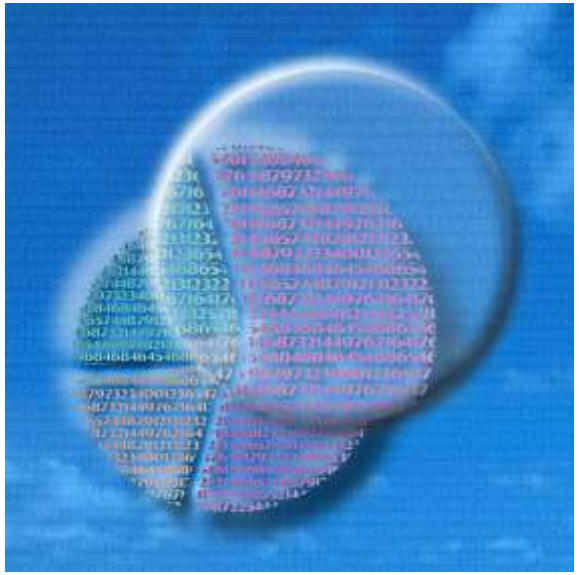

Ethics of quantification

Andrea Saltelli
Open Evidence Research, Open University of Catalonia

MNF990 PhD course on
Theory of Science and Ethics
September 30 2021

Andrea Saltelli

www.andreasaltelli.eu

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Do we live immersed in fantastic numbers?

OPINION

PETER COY

‘The Most Important Number You’ve Never Heard Of’

Sept. 17, 2021

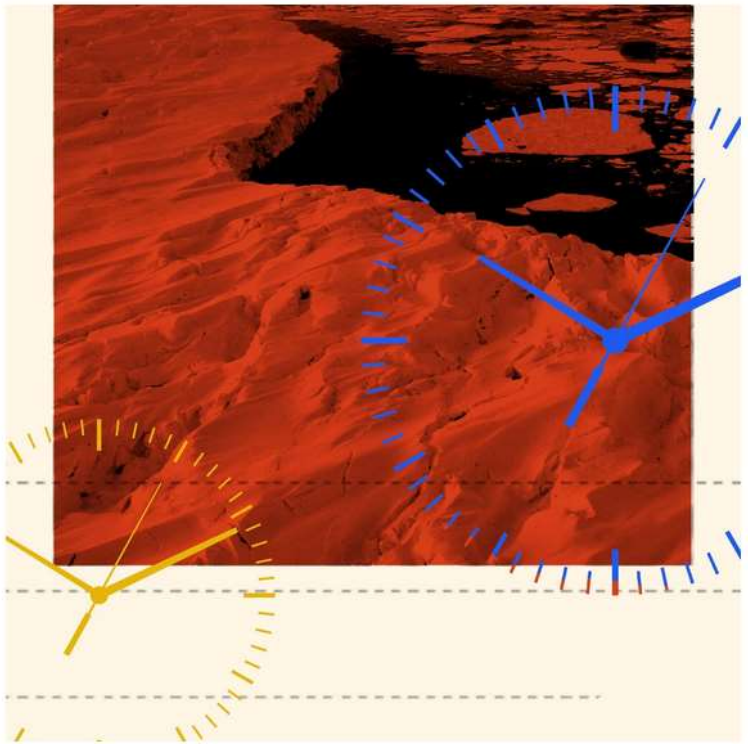


Illustration by Arsh Raziuddin, The New York Times

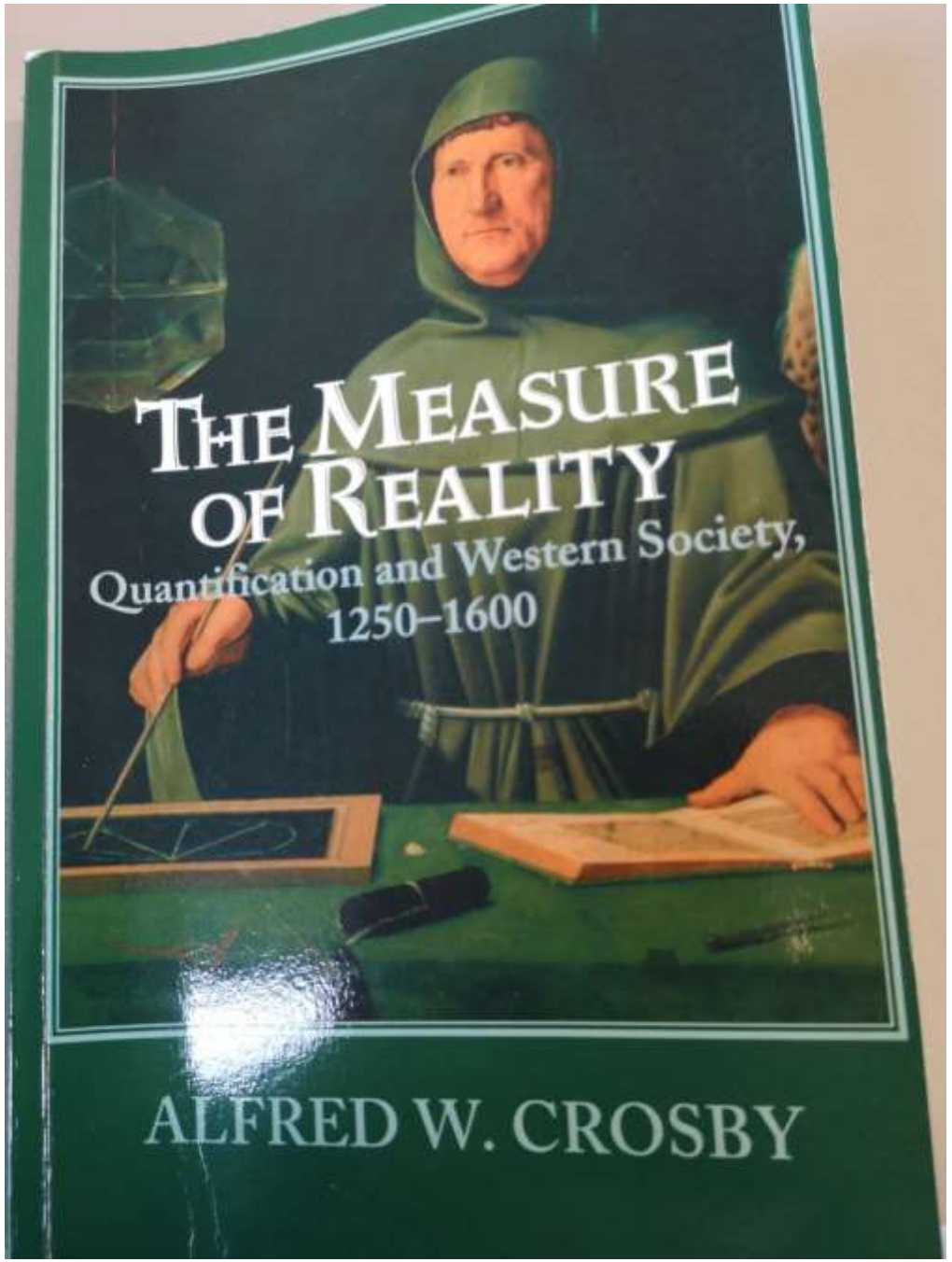
“social cost of carbon:

=$56 a ton on average at a 3 percent discount rate

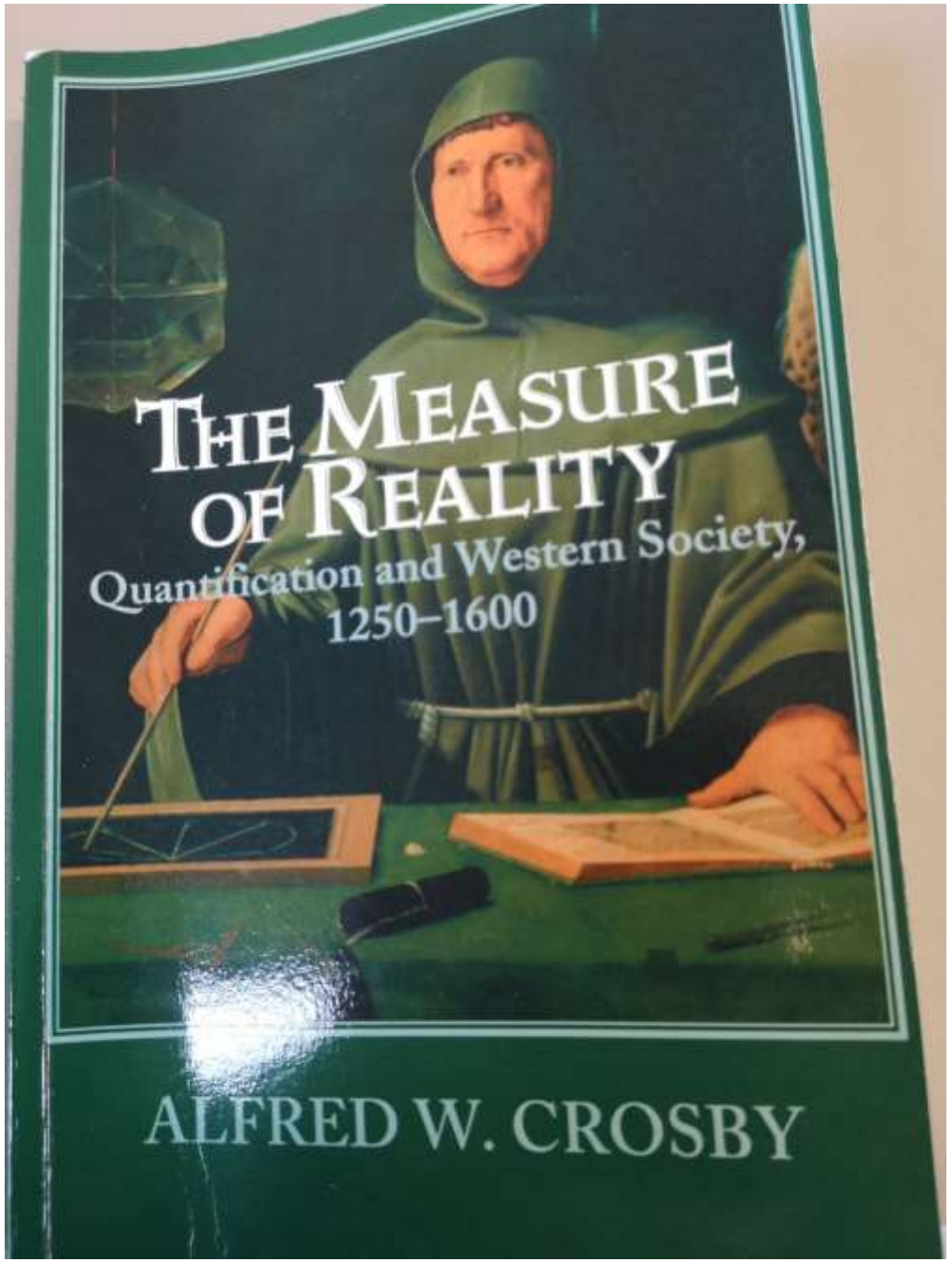
=$171 a ton on average at a 2 percent discount rate”

The New York Times

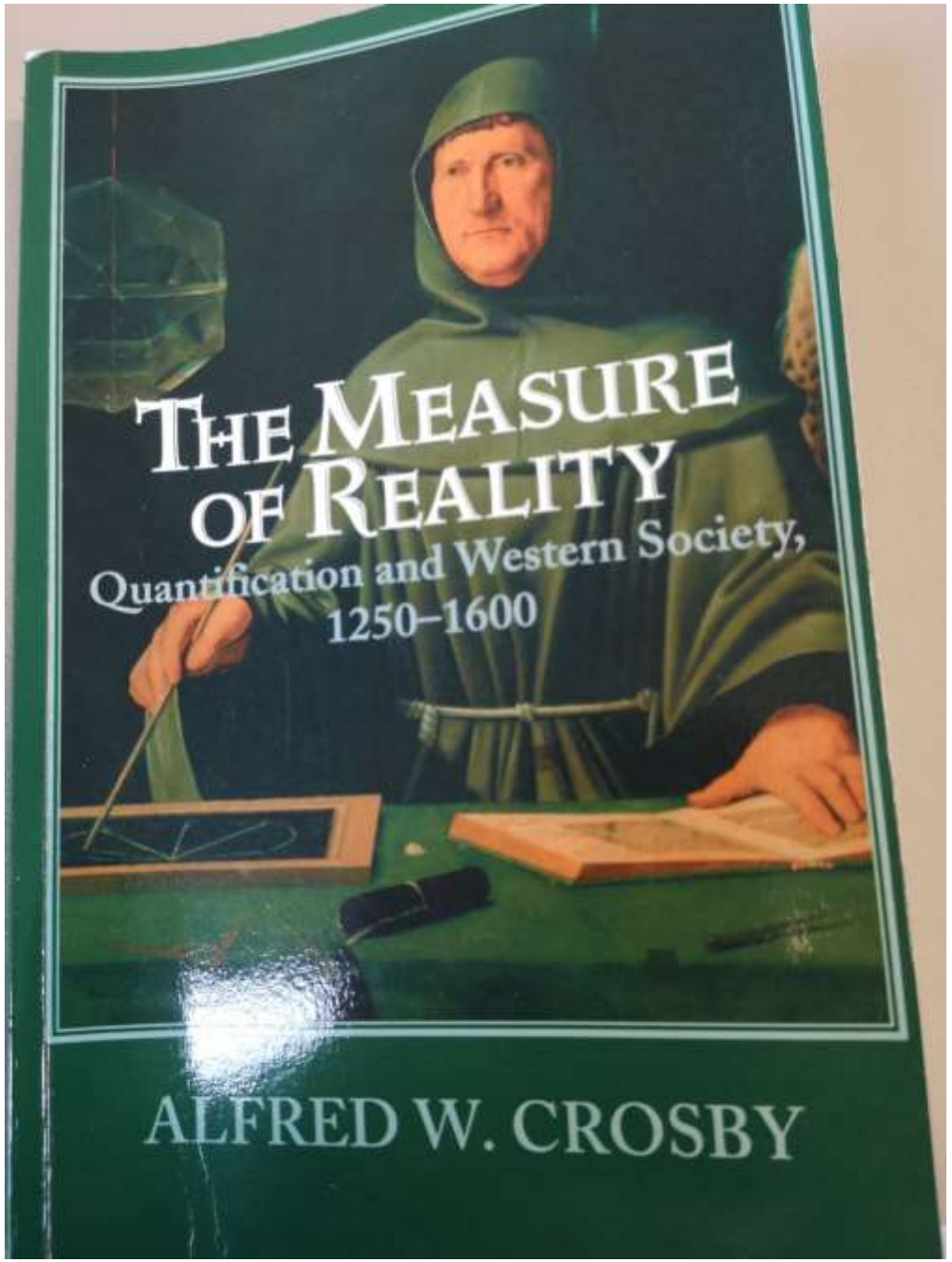
How did we get there?



Were quantification and visualization the engine inside the engine of western success and domination?



Quantification and visualization of space and time gave rise in the XIV century to a true revolution, in music, painting, accounting, cartography, astronomy …



… a revolution that in the following two centuries XV-XVI ensured the epochal success of the West and its domination over the rest of the world

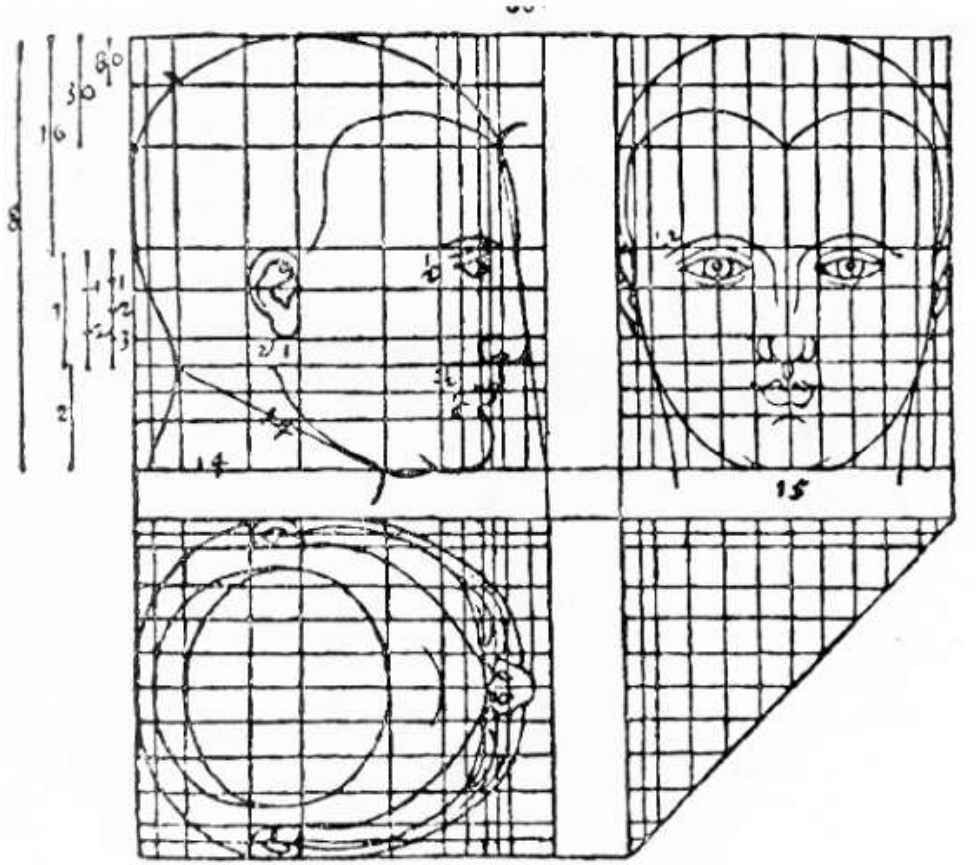
Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Temperance, 1560

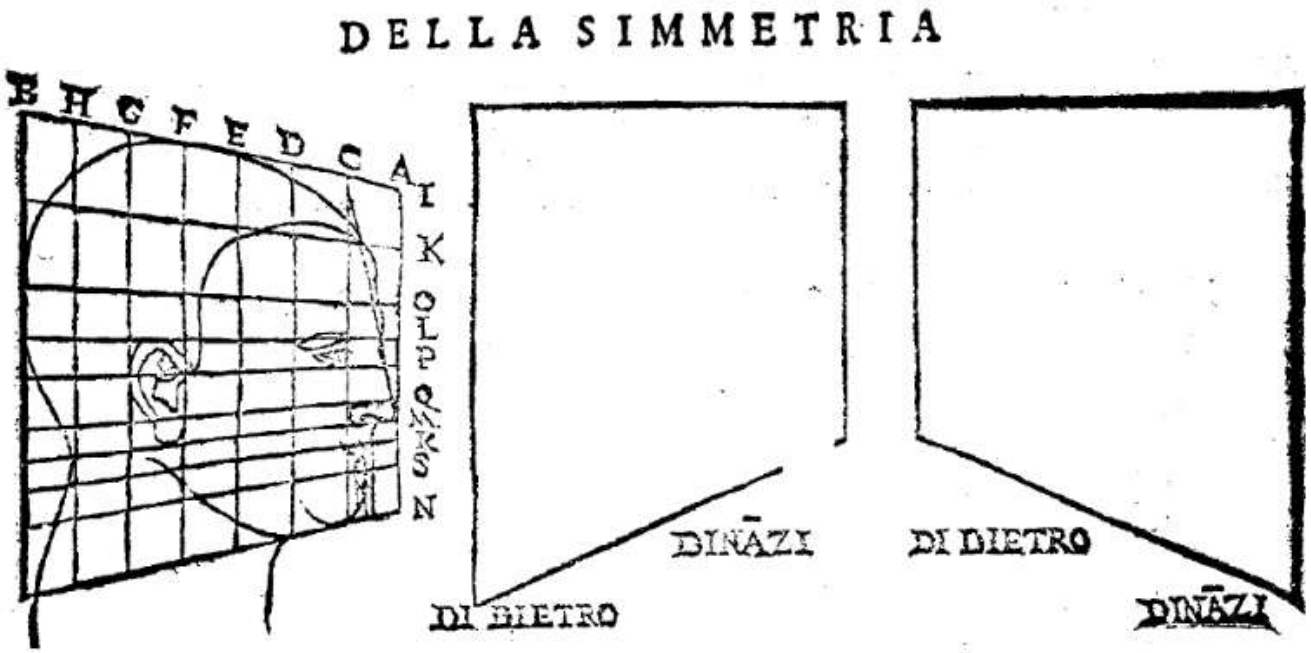
Measuring, military technology (math), dispute on a printed bible, learning, accounting, perspective, polyphonic music, the windmill, the watch …

From the abacus to Arabic numerals

The Annunciation, Carlo Crivelli (1435, 1495)

Draftsman Drawing a Reclining Nude
Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528)

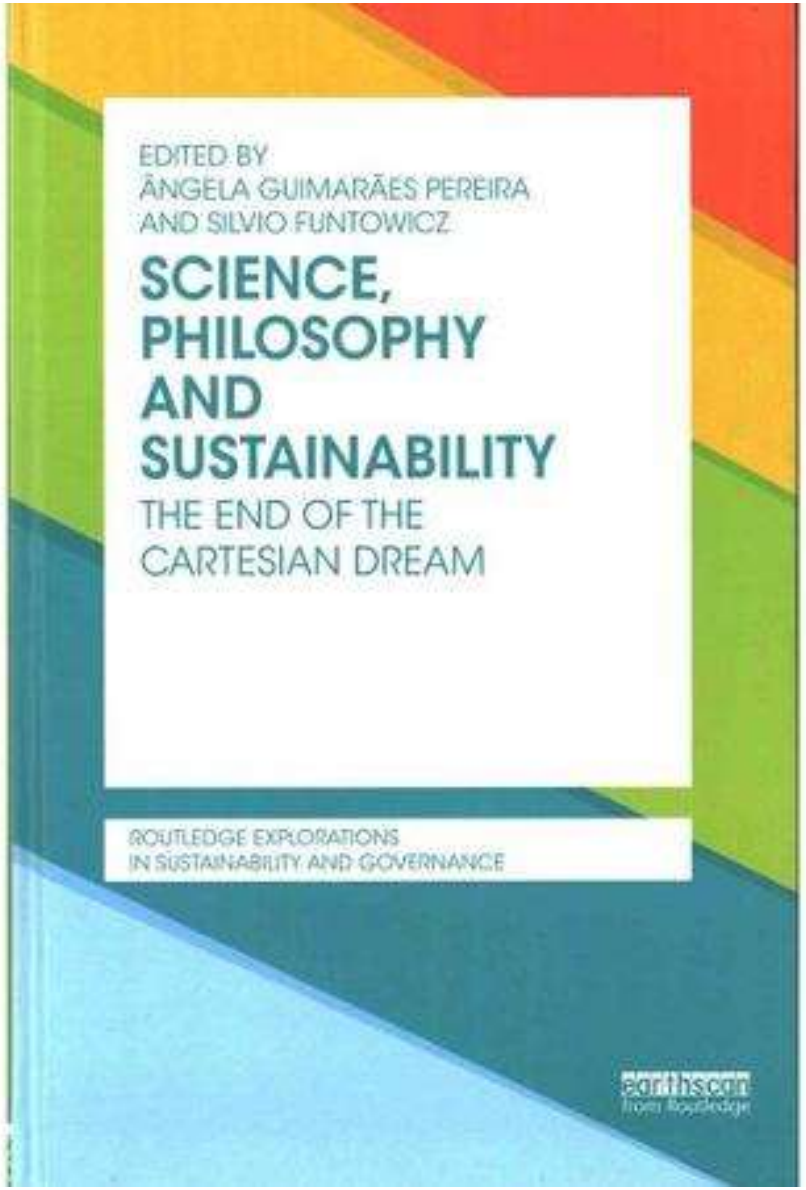




From “De Varietate figurarum”
Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528)

Quantification as a key element of the Cartesian Dream

Guimarães Pereira, Â, and Funtowicz, S, Eds, 2015, The end of the Cartesian dream, Routledge.



