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New Questions of Evidence

In 2012, an Irish magazine introduced the Dublin-based director of “government services” at one of the Big Four auditing firms. The executive spoke from expertise in organizational change: transparency and efficiency would inevitably flow, he explained, from reengineering state institutions to be measurably customer focused according to best practice. The magazine provided another update on the quiet revolution that Shore and Wright have tracked for more than a decade—the relentless rise of audit culture. But, in this instance, the ideological language was exposed by broader circumstances. In 2012, the same firm was sued by the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation (IBRC) over its role in auditing Anglo Irish Bank, the collapse of which cost the state approximately \$40 billion, or 20% of GDP. Nine days before the bank was nationalized, Merrill Lynch gave it a clean bill of health in a report costing approximately \$11 million (incidentally, the IBRC appointed another Big Four firm as its auditor). Business as usual.

The recent financial crisis called attention to the opaque world of global actors who audit, produce rankings, indicators, and transparency. When accused of negligence or sharp practice, they defend themselves with the nineteenth-century mantra, “We are watchdogs, not bloodhounds.” Yet, as Shore and Wright note, they overproduce quasiempirical language and sign their activities as evidence based. As I reflect on recent history, questions about evidence spring to mind. The official inquiry into Irish banking was a toothless process—as in the blinding of Polyphemus, “Nobody” was to blame—but it was revealing. The sector was accused of diverting masses of risk analysis professionals to deal with international Basel II standards. Evidence of actual risk became secondary to mimetic self-regulation indicators derived from abstract quantitative models. Anthropology is certainly equipped to study mimesis, rituals of evidence gathering, and “the magic of numbers” (Merry 2011:S84). Anthropology must reengage with questions of evidence and harness some of its most intellectually rewarding concepts as it does so.

Shore and Wright’s article aims to cut to the heart of the rationales driving and legitimizing so-called audit culture. Similarly, Sally Engle Merry’s recent *Current Anthropology* article “Measuring the World” (2011) examines the contemporary plague of indicators and rankings. These articles should be read together, because the authors provide different genealogies of audits and indicators that might be productively brought into dialogue. Shore and Wright begin with the calculative styles of reasoning born in grading and ranking at West Point and École Polytechnique before tracking the rise of scientific management and new public management. They show the remarkable resilience of these styles of reasoning in the face of numerous failures. But Merry’s genealogy of indicators offers to them interesting challenges. She draws on historian Mary Poovey (1998) to explore the rise of “the modern fact,” the ostensibly neutral and systematic basis of statistical and governmental reasoning by experts. The nineteenth-century shift from moral knowledge to statistical-governmental knowledge may have provoked merciless sarcasm from Charles Dickens, but it also provoked important scientific debates. “Statistics,” William Robertson argued, “is not even a department of human knowledge; it is merely a form of knowledge—a mode of arranging and stating facts” (quoted in Poovey 1998:316; see also Poovey 1993). But the problem here exceeds the

questionable evidential basis of governmental knowledge. We must attend also to the magic and necromancy inherent in rendering into numbers the characteristics of populations. Many nineteenth-century statisticians eschewed “causes” yet found mesmerizing patterns in data. William Cook Taylor stared at lists of murders in France until he saw “a certain sympathy or principle of imitation” (1835:113). What is at stake in these early examples is the potential power of data qua data.

Today, as nurseries and even mortuaries face audits, rankings, and indicators, questions about evidence are foregrounded. Similarly, in my own field of security research, one may note the rise and resilience of scenarios and foresighting by experts. Quasiempirical yet ostensibly evidence-based, quasicorporate yet rampant across society, these forms of knowledge demand anthropological attention. Shore and Wright have provided an important service here by revisiting audit culture and its (perverse) effects. One may, however, add to their ongoing work by highlighting a broader genealogy and what that makes possible. For instance, they note the Amazon UK warehouses in which stressed workers are controlled by omniscient time-and-motion technology. But today, data qua data is taking on new forms scarcely imaginable in the past. Today, such workers are controlled, measured, and ranked as coded data that must respond to algorithms scraping “big data” for magical insights into consumer behaviors. It was a broader genealogy that provoked Gilles Deleuze to picture “transmutable or transformable coded configurations of a single business where the only people left are administrators” (1995:181).

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