



When Data Justice Becomes Governance: On the Depoliticization of a Critical Concept

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Keywords: Data Justice Digital Governance Datafication Power and Inequality Critical Data Studies	<i>This commentary critically examines the contemporary trajectory of as a central concept in critical data studies, focusing on how its political impact risks being diluted as it is incorporated into governance-oriented frameworks. Revisiting the agenda-setting article Data Justice by Lina Dencik and Javier Sánchez-Monedero (2022), the commentary positions data justice not as a fixed normative standard but as an open and contested political framework rooted in critiques of surveillance, datafication, and structural inequality.</i> <i>While Dencik and Sánchez-Monedero emphasize the instability and conflictual nature of justice—drawing on Nancy Fraser’s notion of the “grammar of justice”—this commentary argues that contemporary data governance increasingly seeks to stabilize and operationalize this grammar. Through regulatory compliance, ethical AI frameworks, and technical approaches to fairness and bias mitigation, data justice is progressively translated into a depoliticized language of governance. As a result, the concept often endures at the expense of its inherent political tension. The commentary further highlights a central paradox: although data justice is advocated on behalf of marginalized groups, its incorporation into governance practices often leads to increased regulation of those very populations, rather than their empowerment. By tracing this conceptual shift, the article argues that data justice cannot be understood merely as a policy goal or technical solution. Instead, it should be reclaimed as an ongoing political struggle over data, power, and inequality—one that emphasizes conflict, redistribution, and the reconfiguration of political subjecthood.</i>

1. Introduction: Commentary Object and Problematisation

In the context of accelerating digital transformation, the term has become increasingly ubiquitous. It now circulates not only as a critical framework in academic research but also as policy language adopted by governments, non-governmental organizations, and platform corporations. However, this expansion raises a pressing question: does the widespread adoption of data justice also entail a loss of its critical impact?

This commentary revisits the agenda-setting article Data Justice by Lina Dencik and Javier Sánchez-Monedero (2022), published in Internet Policy Review, to examine the political trajectory of the concept. The article marks a decisive shift in data studies—from a

narrow focus on digital rights to an explicit engagement with structural inequality and power. Crucially, it seeks to clarify the political meaning of “justice” before it becomes fully technicized and absorbed into governance frameworks.

Yet this very success creates a new problem. What happens when a concept rooted in critique is adopted into governance? This commentary argues that the politically charged and tension-filled notion of data justice, as articulated by Dencik and Sánchez-Monedero, increasingly risks being translated into a depoliticized framework of governance. When everyone speaks in the name of justice, justice risks losing its oppositional power.

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2. The Core Contribution: Data Justice as a Contested Political Framework

To understand this slippage, it is necessary to recover the conceptual core of Dencik and Sánchez-Monedero's intervention. Their article does not propose a universal or stable standard of justice. Instead, it conceptualizes data justice as an inherently political and contested framework that highlights the entanglement of datafication with power.

First, they argue that data should not be understood merely as the object of justice or injustice. Rather, datafication itself operates through justificatory logics that normalize particular political and economic arrangements. Second, drawing on Nancy Fraser's notion of "abnormal justice," they emphasize that the grammar of justice—who is recognized, what is contested, and how claims are adjudicated—is fundamentally unsettled and conflictual.

In this context, Dencik and Sánchez-Monedero conceptualize data justice as an open, politically contested framework rather than a fixed normative standard. This openness is precisely what gives the concept its critical potential, but it also makes it particularly vulnerable to institutional appropriation. Their call to decenter technology and refocus attention on historical relations of domination and resistance forms the conceptual foundation for the commentary that follows: justice is a site of struggle, not a checklist to be implemented.

3. Commentary I: From Political Tension to Governance Grammar

One of the article's key strengths lies in its identification of tensions within the concept of data justice. Dencik and Sánchez-Monedero demonstrate how data justice arises as a response to data-driven sorting mechanisms and control logics. However, when this concept is incorporated into mainstream governance practices, these tensions are increasingly neutralized.