Quantifications and the roots of the Cartesian dream

Separate but related stories

Cartesian dream:
possess and domination
of nature

The ‘procedural utopia’:
grounding social harmony and
progress in calculations

Francis Bacon
(1561-1626)

We call Cartesian dream the idea of man as master and possessor of nature, of prediction and control, of Bacon's wonders of science and of Condorcet's mathematique sociale…

René Descartes
(1596-1650)

Nicolas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet
(1743- 1794)

Francis Bacon
(1561-1626)

Magnalia Naturae, in the New Atlantis (1627),

'Wonders of nature, in particular with respect to human use'

The prolongation of life; The restitution of youth in some degree; The retardation of age; The curing of diseases counted incurable; The mitigation of pain; More easy and less loathsome purgings; The increasing of strength and activity; The increasing of ability to suffer torture or pain; The altering of complexions, and fatness and leanness; The altering of statures; The altering of features; The increasing and exalting of the intellectual parts; Versions of bodies into other bodies; Making of new species; Transplanting of one species into another; Instruments of destruction, as of war and poison; Exhilaration of the spirits, and putting them in good disposition; Force of the imagination, either upon another body, or upon the body itself; Acceleration of time in maturations; Acceleration of time in clarifications; Acceleration of putrefaction; Acceleration of decoction; Acceleration of germination; Making rich composts for the earth; Impressions of the air, and raising of tempests; Great alteration; as in induration, emollition, &c; Turning crude and watery substances into oily and unctuous substances; Drawing of new foods out of substances not now in use; Making new threads for apparel ; and new stuffs, such as paper, glass, &c; Natural divinations; Deceptions of the senses; Greater pleasures of the senses; Artificial minerals and cements.

Francis Bacon
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The study of letters leading to “doubts and errors”;

Comparing “disquisitions of the ancient moralists to very towering and magnificent palaces with no better foundation than sand and mud”;

Condemnation of humanities and exaltation of mathematics.

René Descartes (1596–1650)

Discourse on Method (1637)

“I perceived it to be possible to arrive at knowledge highly useful in life; and in room of the Speculative Philosophy [⋯]

René Descartes (1596–1650)

Discourse on Method (1637)

http://www.bartleby.com/34/1/6.html

“to discover a Practical, by means of which, knowing the force and action of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens, and all the other bodies that surround us, [⋯]we might also apply them [⋯]

and thus render ourselves the lords and possessors of nature.”

René Descartes (1596–1650)

Discourse on Method (1637)

http://www.bartleby.com/34/1/6.html

In the formulation of Condorcet: “All the errors in politics and in morals are founded upon philosophical mistakes, which, themselves, are connected with physical errors” (Ninth Epoch)

Nicolas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet
(1743- 1794)

‘Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Spirit’

http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1669

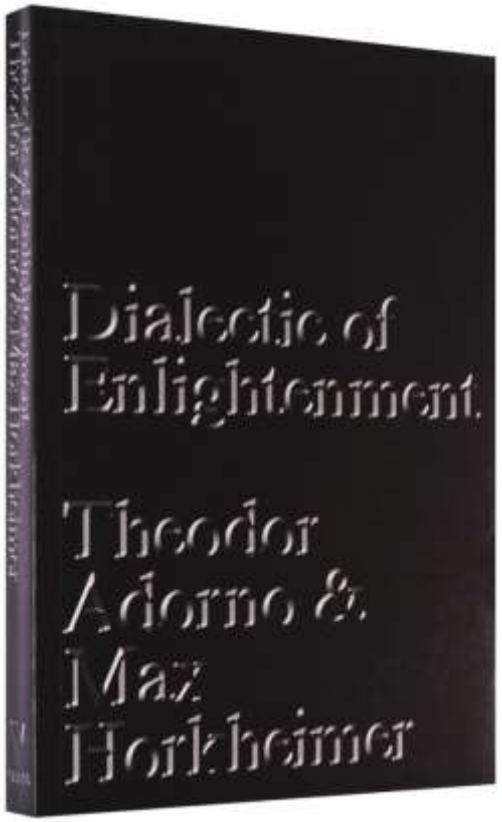
Overpopulation? War due to scarcity of resources? Will not happen because technical progress and ethical progress will go hand in hand. Man will understand that his duty “will consist not in the question of giving existence to a greater number of beings, but happiness.” (Tenth Epoch)

Nicolas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet
(1743- 1794)
‘Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Spirit’

http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1669

“Technical progress and ethical progress will go hand in hand”

Marquis de Condorcet



= progressive view of enlightenment attacked by the Frankfurt school

‘Mathématique sociale’: We still use today terms such as ‘Condorcet method’, ‘Condorcet winner’, ‘Condorcet-ranking procedure’

Nicolas de Caritat,
marquis de Condorcet
(1743- 1794)
‘

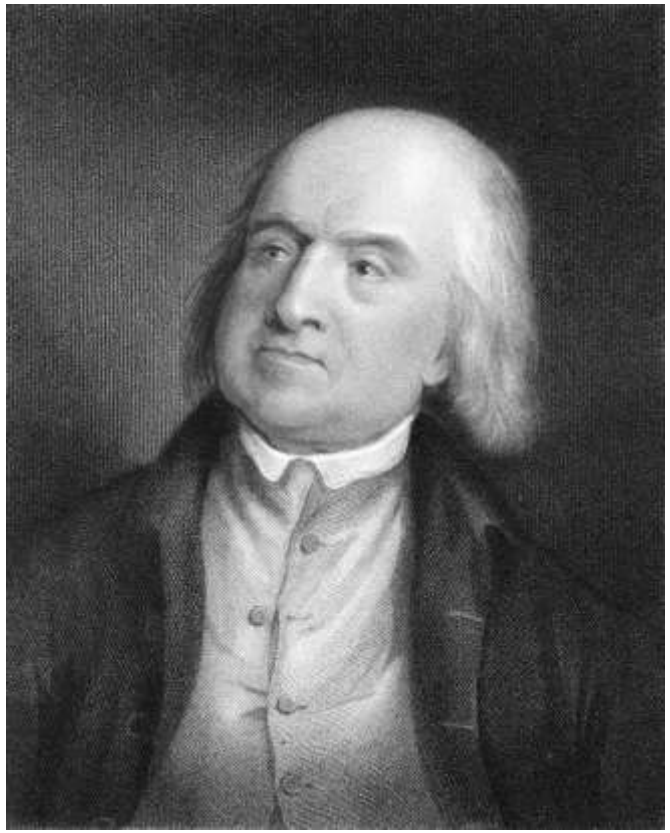
Feldman, J., 2005, Condorcet et la mathematique sociale: enthousiasmes et bemols, Mathematics and Social Sciences, 172(4), 7-41, http://www.ehess.fr/revue-msh/pdf/N172R955.pdf

Munda G. (2007) - Social multi-criteria evaluation, Springer-Verlag, Heidelberg, New York, Economics Series

Condorcet's algorithms and Descartes' Geometry: the dream always had a quantification agenda

Condorcet's Mathématique sociale had its continuation in Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism

Marquis de Condorcet (1743- 1794)



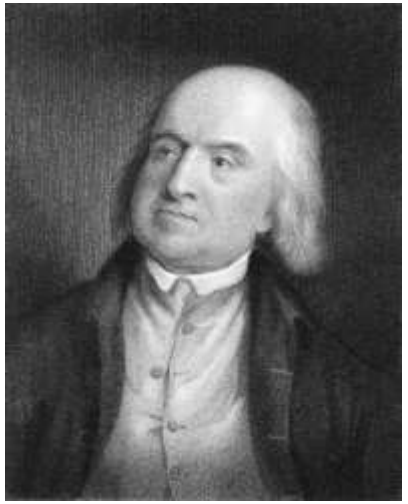
Felicific calculus: 'The greatest good for the greatest number'
(utility or hedonistic calculus)

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)

Artork: Adam Simpson, New York Times

- Intensity: How strong is the pleasure?
- Duration: How long will the pleasure last?
- Certainty or uncertainty: How likely or unlikely is it that the pleasure will occur?
- Propinquity or remoteness: How soon will the pleasure occur?
- Fecundity: The probability that the action will be followed by sensations of the same kind.
- Purity: The probability that it will not be followed by sensations of the opposite kind.
- Extent: How many people will be affected?

Jeremy Bentham



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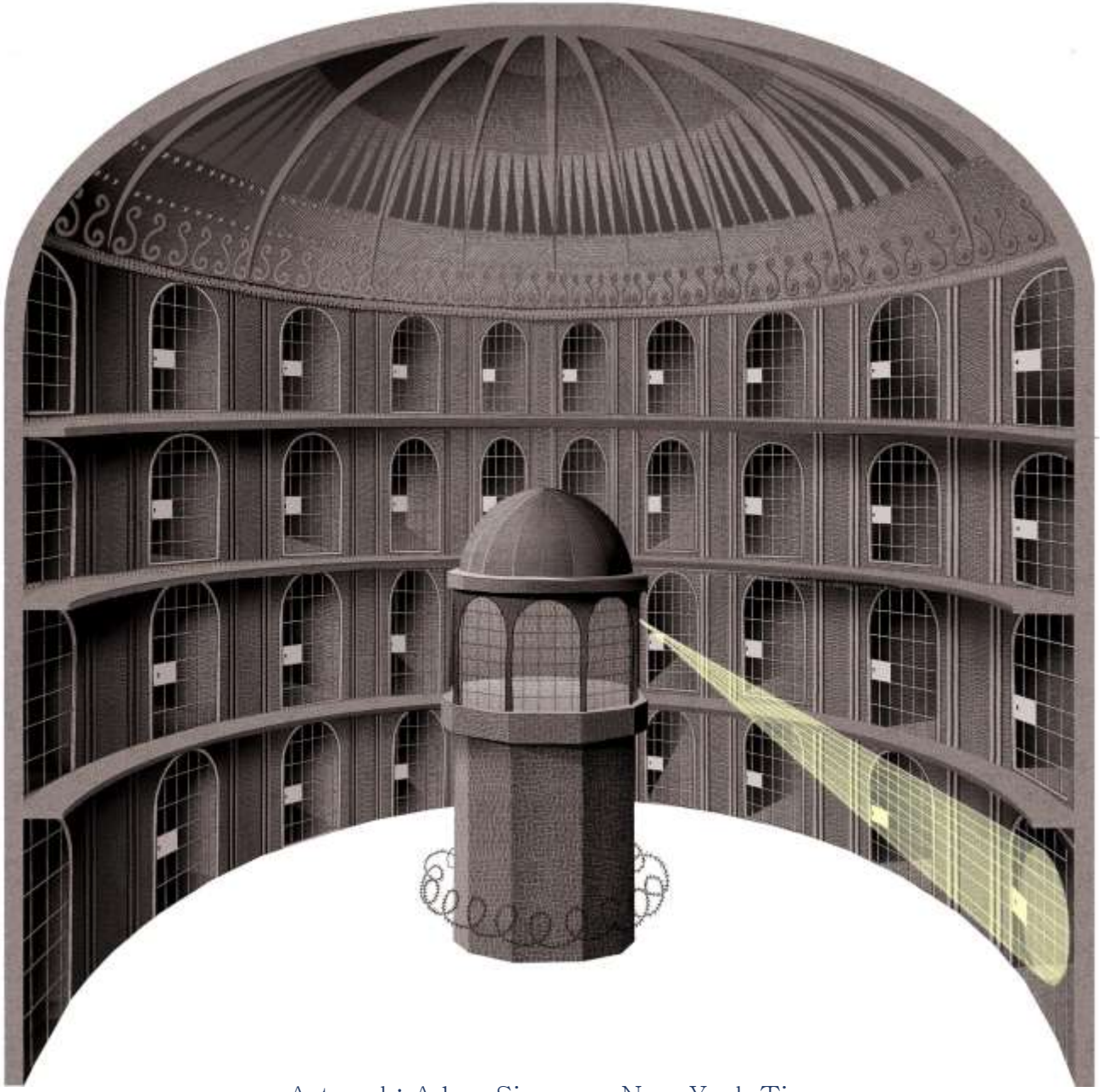
"The utilitarian ethic, of 'the greatest good for the greatest number', was an implicit quantification of ethics, needed for the post-theological age" (Jerome R. Ravetz)

Bentham's Panopticon

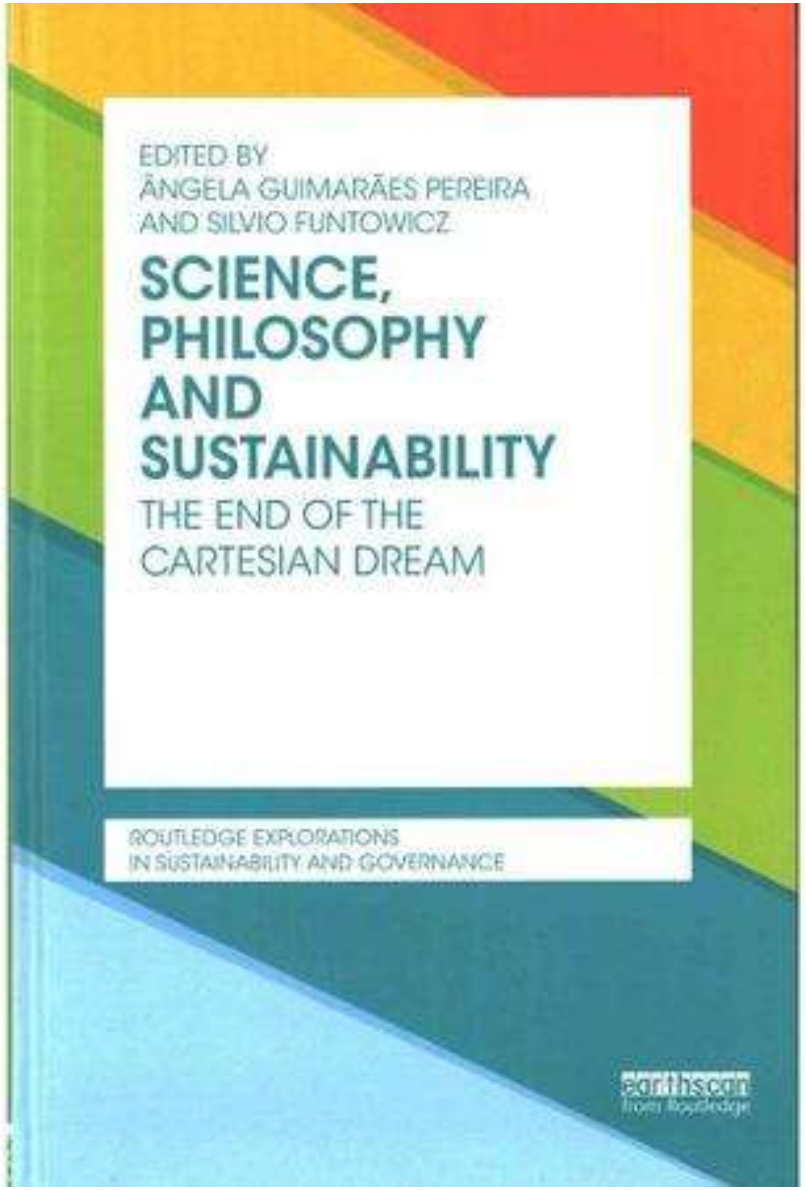


Artwork: Adam Simpson, New York Times

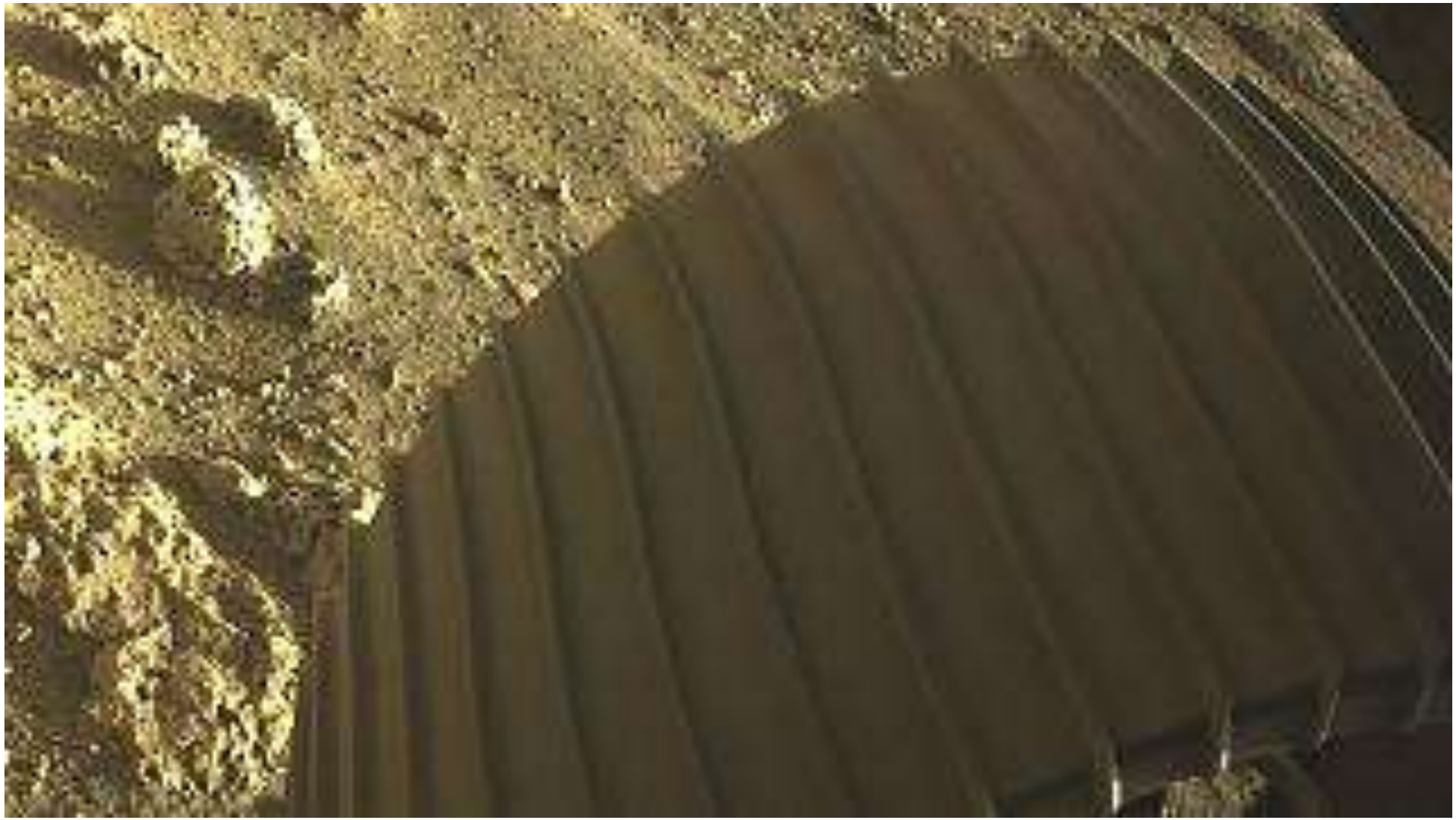
Ravetz, J, R, 2015, Descartes and the rediscovery of ignorance,

in

Guimarães Pereira, Â, and Funtowicz, S, Eds, 2015, The end of the Cartesian dream, Routledge.



The success of the Cartesian dream

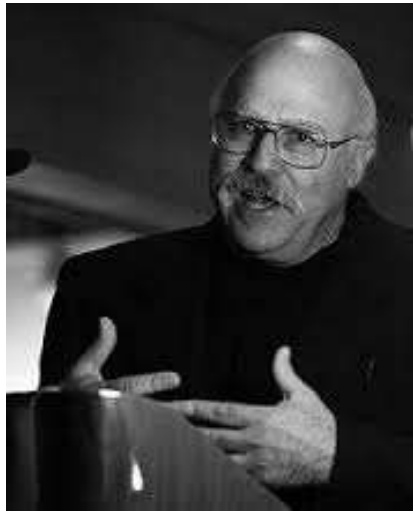


February 18, 2021, Landing of Perseverance on Mars

If you are a natural scientists you were nourished and trained in the Cartesian dream, (S. Toulmin: ‘The hidden agenda of modernity’)

Stephen Toulmin

The dream was spectacularly successful, in all fields of endeavor, leading to what Steven Shapin calls ‘invisible science’



Steven Shapin

Steven Shapin, 2016, Invisible Science, The Hedgehog Review: Vol. 18 No. 3 (Fall 2016).

Many voices of alarm as to misuse of quantification

Numbers, visible and invisible…

Blurring lines:

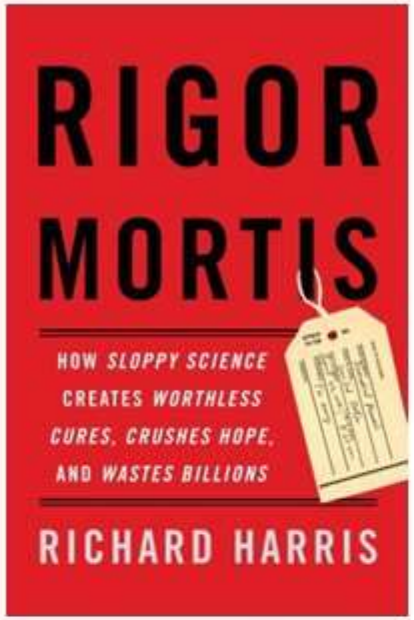
"what qualities are specific to rankings, or indicators, or models, or algorithms?"

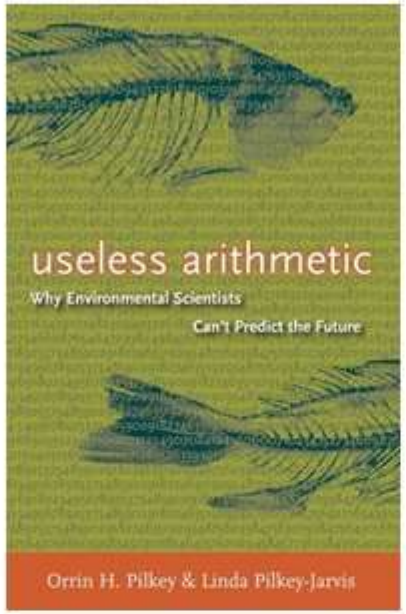
Elizabeth
Popp Berman

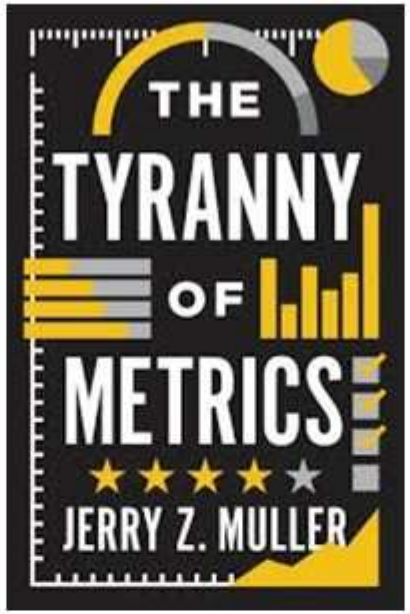
E. Popp Berman and D. Hirschman, The Sociology of Quantification: Where Are We Now?, Contemp. Sociol., vol. in press, 2017.

