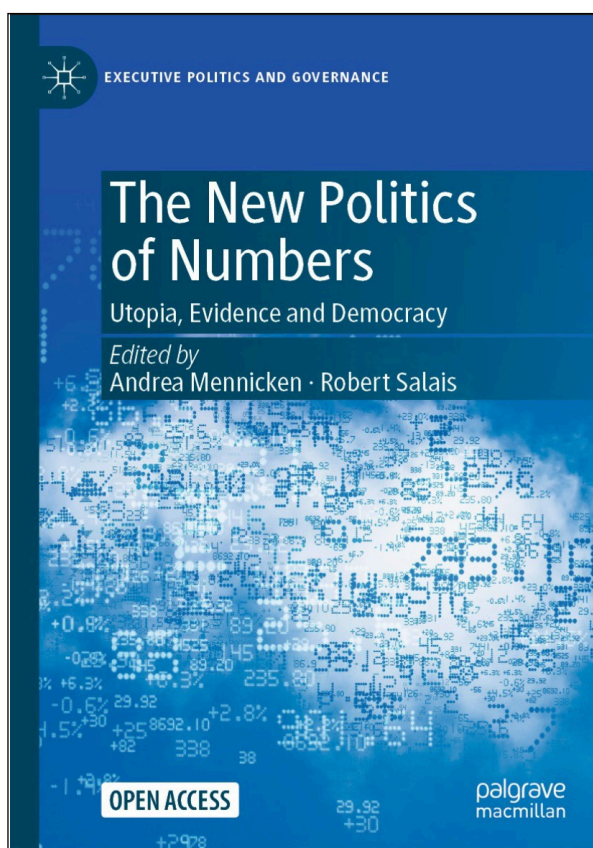


The New Politics of Numbers: Utopia, Evidence and Democracy

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Andrea MENNICKEN et Robert SALAIS (eds.) (2022)



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After reading *The New Politics of Numbers: Utopia, Evidence, and Democracy*, edited by Andrea Mennicken and Robert Salais, it is just impossible to open a newspaper or news site without being reminded of the themes addressed in this volume. This can be about an upward adjustment of the number of unemployed from about 250,000 to 350,000 by the Dutch statistical office CBS to comply with new EU regulations.² Or a plea by (again Dutch) epidemiologists for competition between models to forecast the course of the covid pandemic to thus try to look “under the hood” of the official and for privacy reasons unpublished model and to promote an open debate about its assumptions and robustness.³ Or about a very interesting longread in *The Guardian* in which Ben Rawlence examined the damaging effects of the current climate crisis on the way of living of the Sami in the most northern province of Norway, Finnmark, where the changing natural conditions pit the state’s vision of reindeer as “a useful export” of a region otherwise considered as unproductive against the significance of reindeer to the Sami for whom reindeer represent not only economic, but also cultural and symbolic value. As Rawlence quotes one of his interviewees: “Reindeer are life. They are everything. Without reindeer, we die.”⁴

The fourteen essays in this volume show the reader that the making of numerical, quantified knowledge is not just a problem of objective knowledge, but—as famously phrased by Shapin and Schaffer in *Leviathan and the Airpump* – a problem of social order. Numbers, the quantification of the social, deal with problems of power and control, the imposition and negotiation of classifications, the social valuation and evaluation of past, present and future, and with questions of agency which affect, indeed, life and death.

The impetus for this volume came from a working group on social quantification at the *Wissenschaftskolleg* zu Berlin in 2014 that was continued at various conferences and at the Nantes Institute for Advanced Study (IAS-Nantes). In their introduction Mennicken and Salais present this collaboration as a growing mutual curiosity of two strands of research into the processes and consequences of quantification of the social, the one motivated by Foucauldian themes of power and (self)control that were taken up in Britain by historians and sociologists of accounting at the London School of Economics and elsewhere, most notably the late Anthony Hopwood, Peter Miller, and Michael Power, and that is associated with the journal *Accounting, Organizations, and Society* of which Mennicken is the current editor. The second strand of research will be better known to readers of this journal and is associated with sociologists and economists such as Luc Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot, and Mennicken’s co-editor, Robert Salais. While this strand of research stands in a complex relation with the sociological tradition of Pierre Bourdieu and the actor-network theory of Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and Madeleine Akrich at the *École des Mines*, the details of which need not concern us here, this French-based strand of research took its inspiration from the work of the late sociologist and INSEE statistician Alain Desrosières, whose monumental historical work on social quantification, *La politique des grands nombres* (1990), opened up an extremely fruitful field of research that examined, as Lorraine Daston wrote in her essay review of the English translation of 1998, “why statistics tend not only to describe the world, but to change it” (Daston 2000). In France, Desrosières canvassed this field in collaboration with Boltanski, Thévenot, Salais, but importantly also with historians of science who had been part of the highly successful Bielefeld working group of the early 1980s on the probabilistic revolution of which Daston, Theodore Porter and Mary Morgan, amongst others were part. Desrosières’ emphasis on the conventional basis of social quantification with real consequences aligned well with Boltanski’s earlier work on the French statistical classification of *cadres* in which he showed how a statistical classification transformed into a social class.⁵

