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RESEARCH ARTICLE

STATISTICS AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE

Alain Desrosières
INSEE

ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the history of the uses of statistics as a tool for socialcritique. Whereas nowadays they are very often conceived as being in the hands of the powerful, there are many historical cases when they were, on the contrary, used to oppose the authority. The author first illustrates the theory of Ted Porter according to which quantification might be a "tool of weakness". He then addresses the fact that statistics were used in the context of labour and on living conditions, thus being a resource for the lower class of society (and presenting the theory of statistics of Pelloutier, an anarchist activist). Finally comes the question of the conditions of success of these counterpropositions, discussed on the examples of the new random experiments in public policies, and of the measure of the 1% of the richest persons.

KEYWORDS: Activism, Neoliberalism, Sociology of quantification, Social critique, Statistics

Social critique often relies on statistical arguments[1]. These attempt to express and make visible exigencies of equality and justice. The trust accorded to these types of argumentative tools has nonetheless been recently eroded, by the rise of political projects of neoliberal inspiration.

[1] This paper has been published in French as a chapter of Alan Desrosières, *Prouver et gouverner. Une analyse politique des statistiques publiques*, Paris, La Découverte, 2014, pp. 70-84. Translation by Hippolyte Goux.

Indeed, these projects largely make use of quantitative "indicators" to control social actors, and to put them in competition through techniques such as "benchmarking" (Bruno 2008). Is statistics a tool for liberation or a tool for power? The question might seem ludicrous to one who has known the optimistic years from 1950 to 1970, when information provided by public statistics was seen as a major component of democratic societies.

This optimism can be questioned today, not only by the use of quantification as a practice of neoliberal management, but also by taking into account the contributions during the last three decades of historical and sociological studies of quantification. These studies might sometimes have mistakenly given the impression of relativizing, if not disqualifying, statistical arguments; for example, by the efflorescence of writings on the "social construction of this and that," finely analyzed by Ian Hacking (2000). By making statistical production historical and social, these studies seemed to weaken its scope, they robbed it of the efficacy linked to its image of objectivity and impartiality. Frequent controversies on the measure of unemployment or inflation could only strengthen a mistrust concerning what is too often presented as "undebatable figures." Still, these studies allowed to put in perspective productions whose discussion had appeared restricted, due to their apparently technical nature, to the realm of experts, and to create spaces for public debate about them. The regular colloquia organized by unions of public statisticians, as well as this Journal issue of *Partecipazione e Conflitto* on "statactivism" are excellent examples of this.

1. Statistics as a "tool of weakness" in the hands of the oppressed

Democracy and statistics have in common the idea that it is possible to compare and to "commensurate" citizens. The principle of equality originating in the French Revolution is first juridical. In the 19th century: one man, one vote. But women were excluded, not commensurable. At this time, surveys of household budgets and living conditions, conducted by Frédéric Le Play, focused only on the popular classes. It remained unthinkable to interview members of the bourgeoisie and to compare them to workers (Desrosières 2003). Then, in the 20th century, the requirement for equality became a social requirement: statistical surveys compared social groups, women and men. The extension of social rights and of systems of social protection was linked to the extension of the range of questions that could be the object of statistical enquiry.

The American historian Ted Porter has analyzed this recourse to statistical arguments by speaking, paradoxically, of tools of weakness (Porter 1995). Statistics is indeed often presented as a tool of power, suggesting that, according to a classic line of reasoning, the dominant classes orient statistical production to suite their own interests. Porter suggests, on the contrary, that the hegemony of traditional classes is often founded on implicit, unchallenged evidence, lived as "natural." Statistical argumentation is thus put forward by dominated groups to break the old order and render injustice visible. More precisely, often (but not always) this recourse is taken by the dominated fraction of the dominant class, the more educated middle class, endowed with the resources to construct such arguments.

