

Agnès Labrousse*Poor Numbers: Statistical Chains and the Political Economy of Numbers*

Morten Jerven's *Poor Numbers* sheds light on the acute fragility of African statistics, itself linked to the precarious conditions in which aggregates are produced. As patchy and problematic as they are, these numbers are nevertheless ubiquitous as instruments of proof and tools of government. Quantified fictions take shape in complex statistical chains that stretch from their producers to the economists who use them, and are mediated by international organizations. Focusing on the criterion of accuracy, *Poor Numbers* powerfully conveys its message of "garbage in, garbage out," but leaves important questions related to the relevance of statistics unanswered. The history, sociology, and political economy of numbers sketched by Jerven merit closer consideration with a view to the following: identifying the connections between evolving state forms and the development of statistics; establishing a historical ethnography of the organizations that produce and use numbers; understanding the growing role of multinationals in the political economy of statistics; taking a less conciliatory view of the involvement of international organizations; and, last but not least, denaturalizing the dominant economic categories by integrating the plurality of economic approaches to statistics. The article concludes with a call for a comparative political economy of numbers that would no longer consider the African case in isolation, and would work against the idea that Africa has not entered statistical history, or has only done so "by mistake."

Denis Cogneau*The Economic History of Africa: Renaissance or False Dawn?*

Though it is currently benefiting from a renewal of interest, the economic history of Africa raises intense methodological controversies that are echoed in two books recently published by Morten Jerven, *Poor Numbers* and *Africa: Why Economists Get It Wrong*. A large proportion of these controversies relate more generally to the differences between economists and historians, at least in terms of their dominant practices. In its quest for the institutional "fundamentals" of economic development, much research in this field is content to work with a summary and imperfect base of data, an approach that Jerven is right to criticize. Analyses often suffer from an insufficient knowledge of social contexts, and compress historical time between a "before" and a "now." They also rely on debatable statistical assumptions. Nevertheless, though extant archives present limitations that are both qualitative (the sources are predominantly colonial) and quantitative, a modest renaissance remains a possibility and would offer more space for better controlled comparative analyses.

Boris Samuel

Studying Africa's Large Numbers

Morten Jerven's work offers a historical perspective on the techniques used by national administrations and international organizations to quantify and analyze the growth of African economies. In his view, the work of statisticians and economists has largely failed to account for national economic and social realities since the beginning of the structural adjustment period. The informalization of economies, the weakness of statistical institutions, and the lack of methodological rigor among international experts have led to the production of statistical fictions. Jerven's analysis calls into question the usual narratives produced by quantitative economic history, such as that of an African economic failure since 1960. It also opens a dialogue with the sociology of quantification, highlighting cases where growth calculations appear arbitrary. However, his methodology suffers from a number of weaknesses. While his earliest works were based on detailed national case studies, Jerven's recent analyses have focused on the critique of continent-wide discourses, in particular international comparisons and econometric studies of growth. His work has thus moved away from a careful ethnography of numbers toward a focus on the denunciation of global practices. This shift prevents the author from making precise reflections on the various roles of numbers in African societies, the multiple positions and modes of action that quantification engages, or the specific historical trajectories which calculations of African growth are supposed to represent.

Daniel Nordman

 Of Space and Time: On a *History of Morocco*

The *Histoire du Maroc* edited by Mohamed Kably is a monumental collaborative work involving more than fifty authors, all, with only one exception, Moroccan. It is thus a de facto "Moroccanized" history (though not excessively so) and the synthesis that it presents marks an important milestone. This article will nevertheless suggest some alternative thematic or transversal structures while also highlighting some of the volume's guiding threads: the initial geographical tableau, the periodization, its vision of historical origins and antiquity, the "plural" nature of Morocco and its relationship with the exterior world. In terms of the overall tone of the volume, it is necessary to evaluate its place in the broader historiographical context today. Other recent studies have revealed an oscillation between two scales, the one tending toward oversimplified generalities (the Middle Ages, the modern period), the other toward what has sometimes seemed an excessive focus on the specific and the exceptional. The *Histoire du Maroc* handles these debates with cautious discretion as they run through its chapters in a light filigree; it is a useful tool, pedagogic and accessible to a large and diverse public because it is neither intransigent nor polemical. Hard to reduce to particular historical currents, it is a scholarly work, an example of reasoned academic study. It is based on actual knowledge, without preconceived boundaries, and will remain a reference, scholarly, experimental, and pragmatic. It seems most unlikely, after the publication of this volume, that the history of Morocco will need to be rewritten over again.

Jean-Louis Fabiani

From the Arts to Action Theory: The Sociological Work of Pierre-Michel Menger

This article is an attempt to show the originality of Pierre-Michel Menger's sociological work through the study of his theoretical trajectory. A useful starting point can be found at the

fruitful intersection between the analysis of professions and the justification of public policies. For instance, contemporary serious music depends on public subsidies even though there is as yet no public demand for it. The actors involved must make decisions about the future in an uncertain world, a theme that serves as the guiding thread of Menger's major book, *Le travail créateur*. How should sociology consider the uncertainty that rules inter-individual adjustments? That is the task that an innovative social science must undertake. Menger does not import economic reasoning into his sociology, but confronts these approaches while maintaining a critical tension between them, a position that sets him apart from the partisans of rational choice theory. Menger's research program is ambitious, but two questions remain: What is the status of history within the model under construction? And how can we obtain a clearer vision of the concept of talent, which often remains a black box?