

# Ethics of quantification

Andrea Saltelli

Open Evidence Research, Open University of Catalonia



Rosendal September 1–2 2021,  
Global Health Anthropology Research Group  
Wednesday September 1st: Social studies of quantification



# Where to find this talk: [www.andreasaltelli.eu](http://www.andreasaltelli.eu)

Andrea  
Saltelli

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NEVER PARIBUS

## Tweets by @AndreaSaltelli

andrea saltelli Retweeted

**I-site ULNE**  
@isiteULNE

#statistiques #probabilités #modélisation  
#prédiction Isabelle Bruno du #CERAPS  
@univ\_lille @CNRS\_HdF @ScPoLille nous parle  
des dérives de la #quantophrénie dans un article à  
lire sur le media @FR\_Conversation  
[https://twitter.com/FR\\_Conversation/status/1302651033164881920](https://twitter.com/FR_Conversation/status/1302651033164881920)

♡ ↗

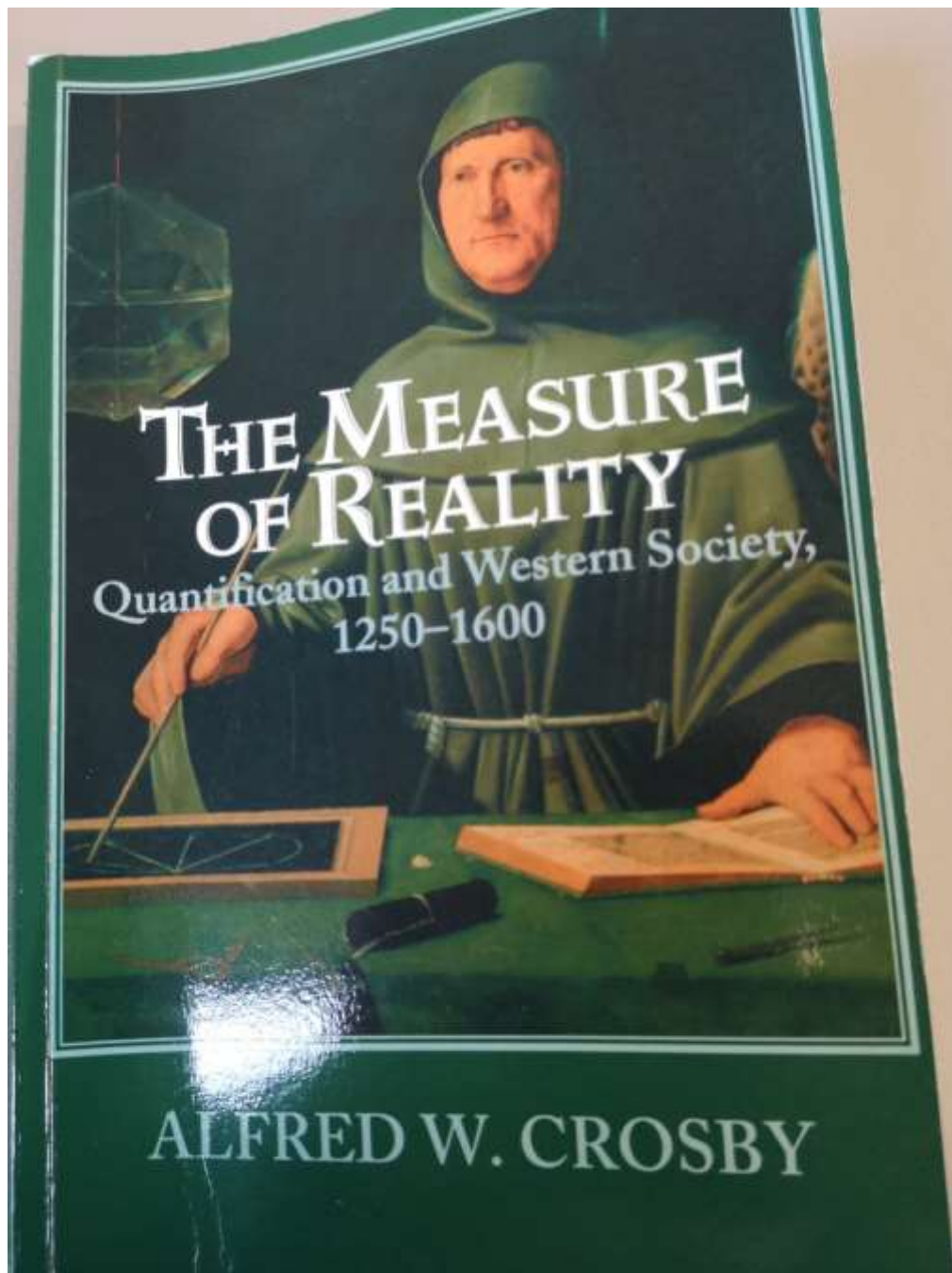
Sep 7, 2020

**andrea saltelli**  
@AndreaSaltelli

Pour mes amis francophones. Honoured to be co-  
author of a statactivist like Isabelle Bruno du  
#CERAPS @univ\_lille @CNRS\_HdF @ScPoLille  
@OpenEvidence @UOCNews  
Statistiques et modèles mathématiques : doit-on

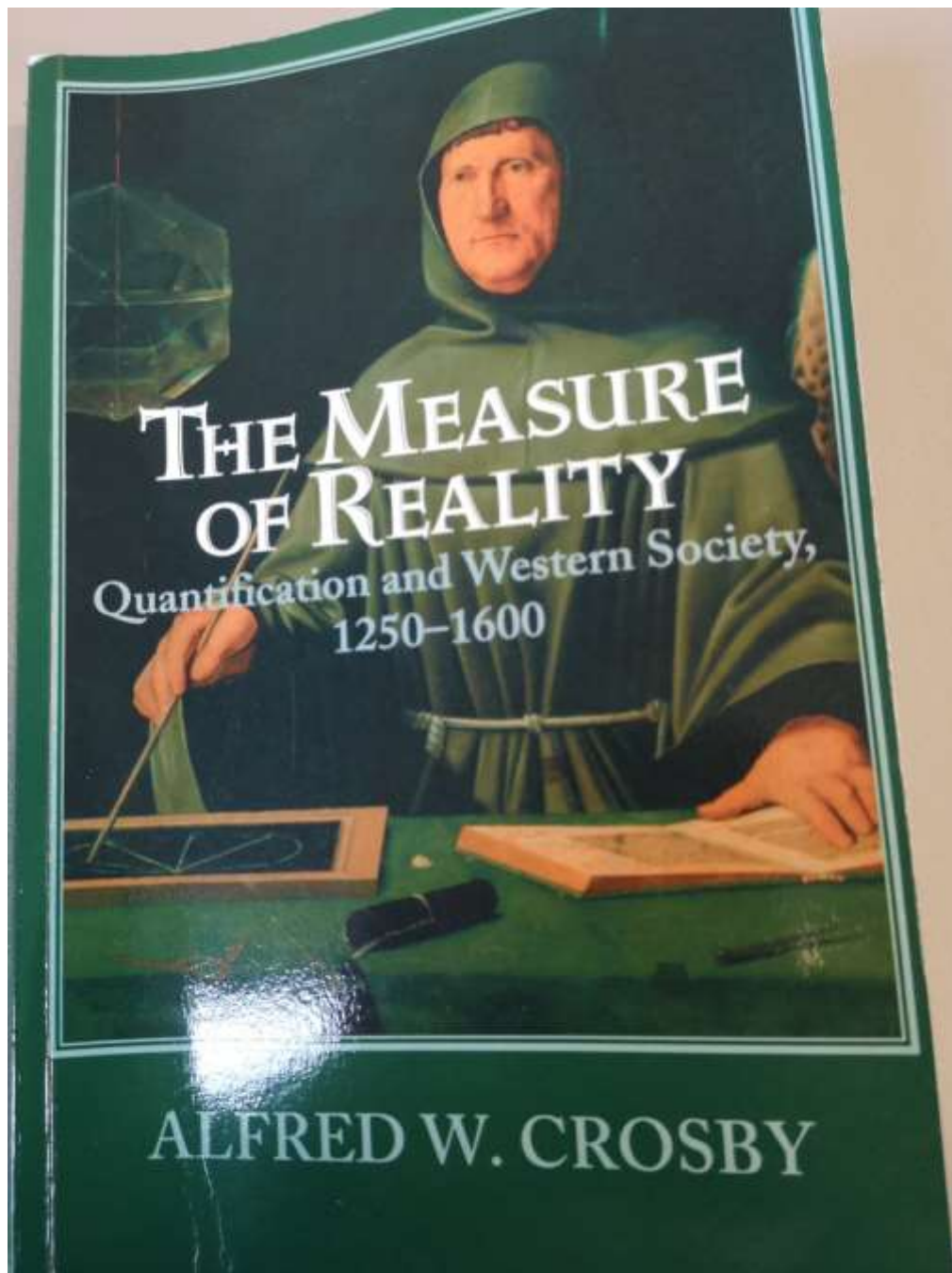
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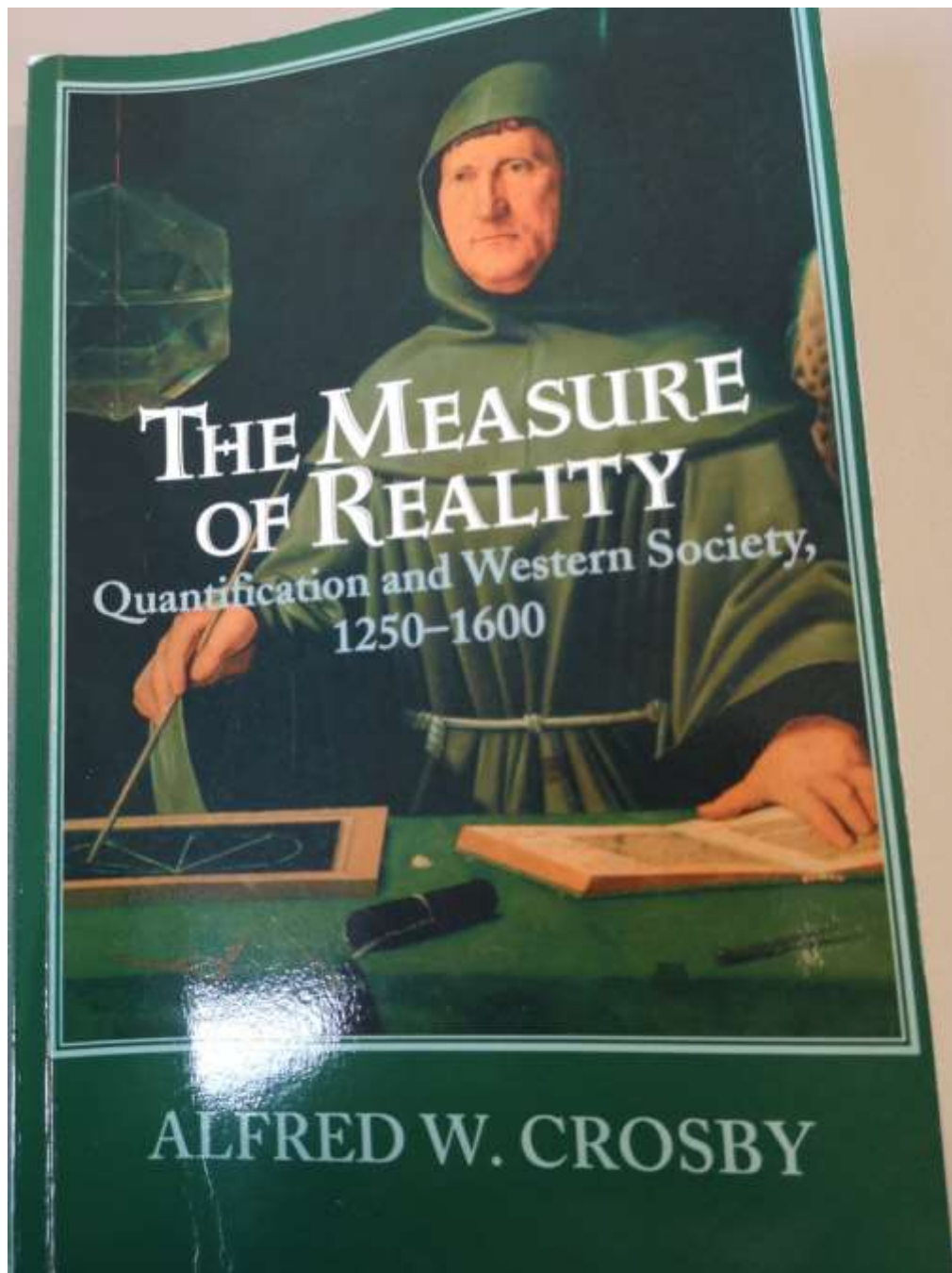


