

## FOREWORD

We've been building our world in both the notional West and global North for about the past two hundred years around the collection and analysis of data—from the natural history and population censuses of yore, to the vast proliferation of data acquisition and analysis practices today. In general, the *West* isn't just the west and the *global North* is not just the north, but historical generalizations have a way of collapsing locals into empires; it's a convenient way of organizing knowledge. In this marvelous volume, Yanni Alexander Loukissas demonstrates that it's turtles all the way down: at whatever level you take an ordered set of givens about the world, you find local practice and exception.

The invocation at the end of the book is a clarion cry for our times: "Do not mistake the availability of data as permission to remain at a distance." It does get messy when you tie data to a place; there were, as Loukissas tellingly shows, over a thousand designations of data in the New York Public Library. You can't simply ingest such data and assume that you can produce scientific facts. All you have access to is data that are machine recognizable as data, and there is a huge amount of work in making it recognizable. One might think of an example from the census: if I fit easily into machine-readable categories, I am easy to count (and therefore my presence counts for something), whereas if I am mixed race and gender nonspecific, I just won't be counted without a lot of extra work. I have served time (yes, it is a sort of prison sentence) looking at biodiversity data. Here Loukissas's insistence on the locality and heterogeneity of data ring true. Most biodiversity data are data from within a hundred miles of an arterial road (it's easier to get to). Global maps of biodiversity work best for areas where most collecting is done by appropriately trained taxonomists, and they are indexed by the specific schools that the taxonomists came out of (a map of fossil specimens in Europe in the nineteenth century was a good map of the Austro-Hungarian empire—folks trained out of Vienna—and British one—folks trained out of Kew Gardens).

Loukissas suggests what for me is precisely the appropriate response: we must create counterdata to challenge normative algorithms. This raises the question of where the site of politics is today. It's hard to think, in the era of Donald Trump, that politics are contained in a Habermasian sphere of rational discourse. In an arena conjured by our data doubles exploiting our every weakness (why does Amazon keep suggesting light stuff that will not ever fulfill me but that will gain my attention?) and magnifying our fears (why does populism become the natural response to induced tribalism?), we are just not collectively performing as rational actors. The central issue is that data about us and the world are circulating much faster than we can have control over. How many of us manage our cookies or read our end-user license agreements carefully? Data are where it's at, and this book provides the best propaedeutic to a reasoned, effective plan of action.

**Geoffrey C. Bowker**

University of California at Irvine

July 2018

