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Deborah Stone

Damned Lies and Statistics: Untangling Numbers from the Media, Politicians, and Activists, by Joel Best. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, 190 pp., \$19.95.

The Sum of Our Discontent: Why Numbers Make Us Irrational, by David Boyle. New York: Texere, 2001, 200 pp., \$24.95.

Because these are both books for a lay audience, the sophisticated analyst is likely to pass them up. Yet taken together, they make a wonderfully provocative excursion into the philosophy of social measurement. Even—perhaps especially—if you think you're above “baby stats,” the reason to read these books is not to learn how to count more wisely, but to find out what you really believe about the role of numbers in policymaking.

The books represent two views of measurement. In one view (the view of APPAM insofar as an organization can be said to have a view), counting is a powerful tool and the wise manager/analyst will learn not only how to count well, but also how to spot the distortions and errors of all those activists who use numbers as political weapons. In the other view (the one to which I am more inclined), we moderns have sadly misplaced our faith in numbers as a reflection of truth. The important things in life can't be counted, and when we try, we often send ourselves chasing after the wrong things and wind up farther from where we want to be.

Joel Best, an American sociology professor, articulates the first view. David Boyle, a British journalist, explores the second. Both books are staples of the crisis genre. For Best, there's a crisis of innumeracy, and like many teachers before him, he aims to solve it through education. His book is a primer on how to read statistics intelligently.

For Boyle, there's a "counting crisis" but it isn't innumeracy—it's the imperial triumph of ever-more narrow and reductionist social indicators, and the extinction of everything precious to human life. His book is a light but very engaging intellectual history of social measurement and its backlash.

Each author pays lip service to the other view. Best acknowledges that some things can't be counted, and that faulty measures in those cases are not the fault of stupid people. Boyle acknowledges that we need measurement and that counting has its place. But beyond lip service, they are each strong proponents of a certain view and their passion is what makes them such a good duet.

Best's nominal purpose is to teach readers how to "sort out the good statistics from the bad," and in that, he does a lovely job. He explains the major ways that statistics go wrong. Sometimes they are just guesses glorified as numbers. Sometimes they are based on kooky ways of definitions the thing to be counted. Sometimes they are based on lousy samples. Sometimes the measurement tool influences the thing (more often the people) it measures. And all too often, people draw conclusions by comparing measures that aren't strictly comparable. In a way, *Damned Lies and Statistics* is an update of Darrell Huff's classic, *How to Lie with Statistics*. It's chock full of examples from recent politics (abortion, child abuse, pollution) but even more interesting for political junkies, it pays attention to the ways advocates strategically craft and manipulate measures.

But *Damned Lies and Statistics* is only part textbook. It's also a morality play in which the role of virtue is played by good measurement. As the subtitle suggests, its villains are activists and media folk who miscount, distort, and disseminate bad numbers. Its apparently more minor villains are us, the public, the unwitting consumers of bad information who are made victims by our own innumeracy. Throughout the book a Calvinist voice constantly drones that counting well is hard work, requiring time, patience, thoughtfulness, and sometimes money.

The last chapter is literally a morality play. Best presents four kinds of people and how they relate to numbers. As in all such parables, he invites us readers and ordinary citizens to choose our moral character from among them. We can be like the Awestruck, for whom any number is a fetish; the Naive, who trust every number they encounter; or the Cynical, who are suspicious of all numbers. Or—drum roll for the virtuous heroic figure of all parables—we can be like the Critical, who "avoid the extremes" and ask lots of good questions, and have the fortitude to resist being "overwhelmed" by what seems like "an impossible amount of work."

A morality tale is an odd way to end a statistics primer, but the device makes *Damned Lies and Statistics* a perfect exemplar of Boyle's argument. Boyle is concerned with how counting has become a goal in itself, one that often transcends or displaces the other goals it is meant to serve. He intersperses chapters about conceptual problems in counting the uncountable with biographical chapters on the great thinkers who invented ways to do so. We learn about Jeremy Bentham's measure of happiness, Robert Malthus' quest for "moral statistics" that would tell us how to behave, Frederick Taylor's control of workers through productivity measurement, and John Maynard Keynes' vision of a single measure for national wealth. There's not much new in any of these portraits, but there is something marvelously fresh about rethinking these intellectual giants as all of a kind, as people who would reform the world through better measurement. For Boyle, what people decide to count is much more interesting than how they count it: "The self-portrait painted by any society isn't so much the figures they collect but the categories they think are important. Societies count what they fear, want, and need the most" (p. 63).

Boyle also shows how efforts to measure health, well-being, learning, national wealth, corporate ethics, and a host of other unmeasurables have often led to perverse results. He explores, though not very deeply, that mysterious phenomenon known to all policy observers: once we start counting something, we tend to find more of it. The book is much richer where Boyle analyzes how people have responded when they fail by their own measures. "If the targets fail, you get more targets" (p. 63). So for example, if customers feel alienated after a company centralizes its customer service with an automated call center, the company sets more targets, such as speed in answering calls. When people realize the mistakes of measures, they typically respond by counting something else, or just counting more. The book is loaded with examples of efforts to measure all the things GNP leaves out. Though Boyle doesn't take it up, Robert Putnam's quest to measure social capital is the latest wrinkle in this old genre.

The perversities of economic measurement tools come in for the greatest criticism in Boyle's book. Something's wrong when child-rearing doesn't count as a contribution to society but flipping burgers does. Something's wrong when oil spills and cancer count as positive contributions to society (which they do because of the economic value of the remedies). Here, too, Boyle doesn't say much that is new, but his synthesis of a lot of other critiques (E. F. Shumacher, E. J. Mishan, Helen Henderson, Marilyn Waring) gains power in the amalgamation.

Boyle's ending is strange, but in a different way than Best's. After a long critique of the folly of measurer's dreams, he hitches his wagon to another dreamer, Edgar Cahn, and his Time Dollar Movement. Cahn pioneered small, local barter economies whose currency is time. Members perform work for one another—anything from home repairs to lawyering to friendly chats on the telephone and grocery shopping. Everybody's contribution is valued at the flat rate of time invested. These systems have some wonderful social capital effects and some other very attractive features, but an economy that measured everything by time spent doing it would surely generate some weird perversities of its own. (Not the least of them is an aristocracy of those who don't need much sleep.) Boyle stops short of calling for a universal time economy, but in the end, the Time Dollar idea is the only constructive hope he offers.

Ultimately, Boyle is a moralist, too, but a moralist of a different kind. Best's mission is to reform our private morals. He aims to uplift our individual character by making us more numerate. Boyle's mission is to reform our public morals, the way we treat one another, and value each other in our social decisions. In our current ways of doing policy, the things money can't buy and accounting systems can't measure are driven out. Boyle wants to find ways to include them.

It's not a bad idea for policy analysts to step back once in while to contemplate the moral imperatives that drive our use of numbers. These two books make a great stimulus for such a retreat.

DEBORAH STONE is a Research Professor of Government at Dartmouth College.

Alasdair Roberts

Rethinking Democratic Accountability, by Robert D. Behn. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2001, 318 pp., \$18.95 paper, \$44.95 cloth.

Robert Behn is an astute commentator on the challenges of managing public agencies, with a gift for conveying his ideas in clear and clever prose. In *Rethinking*