Were quantification and visualization the engine inside the engine of western success and domination?





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 ...





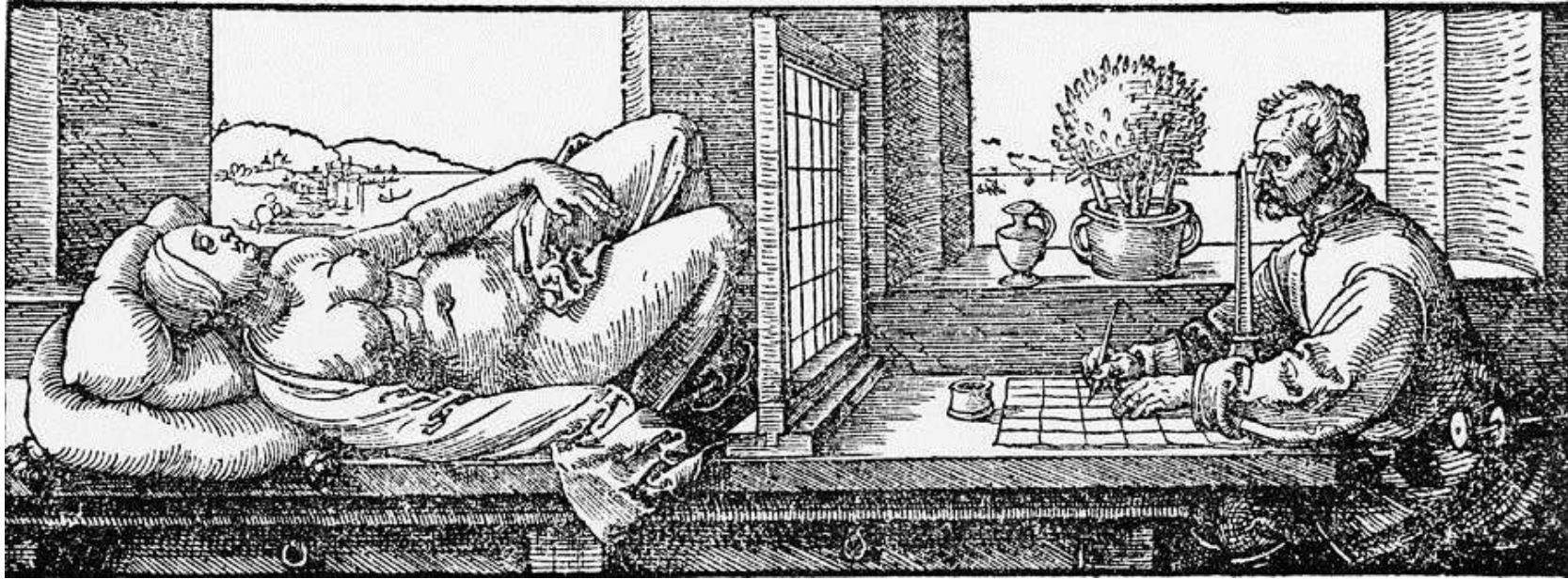


From the abacus  
to Arabic  
numerals

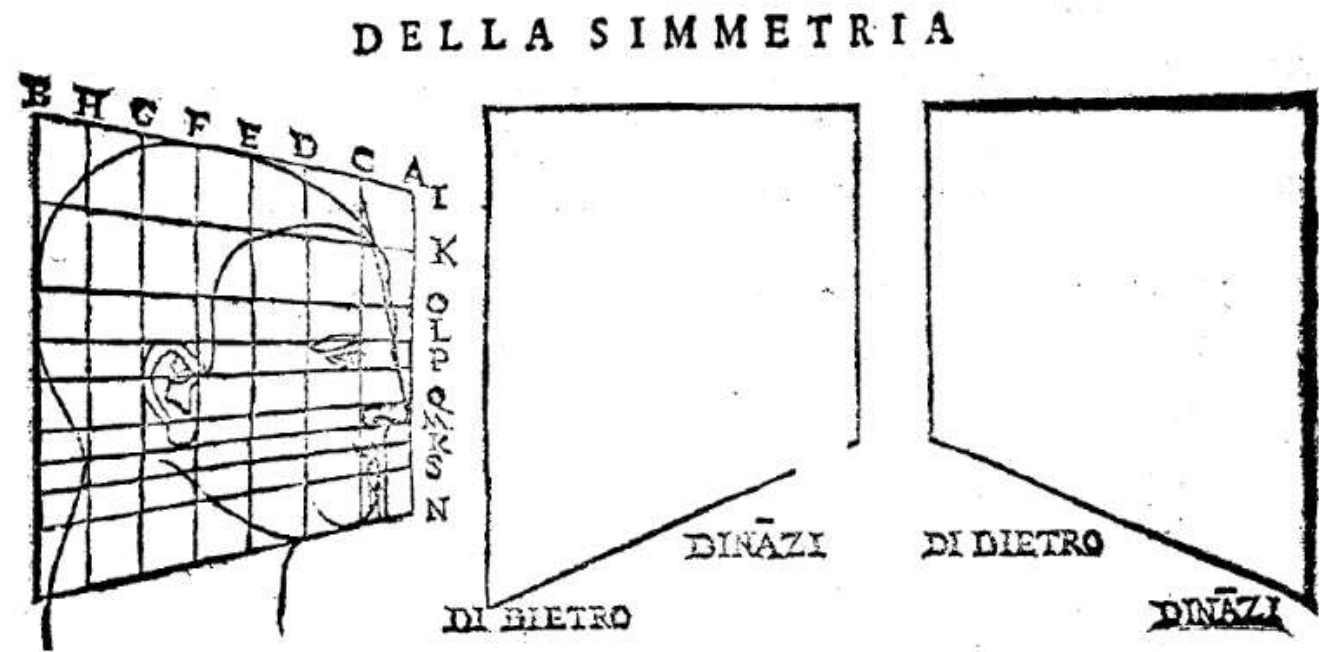
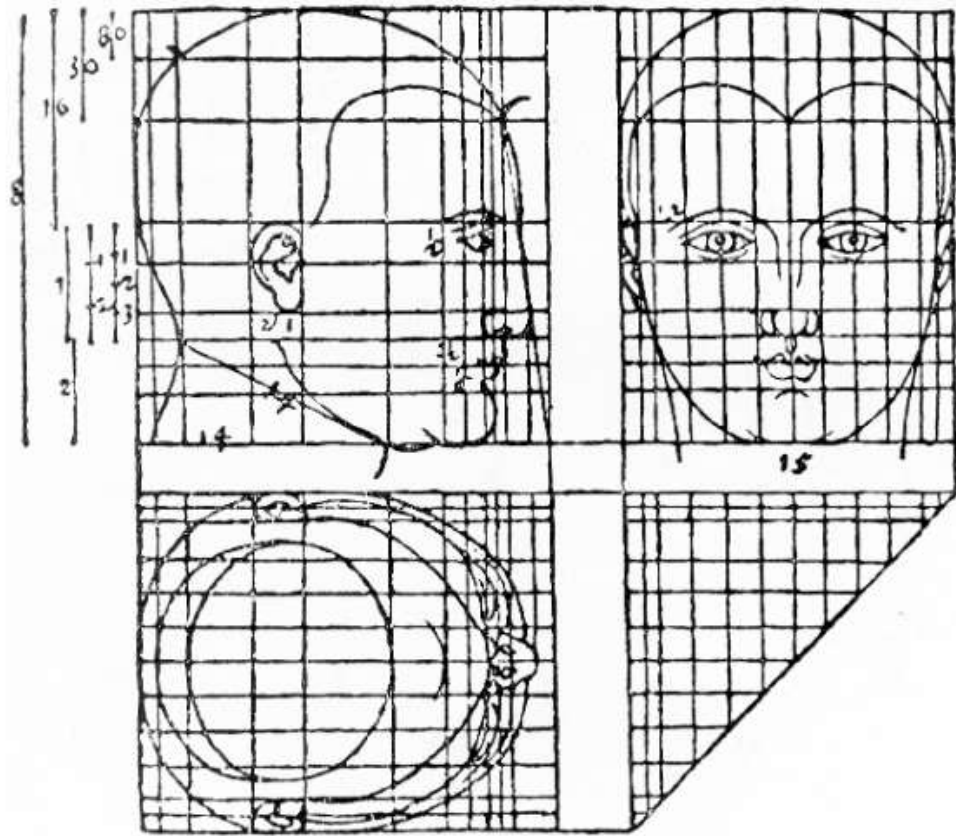


