



“HE HAS FOUR LACKEYS” GOVERNANCE BY NUMBERS AND ITS LIMITATIONS

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This paper contribution represents an attempt to approach the issue of numbers from the two angles which define my work – the two sides of the coin. Those two perspectives are *management sciences*, a discipline with which readers of this journal are perhaps not entirely familiar (although few among us are truly spared by the ever-expanding empire of management), and *philosophy*, with particular reference to Blaise Pascal.

Essentially, the question I seek to address is the following: how do we access the ‘truth’ in contemporary organizations? What is the preferred mode of access when it comes to determining whether an organization is doing well or doing badly? The response will come as no surprise: numbers. Numbers in the form of quantitative evaluations, numerical data, headcounts, numbers of arrests made by a police force, turnover figures, number of tickets sold for a new movie, number of publications for people in our line of work, net profit for business managers, etc. This phenomenon has reached such proportions that social scientists have dubbed it ‘calculocracy’ [DE GAULEJAC, 2012] or even ‘quantophobia’ [SOROKIN, 1956], ironic terms coined to describe the dominance of figures and numericity over all other values within contemporary organizations.

This belief that we can get at the essential truth of an organization via its numbers, a sort of Pythagorean dream, is a phenomenon which can be fairly precisely situated within the history of *organization studies*. As Votadoro notes [VOTADORO, 2016], the passion for numbers and systematically using figures to assess every aspect of business originated in large firms applying the principles of Taylor’s scientific management to their production operations, focused on notions of yield and the division (a mathematical operation) of labor. Frank Bunker Gilbreth, one of Taylor’s most zealous disciples, summarised this position in a characteristically bullish declaration: ‘We live in the age of measurement’ [SUPIOT, 2017 : 120]. This trend was subsequently amplified by the influence of ‘management by objectives’ [DRUCKER, 1954]. In this system each worker is given a numerical target, assessed where possible using an evaluation table, which allows for regular monitoring of the gap between the objectives set and the results obtained. The practice of holding individual evaluations has become widespread, although as Dujarier observes:

As far as I am aware there is no scientific research, based on empirical analysis, which proves the worth or benefits of these evaluation systems. The few management science texts which do address this subject are more concerned with criticising its abuses and economic ineffectiveness, for example in the context of ‘new public management’. [DUJARIER : 148]

This general method has since spread beyond the confines of large companies to infiltrate the major public-sector organizations (in the guise of New Public Management indeed) as well as global 'governance' more broadly. Even Nation States are subject to numerical targets (structural readjustments by order of the IMF, UN Millennium Goals *etc.*) There are a raft of independent bodies, such as the rating agencies, ready to assess a country's performance and determine whether or not it has abided by the rules. Furthermore, Chelli & Gendron have clearly demonstrated that even *sustainability rating agencies*, supposed to take into account the qualitative aspects of policy decisions, are in fact in thrall to an 'ideology of numbers' which the authors describe as 'narrow-minded [CHELLI & GENDRON : 187], relying on the supposed authority of figures to legitimate their analyses. It is as if, to borrow Berland's phrase, 'the heart of the company is no longer the products it makes, but the financial image it presents', regardless of its field of activity [BERLAND : 74]. He supports this assertion with reference to the progressive financialization of business, citing a number of historical examples.¹ The phenomenon of financialization has developed and spread in several successive stages since the 1960s, via the oil crisis (and the ensuing budget cuts), the subsequent pre-eminence of value creation in business discourse (with its emphasis on the importance of predicting flows) and the emergence of new performance indicators such as EBITDA, EVA and EBIT. As Supiot puts it, after decades of creeping financialization it should come as little surprise that even the tools used to manage human resources are couched in terminology derived from banking (skills 'audits', paid leave 'accounts') [SUPIOT, 2017].

