

Czech Association for Social Anthropology
is pleased to Invite you to

213th GELLNER SEMINAR

Thursday 12 December 2024 at 5:30 p.m.
Seminar room René 109 – Skautský institut na Staromáku
Staroměstské nám. 4/1, Praha 1

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Algorithmic Performance and Cultural Narrative. Towards a Cultural Sociology of Artificial Intelligence

This talk sketches a cultural sociology of artificial intelligence (AI) and demonstrates its empirical application in two cases. It consists of three parts: First, I briefly examine the relationship between culture, technology and society in classical and contemporary sociology their implications for the study of AI. I argue that the cultural sociology of technology, found in the works of Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith, offers a non-reductionist account of culture, technology and society and also shows great promise for the sociological analysis of AI. In the second part, I apply a cultural sociological toolkit to the case of AlphaGo, Google's Go-playing AI that made headlines in 2016. I show how AlphaGo become an icon of AI research and how its remarkable performance and its discursive framing facilitated a shift in the public narratives surrounding AI from the mundane to the apocalyptic. In the third part, I apply cultural sociological genre theory to the discourses and narratives that accompanied the rise of large language models. Particularly interesting (and prominent) are apocalyptic narratives, which combine utopian and dystopian aspects. I illuminate their narrative structure using the political and eschatological concepts of interregnum and katechon. Through a cultural sociological lens, we can see that the future of AI (and humanity) not only depends on technological progress, but also on the social meanings we attribute to it.

Werner Binder studied sociology, philosophy and German literature in Mannheim, Potsdam and Berlin before earning his PhD at the University of Konstanz. He is an assistant professor at the Department of Sociology at Masaryk University, Brno (Czech Republic), faculty fellow at the Yale Center for Cultural Sociology, book review editor of the European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology and associate editor at the American Journal of Cultural Sociology. His research interests are sociological theory, cultural sociology, textual and visual methods of interpretation, the analysis of public discourses and, recently, the sociology of artificial intelligence. In 2024, he published "Technology as (Dis-)Enchantment. AlphaGo and the Meaning-Making of Artificial Intelligence", Cultural Sociology 18(1), 24-47.



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