

Knowledge / Value Conference

Contributor Interview: Dr. Theodore Porter

Interview conducted by Eric Hirsch, Meghan Morris, Even Rogers

- Please situate yourself with relation to knowledge/value as a problematic. How do you conceive of the problematic of knowledge/value? How does the concept of value relate to knowledge for you?

I'd like to say first that this and all my responses here are off the cuff, and that I think of this as an interview situation rather than as a form of scholarly publication.

Among the many meanings that knowledge and value might have, I'm interested particularly in the modern ascetic posture of science with regard to values. Nietzsche uttered some appropriate witticisms on this subject. Of course I cannot deny the validity of Poincare's point, which in some form goes back to Hume and I suppose beyond, that we cannot reason logically from statements of fact to values. But holding the formulation of values to a standard of strict logic means we get nowhere, and our sense of what is good or right or proper in this instance is and has to be shaped and reshaped all the time by what we experience and what we take to be the implications or consequences of this or that action. The institutionalized emphasis on a strict separation means that value considerations relating to science come in through the back door, and at the same time license all forms of irrationalism including, paradoxically, that truth claims need no more support than to say that they are mine or are taught by my religion.

- Can you give us your thoughts on method and choice of object of study when examining issues related to knowledge/value? What might one gain or lose in those choices?

I'm interested in the basis of claims of *objectivity* and the constitution of the *technical*, two big ideas linked to science. These are linked in that both involve the withdrawal of the interested self, and that is a key element of their credibility. But objectivity is, for most of us, a public value, while the technical is virtually defined as what does not concern the public. This little contradiction has big implications. But to say I work on this is much too grand. I work on how engineers planned dams and canals and how superintendents of insane asylums gathered up records of the heredity (genetics) of their patients, and what they did with them. These are my sites of knowledge and value.

- Why did you begin thinking about numbers in the first place? Did anything in particular (events, personal experiences, historical moments) influence this trajectory of yours?

I was always interested in numbers, and still am. I am the son of a math teacher and was pretty good at that as far as I went with it. My growing skepticism of the public uses of numbers can be exemplified, though it was not caused, by a little episode between college and grad school, when the Federal Aviation Agency wanted to build an airport [on the urging of a local land developer] near the rural community where I grew up. It was already the era of environmental impacts and all that, and they had projected out demand from 1976 to 2026 or something like that. Supposing exponential growth, as they did, the need for this airport appeared urgent. That was one of many long-term projections we rural folk were shown. What will people do when they arrive at your airport? someone asked. The FAA hoped to get a bus service introduced, they said, and if that didn't work, people could just take a taxi. They had projected all these numbers many decades into the future, and not bothered to learn that there wasn't a single taxi in the whole county.

- Can you tell us more about what you think the relationship of numbers to value is? A few iterations of this relationship in your paper might include the self-referential aspect of numbers, the paradoxes of the reliance on numbers, and how numbers relate to the social world.

The insane enumerations that I discuss in the paper are gestures of accountability to regulators and administrators, already a value matter. Also, though I didn't realize this at first, the numbers go a long way toward constituting the patients as medical cases. They reflect and shape how the alienists thought about their lunatic patients. They helped to convince polities that it was worth supporting the exploding networks of asylums. So they were fully enmeshed in

a world of welfare decisions and of medical treatment. When things didn't seem to be working well, the alienists thought early and often of new ways of collecting and processing numbers. They do also have self-vindicating as well as, sometimes, self-refuting properties.

- Can you situate yourself and your trajectory in relation to other people thinking about objectivity and numbers? What other scholars do you think with?

My graduate advisor, Charles Gillispie, had written about "probability and politics" in the era of the French Revolution. It may be more coincidence than cause that I took a course in history of philosophy with Ian Hacking as a Stanford undergraduate. Certainly his work became important for me later, as it has been important for everyone working on uses of probability and statistics. He also was partly responsible for a year-long project at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research at the University of Bielefeld in 1982-83, whose fellows included Hacking himself, Norton Wise, Lorraine Daston, John Beatty, Gerd Gigerenzer, Nancy Cartwright, Mary Morgan, and the director Lorenz Krueger. Those people and others I met through them and the project, became my network and are still some of my closest friends. Working on statistics in history has also brought me into contact with people from many disciplines, especially the social and human sciences, who are interested in the history of their discipline or how it uses number, measure, calculation, and mathematics. I happen to have hopped early on a train that has picked up a lot of riders from all over the disciplinary and ideological map, and they have provided a continued source of unexpected ideas and approaches. The present conference rooted in Chicago anthropology, for instance.

- What do you consider your relationship to Foucault to be?

I don't cite Foucault very much, and have read him in scattershot fashion rather than with sustained scholarly attention. I get my Foucault a lot of the time through the cracks and seams of the scholarly tents in which I move. I am not an unreserved admirer, but Foucault definitely stands for something that is of key importance for me, as a historian of science. He recognized and has moved many others to recognize that the history (sociology, anthropology ...) of knowledge is not just about prestigious disciplines. Knowledge is all over, and its flow and use in medicine, accounting, administration, schools, prisons, asylums, etc. is just as interesting and just as important as in physics or biology. And knowledge does not flow preferentially from fundamental to applied or from mathematical to empirical or from physics to sociology, but in every direction and in all sorts of unexpected ways. Also, the conditions of its production and use are entangled, and they matter.

- How is the employment of numbers you describe in your work related to broader political economic forms (for example, "neoliberalism", or the "geopolitical imaginaries" Jean Comaroff mentions in her comment on your paper)?

I will just mention a couple of examples of this sort of thing. Numbers are not inherently centralizing or neoliberal, nor do they tend inherently to imprison or liberate. They are preeminent tools of commensuration, of making different kinds of things comparable. They tend to move pretty easily over space, even if different meanings may be attached in various locations. So they have been indispensable tools of centralizing power, and indispensable too for coordination of activity. They also, however, are often quite thin (playing on Geertz's title, I have begun speaking of thin description). Thin description works pretty well in a neoliberal world as a basis for accountability. Let people on the scene make the decisions, and headquarters can judge their effectiveness by the numbers. Of course this kind of faith in numbers can easily produce problems, and does. Astonishingly, people produce bogus numbers, or at least stretch definitions, to advance their interests and to avoid shame. Someone who knows more about business and accounts than I do could write a fascinating history of the recent financial meltdown from the perspective of manipulations of numbers.

- What do you consider to be the stakes of both your overall academic project and the specific project elaborated in your paper?

My project now is about how insane asylums were sites of the creation of a science of heredity. I would include the eugenics movement in this. It illustrates the importance of low, bureaucratic knowledge in relation to the most prestigious forms, such as, in our day, human and medical genetics. It is also about how the activity of science is dispersed well beyond universities and research laboratories, how it is made possible, for example, by new systems of public welfare and by investigations carried out by officials and medical personnel as well as scientists. We find that the Human Genome promised to reach the grail of a gene for every condition was turned into a vast problem of managing one of the greatest of all databases, using tools of the old empirical science of state administration, statistics.