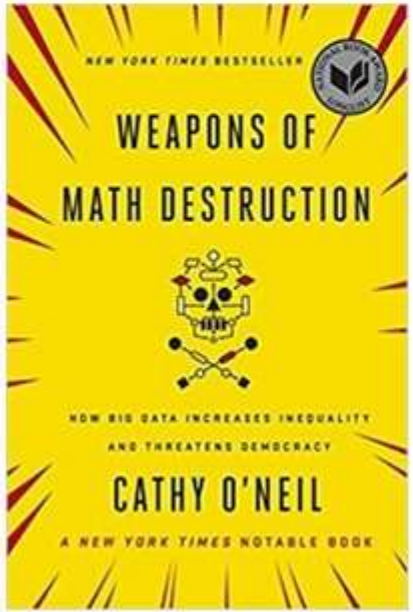
And an explosion of works, from within and without, from many disciplines

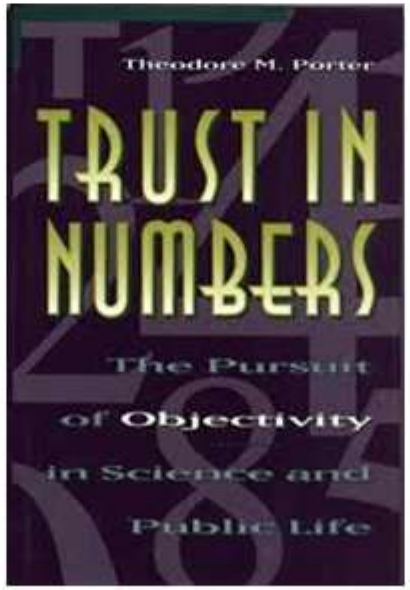
Algorithms, models, metrics, statistics…



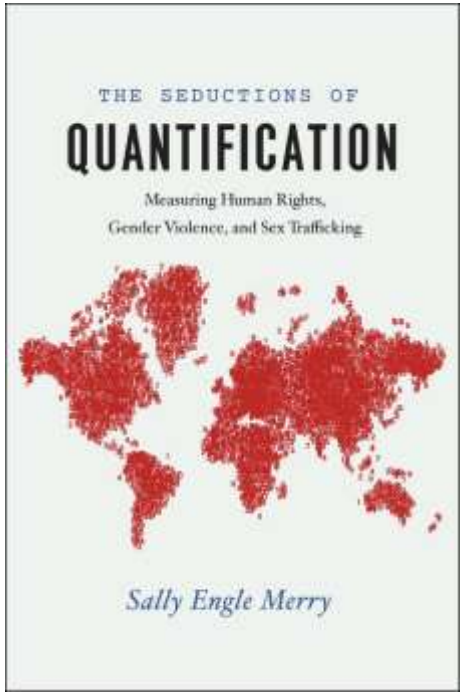


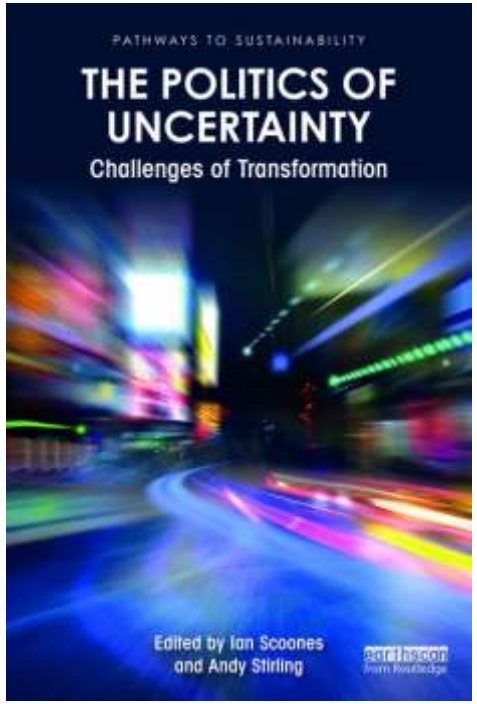


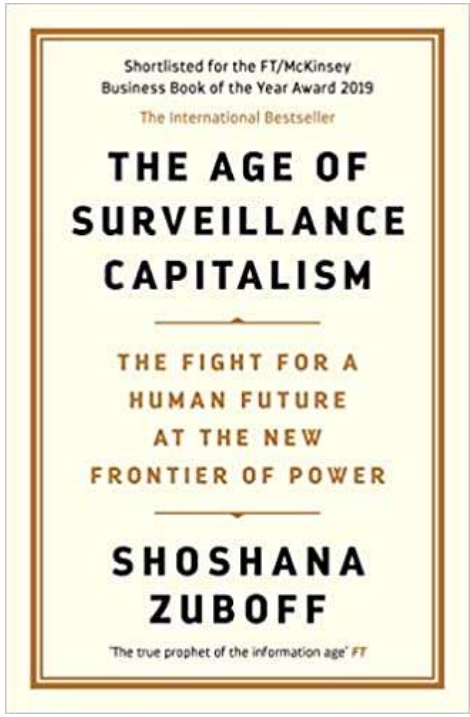


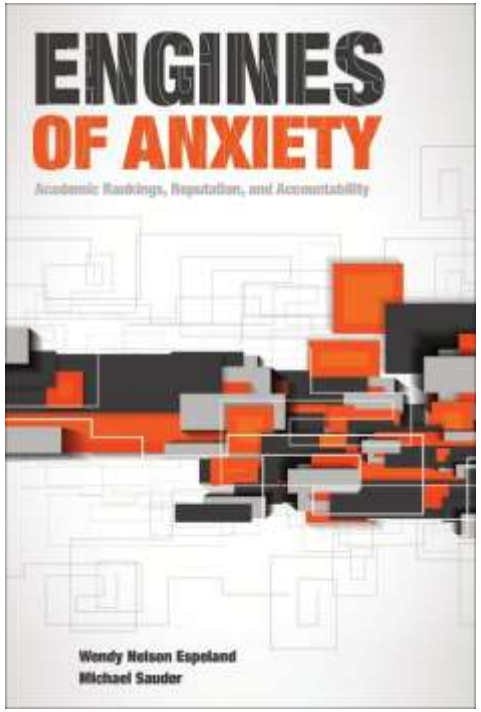


Algorithms, models, metrics, statistics…









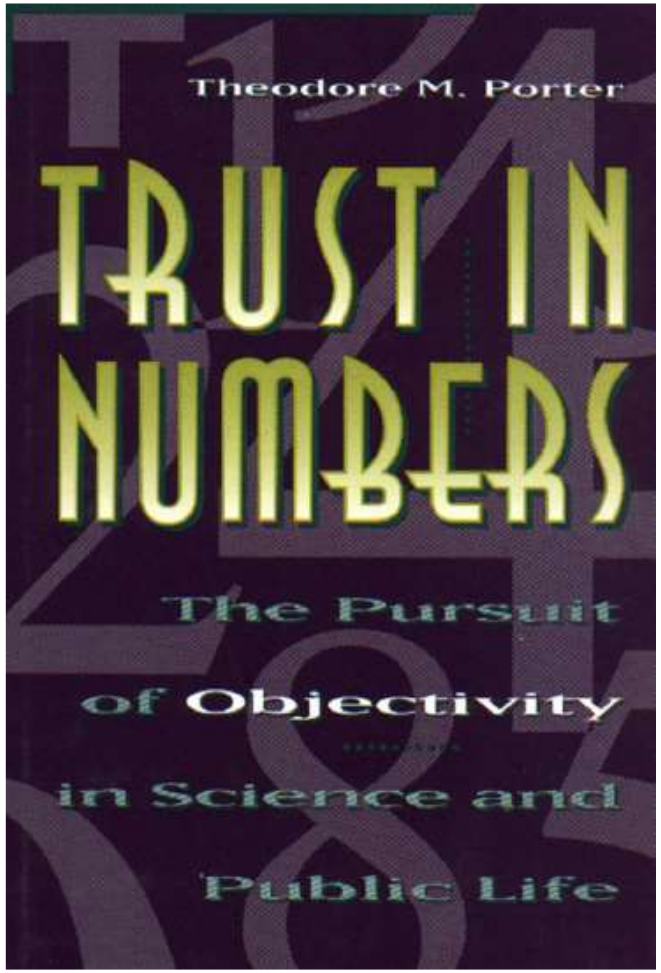
Numbers and their ‘reactivity’
(Espeland and Sauder, 2016)

Incumbent numbers affect what society will measure in the future (Merry 2016)

Numbers “create the environment that justifies their assumptions”
(O’Neil, 2016)

Numbers and trust

Theodor
M. Porter

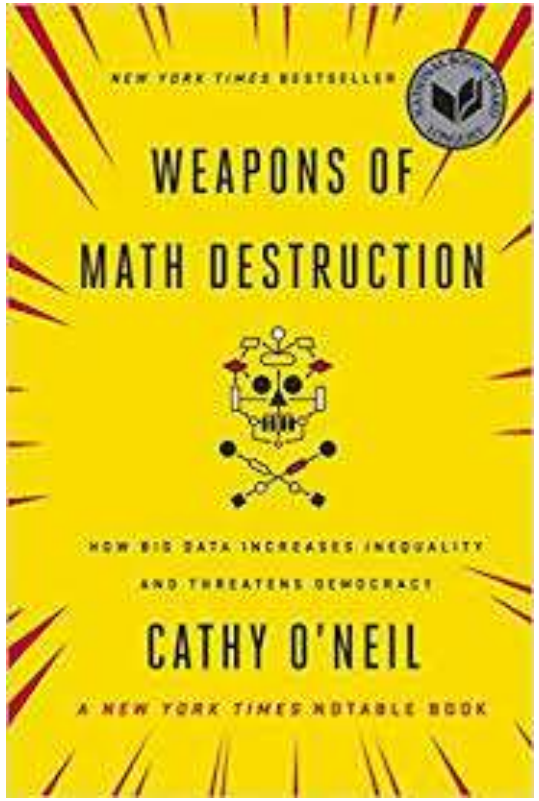


Theodore M. Porter, Trust in Numbers,
The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life, Princeton 1995

Porter's story: Quantification needs judgment which in turn needs trust …without trust quantification becomes mechanical, a system, and 'systems can be played'.

Alarm for Weapons of Math Destruction

Cathy O'Neil

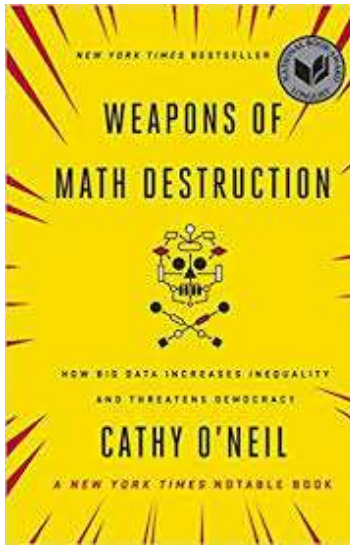


O'Neil, C. (2016). Weapons of math destruction : how big data increases inequality and threatens democracy. Random House Publishing Group.

Opacity (also because of trade secrecy) of algorithms used to decide on recruiting, carriers (including of researchers), prison sentencing, paroling, custody of minors, political campaigns…

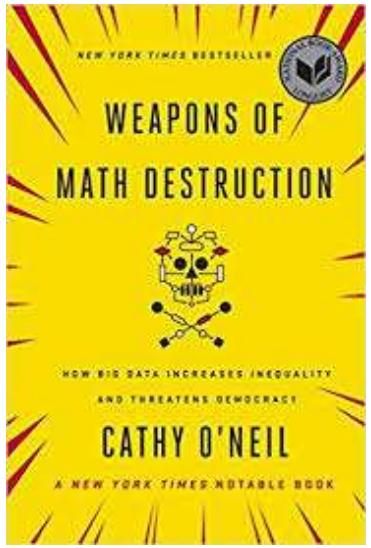
O'Neil, C. (2016). Weapons of math destruction : how big data increases inequality and threatens democracy. Random House Publishing Group.

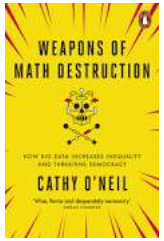
Brauneis, R., & Goodman, E. P. (2018). Algorithmic Transparency for the Smart City. Yale Journal of Law & Technology, 20, 103–176. Retrieved from https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3012499

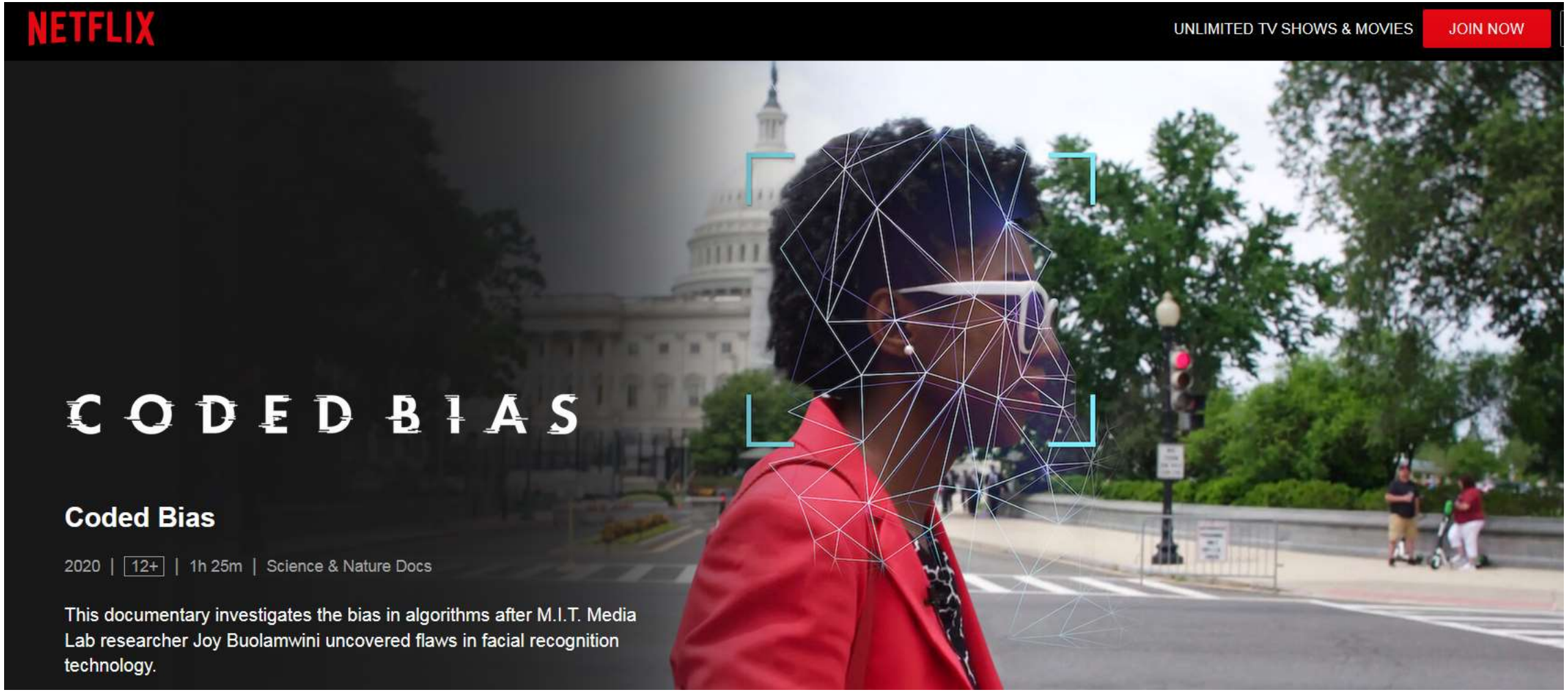


Opacity coupled with opportunity for scale and damage and with non-appealability make them an instrument of oppression & inequality

Cathy O'Neil Google talk https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQHs8SA1qpk




WEAPONS OF
MATH DESTRUCTION
CATHY O'NEIL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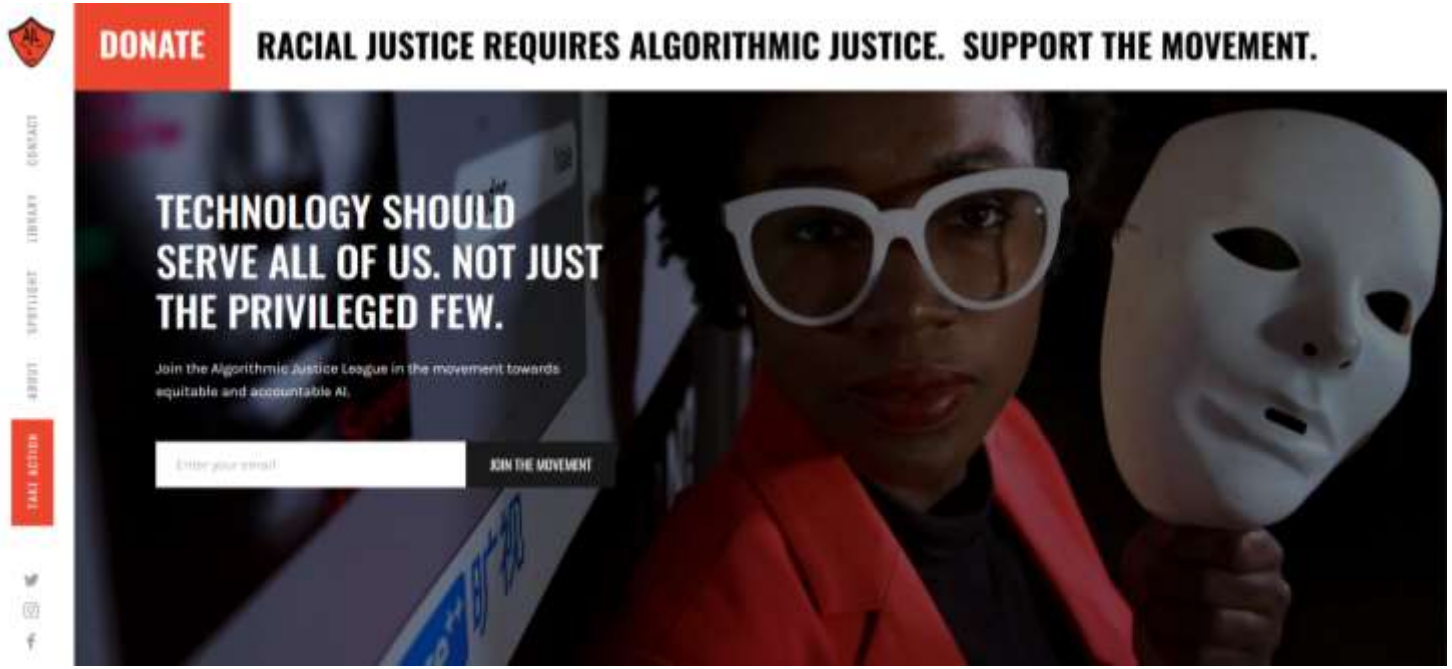
CODED BIAS
Coded Bias
2020 | 12+ | 1h 25m | Science & Nature Docs
This documentary investigates the bias in algorithms after M.I.T. Media Lab researcher Joy Buolamwini uncovered flaws in facial recognition technology.



Algorithmic Justice League

https://www.ajl.org/

The New York Times
Bloomberg Business
Forbes
TIME
FORTUNE
TED
WIRED
The Telegraph

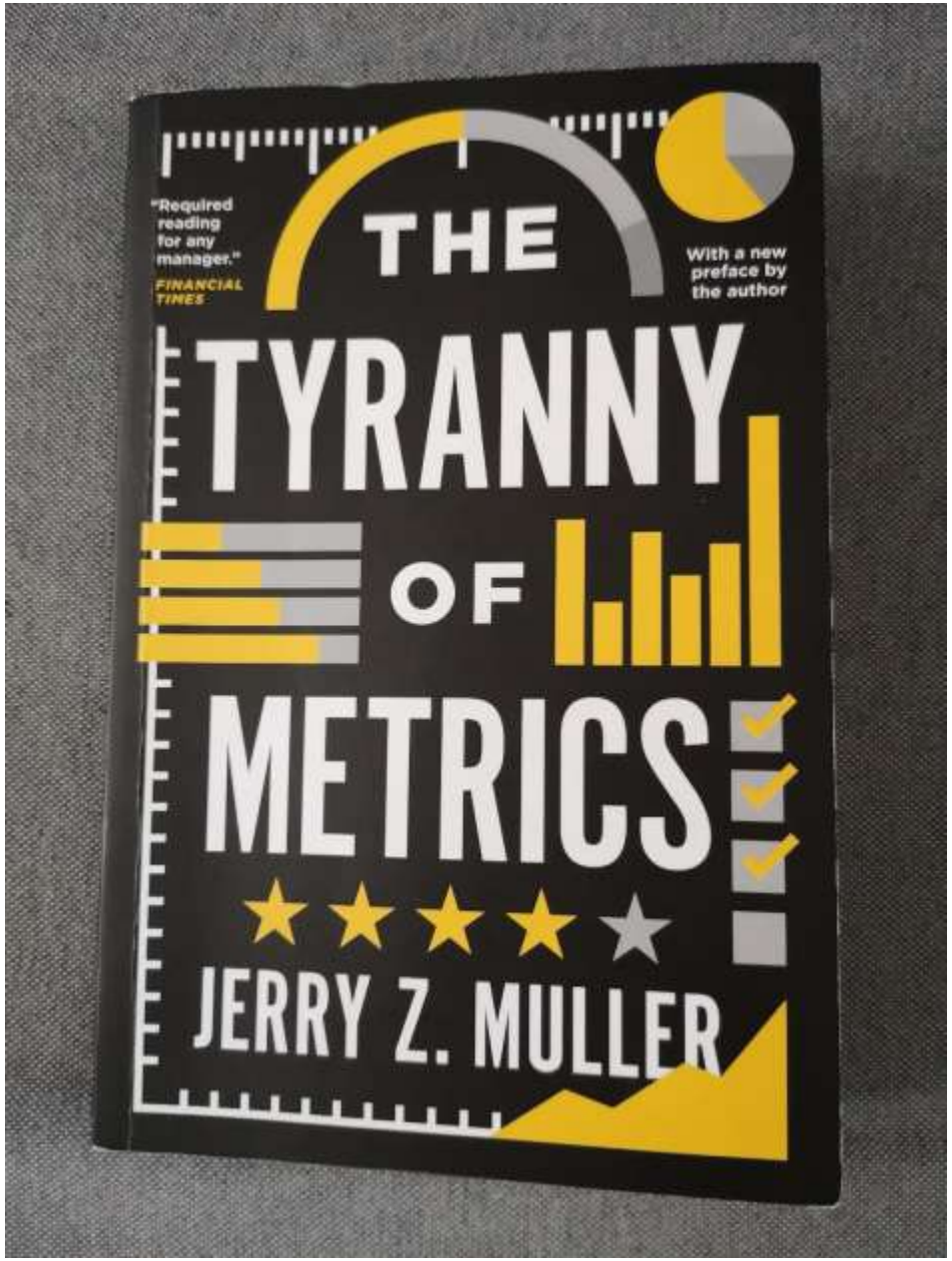
Quantification blues, continued

Charles Goodhart

p. 44 “Any … measures necessarily involve a loss of information … [and distorts behavior]” (Porter, 1995)

This is what we normally call Goodhart’s law, from Charles Goodhart. "When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure."

Also known as Campbell's law (1976);
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goodhart%27s_law

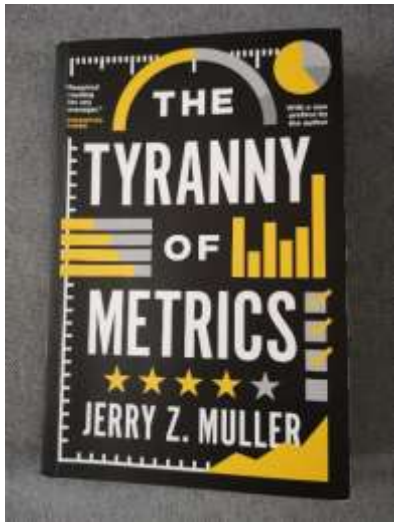


J. Z. Muller, The tyranny of metrics. Princeton University Press , 2018.

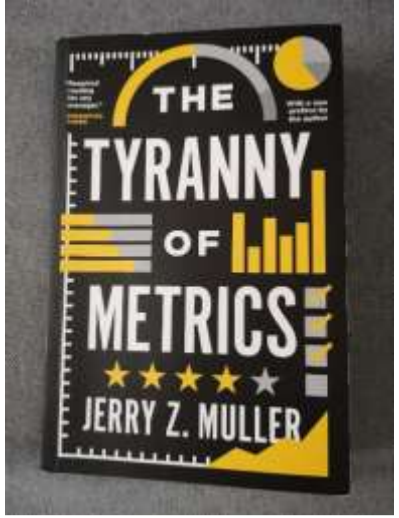
Metric fixation, or the irresistible pressure to measure performance

Gaming of metrics (recall Goodhart law)

A wealth of case studies from education to war to medicine to foreign aid..



