

BOOK REVIEW

# Adolphe Quetelet

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Donnelly, Kevin (2015) *Adolphe Quetelet, Social Physics and the Average Men of Science, 1796–1874*. University of Pittsburgh Press

219 pp.

ISBN: 978-1-84893-568-6

Price: \$45

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Adolphe Quetelet's career (1796–1874) can at least be called impressive. His extensive work, ranging from poetry and opera librettos to scientific publications on astronomy, mathematics, “social physics,” and even the history of science, shows a creative and well-read man with great interest in the arts, the sciences and society. Quetelet's BMI index is still used in medicine and his “average man”, characterised by the mean values of measured variables that follow a normal distribution, is commonly known by historians of science and sociologists. If we also consider his accomplishments as a builder of institutions and networks, and his role in the creation of various scientific platforms, we can confidently state that Quetelet was not only intellectually versatile, but also a doer, and one endowed with an exceptional dose of energy. Although many aspects of Quetelet's project on social physics are recognizable in the present-day practice of many social scientists, his social-theoretical work still struggles to be admitted to the canon of classical sociology. For all these reasons, a contribution on Quetelet's work and thinking is more than welcome.

With *Adolphe Quetelet, Social Physics and the Average Men of Science, 1796–1874*, Kevin Donnelly wants to do justice to the many achievements of Quetelet. Contrary to what the title might suggest, Donnelly's focus is not so much on Quetelet's social physics, but rather on his approach to science.

After an introduction to the layered approach adopted in the book, the first chapter opens with a description of the intellectual context in which the young Quetelet grew up in Ghent. According to Donnelly, this context was determined by what he calls “the war between the arts and sciences” (p. 22). He also outlines how eclectic movements took shape as a way of sorting out the conflicting interests between these two competing philosophical systems at the time.

The second chapter moves from the broader intellectual context to Quetelet and his close network of friends in Ghent. It presents an overview of Quetelet's poetry and opera librettos. Donnelly explains Quetelet's choice of a career in mathematics instead of literature as a consequence of the aforementioned “war.” According to the author, giving up the arts was a necessary condition for Quetelet to become “one of the most successful nineteenth-century men of science” (p. 63).

Chapter Three looks at Quetelet's career in Brussels and shows how Quetelet excelled in the sciences in the aftermath of the “war between the arts and sciences.” It outlines Quetelet's efforts to popularise astronomy. The chapter further highlights Quetelet's role in the professionalisation of the *Académie*

*royale des Sciences et Belles-Lettres* and his successful networking activities in support of the creation of the *Observatoire royal de Bruxelles*. According to Donnelly, Quetelet's experiences in these institutions were crucial to the creation of his social physics.

Chapter Four focuses on Quetelet's role as an international networker. It describes how his travels to France and Germany, set up primarily to collect information on astronomical instruments for the Observatory in Brussels, enabled him to establish international collaborations between scientists and administrators. The chapter also addresses the role of these many "rare men" of science with whom Quetelet met to discuss his social theory. In addition, Donnelly addresses Quetelet's important contributions to the creation of the continental journal, *Correspondance mathématique et physique*.

Chapter Five focuses on the origins of Quetelet's *homme moyen* and *physique sociale* between 1827 and 1835. According to Donnelly, social physics would not have been possible without the cultural context of the "war" and the impending challenges faced by Belgium and the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. Donnelly beautifully illustrates how Quetelet designed his science according to his own specific strengths: the creation of large networks of data collectors. And here we come to Donnelly's central proposition: the development of these "average men" (i.e. the numerous observers and data collectors) demanded by the "new science of man" is a legacy of Quetelet that is at least as important as the average man we know from Quetelet's social physics.

The last chapter closes with a discussion about why Quetelet's social physics has often been perceived as deterministic "Queteletismus." According to Donnelly, instead of a theory designed to be judged against Durkheim's autonomous society or a "failed path to evolution," the only consistent way to understand Quetelet's work is as a methodological project for individuals to serve governments and scientific institutions. Donnelly concludes by stating (p. 165) that as long as the average man of science endures – which is, according to the author, still clearly the case today – the social physics of Adolphe Quetelet will remain.

The major strength of the book lies in Donnelly's specific focus on Quetelet's scientific approach and practice, based on large-scale data collection and international cooperation (p. 163). Particularly interesting is the way in which Donnelly shows how international collaborations enabled Quetelet to exchange a wide range of social data that would form the basis of his social theory. Donnelly indeed nicely shows how Quetelet was able to "actualise" ideas that were circulating throughout Europe. Therefore, Donnelly's proposition that Quetelet's approach to science was as valuable to his career as his writings on social physics seems an interesting and convincing point of departure.