The march of quantitative measurement systems in the world of work over the past few decades has not been without its critics. Faced with this inflation, which has even spread to the world of academia (via university rankings, the Shanghai table, the pressure to publish in certain 'prestigious' journals, the end-of-term questionnaires asking students to rate their teachers *etc.*), some researchers in philosophy and the other humanities have attempted to call attention to the risks posed to our social model at large. As Dujarier observes, this numbers-focused ideology has been variously described as 'an inverted vision of reality' [DUJARIER : 154] 'voluntary servitude', 'false neutrality'² and even 'government by technology' by authors as varied as Desrosières [DESROSIÈRES, 2000], Power [POWER, 1999] and Agamben [AGAMBEN, 2007].

This constant evaluation of processes and people also shapes the way we see ourselves. The quantified self or 'auto-analytics', sometimes considered a positive phenomenon in management science [WILSON, 2012], is in some respects an agglomeration of the wealth of numerical data available to us, allowing us to improve our performance in the way that elite athletes track their training results in order to keep progressing. The quantified self is a revealing consequence, and perhaps the logical culmination, of the professional world's constant obsession with quantitative evaluation [BLADT & FILBIN, 2014]. With the help of embedded software tools, primarily stored on our smartphones, these new programs for analysing personal data are supposed to help us take the right decisions (including career choices) at the right moment [WILSON, 2012], cutting out any interference from extraneous influences such as intuition, personal reflection or collective deliberation.

In this article, I hope to tease out some of the implications of this tyranny of numbers, in order to better respond to the key question posed by Supiot: *'That which was once expressed in words is now*

¹ See also MENNICKEN & POWER and MILLER & O'LEARY.

² The neutrality of numbers may well hold true when it comes to describing the movement of the stars, but it is of no relevance to the description of human behavior. Human beings, unlike the stars, react to the information they are given and adapt their behavior accordingly. [...] Figures do not contain some essential truth which exists independently of any frame of reference; they implicitly bear the influence of human choices (the reference framework used, the timeframe considered, the way information is presented, the intended audience, *etc.*). [CHAROLLES : 101]

expressed in numbers. But at what cost? Under the tyranny of numbers, there is absolutely nothing which cannot be measured through calculation. It therefore falls to us to question the seemingly self-evident primacy of numbers, or of numbers as evidence, and specifically the quantophrenic use of quantitative data as a manner of dodging the truly fundamental questions facing organizations, questions which can surely not be reduced to a simple calculation. Managerial imagination [DESLANDES, 2017], solidarity between colleagues, identity and respect for certain shared values are all of incalculable value to organizations. And yet there is always the risk, in Bernard Stiegler's expression, or 'calculation destroying the incalculable' [STIEGLER, 2006].

1. *Governing by numbers*

To begin our critical reading of the growing power of calculocracy within organizations, we need to ask ourselves a simple question: are we right or wrong to pilot our organizations using statistical dashboards, thus allowing the figures to take charge? In Alain Supiot's view, the increasingly widespread use of the term 'governance' can be directly linked to the growing power of figures in contemporary society, a pre-eminence achieved at the expense of the law. Supiot is a legal scholar specializing in the labor market, and he considers governance to be a socio-economic system based on calculation. In this system, the law itself is superseded by calculations of utility. And yet, somewhat surprisingly, Supiot cites the socio-economic system of the former Soviet Union as the first failed experiment in governance by numbers:

Generally speaking, in seeking to ascertain when and how the dictatorship of figures first reveals its limitations, the Soviet example suggests that the critical moment occurs when the principle of reality makes a comeback. The USSR did not succumb to a foreign invasion: it crumbled when the disparity between the real world and its numerical representation became untenable. The system reached its crisis point. [Qtd. in CHIAPELLO, 2015]

The normative order of the USSR was indeed rooted in figure-heavy five-year plans (issued by the Gosplan committee), which dictated the conditions of economic life. But this 'dream of harmony' through calculations has since become the preserve of liberal democracies, which have also adopted economic calculations as the primary regulating force of their political systems. Muller astutely describes the seductive power which the culture of results exerts upon the workings of democracy: our modern Western societies consider themselves to be meritocratic, revealing a natural penchant for the culture of numbers which promises to facilitate the creation of objective procedures for selecting the most deserving individuals [MULLER, 2015].