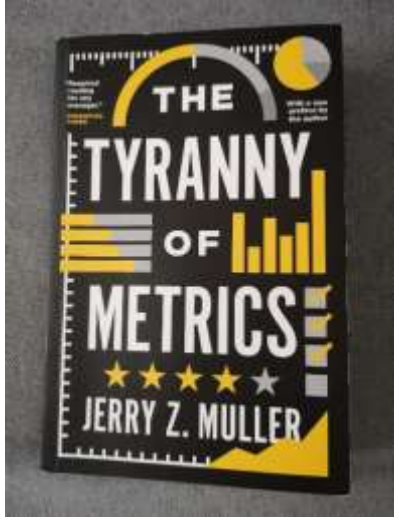
Unintended consequences



- Goal displacement
- Short termism
- Diminishing utility
- Rule cascade
- Discouraging risk taking
- Discouraging innovation
- Rewarding luck
- Discouraging cooperation and common purpose
- Degrading work
- Time waste
- Loss of productivity

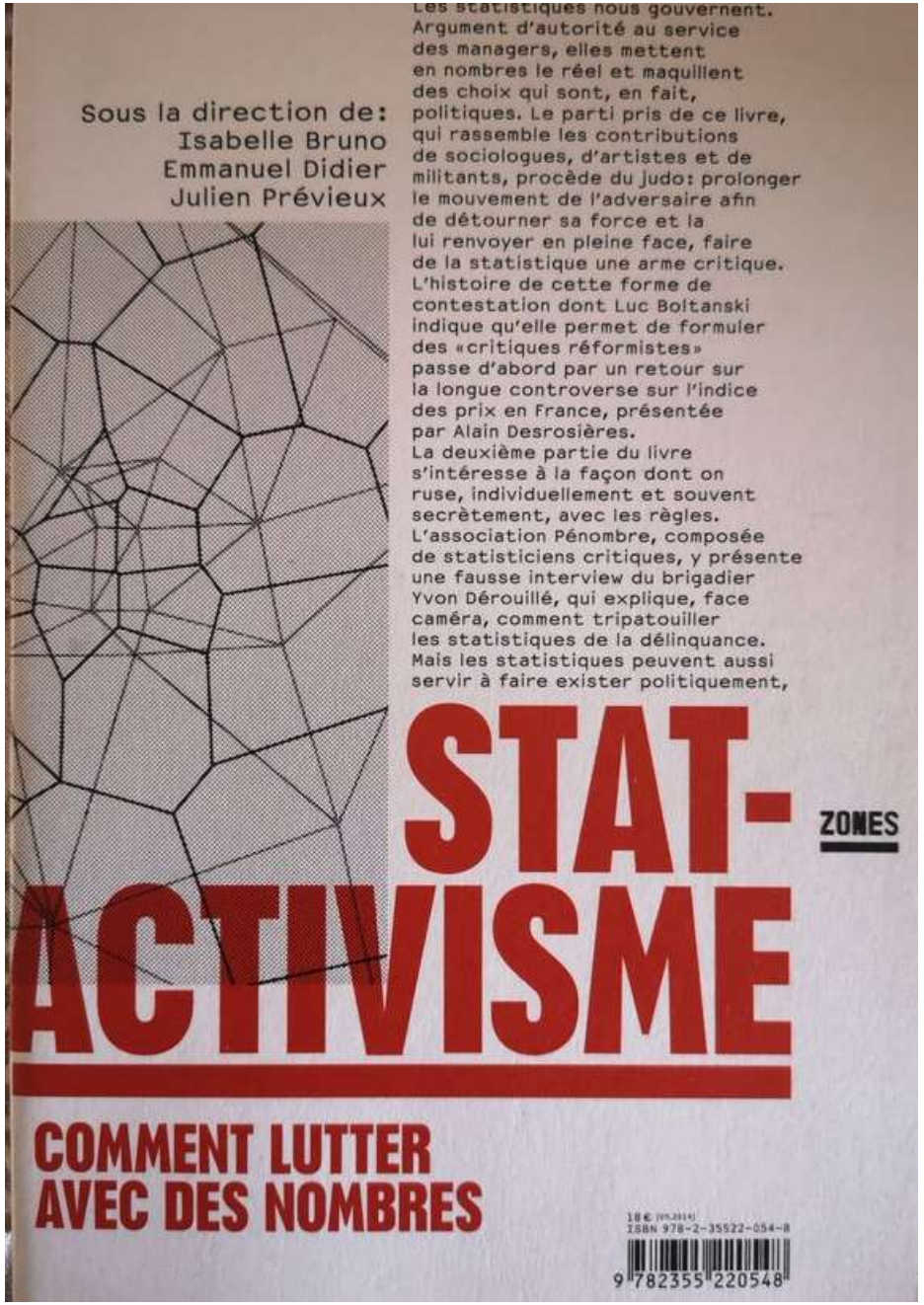
A concluding remark of Muller

Considering all of the above keep in mind at every step that “the best use of metrics may be not to use it at all”



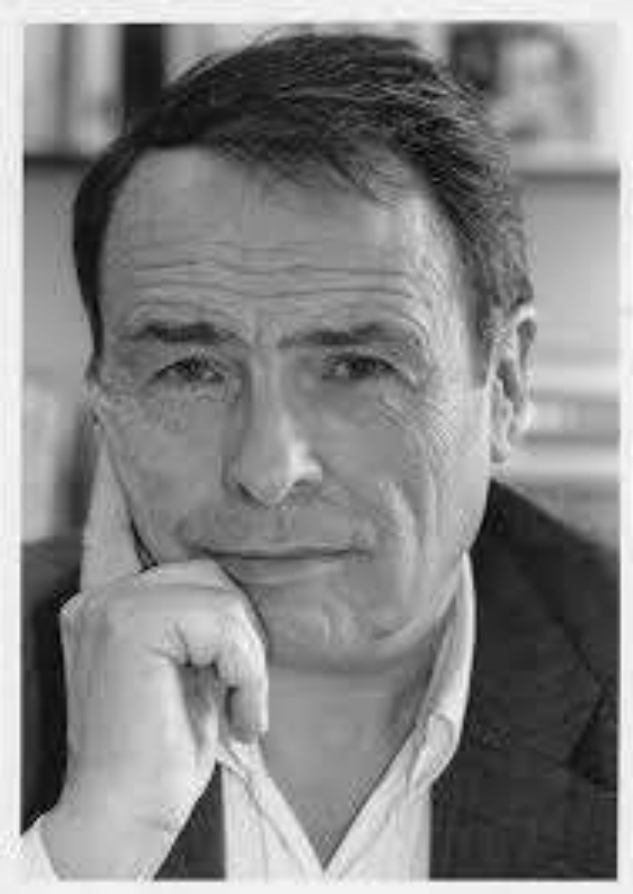
Do we need a movement of resistance?

I. Bruno, E. Didier, and J. Prévieux, Stat-activisme. Comment lutter avec des nombres. Paris: Zones, La Découverte, 2014



How to be a "statactiviste"?

1. Deconstruct existing metrics, including using irony (Pierre Bourdieu, *Les héritiers*).



La sociologie, ça doit être rigolo

(Sociology must be fun)

How to be a "statactiviste"?

2. Gaming metrics (statistical judo) – use Goodhart's law to your advantage – or make the ruse public.

- Police statistics in NY

How to be a "statactiviste"?

3. Bring to the surface what is hidden / unsaid/ excluded – new social classes, marginalization, minorities:

- ‘Creative class’ or ‘precarious intellectuals’?

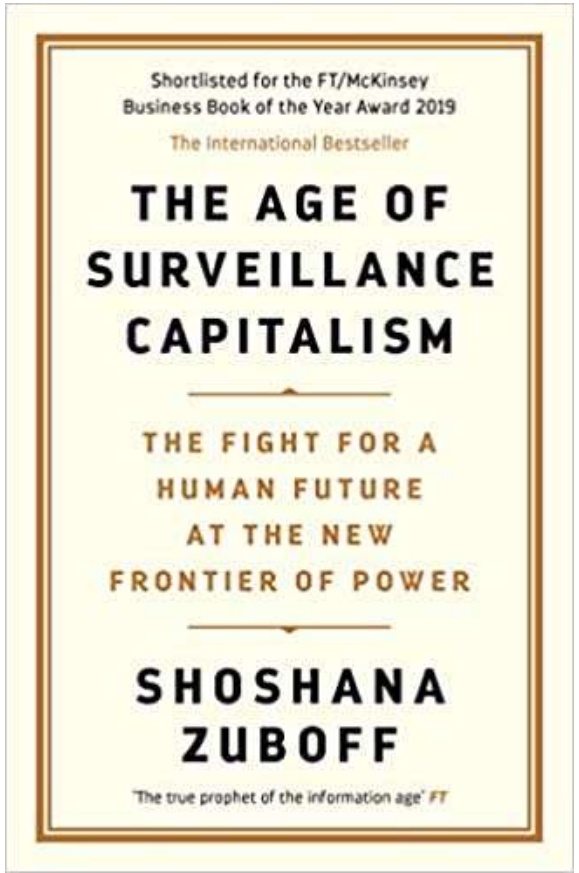
How to be a "statactiviste"?

4. Measure something different.

- Suicides at France Telecom;
- BIP 40, a new French measure of poverty/inequality

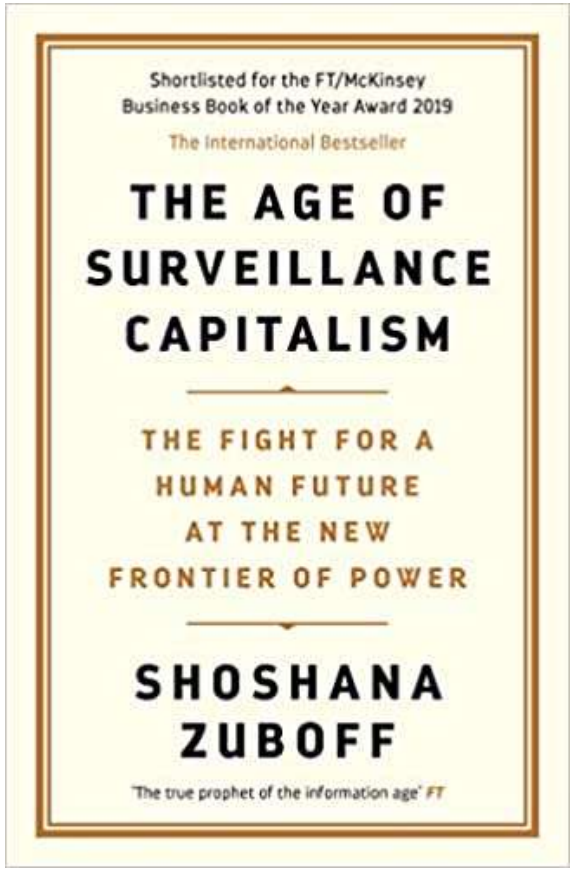
Important:

"Quantification should not be abandoned to the advantage of exalting qualities, singularities, and the incommensurable. Such an abandon would be a tactical error"



A project of domination of consumers and voters is made possible by artificial intelligence, big data & cognitive psychology

Inequality, power asymmetries and the world of surveillance capitalism



Chapters 11 & 12

Instrumentarian power

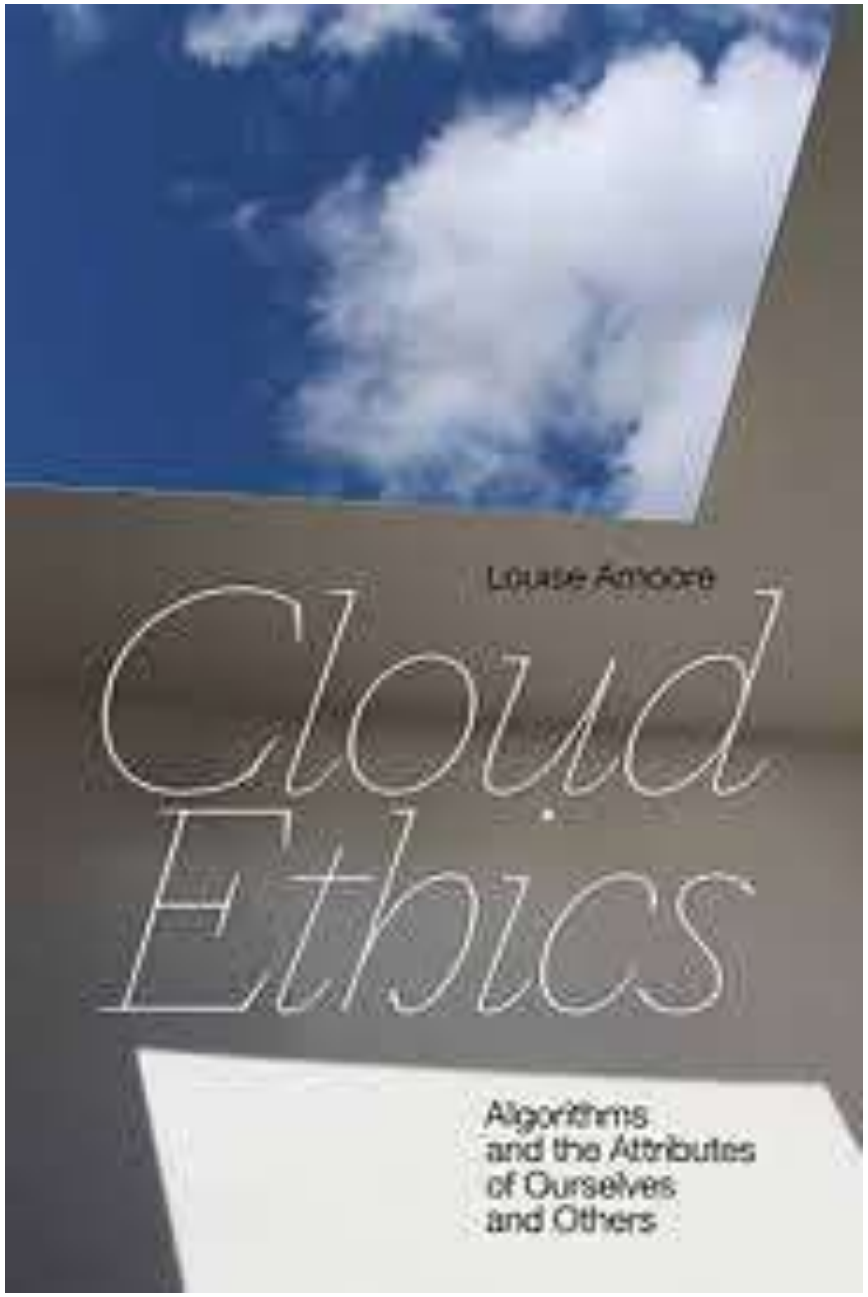
Chapter 10

Néorationalism d' importation

La trollisation de l'espace public

Cognitive psychology and evolutionary psychology

A project of domination?



Making algorithms ‘good’ or ‘transparent’ is beyond the point. Algorithms create new norms of good or bad.

Algorithm = ethicopolitical arrangement of values, assumptions, and propositions about the world

Louise Amoore

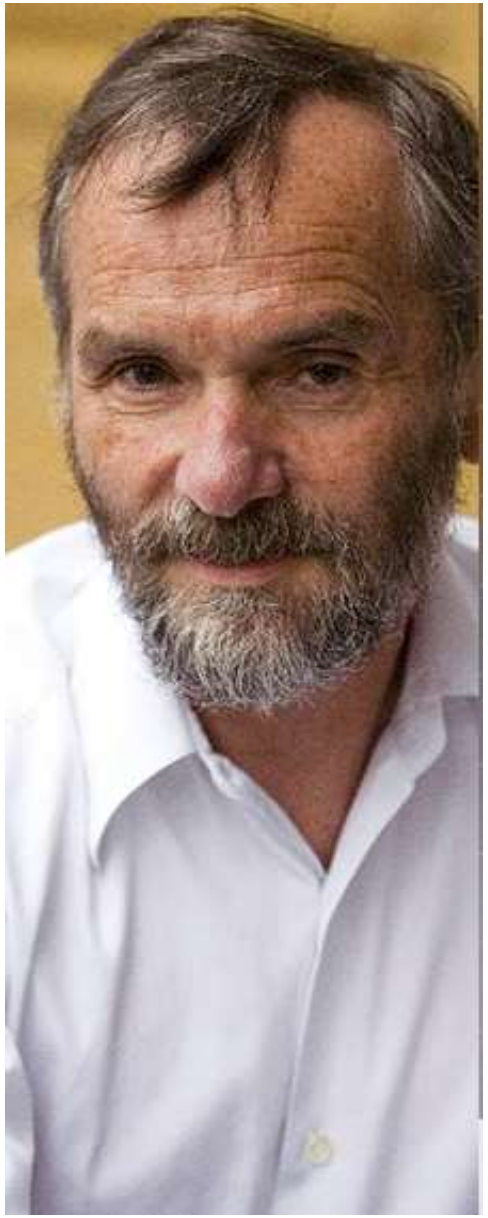
Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias

Data colonialism: rethinking big data's relation to the contemporary subject

Couldry, Nick and Mejias, Ulises (2018) Data colonialism: rethinking big data's relation to the contemporary subject. Television and New Media, vol. 20, 4: pp. 336-349.

Quantification blues, continued (II)

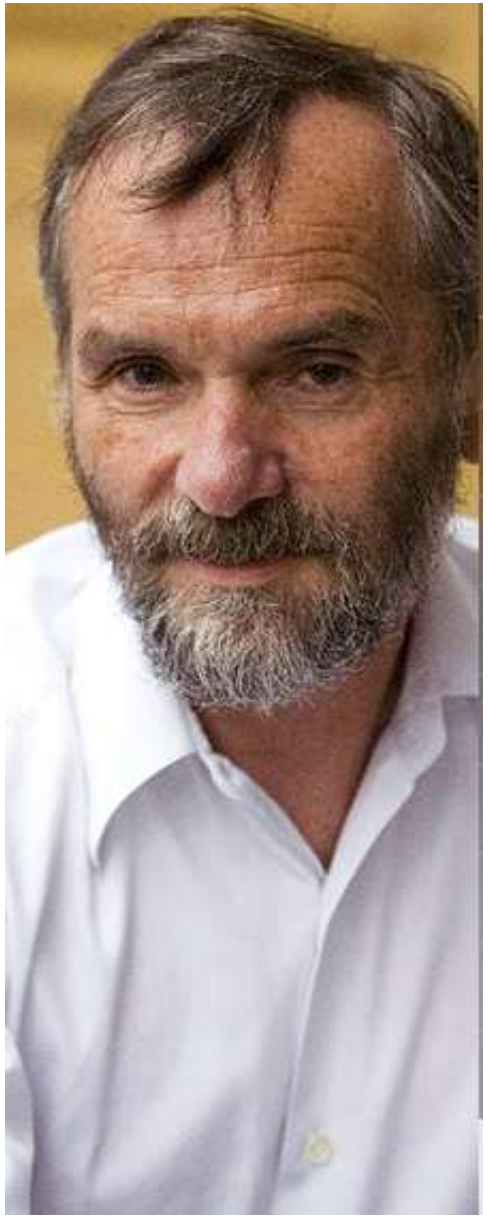
Alain Supiot



An indictment of the Total Market and the normative uses of economic quantification

https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/en-alain-supiot/Governance-by-Numbers-Introduction.htm

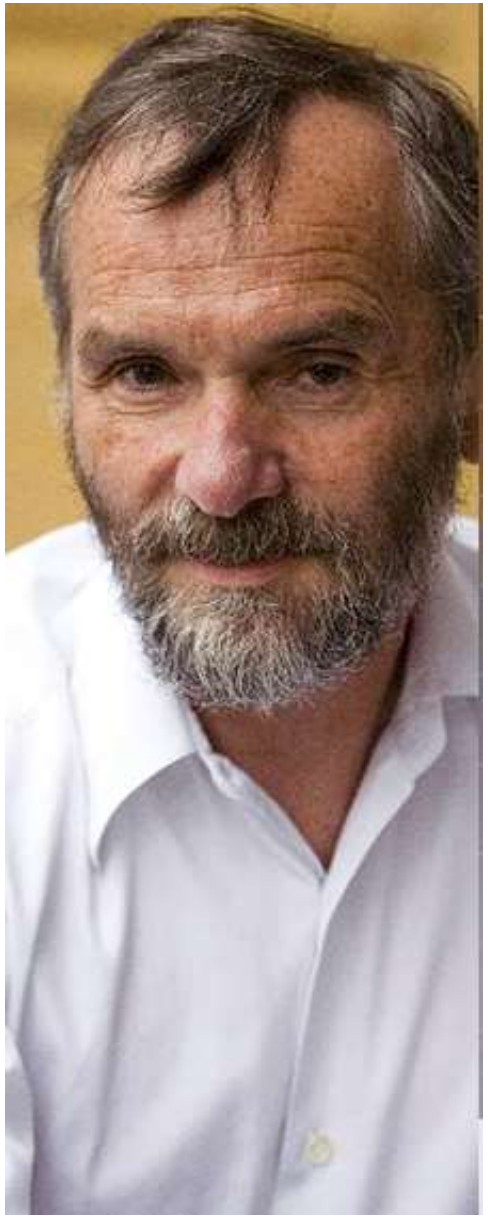
Alain Supiot



…we have entered the era of the cybernetic imaginary, which revives the West's age-old dream of grounding social harmony in calculations.

Repudiating the goal of governing by just laws, this new discourse advocates in its stead the attainment of measurable objectives efficiently

Alain Supiot



… This leaves no option open to populations or countries than to ride roughshod over social legislation, and pledge allegiance to those stronger than they are

Dangers of mathematization of economics

Wolfgang Drechsler

Erik S. Reinert

Paul Romer

Philip Mirowski

W. Drechsler, “On the possibility of quantitative-mathematical social science, chiefly economics,” *J. Econ. Stud.*, vol. 27, no. 4/5, pp. 246–259, 2000.

E. S. Reinert, “Full circle: economics from scholasticism through innovation and back into mathematical scholasticism,” *J. Econ. Stud.*, vol. 27, no. 4/5, pp. 364–376, Aug. 2000.

P. Romer, “Mathiness in the Theory of Economic Growth,” *Am. Econ. Rev.*, vol. 105, no. 5, pp. 89–93, May 2015.

Mirowski, Philip. 2013. Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown. Verso.

