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Fixations, Charismatic technologies and the perennial enthusiasm of techno-solutionism

Disruptive Fixation: School Reform and the Pitfalls of Techno-Idealism, by Christo Sims, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017, 232 pp., (paperback), ISBN: 9780691163994

The Charisma Machine: The Life, Death, and Legacy of One Laptop Per Child, by Morgan Ames, 328 pp., Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019, (paperback), ISBN: 9780262537445

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Hundreds of ethnographies have followed in the steps of James Ferguson's *The Anti-Politics Machine* to document the failure of developmental or "disruptive projects." Through them, Ferguson's point that technical solutions are fundamentally unable to solve other-than-technical problems and tend to reproduce them became a sort of anthropological common sense. Relatively few, however, take on Ferguson's other exhortation: to examine how developmentalist enthusiasm remains impervious to these failures and what it is that such projects *do* accomplish, how, and for whom. Avowedly heirs to this tradition, Sims and Ames address these last questions in their ethnographies of education reforms, *Disruptive Fixation* and *The Charisma Machine* respectively, with a twist: how do certain technological imaginations mediate the ghost of failure and shield and buttress these enthusiasms?

Disruptive Fixation examines the planning, concretisation and functioning of the "disruptive," tech-oriented Downtown School in Manhattan; *The Charisma Machine* traces the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) project, from its inception at the MIT's media lab to its deployment, and by most metrics failure, in rural Paraguay. Both projects involved similar understandings of 21st century children. Downtown School planners imagined children as inherently creative, active learners failed by an antiquated, inflexible schooling system disconnected from reality and unfit to train them in coding, design thinking and the technological skills they are allegedly both keen on and in need of (40; 48). These commitments and imaginations of children, technology and the role of the school congealed in moral imperatives (53), and as such entered the design of a student experience were social

media networks, hacking, coding, programming, and media production were built into lessons and school-sponsored extracurricular activities. Similarly, from the outset, addressed to the children of nations lacking in schooling budgets and infrastructure, the OLPC project hinged on disembodied universal notions of children's autonomy, free-thinking rebelliousness and technological curiosity, able to learn on their own regardless of peers, teachers, funds and culture. This imagined "technically precocious boy" (38), echoing MIT hackers' self-image, was built into a machine whose affordances were loftily aimed at enabling play, connectivity and freedom (47-61). MIT media lab's founder and best-selling author Nicholas Negroponte had been scouring markets to place this developmental fantasy of his for years, and Paraguay agreed.

These projects flopped for reasons fundamentally similar to those that led to the failure of Lesotho's developmental overhaul in *The Anti-Politics Machine*. Imagined as a racially and socioeconomically inclusive space, the Downtown School did not actually engage any of the racial or socioeconomic inequalities of New York society it interacted with, inevitably reproducing them. Sims's nuanced ethnographic gaze is particularly sharp in showing how BIPOC families struggled to place their kids in the school to begin with (60-62), how these children's extracurricular activities did not count as "creative" to the school's "disruptive" gaze (135) and how vaguely-coded moral panics around bullying worked through socioeconomic and racial inequalities with an obsessive, differential policing that resulted in these students leaving the school (152). Many of these students were by all metrics among the highest academic achievers in their classes. Similarly, although the school's pedagogic project was constantly vaunted as innovative, when facing technological malfunction, students' disinterest, poor exam results or other unexpected hurdles, educators reached for age-old, canonical discipline and control measures to stabilise the project (96). All of these issues were compounded by an increasingly active clique of parents with greater cultural, economic and logistical resources: aggressively lobbying for zero-tolerance policies, monitoring the school's exam performance and teaching techniques, they effectively co-ran the school (144-148).

Meanwhile, OLPC's materialisation in Caacupé, in rural Paraguay, was spectacularly short of utopian from the outset. Infrastructurally speaking, the computers cost almost twice as much as originally advertised, spare parts were hard to find, computers froze and broke down regularly, batteries were deficient, children uninstalled software, schools and village homes

had no or little electricity and there were not enough qualified trainers to provide IT support. In a despairing, brilliant vignette tracing a single morning at school, Ames shows how $\frac{3}{4}$ of already preciously scarce lesson time was lost trying to get enough computers to work as intended (81-92). Dreamed of as a Trojan horse pregnant with freedom, autonomy and the promise of progress, the computer hijacked the learning experience with so many breakdowns that teachers dreaded using them and engaging in the onerous and unpaid labour of reorganising classes to fit laptops' affordances. The precious few children who coded, designed, and used the computer as the learning and exploratory tool it was supposed to be were those who had familial and institutional encouragement, support and infrastructure, from celebratory remarks to electricity at home (140-152) – that is, the other-than-technical structures that, as Ames shrewdly points out, were all allegedly ancillary in OLPC's techno-solutionism.

So far these are well-chartered dynamics in anthropology; the key to both books' contribution lies in their examination of how those involved in these projects sustained their belief in their promises *despite* mounting evidence to the contrary. Sims refers to this phenomenon as a work of repairing idealism, which in the Downtown School project meant an array of "as if" dispositions: the affects, sensibilities and orientations of educators, designers and many parents helped them inhabit these experiences *as if they were really ground-breaking*. This "as if-ness" hinged greatly on what the author calls sanctioned counterpractices: "the periodic orchestration, documentation, circulation and ritualistic celebration of practices that appear to fulfil the intervention's innovative philanthropic promise" (18). These included the overperforming of enthusiasm, the constant signalling out of novelty and a general emotional and performative work that, even if openly acknowledged as contrived and occasionally cringe-y, allowed the framing of the school's activities as innovative. This was the case even when, as Sims repeatedly shows, pedagogies, disciplining techniques, use of time and resources and kinds of activities were increasingly identical to those of "traditional" schools, sometimes enhanced and sometimes encumbered by gadgetry and the fixation with innovation (87-88, 94-95). The author's argument against cynicism here is subtle and convincing: the point of these counterpractices was less to produce actual change than to work as ritual reparations of the moral feeling of the goodness of the intervention many of these people genuinely believed in (105).