In Supiot's view, however, the problem with current modes of governance – in the international political, public and private spheres – is that they are founded exclusively on a quantitative approach to problems, even with regard to cultural and civilizational values which are, by definition, unquantifiable. Supiot cites as an example the way that economic thinking has invaded contemporary attitudes to the practice of law, while also soaking up influences from certain theories of management such as game theory, and which by definition 'would leave no room for somebody like Jean Moulin, nor anybody else who, for better or for worse, holds certain values to be more important than their own life' [SUPIOT, 2017 : 192]. But, as he is at pains to point out, 'it is not mathematics which governs the alliances formed by humans, it is the need to strike a balance between the differences in our labors and the similarity of their needs' [116].

Governance by numbers thus emerges as a system in which self-referentiality and 'evidence' are prioritized even in situations which would be better understood with other tools and methods, methods which might enable political and economic decision-making to integrate unmeasurable

factors such as, for example, basic human dignity [PALMER, 2011]. As Kant noted, human dignity in its most profound moral sense lends itself poorly to numerical evaluation, even when this evaluation is intended to be neutral and objective [CHAROLLES : 101].

2. *Digitalization and algorithmic governmentality: analyzing a few contemporary trends*

Central to Supiot's thesis is his contention that, ultimately, workers have become simply another category of data alongside the various other measurable quantities which make up modern organizations. And this data can be programmed in much the same way as any other management system or feedback-based learning programme.

As Sadin makes clear, the proliferation of algorithms and their infinite capacity for high-speed calculation, along with the optimization of related processes, represents the next great challenge for all management disciplines, fuelling the rise of 'governance by numbers' [SADIN, 2015]. Faced with this new form of *thirst for knowledge*, are we doomed to become, to borrow Cardon's expression, 'little mechanical mice in the claws of the calculators?' [CARDON : 69-70] Or, as we confront this deluge of data, should we share the optimism of Silicon Valley guru Chris Anderson and seize the opportunity to definitively discard the complexity of academic disciplines in favor of the clarity of mathematical calculations and the primacy of the *matheme*?

In terms of leadership, for example, will we maybe soon find it more acceptable to be directed by a courteous software programme using artificial intelligence to provide a constant stream of personalized advice, tailored to our past experiences and requiring absolutely no effort, rather than by a grumpy and incompetent human boss? Harari gives this example of a Hong Kong-based firm which appointed the *Vital* trading algorithm to its board of directors [HARARI, 2016]. Along with the other members of the board, the algorithm is invited to give its opinion on potential investments being considered by this venture capital firm, forming its judgments based on mountains of data which no other member can ever hope to analyse thoroughly. Algorithmic governmentality is also 'behavioralist' by definition: it observes past behavior in order to extract lessons for the present and future. This behavioralism is not, however, without its downsides [CARDON]. For example, the fact that authority is measured solely on the basis of popularity, and the distorting effects of digital filtering: users find themselves trapped within bubbles of their own creation, as the system presents them with options based entirely on their own past choices. These calculations are based on the assumption that individuals will necessarily agree with their friends, and that their future will naturally be an extension of their past. As Martin and Golsby-Smith also remind us:

Steve Jobs, Steve Wozniak, and other computing pioneers created a brand-new device that revolutionized how people interacted and did business. The railroad, the motor car, and the telephone all introduced enormous behavioral and social shifts that an analysis of prior data could not have predicted. [MARTIN & GOLSBY-SMITH : 130]