IIPP UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose

UCL

WORKING PAPER
WP 2021/07

Altered States: Cartesian and Ricardian dreams

Erik S. Reinert
Tallinn University of Technology
UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose

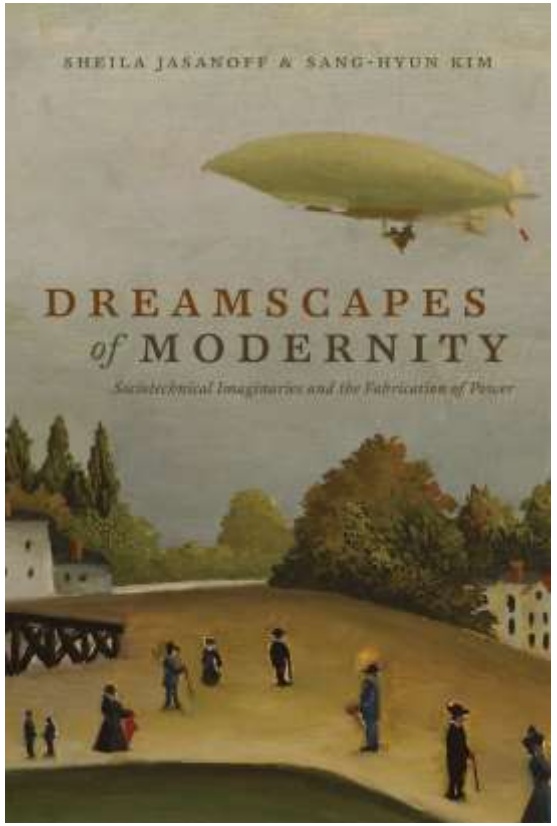
Monica di Fiore
Institute for Cognitive Sciences and Technologies, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche

Andrea Saltelli
Open Evidence Research, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC)

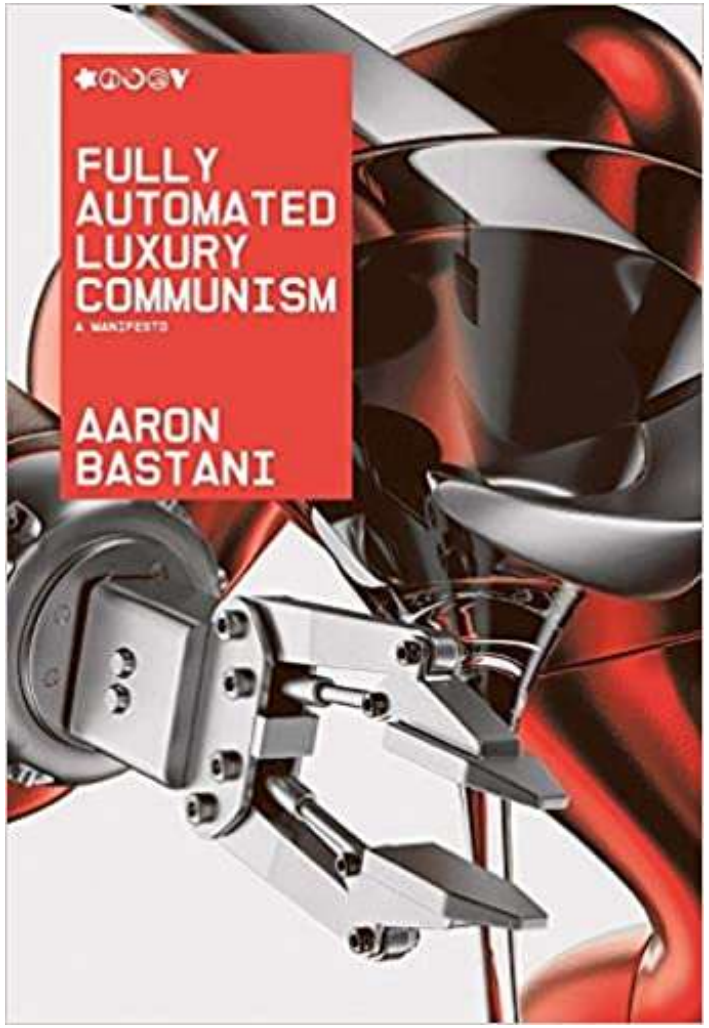
Jerome R. Ravetz
Institute for Science, Innovation and Society, University of Oxford

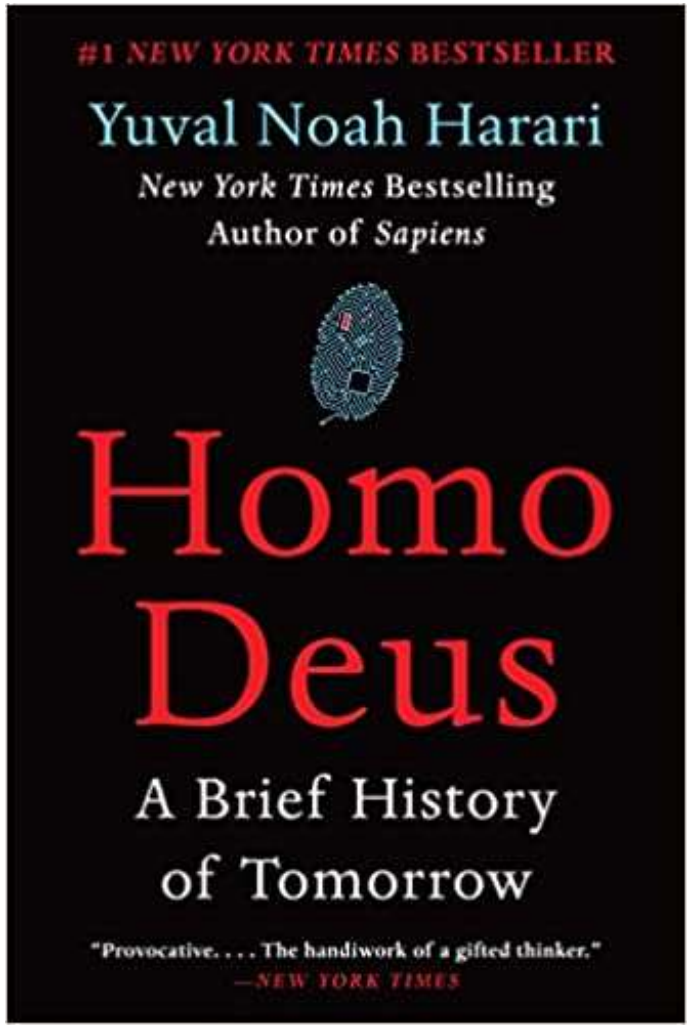
And yet …which is the prevailing sociotechnical imaginary ?

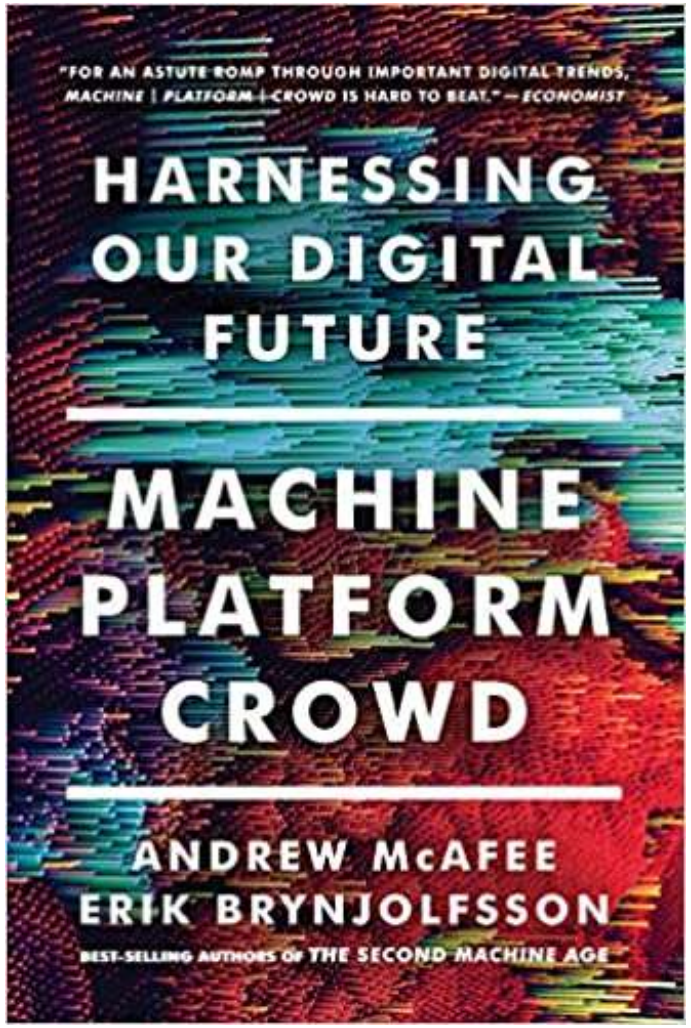
Sociotechnical imaginary: How visions of scientific and technological progress carry with them implicit ideas about public purposes, collective futures, and the common good



Sheila Jasanoff


FULLY AUTOMATED LUXURY COMMUNISM
A MANIFESTO
AARON BASTANI


#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
Yuval Noah Harari
New York Times Bestselling
Author of Sapiens
Homo Deus
A Brief History of Tomorrow
"Provocative. . . . The handiwork of a gifted thinker."
—NEW YORK TIMES


"FOR AN ASTUTE ROMP THROUGH IMPORTANT DIGITAL TRENDS, MACHINE | PLATFORM | CROWD IS HARD TO BEAT." — ECONOMIST
HARNESSING OUR DIGITAL FUTURE
MACHINE PLATFORM CROWD
ANDREW McAFEE
ERIK BRYNJOLFSSON
BEST-SELLING AUTHORS OF THE SECOND MACHINE AGE

Good news!

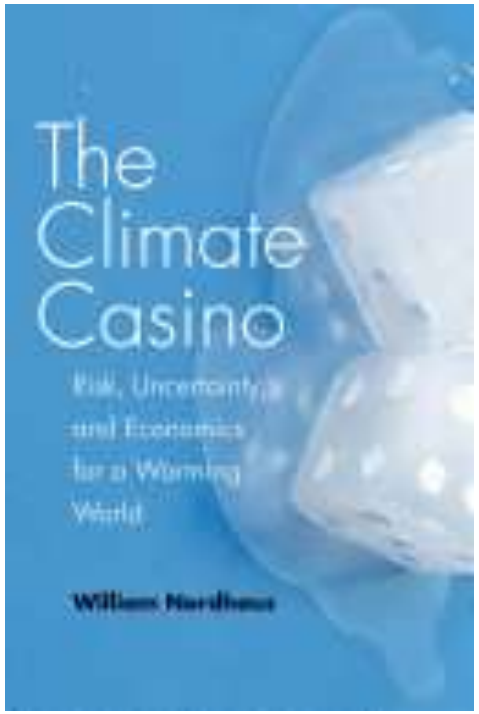
Which is the prevailing sociotechnical imaginary for quantification?

‘Decisionism’ is mainstream

“Often, immersion in the facts often makes value disagreements feel much less relevant” (C. Sunstein)

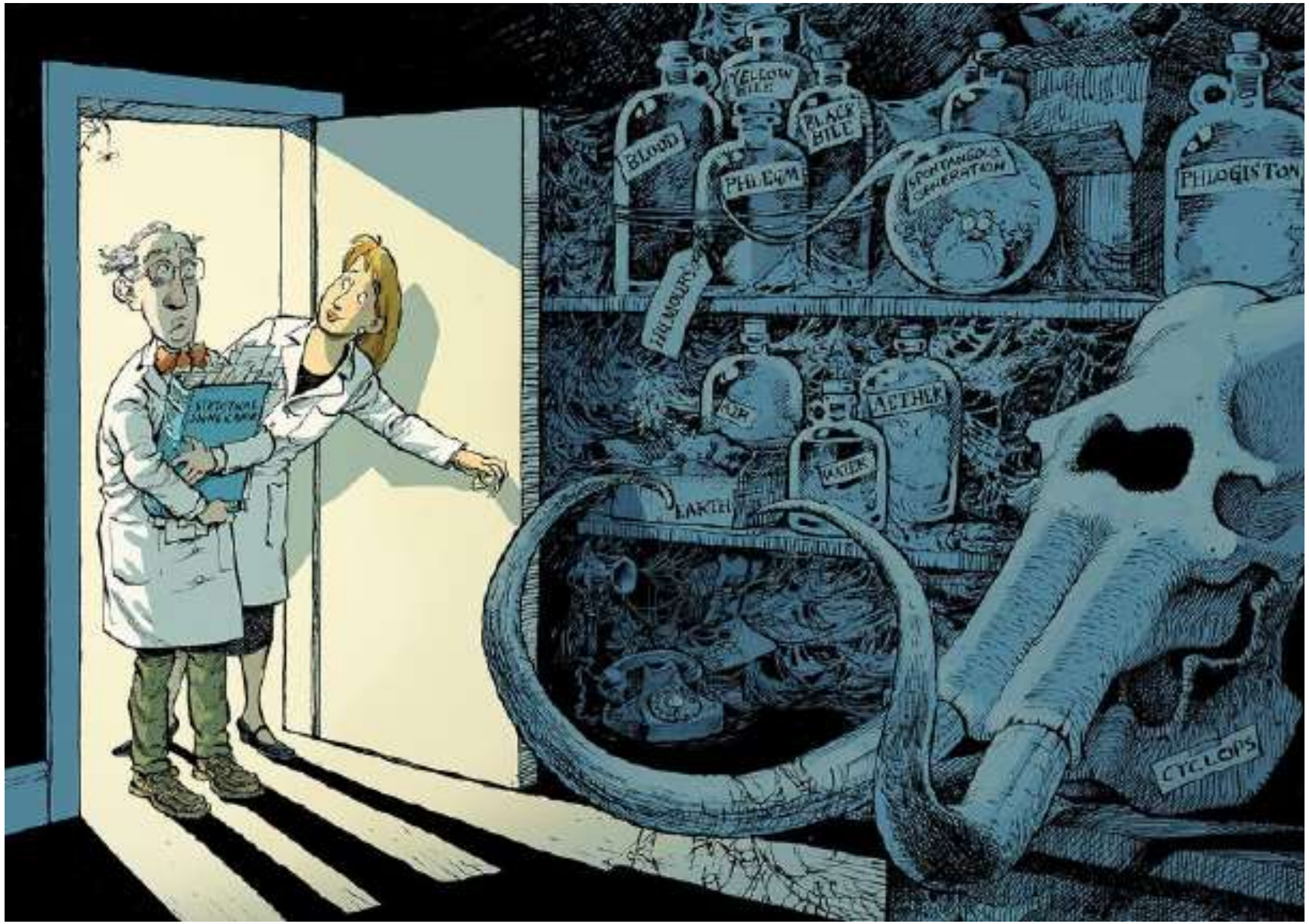
Cass Sunstein, winner of the 2018 Holberg Prize

One of the winner of Nobel prize for economics 2018 was Willem Nordhaus, for his work on the economics of climate change.



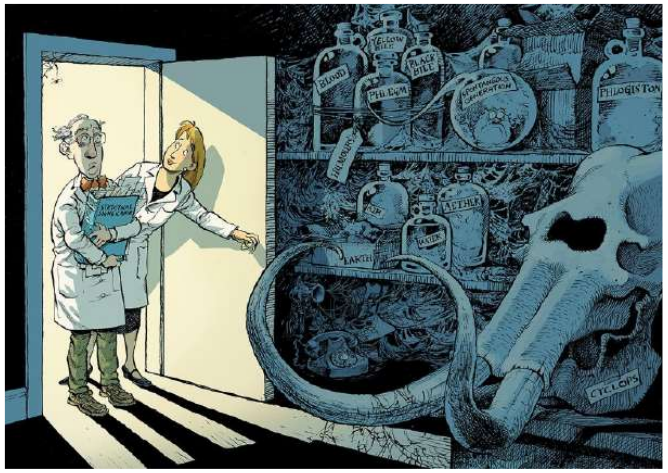
Cost benefit analysis to the year 2100?

Statistical and mathematical modelling



Throw away the concept of statistical significance?

nature
International journal of science



COMMENT · 20 MARCH 2019

Scientists rise up against statistical significance

Valentin Amrhein, Sander Greenland, Blake McShane and more than 800 signatories call for an end to hyped claims and the dismissal of possibly crucial effects.

Valentin Amrhein, Sander Greenland & Blake McShane

See the discussion on the blog of Andrew Gelman https://statmodeling.stat.columbia.edu/

Statistics in the wake of the reproducibility crisis

Statistical wars?

Mathematical models

COMMENT · 24 JUNE 2020

Five ways to ensure that models serve society: a manifesto

Pandemic politics highlight how predictions need to be transparent and humble to invite insight, not blame.

Illustration by David Parkins

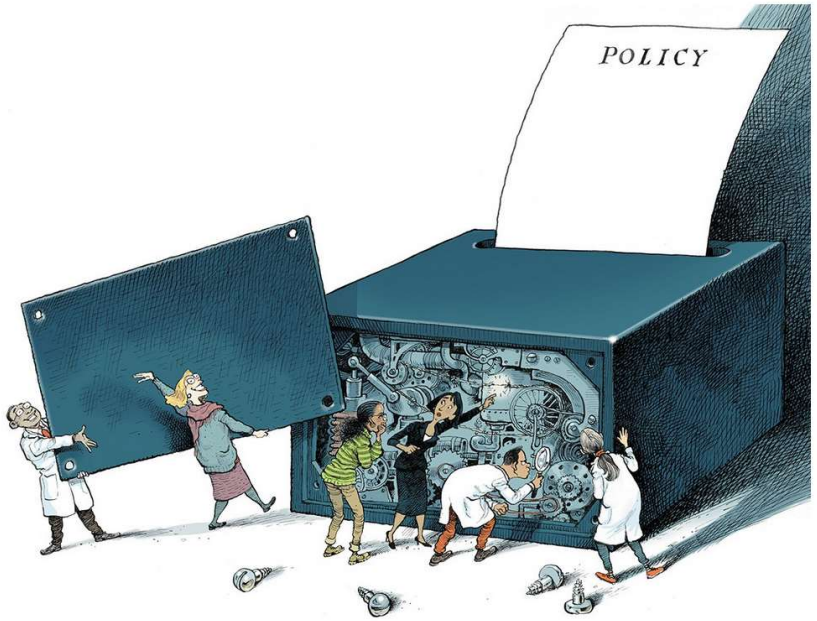
nature

nature

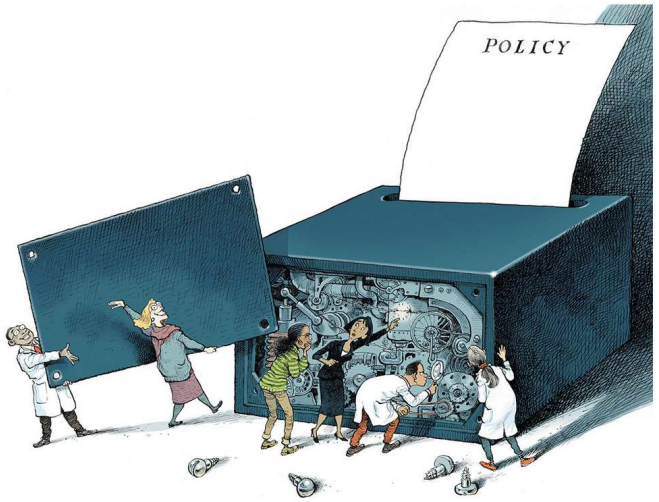
Andrea Saltelli, Gabriele Bammer, Isabelle Bruno, Erica Charters, Monica Di Fiore, Emmanuel Didier, Wendy Nelson Espeland, John Kay, Samuele Lo Piano, Deborah Mayo, Roger Pielke Jr, Tommaso Portaluri, Theodore M. Porter, Arnald Puy, Ismael Rafols, Jerome R. Ravetz, Erik Reinert, Daniel Sarewitz, Philip B. Stark, Andrew Stirling, Jeroen van der Sluijs & Paolo Vineis

3 modellers Lo Piano, Puy, Saltelli
2 experts models and society Pielke, van der Sluijs
3 statisticians Mayo, Stark, Portaluri
2 statactivistes Bruno, Didier
2 economists Kay, Raynert
1 epidemiologist Vineis

2 sociologists of quantification Espeland, Porter
3 STS scholars Bammer, Sarewitz, Stirling
1 philosopher Ravetz
1 historian Charters
1 political scientists Di Fiore
1 expert RRI - Open Science Rafols

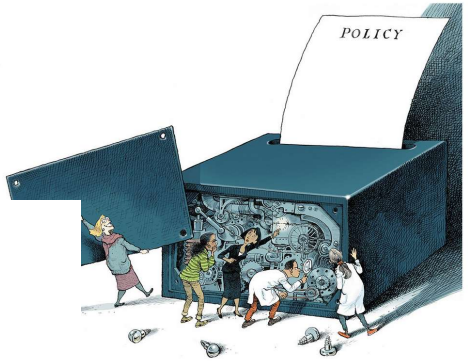


COVID has put mathematical models in the limelight



➔ Power & controversy

Power



The New York Times

Behind the Virus Report That Jarred the U.S. and the U.K. to Action

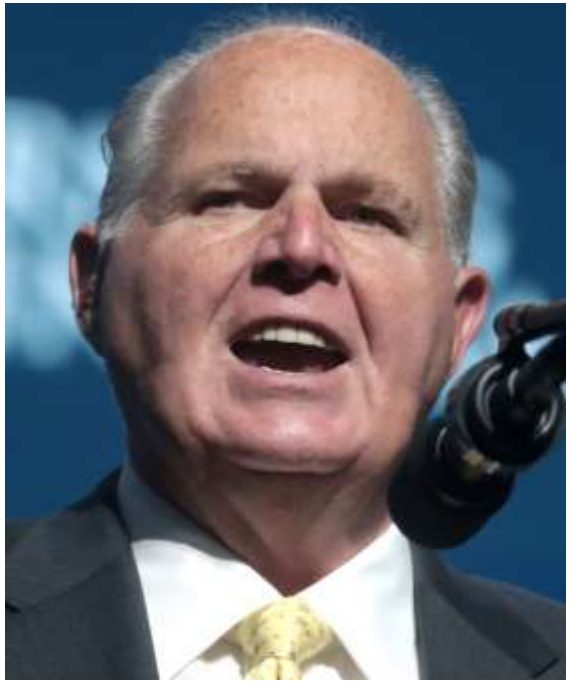
It wasn't so much the numbers themselves, frightening though they were, as who reported them: Imperial College London.

Landler, Mark, and Stephen Castle. 2020. Behind the Virus Report That Jarred the U.S. and the U.K. to Action - The New York Times.

Conflicts, when questions of urgency, stakes, values and uncertainty collide

"Wild-Ass Covid numbers … The minute I hear anybody start talking about models and modeling, I blanch"

Rush Limbaugh



Rhodes, Tim, and Kari Lancaster. 2020. "**Mathematical Models as Public Troubles in COVID-19 Infection Control: Following the Numbers**", Health Sociology Review 1–18. doi: 10.1080/14461242.2020.1764376

Mind the assumptions

Assess uncertainty and sensitivity

Mind the hubris

Complexity can be the enemy of relevance

Mind the framing

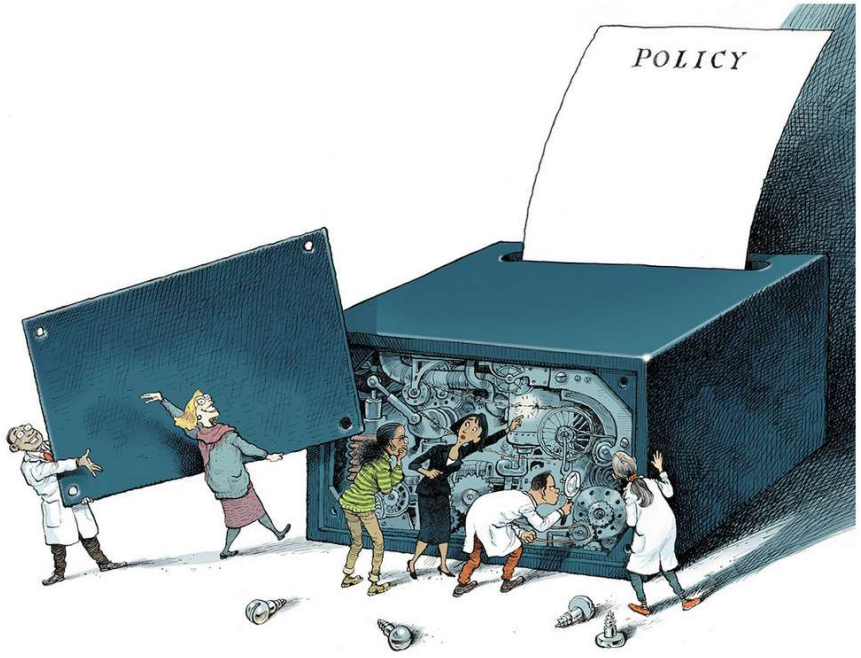
Match purpose and context

Mind the consequences

Quantification can backfire.

