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EDITORIAL

STATACTIVISM
Forms of action between disclosure and affirmation

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ABSTRACT: This article introduces the special issue on statactivism, a particular form of action within the repertoire used by contemporary social movements: the mobilization of statistics. Traditionally, statistics has been used by the worker movement within the class conflicts. But in the current configuration of state restructuring, new accumulation regimes, and changes in work organization in capitalists societies, the activist use of statistics is moving. This first article seeks to show the use of statistics and quantification in contentious performances connected with state restructuring, main transformations of the varieties of capitalisms, and changes in work organization regimes. The double role of statistics in representing as well as criticizing reality is considered. After showing how important statistical tools are in producing a shared reading of reality, we will discuss the two main dimensions of statactivism – disclosure and affirmation. In other words, we will see the role of stat-activists in denouncing a certain state of reality, and then the efforts to use statistics in creating equivalency among disparate conditions and in cementing emerging social categories. Finally, we present the main contributions of the various research papers in this special issue regarding the use of statistics as a form of action within a larger repertoire of contentious action. Six empirical papers focus on statactivism against the penal machinery in the early 1970s (Grégory Salle), on the mobilisation on the price index in Guadalupe in 2009 (Boris Samuel), and in Argentina in 2007 (Celia Lury and Ana Gross), on the mobilisations of experts to consolidate a link between working conditions and

health issues (Marion Gilles), on the production of activity data for disability policy in France (Pierre-Yves Baudot), and on the use of statistics in social mobilizations for gender equality (Eugenia De Rosa). Alain Desrosières wrote the last paper, coping with mobilizations proposing innovations in the way of measuring inflation, unemployment, poverty, GDP, and climate change. This special issue is dedicated to him, in order to honor his everlasting intellectual legacy.

KEYWORDS: Activism, Repertoire of action, Protest, Social movements, Statistics

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In Alain Desrosières' memory

1. Statistics at Stake

> "To be sure, the principle of specialization is sound and surely makes it legitimate for some scholars to do research that does not depend on statistical series. There are a thousand and one ways to do social science, and accumulating data is not always indispensable or even (I concede) especially imaginative. Yet it seems to me that all social scientists, all journalists and commentators, all activists in the unions and in politics of whatever stripe, and especially all citizens should take a serious interest in money, its measurement, the facts surrounding it, and its history. Those who have a lot of it never fail to defend their interests. Refusing to deal with numbers rarely serves the interests of the least well-off."
>
> Thomas Piketty (2014, 577)

Nowadays statistics are often contested. Certain movements denounce them, accusing quantification of freezing human relations; of conveying a cold image of society; of constantly evaluating human beings, citizens, workers.

Yet there are also forms of emerging collective action that use numbers, measurements and indicators as means of denunciation and criticism. In certain cases, activists use statistics as a tool for struggle and as a means of emancipation.

Sometimes statistics are simply employed for local resistance, used by actors who are supposed to be "accountable" but present the results of their action manipulating data to their own advantage. In other cases, groups mobilize to oppose specific indicators, or to more generally resist the whole logic of benchmarking and continuous assessment. Statactivism is a portmanteau word coined by Bruno and Didier (2013). Formed by contraction of *statistics* and *activism*, it may perhaps be understood as a slogan to be brandished in battle, but it is also a term to be employed in describing those experiments aimed at reappropriating statistics' power of denunciation and emancipation (Bruno, Didier and Prévieux 2014).

Some of these mobilizations are led by lay persons or experts, others by NGOs, even by local administrative bodies and municipalities in reaction to evaluative criteria that they perceive as discriminating against them. In other cases, statactivism is not against indicators but rather consists in quantifying original data to make an issue visible and relevant – workers whose jobs are precarious point out their real numbers to defend their rights, pro-migrant activists estimate the cost of deportation policy to show that it is too expensive, the Blacks use statistics to shed light on the discrimination they are subjected to (Tin 2014), and so on and so forth[1]. On the whole, the use of statistics is part of the repertoire of contention and a major resource for contemporary mobilizations.

In this article we seek to show the use of statistics and quantification in contentious performances connected with state restructuring, main transformations of the varieties of capitalism, and changes in work organization regimes. In the second section we will consider the double role of statistics in representing as well as criticizing reality. We will show just how important statistical tools are in producing a shared reading of reality. In the third and fourth sections we will examine the two main dimensions of statactivism – disclosure and affirmation. In other words, we will see the role of statactivists in denouncing a certain state of reality, and then the efforts to use statistics in creating equivalency among disparate conditions and in cementing emerging social categories. The fifth section is devoted to the issue of cross-fertilization between these two main logics of disclosure and affirmation. And the last section will discuss the main contributions of the various research papers in this special issue regarding the use of statistics as a form of action within a larger repertoire of contentious action.

2. Statactivism, Collective Action, and Criticisms of Reality

Statistics is about representing reality – a synthetic representation of reality – and statactivism is about challenging the representations of reality. Many different practices could be assembled under this label, but all of them finally have to do with criticism. Why do people mobilize around a certain representation of reality? We could also state that today there is hardly a better example of authority capable of disarming any and all criticism than a number or nexus of numbers (Didier and Tasset 2013). Quantification often plays a leading role in producing that "authority of facts" which has been at the heart of those difficulties encountered by the Frankfurt School in its attempt to construct a theory of emancipation (Genel 2013).

To the contrary, one of the ways for critical thought to confront the authority of facts can be found in the distinction drawn by Luc Boltanski (2011) between "the reality" which "tends to merge with that which appears in a way to occur by its sole force, namely through order" and

[1] Just as an example, in France the reports on the *Défense des étrangers retenus* (DER) de la Cimade (http://www.lacimade.org).

"the world" as "whatever happens," the totality "of events or experiences whose possibility had not been inserted in reality's design" (*ibid*., 93-94). The former is organized on the basis of "formats determined under constraint of an institutional power" that tends to "board and search the world in its entirety" (*ibid*., 140) whereas the latter, "immersed in *life's flux*," consists of experiences not easily "attaining the level of language" (*ibid*., 94).

