

The Digital Cage.

A Sociological Analysis of Algorithmic Bureaucracy as a Total System

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Abstract

This paper conducts a critical sociological analysis of digital bureaucracy, interrogating the dominant narrative that posits it as an efficient and democratic solution to the problems of traditional bureaucracy. Through a synthesis of classical theory (Weber, Foucault) and contemporary critique (Deleuze, Benasayag, Han, Eubanks), this paper argues that the “digital cage” tends to embody a form of power that is often more totalizing and potentially more insidious than the Weberian “iron cage”, especially in its current applications. The analysis unfolds along three interconnected lines of inquiry: 1) the eclipse of the human mediator and the consequent elimination of discretionary power and negotiation; 2) the transition from a disciplinary-panoptic model of control to a pervasive system of modular control, embedded within the very code of digital platforms; 3) the illusion of universal access, which masks the creation of new and deeper forms of social inequality and exclusion. The paper concludes that the digital cage, by combining the total visibility of the subject with the total opacity of the power mechanism, and by requiring the user’s active complicity, achieves a more sophisticated and resilient form of control, with profound implications for the future of citizenship and democracy.

Keywords: Sociology, Algorithmic Governance, Modular Control, Digital Divide, Dehumanization¹.

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1. Introduction

The message is as simple as it is insurmountable: “*Error: Data not compliant. Please try again*”. No explanation, no contact, no way out. This digital dead-end, experienced by millions, is the microcosm of a far broader phenomenon. It is a symptom of the transition from human to algorithmic bureaucracy, a shift that for years has been presented as the paradigmatic solution to the historical inefficiencies of traditional bureaucracy.

In both political and managerial discourse, the explicit objective was a radical “de-bureaucratization” founded on faster processes, universal 24/7 access to services, and a newfound transparency in the relationship between the state and its citizens. This optimistic narrative viewed technology as the instrument to finally dismantle the cumbersome Weberian “iron cage”, freeing the individual from the long waits and opaque procedures of the paper-based world. This techno-optimistic vision was underpinned by a powerful threefold promise. Economically, it heralded unprecedented efficiency, promising to cut administrative costs by automating tasks previously performed by human officials. Politically, it promoted a new model of citizen empowerment, where individuals could directly manage their relationship with the state, free from the traditional gatekeepers of bureaucracy. Ethically, it claimed to offer a realm of pure objectivity, where algorithmic processing would eliminate human error, personal bias, and the potential for corruption, thus ensuring truly equal treatment for all. This narrative of a frictionless, transparent, and impartial public sphere crystallized into the new paradigm of “*Digital Era Governance*” (DEG), which superseded the previous model of “*New Public Management*” (NPM) and became the dominant ideology driving digitalization policies worldwide².

However, as this transition has consolidated, a sociologically relevant paradox is emerging with increasing clarity. Far from achieving liberation, the architecture of digital bureaucracy appears to have generated a new and more insidious form of constraint, where human inefficiency is replaced by the inexorability of the system. It is

² “*New Public Management*” (NPM) refers to the wave of public sector reforms, dominant in the 1980s and 1990s, aimed at making government more “business-like”. Its core tenets were disaggregation (breaking up large departments into smaller, single-purpose agencies), introducing competition (through outsourcing and internal markets), and incentivization (using performance targets and managerial autonomy). “*Digital Era Governance*” (DEG), as theorized by Dunleavy *et al.* (2006), represents a subsequent paradigm shift driven by digital technology. DEG moves in the opposite direction on key metrics, promoting the re-integration of services, a needs-based holism that puts the citizen at the centre, and end-to-end digitalization. While NPM used IT to support its goals, DEG sees IT as the fundamental driver of structural change.

