupt the notion that the technologies at issue—information, statistics, databases, economy, and accountability—are ahistorical entities which exist outside of the discourse which makes them intelligible. Thus, the goal of the book is to problematize this taken-for-granted reality so that we might think differently and create new realities about ourselves and our practices.

The book is composed of six chapters. Chapter one lays the theoretical groundwork for the understanding of key terms such as *government* and *governmentality*. Though the title of the book may imply an analysis of the contemporary nation-state, Baez makes a clear distinction between *the State* and *governmentality*. Following Foucault, he states that governmentality is the way in which various institutions and actors, which may or may not include those tied to the State, direct the conduct of individuals for particular objectives. This is an important distinction as Baez contends that the technologies he examines are major forms of governing in an era where the nation-state plays a less important role in the process of subjectification (Baez, 2014, p. 6). With this explanation of the key role of governmentality in his analysis, Baez proceeds by discussing each particular technology in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter two focuses on information, specifically on the notions of the information age and the information society. Baez refers to arguments that the information age represents a radically new society and to those which claim otherwise to illustrate how the idea of a society in these terms privileges ideas about information and prevents us from asking questions about the role of information itself. He contends that, rather than assuming the fixed nature of information, we should question, among other things, the monopolization of information by corporate entities, the idea of information as a commodity, and the ways in which information itself frames individual identities. Chapter three moves to a discussion of statistics. In this chapter, Baez examines the prevalence of *technorationality* in Western societies, how it has privileged scientism, and how it has mathematized experience in a way “that makes what is knowable that which is calculable” (Baez, 2014, p. 49). By quantifying experience, the individual can now be understood relative to populations, in terms of probabilities and risk management, and according to categorizations of normalcy which create new forms of governing behavior. Chapter four extends the arguments made about information and statistics to the database. Baez describes how databases create the opportunity for masses of quantitative information and subsequent statistical generalizations. The logic of the database, he points out, is one of power because it has come to constitute knowledge and support political discourses about how individuals should think and act. In chapter five, Baez connects each of the previously discussed technologies with the economy, specifically neoliberal rationalities of government. The main focus of this chapter is to distinguish neoliberalism from both classical liberalism and new liberalism in that neoliberalism interprets all human domains, including social ones, as economic. Thus, contemporary politics characterized by neoliberal rationality incorporate the technologies of information, statistics, and databases to allow individuals to make choices for maintaining self-reliance, even within domains of social services. Baez concludes the book with a discussion of accountability as a technology

of government in chapter six. Using personal experiences in higher education as an introductory example, Baez suggests that the notion of accountability has become interconnected with technorationality and a consumerist logic of social services. Now, he argues, even university academics must calculate themselves in economic terms and become accountable to the standards and objectives emphasized by a managerial audit culture.

Baez succeeds in this book by illustrating how each of these technologies produces the construction of particular identities and subsequent governmentality, and how each is a sociocultural phenomenon rather than a fixed reality. Though there certainly are additional salient features, the themes which stand out in my mind connect to these overarching notions. Regarding the construction of identities, Baez points out that not only do information, data, and statistics frame the way external entities (e.g. state and private institutions) view individuals, but they also frame the way individuals view themselves. Additionally, these technologies generate emotional responses, such as when one feels overwhelmed by information or when one feels they have fallen short of (or surpassed) statistical norms. Referring to the work of Kathleen Woodward (2009), Baez (2014) states that sociocultural changes produce emotions, thus rendering our feelings as more than just psychological phenomena, but as a register of shifting social forces as well (p. 58-59). Certainly, any student who has experienced test anxiety or any teacher who has experienced dismay from low teaching evaluations can relate to this concept. The point is that these technologies construct reality to an extent that individuals are controlled, not only by external forces, but also internally by the way they understand themselves relative to these constructs. Consequently, individuals react to these constructed identities both rationally and emotionally.

Baez helps us to see how ideological social forces, and thus technologies of government, shape individuals' rational responses as well. In his explanation of the technology of the economy, Baez discusses that, at present, neoliberalism defines what it means to act rationally. The rational individual is a self-reliant consumer who makes choices based on economic efficiency as supported by the technologies of information, statistics, databases, and accountability. This, of course, need not be the case. Information, statistics, and data can (and are) used for more democratic and egalitarian purposes such as identifying income inequality or unequal access to health care. However, decisions about social services are becoming more and more about the rational consumer choices embedded within neoliberal logic. The selection of a university, for example, becomes a simple cost-benefit analysis (i.e. how much will it cost and is it worth it relative to the probability that my degree will result in lucrative employment?) which relies upon information, data, and statistics about the school relative to other schools. Again, this illustrates that these technologies both construct identities relative to a particular reality and govern behavior accordingly.

As Baez indicates, the way these technologies frame how individuals view themselves and others may represent a greater danger than external forces. For example, he states that academics might reinterpret the present crisis concerning increasing administrative oversight in higher education as not necessarily a loss of power, but as a reinforcement of power, as academics cycle back to the very institutions which provide power and governing rationalities. He writes, "Academics may want to see their struggles with accountability as being against external actors—business or state bureaucrats—but their real 'opponents' in these struggles, so to speak, come from within" (Baez, 2014, p. 139). Thus, there is a need to move beyond simply criticizing current measures of accountability for their dubious validity to understanding how these technologies shape identities and govern practices. But more than that, there is a need to question the nature of these technologies within academic discourse rather than making critiques which,

though well-intentioned, may simply reify the existence of these technologies as givens. This, more than anything else, is what Baez provides. Early in the book, he writes,

Contrary to most social and political analyses of these terms...I do not take the notions of information, statistics, the database, the economy, or accountability as given, as reflecting empirical realities independent of the ways they are put into discourse and made intelligible and practicable. I will treat these concepts in terms of (the sometimes oppositional) rationalities for rendering reality thinkable, and consequently, governable. (Baez, 2014, p. xviii)

In other words, it is not necessary to understand education (or any other field) by these technologies because they are social and ideological constructs rather than fixed realities. Thus, the question becomes, how might we think and govern differently? In Foucauldian form, Baez refrains from presenting normative answers to the questions raised by his problematization of these technologies. However, he does offer vague suggestions of refusing to calculate ourselves or to even “miscalculate” ourselves (Baez, 2014, p. 140). The excitement (and frustration) with these uncertain answers is that there now exists the potential for a new discourse; the rendering of a new reality in which we may think differently about governing.

References

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