This opposition seems to us invaluable not only in understanding the impact of domination but the critical power of statistics. As the word's etymology reminds us, statistics have long been associated with power and in particular state power (Bourdieu 2012) but neither have remained unchanged. The active instrumentation of statistics by the neo-liberal state is unique (Desrosières 2008, 56). Its basic core consists of constant comparative and quantitative evaluation of the activity of agents, thus placed in competition with each other by means of a technology that one might call "benchmarking" (Bruno and Didier 2013). Evaluations are so systematic these days that they tend to be conflated with the action itself: "Once the quantification procedures are codified and routinized, their products are reified. They tend to become "reality" through an irreversible ratchet-effect" (Desrosières 2008, 12). We are thus required to attain objective figures and to indefinitely intensify our performances in that sphere defined by the indicator. This mode of government reached its apex in the United Kingdom under the New Labour governments (Le Galès and Scott 2010; Faucher and Le Galès 2011). The practices induced by benchmarking are a constant and poor reproduction of the same behaviours, to the detriment of variations, experimentations, accidents and the unforeseen. The insertion of actors in the increasingly dense networks of quantification would thus appear as one of the major instruments in reducing the practical possibilities on offer. Not to forget the power issues at stake and the political effects produced by allegedly neutral practice of comparative assessment, as in the case of intergovernmental benchmarking in the European Union (Bruno 2009).

With the development of benchmarking, statistics have become the object of criticism and have been ultimately rejected on principle. The first losers of these neo-liberal methods of evaluation were professionals, such as medical doctors, academics, police commanders, etc. They immediately felt the harmful effects of these techniques and denounced them in the name of their autonomy and of an impenetrability of their "prudential practices" (Champy 2009) with regard to quantification (Gori et al. 2009). However, others, in France, have generalized this denunciation to include all quantification of whatever sort, requisitioning notably those arguments derived from different strains of Lacanian psychoanalysis (ECF 2008; Milner 2011) or from the Marcel Mauss gift-paradigm (Caillé 2012). So much so that other kind of statistics, which have only a very distant connection to benchmarking and which until then enjoyed a rather progressive image, came in for criticism.

Emblematic is the case of a young, militant statistician of the recently formed Comité de Défense de la Statistique Publique. Participating in a demonstration of the trade unions against government policy, she solicited support among the demonstrators through a petition. Then she was surprised to hear: "Your statistics only serve to monitor us, to police us, to aggravate our working conditions!" (Desrosières 2014a, 34)

But if today one would fain reproach statistics for their complicity with power and legal sanctions, the history of their ties to social reform and emancipation is also a long and rich one. In the past, statistics have also shown that another reality was possible or they have rendered other possibilities real. So those who reject them altogether in crying "No to quanto-phrenia! No to numbers! No to quantities! Yes to qualities!" – such individuals would allow a monopoly of these instruments to the powerful. This is why in our judgement it is urgent to recognise how much social movements use statistics and quantification as part of their repertoire of actions, both criticizing certain statistics as well as using other ones as powerful instruments in political fights.

Statactivism is to be understood in both an enlarging and a restricting sense. First of all, it designates those statistical practices that are utilized for critiquing and freeing from whatever authority. These statistical practices have existed for a long time (Desrosières 2002; Boltanski 2014). Desrosières (2008) identified five forms of state that have resorted to specific statistical tools. For instance the Keynesian state has recourse to national accounting so as to monitor the economical flows useful for demand-side policies, whereas the neo-liberal state mobilizes performance indicators and quantitative targets for evaluating the efficiency of its services. There is always a match between the form of public action and the statistical tool. But this match also holds for the critical tools even when they are quantitative. Each form of authority has its forms of opposition. It is within this framework that today statactivism takes on a particular meaning by designating specific methods fitted to the neo-liberal government.

So as to cope with that governmentality which infiltrates a plethora of traditionally compartmentalized worlds, today social, academic, and artistic critiques converge in statactivism.

The history of the link between statistics and social liberation is a long one. An interesting example of this is offered by the book *The Inheritors* (1979) by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron. It shows how school did not remedy the cultural inequalities among the pupils but had in fact effectuated the exact reverse by recognizing and validating the cultural capital of those who had received it from their families. This was demonstrated through use of variables correlated with one another, in particular the father's socio-professional category with different measurements of student life and scholastic success, thus showing that the children of parents who are members of those social categories already possessing important cultural capital are those who succeed in entering upon the educational pathways regarded as the most prestigious[2]. This book showed what everyone already more or less knew based on their own personal experience. But it added up those individual experiences and objectified them statistically, thus allowing a person to understand that his individual case was less the result of his academic powers than of a system of domination that had imposed itself. The effect was not only a relief

[2] For a contemporary analysis of the persistency and reproduction of educational inequalities, see Barone (2006) and Barone and van de Werfhorst (2011).

from feelings of guilt: it was also the creation of equivalence between singular situations and lending support to shared identities and collective action[3].

Of interest here is that the nomenclatures used were of an official nature; that is to say, they were based on a reality reinforced by state institutions. A product of the "system" itself, it showed its internal contradictions – the public service of national education pretending to palliate injustice and invoking the ethos of teachers dispensing knowledge in the general interest but then in fact only reinstituting and perpetuating the injustice.