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within this context that the thesis of this paper is situated. This paper argues that digital bureaucracy, far from overcoming the limits of the Weberian model, represents, in many of its current configurations, a totalizing and qualitatively more problematic intensification. We contend that its algorithmic nature, by eliminating any space for human mediation, renders it ontologically inhuman; that its interconnected architecture transforms it into a panoptic system of control (Foucault, 1975); and that its apparent simplicity masks new and deeper forms of inequality (Eubanks, 2018). In short, the “iron cage” has not been demolished but upgraded into a “total digital cage”, one that is more efficient in its control and more impermeable to negotiation.

Beyond the existing scholarship on platform governance and datafication, the specific contribution of this paper lies in integrating three usually separate analytical strands — the erosion of human mediation, the emergence of modular control, and the stratifying effects of digital infrastructures — into a unified sociological framework capable of explaining the totalizing nature of contemporary algorithmic bureaucracy.

To develop this thesis, the article is structured as follows. First, it will analyse the three detrimental dimensions of this digital evolution: the annulment of human discretion, following the scholarship on digital street-level bureaucracy; the total and panoptic nature of algorithmic control; and the emergence of new forms of socio-technical exclusion. Finally, the conclusion will discuss the social implications of this transformation and advance the need for a critical rethinking of digitalization policies.

2. The Eclipse of the Human Mediator: Discretion and Power in the Algorithmic Era

The shift to an algorithmically governed organization marks a fundamental rupture with the classical model, whose linchpin, however problematic, was always the human being. In classical sociology, the figure of the “street-level bureaucrat” (Lipsky, 1980) – the front-desk clerk or the case-processing official – represented the ultimate interface between the rigidity of state regulation and the complexity of individual lives. This “human gear” in the organizational machine, though bound by procedures, possessed an irreducible space of discretionary power: the capacity to interpret a rule, to assess an exception, to adapt procedure to an unforeseen case. It is precisely this space of human mediation, however minimal, that is being systematically dismantled by digital architecture. The digital platform, the chatbot, or the interactive voice response system are not simply tools in the hands of a new type of clerk; they *are* the clerk (Bovens and

Zouridis, 2002). The interaction of the client or citizen is no longer with an operator who *uses* a system, but directly *with the system itself*. Consequently, the logic of administration is reduced to a crude binary operation: the data provided by the user either conforms to the predefined fields of the software (1) or it does not (0). In this way, the ideal of “impersonality”, which for Weber (1922) was a guarantee against passionate arbitration, is taken to its extreme and inverted into a form of blind inexorability. It is purged of that last residue of cognitive flexibility and contextual understanding that the human interpreter, with all their limitations, still guaranteed. This process has direct consequences on the individual’s perception of power. When faced with a system error or a personal situation not contemplated by the interface, there is no longer a counterpart to appeal to, nor a space for negotiation. The “computer says no”, whether manifested on a public portal or in the frustrating loop of an automated call center, is not a figure of speech but the literal description of an interaction without appeal. This generates a profound sense of powerlessness and alienation, especially among the most vulnerable populations (Eubanks, 2018). If the Weberian “iron cage” was a structure of impersonal norms applied by humans, the digital cage presents itself as a structure of self-executing code that extends from the state to the market, eliminating the figure of the mediator and, with it, any possibility of dialogue with the machines of power. This substitution of the human mediator with a digital interface is not, however, a simple change of actors, but one that imposes a profound anthropological torsion. As Miguel Benasayag has lucidly analysed, the digital world is not a neutral extension of the real world, but a self-contained environment governed by a disembodied, purely calculative, and binary logic that is fundamentally alien to the complexity, ambiguity, and “messiness” of the living (Benasayag and Schmit, 2016). To interact with the bureaucratic machine, the individual is forced to abandon their own language and organic logic to adopt those of the machine. We are pushed into a form of forced hybridization, where our thinking is moulded to the system’s needs: we must simplify our requests, translate our complex histories into discrete data points, and anticipate the software’s errors. In this process, man does not “augment” his brain but rather “diminishes” it, atrophying the capacities for judgment, empathy, and contextual understanding that the machine neither possesses nor requires. The frustration and alienation previously described are therefore not merely the result of a malfunctioning service, but the “sad passions” that inevitably emerge from the clash between the irreducible richness of human experience and the structural poverty of a power that only knows how to calculate.