However, I found less convincing Donnelly's claim that "in order to make progress in social physics, both the sciences of man and the men of science needed to strive to be average" (p. 2). It is very welcome that Donnelly values the importance of the trained "army" of civil servants-scientists, necessary to carry out the different data collection projects coordinated by Quetelet. However, although the book opts for a focus on Quetelet's scientific practice rather than on his social physics (p. 4), a more in-depth exploration of Quetelet's social physics might challenge the author's claim (pp. 4-5) that the new science-worker "was expected to be standardized, interchangeable and to exhibit none of the extremes of genius or eccentricity." For example, in *A treatise on man and the development of his faculties* (1842, origin. 1835), Quetelet repeatedly points to the special role of "men of genius," including Lavater, Gall, Newton, and Rubens, or types of "several eminent qualities" in both the arts and the sciences (e.g., p. 97, p. 101). Or as Quetelet (pp. 100-101) puts it: "...the great man, in his individuality, is the best representative of the degree of development to which human nature has attained in his times, and his works show the extent in which he himself has aided that development."

Also in his *Letters addressed to H.R.H. the Grand Duke of Saxe Coburg and Gotha* (1849, origin. 1846), Quetelet frequently stresses the need for the “observing genius” (p. 130; also see pp. 230-232). Quetelet’s writings, permeated with such statements, indeed challenge Donnelly’s central claim that, according to Quetelet, “individual genius was no longer necessary in the sciences” (p. 84).

Moreover, Quetelet’s close collaborators, who directly contributed to his project of social physics, were in fact all renowned scientists, such as Louis-René Villermé, Thomas Malthus and Charles Babbage, whom Quetelet certainly did not consider “average.” Although Donnelly’s notion of the increasing incompatibility between the arts and sciences in the nineteenth century is compelling, it seems difficult to reconcile this argument with Quetelet’s repeated emphasis on the confluence of the arts and sciences (pp. V-VI, pp. 97-98). Or, to cite Quetelet (p. 5): “It would be an error, doubtless, to suppose that science makes the artist; yet it lends to him the most powerful assistance.” Therefore, with Quetelet’s social physics in mind, it is difficult to follow Donnelly’s reconstruction of Quetelet’s trajectory through the “war between the arts and sciences.”

Although the book explicitly states that it does not intend to provide a biography of Quetelet (p. 4), it is remarkable that Quetelet has undergone three changes of power during his lifetime. While Donnelly describes how Quetelet cleverly anticipated the needs of the respective rulers, Donnelly also projects, on many occasions, the existence of Belgium back in time. Though Belgium was only established in 1830, Donnelly writes about Belgium in the sixteenth century, the Enlightenment, the end and beginning of the nineteenth century, and more (p. 1, p. 65, p. 66, p. 79, p. 86, p. 97). In this way, Donnelly at times tends to participate in Quetelet’s project aimed at restoring the position of Belgium among the great scientific nations of Europe (p. 1). This is not only an anachronistic interpretation, but also a missed opportunity to delve deeper into the question of how the development of Quetelet’s network of correspondents – one of the most vital pre-conditions for the development of his social physics – can be understood against the rapidly changing political landscape in which he lived and worked. It would furthermore have been interesting if Donnelly had connected Quetelet’s interest in large-scale data collection and the conception of his ‘average man’ with global processes of democratisation in the nineteenth century Western world.

Although Donnelly rightfully highlights the importance of Quetelet’s accomplishments, he himself sometimes falls into superlatives when referring to Quetelet, thereby running the risk of losing critical perspective. While Donnelly interestingly remarks that Quetelet’s skills in working with governments are perhaps the primary scientific qualification of the day in continental Europe (p. 86), he does not take up a critical stance towards the different typologies developed by Quetelet and the normative underpinnings of the concepts and classifications at use (think, for instance, about the use of racial typologies, and where is the average woman?). Also, at times, it seems as if Donnelly retrospectively attributes intentions to Quetelet, although persuasive arguments are lacking. This is shown in statements such as, “When Quetelet took over as the sole editor [of the *Correspondance*] in 1827, his intentions became clear” (p. 99), or “Anticipating the later centrality of Brussels to European bureaucracy by over a century, Quetelet successfully brought the first International Maritime Conference to Brussels in 1853...” (p. 162).

Donnelly wants to highlight Quetelet’s structural contribution to the formation of the “average men” at the service of government and scientific institutions. Subsequently, he argues that the practitioners of *physique sociale*, the real average men, self-sacrificing their will, was an essential prerequisite for the realisation of this project (p. 158). However, Donnelly does not touch on the fact that participation in censuses in several countries was constitutionally embedded and enforced. Processes of normalisation, standardisation, and the disciplining power associated with the introduction of no-



tions such as the “average man” are not addressed. A somewhat critical approach would have been welcome at these points.

Apart from these observations, this book, with its exceptional focus on Quetelet’s *praxis* of science, makes a unique contribution to the history of the social sciences. Moreover, it beautifully illuminates the undervalued but intellectually wide-ranging oeuvre of the artist, scientist, and administrator, Adolphe Quetelet.