“As if” dispositions also generated a rationale to protect utopianism from failures in the form of *unsanctioned* counterpractices, that is, new or unscripted practices that challenge or do not pay heed to this utopianism. When high academic achieving BIPOC students were effectively chased out of the school for not being disruptive in “the right ways,” a rhetoric of personal choice and of not being “a good fit” morally shielded the experience of innovative disruption, ironically touted as striving for social justice, from coming to terms with its own inequalities (153). Readers coming to this book from Ferguson’s tradition will recognize in this legerdemain a variation of the de-politicizing logics of technical intervention, working in this case by bleaching structural issues with a grammar of choice and individual responsibility. Sims spotted it too, and convincingly extended it to the school’s dealing with elite parents who described themselves as risk takers and unconventional but increasingly lobbied to run the school in the logics of a depoliticized “community” as they forced the curriculum and its pedagogy down increasingly conventional paths (143-145, 158). The point is that the project now had rationalities and affects to experience the failure, or at least inconsistency, of being openly taken over by neurotic, privileged parents, in a manner that did not threaten the promise of its success. This is how techno-idealism, as Sims calls it, outlives its blatant failures and inconsistencies: through immense work to repair it “live,” on the go, a kind of work that is emotional, performative, rhetorical, ritualized and fundamentally, even if in other guises, ideological (99).

Through the case of the OLPC project, Ames argues that techno-solutionism is impervious to its own failures because its appeal is less premised on actual results and more on their charisma. In the genealogy of the notion of the technological sublime, charismatic technologies seduce through the promise of a possibility of action: it is not about what they are or do, but what we imagine they *could* possibly do (9). This charismatic quality is not only immune to the pettiness of evidence against its promises and the messy complexity of reality: particular kinds of charismatic performances create a salvific distance that ensures charisma and its promises remain unsullied by “facts.” When a funders’ envoy was sent to Paraguay to check on the project’s progress, educators, state officials and selected children participated in a ceremonious, scripted performance to “show” how much progress the computers had brought about. In a sophisticated spin, Ames argues that what matters here is not to unmask the contrived character of these performances, because the fact that they are obviously contrived to everyone involved was always beside the point: the visit’s *actual* purpose was less to assess progress and more to uphold and reinforce the imaginations that

what everyone was doing was keeping alive the promise of progress. All actors involved had internalised through this promise what success should look like (170-173), in a purifying ritualization akin to that identified by Sims in New York.

There's yet more to the story of how charisma survives the disenchantment of reality checks. Charismatic technologies make sense within various different social imaginaries, and titillate in different ways those that come to be invested in their promise. In the universe inhabited by Nicholas Negroponte, MIT hackers, Paraguayan elites and other globalist, highly educated, socioeconomically resourceful actors, charismatic technologies promise to reproduce the world those people already thrive in. For Paraguayan children, however, the charisma of OLPC hinged on their investment in other kinds of promises. On the one hand, these laptops generated, exacerbated, and offered a way to satisfy desire for access to media like Youtube, gaming portals and Nickelodeon (120, 134), enfolding these children as consumers of global products designed precisely to (re)produce their condition as consumers. On the other hand, the computers allowed some enthusiastic and programming-oriented children to prepare for and participate in competitions awarding trips to the US and other kinds of recognition of entrepreneurialism, coding and digital shrewdness. In so doing, these children were not seeking the promise of the hacker and coding identity of MIT ideologues: the charismatic promise laptops sustained *for them* pointed to a horizon of well-paid jobs, English language proficiency, and what they identified as a land of opportunities. The fact that, unsurprisingly, English-speaking students from well-resourced schools and families in Asunción, Paraguay's capital, won every year, may confirm how structurally naïve techno-utopianism can be, but if anything it exacerbates its cruel optimism around the charismatic promise of being included (156-163).

In the immensely crowded subfield of studies of how developmentalism does not work, Sims and Ames manage to stand out through highly nuanced contributions. Their arguments are persuasive, their prose is lively and both books will capture readerships across social sciences and would make excellent course reading material, separate and together. In a sense, too, beyond the solidity of their arguments, perhaps the greatest contribution they both make is epochal. Across disciplines, researchers of technologies - algorithms, AI, social media platforms, platform economies, robotics - seem to be converging in the peculiar conclusion that techno-utopianism is dead. The recently published (ironically, in light of Ames' work, by MIT Press) *Your Computer Is On Fire* confidently claims that people and societies are

increasingly aware of the dystopian effect technologies have on our lives. The subset of “people” that academics of a certain ideological extraction make may be in near-universal agreement here, and would probably discount the study of techno-utopianism as “old news,” committed as we are to our endogamic pursuit to go “beyond” what “we” know already. *Disruptive Fixation* and *The Charisma Machine* are sobering, sophisticated invitations to realise not only that techno-utopianism is as alive and well in the centre of the developed world as it is in a remote rural enclave, but that dismissing the study of how it sustains itself despite all “we” know about its shortcomings could well be, ironically, extending it a new lease on life.

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