

Libby Schweber**Disciplining Statistics: Demography and Vital Statistics in France and England, 1830-1885.**

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Drawing on Ian Hacking and Theodore Porter's past work on national styles of reasoning in statistics, Alain Desrosières' linking of cognitive and institutional change, Ronald Jepperson's notions of statist and anti-statist liberalism, and on the literature on the formation of scientific disciplines, Libby Schweber has produced a descriptively rich and analytically intriguing account of the shifting status of statistical investigation in nineteenth century France and England. Although intellectuals and state servants in the two countries shared exposure to a common body of statistical work in the 1820s and 1830s, especially in the areas of public health, statistics met a very different fate in each of them, both in estimations of its epistemological status and in its practical use in political reasoning and social policy-making. Differences in state forms and administrative practice and in the social organization of science shaped the fate of statistical work in the two countries.

In France, a centralized state and formal, relatively autonomous regulation of the legitimacy of science by the Academies created formidable barriers to the acceptance and spread of statistical reasoning. Schweber argues that statistical knowledge of population served representational, rather than instrumental, purposes for French governments, offering more or less flattering visions of the nation rather than policy information. The control of legitimate knowledge exerted by the academies meant that statistics was subjected to criteria of epistemological validity based on correspondence to observable reality and probabilism was rejected as idle speculation. The Academy of Medicine, in a series of well-known debates, rejected statistical investigations as fabricating abstractions, such as the average rate of death, that were clinically useless. Social science more generally failed to gain official legitimacy.

In England, by contrast, for most of the period studied, a relatively decentralized polity meant that civic associations, such as the London Statistical Society and the Social Science Association, could figure as 'parallel governments', generating statistical knowledge of the social, defining social problems and solutions, and influencing government policy. The associations initially barred theoretical discussion as a source of divisive opinion. Statistical indices, such as William Farr's 'healthy district mortality rate,' were treated as politically and practically useful concepts with which to identify and to engage problems of public health. Debates over the epistemological status of statistical knowledge were muted and Schweber suggests that the French concern with the representation of the nation did not figure centrally in debate.

Schweber makes a particularly useful contribution to the literature by examining the fate of English vital statistics and French demography in the period after 1860; the latter subject especially has received little attention. In France, disciplinary activity, including the convening of scientific congresses, the publication of texts and of a scientific journal on the part of such people as Louis Adolphe Bertillon aimed at creating new bases of legitimacy for forms of enquiry blocked by Academy gatekeepers. Interestingly, the acceptance of mathematical statistics in the 1880s by such gatekeepers led to the demise of demography's pretensions to disciplinary status. English vital statistics was similarly a victim of its own success. The professional organization of medical officers of health, who had been created by legislation promoted by the statistical societies, the modernization of the universities, increasing state intervention in local government and the

bureaucratization of expertise destroyed the social basis of the earlier informal practice of vital statistics. The Social Science Association withered and a new generation of mathematical statisticians appeared in universities and government departments.

In an interesting move, Schweber rejects a formal definition of discipline in favor of the study of disciplinary activity as 'any activity associated with the introduction of a new disciplinary category' (222). The aim of such activity is by no means necessarily the establishment of an autonomous professional group, as much of the literature tends to claim. Rather, disciplinary activity is a set of strategic moves invoked in conflicts over the scientific and political legitimacy of forms of knowledge. One particularly intriguing demonstration of this study is that disciplinarization leads to the demise of demography and vital statistics.

This book has been a long time coming and it bears a few infelicitious marks of the longer work from which it emerged, especially in the uneven treatment of some areas of enquiry, and rough transitions among some of its sections. It is striking as well that Schweber cites neither of Edward Higgs' recent publications, *The Information State in England* (2004) or his local population studies supplement *Life, Death and Statistics* (2004). The latter especially is an exhaustive revisionist history of the English General Register Office, the site of vital statistics. Although her period ends before the rise of French '*solidarisme*,' she might also have made better use of the analysis of Quetelet's work in François Ewald's *L'État providence* (1986), which makes the links between the earlier statistical tradition and the work of Durkheim.

Still, Schweber's work commends itself to a wide range of sociologists and historians for its presentation of new empirical material, for its comparative impluse, and for its novel approach to the study of disciplines.

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