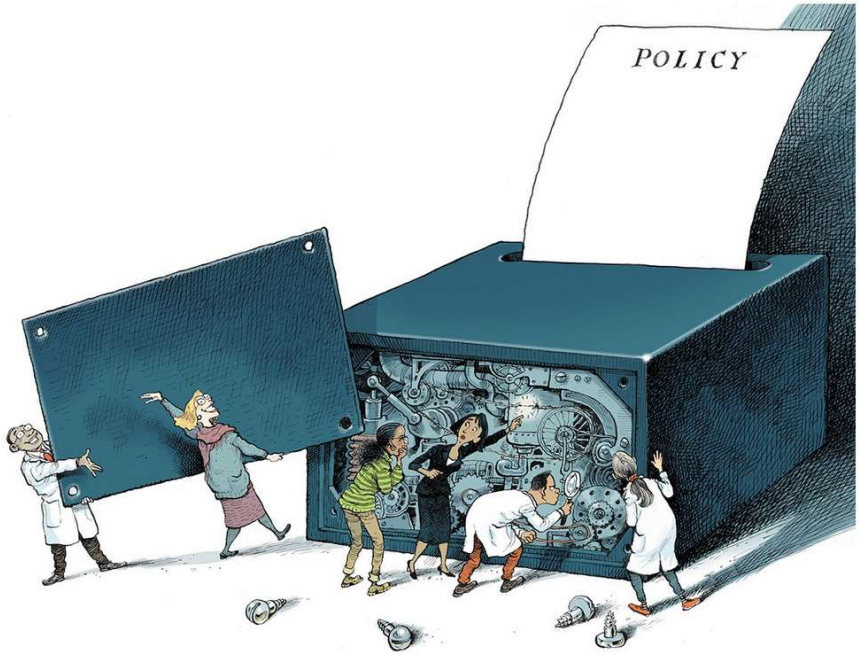
Mind the unknowns

Acknowledge ignorance



Mind the assumptions

Assess uncertainty and sensitivity



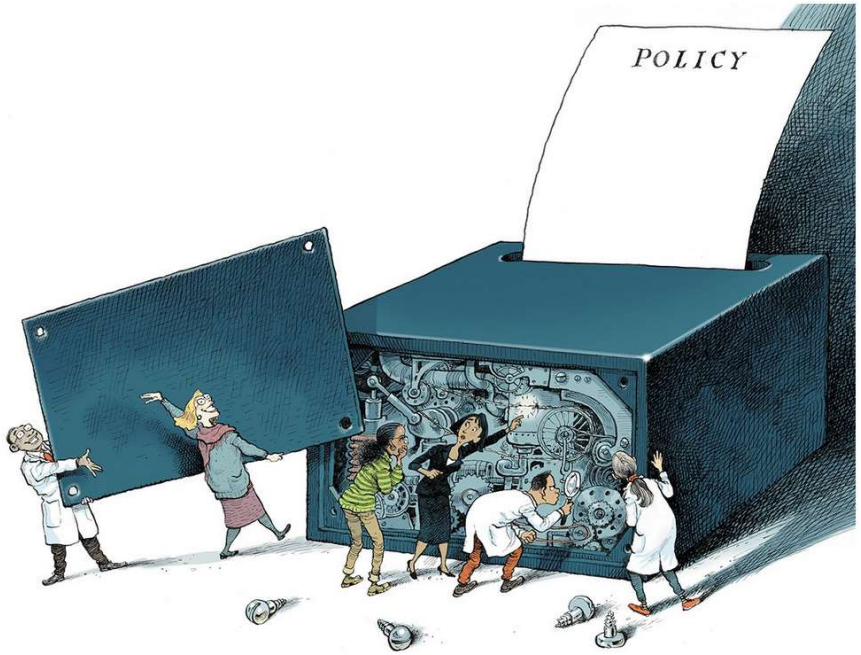
… models require input values for which there is no reliable information…

…global uncertainty and sensitivity analyses are often not done. Anyone turning to a model for insight should demand them …

Mind the assumptions

Assess uncertainty and sensitivity

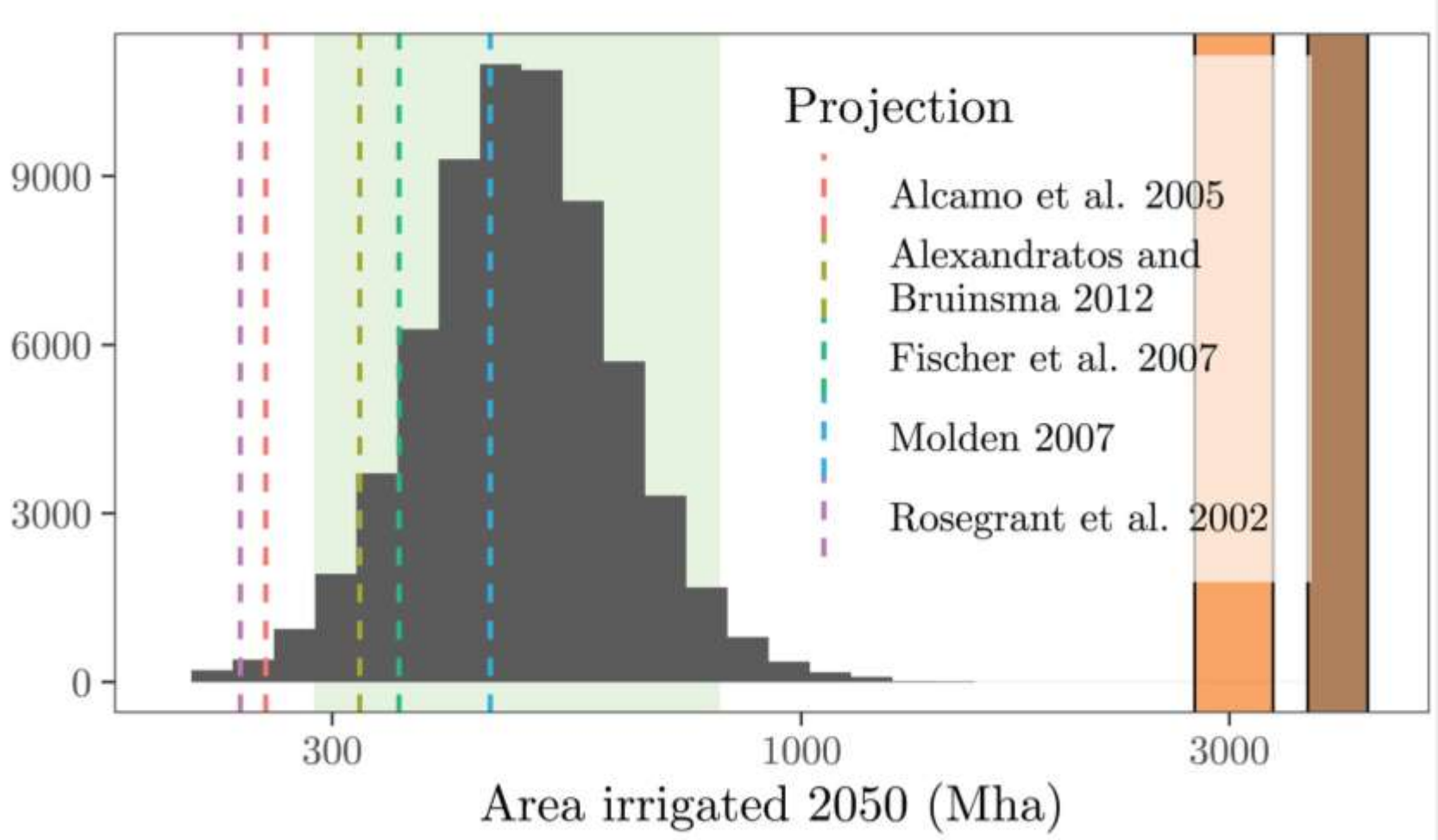
… this may lead to interesting discoveries …



Geophysical Research Letters

Current Models Underestimate Future Irrigated Areas

A. Puy, S. Lo Piano, A. Saltelli First published: 17 April 2020 https://doi.org/10.1029/2020GL087360



Models ask as input information which we don't have – The case of WEBTAG

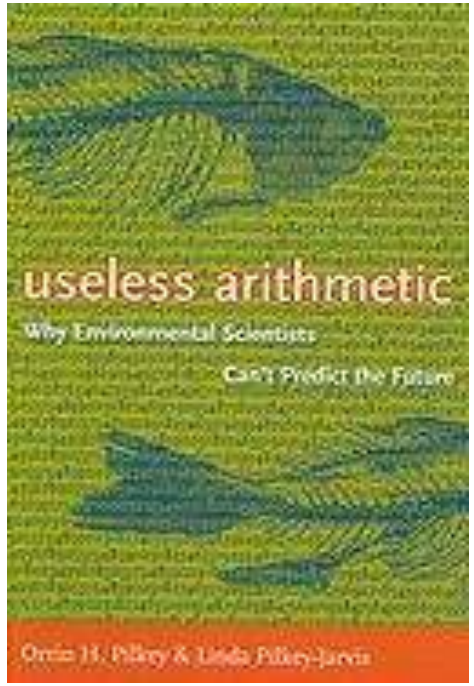
John Kay

J. A. Kay, "Knowing when we don't know," 2012, https://www.ifs.org.uk/docs/john_kay_feb2012.pdf

WebTAG: Annual Percentage Change in Car Occupancy (% pa) up to 2036

Journey Purpose	Weekday					Weekend	All Week
	7am-10am	10am-4pm	4pm-7pm	7pm-7am	Weekday Average		
Work	-0.48	-0.4	-0.62	-0.5	-0.44	-0.48	-0.45
Non - Work (commuting and other)	-0.67	-0.65	-0.53	-0.47	-0.59	-0.52	-0.56

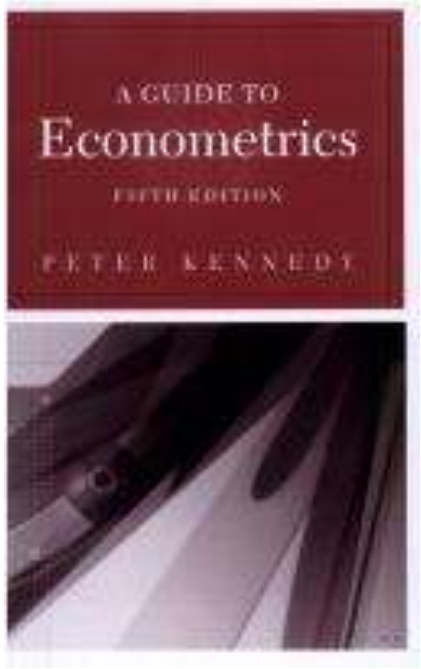
Orrin H. Pilkey



More examples in Useless Arithmetic: Why Environmental Scientists Can't Predict the Future, by Orrin H. Pilkey and Linda Pilkey-Jarvis

Peter Kennedy, A Guide to Econometrics.

One of the ten commandments of applied econometrics according to Peter Kennedy:



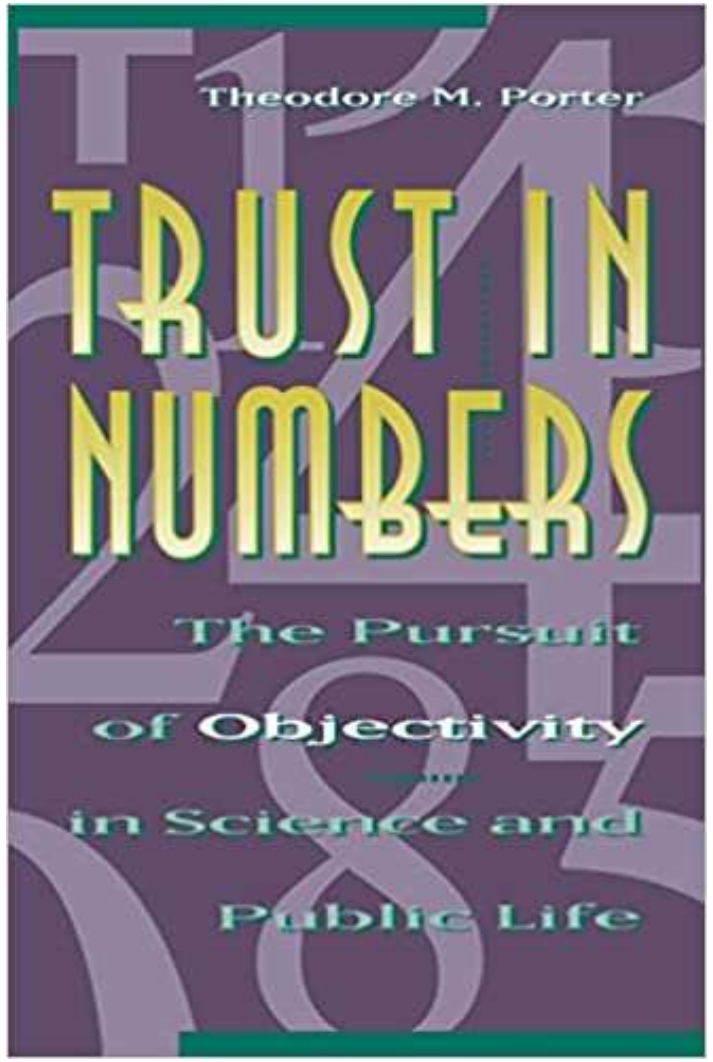
Peter Kennedy

“Thou shall confess in the presence of sensitivity. Corollary: Thou shall anticipate criticism “

“One reason these methods [global sensitivity analysis] are rarely used is their honesty seems destructive;”

“or, to put it another way, a fanatical commitment to fanciful formal models is often needed to create the appearance of progress”

Tantalus on the Road to Asymptopia, Edward E. Leamer, 2010 *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, **24**, (2), 31–46.



Cost benefit analysis: chapter 7 in Porter's book Trust in Numbers", Princeton, 1995

Theodor Porter

Mind the assumptions

Assess uncertainty and sensitivity

Mind the hubris

Complexity can be the enemy of relevance

Mind the framing

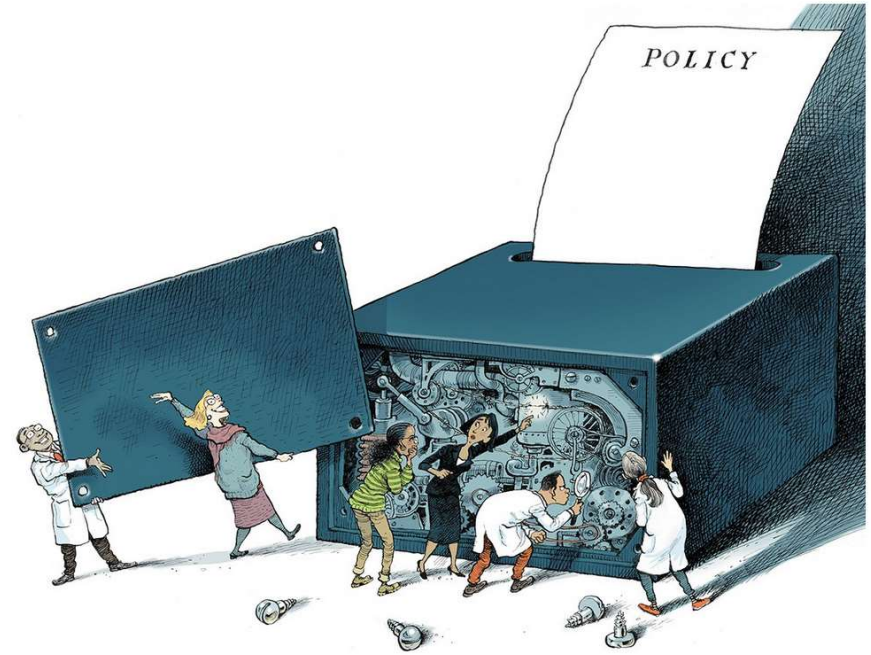
Match purpose and context

Mind the consequences

Quantification can backfire.

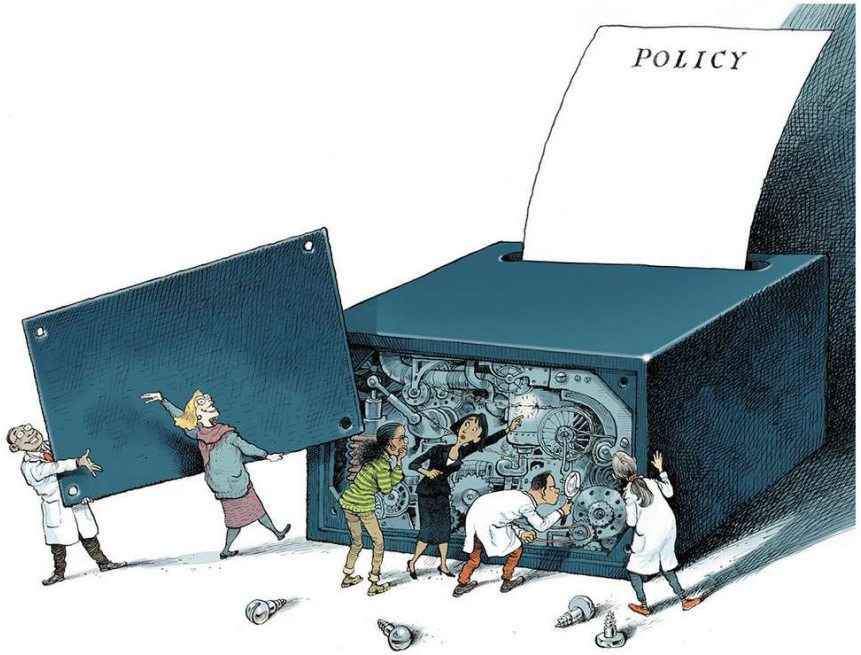
Mind the unknowns

Acknowledge ignorance



Mind the hubris

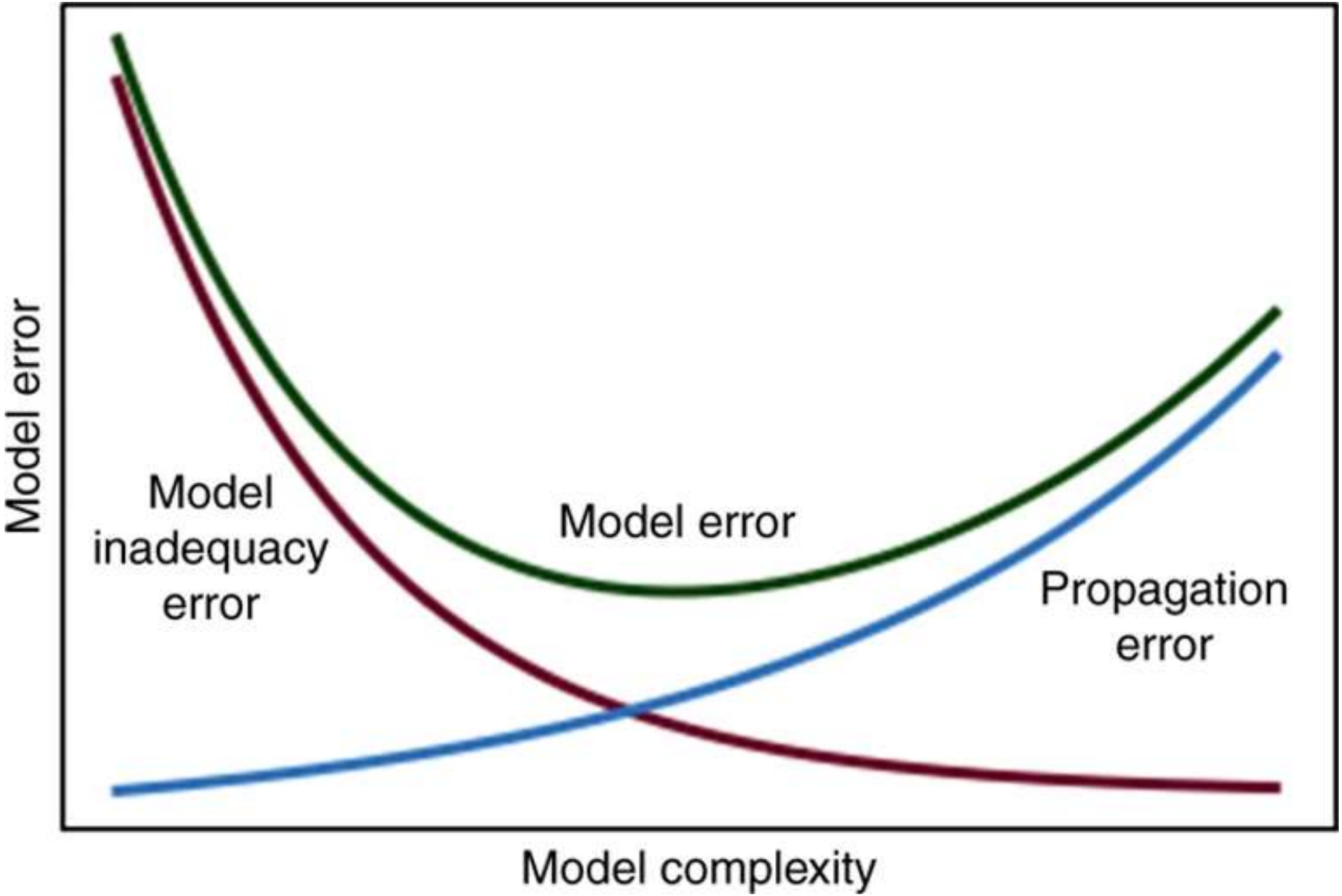
Complexity can be the enemy of relevance

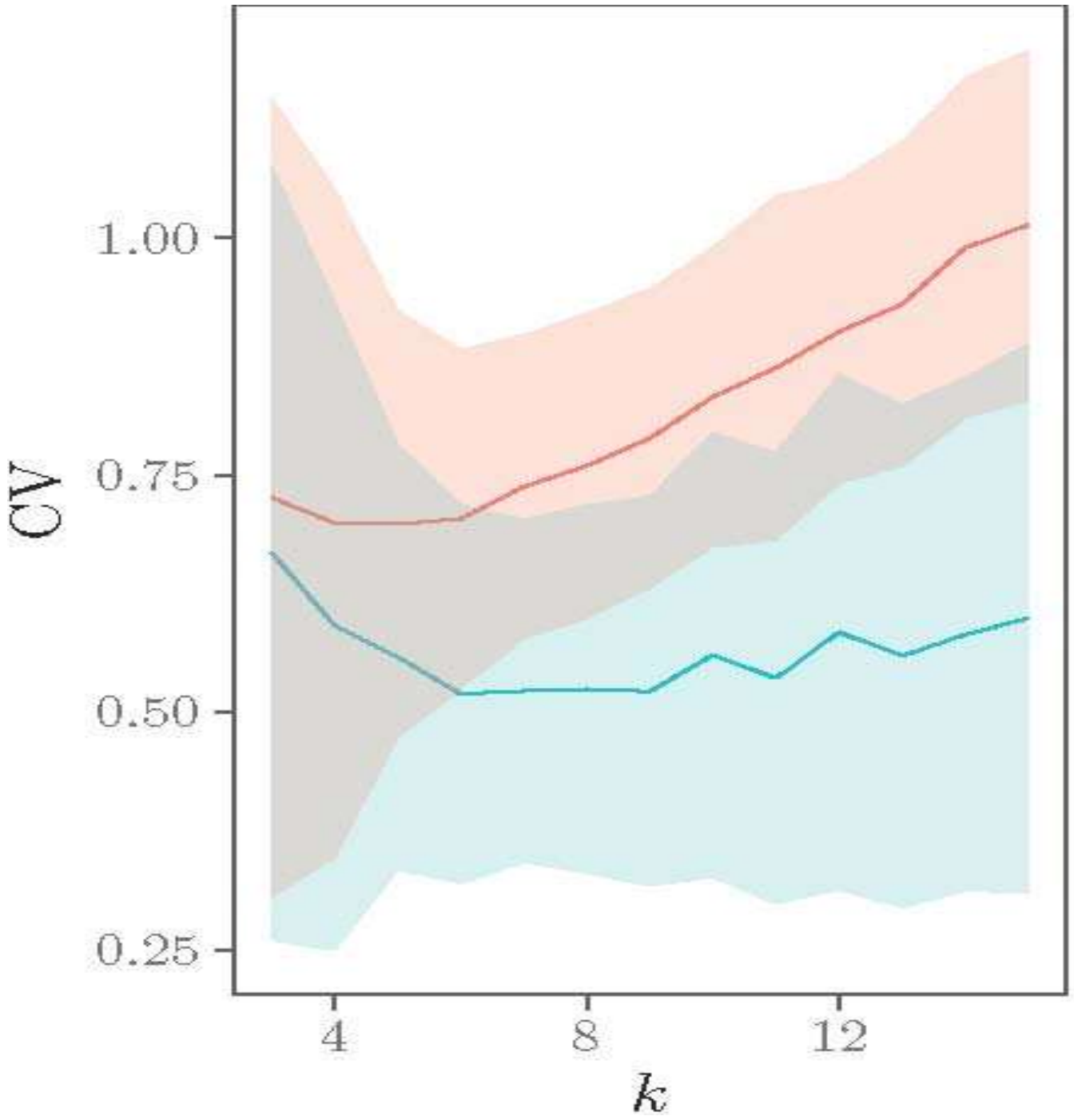


… many are seduced by the idea of adding complexity in an attempt to capture reality more accurately, but…

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

1. Additional information and references >260 references


Model error
Model inadequacy error
Model error
Propagation error
Model complexity



O'Neil conjecture

CV=coeff. of variation=
STD/mean
k model dimensionality

Interactions

Up to the k-th order

Up to the n-th order

with $n \leq k$

From A. Puy et al, "Effective dimension and model uncertainty", **paper in progress**

Mathematical models (continued)