2. <https://nos.nl/artikel/2413776-het-cbs-heeft-meer-dan-100-000-nieuwe-werklozen-gevonden-hoe-kan-dat>, accessed 20-1-2022.

3. <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2022/01/19/oproep-modelleurs-nederland-heeft-recht-op-een-second-opinion-a4081121>, accessed 20-1-2022

4. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2022/jan/20/norway-arctic-circle-trees-sami-reindeer-global-heating>, accessed 20-1-2022

5. Boltanski published his work in the same period that sociologists and political scientists in Eastern-Europe questioned to what extent the soviet administrative category of *nomenklatura* similarly evolved into a separate social class. See especially György Konrád and Iván Szélenyi, *The intellectuals on the road to class power*, Harcourt, 1979.

The French strand of research that emerged from this collaboration is currently referred to as the economics or theory of conventions. It stresses the investment in form (as in the example of the *cadres*), the material differences between different spheres of valuation, and the agency of actors in the construction, use and counter-use of numbers. This agency of actors, and its concomitant possibility of resistance to social quantification, is an important distinguishing characteristic with Foucauldian approaches.

Against this background, it seems fit that the book is dedicated to the memory of the two founding representatives of the Foucauldian and convention approach to numbers, Anthony Hopwood and Alain Desrosières. But the explanation of the title of this volume by the editors may come as a surprise as it echoes William Alonzo and Paul Starr's 1989 edited volume *The Politics of Numbers* (without subtitle) in the Census series of the Russell Sage Foundation. Built around the history and politics of the American Census, the book was completely centered on the American situation and on the peculiar status of the American Census in American politics (the assignments of seats in the House of Representatives and the Electoral College) which to this day is still enmeshed with questions of racism and exclusion, as brought out so well in Gunnar Myrdall's *An American Dilemma: the Negro Problem and American Democracy of 1944*.⁶ Far from concealing the entanglements of statistics and politics, the contributions to Alonzo and Starr's edited volume presented the assumptions, choices, and resulting tensions in American (census) statistics as issues which at the end of the day could be resolved by an ordered technical discussion by statisticians in the service of the common good. Or, as Mennicken and Salais note in their introduction, the *Politics of Numbers* showed how vital government statistics is for a democratic polity. In this new collection, the optimistic tone of Alonzo and Starr's volume has vanished. While Alonzo and Starr viewed numbers as a support of governing by democracy, Mennicken and Salais emphasize in contrast that the current politics of numbers replaces government by democracy with government by numbers.

The meaning of this shift is explored in fourteen essays grouped under the headings of utopia, evidence, and democracy. The first group comprises essays by Martine Mespoulet, Tong Lam, Uwe Vormbusch, and Ota de Leonardis that all one way or another address utopian dreams to improve society through quantification. In a sense this theme runs as a basso continuo through the essays of the two other groups of essays as well. The four essays in the section *The Politics of Evidence* discuss the role of official statistical infrastructures in France in terms of knowledge and representation of society (Thomas Amossé) and in the transformation of education politics (Corine Eyraud), and on certification standards (Laurent Thévenot) and statistical indicators (Ousmane Oumarou Sidibé) as instruments of international politics and 'global world making'. The section *Voicing for Democracy* contains essays on British prison ratings and rankings (Andrei Guter-Sandu and Andrea Mennicken), price and (un)employment statistics (Boris Samuel and Robert Salais respectively), and the fiction of a history of purely qualitative sociology (Emmanuel Didier). With a clear nod to Albert Hirschman's magnificent *Exit, Voice, Loyalty* these essays deconstruct received tenets on the immutability of statistics for policy purposes, and exemplify citizens' and scientists' responses to declining trust in the statistics on offer from, as Hirschman had it, firms, organizations, and states. Peter Miller closes off this collection of essays with a reflection on the history and political function of a number that has become *the* most discussed number since the outbreak of the current pandemic: R, the reproduction ratio of the covid virus. Miller shows how this number emerged from historical debates on demographic modeling in the interwar period and then traveled to the field of epidemiology. Miller argues that R is not so much a number but a focal point in a modeling exercise that made R a mediating instrument in the machinery of current political decision making, with serious consequences on the health, wealth and wellbeing of the polity as we experience presently on a daily basis.