The first wave of construction of public statistical bureaus took place between the years 1830 to 1860, under the impetus of the Belgian Adolphe Quetelet. These statistics were constituted, on the one hand, by population censuses, on the other, by the compilation of administrative registries of the Civil service (births, marriages, mortality, morbidity, suicides) and of the Judicial system (crimes and offenses). Quetelet interpreted these first statistics in terms of the *average man* and of the regularity of social phenomena such as crimes and suicides. These contributed to spreading the idea that societies can be analyzed in global, macrosocial terms, relatively independently of the behavior of individuals. This idea can be used in a conservative perspective (nothing can be changed), but also in a critical perspective: if social relations are independent of the possible goodwill of the powerful, it is the entire system that must be changed. It is just in this way that Marx reasoned, and later, the socialists: it is not the capitalists that must be changed, but capitalism itself. In fact, Marx and Engels made wide use of the statistics of manufactures of their time to analyze and critique capitalism.

The second great wave of statistical development is linked to the great economic and social crisis from 1870 to 1890. In England, two very different interpretations of the crisis are given opposed to each other: The first, stemming from biology, rests on statistical arguments concerning the putative heredity of aptitudes, and promote eugenic policies.[2] The second, more sociological, provide descriptions of the living conditions of the working class based on statistical surveys, feeding the project of social reformers and of the workers movement (Béatrice and Sidney Webb, Beveridge). In Germany, labour unions organized grand surveys on salaries and employment.[3] In France, an older tradition of surveys on the households' budgets of workers had been initiated by Frédéric Le Play, a conservative catholic engineer. He blamed capitalist waged labor for uprooting workers from their former solidarities, traditional and familial. This criticism, while coming from a conservative milieu allergic to the French Revolution, generated a movement of surveys and social reforms. The *Musée Social* in Paris is the avatar of these ones.[4]

2. At the beginning of the 20th century, statistics focused on work

The crisis at the end of the 19th century is at the origin of a reorientation of public statistics towards questions of work, labor, and unemployment. In France, an Office of labor (the origin of the actual *Ministère du travail*) is created in 1891, absorbing the older *Statistique générale de*

[2] In a way which surprises today, this "scientistic" frame of understanding was supported by numerous socialists, and even had echoes in the Soviet Union of the 1920s and 1930s (Kevles 1995).

[3] Maurice Halbwachs (1913) would make a wide use (and would praise) of these surveys in his thesis disseration entitled *La classe ouvrière et les niveaux de vie* (*The working class and its standard of living).*

[4] This little-known museum has become an important site of conservation and memory for the worker's movement and its research, lead by Colette Chambelland and Françoise Blum (Horne 2004). See its history on the site : http://www.cedias.org/dossier/histoire-presentation-bibliotheque.

la France (SGF). Militants in workers unions, such as Fernand Pelloutier, collaborate with these offices. He insisted "on the use of statistical tools that would permit workers in post-capitalist societies to not only manage needs, but also to control and organize the exchange of goods."[5] Statistics are often seen as inseparable from the state (if only by the etymology of the word, a science of the state). The idea that it could play an important role for the organization of a post-capitalist society is nonetheless mentioned many times in the texts of federalist libertarian militants (*a priori* hostile to a centralized state), as is shown by a detailed programmatic text of the anarchist Federation published in 1934, and republished several times after (Besnard 1934).[6] This suggests that statistics can intervene in two very different ways in the activities and projects of social movements. On the one hand, it furnishes arguments to contest the injustices of society. On the other, it is seen as a tool to organize production and exchange for a possible post-capitalist society[7], participating in the possibility, envisaged by Michel Foucault, of a "socialist governmentality."

In the major industrialized countries, the responses to the crisis at the end of the 19th century were mainly aimed at the organization and protection of the labor market, and setting up the first elements of what would later become the welfare state: retirement for older workers, unemployment insurance, social security. Statistical bureaus are then organized around the question of labor. The *Bureau international du travail* (BIT) is created in Geneva in 1920. Workers unions play an important role in it. Surveys on the budget of worker families and on the prices of the goods they consume are developed. Putting social relations into statistical form provides a language for the expression of demands, and for the negotiations resulting from class conflict. This statistical language is presented, after 1945, as symbolic of "appeased" social relations, founded on reason and "shared acknowledgements" based on statistics, rather than on the passions or violence.