The Annunciation,  
Carlo Crivelli  
(1435, 1495)





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

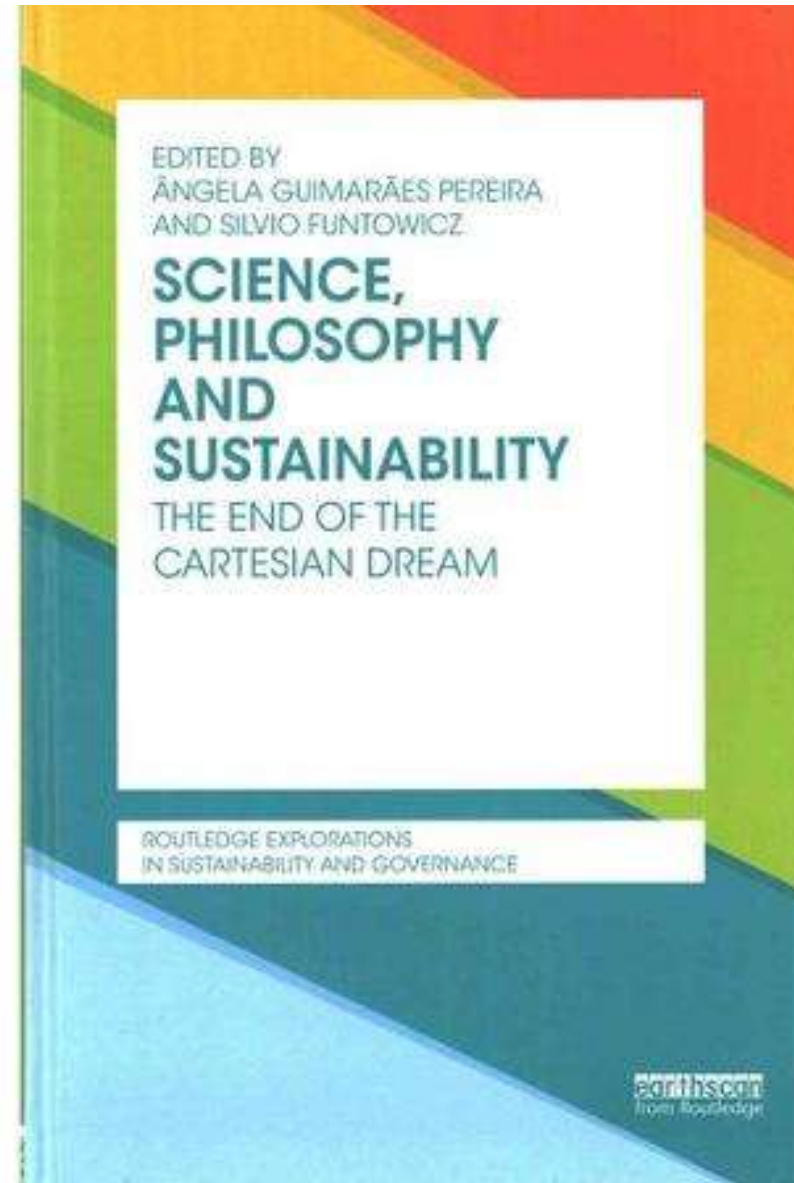


From “De Varietate figurarum”  
Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528)



# Quantification as a key element of the Cartesian Dream

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



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?”



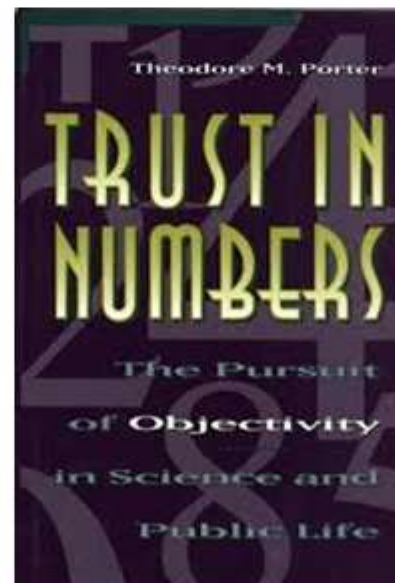
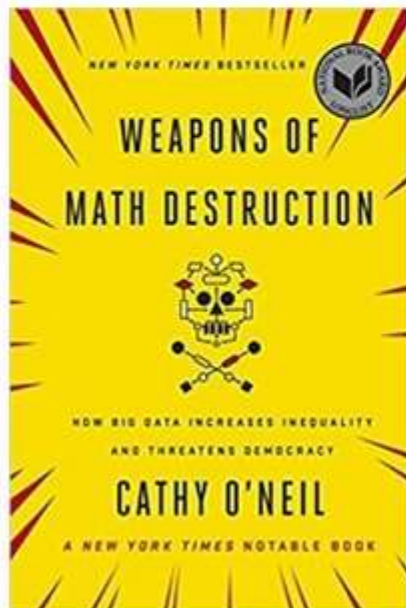
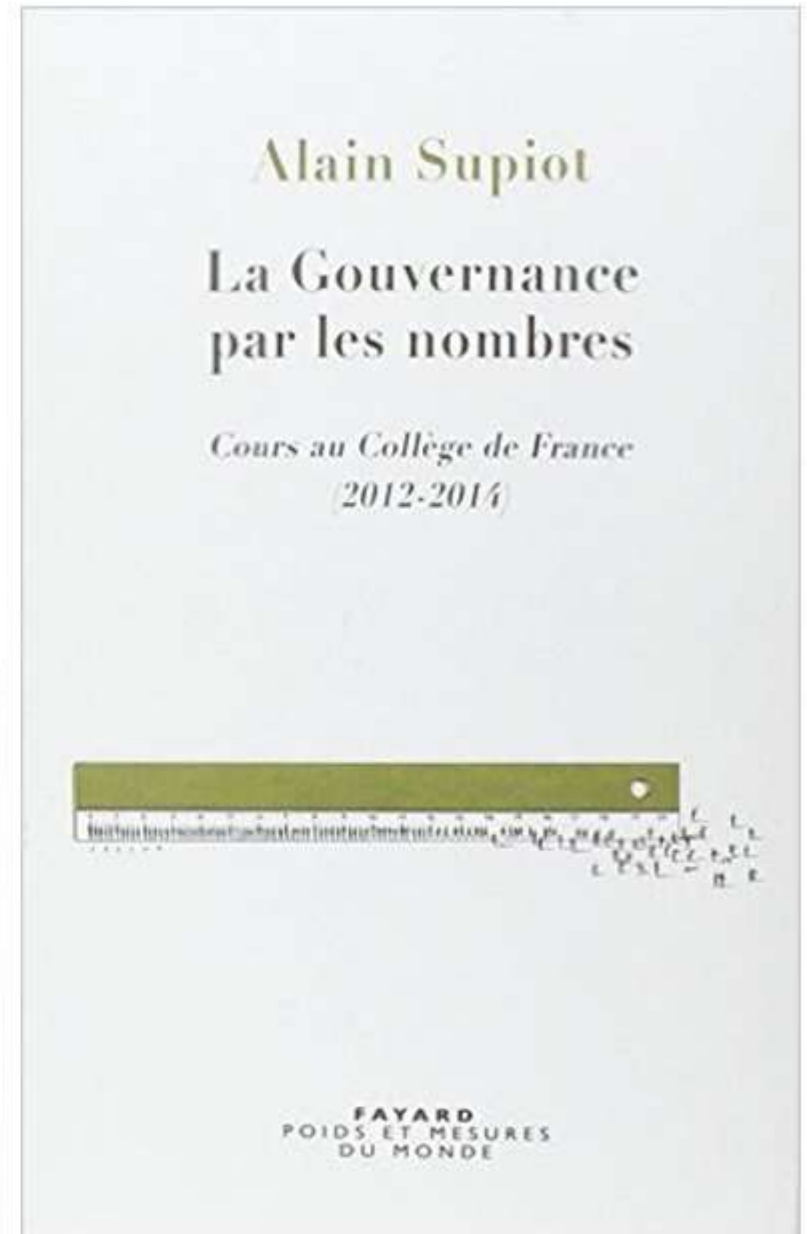
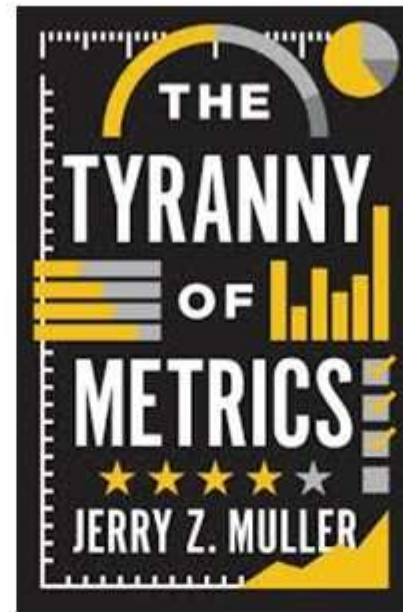
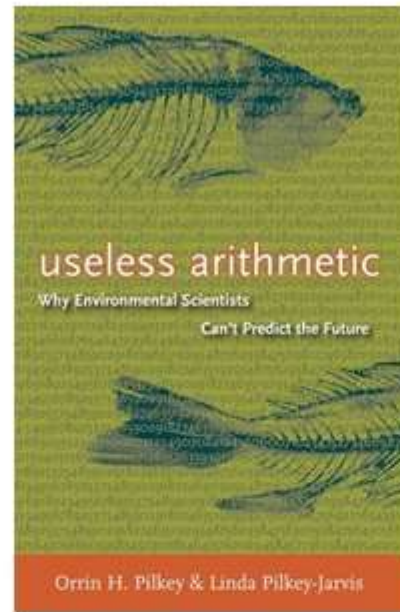
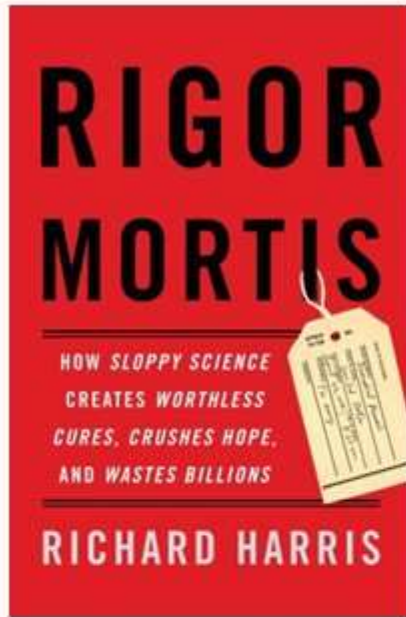
Elizabeth  
Popp Berman