Such is the analysis presented in a recent paper by Luc Boltanski (Boltanski 2014). He concludes that statistical criticism does not permit of capturing what he calls the *existential* critique. This form of radical critique, which is most often that of the artist, consists in drawing from the world those elements that have not been institutionalized in one fashion or another. *The Inheritors* did not encourage people to question the existence of school itself. In line with the Marxist-inspired dichotomy of opposing reformism to the revolutionary radicalism that had been going around, one could say that the book was proposing a *reformist* critique constructed from categories of institutional reality. He critiqued the institution in the intervening period, and all that remained him was to publish his book to resounding success. According to Boltanski, this work "played no insignificant role in changing the collective mood that preceded May 1968." (Boltanski 2014, 40)

The drawn-out controversy over the price index in France, presented by Alain Desrosières (2014b) in this special issue, is another historical example of the critical import of statistics. It exhibits the progression of alternative price indexes from the 1970s to the 1990s. Throughout this period the largest French Union, Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), published the results of an index that they themselves constructed, different from that of the French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE). It argued that the INSEE index was based on hypotheses that were too in line with the mode of consumption of the middle classes, which was very different from that of the lower class.

The CGT index enjoyed initial success and was used – alongside that of INSEE – during salary negotiations. Sometimes the media even covered its fluctuations (Piriou 1992, 82). However, as of the late 1980s it was used less and less, until the CGT finally decided to completely cease its calculations in the 1990s. How could this index be initially more than acceptable but then have people gradually lose interest until it finally disappeared completely? Desrosières advanced a sociological explanation. He thought that statistical arguments encounter conditions of reception that are more or less favourable to them and which can change over the course of time. Certain of these conditions are macro-sociological and include ways of conceiving and organizing social relations; others are more micro-sociological and rely on networks of actors mobilized for implementing these alternative statistics.

[3] On statistics and the power of building equivalence, see Boltanski (1987); Desrosières and Thévenot (2002); Boltanski and Thévenot (2005); on the relevance of equivalence for collective identity and social movements formation, see also Tosi and Vitale (2009) and Jacquot and Vitale (2014).

In any event the fact is that the developers of these indexes agreed on the methodological apparatus permitting their calculation and on their institutional usage. If the CGT modified the products taken into account in the consumer's "basket," it nevertheless adopted the architecture of economic concepts that make such an index pertinent. It is in this sense that the critique was again of a reformist nature – and not radical.

In the same year that the CGT launched its index, the German artist Hans Haacke had an exhibition at the John Weber Gallery, in New York, with objectives that were similar to those of *The Inheritors* mentioned above.[4] The day of the *vernissage* the public saw nothing more than a table upon which sat questionnaires addressing some twenty items regarding the public's socio-demographic features and its opinions concerning current events. Some days later Haacke added to his exhibition the results of his survey in the form of tableaux replete with graphics and bar charts. These showed that the vast majority of visitors to the exhibition were themselves professionally connected to the world of art, that they belonged to the educated middle class, had limited financial resources, and the large majority of which declared themselves "liberal" in the American sense of the term. All this in contrast to another exhibition that Haacke had in New York during the same period where he simply posted, without any accompanying commentary, the numerous memberships of the administrators of the Guggenheim Museum on the boards of directors of the nation's great capitalist enterprises. Thus, at the executive level of the art world's great institutions, in the prestigious New York galleries and in one museum, and through use of well-established categories, Haacke exposed the wide socio-political gap separating the public for contemporary art from the elite which was that art's sponsor (Haacke and Becker 2014). Critical statistics were once again more reformist than anything insofar as they were supported by those institutions they was pretending to erode.

These three experiments – very in line with the zeitgeist of the 1970s – had authors who were not all specialists in statistics but who nevertheless used them to effect. In his use of statistics, Bourdieu was part of that long sociological tradition going back to Durkheim's study of suicide. Moreover, he had had personal contacts with statisticians of INSEE ever since the 1950s, and in the same year as appearance of *The Inheritors* he had taught at the French National School for Statistics and Economic Administration (ENSAE), which was that school which trained INSEE administrators. And CGT also continued a long tradition of producing social statistics that dated back to those on the labor unions in the late nineteenth century (Topalov 1994, 280ff.). As for Hans Haacke, even if he only produced questionnaires, he was commended for his sociological work by Howard Becker, who recounts the story (Haacke and Becker 2014). The representatives of that generation of statactivists thus used the rich intellectual and institutional resources available to them so as to produce statistics.

In employing consolidated and institutionalized elements of reality – the nomenclature, the series of products, the self-segregation of a certain milieu, etc. – these statistics did not call into radical question that reality which they simultaneously denounced; rather, they allowed for its

[4] Moreover, Haacke subsequently published a book of dialogues with Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Haacke 1994).

inflection, for its reform. Bourdieu and Passeron did not call into question French schools, but they made their reform possible; the CGT constructed a tool that permitted it to throw greater weight – though within the institutional framework – into salary negotiations; and Haacke participated in establishing a new movement called the "institutional critique," which took its place within the existing artistic milieu. Thus the conjoint effect of access to institutional statistical resources was to render reform possible while stabilizing the framework wherein it took place. In the Seventies, Statactivism was all about *Framing and Being Framed* – to appropriate a title from Haacke's catalogue; in other words it was about placing yourself within a preestablished framework, which was hardly radical, while at the same time finding here the margins affording you a certain liberty, which was the reform aspect.

3. Denouncing and Exposing the Representation of Reality

The scale on which institutional statistics were applied had greatly changed since the 1970s. Previously they were applicable to large-sized institutions, vast aggregates like the school system, salary negotiations, the world of art, and statactivism was deployed on that scale. These days, in the institutions, they serve to evaluate individual agents. In numerous sectors, and with increasing frequency, one must keep quantitative tabs on their own activity, which is part of a person's regular self-evaluation vis-à-vis other individuals or teams with respect to predetermined target figures. In many small stores the clerks are compelled to monitor, from hour to hour, the ratio of customers to merchandise sold, comparing their performance with that of the previous year and also with the ratio at that same hour in stores of the same chain (see also Darr 2011).