But the success of the statistical argument depends strongly on the legitimacy of the institutions that furnish the data on which it relies. Either these are viewed as "incontestable," and there is consensus on the very terms of disagreement, for example, in the case of demands for increased salaries to compensate increase of the price level. Or, on the contrary, the tool itself is brought into question, as it has been the case while weighting the consumer goods whose price variations are tracked through price indexes, or while measuring changes in the quality of these goods. As can be seen from these examples, the critique can be "reformist," and lean on "numbers beyond question," or, by contrast, more or less "radical," and recuses the calculations of the tools that are used, or *a fortiori,* by refusing even the recourse to these tools to express class relations. A sociology of the critical uses of statistics must take into account this whole

[5] Source on Pelloutier on the libertarian site: http://cnteducation30.free.fr/historiquefernand.htm.

[6] This role of statistic in an federalist libertarian organization is also presented in 1946 by Pierre Besnard: http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/Besnard_ _Le_federalisme_libertaire.pdf.

[7] The (tragic) transition from statistics made for a capitalist society to another setup in a planified socialist society is finely analyzed, for the case of the Soviet Union o the 1920s and 1930s, by Martine Mespoulet (2001).

palette of recourses or non-recourses to this type of argument, and the play of actors, in context, between recourse and refusal to statistical argument.[8]

For a statistic to play its social role as a neutral reference, above the conflicts of social groups, it must be instituted, guarantied by democratic procedures, themselves legitimate. It then contributes to making reality and not simply reflecting reality. This idea is not relativist, in that it does not deny the existence of inflation or unemployment. But it draws attention to the fact that inflation and unemployment can be thought, expressed, defined and quantified in multiple ways, and that the differences between these ways of doing are not simple technical details, rather always have an historical, political, and sociological meaning. Moments of innovation happen when social actors criticize older forms of quantification, and oppose them new ones, thus prompting doubt and controversy. But the success of such enterprises is not always assured. It depends not only on the accuracy of the critique, but also on the strength of the social networks that either do or do not sustain these.

We will examine five cases were such debates took place: inflation, unemployment, poverty, GDP, and climate. In each of these cases, the act of quantifying, and the way of doing it, was begun then discussed and put into question, by critical movements promoting new ways of thinking social relations. But, if the innovations proposed by these critical movements had for effect to provoke reflection and debate, by undermining the evidence of institutionalized statistical indicators, it has been more rare that these new propositions acquired a visibility comparable to the former. We will nonetheless cite two cases were innovation, bearing very different political significance (if not opposed), had an important impact: the explosion of inequality of income, and the media success of university rankings.

3. The rebounding critiques of price indexes

The consumer price index is one of the statistics for which these controversies were most numerous. Its principle is to follow the evolution over time of a few goods and services, and to take a "weighed average" of these changes. This average can be used to index salaries, or at the very least to provide arguments for workers who want to protect themselves from inflation. Yes, but: how should one choose the consumer goods to track? Consumed by whom? (workers, low-income classes, all salaried workforce, everyone?), how is the mean to be calculated? What weighing system to use? Are the goods selected really identical and comparable over the course of time? All these questions come up during the course of technical and political debates.

First example: until the beginning of the 1950s, the content of the "basket of goods" used was *negociated* by unions and bosses. The former reasoned in terms of *needs*, a list and quantity of minimal goods, indispensable, according to them, for the reproduction of the workforce of

[8] A detailed study of such a conflict situation, where statistic argument is, at the same time, advanced and contested, is provided by Boris Samuel (2012), about the conflict on "pwofitasyon » in Guadeloupe in 2009. See also is article in this special issue.

workers and their family. This index was called *normative,* because it appeared to imply value judgments: should tobacco and alcohol be included? These first debates were left behind as soon as public statisticians were able to produce "surveys on budgets," involving *actual* consumption, either of workers and employees, or of the entire population. This index was descriptive. Nonetheless the question remained: what population? For a long time an index was published only for workers and employees. Beginning in the 1980s, this "class" character to the index disappeared in part, to reappear clearly since the 2000s, when the index was again criticized, and accused of no longer "reflecting reality," especially since the transition to the Euro. At that moment, different indexes depending on socio-professional category were again proposed.

Consensus on the method used for the descriptive index was nevertheless not total, since the *CGT* (the strongest French workers union) would publish a distinct index, at least until inflation ceased to be very strong, that is, until the 1980s. At that moment, the problem of unemployment was the most pressing. Besides, the question of the normative index did not completely disappear, since, around 1990, the law against smoking, which planned stiff price hikes on cigarettes, suggested removing tobacco from the index of prices, in order to avoid inflationary effect. In the face of protests, it was prudently decided to publish two indexes, one *including*, and the other *excluding* tobacco, leaving it to managers and unions to figure out which one to use.