In policy discourse and corporate frameworks, data justice is rapidly becoming established. Regulatory instruments such as the GDPR and the rise of ethical AI discourse translate justice into procedural safeguards and compliance mechanisms. Concepts that originally aimed at structural critique are now operationalized as individual consent, data stewardship, or risk management.

The consequence of this translation is significant. The concept endures, but its political tension does not—indeed, it persists precisely because that tension is removed. Governance-oriented interpretations of data justice frame injustice as a technical problem to be solved, rather than as a manifestation of deeper political-economic structures. In doing so, they obscure what Dencik and Sánchez-Monedero emphasize: that datafication often reinforces existing forms of stratification rather than addressing them.

4. Commentary II: From a Grammar of Justice to a Grammar of Governance

Dencik and Sánchez-Monedero's use of Fraser's concept of the "grammar of justice" aims to highlight disagreement, redistribution, and the instability of political subjecthood. In this formulation, justice is not something to be resolved but something to be contested.

Contemporary governance trends, however, move in the opposite direction. Rather than perpetuating this instability, they aim to repair and prematurely fix the grammar of justice. In dominant data governance frameworks, justice is redefined as

fairness, transparency, and accountability. Fairness, in particular, is often reduced to computational bias mitigation, where discrimination is framed as a technical artifact resulting from flawed training data.

While Dencik and Sánchez-Monedero explicitly warn against translating social justice into computational fairness, this risk has only intensified. Whereas they emphasize the instability of justice grammars, governance frameworks increasingly seek to operationalize and stabilize them. This process not only fails to challenge institutional logics but often reinforces them by relocating normative authority from political contestation to technical expertise.

5. Commentary III: The Problem of the Political Subject—Who Is Governed?

Building on Dencik and Sánchez-Monedero's argument reveals a critical political consequence. Although data justice is framed in the name of marginalized groups—such as welfare recipients, migrants, and racialized populations—its incorporation into governance often results in these groups becoming subjects of intensified regulation.

In welfare systems, justice-oriented rhetoric may be employed to refine classification algorithms that target benefit recipients. In migration governance, fairness can be used to justify more sorting of asylum seekers. In these cases, justice becomes a tool for optimization rather than empowerment.

As Indigenous data sovereignty movements emphasize, achieving justice requires transforming decision-making authority—not merely including marginalized groups within existing systems. This creates a paradox in which data justice is proclaimed on behalf of marginalized communities but primarily governs them instead of empowering them to govern themselves. Without addressing this imbalance, data justice risks becoming a managerial tool rather than a project of emancipation.

6. Positioning the Commentary: Reclaiming Data Justice as Political Struggle

Taking Dencik and Sánchez-Monedero seriously requires resisting precisely those governance frameworks that claim to realize data justice. Data justice should not be understood as a policy goal or governance principle that can be fully integrated into existing institutional arrangements.

Instead, it must be reclaimed as a political struggle and a contested concept. This includes the possibility of refusal and abolition—rejecting oppressive data systems rather than optimizing them. Justice, in this sense, requires that datafication be situated within broader histories of domination, resistance, and solidarity.

Justice cannot be implemented as a purely technical feature without being politically hollowed out. Attempts to encode fairness into systems ultimately evade the critical political questions of who decides, who benefits, and who bears the costs of data-driven governance.

7. Conclusion: What This Commentary Adds

Dencik and Sánchez-Monedero's article offers an essential critical vocabulary for understanding data justice. This commentary does not aim to undermine that contribution but rather

to trace the political trajectory of the concepts it introduces. By following the evolution of data justice from critique to governance, it reveals the risk that critical concepts may gain influence precisely by losing their political edge.

Once this trajectory becomes visible, data justice can no longer be invoked innocently as a neutral or technical solution. Its continued relevance depends on a sustained return to its radical origins: power, conflict, and structural transformation. Only under these conditions can data justice remain a force for change rather than serve as a legitimizing language for the status quo.

Author Contribution

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The author declare that, to their knowledge, they have no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could be construed as a potential competing interest regarding the work described in this manuscript.

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