

## BOOK REVIEW

Kevin E. Davis, Angelina Fisher, Benedict Kingsbury and Sally Engle Merry (eds.), *Governance by Indicators. Global Power through Quantification and Rankings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 491 pp. 2012.

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As many academics, I first became aware of the growing use of numerical indicators in governance as a result of power struggles within academe about what constitutes fair assessment tools for individuals, programs and schools. In Canada, university administrators quickly implemented the new tool of quantifiable 'performance evaluation' and the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) rapidly launched a counter attack. As part of that counter attack, Bruneau and Savage published *Counting Out the Scholars* in 2002. This book compared the experiences of Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand in the implementation of numerical performance indicators in their post secondary institutions, and argued that, in similar fashion to these other countries, Canadian universities were losing their autonomy under the guise of accountability. Other assessments of the impact of this governance approach in universities followed (Shore 2008). Meanwhile, increasing numbers of scholars developed a research interest in these 'audit cultures' and the audit application in ever increasing areas of social life. In fact, numerical indicators, as this book amply illustrates, have become the new favorite tool in governance technologies of power.

The contributors to this volume cover a range of applications for quantification through indicators in both the private and the public realm. Applications discussed in the book include: education, human rights, designation of 'fragile states', international rankings of banking practices, immunization coverage as an indicator of health care systems, justice systems, human trafficking, humanitarian aid, and more. The book is divided into five parts, namely: (1) indicators as technologies of knowledge production and global governance; (2) indicators, power and authority; (3) the relationship between local and global in indicator production and use; (4) case studies, particularly in human rights and humanitarian assistance and (5) regulating indicators. The five parts include a total of 18 chapters.

The introduction by Davis, Kingsbury and Merry provides an excellent review of the way in which the contributors use “a power-knowledge framework” to study the effects of quantification and indicators. As they point out, the contributors find useful theoretical fodder in law and power studies in global governance, in the new governance literature with its focus on networks and learning, the theoretical writings on quantification and indicators, and in science and technology studies including actor network theory. The introduction also lays out the working definition of indicators for the volume, and illustrates the way that indicators are portrayed as neutral and value free measures of real properties, when in fact they are social constructs. The salient features of these social constructs are:

- (1) the significance of the name of the indicator and the associated assertion of its power to define and represent a phenomenon such as ‘the rule of law’;
- (2) the ordinal structure enabling comparison and ranking and exerting pressure for ‘improvement’ as measured by the indicator;
- (3) the simplification of complex social phenomena; and
- (4) the potential to be used for evaluative purposes (p. 7).

Indicators set standards. They make a theoretical claim about the appropriate standards for evaluating conduct, and in the process also make a claim about the appropriate person or body for both setting those standards and deciding when they have not been met. This is particularly important, as the introduction points out, in the context of expanding “global governance”, which is conceptualized as engaging a complex mix of both private and public agents.

Each of the contributors assesses how indicators work in the exercise of power over large numbers of geographically dispersed actors, employing technical expertise to ‘govern from a distance’. In the first section of the book, Tom Büthe, for example, uses case studies from other contributors to illustrate the “political-economy model of the supply and demand for indicators”. His useful contribution expands the ‘stakeholders’ involved into four relevant sets and explores the interaction between them. Von Bogdany and Goldmann use a public law perspective to explore the implications of the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) evaluations and rankings by the OECD, and in particular the “clumsy” ranking that rated country performance against other countries (p. 53). Espeland and Sauder, on the other hand, take a sociological perspective on the way that indicators take on a life that may go beyond anything intended by their promulgators. Their examples are drawn from US law school rankings, transnational rankings of business schools, and world university rankings. Their

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examples are particularly useful for understanding the “reactivity” of indicators (p. 95) or the ways in which they cause people to change their behavior in response to being measured or evaluated – often in ways that change the rankings rather than improving their institutions. Shamir and Weiss utilize actor network theory to track the emergence and reach of indicators of corporate assumption of responsibility for human rights. Their work shows how indicators tend to generate secondary and even third-tiered indicators increasingly abstracted from and irrelevant to the reality they purport to measure. Nehal Bhuta contributes an explicitly diachronic perspective while tracking the development of international standards of state fragility, a process that was intimately caught up in power struggles between nations over the direction of development interventions.