Making the practice of statactivism very widespread today, even if it remains as discreet as is commonly the case, entails (for the actors situated at the bottom of the hierarchy) securing room for manoeuvre within the framework of the statistical reports that are imposed upon them. This way of resisting the evaluation amounts to behaving exactly like the managers; that is to say, not truly believing in the letter of the regulations so as to adapt it in a manner that better suits those to whom it is applied. But the principal difference between the top and the bottom of the hierarchy is that at the bottom these readjustments remain secret – or more precisely put, they are effectuated with supreme discretion, as they are held to be illegitimate, whereas at the top they are proclaimed to be nothing more than salutary adaptations of the regulation, tokens of suppleness and flexibility (Boltanski, 2009, 217 ff.). Statactivist liberation, in this particular case, is for those who are being dominated to take liberties with the letter of the law and, on the other hand, to make both public and legitimate a common practice not yet brought to light.

To illustrate the point we can look at police statistics, which is an interesting case insofar as its function is precisely to enforce the rules of social life. For some years now the police have been subject to performance measures. We are accustomed to locating its birth in the system employed by New York City during Republican Rudy Giuliani's tenure as mayor from 1994 to

2001. Under the auspices of his chief of police, William Bratton, a system of police management was established that was called CompStat (which for some stands for "computer statistics" and for others "comparative statistics") and which was all about quantifying the activity of officers. The police commanders in each precinct were commissioned with quantifying their activities by giving regular reports to the police top brass that allowed them to prove they had taken sufficient initiative and been "pro-active" in discharging their duties. As soon as this instrument was in place the city's official crime rate took a dramatic drop. Some experts have raised questions as to the cause-and-effect relationship by explaining it as mere concomitance; while others such as the Eli Silverman, a sociologist specializing in police matters who published a detailed study of CompStat (Silverman 1999), spoke of the "miracle of New York." In any event, numerous police forces have copied the system in both the United States and throughout the world. This was particularly the case in Baltimore, whose "CitiStat" system appeared in the famous television series *The Wire*, and so too in France where Jean-Paul Proust, Paris police commissioner, imported CompStat in 2001 (Didier 2011a).

But in the past few years we have witnessed a spectacular reversal of judgments passed on CompStat. Even Silverman has vigorously questioned the effect that the system has had on police officers, finding that it does not encourage them to fight crime but rather incites them to circumvent their own regulations. So as to demonstrate the systematic drift of CompStat, Silverman and a veteran police officer, John Eterno, formulated and conducted a statistical survey (Eterno and Silverman 2012). The union for retired police officers gave them access to the files of its members. These latter were given an anonymous questionnaire asking if they harboured the feeling of having transformed their targets or rather their conduct under impact of CompStat in a way that ran counter to professional ethics, and if they could attribute this changed conduct to CompStat. More than half of those responding stated that since the installation of CompStat their conduct had strayed very "unethical" and a quarter of the respondents asserted that it had strayed reasonably "unethical".

This questionnaire had the virtue of showing, moreover statistically, that the officers had reclaimed the CompStat rules in a way that suited them, while at the same time not manifestly contravening regulations. But in posing the question in terms of transgressing professional ethics, the questionnaire had the drawback of passing negative moral judgment on an activity that is otherwise nothing but a defence.

In France certain law-enforcement officials also denounced these foibles in the form of testimony published in books. In the same year of 2007 it was together with the sociologist Christian Mouhana that Jean-Hugues Matelli, a sergeant of the gendarmerie, wrote *Police: des chiffres et des doutes* (*Police: Dubious Targets*) and that the police captain Philippe Pichon published his *Journal d'un flic* (*Diary of a Cop*). In both cases the authors insisted that quantifying their activity not only incited officers to operate more efficiently but that it pushed them to adopt conduct dictated by a race for results that could be very different from those expected of a good police force. So as to obtain "good" performance, that individual conduct which was most unbidden often consisted of skewing the targets.

Julien Prévieux, a visual artist, pushed things to their extreme by using the freedom engendered by the gap between a regulation and its application as his inspiration in making an artistic statement. Having made contact through friends with young policemen of the Brigade Anti-Criminalité in the Paris fourteenth *arrondissement*, he asked them to participate in a workshop for statistical design based on the data of observed criminality in their arrondissement. The officers used the complaints lodged at their station for a certain number of infractions (burglary, theft, etc.). Prévieux (2014) showed them how to transform this data into a Voronoi diagram, a graphic representation resembling meteorological isobars, and exploring the volume of crime through the density of its most important features. The policemen applied their aesthetic sense in drawing splendid designs on weekends, during their leisure hours, and perhaps even during their shifts (though no one can testify to this). The results have been exhibited numerous times in prestigious venues, thus attesting to the indubitably artistic character of these productions. Certain of them have been sold to collectors and two designs have been acquired by the Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne (MAC/VAL). The room for manoeuvre that persists in application of police regulations have thus taken on an artistic value. We can also note that this activity is no more selfless and disinterested than that which allows one to present good results to their boss and thus make a career and receive a bonus, for it was agreed upon by this certified artist and the policemen that they should equally divide the proceeds from any eventual sale.

Once again in France, the Pénombre association – primarily but not exclusively composed of professional statisticians and teachers of mathematics involved in the public movement against "innumeracy" – made a little film that took the form of a television report on a fictive commander called Yvon Dérouillé (Pénombre 2014). This explains how it is possible, with the requisite luck and malice, to enumerate many more *faits élucidés* (cases that can be attributed to a suspect) than *faits constatés* (cases without a suspect) that are judged positively by the hierarchy. This result, even if it can be understood from the standpoint of quantitative logic (if a smoker of hashish rats on three suppliers, this is a *fait constaté* – illicit consumption – and four *faits élucidés*: one smoker + three suspects), still remains paradoxical to the extent that common sense would demand that a *fait élucidé* always first be confirmed, or *constaté*.