3. Beyond the Panopticon: From Discipline to Modular Control

A recurrent limitation in the analysis of digital surveillance is the tendency to interpret it as a mere technological intensification of the Foucaultian Panopticon. While the metaphor of asymmetrical visibility remains a useful entry point, it is deeply rooted in a disciplinary paradigm that proves increasingly inadequate for capturing the dynamics of algorithmic control. Foucault's model, a product of the industrial age, was founded on the efficacy of enclosed and circumscribed spaces: the prison, the barracks, the factory, the school. Each of these institutions aimed to "mould" the individual, to impose a standardized cast in order to produce a predictable subject and a docile body, functional to its social role. Surveillance, in this context, was the means to verify conformity to the mould and to correct deviations. The digital cage, however, no longer operates through the logic of enclosure and a fixed mould. Its efficacy lies, on the contrary, in its open, reticular, and fluid nature, which renders the model of enclosed space inadequate to describe its power. To grasp this qualitative rupture, it is far more heuristic to turn to Gilles Deleuze's prophetic *"Postscript on the Societies of Control"* (1990). Writing before the mass diffusion of the Internet, Deleuze anticipated with extraordinary lucidity that disciplinary societies would be supplanted by a new regime, that of control, which no longer operates through finite moulds but through continuous modulations. Unlike discipline, which presupposes a beginning and an end (the worker clocks in and out, the patient is discharged), control is perpetual and boundless. The individual is no longer a body to be moulded, but a *"dividual"*, a collection of data, passwords, and profiles whose identity is constantly broken down and reassembled by the system. A single person, for example, is fractured into a series of parallel data-selves that rarely communicate: the consumer profile on an e-commerce site, the professional history on a career network, and the social persona on an app, each one a distinct *"dividual"* to be modulated. Modulation, as Deleuze writes, is an incessant process.

Les enfermements sont des moules, des moulages distincts, mais les contrôles sont une modulation, comme un moulage auto-déformant qui changerait continûment, d'un instant à l'autre, ou comme un tamis dont les mailles changeraient d'un point à un autre³ (Deleuze, 1990, p. 240).

³ English translation (1992, p. 4): «Enclosures are moulds, distinct castings, but controls are a modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point».

While disciplinary societies relied on fixed molds (*moules*) to shape subjects through enclosed institutions, control societies operate through flexible, adaptive *modulations*. Modulation refers to a continuous, self-adjusting form of power that adapts in real time to behaviour, context, and profile. It is not a matter of fitting individuals into predefined categories, but of constantly reshaping the categories themselves to follow and influence the subject's actions. This condition has been described as a new form of imprisonment, «no longer characterized by physical constraint ("captivity"), but by the impossibility of stopping. Not the iron bars of the solid world, but the fluid prison of an incessant flow, in which subjects are immersed "with the obedience of blood in its blind circuit" »⁴. Power, therefore, no longer encloses us, but follows us everywhere, modulating our access to the world. The logic of perpetual debt (both economic and in data) replaces the prison sentence, continuous distance learning replaces the classroom, and instantaneous, constant evaluation (the rating, the review) replaces the final exam. But what is the concrete mechanism that operates this continuous modulation? The answer lies in the infrastructure itself, in the code that governs it. As Lawrence Lessig (1999) masterfully argued, in the digital environment, "Code is Law". The software architecture of a platform is a form of normativity far more powerful and binding than state law. Laws can be ignored or violated; rules inscribed in code, however, are self-executing and inescapable. The architecture of a social network that rewards polarizing content with greater visibility, the design of an e-commerce app that creates a sense of artificial urgency, or the interface of a public portal that makes one procedure complex and another simple – these are not neutral design choices. They are acts of regulation that structure the field of possible actions, incentivizing certain behaviours while making others impossible. In this sense, control precedes surveillance: it does not merely observe our choices, but designs the environment to make certain choices almost inevitable. This new form of power inevitably produces a new subjectivity. The neoliberal *psychopolitics*, as defined by Byung-Chul Han (2014), does not oppress us but seduces us with an appearance of freedom. We are encouraged to become "entrepreneurs of the self", optimizing our profiles and managing our reputations within a logic of performance. The subject of control is not a passive victim but a participating user who enters into a dynamic of voluntary self-exploitation, ceding data in exchange for convenience, connection, and gratification. Surveillance is disguised as service, and transparency becomes an