The second problem is what Stiegler calls 'the proletarianization of the elites' within the computational economy, *i.e.* the decline of human knowledge in relation to the machines.¹ Stiegler contrasts this phenomenon with the old concept of 'pauperization'. He defines the (new) proletariat as all those, both managers and managed, who are no longer the bearers of essential knowledge, but are the 'useful' tools of systems of control whose power far surpasses their own. At a fundamental level, the proletarianization of the individual in the workplace reflects the inability of that which cannot be

¹ See also CRAWFORD, 2009.

standardized (*i.e.* the workers) to wrest back control from that which is (the machine). But, as Stiegler makes clear, work is only meaningful if we are capable of stepping back from its inherited automatisms, to take or take back the initiative, to disengage from the systems. He summarizes the risks inherent to our current situation thus:

The connected beings which most of us are becoming are calculated by algorithms which always march ahead, making us auxiliaries of the system [...] The problem is that, once they are subjected to these calculations, connected beings are de-individualised, 'averaged', as Gilles Châtelet has demonstrated, losing the heteronomy which they once brought to the system (heteronomy from the perspective of the system, but which to them constituted autonomy). And so the system tends irresistibly towards entropy, because it is structurally self-referential. [STIEGLER : 127-128]

This analysis appears to challenge the image of 'excellence' to which many business organizations lay claim. We may also draw comparisons with the concept of 'functional stupidity' described by Alvesson and Spicer [ALVESSON & SPICER, 2016]. Looking beyond the optimistic declarations of businesses and their unerring faith in 'science parks', 'innovation zones' and 'knowledge clusters', the authors define organizational stupidity as a tendency to narrow employees' field of vision. They consider this to be a three-step process: the first stage is a lack of personal self-awareness, with individuals incapable of questioning the dominant assumptions. In the second phase, workers no longer ask why they must perform certain actions; such impertinent questions are subsumed by respect for the hierarchical order or organizational taboos. In the third phase, individuals no longer worry about the consequences of their action beyond their own immediate purview. They thus limit their capacity for reasoned judgement to its strict minimum, focusing purely on the technical dimension of their actions. There can be no doubt that all three stages of this process are facilitated by the complexity of the algorithms used in contemporary organizations, working in ways that are simply incomprehensible to the great majority of users while continuing to offer great ease of use.

The self-referentiality criticized by Stiegler also has serious consequences for the ethical dimension of management. This is the third major problem. Algorithms are simply incapable of comprehending the human capacity to change direction, demonstrate cunning or make decisions on moral grounds. They cannot understand that companies, businesses, organizations and institutions sometimes need to *break out of the hierarchies by which they are bound* [CARDON]. Algorithms are only interested in tracking and archiving our actions, compiling a never-ending record of our past behavior. As such they are totally incapable of feeling regret for mistakes, or demonstrating moral imagination [WERHANE, 2002]. Numbers can tell us much about the way the world is, but they tell us next to nothing about how the world should be. Ultimately, computational processes may predict the future on our behalf, but they cannot judge whether or not that future is desirable: 'they can analyse the way things are going without grasping what that means; they can contribute to science but they cannot achieve consciousness' [DE BRABANDÈRE : 122].

3. The strength of numbers in the work of Blaise Pascal

As we seek to follow in the footsteps of Alain Supiot, are we perhaps too harsh on those for whom numbers are unquestionably a governing force, or the means by which we should aspire to govern? This is perhaps the appropriate juncture for a *skolia*, or at least a few brief and critical remarks concerning the ideas outlined above.

As the basis for this reflection, I propose one of the shortest of Pascal's *Pensées*, found in the bundle of papers collected under the title 'Diversion': 'He has four lackeys' [PASCAL : 318]. Pascal's reference to four lackeys is a matter of strength in numbers, and a suggestion that acknowledging this

strength allows us to live in peace. He has more lackeys than I do, and we are thus separated by a numerical distinction which enables us to coexist peacefully.