These sociological, artistic and activist cases illustrate a kind of *two-level statactivism*. The first level concerns all the officials of an administration and requires only minimal resources to be implemented; in particular, it does not necessitate any working knowledge of statistics since this discipline is not taught to policemen. It consists of appropriating the rules for production of data serving in one's self-evaluation in a way (more or less discreetly, more or less openly) so as to adapt them to one's own interests – which can range from pure spineless flattery of your boss's expectations to a fierce independence in the production of works of art. Statistical activity is constrained by encoding, without which there would be not quantifiable data, though encoding more often than not is left in the hands of those most dominant in the hierarchy, necessarily leaving them room for manoeuvre. It always creates possibilities (Thévenot 1983). To the extent that, as is the case today, the encoder is the same person who will be evaluated by the data that he encodes, he will employ this to his benefit. He becomes emancipated.

At a second level, statactivism consists in collecting all these local practices and showing, no matter how hushed they are, that they are nevertheless so common that one might accuse the entire institution of not really pursuing its professed goals.[5] The statactivist thus resolves the paradox of being both inside and outside an institution. Indeed it is impossible to see any trace of an encoder's discreet operations if one is not with them in the institutions and, at the same time, one must have access to a public tribune to render account at an aggregate level of what one has witnessed. This is why statactivists tend to work in pairs or in groups, the typical case being a policeman collaborating with a sociologist.

The type of publicity will vary. Silverman and Eterno undertook a survey, Prévieux created a workshop, the French police published testimony, and Pénombre made a film. In none of these cases did they depend upon the state or its institutions. Indeed, in order to cast public doubt on the effects of these fragmentary games of quantification, one must seize on elements not taken into account – hidden – by the institution. It is therefore impossible to make resort to institutional resources so as to aggregate them.

The liberating effect of this second-level statactivism is twofold. On the one hand it seeks to show the possibility of an aggregate reality other than that put forward by the institution. For instance it claims that: "No, contrary to what the state proffers, we show that there has not been a constant reduction in crime, for that reduction is better explained by the coding effectuated by law enforcement." It thus denotes the possibility of a reality other than that of the official one. At the same time, it denounces the ability of the institution to counterfeit reality. Here the formula for contention is: "The state has the means for lying to us." Thus it is not reality which is being doubted but state action that pretends to do one thing (fight crime) while doing something entirely different (manipulating opinion). The statactivists denounce the state's possibilities for action. The state will of course put up a fight, which can be metaphorically compared to a fencing match, and the series of parries and ripostes between the state and the statactivists will surely continue for some time into future (Didier 2011b).

Statactivism thus covers a variety of practices ranging from those of a fiercely individual nature to those which are expressly collective. On the one hand it consists of emancipating us from the rules that authority imposes and, on the other, of uncovering the lies that they proffer. But at this stage the collective that it constructs is still not a political subject endowed with interests and its own will. How is this creation of a subject possible via statistics as means of contention?

[5] For an emblematic case – i.e. activist codage of violence during demonstrations against the G8 in Genoa in 2001 – see Cousin (2007).

4. Defending and Producing New Categories

Recent social transformations have been accompanied by the appearance of new social categories. As could be shown in the case of managers (Boltanski 1987), social groups have an interest in institutionalizing themselves statistically so as to gain recognition. The invention of new social categories – and their criticism – is an important terrain for statactivism. We can take as an example the case of the precarious intellectuals, as well as that of the Blacks.

Among those social worlds most strongly affected by the development of flexibility policies in the labor market is that of artists and professional intellectuals. The invasion of these vocational trades by quantifying instruments of the managerial system has brought about novel experiences that are of a highly ambiguous, strange, grotesque character – or conversely, quite innovative and exciting. Moreover, invoking social experiences that no longer correspond to the available formats only succeeds in feeding criticism of official nomenclature. It can even happen that these experiences are inserted into political and cognitive work aiming to construct a new social category capable of putting forward demands.

Those efforts to regroup the artistic and intellectual workers in new social categories follow two different kinds of logic, one which operates from below and the other from above. According to Cyprien Tasset (2014), the strategy from below is illustrated by the work *Les Intellos précaires* (2001) by Anne and Marine Rambach. For these authors the *intellos précaires* is a rubric under which are gathered those "intellectuals" who lack job security owing to the current economic system, such as researchers without status, artists labouring to obtain remuneration for their work, freelance journalists, etc. These individuals often have diplomas, are not always the youngest, yet they are still unable to find stable employment, and as a result their way of life is far from what their acquired level of studies and training would seem to have promised. The Rambachs' argument is that this situation exceeds such individuals' holdings and skills and that it is attributable to a mode of social organization that depreciates intellectual work and even aims to render it tractable and submissive. They also exhort the *intellos précaires* to unite and let themselves be counted, a task which should be tackled in listing any statistical results which they can lay their hands on in the course of their inquiry.

As opposed to this strategy from below, others prefer that from above. Though hardly alone in this observation, Richard Florida (2002) has noted the emergence of a "creative class." This group, although much larger than that of the *intellos précaires*, resembles it in all but the fact that precisely those characteristics which carry negative connotations for the Rambachs are here highly valued. Not insecure but always ready to exercise their freedom on the labour market, according to Florida, the members of this educated class are in quest of creative opportunities. They are not suspected of being useless but are instead seen as the spearhead of cognitive capitalism going into the future, agents of innovation and human capital and thus of maximum urban development.

In view of these attempts at aggregating a collective subject, the artist Martin Le Chevallier (2014) questions the "lone wolves" of society. At the age of forty he asked himself at what point he would cease to be a so-called promising young artist and how he would become an art-

ist who counted. To solve this riddle he had the idea of turning to a consulting firm and asking them to do an audit on him. The activity of an artist was thus made the equivalent of that of an enterprise. The consulting firm's initial reaction was one of surprise, but it accepted his commission. Le Chevallier tells how the audit unfolded, with its SWOT model (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats), the determining of various strategies and consulting clients, and the conclusions that were finally drawn from it all. The merging of artistic activity and this managerial language is a particularly explosive mixture. Instead of lobbying with artists of integrity to maintain the system of compensation allowing them to "earn a dignified living within their *métier*," and instead of endorsing a collectivism gladly identifying itself with the emancipatory function of art, he, on his own, made recourse to tools that every good "self-marketer" is supposed to mobilize in the neo-liberal era. And the whole thing is of course rather funny. But what in fact is so amusing about a practice involving, at least secretly, the majority of artists and many other cultural and scientific workers? Why are we surprised to see an artist as auditor of his own career?