Worker unions raised another criticism as early as the 1970s: that of the "quality effect." One of the drivers of capitalism's competitive dynamic is the creation of new products, rendering or not "new" services, and whose prices are of course different from older products. The latter can, in certain cases, purely and simply disappear. This undermines the principle of the index, which is supposed to follow identical products over time. More deeply, this also poses the problem of "needs." Who decides what is indeed "needed"? The ecological movement, concerned with the survival of the planet, poses these questions in radically new terms, weighing the depletion of resources and greenhouse gas emissions. This new wave of criticism brought about a whole new kind of statistics.

4. Unemployment and poverty: the difficulties of changing the institutionalized sight

Beginning at the end of the 1970s, unemployment became a grave problem. Its quantification had rested, for a long time, on two different sources. A sample survey used the definition of unemployment of the *International Labour Office (OLI),* which bore on three "conditions." An unemployed person is "one who 1) is without work, 2) is taking 'active steps' to find work, and 3) is immediately available to work." Depending on the period, this survey took place yearly, then each trimester. The other source comes from the enrolment numbers in the files of the *National Unemployment Office (NUO)* (*Agence nationale pour l'emploi – ANPE-*, which became *Pôle Emploi* in 2008). This source is monthly. Unemployment statistics are followed closely and anticipated by the political world, social and economic actors, and the press. Even if the "quality" of enrolment data is judged to be poor, its monthly frequency confers it with a decisive advantage. One of the gambits of recurring controversies on unemployment statistics (the details

of which we won't develop here[9]), bears on the ways of articulating these two sources, to benefit from the quality and pertinence of one, and the monthly frequency of the other.

Both sources offer many possibilities of critique because the very notion of unemployment is highly subject to debate, and thus its quantification too (which is not to say that unemployment does not exist). On the "three conditions of the *OLI*": 1) what about very short employment (one hour per week?) ; 2) Is applying to the Unemployment Office considered an "active step"? (this is debated) ; 3) Is a person "available" if they are ill or on internship? (this is also debated). On *NUO* files, at least eight categories of unemployment, total or partial, are listed: which ones to include? (this is debated). In any case, the method used to calculate the "official figure" announced each month on the evening news is fiercely criticized by worker's unions. The relative malleability of the definition of unemployment feeds suspicions, always present, of governmental manipulations.

What is important for our considerations is that, during a particularly fierce controversy in spring 2007, a group of researchers and activists tried to escape from this repetitive debate to propose another way of utilizing these sources. This group lobbied for "other unemployment numbers" (« Autres chiffres du chômage » (ACDC) in French)[10]. It presents itself thus:

"Beyond the current controversies, the search for a 'real unemployment number' is in vain, for there exists a diversity of unemployment situations, of under-employment, and of precariousness, which should be illuminated by a small number of pertinent indicators. With this focus, we present here the first estimate, for the French case, of the number of workers who are unemployed or with inadequate employment, in the sense of the OLI." »[11]

Thus, ACDC rejects the notion of a "real unemployment number," and proposes that another category, wider, be quantified. This idea is bold, but too bold given the state of the debate at the moment when it is proposed. The notion of unemployment is strongly inscribed in social debates since at least the 1930s (Salais *et alii* 1986), in conjunction with the institutionalization of salaried work, during the course of the 20th century. What ACDC demands comes down to taking into account the deinstitutionalization of salaried labor, accelerating since the 1980s, and to measure its consequences by proposing a new statistical indicator. But to succeed at this ambitious enterprise, ACDC has to have a much more significant network of scientific, political, administrative allies. The leap they proposed is of a different nature altogether to the ritual denunciation of vulgar manipulations in which politicians engage.

The quantification of poverty has brought up the same kind of debate and alternative propositions. Classically, in European countries, the rate of poverty said "relative" is evaluated based

[9] A clear and accessible synthesis is provided by a note from the *Centre national de documentation pédagogique* (CNDP): http://www.cndp.fr/entrepot/themadoc/formation-et-emploi/reperes/mesures-du-chomage.html.