⁴ «The deprivation of freedom no longer lies, as it did in the solid world, in the limitation of movement (in "captivity"), but in the impossibility of stopping. No longer the metal of the bars but the fluid prison of the incessant flow in which we are immersed "with the obedience of blood in its blind circuit"». The final words are a quote from Cortázar (1972).

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imperative to which we spontaneously adhere. This is not simple self-discipline, but a continuous self-modulation to remain “compatible” with a system that flatters our narcissism while extracting value from our affects. As Deleuze foresaw, code becomes the new measure of identity.

On ne se trouve plus devant le couple masse-individu. Les individus sont devenus des «dividus», et les masses sont devenues des échantillons, des données, des marchés ou des «banques». [...] Le langage numérique du contrôle est fait de chiffres, qui marquent l'accès à l'information, ou le refus (Deleuze, 1990, p. 245)⁵.

Within this framework, an immense hypocrisy emerges, perfectly embodied by the European hyper-bureaucracy on privacy. Conceived with the intent of protecting the individual from surveillance, regulations like the GDPR have, in practice, translated into a regulatory technology that reinforces the very logic of control it purports to fight. The core issue is that the regulatory focus on formalistic compliance has eclipsed any substantive commitment to ethical design. Instead of fostering a culture of privacy, it has generated a sophisticated “compliance industry” whose goal is to secure legal legitimacy for data extraction. The critique of this system can be articulated on three interconnected levels, which reveal its nature as a performative hyper-bureaucracy. The first level is cognitive and behavioural. The model is founded on an unrealistic premise: that the individual can and will engage in a continuous process of rational decision-making about their data. Academic research has thoroughly demolished this fiction. Seminal studies have demonstrated the existence of the “privacy paradox” and an inevitable “consent fatigue”. Overwhelmed by an uninterrupted flow of requests, the user is unable to evaluate them individually and resorts to heuristics and mental shortcuts, ignoring the details and opting for the path of least cognitive resistance, which almost always coincides with generalized consent (Acquisti, Brandimarte, and Loewenstein, 2015). The system, therefore, does not promote informed choices but exploits the limits of human rationality to extort a consent that is formally valid but substantively empty. The second level is architectural and manipulative. The user’s cognitive weakness is deliberately exploited through interface design, a field of study that has highlighted the systematic use of “dark patterns”. These are design schemes crafted not to clarify but to deceive, confuse, or nudge the user toward choices that run counter to their own interests but favour the platform’s business model (Mathur *et al.*, 2019). The ‘*Accept All*’ option is made chromatically inviting and immediately

⁵ English translation (1992, p. 5): «We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become “dividuals”, and masses, samples, data, markets, or *banks*. [...] The numerical language of control is made of codes, that mark access to information, or reject it».