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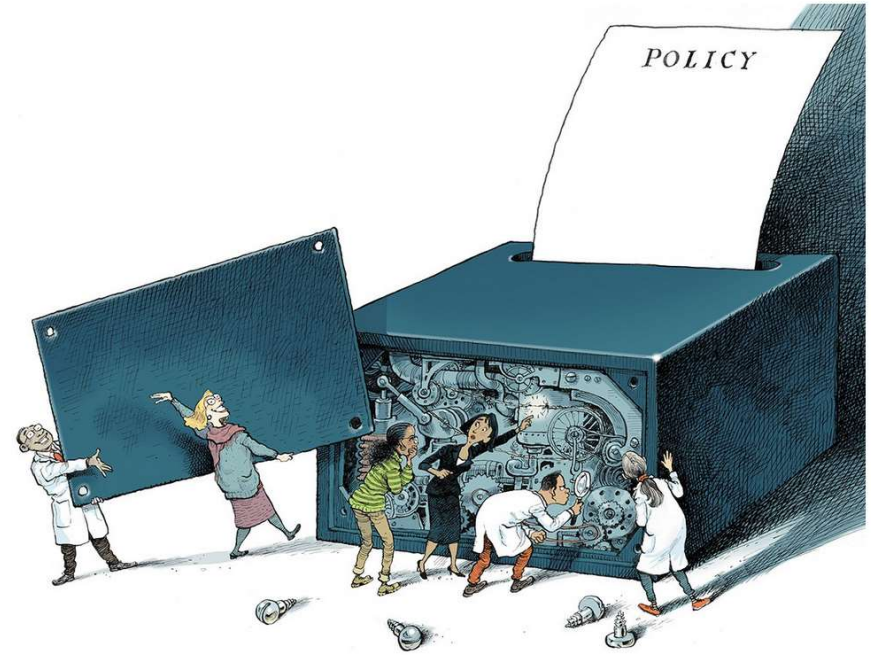
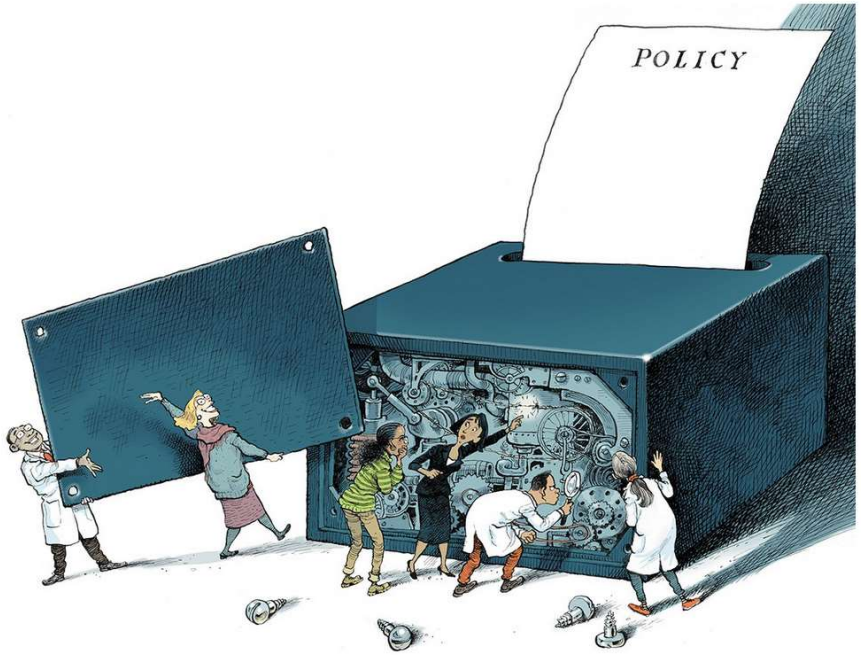


Mind the framing

Match purpose and context



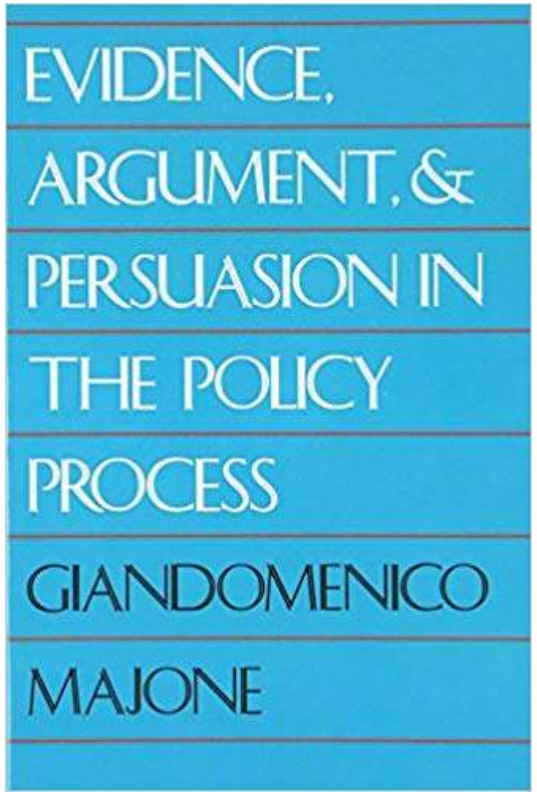
… models will reflect the interests, disciplinary orientations and biases of the developers…

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

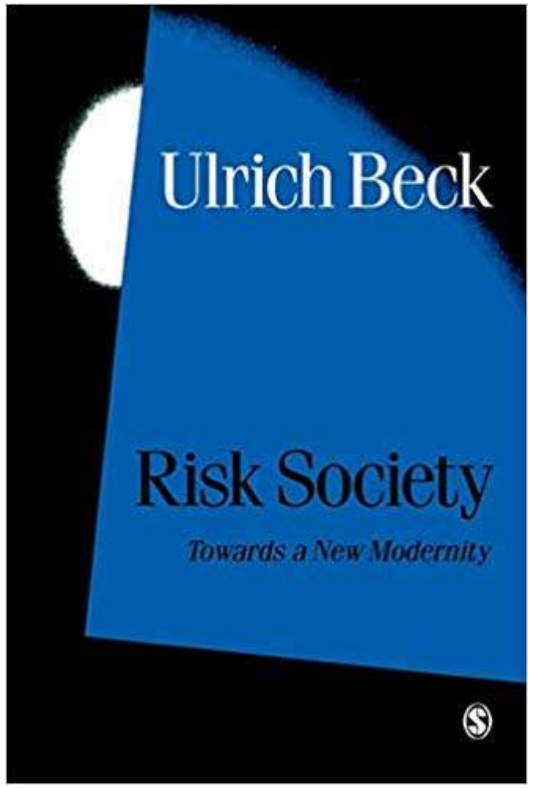
1. Additional information and references >260 references

From Ulrich Beck to Giandomenico Majone: the technique is never neutral

Ulrich Beck
(1944 –2015)



1989



1992 (1986)

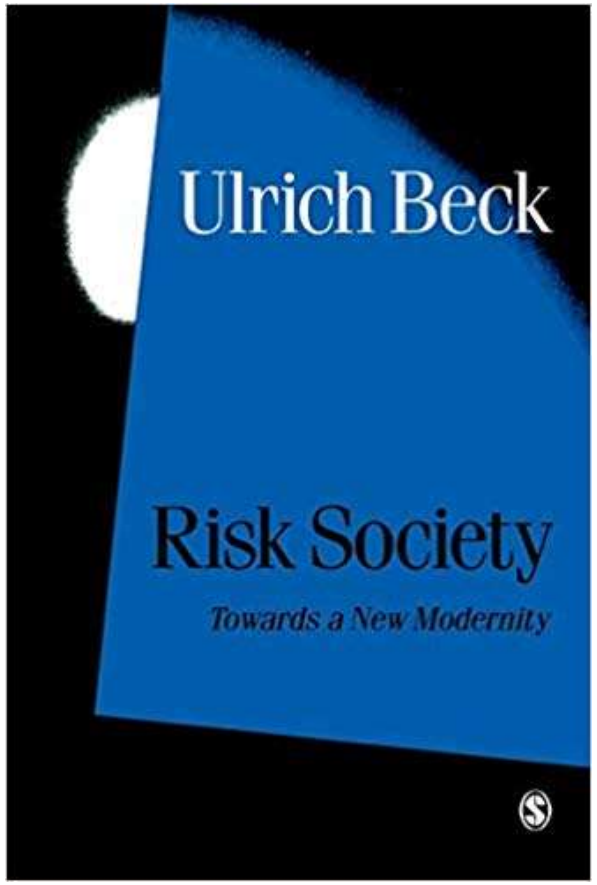
ELSEVIER

Environmental Science & Policy
Volume 106, April 2020, Pages 87-98

The technique is never neutral. How methodological choices condition the generation of narratives for sustainability

Andrea Saltelli [a, b], Lorenzo Benini [c], Silvio Funtowicz [a], Mario Giampietro [d, e], Matthias Kaiser [a], Erik Reinert [a, f], Jeroen P. van der Sluijs [a, g, h]

“It is not uncommon for political programs to be decided in advance simply by the choice of what expert representatives are included in the circle of advisers.”



1992 (1986)

Ulrich Beck
(1944 –2015)

The technique is never neutral. How methodological choices condition the generation of narratives for sustainability

Environmental Science & Policy
Volume 106, April 2020, Pages 87-98

Andrea Saltelli [a, b], Lorenzo Benini [c], Silvio Funtowicz [a], Mario Giampietro [d, e], Matthias Kaiser [a], Erik Reinert [a, f], Jeroen P. van der Sluijs [a, g, h]

Combine more lenses, including Post-normal science (PNS), Bioeconomics, and Non-Ricardian economics

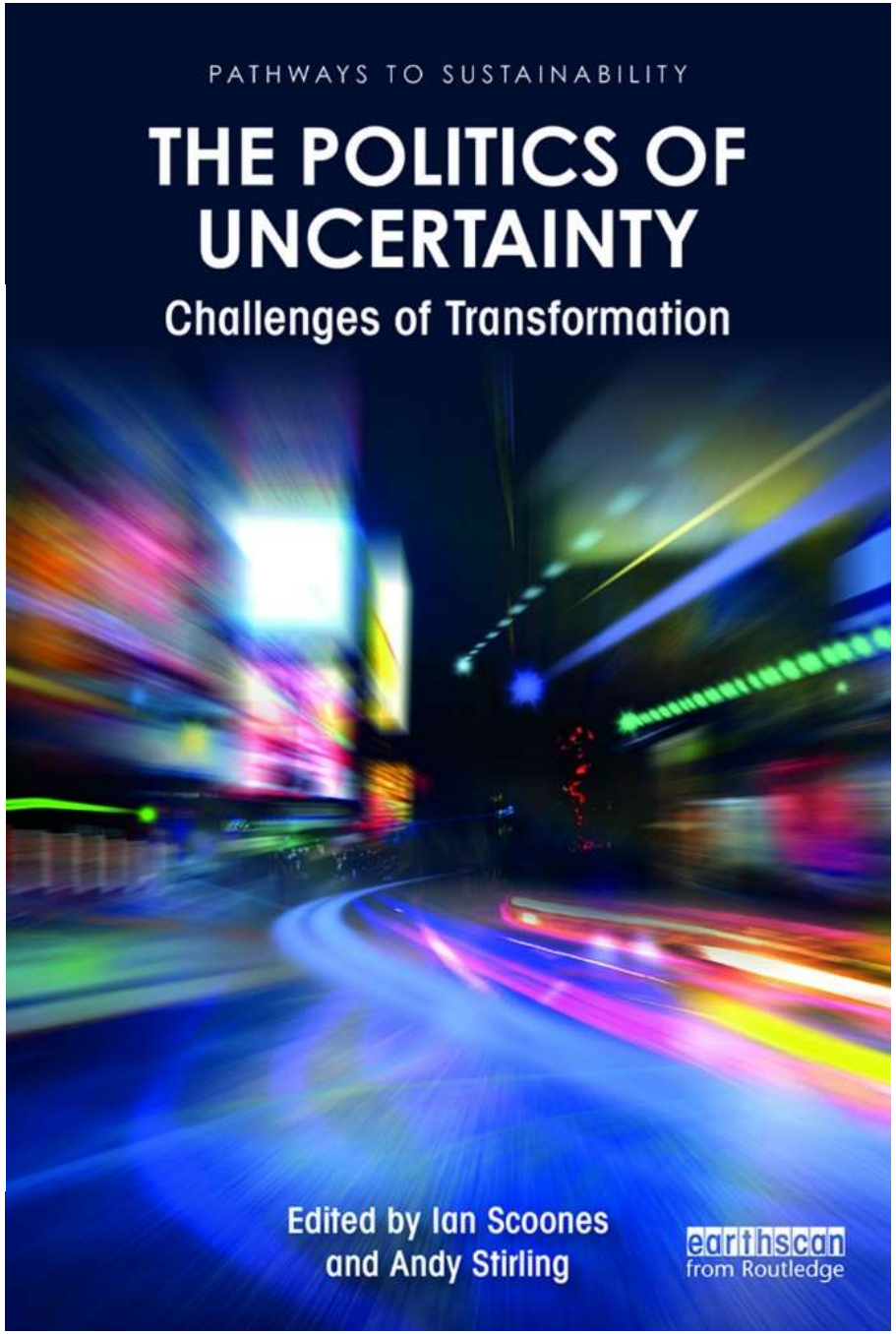
On reductionism

4

THE UNRAVELLING OF TECHNOCRATIC ORTHODOXY?

Contemporary knowledge politics in technology regulation

Patrick van Zwanenberg



Frames as hypocognition & Socially constructed ignorance

Steve Rayner

Rayner, S., 2012, Uncomfortable knowledge: the social construction of ignorance in science and environmental policy discourses, Economy and Society, 41:1, 107–125.

Rayner's (2012) strategies to deal with "uncomfortable knowledge".

Denial, Dismissal, Diversion, Displacement

Model based

Rayner, S., 2012, Uncomfortable knowledge: the social construction of ignorance in science and environmental policy discourses, Economy and Society, 41:1, 107-125.

Displacement: “The model we have developed tells us that real progress is being achieved” (The focus in now the model not the problem).

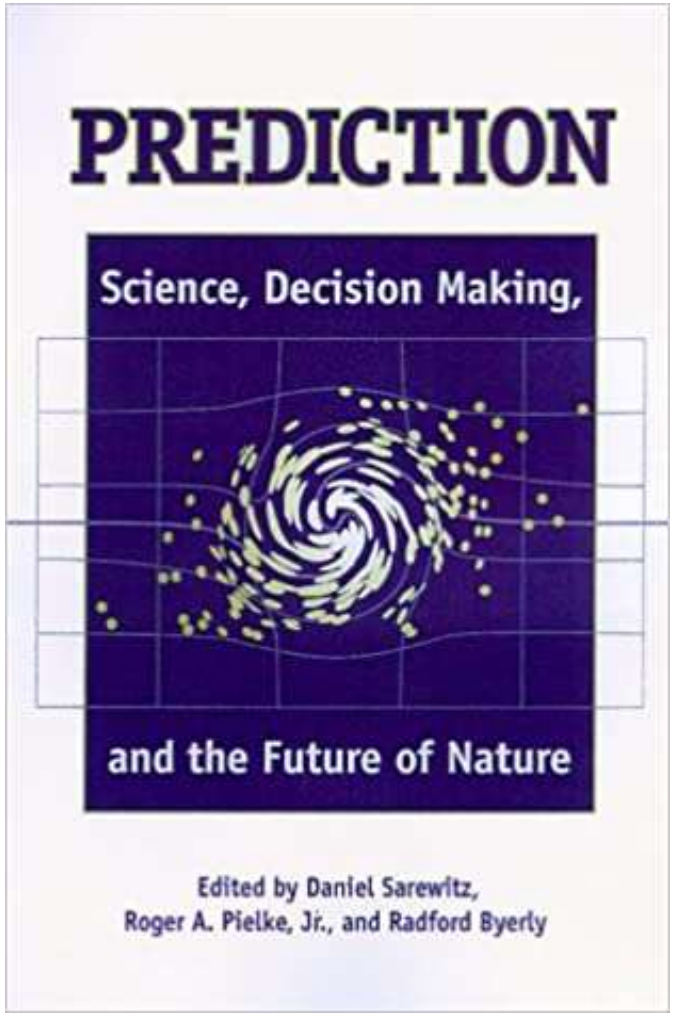
Rayner, S., 2012, Uncomfortable knowledge: the social construction of ignorance in science and environmental policy discourses, Economy and Society, 41:1, 107-125.

Example of displacement: Chesapeake Bay Program (CBP) modelling work

"Bay models are used to track nutrient loads to ensure the cap is not exceeded"

➔The model results – rather than the actual measurements, become the substance of use

Rayner, S., 2012, Uncomfortable knowledge: the social construction of ignorance in science and environmental policy discourses, Economy and Society, 41:1, 107-125.



Model GENESIS for beach erosion

US Army Corps of Engineers ®

Manipulated to support coastal-engineering projects

It neglected the role of extreme event

Sarewitz, D., Pielke, R. A. & Byerly, R. *Prediction: Science, Decision Making, and the Future of Nature* (Island Press, 2000).

Mind the assumptions

Assess uncertainty and sensitivity

Mind the hubris

Complexity can be the enemy of relevance

Mind the framing

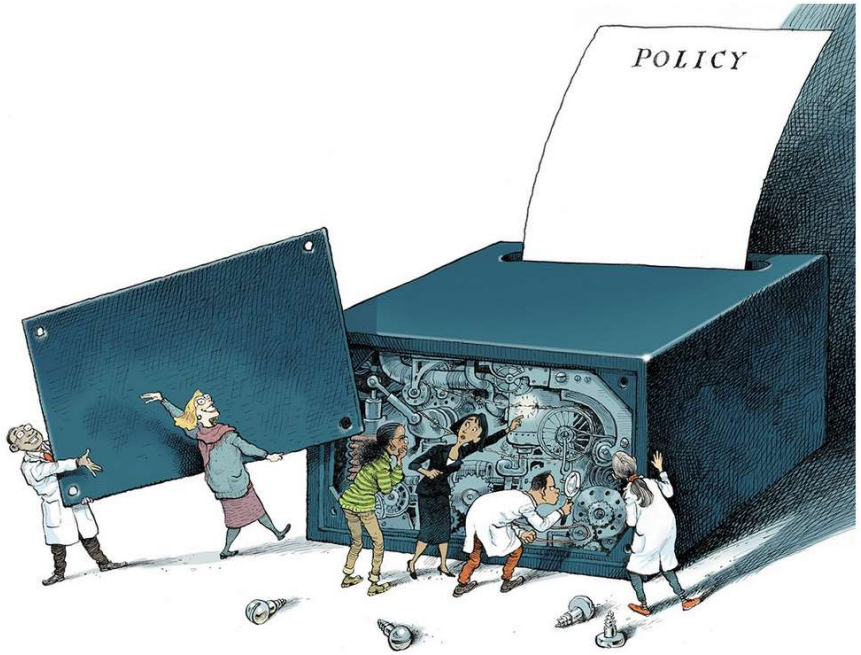
Match purpose and context

Mind the consequences

Quantification can backfire.

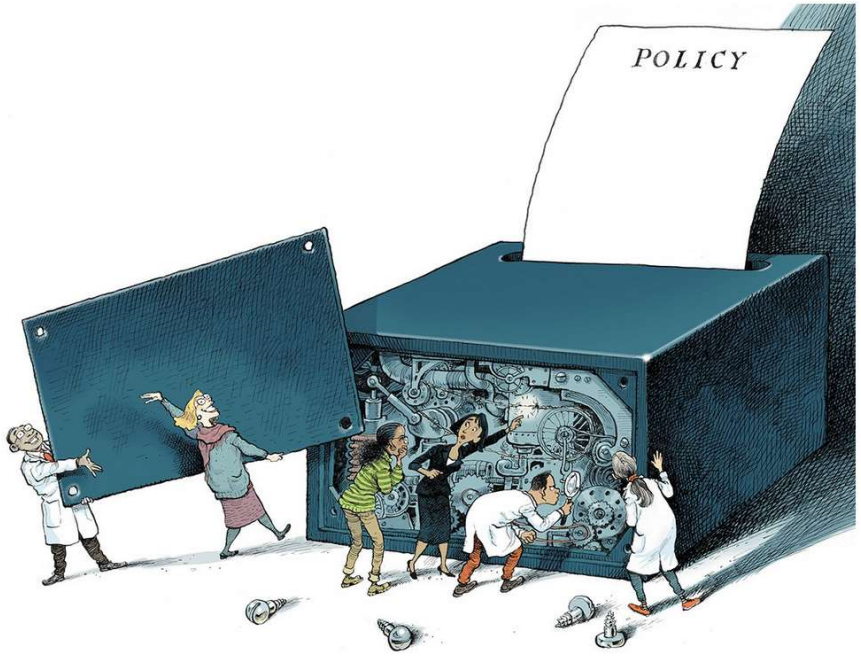
Mind the unknowns

Acknowledge ignorance



Mind the consequences

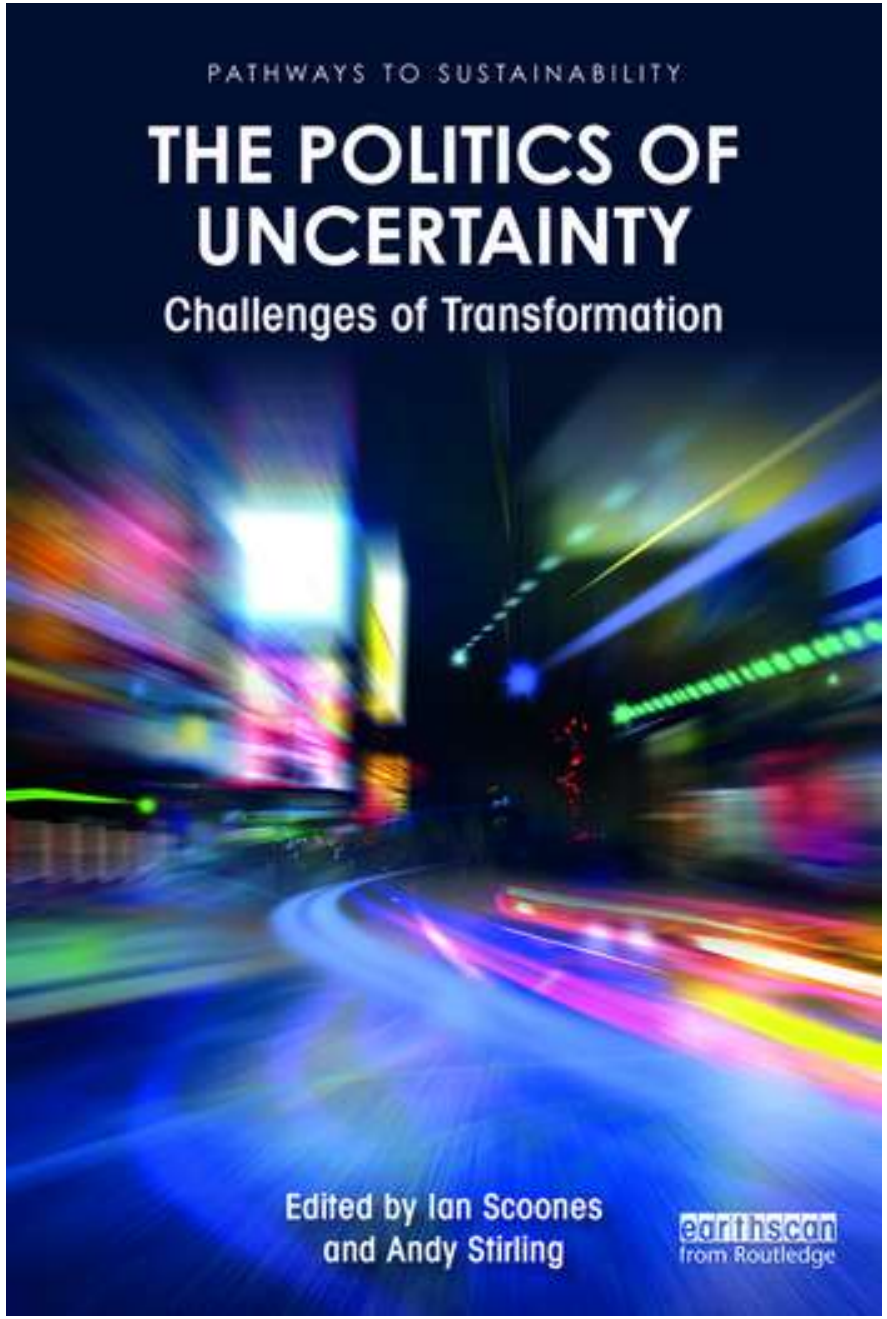
Quantification can backfire.



From the risk of financial products to the management of costal zones to the models for disaster insurance bad modelling may lead to wrong decisions

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

1. Additional information and references >260 references



3

SHARING RISKS OR PROLIFERATING UNCERTAINTIES?