The notion of strength occupies an important place in the work of Pascal, who writes elsewhere that ‘it is necessary for strength to be obeyed’. This strength in numbers, or strength as number, the ultimate source of strength, is what Pascal calls ‘plurality’. On this subject I am greatly indebted to the work of Thirouin¹ and in particular to his study which has been published in the latest issue of the *Chroniques de Port-Royal*.

In this article, entitled ‘The Republic and numbers: Pascal as philosopher of plurality’, he conducts a ‘lexicographical enquiry’ in order to justify and comprehend the use of the term ‘plurality’. The *Dictionnaire de l’Académie* published in 1694 defines it as ‘the greatest quantity, the greatest number; The plurality of votes, to decide a matter by plurality of votes’. In the seventeenth century the term ‘majority’ was used only to refer to the age of legal emancipation, the official transition to adulthood. It is also interesting to note, as Thirouin does, that the lexicographer ‘Littre’ was firmly against this lexicographical innovation (the replacement of the term ‘plurality’, whose meaning is now more or less the opposite of what it was in the Port-Royal era, by the term ‘majority’) and he notes that: ‘Nowadays one almost exclusively hears the term majority used in this context, an adoption of the English usage which in turn was originally derived from French, although over time it has become detached from its original meaning and usurped that of plurality; it was therefore wrong of us to abandon our former, excellent term’. Majority is therefore an Anglicism, albeit an Anglicism of an existing French word, which has succeeded in imposing itself instead of plurality in matters pertaining to votes, decisions and governance. We used to elect candidates by a plurality of votes; we now govern by majority. Thirouin also notes that ‘there is a tendency in English-language political discourse, particularly in America, to use the two terms *plurality* and *majority*, referring respectively to the relative majority and the absolute majority’ [THIROUIN, 2018].

Might we read this as a prescient riposte to modern critiques of ‘governance by numbers’? Should we shift our point of view, and accept that if any social force can be converted into numerical power, then governance by numbers is in fact the only possible solution? Is it possible to escape the numerical force of plurality (as per the definition in the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie*)? And if so, how?

In fact Pascal appeared to consider the power of numbers to be an inevitable, and regrettable, result of the lack of discernment. While plurality/majority may be ‘the best way’, he is at pains to add that it is also the path of least intelligence. Pascal also has one eye on those who do not represent the truth, and yet ‘invoke numbers in their favor’ and the dominance of plurality (the Jesuits, in his opinion).

4. Discussion: restoring a certain ‘biodiversity’ to evaluations

Ignorance of ‘events’, proletarianization of elites and a chronic lack of imagination: such are the risks inherent to algorithmic governmentality. All of which means that modern management is faced with a lack of control (black swans), a lack of autonomy (proletarianization) and a lack of purpose (meaning and imagination). These three elements – control, autonomy and purpose – are precisely the factors which Deci, Ryan and Pink [DECI & RYAN, 2006] identify as the defining conditions for motivation at work [MAUGERI, 2004]. But capitalism runs on motivation; without motivation, it will stall [STIEGLER 2006 : 87].

¹ L. Thirouin, 2018.

With *desaffectio societatis* and *bore-out* becoming endemic [DESLANDES, 2016 & 2017], perhaps we should begin by looking at the declining motivation of managers. For Stiegler, rekindling professional desire is only possible via a ‘process of individuation’ for managers and employees, fighting back against the high-performance calculation capacities in which contemporary capitalism has placed such faith but which actually ‘create an economy in which the incalculable is destroyed by the calculable, and which thus destroys itself’ [STIEGLER 2015 : 91]. Only a form of ‘renewable energy for the libido’ is capable of overcoming this situation, an energy which cannot rely on calculability as its sole measure of value. It is the responsibility of management science to make room for freedom, self-reflection, morality and participation in the setting of goals, all demands regularly expressed by employees. Management cannot afford to neglect ‘inestimable’ factors such as ‘compassion on a hospital ward, intellectual curiosity in teaching, clients’ trust in commercial relationships, the long-term performance of a technical solution *etc.*’ [DUJARIER : 145 ; CUGUERO-ESCOFET & ROSANAS, 2017]. With this goal in mind, I propose to describe a potential avenue for restoring the degree of autonomy and control which individuals demand from their work by re-establishing a certain ‘biodiversity’ of evaluation methods.

