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Contemporary Notes on Political Arithmetic

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Desrosières, Alain (2014). Prouver et gouverner: Une analyse politique des statistiques publiques. Paris : Éditions La Découverte.

Review by Jennifer Johnson-Hanks

Prouver et gouverner: Une analyse politique des statistiques publiques is a remarkable book, broad in scope and bold in argument. It is also a raw book, left incomplete at the time of Desrosières' death in 2013, and brought to press thanks to the talent and efforts of Emmanuel Didier. The central issue of the book, and the inspiration for the title, is how public statistics serve simultaneously as sources of knowledge (to prove) and as sources of power (to govern). This inherent ambivalence has the important consequence that public statistics "retroact" on their objects, remaking social practices in alignment with the metrics. That is, the form of quantification entailed in public statistics is not measurement, but rather a process of social transformation, which moves people and institutions from a focus on actions to a focus on indicators. How can we use public statistics for the production of knowledge when they are simultaneously deployed for purposes of governance?

If all of this sounds somewhat common—do we not already know about the inherent ambivalence of quantification and the reflexivity of social facts?—two points are important. First, Desrosières himself, in his acclaimed 1993 book La Politique des grands nombres, contributed to the initiation of this line of research in an important way. And, as with that earlier one, the strength of this book lies not in its central argument, but rather in the details of how that argument is explored and expanded. In particular, specific institutions—including INSEE, where Desrosières himself worked—play starring roles here, as they create and use statistics and metrics for specific, if dual, purposes.

The book is organized into four parts. First comes an engaging and rather intimate intellectual biography of Desrosières, written by the editor Emmanuel Didier. This ends with a useful discussion of how Didier constructed the book out of Desrosières' papers and public talks, notably including the fact that the classification and order of chapters is Didier's. The eleven chapters of Desrosières' text are organized into three sections: The role of statistics in the neoliberal era; The international statistical scene; and The role of quantification in the social sciences. While all sections have merit, the last one really shines with Desrosières remarkable erudition.

The first section ("The role of statistics in the neoliberal era") is focused on the uses of public statistics since the 1970s. Here the key point is that new kinds of metrics have not only new effects, but

actually new *kinds* of effects on the social and political world. "Benchmarking," for example, in which all individuals, groups, and institutions serve as standards against which others of their class are measured, creates kinds of competition that previous forms of public statistics did not. Once you classify and rank by performance metrics, the metrics—and not the actions or outcomes that they nominally measure—become things to optimize. Thus, different branches of the state—regardless of whether it is liberal, Keynesian, or other—seek to modify, coordinate, and orient the behavior of individuals and institutions through metrics. The individuals and institutions, meanwhile, seek both to improve their ranking, and to influence the metrics themselves to make them more favorable; metrics can therefore be "weapons of the weak" as well as mechanisms of domination. In chapter four of this section, Desrosières discusses how statistical practices have been transformed by economic crises— periods of debate when the inevitable mismatches between metrics and the things of which they are intended to be indices come under new scrutiny.

The second section of the book ("The international statistical scene") takes up three distinct issues. Chapter five is a brief history of the International Institute of Statistics, from its prehistory under Quetelet in the 1830s, through its formal establishment in 1885, until the full professionalization of the field by the 1950s. Chapter six concerns the use of statistics, particularly as methods of coordination and commensuration, in the economic development of poor countries. Chapter seven also considers the problem of cross-national coordination and commensuration, except in the case of the emerging European Union in the 1990s. This chapter explores qualitative commensuration as a necessary step before quantitative commensuration.

The final section focuses on the social sciences, starting with the emergence of quantitative social science in the 18th century, and building through to the contemporary forms of history, sociology, political science, economics, and psychology. Throughout this section, Desrosières attends to the tension between qualitative methods, which constantly put in question the object of their description, and statistical methods, which cannot. Here the theme of dual nature of the public statistics—as proof and tool of governance—comes through clearly. More so than qualitative methods, Desrosières argues, statistical social science is inherently political, because it creates incentives for the behaviors that it subsequently measures. It is *because* public statistics are commonly granted the status of proof that they serve so effectively as tools of government: the contradiction is its own solution.

Overall, <u>Prouver et gouverner</u> is engaging, compelling, and immensely worth reading. Still, the untimely death of its author takes its toll on the success of the work. Minor technical shortcomings (such as a certain amount of redundancy, the thin or absent explanations of key terms, and the lack of an index) should be overlooked. But the book reads like a draft-in-progress, with some chapters fully actualized and others less so. It is less "a political analysis of public statistics," as the subtitle asserts, than a kaleidoscopic set of related analyses of public statistics. It is demanding reading, often lacking transitions and with pieces of the argument unstated. Emmanuel Didier explains in the introduction that he chose to revise Desrosières' unfinished text only lightly, leaving the incompleteness of the text visible. We owe him a great debt of gratitude for his work in bringing forth this book, for every reading of it will remind us clearly of both Desrosières extraordinary mind, and of his loss.