

## Interpreting Numbered Subjects

RACHEL SEILER-SMITH

In *Trust in Numbers*, historian of science Theodore Porter argues that numbers are “first of all...strategies of communication” that work somewhat paradoxically as “technolog[ies] of distance”: “Since the rules for collecting and manipulating numbers are widely shared,” he writes, “they can easily be transported across oceans and continents...Perhaps most crucially ... quantitative manipulation minimizes the need for intimate knowledge and personal trust” (Porter ix). According to Porter, this is precisely the “working definition of objectivity”: a “set of strategies for dealing with distance and distrust” by excluding judgment, by “struggle[ing] against subjectivity” (ix). This is a term (“objectivity”) that hasn’t really come up in our discussions so far, though it and its apparent opposite (“subjectivity”) have been implicit in many of them. It is not a coincidence I think that our modern understanding of objectivity and subjectivity—of information we trust and that we do not—is a particularly eighteenth-century phenomenon (starting in the 1760s or so). Mary Poovey adds that numbers “have come to seem preinterpretive or even somehow noninterpretive” (Poovey xii). They were not always so, and aren’t really so now.

Indeed the problem with the objectivity thesis is that quantified knowledge is still constructed, and “reality [then comes to be] constructed from [that] artifice” (Poovey xii). Despite all appearances of abstraction, Poovey insists, “numbers are interpretive, for they embody theoretical assumptions about what should be counted, how one should understand material reality, and how quantification contributes to systemic knowledge about the world” (xii). Thus, despite all attempts to divorce numbers, datas, graphs, formulas from judgment, subjectivity or ethics, the credibility and use of numbers is, to quote Porter once more, “a social and moral problem” (11).

Porter and Poovey characterize the nineteenth century (and the 1830s in particular) as a sort of turning point. The three essays before us today work backwards from that point to provide texture to how we understand numbers during the Enlightenment: not only as producers of knowledge, but as problematizations of the types of value-judgments and actions extracted from such knowledge. In fact, all three essays contend in varying degrees with the threats inherent to the unchecked proliferation of numbers *as well as* of the entities those numbers count. In Feder and Roberts such threats come in the shape of mad mothers and un(re)productive slaves, while in Sheldon they manifest via epidemic. And all three authors link these threats to different social and moral problems: for Sheldon, early engagements with political arithmetic enable writers like Graunt and Defoe to “represent modern social space” without necessarily requiring a reader to witness it in person (206); for Feder, infinity discourse is a generational point for the Romantic sublime that enables us, in post-humanist fashion, to “recko[n] with the question of what transcends the human” (177); and for Roberts, “calculating and quantifying the value, productivity and reproductivity” of slaves acts as a “rationalizing...process” for exploitation (186).

According to our authors, quantification brings legible order to the experience of urban life on the one hand, while, on the other, it thrusts us beyond coherence, perhaps beyond intelligibility, to transcend human-centered notions of life. It is a technology of biopolitics that manages and contains, witnesses and navigates particular spaces, and it is an

aesthetic of infinite space. But the quantifying spirit can don a malevolent visage, too, as planters conjure it "to more systemically dehumanize the slaves" (198-199). Despite these distinctive characterizations of quantification, all three essays, when placed together, suggest that long eighteenth-century numeration relied on three key factors: context (that is, where and when the quantification takes place), application (the interpretation and use of the numbers), and credibility (the critical reception not just of numbers but the conclusions about said numbers).

Eighteenth-century anecdotist Joseph Spence asserts that Isaac Newton, when asked about "the continuance of the rising of South Sea stock," replied that he could pretty much calculate the movement of stars but "that he could not calculate the madness of people" (368). We are encountering a moment where numerical data is more crucial than ever for staving off the madness of the people *and, at the same time*, a common target of skepticism from the maddening crowd (at times I am not sure whether I am talking about the Enlightenment or 2017). It seems to me, though, that Newton's alleged point ought to feature in our discussion of these essays: for the quantifying spirit may well take the shape of the "objective" shoulder angel of Enlightenment thought, but people's interpretive approach to numbers and quantification appear equally important to our conversations about number, weight, scale. So I want to invite all three authors to "weigh in" on interpretation—both in terms of their own methods for making sense of numbers in history and in terms of how interpretive practice plays into the records they're examining here.

And lastly, I have individual questions for each of our authors. For Rachel, I invite her to provide a bit more context about *how* "infinity" was working with Enlightenment. And I ask because while your reading of Wordsworth's mad mother is rich and fascinating, I wasn't quite sure about the connection. Because as I understand it, "infinity" applies when a quantity is so vast that it can't be counted, but both Wordsworth and mothers count *a lot*. When we do talk about crowds, masses, mobs—things that are notoriously hard to quantify—are they really "infinite" or just difficult to count? Malthus's idea of the finitude of resources does mean that the apparent infinite threat of possible population growth does, in fact, have a very finite end. I am wondering if what you are describing isn't "overflow"—and if calling that "infinity" isn't maybe problematic? For Justin: you write that "energy... humane" toward end—I just wanted to call attention to "still," which seems to be drawing a line between humane governance and biopolitics. My own understanding has always been that the technologies of biopolitics are rationalized by arguments that they "optimize" and hence contribute to the greater good, so I was hoping you could speak to that and how these planters imagined what they were doing, what sense they made of these strategies? And, finally, for Ryan: Your essay focuses on order and its centrality to Defoe's and Graunt's thinking about numbers in plague time, but I want to return to "disorder"—especially because I consider *Journal of a Plague Year* to be really remarkable in its disorderliness. Despite being confined to London and the surrounding villages, the words are really chaotic, in a way that doesn't at all match, for instance, Pepys's very methodical prose. And at another point, he writes (in a proto-Malthusian moment) that plague and fire and famine might actually be good for London. So I am wondering if government doesn't in some ways thrive on disorder. So are these political arithmeticians embracing a fantasy of order (and do they understand it *as* a fantasy?) or is there something else going on?