accessible, while the possibility of denying or granularly managing consent is hidden behind complex menus, ambiguous texts, and obstacle-ridden paths. This is not a neutral design choice but a deliberate exploitation of the platform's architectural power: the interface becomes a tool of soft coercion, shaping the environment so that consent becomes the default, almost obligatory, outcome. The third and final level is legal and structural. The GDPR's normative model, despite its good intentions, is based on a paradigm of "privacy self-management" that is structurally flawed (Solove, 2013). This flaw is systematically amplified by a stark asymmetry of resources: tech giants deploy legions of designers and lawyers to engineer formally compliant yet manipulative interfaces, while regulatory bodies often lack the capacity to effectively challenge these practices. Within this framework, the European regulatory architecture – particularly in the domain of digital rights – reveals a deep and pervasive structural ambivalence. While instruments such as the GDPR or the Digital Services Act are ostensibly designed to protect individual autonomy and limit excessive datafication, they often fail to confront the material logic of the platforms themselves. In practice, these regimes tend to formalize consent rather than guarantee real choice, to certify compliance rather than ensure justice, and to create a dense bureaucratic shield that legitimizes practices of surveillance, profiling, and behavioural nudging. The result is a bureaucratic simulacrum of protection, in which legal protocols provide a veneer of democratic control while consolidating the very asymmetries of power they claim to redress. The architecture of regulation becomes not a site of resistance, but a sophisticated apparatus of ratification, where subjugation is rendered lawful, frictionless, and invisible⁶. As Yeung (2018) has argued, algorithmic regulation does not merely apply existing rules but generates new ones: through feedback loops, dynamic thresholds, and automated nudging, these systems actively shape behaviour, shifting the normative centre from law to computation. This dynamic has been observed in systems like the SPID-based Italian welfare platforms, where access to basic services is conditioned by the user's ability to navigate complex digital interfaces without human assistance, or in the infamous

⁶ On the performative nature of privacy and digital regulation, see Solove (2013), who critiques the paradigm of "privacy self-management"; Nouwens *et al.* (2020) on the strategic use of dark patterns; and Cobbe (2020), who argues that European algorithmic regulation often serves to formalize legitimacy rather than limit harm. On the broader notion of legal-bureaucratic ratification, see Veale and Edwards (2018), who document how GDPR-compliant practices can obscure rather than prevent discriminatory algorithmic profiling.

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Allegheny County predictive risk model in the U.S., which automates child welfare decisions based on opaque algorithmic scoring (Eubanks, 2018)⁷.

4. The Illusion of Universal Access: The Digital Divide as an Exclusionary Apparatus

The narrative accompanying the implementation of digital bureaucracy is founded on a technocratic utopia: the promise of universal, instantaneous, and equal access to services, capable of transcending geographical and social barriers. In this vision, digitalization would act as a great levelling force, a panacea for the inefficiencies and disparities of the old paper-based world. A rigorous sociological analysis, however, reveals that this rhetoric of democratization masks a very different reality. Far from eliminating social fractures, the digital cage creates new ones and deepens existing ones, operating through an exclusionary apparatus that is all the more effective for being invisible. The heuristic of the “digital divide”, if understood in the reductionist sense of a mere disparity in internet access, proves to be entirely insufficient. The true fracture is not technological, but social and cultural. To understand it, one must turn to the conceptual apparatus of Pierre Bourdieu: digital competence is not a neutral technical skill but a form of embodied cultural capital, whose accumulation depends strictly on social origin, educational background, and family environment. The ability to navigate complex interfaces, to understand the logic of security protocols, or to independently troubleshoot a system error is a disposition (*habitus*) that is “second nature” for some subjects, while for others it represents a source of profound anxiety and alienation, an insurmountable wall that precludes their participation. This exclusionary dynamic finds its most brutal and systematic application in the automated systems aimed at the most

⁷ The case of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, is one of the most extensively studied examples of algorithmic welfare governance. Since 2016, the local Department of Human Services has implemented a predictive risk assessment system known as the Allegheny Family Screening Tool, which assigns risk scores to families based on automated analysis of dozens of public databases – ranging from welfare usage and eviction records to healthcare, school attendance, and police reports. As Virginia Eubanks has convincingly demonstrated, this system is far from neutral: it produces systemic discrimination because low-income families, by virtue of their constant interaction with public institutions, leave behind a far denser digital trace than middle or upper-class households, who rely on private services and thus remain largely invisible to the algorithm. Social visibility becomes exposure to suspicion: individuals are flagged as “at risk” not necessarily because they pose a threat, but because they are legible to the system. The paradox is striking: those most in need of support become the primary targets of predictive surveillance, in the name of a preventive logic that often translates into anticipatory stigmatization (Eubanks, 2018, chapter 2).