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

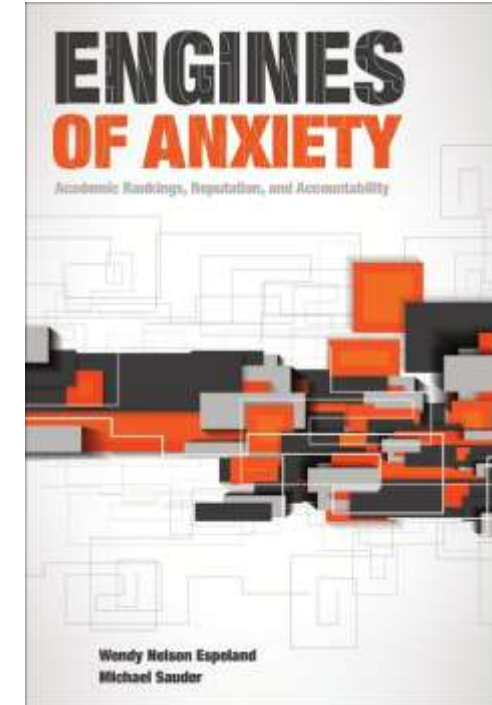
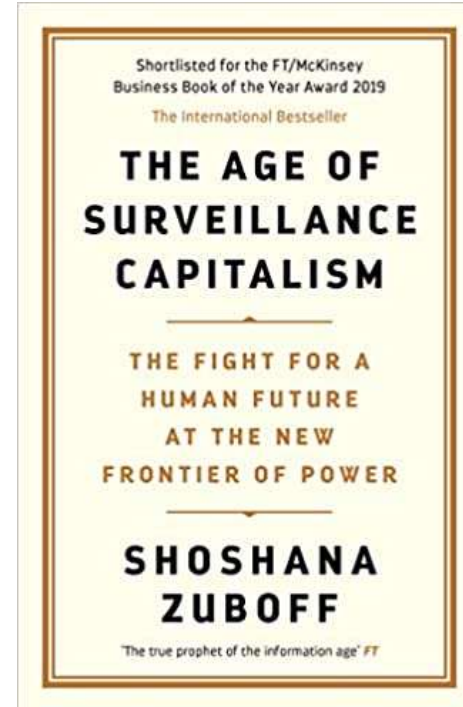
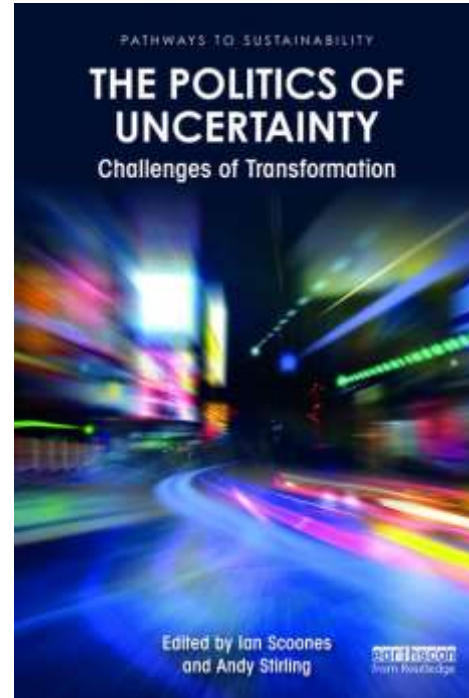
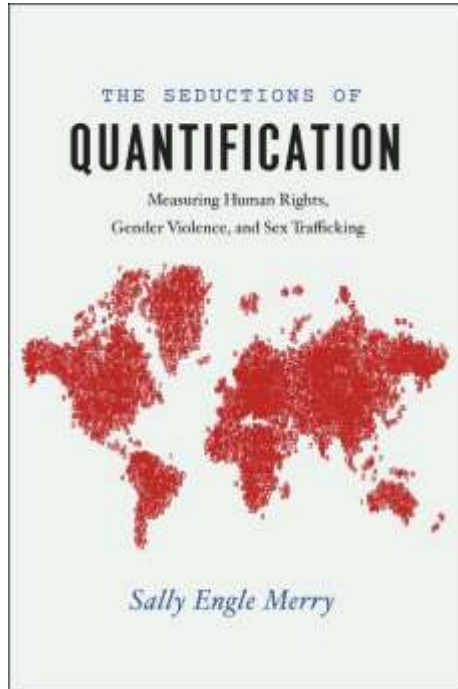


And an explosion of works, from  
within and without, from many  
disciplines

# Algorithms, models, metrics, statistics...



# Algorithms, models, metrics, statistics...





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

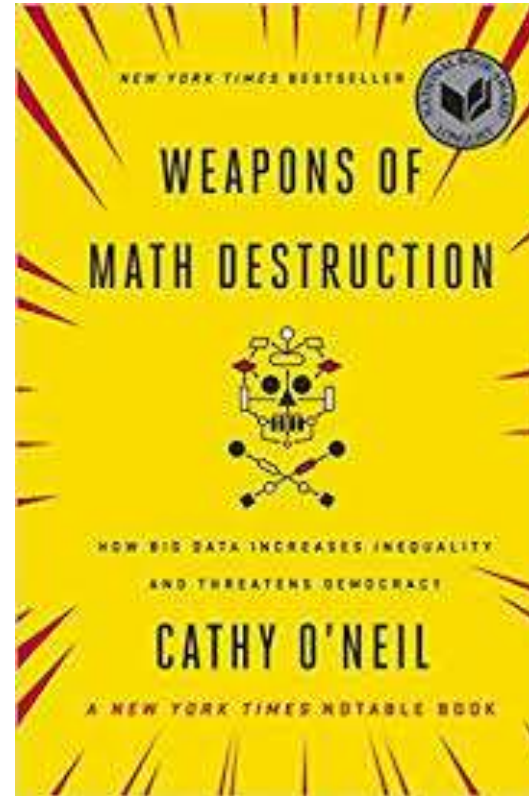
Incumbent numbers affect what society will  
measure in the future (Merry 2016)

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

# Alarm for Weapons of Math Destruction



Cathy O'Neil

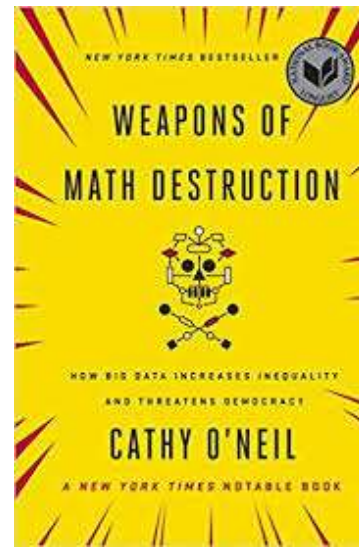


O'Neil, C. (2016). Weapons of math destruction : how big data increases inequality and threatens democracy. Random House Publishing Group.

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.

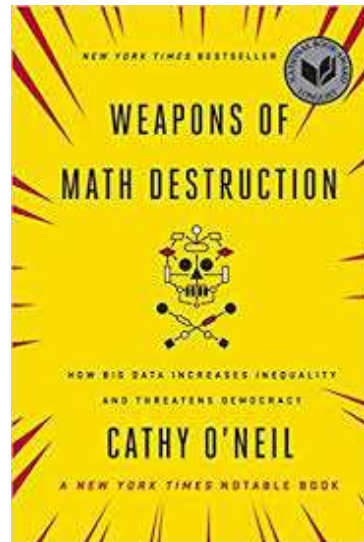
Brauneis, R., & Goodman, E. P. (2018). Algorithmic Transparency for the Smart City. Yale Journal of Law & Technology, 20, 103–176. Retrieved from [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3012499](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3012499)

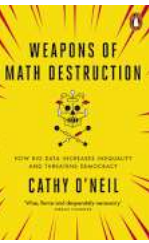




Opacity coupled with opportunity for scale and damage and with non-appealability make them an instrument of oppression & inequality