6. How insulated this book was on the American situation can also be seen from its remark in the introduction that "no social scientist has yet attempted any systematic comparative analysis of the organization and politics of the statistical process," (p. 25) whereas the Bielefeld project had already published some of its major results, and Theodore Porter's *The Rise of Statistical Thinking* was in the process of being published.

The comparison between a Foucauldian approach to quantification and the economics of conventions works well through the volume, though for some of the stories told they read a bit like overkill. Statistical classifications and indicators may make appear, disappear or redefine social phenomena such as poverty and unemployment, as Desrosières has shown so well, but a conventions 'light' approach seems sufficient to this reader to argue such cases. Salais beautifully shows how the shift from the measurement of unemployment to that of employment is embedded in shifting theoretical discourses in economics that moved away from Keynesian politics. The adverse effect of development politics by indicators comes out well from Sidibé's very interesting inside account of the measurement of the effects of development aid on socio-economic development of Mali by indicators, which leads to the strategic gaming of the indicators just as in the case of French education politics discussed by Corine Eyraud and British prison ratings and rankings discussed by Guter-Sandu and Mennicken. Thévenot mobilizes both the Foucauldian and conventions approach in his discussion of certification in the international palm oil industry to argue for the reductive forces of such technologies of standardization that straightjacket democratic discourses about different value systems into a measuring system fit for the market. In Thévenot's case study, little is left from Montesquieu's utopian *doux commerce* thesis, in which the standardization of measures was seen as a liberating force from vested interests and power relations (think of Ken Alders' book on the standard meter), and international certification becomes a destructive instrument used by international Palm Oil Companies against smallholders. In a similar vein does Boris Samuel discuss the social movement in Guadeloupe starting with local businesses against rent-seeking (or *pwofitasyon* in creole – outrageous exploitation) by businesses, a phenomenon that did not appear in the price statistics provided by the local INSEE, but that via a combination of social pressure (strikes) and local expertise became the subject of an official fact-finding mission. The chapter shows how different styles of calculation unveil different realities and as in Thévenot's case, points to the difficulties local actors in a minority position experience in using calculative strategies against vested institutional and business interests.

How utopian trust in numbers turned dystopic comes out strongest, perhaps, in the first three contributions to this volume that I will discuss at some greater length. Mespoulet starts with the Bolsheviks' high hopes for a new type of quantification, distinct from the 'bourgeois statistics' of the nineteenth century, that would fit to a new form of ordering society via planning instead of the market. Her reference to the experiences of the Great War reminds one of Otto Neurath's similar high hopes in planning, as witnessed from his pictorial statistics that showed the vanishing of business cycles during the war economy, hopes that led to the notorious planning debate between Neurath and Ludwig von Mises. Lenin pitched two different styles of quantification against one another: statistics and accounting. No longer should statistics merely register production decisions in the market, as bourgeois statisticians were doing, but the administrative scaffolding of the production processes – that is planning through accounting – should make markets oblivious. Controlling business accounts should produce the data that, Mespoulet quotes Lenin, "*the state needs to know now, today.*" Mespoulet explores how prerevolutionary statisticians tried to survive by accommodating their received style of quantification with accounting practices that promised planned historical change, but in the end became fully dependent on the whims of Stalin and the communist party.

Mespoulet's picture of Bolshevik utopian dreams turned oppressive through state controlled administrative procedures is contrasted with two contemporary cases, the first, the nowadays much discussed, and feared, Chinese Social Credit System, the second, the self-quantification movement known as the Quantified Self (QS). Lam investigates this Social Credit System as a centralized apparatus of authoritarian control of individual behavior, Vormbusch the Quantified Self Movement as a self-proclaimed collective movement of self-control through self-measurement, that seemingly find themselves at opposite ends of a spectrum running from state-control to self-governance. Both contributions show that the distinctions and similarities

between both forms of governance are more complex, nuanced and (unfortunately?) closer to one another than one might think.

