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Author

Cserkits, Michael

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Crystal Biruk, *Cooking Data: Culture & Politics in an African Research World*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018). pp. 296.

Michael Cserkits

In her book *Cooking Data: Culture & Politics in an African Research World*, author Crystal Biruk aims to show how statistical numbers, perceived as clean and free from association or expectations, travel throughout different processing stages and are messier than they appear. With different research examples, where the author participated as an ethnographer, Biruk contributes a vivid part to the discussion that numbers are, in fact, alive. As Knorr-Cetina¹ had demonstrated with her “Viscourse Theory” that even the specific use of colors in scientific publications serve a specific social agenda, Biruk shows that numbers are alive and serve the same purpose. Not only are they packed with social transactions, expectations, and colonial thinking, they further travel from the field through the evaluation office and transform even on the way to their last destination: the scientific journal. Highlighting this process “encourages us to more critically engage with the kinds of evidence we too often take for granted, whether inside or outside our discipline and training.” The book is neither an indictment of demographers nor a call to abandon all statistical evidence in the research world.² It does, however, call for ethnographers and anthropologists, as well as policymakers, to reflect more deeply about the links between those who measure and those who govern. A deep connection to the Bordieuan concept of “body politics” can be read between the sentences throughout the entire argumentation, but it would be quite interesting if this aspect would be stressed more during the following chapters³.

Following the Introduction, the author sometimes did not hold back with her critique against demographers, as they tell a story from her point of view; however, one could ask if storytelling or narrating in itself isn't also the task of the ethnographer, who has to transform and transfer knowledge and information from the field to an audience or a journal. Further, when it comes to the role of the local researchers, who undergo special training after being employed for a specific research project, the author sometimes argues in a conflicting way: On the one hand, she complains about the fact that the local (in this case, Malawian) knowledge of researchers was not considered as valuable as it should have been, yet on the other hand, she

argues that a good field worker doesn't have to master local cultural knowledge in order to perform well in the field. What is certain is that the native mastering of certain habits, language, and social skills is definitely a factor in accessing and collecting data, and that these skills are not mentioned in the demographers' reports or taken into account when it comes to the quality of data. Another shortcoming in the argumentation line is the overexaggeration of the way local Malawian fieldworkers are perceived: Her comparison with a "Fordian-like" assembly line, which tries to control and exert power over the researchers, is in my view inapt, even if standardized training is necessary and often has nothing to do with the social reality on the spot due to the lack of the demographers' knowledge.

Nevertheless, what makes the book outstanding is the further on-hand discussion about ethics in research. Here, several aspects of research are very well and vividly described, such as the problem of the outcome—researchers may come and go and extract data, but what is left for those on the spot, except for a little piece of soap as a takeaway gift? Here, I think Biruk's call to evolve from a culture-centric critique to center-structural inequalities and their reproductions has potential to become a new form of thinking in global health research and policymaking, as it focuses directly on the problem. Also, the argument cannot be stressed enough that raw data is, always has been, and always will be directly connected with the worldview of those collecting and processing it: a fact that Gitelman has already shown in her research.⁴ To sum up, "Cooking Data" provides insight not only from an ethnographic perspective on how health policy and research is conducted via on-hand examples; it also appeals to the reader to critically reflect on the role of "clean" data and "sterile" statistics, which are far from being detached from the social reality as is sometimes claimed.

Notes

¹ Karin Knorr-Cetina, "'Viskurse' der Physik der Physik: Konsensbildung und Visuelle Darstellung," In *Mit dem Auge Denken. Strategien der Sichtbarmachung in wissenschaftlichen und virtuellen Welten*, eds. Bettina Heinz and Jörg Huber, 305-320. Wien/New York: Springer Verlag, 2001.

² Crystal Biruk, *Cooking Data: Culture & Politics in an African Research World*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 27.

³ Mathieu Hilgersand; Eric Mangez, eds. *Bourdieu's Theory of Social Fields: Concepts and Applications*, New York: Routledge, 2015.

⁴ Lisa Gitelman, *"Raw Data" Is an Oxymoron*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013.