

"A Life of the Dead: Personal Data and Surveillance in Everyday Life"

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My dissertation, *A Life of the Dead: Privacy, Data Subjects and Labour*, is a study of the reduction of cultural concepts and objects to mathematical code. The overarching narrative is best summarized as a broader analysis of the "dream of a *mathesis universalis*," which according to Michel Serres and others has dominated across the exact and human sciences in the post-war years. I trace this assumption in a diverse range of discourses, from the modern conception of privacy (from Hobbes and Locke, through Mill and Hegel), to cybernetics' influential information-theoretical account of subjectivity, and the redefinition of labour in terms of "communication and control in the animal and the machine" (Norbert Wiener). The final chapter links this history to a contemporary case study: Six years ago, DeCode Genetics, Inc. unveiled a scheme for entering all medical records in Iceland into a database in order to conduct population genomics research by effectively simulating a population. I study this scheme through the relevant legislation and corporate publications. Thus, the case of DeCode Genetics' simulated population is both a point of departure and a narrative end-point, in which the history of the key concepts of the thesis is anchored in examples of law, capital investment and institutions.

As an object of study the database, named the Icelandic Healthcare Database (IHD) presents a number of problems: First, it does not exist yet, except as a legal concept (Alþingi 1998), a business-plan (deCode 1998), public stock-offering (deCode 2000), a schema for connecting separate databases (Gulcher and Stefánsson 2000), and negatively as a list of individuals who wish to be excluded. Secondly, the IHD would not be a single coherent technological entity, but a complex assemblage of computer hardware, analytical techniques in molecular biology, specialized database software, security technologies (both data- and site-specific), laboratory equipment, not to mention the legal, regulatory and bureaucratic apparatuses to contain the gathering and processing of data about patients, who themselves are active components. Therefore, and thirdly, the IHD is an intersection of a number of different historical trajectories, of concepts and narratives which themselves have led a colorful cultural existence prior to the founding of deCode Genetics in August 1996. Thus, the database serves as both a starting-point and a rhetorical *telos* for my dissertation, for the company's plan for the database to eventually contain a simulacrum of the population *in silico* is nothing if not a clear example of the "dream of a *mathesis universalis*" raised to the level of a national population.

I have focused on the legislative documents available, as well as the company's own corporate releases (e.g., deCode 1998; deCode 2000), in order to examine the database as a fantasy, or as a narrative object. However, this narrative is deadly serious, for it involves a process by which personal data is cleared of proprietary, legal, and medical-ethical restrictions; thereby rendered exchangeable. I argue that deCode managed to acquire a digitally knowable and exploitable "national body," free of medical-ethical obligations towards actual bodies, and secure from any proprietary claims that the citizens of the nation-state might make upon the eventual database.

This is where the notion of "everyday life" comes into the picture. Long considered as a space of resistance, of release from the structured demands of the workday, I suggest that everyday life must be reconsidered from the point of view of its saturation by media. Consumers are under constant low-level, fragmented surveillance when swiping credit cards or using cell phones. deCode's database shows how health data can, given the right apparatuses, be used in the same manner to generate information capital. The deCode case shows that while personal data is subject to various legal protections, its status as a form of capital makes it highly exploitable, given the right technological and institutional framework for divorcing accessible data from personal identifiers. This is the key requirement of the European Union's Directive 95/46/EC on data protection, in which anonymity liberates protected data for "free movement." In short, were deCode's database ever to be constructed, it would illustrate how the body of the medical patient, along with the everyday life of the consumer, have been redefined as sources of information capital and as raw material for its production.

The Consortium grant allowed me to spend the entire summer of 2002 researching and writing the outline of three chapters for my dissertation. This grant could not have come at a better time, for while my project had been formulated and some research had been done, I had yet to begin writing. The Consortium's acknowledgment of my project gave great impetus to the writing, and enabled me to work full-time without distraction on the dissertation. I presented a chapter titled "The Cyborg Leviathan, or How to Have Government Without Politics" at the American Comparative Literature Association's annual conference, California State University San Marcos, April 4-6, 2003. The completed *A Life of the Dead* was defended 18 February 2004.

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