[10] The activity of the ACDC group is well described in a note by Juliette Raynal, of the *l'Institut pour le développement de l'information économique et sociale (IDIES):* http://www.idies.org/index.php?post/Le-collectif-ACDC-decortique-a-nouveau-les-chiffres-du-chomage.

[11] ACDC site: http://acdc2007.free.fr/.

on the part of households whose revenue is inferior to half the median of the distribution of incomes. In many other countries, the rate of poverty said "absolute," is fixed based on a threshold for monetary income (for example, one dollar per day). Without returning to debates on the very different meaning of these two measures, numerous critics observe that these rates of poverty are quite poor to express the complexity of the phenomena of poverty. These questions were debated in the framework of the *Statistical Information National Council* (SINC – in French: *Conseil national de l'information statistique)*, a joint advisory body where the research programs of public statistical services are presented and discussed.

Between 2004 and 2007, several reflections were lead at SINC, at the demand of activists, including some who participate in an "alert network against inequalities" (« Réseau d'alerte contre les inégalités » (RAI) in French) (Sujobert 2012). This group had proposed in 2002 an annual indicator, an "indicator of inequalities and of poverty" [12], itself a synthesis of fifty-eight statistical series, concerning six dimensions of inequality and poverty: work, revenue, housing, education, health and justice. This indicator suffered the same fate as the propositions of the ACDC, for analogous reasons. In spite of the important work first to construct, then to make them known, the politicians and the major public media did not make much use of these, and its publication seems to have ended since 2005.

Nonetheless, these two half-failures are also half-successes. They have provoked numerous instructive discussions. Born from demanding volunteer work, they ran out of steam because no academic or administrative institution took over. These experiences show, *a contrario*, the extent to which public statistics constitute reality, and, on these terms, they can be compared to a Constitution. They are the product of society reckoning with itself, and embody the state of social relations at a certain time. This does not mean that these statistics are purely and simply the expression of dominant groups (as was said in the past). Rather, they formalize a historical configuration of these relations, by reducing, simplifying, and stylizing these through long and complicated mediations, according to forms which are very difficult to undo and to alter. This was demonstrated by the project of ACDC and BIP40, and also, as we will see, by ecological criticisms of the gross national product (GDP) which proposes alternative ways to quantify the economic, social, and environmental state of society, by constructing "other indicators of wealth."

5. Alternative propositions: attempts and successes

What are the conditions for success of a statistical innovation? It does not suffice that it be technically innovative. It must, on the one hand, correspond to new ways of thinking and organizing social relations, that, in return, it contributes to making exist. On the other hand, a network of innovators must find enough allies to diffuse it. The first reading is macro-historical. The second is more micro-sociological. But the two do not exclude each other. We can examine four

[12] BIP40: http://www.bip40.org.

highly contrasted examples, with very different social and political reach: the diffusion of national accounts in France in the years 1950 to 1960, attempts to criticize the GDP in the years 2000, the measure of the relative evolution of the 1% of wealthiest households, and the so-called "Shangai" ranking of universities.

The PIB was invented in the 1950 as part of a large and complex construction, that of the equilibrium of national accounts. The latter attempted to implement Keynesian macroeconomic policies. The history of this creation is well documented by three complementary tales, which present, as school-book cases, the two dimensions, macro-historical and micro-sociological. Francois Fourquet (1980) writes a kind of historical novel of the project for post-war modernization, centered on interviews with its main protagonists. Aude Terray (2002) describes the institutional context of this innovation. André Vanoli (2002), one of the main actors, analyzes in a detailed way its genesis and technical content. Its founder, Claude Gruson, directed the *INSEE* from 1961 to 1967. National accounting became, beginning in the 1960s, the organizing framework for the greater part of the French system of public statistics.

This success was due to the fact that public accounts were in agreement with the way of managing the economy at that time. It was conceived at the moment when the Marshall Plan had contributed to the reconstruction of France after the war. It provided the *ad hoc* language, on the one hand, for the incentive planification imagined by Jean Monnet, and on the other, to pilot macroeconomic equilibria thought in Keynesian terms. The three books cited present complementary facets of this success story, notably the small network of personalities who, around Jean Monnet, Pierre Massé, Claude Gruson and Andre Vanoli, were at its origin.