vulnerable segments of the population, giving rise to what Virginia Eubanks has termed the “digital poorhouse” (Eubanks, 2018). These systems, designed to manage the distribution of welfare benefits, healthcare, or public housing, are often informed by an epistemology of suspicion, a security-oriented logic that aims more to prevent fraud than to guarantee rights. This logic translates into the imposition of disproportionate administrative burdens on applicants. Labyrinthine online procedures, the requirement to upload documents in specific and error-free formats, peremptory deadlines, and the absence of human support to turn to in case of difficulty all function as a powerful deterrent. These are not simple inefficiencies but are barriers designed, consciously or not, to test not only an applicant’s eligibility but also their tenacity, their cognitive resources, and their social capital (the ability to get help). The result is a cruel form of exclusion: people are rejected not because they are not entitled to a service, but because they do not possess the skills and resources to navigate the digital procedural labyrinth erected in its defence. In addition to actively excluding the most fragile, digital bureaucracy operates an invisible but profound restructuring of labour itself, through a massive process of offloading shadow work from the official to the citizen. In the previous model, it was the bureaucrat, a paid employee, who took on the burden of decoding the request, filling out forms, filing, and verifying data. Today, this entire bureaucratic workload is offloaded onto the end-user, who must act as an unpaid clerk for their own case. It is the individual who must now enter the data, scan and convert documents, navigate complex authentication systems, and, above all, invest an enormous cognitive and temporal cost in resolving errors and procedural frictions generated by opaque systems. This transfer of labour is not equally distributed: an hour of time for a professional with a high-speed connection and advanced skills has a different cost than for a single parent with a precarious job, an obsolete computer, and poor IT skills. The system’s supposed efficiency is thus revealed not as a genuine optimization, but as a vast cost-shifting exercise. It functions as a hidden regressive tax, where the organization achieves savings by externalizing labour costs onto its users. This uncompensated work represents a subsidy paid by the citizens’ time and mental health – a burden that falls most heavily on those least able to afford it. The combined effect of these dynamics – the cultural capital divide, the punitive exclusion of the weakest, and the offloading of bureaucratic labour – reveals the true nature of the digital cage: not a monolithic structure, but a system of differentiated and stratified citizenship. Similar dynamics have been observed in several national contexts. In Italy, access to welfare services provided by the National Social Security Institute (INPS) increasingly depends on the use of digital authentication systems such as SPID. While ostensibly aimed at enhancing security and efficiency, this model presumes a high level of digital

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competence and access to stable technological infrastructure –conditions not universally met. As a result, the system tends to privilege the digitally fluent while marginalizing those who lack adequate support, especially the elderly, migrants, and precarious workers. In the United Kingdom, the implementation of the Universal Credit program has institutionalized a digital-by-default logic, requiring claimants to manage their benefits entirely online. The consequences of this shift have been widely documented: payment delays, bureaucratic errors, and increased levels of anxiety and indebtedness, particularly among vulnerable populations. These cases illustrate how digital infrastructures, when applied to social protection systems, often produce the opposite of what they promise – intensifying rather than alleviating precarity⁸. For a privileged minority, who are technologically competent and resource-rich, it can indeed manifest as a “gilded cage” of convenience, efficiency, and personalized services. For the vast majority, it represents a space of constant friction, procedural anxiety, and incessant self-management labour. For the most marginalized segments of the population, finally, the walls of the cage are not gilded but opaque, punitive, and insurmountable, and the system acts not as a service provider but as a gatekeeper that denies access and certifies their exclusion. Far from being the great equalizer it was promised to be, digital bureaucracy is establishing itself as one of the most powerful and sophisticated engines for the reproduction and amplification of social inequality in the 21st century.