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





NETFLIX

UNLIMITED TV SHOWS & MOVIES

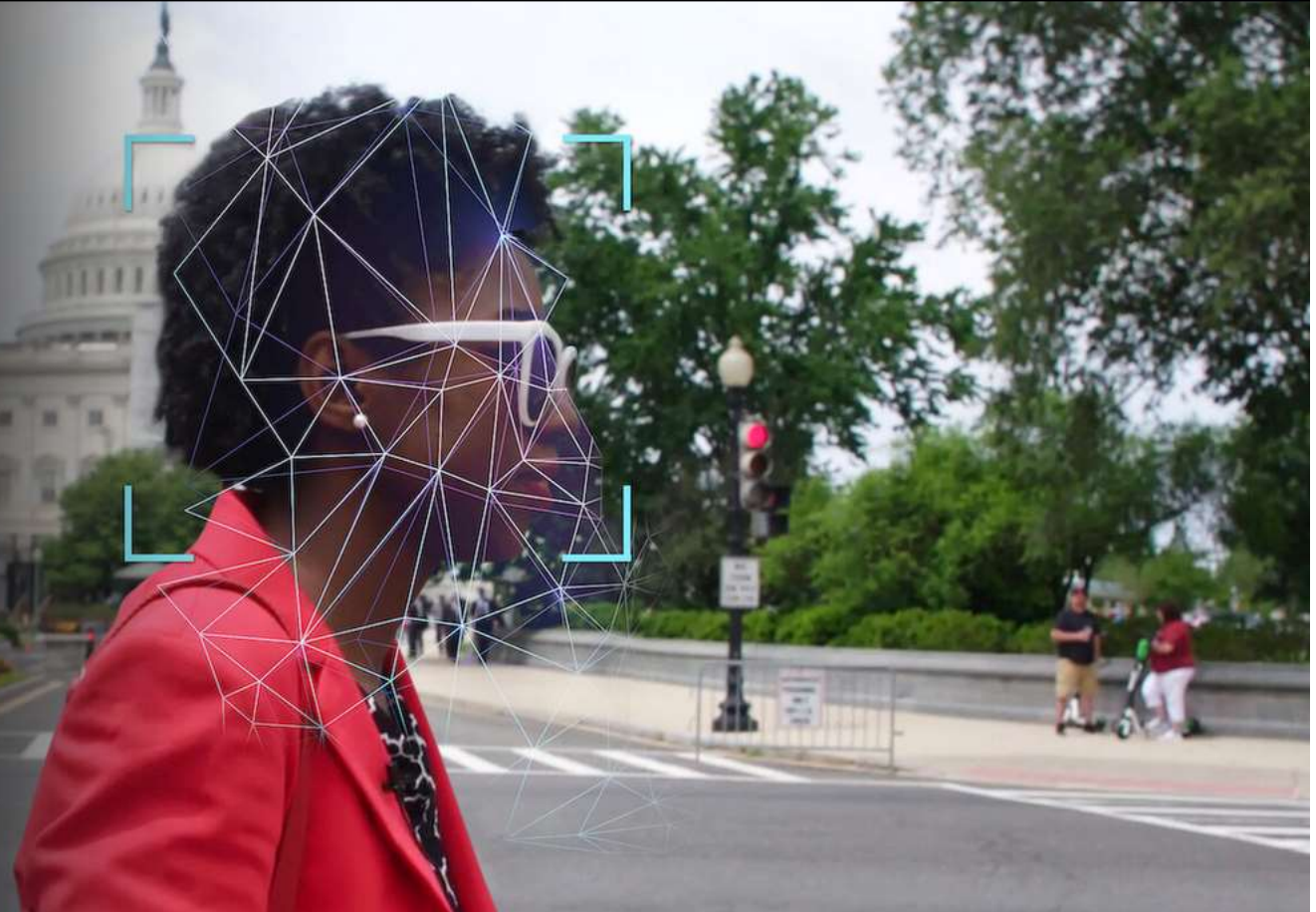
JOIN NOW

# C O D E D B I A S

## 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





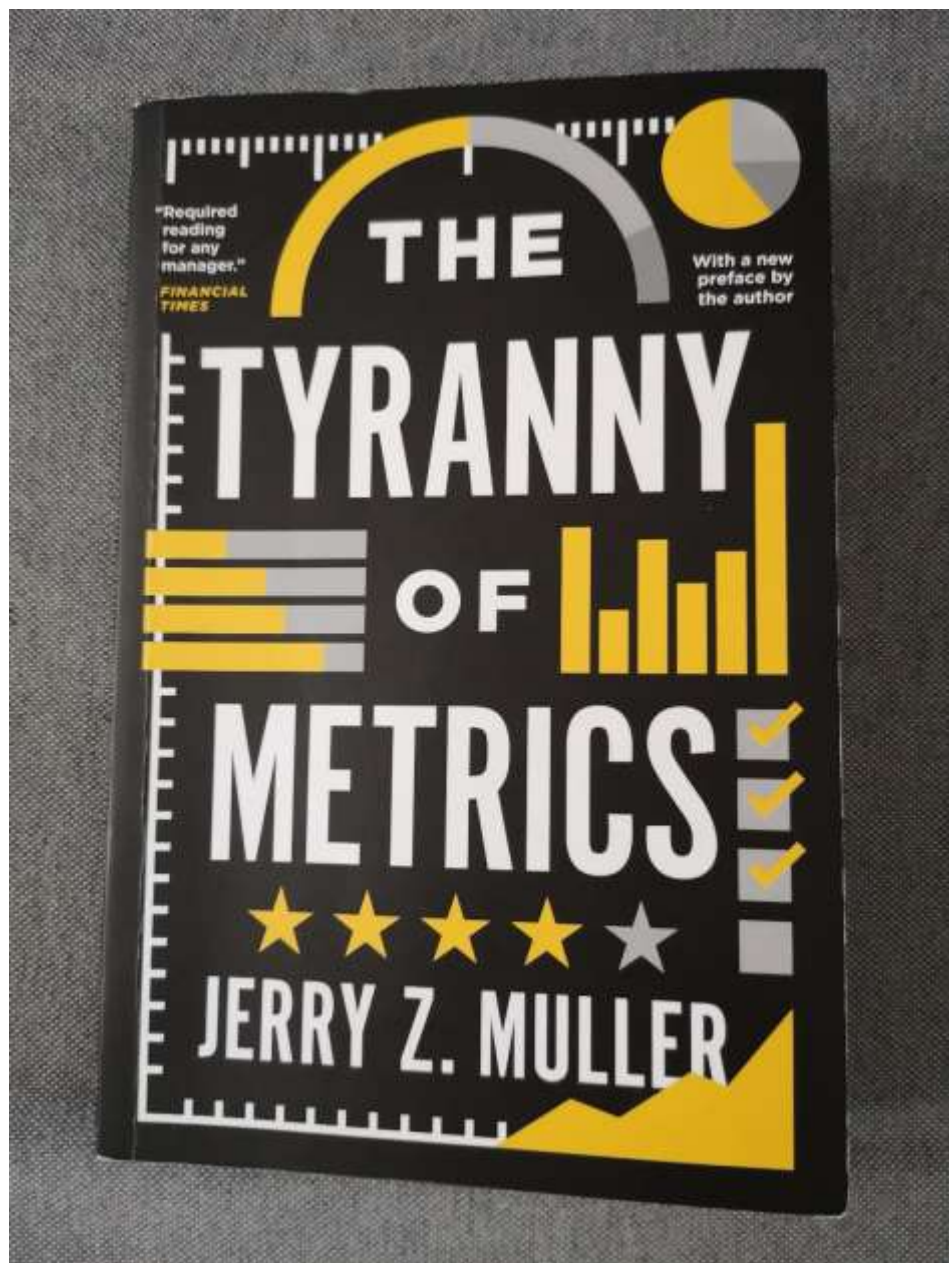
Charles Goodhart

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](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goodhart%27s_law)

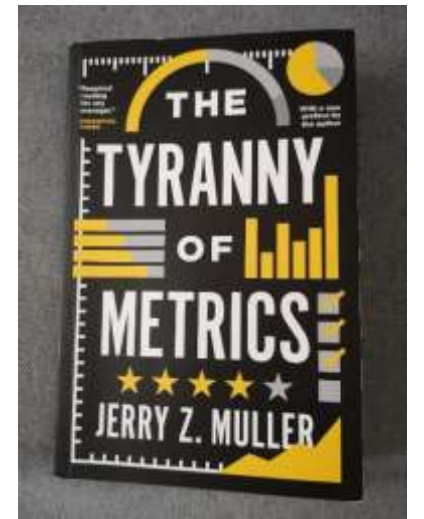


J. Z. Muller, The tyranny of metrics. Princeton University Press , 2018.

Metric fixation, or the irresistible pressure to measure performance

Gaming of metrics (recall Goodhart law)

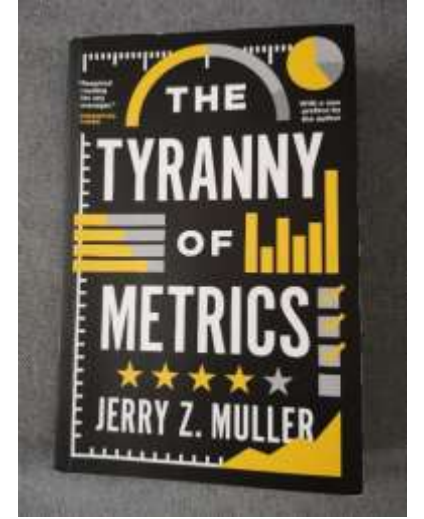
A wealth of case studies from education to war to medicine to foreign aid..