The contributors to Part II of the book use “social science methodologies to investigate how power and authority are exercised by and through indicators” (p. 23). Pistor, for example, tracks how country risk rankings developed by a private agent on the basis of a narrow set of indicators for use of corporate investors, was adopted by public multilateral agents in order to measure ‘development success’. The original creators of the measurements enthusiastically endorsed this adoption despite the broadening of the indicator mandates. In a similar assessment of the market for agency impact, Halliday examines attempts by inter-governmental financial institutions to measure and rank the quality of national laws on commerce and banking and traces how these efforts get caught up in the competition between such institutions as they compete to control development policy. Fisher studies immunization coverage and the use of coverage indicators by WHO/UNICEF to determine funding allocations. The proxy measure use of these indicators to evaluate ‘good governance’ went far beyond their purported scope but filled a measurement gap created when previous measures created an international uproar.

Contributors to Part III of the book examine the dynamics between and among global, regional and local indicators, and the way that these acquire and confer authority through the policy process. Uruña, for example, refers to the use of indicators to track numbers and circumstances of “internationally displaced persons” – a concept loaded with meaning relating to national boundaries and belonging. Where the numbers come from locally, and how they get picked up by global actors, only to reappear in the Columbian media, gives us some idea of the power of numbers to travel well. Unlike many of the other contributors, who express a lot of uneasiness about the indicator process, Stone wonders if it is possible to produce bottom-up ‘active’ indicators that are ‘real time’ and thus valuable in making assessments. He uses cases from policing and from pre-trial

detention to explore this possible ‘real time’ generation of more valid indicators.

In Part IV of the book, contributors consider the role of indicators in law, human rights and humanitarian governance. Rosga and Satterthwaite explore the ways in which indicators on human rights have been extensively criticized, but they nevertheless argue for the potential for some indicators to play a valuable role in pressing for change. Gallagher and Chuang explore the role of the US State Department in trying to generate indicators that could be used to assess the scope and impact of human trafficking. They argue that this unilateral attempt, when placed within the wider context of multilateral failures to reach agreement on effective criteria, can be viewed as providing an important public good. Zaloznaya and Hagan, on the other hand, express concerns about how the anti-trafficking agenda has been used by the authoritarian Belarus government to deny young students the freedom to travel abroad. This raises the issue of the use of indicators in authoritarian contexts, although I would argue that the concern is implicit in all contributions to this volume. Legitimate counting can quickly turn to authoritarian uses and abuses. Satterthwaite also provides a case study drawn from humanitarian relief in Haiti and the role of self-generated NGO standards, used to maintain legitimacy for the NGO industry. The application of these standards in humanitarian interventions, however, produced unintended outcomes such as restricting the number of people to be assisted in order to meet minimum assistance standards. Dadush explores the ways in which the market is responding to philanthropic concerns (social impact investing) by providing standards and rankings for investment dollars. She explores both the advantages and disadvantages of this system but also notes how it is creating a universal approach to and language of global markets that can be imposed on small players.

In Part V of the book, contributors consider in what ways indicators might themselves be subjected to regulation. Dutta focuses on market mechanisms and returns to the idea of supply and demand for indicators in order to explore observed levels of accountability in sets of indicators: those applied to private country risk guides for corporate use and the minorities at risk project developed by academics. In the final chapter, Cassese and Casini discuss arguments for and against the regulation of a number of different global indicators with a case study drawn from credit ratings. They attempt to separate out cases where regulation of indicators may be counterproductive, from those where some regulation of indicators and their use may be valuable.

The overall structure of this volume is not always intuitive, the separation into

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parts not always inherent in the contributions, but the overall contribution of the book is strong, both in academic and practical terms. The index is well-developed and my only quibble with the book is the lack of a references cited section that could easily be trolled for further reading. As I am currently involved in a research project that explores the use of indicators in providing “report cards” on particular Canadian fisheries, the volume was fascinating to me in the depth of the case studies, in the care and attention paid to the role of indicators as technologies of power and knowledge, and in the insightful warnings of the life indicators can have independent of any intentions on the part of those who constructed them. Readers with similar research interests will find this an extremely valuable book.

### References

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