5. Conclusion: Anatomy of a Perfect Cage

The analytical path taken in this article has sought to deconstruct the optimistic and technocratic narrative of digital bureaucracy, exposing its nature as an apparatus of power that is qualitatively more pervasive and problematic than its analogue predecessor. First, it showed how the eclipse of the human mediator and the nullification of their discretion did not simply eliminate arbitrariness, but annihilated any space for negotiation, contextual understanding, and empathy, replacing it with the opaque inexorability of code. Subsequently, the analysis revealed how the paradigm of control has evolved far beyond the Foucaultian panoptic model, arriving at a society of modular control, as anticipated by Deleuze, in which power is exercised through the very design of the digital architecture. Finally, the illusion of universal access was dismantled, demonstrating how the digital cage functions as a powerful apparatus of social stratification. These three dimensions – dehumanization, modular control, and

⁸ See House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (2017) and Patrick (2022).

social stratification – are not distinct phenomena, but the interconnected and mutually reinforcing faces of a single, coherent system of power. The digital cage is ontologically worse than the Weberian iron cage not because it is more “rigid” – on the contrary, its strength lies in its fluidity and capacity for modulation – but because it is more sophisticated, totalizing, and invisible. If Weber’s cage was a system of explicit norms applied by humans, the digital one is a system of implicit rules executed by inscrutable code. Its perfection lies in combining the total transparency of the subject, whose digital profile is analysed in depth, with the total opacity of the power mechanism that judges them. Furthermore, it imposes itself not primarily through coercion, but through the seduction of convenience, requiring our active and voluntary participation in the very process of our own subjugation, as evidenced by the performativity of consent rituals. The consequences of this new paradigm extend far beyond mere administrative efficiency, striking at the very foundations of the social contract and democracy. The rise of an *algocracy*⁹ – a government by algorithms – risks eroding the spaces for deliberation, contestation, and accountability that define a mature citizenship. The growing friction with opaque and unappealable systems fosters a sense of powerlessness and distrust in institutions, both public and private, while the normalization of surveillance and constant evaluation generates new forms of anxiety and conformism. In the face of this scenario, the questions for a future critical research agenda become urgent. Is it possible to conceive of a digitalization that does not translate into a cage? What forms of a “right to explanation” and “algorithmic contestability” can be made effective, moving from a bureaucracy of formal consent to one of substantive accountability? Can a “humane digital bureaucracy” exist, or is this an oxymoron whose pursuit only serves to mask the inexorable logic of control? Without critical reflection and conscious political action, the risk is that the utopia of digital efficiency will be realized as the most perfect dystopia of power ever built.

It is important to distinguish between the current dominant configuration of digital bureaucracy and its possible alternative trajectories. The tendencies examined in this article are not technologically predetermined: they arise from specific architectural choices, institutional arrangements, and political priorities. Different design principles – such as mandatory auditability, meaningful contestability, or the integration of human oversight – could in principle generate less opaque and less coercive bureaucratic

⁹ The notion of algocracy was first introduced by Aneesh (2006) to describe forms of rule in which algorithmic systems perform tasks of governance and decision-making that were once the prerogative of human institutions. The concept was further elaborated by Danaher (2016), who analyses the risks and characteristics of algorithmic governance in liberal-democratic societies.

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infrastructures. The problem, therefore, is not digitalization per se, but the particular socio-technical regime that has crystallized around it.

An alternative digital bureaucracy is often evoked in political discourse, yet such a prospect seems illusory. As long as the architecture of digital systems remains structurally oriented toward control, any attempt at “humanization” risks functioning as a mere aesthetic gesture – reinforcing the very logic it claims to resist.

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