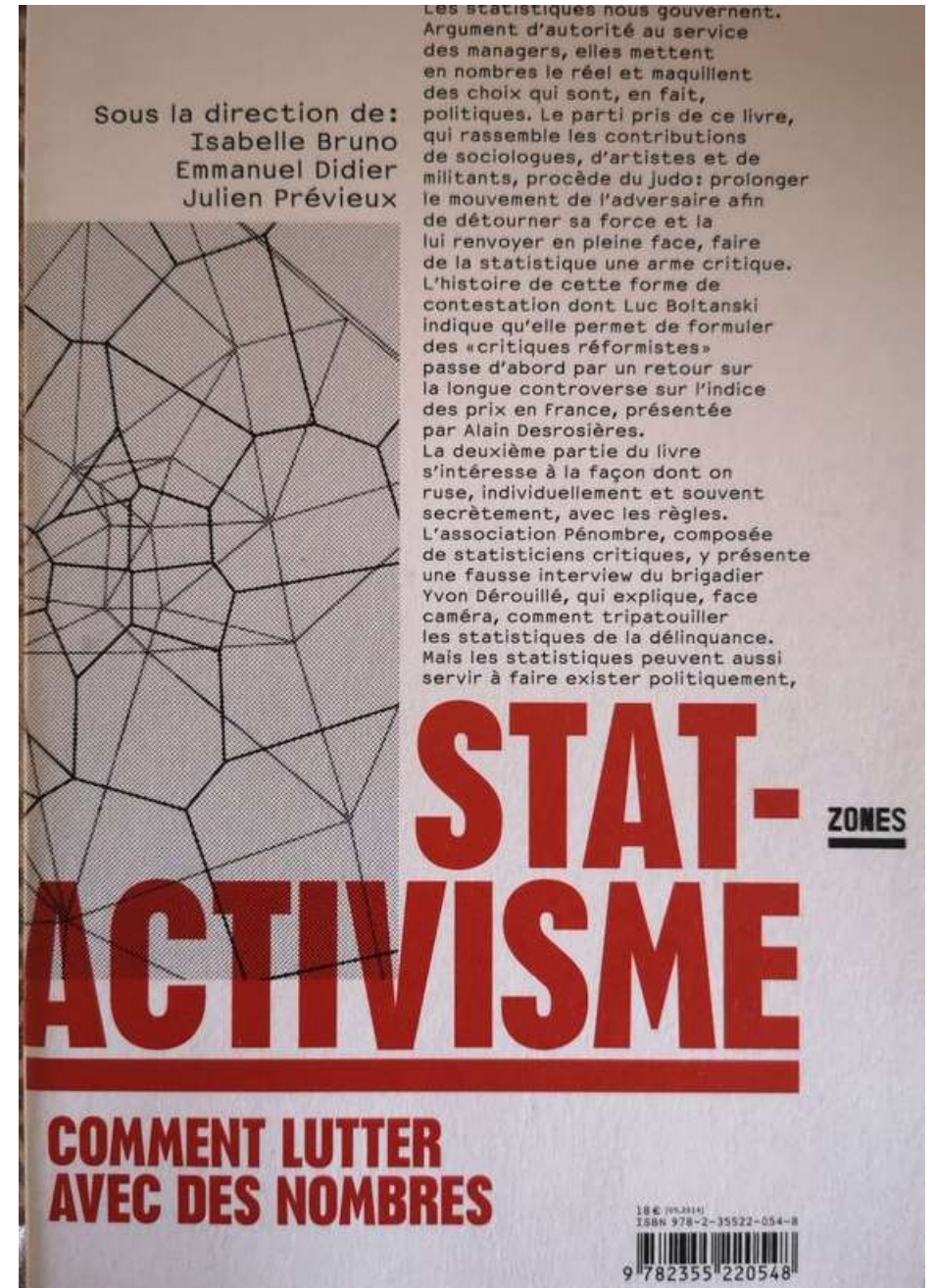
A concluding remark of Muller

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”



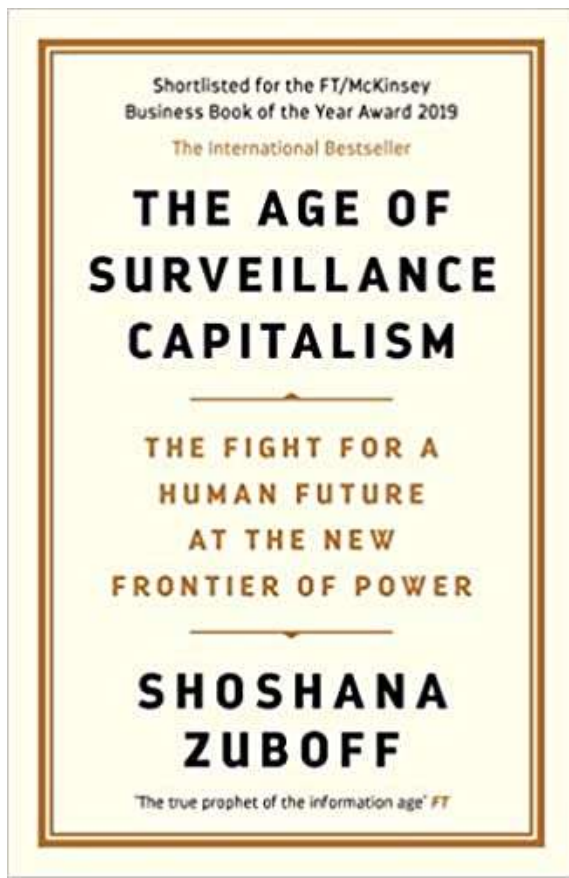
# Do we need a movement of resistance?

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





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





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



THE LONDON SCHOOL  
OF ECONOMICS AND  
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

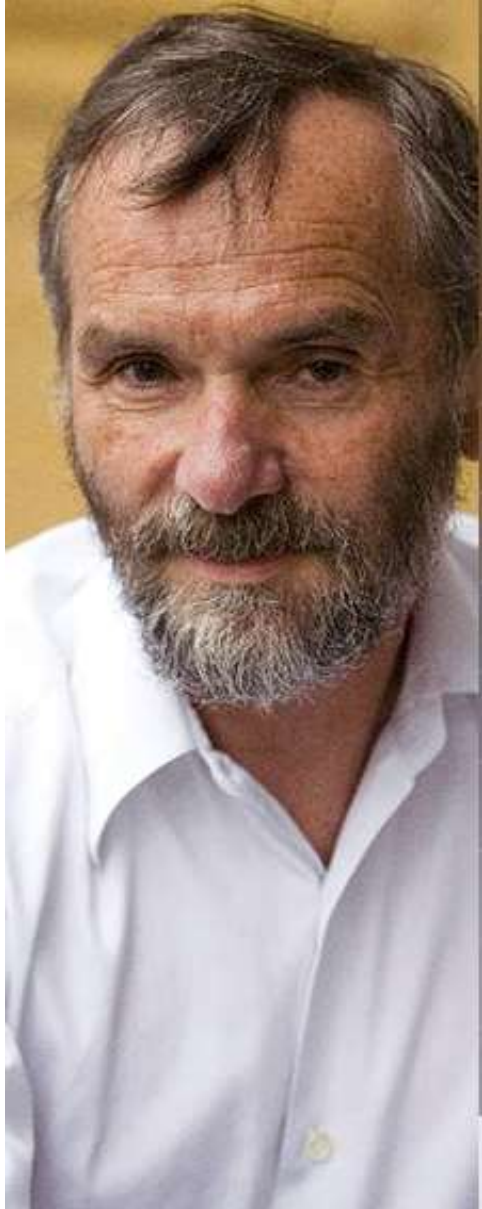
# LSE Research Online

[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.

# Alain Supiot



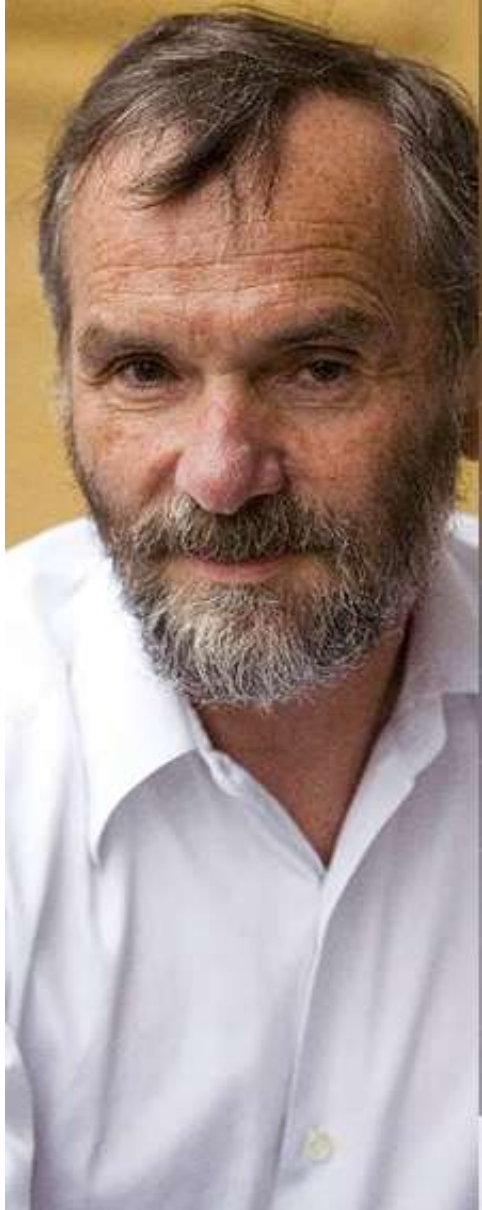
An indictment of the  
Total Market and the  
normative uses of  
economic quantification

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





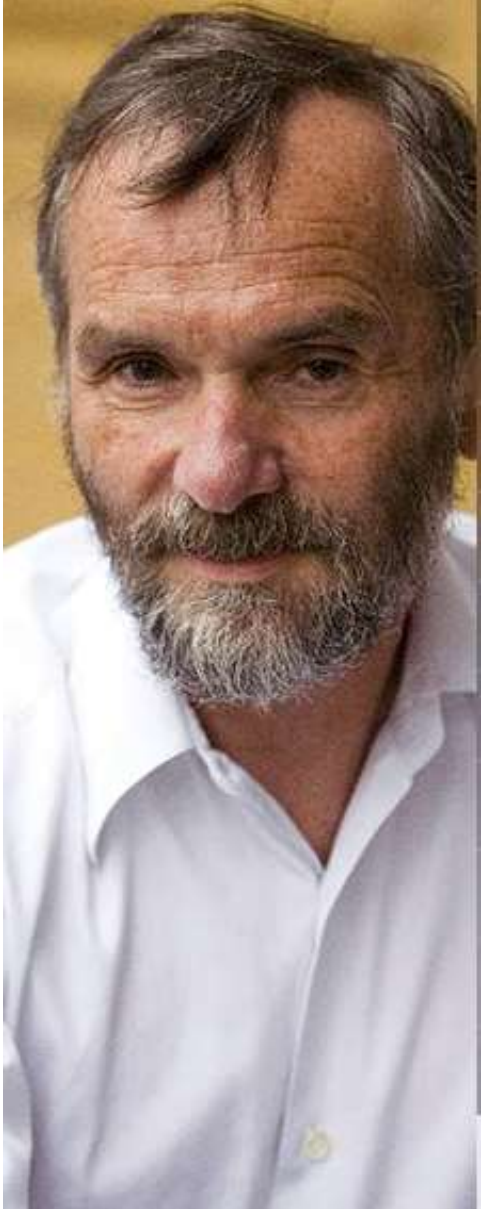
# Alain Supiot



...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.