The struggles over definition among those new classes that include the intellectuals and creative individuals whose careers are unstable quantities – this is an important sphere that necessarily implicates statistical categories and statactivism, helping to define the subject that serves as receptacle for the desire for and praxis of emancipation. The group concerned here, by definition, has sufficiently rich cognitive resources that it would seem they could adequately compensate for any specific ignorance regarding statistics. At the moment when the actors recognize the advantage of using such arguments, they cobble together all the needed resources (letters, inquiries by means of the snowball effect, fierce documentary research) or do not hesitate in resorting to specialists (consultants, sociologists, statisticians). Moreover, these associations of competence make them an active component part of the collective. It is not only about subsuming many individual cases under a sole category but also about aligning a series of diverse competences with this category-specific ensemble.

As always the case when speaking of mobilization, even in the case of precarious intellectuals, the emancipation not only refers to the institutional activity of this collective political subject but the *alignment* of a series of possibilities for action of that subject. It is distinguished from that case seen among the police where statactivism is on the order of disclosure – it breaks down that institutional reality which is self-proclaimed through statistical findings by exhibiting that other reality as expressed in the generalized phenomenon of tricks employed with numbers. Here is where statactivism is a positive force in its attempt to prove that a category may well and truly exist while not recognizing its existence, and it seeks out means of action so as to defend it.

It is the case of a propoor alliance of housing activists based in Mumbai described by Appadurai (2002). Housing activists have organized a census of the population to exist and to organise in a reduced synthetic manner the knowledge of the poor about their slums, with methods "driven by the poor and for the poor" and then fight against "projects" and "projectization" "that underlies almost all official ideas about urban change" (Appadurai 2004).

Of course disclosure and affirmation are not mutually exclusive, and in many cases they are intermeshed. However, these two notions allow one to draw an axis running from the negation of a preexisting reality to the affirmation of entities that have yet to exist. But once the axis is traced, the most interesting thing is to then understand the complexity of that blending of the continuum's two extreme poles. And this is why it is so important to look at the mobilizations that take place around social indicators.

5. Redefining the Objectives of Public Action

With its utopia of governance by means of objectives, the neo-liberal approach makes great use of indicators (Thévenot 2011). An indicator is a measurement that transforms a complex phenomenon into a single and simple value that varies with time. For instance the gross domestic product (GDP) is supposed to indicate the wealth of a country and allow us to follow its fluctuations from year to year. Indicators give a sense of direction and help to shape action. If you want to augment the GDP then you must find the means of increasing the added value – for instance by choosing to develop increasingly rich fertilizer that will ensure ever more abundant harvests. But inherent to an indicator's structure is that the only real aspects of it are those judged to be pertinent. In the case of GDP, one solely measures the production of different economic branches in terms of added value. It thus helps to consolidate only particular aspects of reality and hence neglects others that might in fact be judged as having priority from points of view other than that of the indicator. For instance fertilizer can have injurious effects on the water table, a harmful consequence that is not taken into account by the GDP. There are all sorts of statactivist initiatives that intervene at this level – so official statistics will reassign an institution's priorities; they point to other aspects of reality and propose alternative indicators.

Among these latter there are certain ones that make clear the unsuspected and pernicious consequences of public or managerial policy. Others point out the importance and pertinence of elements that are not taken into consideration by official quantitative measurements. The one enables us to include that which has (still) been excluded, while the other disputes the allegedly indisputable.

The pernicious effects are of two types. On the one hand, one gathers a series of conceivably disagreeable facts so as to show their systematic and repetitive character. A most effectual case, due to its extremeness, is the enumeration of suicides at France Télécom. Ivan Du Roy (2014), for instance, explains how trade unionists have come to count the suicides that have taken place in their enterprise so as to reveal the toxicity of its managerial methods. On the other hand, one takes the detour of money and recalls the political price – which is of course very high. This is the operation that Damien de Blic (2014) undertakes in calculating the cost of expelling people "without papers." Exasperated by France's migration policy, this researcher was able to make public a powerful argument regarding the exorbitant bill to be paid for expelling workers who ask nothing more than to pay their taxes. The Hong Kong based organization SACOM (Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior) started analysing the suicide

rate of young workers (between 17 and 25 years old) within Foxconn to launch a global campaign to change rhythm of labour and advocate for workers' rights (Borghi 2014).

The group Superflex (2014) drove the critique of activity-indicators to an absurd level. The project "Visitors Numbers" consisted of synchronizing the mechanism which counted visitors entering a museum with an oversize counter conspicuously hung from the museum's exterior as if this was the most important information of all – as if the sole thing that counted was that the museum be much visited. Employing a caustic irony, those behind the stunt wished to make tangible the nonsense surrounding the marketing of a museum to achieve profitability.

But statactivism also aims to affirm realities neglected by the certain institution and to make official data judged indisputable as the very object of dispute.

Midway between the counting of events and estimating a price one finds the measurement of social inequalities and, in particular, inequalities in revenue and the demonstration of their unceasing increase. In forging the "BIP 40," Pierre Conciliadi (2014) and other individuals have constructed an indicator whose name evokes the CAC 40 (Cotation Assistée en Continu), the main stockmarket index for the Paris financial center and for the GDP, while also suggesting a warning signal (Biip! Biiip! . . .). Their central idea was to disclose the fact that the profits obtained by surges in the stock market grow in correlation to social inequalities. As a counterpoint, Bernard Sujobert (2014), CGT trade-union representative at INSEE, recounts how this BIP 40 as well as other measures of inequality helped the publications of INSEE to evolve. He underscores the absolutely crucial role played by the Conseil National de l'Information Statistique (CNIS), a somewhat peculiar entity among French institutions. If the measures of inequality published by INSEE are different today from those published in the early 1990s, it is in part owing to these actors who shared their experience.

