

way that appears to be flexible, ambivalent, restive and exposed to technoscientific and marketing logics that are strongly intertwined together.

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Ann Rudinow Saetnan, Heidi Mork Lomell, Svein Hammer (Eds.)

The Mutual Construction of Statistics and Society

London, Routledge, 2010, pp. 314

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To read a book like *The Mutual Construction of Statistics and Society* for a social research methodologist who works daily with numbers, producing them, analyzing them, and then providing – sometimes – policy indications, is an interesting experience. This both for the estrangement approach, and the language and style of argumentation. Furthermore, this book forces us to deal with the "unsaid" and "taken for granted" typical in the use of "big data" or official data collected and organized at various levels, when using socio-economic indicators as those produced by national or international organizations, as well as large scale dataset based on big social surveys.

The construction of samples, of instruments created for data collection and their organization in matrix ready to be analyzed, their publication in the form of reports and indicators often used as a tool for "evidence-based" policies is a set of operations at the same time autonomous and connected with each other.

The networks of interaction between these phases and among the different actors, human and technological, involved in the process of data creation, have important effects on social life; to borrow the title of the book, in this mutual construction, the “experts” and the technicians (but also the discourses and the rhetoric that drive the research in a direction rather than another) build statistics which, in turn, through the processes of categorization and objectification, produces the “society”.

Statistics is everywhere. It permeates our daily lives, and often we do not realize it. The book edited by Ann Rudinow Saetnan, Heidi Mork Lomell, Svein Hammer shows where and how a variety of statistics, through a series of human decisions, becomes an “objective” description of the “society”.

The book is divided into four parts, the first (Overarching Themes and Approaches) related to the technical aspects and the role of statistics, techniques and indicators (especially in the processes of government); a second part (Visibility, Invisibility and Transparency) relating to how statistics shapes individual differences creating real social categories (the case of the definition of “ethnicity” and “racial” categories); the third and fourth part are based on different case studies (Accountability and Manageability; Reporting and Acts of Resistance).

What is immediately clear is the power and limitations of statistics and the dangers of it as a tool: these dangers lie in the routines through which statistics are applied, the discourses from which they emerge and into which they are deployed, the power relations created by those discourses, and the assumptions which statistic categories carry with them in those discourses.

The key point is probably that statistics and technical tools related to it (e.g. the difference between logistic regression and correspondence analysis, pp. 52-55) are not theoretically “neutral” but they are “theory laden”. These theories, when statistics is used as a classification tool, in the activity of “governing by numbers”, in decision making and policy-making processes, are sometimes not sufficiently taken into account. Statistics is a social product that responds to certain visions of the world, politically, ethically, and epistemologically oriented; in the use of statistical data, in their presentation, statistics incorporates these visions but they become “opaque” or even “transparent” for a user not able to manage the techniques or when a user decides deliberately not to consider them.

Often statistics are seen as simple, straightforward, and objective descriptions of society, but the way in which statistics and numbers are constructed, produced, gathered, and applied by different social organizations needs to be read, deconstructed, interpreted in its discursive, rhetorical and technical components.

Statistics is reified, materialized through the coding and implementation of a database; it becomes a “not inert” socio-material object, instead strongly characterized by its theoretical, ideological, technical and technological background. One of the key issues is that often statistics, indica-

tors and different methods, techniques, artifacts or routines of production and use, have the status of a “second nature” in which statistics is used as a self-evident object. The authors clearly show that the use of a certain technique of analysis incorporates a certain epistemic culture not automatically visible, because embedded in a socio-technical object as a software or an algorithm.

If we look at the profound degree of theoretical and technological “embeddedness” that permeates the tools of data collection (the example of the “Response Rate Accomodation” is really interesting, see p. 73), it becomes clear the powerful impact in terms of social effects produced by the data now naturalized and taken as objective. This interpretive key is fundamental to understand and underline the social nature of the data produced daily in large quantities by many collective actors.

One of the most important implications of this kind of use is linked, according to some authors in the book (Svein Hammer, Asuncion Lera St. Clair), to the neo-liberal strategies of government which rely heavily on ‘statistics’, and more particularly, on socio-scientific expertise. Another kind of implication is linked to the relationship between governmental structures (at different levels, global and local) in the creation of official numbers: for example, at global level, the diffusion and the progressive power of persuasion of the OECD-PISA in the government of education. Furthermore, at national or local level, the same thing happens for statistics on immigration, on crime, or the categorization of the condition of “health” and “disease”. Similarly to the process of categorization in everyday life, which allows the continuous production and reproduction of the “social reality”, statistical categories define the status of an individual in his relations with the State, the Law, or to a set of possibilities and obstacles, rights and duties and also, as in the case of the definition of health conditions, the self-representation or even the social stigma.

The main contribution of the text is, in my opinion, on the one hand, the invitation to reconstruct and always retrace the political and methodological genesis of certain data before using them as a “natural” fact. On the other hand, the need to consider the social effects that statistical data can produce through a distorted or ideological use. The point is not, therefore, a refusal of statistics that can be a powerful instrument to analyze large scale phenomena. Rather, a judicious use, self-critical and conscious of data and analysis techniques, being aware that these data could be used to justify actions of policy-making, and construction of public opinion, but also that they can have a strong effect on individual lives through the process of categorization.

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