UCL Institute for  
Innovation and  
Public Purpose



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

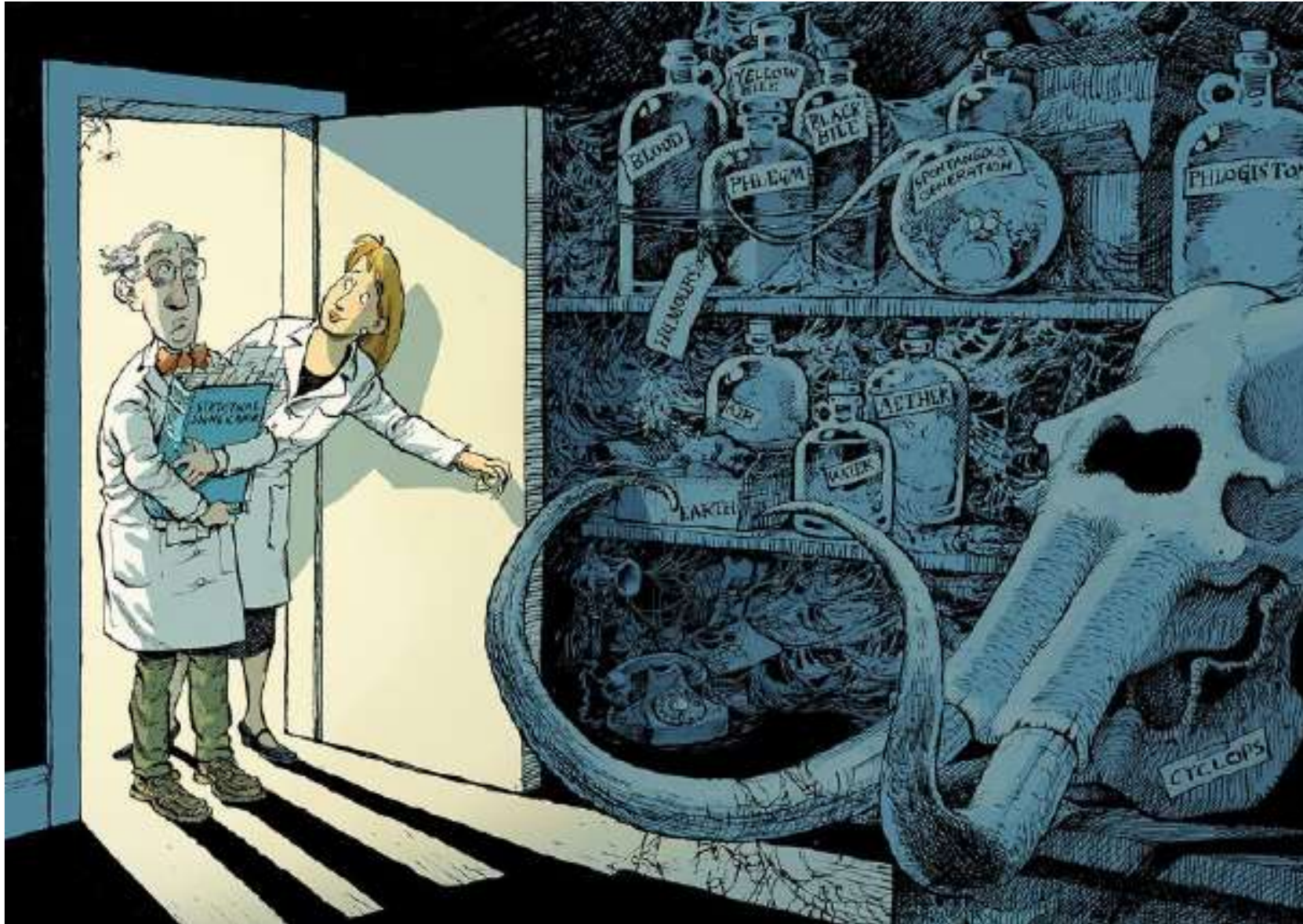
**Andrea Saltelli**

Open Evidence Research, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC)

**Jerome R. Ravetz**

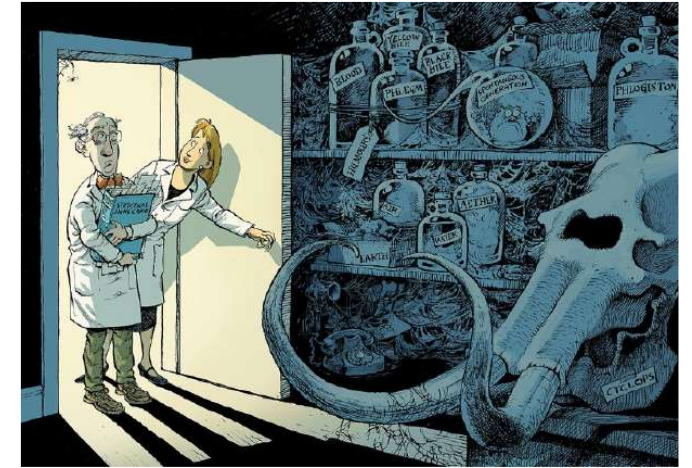
Institute for Science, Innovation and Society, University of Oxford

# Statistical and mathematical modelling



Throw away  
the concept of  
statistical  
significance?





COMMENT • 20 MARCH 2019

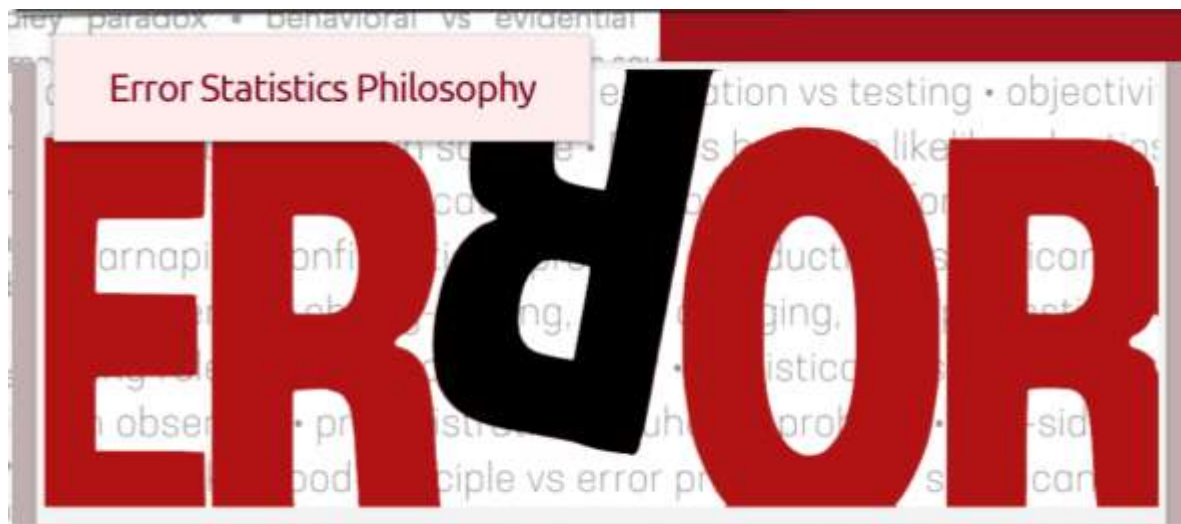
# Scientists rise up against statistical significance

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/>





**A. Saltelli (Guest post): What can we learn from the debate on statistical significance?**

Posted on November 22, 2019 by Mayo



**Professor Andrea Saltelli**  
Centre for the Study of the Sciences and the Humanities (SVT), University of Bergen (UIB, Norway),  
&  
Open Evidence Research, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), Barcelona

*What can we learn from the debate on statistical significance?*

Parent Comments



## Cargo-cult statistics and scientific crisis

Written by Philip B. Stark and Andrea Saltelli on 05 July 2018. Posted in [Science](#)



