



Partecipazione e Conflitto
 * *The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies*
<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>
 ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)
 ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)
PACO, Issue 7(2) 2014: 406-408
 DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v7i2p406

Published in July 15, 2014

Work licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non commercial-Share alike 3.0
 Italian License

BOOK REVIEWS

Isabelle Bruno and Emmanuel Didier, *Benchmarking: l'Etat sous pression statistique*, Paris, La Découverte, coll. Zones, 216 p., 2013. (*Bechmarking: State Bureaucracy Under Statistical Pressure*)

Bruno and Didier's *Benchmarking* (BM) deals with the history of this technique and of its penetration in French public services. Bruno is a political scientist, while Didier a sociologist and historian. The book results from a research project conducted by the two authors, together with several post-doctoral researchers.

The ambition of the book is three-fold. It is, first, to expose the networks of people, organizations and instruments, spanning the public and the private world, through which this three-fold approach of quantification, comparison and improvement of activities has expanded. Second, it is to show how it affects the functioning of public services organizations and the work of its agents in adverse, if not pathological ways. Third, it exposes the politics inherent in benchmarking techniques, outlining a repertoire of action for public service agents to mobilize against these.

The first part of the book defines benchmarking, and illustrates its rather pervasive presence in public discourse (variously quoting from a well-known French novel writer, the former head of the national French business organization or Jacques Santer, former President of the European Commission), and offers several vignettes of its current deployment in French public services. It gives a sense of the hype around BM, and of the thick promissory discourse that management gurus, journalists, consultants maintain through a constant flow of books, awards, business case studies or public success stories of BM application. The second part of the book is a history of the codification and circulation of the approach, between the US and Japan, or firms and governments. The third part contains the results of ethnographic observations in police forces, hospitals and universities in France, where the approach was most recently deployed. The conclusion of the book is entitled « Stactivism » (a neological contraction of activism and

statistics), and calls upon agents of public services to quantify the damages of the quantification of work.

The book, overall, nicely combines genealogical study of BM, ethnographic work and critical sociology. By its structure and by the writing style adopted, the authors manage to embark the reader into an investigative journey. Though critical, or even sarcastic at times (pointing the spiraling dynamics of benchmarking, whereby benchmarkers, e.g. research assessment agencies, benchmark themselves and push agents of public services to self-benchmark), the book is not a pamphlet. It contains a range of robust research results, with relevance for several ongoing conversations in social sciences around, for instance, quantification as a tool of government, bureaucratization of the world, impoverishing of knowledge and competences of organizations submitted to regimes of quantitative evaluation, or the transnational circulation of instruments of governance and management.

What, then, are the results? Reading the book, one learns, first, how to tell benchmarking when one sees it. This is achieved without essentializing BM. The authors delimit instead the “constellation” of tools (e.g. rankings) that are typically used in these contexts where people say they benchmark. The family resemblance between BM and parallel managerial doctrines like total quality management, reengineering, New Public Management thus becomes more explicit... It also gets clear that all of these doctrines, tools and practices progress simultaneously, through converging acts of codification of these approaches in various places across the world.

The second part of the book shows that the dissemination of BM owes much to the repeated attempts to experiment, codify and promote the approach across a wide range of organizations and sectors. This is what the so-called “fathers” of BM (Camp, Deming) did, inside and outside Xerox, but also consultants, journalists, think tanks, industry lobby groups, but also international organizations like the OECD. All of them have in common to have used BM and its codification as a vessel to penetrate such sectors as the provision of health services or higher education, in which they originally had no presence. Investigating the work of these carriers of BM, one understands that managerial apparatuses of this sort disseminate faster if and when their application and mastering become a criterion of professional competence and legitimacy. The executives in Xerox, active proponents of BM, have massively used this strategy of diffusion of BM through education and training. The action of Kearns, former CEO of Xerox, subsequently US vice-President for Education under Bush father, or of Camp, testifies it.

By philosophy BM is not a top-down form of organizational control. Instead, it is supposed to materialize by organization-wide processes of measurement and reporting, embracing the activities of all members of the organization at all echelons. Still, the deployment of BM enacts a form of domination. The ethnographic parts of the book illustrate it with great clarity. The study of police forces specifically shows that the less legitimate parts of the organization (street-level police agents as opposed to crime investigative officers for instance) are at first attracted to BM, since it can help them giving publicity and proving the value of their service. At the same time, they soon fall victim to the definition of indicators for their activities, which is controlled by higher levels and leaders of the organization – who manage to avert the extension of BM to their activity. The only defense left for agents against BM is to distort the definition of their ac-

tivities so that they can be classified under the indicators that they want to see increasing or decreasing. These tactics are not sufficient though, and the authors establish a plausible link between the spread of BM in police forces and the increasing rates of psychological disorders and suicide among police forces.

Given the extension of the BM networks, the authors have by necessity bounded their investigations. The first boundary is geographical: the fields investigated in the ethnography are all in France. The second boundary was drawn by concentrating on one version of BM: the most competitive and control-oriented one, as opposed to the more collaborative variant, only briefly presented. A third boundary of their work comes from the focus on BM in public services only. This focus can easily be justified: public organizations have characteristics (the weight of professional ethics, multiplicity and irreducibility of aims and objectives...) that make the application of BM to them specifically controversial. The research design emerging from the three methodological choices cannot adequately test, or even seems to imply, the uniqueness of French public services, by opposition to public services in other countries, or to firms. Is it so? Being silent on this, the book does not provide the reader with a key to interpret, or break with, the common discourse according to which French public services would be reluctant and inadapted to managerial modernization.

At times, the authors seem to prefer well-rounded critical claims over analytical nuances (possibly an effect of the series in which it is published). Some word space could have perhaps been spared to deal with issues the authors only hint at. What would a more exhaustive ethnography of the circulation of the approach look like, for instance? The generified nature of the approach explains its dissemination. But what are the attributes of people like Kearns, Camp or Deming and of their action, that explain their capacity to weave together heterogeneous networks, and open new paths for the expansion of BM? More could have been said also about the politics of BM, specifically how it is picked up as a policy instrument by political parties and governments that are in power. The book is also much too curt on the so-called "new elites" of BM.

The net benefit for the reader is incontestable though. At the end of the day, a rather disturbing impression stems from the book: that of BM being an unfalsifiable tool. The approach clearly does not live up to its promises, and its untoward effects are many (see for instance, the proliferation of indicators and the very impossibility of interpreting activity; the plausible link between the application of BM and the decrease in service quality). Criticism of it accumulates, not only locally. However, none of this seems to be able to stop the extension of the networks of BM. Upon finishing the book then, one may then wonder what are the limits of BM? Is staccativeness really its sole frontier?

(David Demortain, *Chargé de recherche INRA-SenS et IFRIS*
Research associate, CARR, London School of Economics)