The initial relative harmony entered a period of crisis beginning in 1975. At that moment, growth slowed, inflation and unemployment grew simultaneously, which was not expected in the earlier models. Keynesian theory was disqualified by the new theory of so-called "rational expectations." This one affirmed notably that any effort to alter the course of macroeconomic equilibria by public action was doomed to failure, insofar as micro-economic actors would anticipate the effects, and would make decisions tending to cancel these. This theoretical innovation contributed to the major turn towards neo-liberal policies, which win the day beginning in the 1980s (Jobert *et alii* 1994). At that moment, national accounting tools were losing their old luster, but yet gaining a new role, because, beginning in the 1980s, the GDP was used first to fix the level of national contributions to the budget of the European Union, and especially as basis to calculate ratios set by the "criteria of the Treaty of Maastricht" of 1992. This profoundly changed the nature of this aggregate, which thus ceased to be a piece in a complex ensemble constructed around the "Keynesian equation" of global macroeconomic equilibria.

Then, in the 2000s, the GDP changed status again. Within the framework of debates, initiated notably by the ecological critique, on the dangers of productivism, on the necessity of transition to renewable energies, and on global warming, it became an "indicator of wealth". But it became isolated from its original context, the general account chart, coherent and balanced. From then on, the GDP was supposed to express the social and environmental health of a nation. Criticism of it was linked to this new status and to this new role (Cassiers et Thiry 2009). In the conclusion of their book on "the new indicators of wealth," Jean Gadrey and Florence Jany-catrice

(2005) explicitly draw the parallel between the current period and that of the 1950s, which saw the success of Gruson's national accounting. They call for an equally significant renewal of the economic information system, which would be lead by a vast ecological project, of comparable scope to the modernizing projects of post-war planners. This comparison is interesting, because it brings up the question of the network of alliances of all kinds that could make possible this project. Even if we judge it very pertinent, the comparison suggests this possible project is still far from provoking the same unanimity as the one of the 1950s (notably because of the 2008 crisis). This terse parallel between very different times shows that the success of the social critique expressed in the language of statistics cannot rely simply on the justness of the arguments, but depends largely on the political and social network in which it is inscribed.

On the contrary, we can consider the case of two innovations, very different in nature and in their political reach, which nonetheless had an important impact in the 2000s. One is the ultra rapid diffusion of references to the "ranking of universities," based on that of the University of Shangai in 2003. This spread of management based on *benchmarking*, which is to say, a permanent competition based on quantified indicators, profoundly transformed university practices, by unifying these around a single objective: climbing upwards in the Shangai rankings (Espeland et Sauder 2007; Bruno 2008). A sociological analysis of this rapid transformation would have two facets. One, micro-sociological, would follow the trajectory of the innovation, beginning in China, its actors, its vectors, its retranslations from one continent to another. The other, more macro-sociological, would analyze how this innovation was coherent with the neoliberal turn symbolized by the "Washington consensus," founded on free exchange and competition generalized to global scale.

The other innovation with spectacular success can be seen as the dark side of neoliberal globalization, that is, the explosion of inequalities, with the vertiginous enrichment of the already richest of the dominant classes. At about the same time, the idea of Thomas Piketty and of certain American researchers was simple and original. Instead of describing the distribution of revenues, as it was done in the past, based on deciles (10% increments), they "zoomed" into the richest centile (1%), and even thousand (1 for 1000) and ten-thousand (1 for 10,000) [Landais 2007]. They thus render visible the fact that a very small part of the population, participants of the famed globalized trading, have monopolized all the profits, thus separating themselves completely from the rest of the world. This was translated by the slogan of the "revolted" of the *Occupy Wall Street* movement: "We are the 99%" (Contretemps 2012). In a micro-sociological perspective, we can reconstruct the trajectory leading from the work of Piketty to the slogan in New York[13]. The success of this apparently simple innovation is representative of the increasingly explosive tensions engendered by globalization.

[13] Thanks to Cécile Brousse for having reconstructed the lineage going from university research to the political realm.

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AUTHOR INFORMATIONS:

Alain Desrosières (1940-2013), was administrator of the INSEE and a member of the department of research of that institute. He was at the Center of Work for Developping the New Nomenclature of Socioprofessional Categories in the 1980s and was associated with the Groupe de sociologie politique et morale (EHESS). He is the author of *The Politics of Large Numbers*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2002.