To make that point I would like to insist upon is the tendency to forget, in relation to governance by numbers, the original definition of management (or proto-management) [DESLANDES, 2020]. This definition was proposed by Aristotle, who clearly distinguishes between *chrematistics*, a form of practical wisdom, and *sophrosyne*, an ideal virtue [DESLANDES, 2012]. But this prudence, taken up by influential authors such as Peter Drucker [DRUCKER, 1954] and translated into terms applicable to the methodology of results-based management, seems to have been forgotten in more recent times. And yet, it seems abundantly clear that this prudence, the importance of experience combined with a capacity for balanced judgement, has been replaced by an unbending faith in figures. As Hannah Arendt presciently remarked in the early 1970s, professional problem-solvers do not think, they calculate [ARENDR, 1972]. Arendt was referring to the way in which American politicians justified their decision to prolong the Vietnam War using statistical data, which appeared to back them up, but masked a total ignorance of the situation on the ground and the nature of the enemy.

This unshakeable faith in figures ‘goes hand-in-hand with a terrible loss of trust in the capacity of human beings to make reasonable judgements’ [CHIAPELLO *et al.*, 183]. And yet, managers are supposed to be able to trust their ‘feeling’ about people and things, to ‘weigh up’ situations, to gauge and analyse tensions and take action accordingly. Dujarier examines this contradiction:

Current methods of evaluation attempt to distil this capacity for judgement, asking professionals, in a ‘participatory’ manner, to explain how they make judgements, listing the pertinent criteria and indicators, the checking procedures, the type of attention required by different people and things, the regularity of their checks, and the manner in which the information is to be interpreted. [DUJARIER : 142].

But the question of balance is central to this form of virtue, which Aristotle conceives in terms of *phronesis*: the challenge is to avoid doing too much or not enough, depending on the objectives in play. A prudent manager is wary of spurious infinity, and shuns *hubris* and excess. That also means acknowledging the notion of non-commensurability. Sen offers a pertinent analysis of this last point:

Anyone who has ever gone to shop would know that one has to choose between non-commensurable objects – mangoes cannot be measured in units of apples, nor can sugar be reduced to units of soap (though I have heard some parents tell me that the world would have been much better if that were the case). Non-commensurability can hardly be a remarkable discovery in the world in which we live. And it need not, by itself, make it very hard to choose sensibly. For example, having a

medical intervention and enjoying a visit to a foreign country are two quite non-commensurate achievements, but a person may not have much problem in deciding which would be more valuable in her condition, and that judgement may of course vary with what she knows about her state of health and what her other concerns are. The choice and the weighting may sometimes be difficult, but there is no general impossibility here of making reasoned choices over combinations of diverse objects. Making choices with non-commensurable rewards is like speaking prose [SEN : 295].

Transferring a factory overseas, launching a new product, selecting an architect for the new HQ, changing the color of the logo... managers are required to make many decisions which cannot be quantified using standard units. Hence my use of the term 'biodiversity' in relation to evaluations, by which I mean a mode of evaluation which leaves sufficient room for the manager's experience, culture and prudence. The important thing is to ensure that, to borrow other Pascal's terms, the 'spirit of finesse' plays as much a role in 'organizational management as the 'spirit of geometry'.