Insurance, disaster and development

Leigh Johnson

Model-based parametric insurance led to dramatic consequences for developing countries experiencing draughts

Open access: https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/politics-uncertainty-ian-scoones-andy-stirling/e/10.4324/9781003023845

New WHO estimates: Up to 190 000 people could die of COVID-19 in Africa if not controlled

07 May 2020

Brazzaville – Eighty-three thousand to 190 000 people in Africa could die of COVID-19 and 29 million to 44 million could get infected in the first year of the pandemic if containment measures fail, a new study by the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Africa finds. The research, which is based on prediction modelling, looks at 47 countries in the

Speculative scenario in which ten uncertain input probabilities are increased by an arbitrary 10% — as if they were truly equally uncertain — with no theoretical or empirical basis for such a choice

World Health Organization
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR Africa

Mathematical models (continued, II)

Mind the assumptions

Assess uncertainty and sensitivity

Mind the hubris

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Match purpose and context

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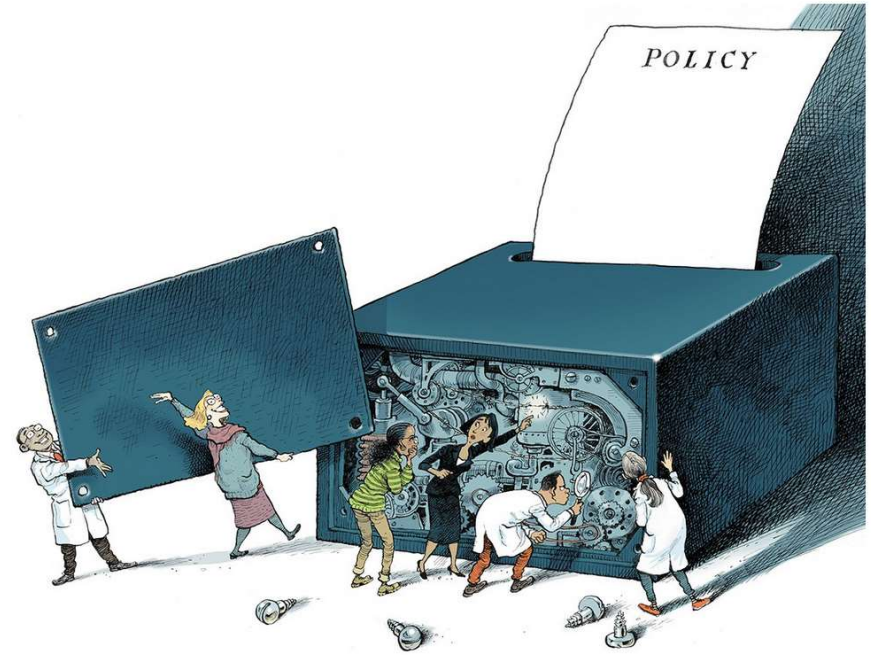
Quantification can backfire.

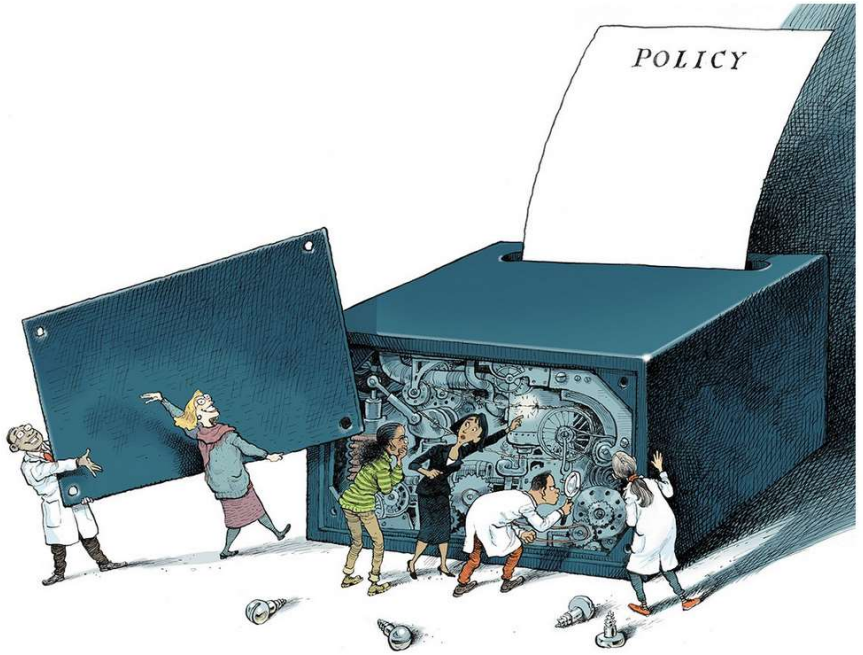


Mind the unknowns

Acknowledge ignorance

Mind the unknowns

Acknowledge ignorance

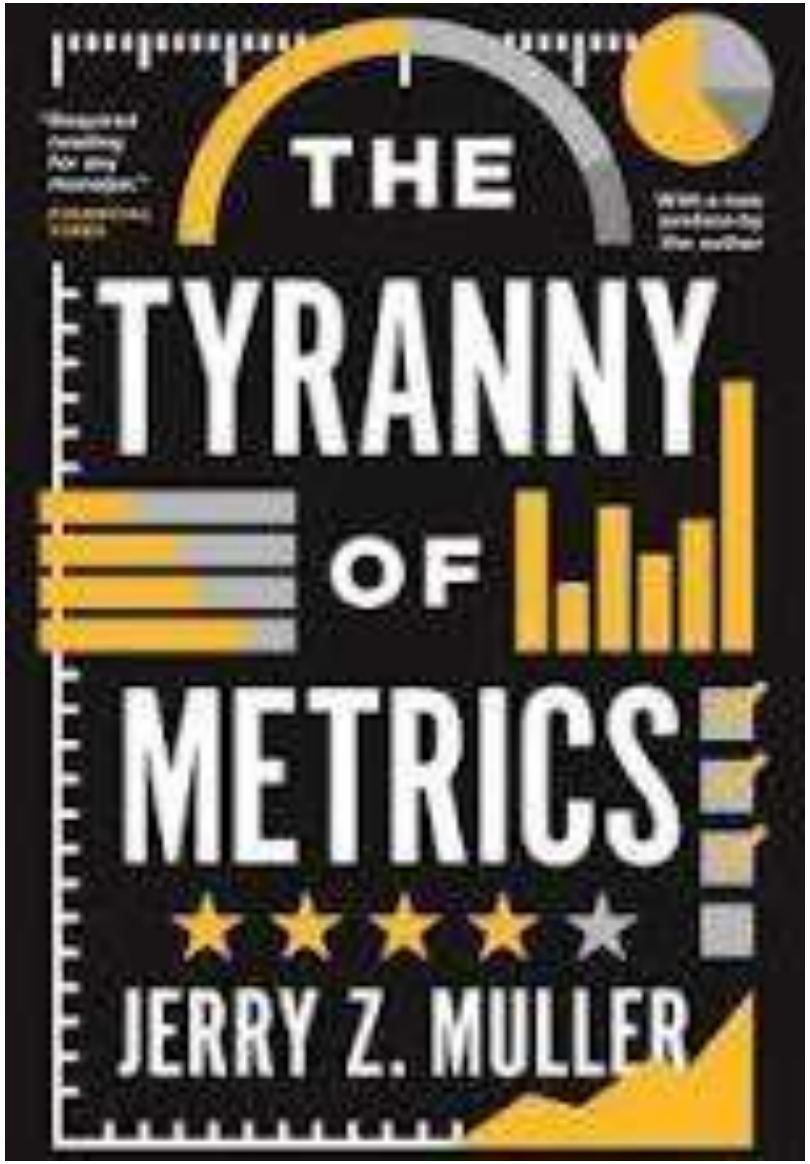


"there is no number-answer to your question"

Anthony Fauci

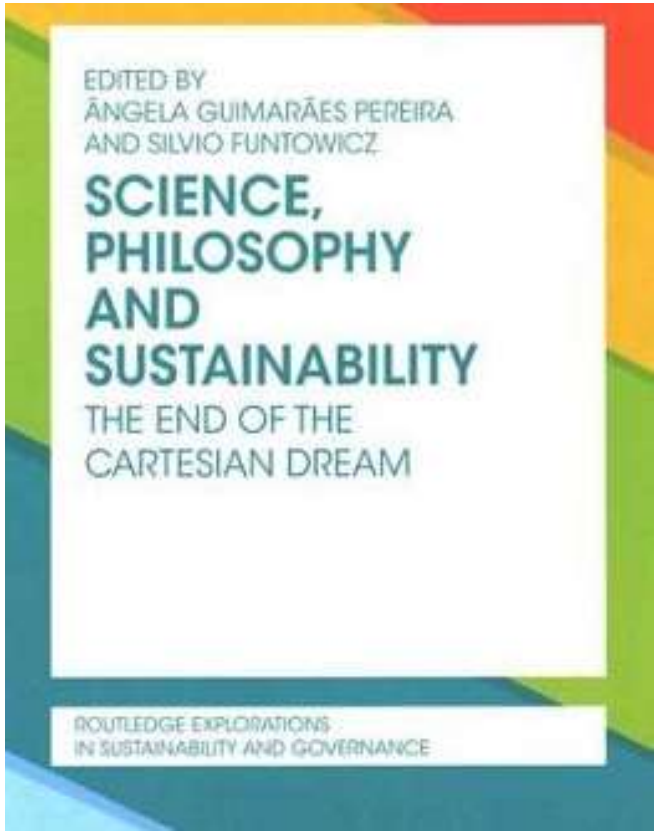
SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

1. Additional information and references >260 references



As already mentioned:

"keep in mind at every step that the best use of metrics may be not to use it at all"



Jerry Ravetz

Ravetz, J, R, 2015, Descartes and the rediscovery of ignorance, in Guimarães Pereira, Â, and Funtowicz, S, Eds, 2015, The end of the Cartesian dream, Routledge.

Ravetz, J., R., 1987, Usable Knowledge, Usable Ignorance, Incomplete Science with Policy Implications, Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, Utilization, 9(1), 87-116.

ELSEVIER

Futures

Volume 91, August 2017, Pages 62-71

Original research article

What is wrong with evidence based policy, and how can it be improved?

Andrea Saltelli [a, b, c], Mario Giampietro [a, c, d]

Responsible use of quantitative information; try via negativa (N. Taleb); instead of proving policy options try to falsify them

ELSEVIER

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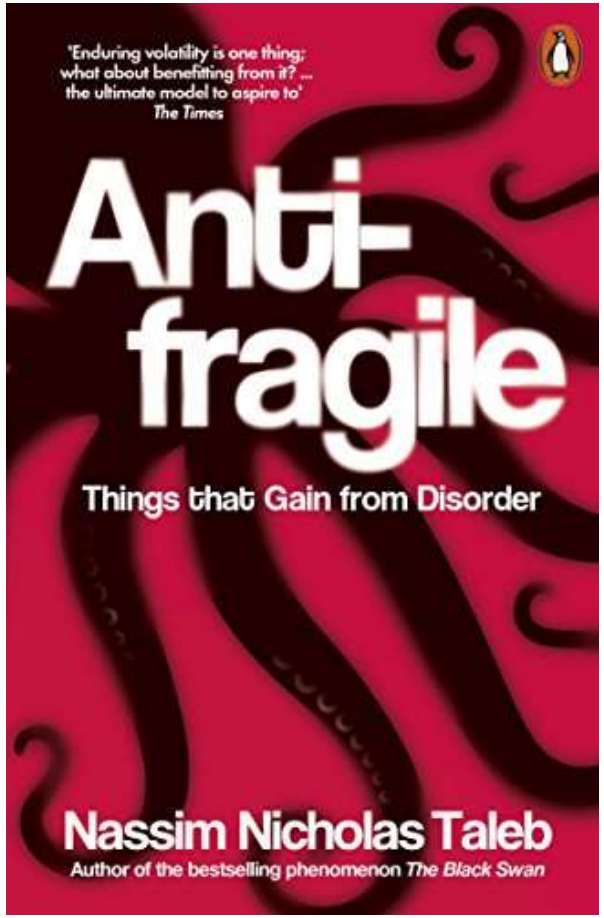
What is wrong with evidence based policy, and how can it be improved?

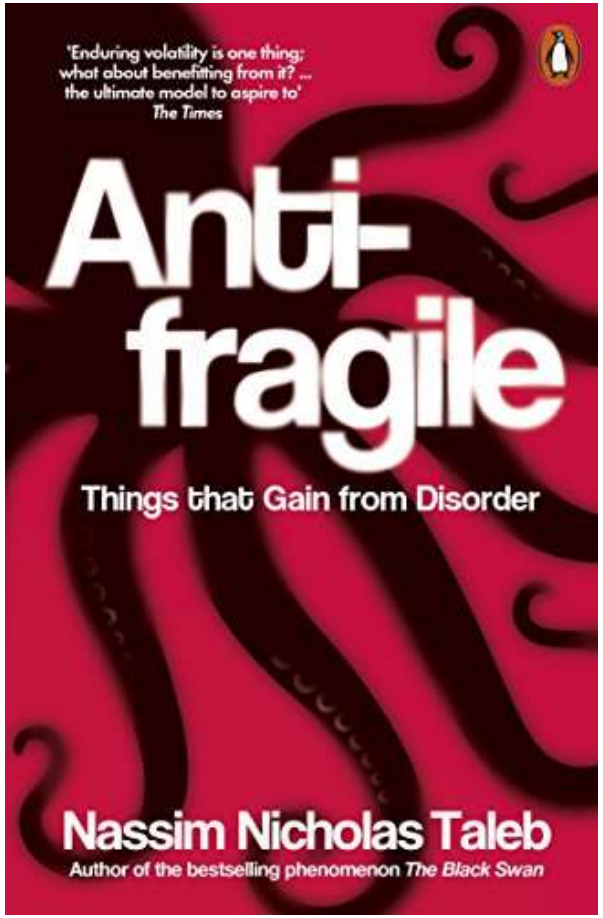
Andrea Saltelli [a, b, c], Mario Giampietro [a, c, d]



"…we know what is wrong with more clarity than what is right, and that knowledge grows by subtraction

… easier to know that something is wrong than to find the fix …

Actions that remove are more robust than those that add because addition may have unseen, complicated feedback loops"



Falsification of the available options based on:

- Feasibility (compatibility with external constraints),
- Viability (compatibility with internal constraints), and
- Desirability (compatibility with normative values adopted in the given society)

ELSEVIER

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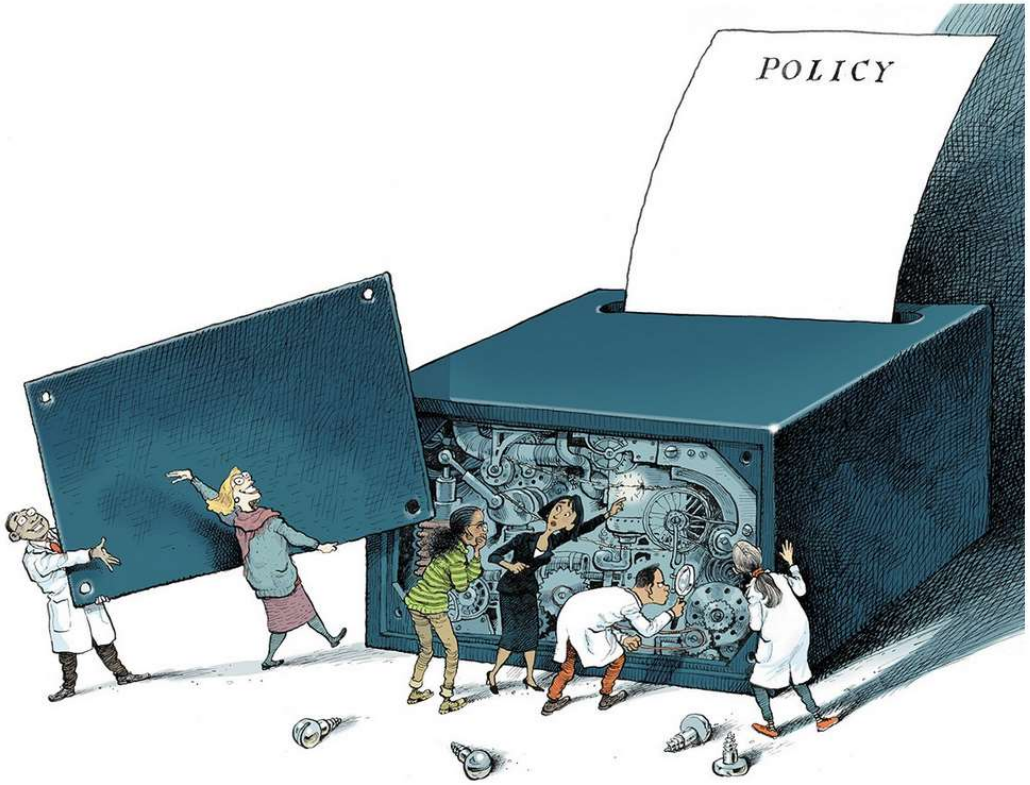
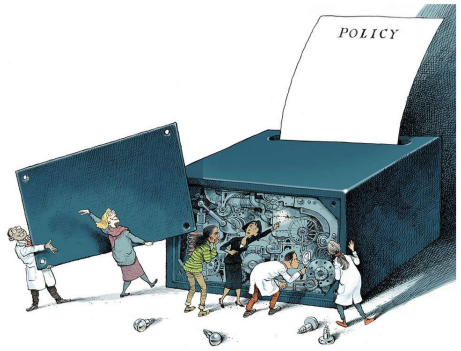
nature › comment › article

COMMENT | 24 June 2020

Five ways to ensure that models serve society: a manifesto



➔ Responsible modelling; reciprocal domestication between models and society



“Modellers must not be permitted to project more certainty than their models deserve;

and politicians must not be allowed to offload accountability to models of their choosing”

Beyond models

Why ethics of quantification is needed now

Andrea Saltelli
Open Evidence Research, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain

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UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose; South African Research Chair in Industrial Development, University of Johannesburg, South Africa

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Andy Stirling
Science Policy Research Unit, University of Sussex

Ting Xu
School of Law at the University of Essex

IIPP UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose

WORKING PAPER
WP 2021/05

UCL

… our world is structured by numbers, visible and invisible, where truth is conveyed and reality constructed

Numbers are seductive, performative, confer to their masters' epistemic power and legitimacy

Governing the modern state, or even contesting it, without numbers is impossible

Numbers are the prevalent means to express value in our societies … Access & production of numbers reflect and reinforce power imbalances

Numbers capture our attention; they illuminate the part of reality which is being numerified, and fatally push those parts into the background which come without the clothing of …

… numbers are so deeply entrenched in our existence that we barely reflect on them critically them anymore — too close to us, they have become part of the very lens through which we attend to and comprehend the world.

IIPP UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose

WORKING PAPER
WP 2021/05

Scope for harm from ‘wrong numbers’ e.g. in :

- Medical research
- Higher education
- Governance of science
- Finance
- Numbers from international organizations
  - Food and Agriculture Organization
  - The World Bank
  - OECD
  - …
- …

‘Trendy’ methods may also harm

- Randomized control trials) may be misused to suggest more general conclusions that may not be valid
- Sophisticated statistical/econometric techniques that can be designed in ways that promote particular policy conclusions reflecting researchers’ biases

nature

COMMENT | 21 March 2018

A global observatory for gene editing

Sheila Jasanoff and J. Benjamin Hurlbut call for an international network of scholars and organizations to support a new kind of conversation.

Sheila Jasanoff & J. Benjamin Hurlbut

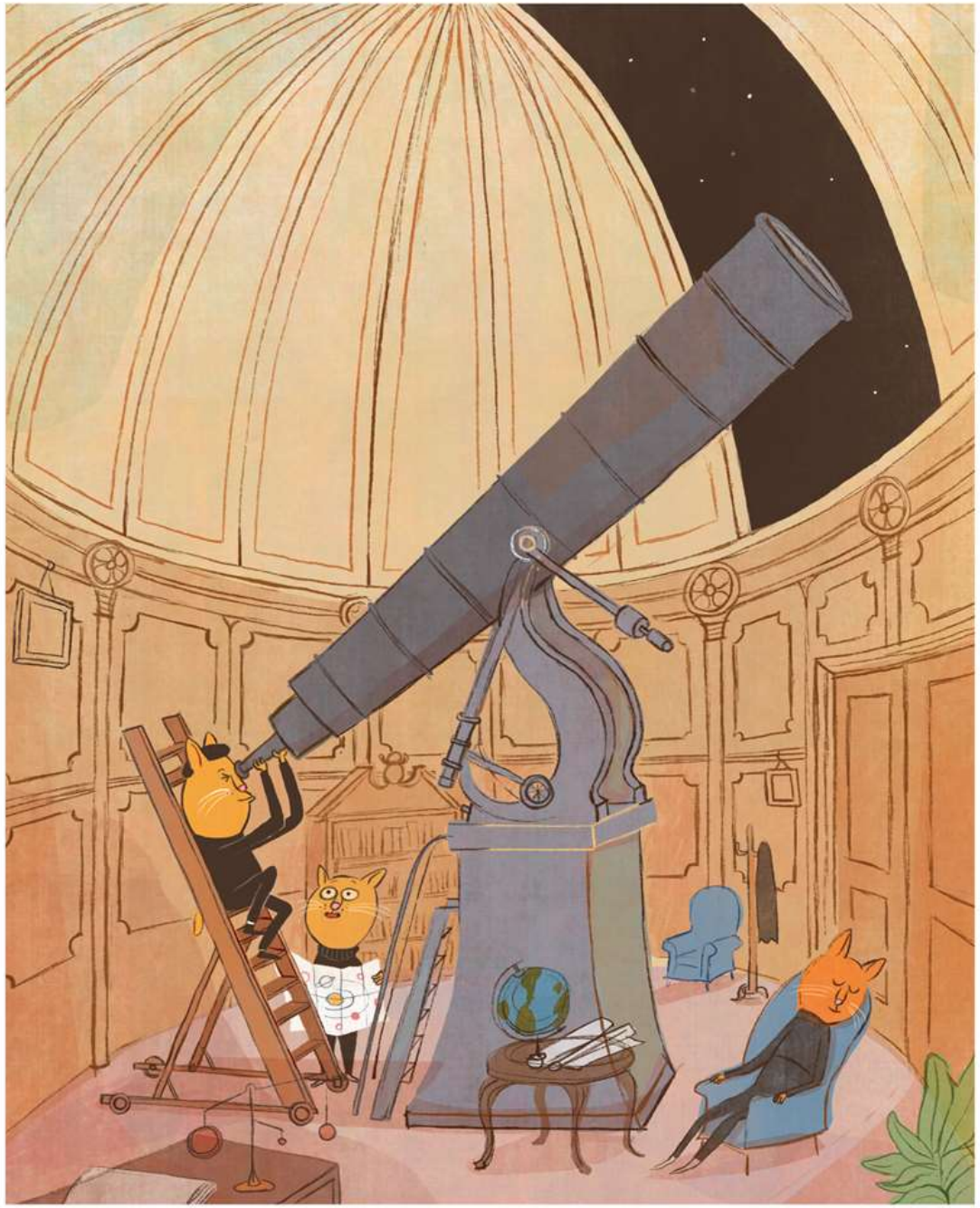
Illustration by Marina Muun

… the potential of numbers to inflict harm is on par or superior to those of biotechnologies

UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose

WORKING PAPER
WP 2021/05

… then how about an observatory for visible and invisible numbers ?



Source: Tor Freeman, http://tormalore.blogspot.com/

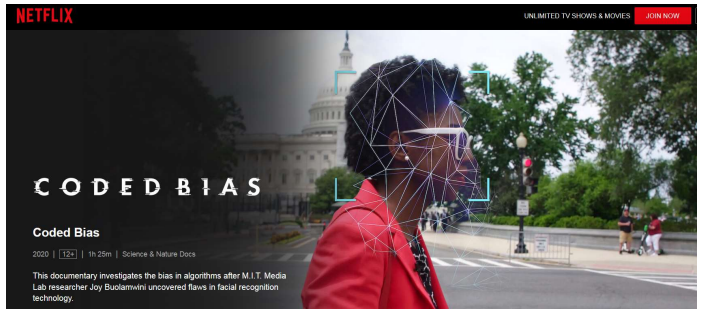
Existing initiatives looking at quantification

Data Justice Lab

CARDIFF UNIVERSITY
PRIFYSGOL CAERDYDD

Radical Statistics Group

Using statistics to support progressive social change



THE ALGORITHMIC JUSTICE LEAGUE

The End

@andreasaltelli