Lam explains that the Social Credit System is in fact a public-private collaboration between the Chinese State (or rather the Communist Party) and private companies such as Alibaba and Tencent. Individual data are harvested to control, regulate, and engineer individual conduct through a system of merit and demerit points that affect people's access to public and private resources and services such as bullet-trains, mortgages, education, but also matching proposals in dating apps. Lam situates this Social Credit System against systems of individual surveillance that were in fact put in place by the National Party in the interwar period to control the conduct of party members. After the Communist Party came to power, this system was extended under Mao to cover the conduct of all urban citizens. Starting at child age, a system of personal files aimed to track and trace a person's character, attitudes, performance and social relationships. There is a limit of course to what Lam can cover in the space of one article, but an even longer durée would bring us to the early Buddhist and Confucian Ledgers of Merit and Demerit, so well discussed for the late Ming period by Cynthia Brokaw.⁷ Under the banner of the Social Credit System, the Communist Party now aspires to put a similar system in place to register and monitor the behavior of all Chinese citizens and like a FICO score to aggregate the merit and demerit points of an individual in one number. Lam rightly notes that the Credit systems developed by companies like Tencent and Alibaba (Sesame Credit) are more like private company fidelity point systems to nudge behavior with a much smaller social reach and that a unified state-led credit system is so far only a (utopian/dystopian) promise. Instead of one Social Credit System, China is rather implementing a convolute of different systems. Lam argues that the Social Credit System should be seen as "*part and parcel of a state-led neoliberal model of development and governance*" that "*seeks to economize and financialize*" the social world. Characterizing China's totalitarian aspirations as neoliberal seems to this reader however a missed opportunity to discuss the Social Credit System from the perspective of the economy of conventions in which a totalitarian state aims to capture different value systems in one number.⁸ The more so, because Lam situates the Social Credit System in a long history of Chinese social and individual state and party control which sits difficult with the discourse of neoliberalism. The joint circulation of monetary and moral (celestial) worth was already part and parcel of the Ledger system.

The contribution of Vormbusch explores the seemingly opposite of state or large enterprise led surveillance projects of individual citizens. He takes the Quantified Self movement, linked to the Californian based journal *Wired* and its former contributing editor Gary Wolf, as a laboratory that explores new ways of self-making by self-measurement, or as the movement's slogan goes "self-knowledge through numbers." The movement meets regularly, amongst others in show and tell sessions in which self-measurers show how they use and personalize technical artifacts, ranging from the good old cycle to measure Watts, to wristbands like Fitbit, and a plethora of performance measuring apps to fit to their personal needs of self-measurement or as Vormbusch says, *leibschreiben*: 'writing the body'. Vormbusch usefully problematizes the question of agency in the use of apps which one way or another rely on standardized practices of recording and visualization, even when these practices may not be as fixed as in other domains. Clearly, and as examined at length in this article, self-quantification through technical artifacts changes the attitude of an individual to his or her body. But technical devices as fitbit or moodtracker apps such as *Mood 24/7 of Track Your Happiness*, also show the dependence

7. The Ledgers (or tables) of Merit and Demerit of the late Ming period was firmly rooted in Buddhist and Daoist traditions. They became a popular means to measure an individual's karma and implied socio-economic standing. See Cynthia Joanne Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Cynthia Brokaw, "Yüan Huang (1533-1606) and The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 1987, pp. 137-95.

8. The design of the Social Credit System is inspired by the US based system of FICO scores by credit companies but aims to expand these scores beyond the sphere of the market. On the US, see Josh Lauer, *Creditworthy: A History of Consumer Surveillance and Financial Identity in America*, Columbia Studies in the History of U.S. Capitalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

of individual experiences on business classifications and algorithms as most visible in his discussion of apps that monitor the sleeping behavior of babies to uncertain young parents and provide them preformed diagnoses. To quote Vormbusch: *"quantifying the self is as much about the self as a subject competing in markets, as it is about the cultural indeterminacy of today's forms of living."* If anything counts as the construction of the neoliberal self, we can find it here.

In all, this collection of essays makes a very useful contribution to the existing literature on social quantification that will be of use to sociologists, historians and philosophers of quantification. It creates a largely successful dialogue between the British Foucauldian and French convention approach to social quantification. The development of the French convention approach from Desrosières's work has been largely discussed in a francophone environment, and with this volume, as Wendy Espeland rightly notes in her preface to this collection, received the attention in the Anglosaxon world it deserves.