One way of encouraging this biodiversity would be to follow Rey's suggestion of replacing quantitative measurement with 'fair measurement', the ability to exercise judgement and find the right balance. Rey invokes the *Philebus*, in which Plato contends that the most important quality in all things is a sense of measure, or *metron* [REY, 2014]. Extending this idea, we can agree upon another important point: the truth found in science, beauty, pleasure etc. is always subject to a certain sense of proportion. Not the quantitative measurements which increasingly form the basis of all thought in business, but the ability to take the measure of a situation and strike the correct balance, considering the full spectrum of available options and demonstrating a capacity to sense and seize the right moment (what Aristotle calls *kairos*). To illustrate this nuance, Olivier Rey cites the example of the palace built by Ceausescu in Bucharest, and which is intended to be perfectly symmetrical. And yet, as Rey explains, this definition of balance as the 'invariability of an object when subjected to certain mathematical transformations' is the exact opposite of the balance as the Greeks understood it, concerned primarily with elegance and harmony between different components.

This principle appears to offer a form of reconciliation, if not with governance by numbers, at least with the idea that quality and quantity should co-exist harmoniously. This also means that the debates over growth and degrowth which so preoccupy economists of all stripes become null and void, because what really matters is to find the right balance and stick to it: to grow when a structure requires growth to reach its point of equilibrium, and to shrink when an organization's development causes it to run into problems which require a disproportionate amount of resources to find a satisfactory solution.

Conclusion

My aim for this article has been to draw attention to the hegemonic dominance of figures in modern management. In doing so I was not motivated by the practices of accountability, identifying requirements or setting numerical targets for organizations, which are not problematic in and of themselves [SALAIS, 2016]. What is problematic is the fact that quantitative evaluations tend to become the only acceptable form of evaluation, reducing the historic and cultural weight of an 'organization to a series of numbers, forcing them through the mangle of a model of rationality restricted to simple quantification. The result is an economic world in which quality is no more than a secondary offshoot of all-conquering quantity.

But, as we have seen, this profusion of figures, even when used to power decision-making tools, always requires subjective appraisal. Our priority should be to re-examine our relationship with the figures we produce. Ultimately, the choice and analysis of numerical data is always a matter of

judgement and interpretation [PATOCCA, 1973]. As Supiot points out, ‘the social sciences must take some responsibility for the scientific mindset’ which has allowed this digital exuberance to flourish, ‘believing that human beings can be understood ‘like particles in a magnetic field’, which is to say as objects whose trajectories can be calculated and manipulated’ [in CHIAPELLO : 184].

In concrete terms, the creation of data and their manipulation through artificial intelligence are subjects too important to be left to the specialists. In arguing for a new relationship to numbers which leaves room for ethical judgement and other analytical criteria (the environment, employee well-being *etc.*), it is not my intention to do away with quantitative evaluation entirely: this would be neither possible nor desirable. Our goal should be to reposition quantitative assessment in a context where considerations of fairness and well-being at work are recognised as essential factors of economic development. My aim here is to state the case for intelligent use of figures, bearing in mind the fact that using numbers to guide people and things is always accompanied by a higher responsibility and a broader social and cultural context. As I have attempted to demonstrate, the supposed ‘factuality’ of numbers must always be confronted with the singular realities and many incalculable factors which are necessarily present in organizations, not least the impact of joy and suffering at work.

In this respect, the scope for further theoretical and empirical research is vast. Perhaps, at a fundamental level, our task is to learn how to play with numbers again. This proposition is particularly relevant to the world of academia, currently laboring under the yoke of rankings and the injunction to ‘publish or perish’. Rediscovering the capacity to play with numbers might even be a fundamental condition for restoring lost academic ‘sovereignty’, in the sense attributed to that word by Georges Bataille [PAINTER-MORLAND, DEMUIJNCK & ORNATI, 2017]. The idea of ‘transcending usefulness’ extends to the way we approach the evaluation forms with which our professional efforts are rewarded [CASSIN, 2014], and the manner in which we choose to resist the increasingly blatant use of *impact factor* as the only measure that matters, pushing back against the rising tide of what Lacan called ‘trash publications’ (*pouvellications*).

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