The work of the Forum for other wealth indicators (FAIR) offers another example of statactivism. As shown by Florence Jany-Catrice (2014), FAIR attempts to topple GDP from its pedestal so as to reinstate both social and environmental dimensions of a country's wealth and not be solely beholden to the environmental aspect. Another example is the Ecological Footprint promoted by the Global Footprint Network created by Mathis Wackernagel in 2003, as an accounting tool that measures human impact on the Earth[6].

Among those struggles that use indicators as weapons or targets, that of the trade unionists of France Telecom must be accorded special treatment. These statactivists had the simple yet devastating idea of counting the number of suicides – which does not demand any sophisticated competence in the sphere of statistics but rather certain human qualities in meeting with the families of those persons who have decided to end their lives, in understanding their desperate act, and in determining if there was somehow a link between it and their work conditions (Du Roy 2009).

We see struggles to criticize established indicators and to institutionalize new ones. These mobilizations require specific knowledge to analyze, break down and recompose indicators – or,

[6] See http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/.

like Superflex, to reproduce and shift their place of issue. This statactivism necessitates a certain technical savoir-faire. Its efficacy thus largely depends on knowing why the indicators must be called into question – to what end. The adaptation of inequality indicators found its usage in new thinking about the tax system, which explains why it had been taken up again by INSEE. But reconsideration of the GDP seems not to have presently succeeded in advancing beyond a general set of demands that have not been applied in any concrete fashion. It is yet again statactivism which is the emancipator in that it offers the possibility of creating more of those certain material realities by applying them to certain objects and certain ends that remain to be determined.

But if in returning to the axis composed by disclosure and affirmation, one places the enumeration of suicides on the side of the purest of disclosures, affirming nothing but the nothingness of death in the face of institutional order, then the artistic act ridiculing this system is not entirely negative in that it proposes a new locus where the system is in fact made a spectacle of. There then follows an estimation of the costs engendered by the deportation policy, then the work in CNIS, and finally the promotion of BIP 40 and the GDP alternative that seeks to institute, firstly, another gauge of inequality among members of society and, secondly, another way of tallying the wealth of a country. Quite a number of modalities take place between destruction of the institution's objectives and affirmation of alternative goals.

6. Other Numbers for Other Possibilities

Statactivism is a banner that rallies a wide variety of practices sharing the goal of placing statistics in the service of liberation. In examining the most contemporary of practices, we have seen, firstly, how it consists of showing and making use of all the margins of liberty which the rules of the production of numbers allow those agents who are subject to them. Statistics is not a corpus of immutable law; to the contrary, statisticians learn to play with their namesake without falling into error. Secondly, statactivism consists in utilizing diverse methods of quantification so as to produce groups, subjects, that arise from an aspiration to liberate themselves from conditions to which they are beholden; to be strong one must ally oneself, and statistics is a primary cement of such alliances. Finally, it consists of employing statistics so as to redefine the objectives pursued by institutions. In the three cases – denouncing the certain representation of reality, generating a group, redefining the objectives of public action – it is taking into account the authority of facts without forgetting their statistical construction, which allows us to articulate them to the world's elements. These practices traverse the milieux of art, research and activism. All the contributions to this work highlight the importance that must be granted statistics as a political argument.

In particular they dispel one of the misunderstandings that divide potential opponents of authoritarianism by numbers. Indeed, while the Romantic tradition, which was a reaction to industrialization, and still enduring in other forms, is a powerful source of criticism, it tends to perceive statistics as solely an emanation of the "dispassionate and quantifying spirit of the in-

dustrial age," whose literary incarnation was someone like Thomas Gradgrind from Dickens' *Hard Times* (Löwy and Sayre 2010, p. 20). Yet the series of statactivist experiences that we have pointed in this paper entail a use of numbers that manages to stay attuned to the mechanisms of finance-capitalism while following an agenda of free creativity and emancipation. Far from expanding the existential desert of utilitarianism, the anti-establishment inventions based on statistics *expand* the actors' autonomy and, beyond their emancipatory scope, are sometimes conduits of a certain aesthetic value.

Even, as Ted Porter argues (2012), there is some humour in statactivism. One might *a priori* think that there is nothing less humorous than statistics, but this is not at all the case. Bakhtine (1982) helps us to understand why. Starting with the work of François Rabelais, which is full of numbers games, Bakhtine shows that the structure of laughter is highly ambiguous. On the one hand it belittles official reality through irony, parody and hyperbole. But that is not all. Laughing also accompanies a joy in the counterproposal, the materialization of a new and unexpected reality, the liberties taken with the burden of instituted reality, the productive transformation. Bakhtine speaks of "the creative force of laughter" (*ibid*., 80). He writes that "laughter humbles and reifies" (*ibid*., 29), it is concomitant with belittlement of the official which was big, and of the realization and liberation, starting from magnification, of that which gains in reality. Emancipation can also assume the form of collective laughter.

In the end, if a form of statistical activism has today become inescapable, it is firstly because of the central role played by instruments of quantification in the maintenance of those certain fates against which the emancipatory struggles are engaged. Indeed the coding, the categories, the indicators – in short, all the statistical entities – make important contributions to the construction of reality. Though justifiably denounced as basic equipment of the "iron cage" of capitalist reasoning, quantification should not be divested to the benefit of qualities, singularities, and the incommensurable. Such a renunciation would be an error, for the binding stability of statistical entities is not unshakeable. To the contrary, the attention given to the introduction of measures and indicators helps to reveal their creative character and often their capacity to eclipse former ones. As a means of reducing incertitude and of opening up practical possibilities, statistics is both a disciplinary intersection (mathematics, social sciences, accountancy, management, etc.) where unexpected encounters can take pride of place.

Accordingly "another number is possible" – that what a hegemonic logic of quantification has installed, experienced stactivists may seek to dismantle or at least roughen up. Of course the fate of an alternative indicator, of calculating the cost of a policy or of enumerating a new social category, is uncertain; of course these mobilizations could gain ground in the public space or go unnoticed, and the objective of this special issue is to introduce case-studies so as to make progress in the explanation of those processes that contribute to the success of a mobilization around statistics.

The first article of this special issue tackles the case of the French *Groupe d'information sur les prisons* (GIP), which resorted to statactivism against the penal machinery in the early 1970s. In this article, Grégory Salle argues that there is something to be gained from re-examining the

GIP's activities from the perspective of statactivism on the assumption that, because prison was —particularly at that time— a place of deprivation and scarcity, it was a world in which quantities, however low they may have been, did count. Quantification was not the most important of the GIP's wide range of activities; yet it was crucial under certain circumstances, or for addressing certain issues: if information was "a weapon" (a watchword of the group), then statistical information was no exception to the rule. Emphasizing the issues of prison suicides and class justice, the author reviews different practices of statactivism, from challenging official figures to resorting to an original quantification operation. If the GIP paved the way for a critique that is now commonplace, it has also brought about a decisive and paradoxical shift, by which citing numbers no longer only answered the conventional quantitative question "how many?" (how many prisoners?), but also answered the qualitative and more disturbing question "who?": who are the prisoners?

Samuel's very original paper shows, against a reading of statistics that would argue for their rationalizing effect, how deeply they might be connected to *violence*. He focuses on the price index. His case study is located in Guadalupe in 2009 when a huge protest took place. It opposed the LKP, the main workers union, to retailers of the island, the State acting like a referee. Samuel shows that statistics deployed at the negotiation table might be accompanied by violent marches in the street. But also that violence can be inherently linked to data, since it has been used to get the prices surveyed that would be alleged by the union or that the public release of some data might have explosive results.

Also Celia Lury and Ana Gross' paper focuses on the price index. It addresses a controversy that took place in Argentina beginning in 2007. It opposed some of the State statisticians of the INDEC (Argentina's national institute of statistics) to the government of Cristina Kirchner. The paper documents public marches organized in the defense of the index against what has apparently been called the "intervention" ordered by the secretary of commerce. The authors then move on to present an alternative method assessing the variation of prices, the *Billion Price Project*, a MIT based enterprise, that bears on prices collected on the web worldwide, which aims at replacing the national index. The scene they describe is thus packed with actors using statistics in different kind of activism; they insist on the fact that there is a space aspect in statactivism, exactly like in war, where each force in presence tries to hold the territory defined by its own statistics.

In another article, Marion Gilles sheds light on to what extent "recounting health at work counts". Here the statactivists are occupational physicians, ably assisted by researchers in various disciplines dealing with occupational health related topics. More precisely, the article is about the construction in the early 2000s of a new type of statistics at Aero, a major aerospace group. Embedded in the EVREST (EVolutions et RElations en Santé au Travail) scheme, these statistics rely on a questionnaire-based survey administered during the medical check-up. Each year, the occupational physicians report the survey results to the social partners in several

workgroups. Through the use of statistics issued from EVREST, the physicians wanted to display a link between working conditions and health issues, which was often ignored by the institution and its representation of occupational health and safety. Focusing on the "conflicting uses" around numbers, this article demonstrates that their production is part of social relations, which redefine the goals initially assigned to them. It dwells on the social conditions requisite for the development and acceptance of alternative indicators.

The research paper of Pierre-Yves Baudot weighs up the production of activity data for disability policy in France. Based on a field work within the Maisons départementales des personnes handicapées, the paper shows the organizational commitment and tasks to produce activity data. It explores how the production of data is related to a quest for autonomy by these specialised administrations. On the other side, political authorities try to limit the autonomy of these organisations on befit attribution and beneficiaries selection. It shows the relevance of looingin at compromises to understand the choices of statistical instruments. Questioning the forms of (non-)production of an information system, the paper points that statistical instruments enacts links between the organization, the policy sector and its broader political environment. Alliances too are sealed by statistical instruments, also in extremely stable contexts.

Eugenia De Rosa' s paper deals with the use of statistics in social mobilizations for gender equality. It highlights how civil society organizations have committed to advance gender categorizations, gender-sensitive data and gender investigation. It links this engagement with a human rights framework. It points at how do NGOs develop and use gender-sensitive data for social mobilizations. Looking at five large NGOs and three networks of human rights experts, the author surveys the strategic production of categorizations and data. She looks over the «gender statactivism» of NGOs, identifying four phases of mobilization, at the level of framing processes, of policy (design and implementationà, of action (via campaigning and advocacy) and monitoring. Conclusion are drown on the relation between statactivism, gender, and intersectionality, showing how much the mobilizations through statistics are contributing to the debate and the practice of intersectionality.

The last paper of this special issue was written by Alain Desrosières. We have already presented the drawn-out controversy over the price index in France discussed in his paper. After showing the innovative role of statistics in the XIX Century, and its relation with the worker movement, the Author look at ways of measuring inflation, unemployment, poverty, GDP, and climate change. Social movements criticized the quantification of these topics. Debates on the way of quantifying reflect contrasting mode of framing social relations. The article considers also the conditions for statistics' innovation, and its political significance. Indeed, two opposite cases are discussed in the conclusion: the explosion of inequality of income, and the media success of university rankings. Alain Desrosières was a key figure in the social and historical study of statistics in France, and this paper was one of his very last interventions before his death. To

him this special issue is dedicated, as a way of honouring his engagement in doing social sciences that matter, and his everlasting intellectual legacy.

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