Statistics in the  
wake of the  
reproducibility  
crisis

# Statistical wars?



# 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.

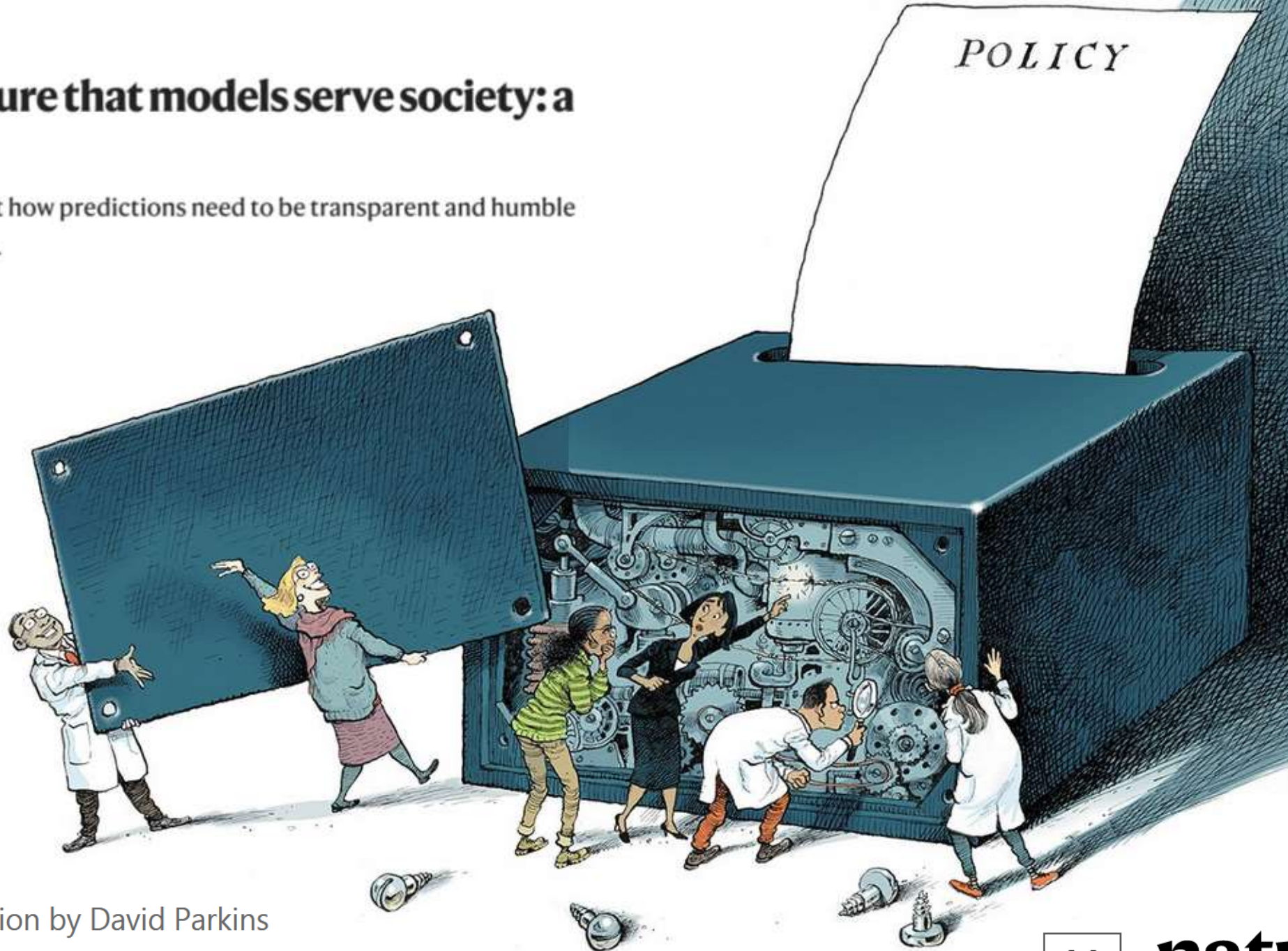


Illustration by David Parkins



**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

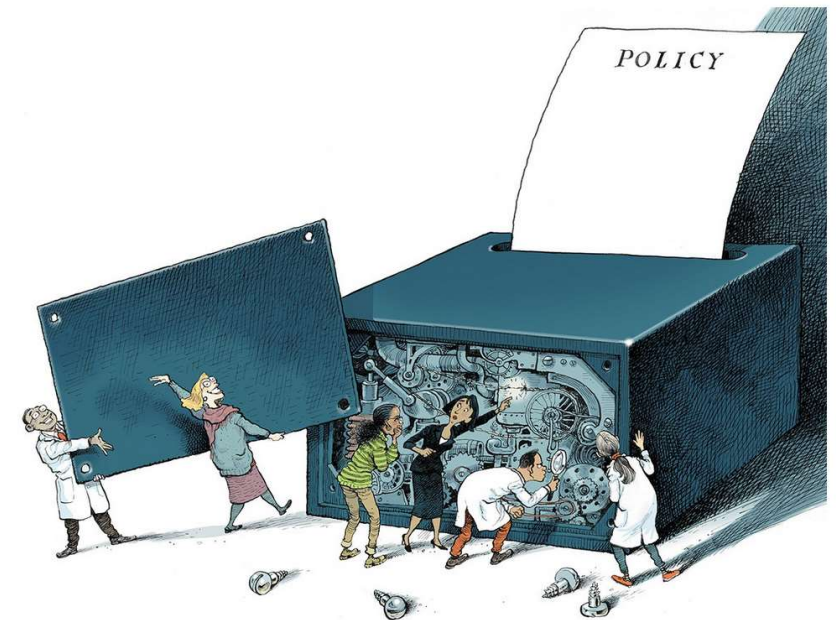
**3 STS scholars** Bammer, Sarewitz, Stirling

**1 philosopher** Ravetz

**1 historian** Charters

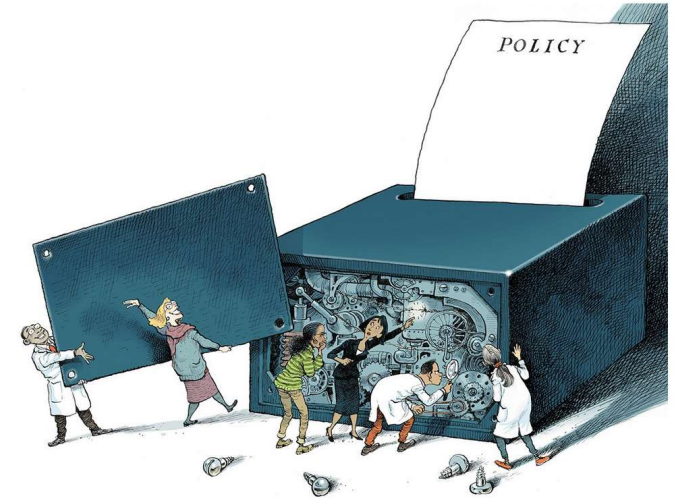
**1 political scientists** Di Fiore

**1 expert RRI - Open Science** Rafols



COVID has put mathematical models in the limelight

→ Power & controversy



# Power

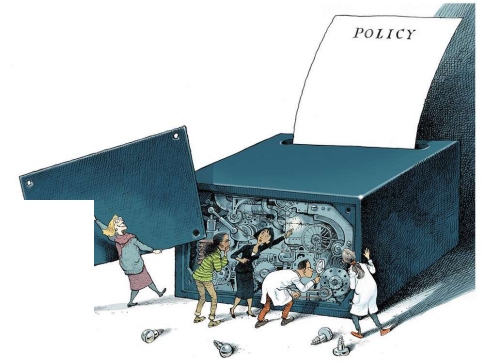
The New York Times

## *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

Rush Limbaugh

“Wild-Ass Covid numbers  
... The minute I hear  
anybody start talking about  
models and modeling, I  
blanch”



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

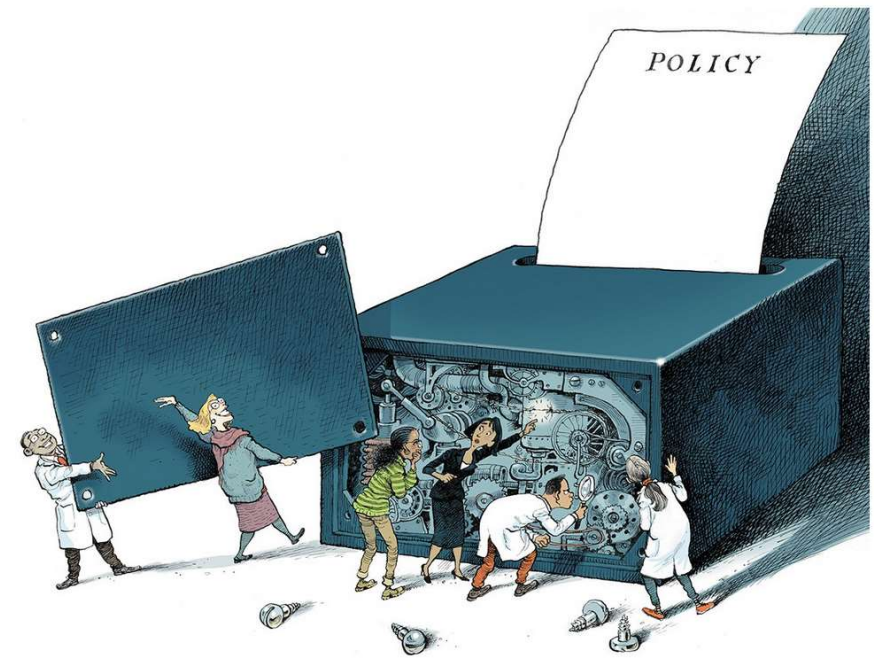
Match purpose and context

## Mind the consequences

Quantification can backfire.

## Mind the unknowns

Acknowledge ignorance



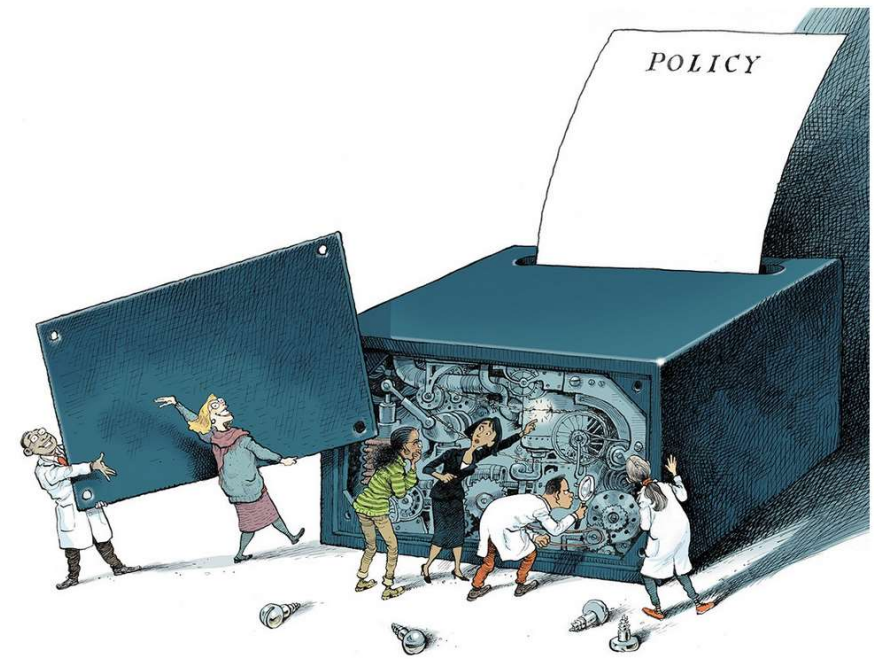
# Mind the assumptions

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 ...



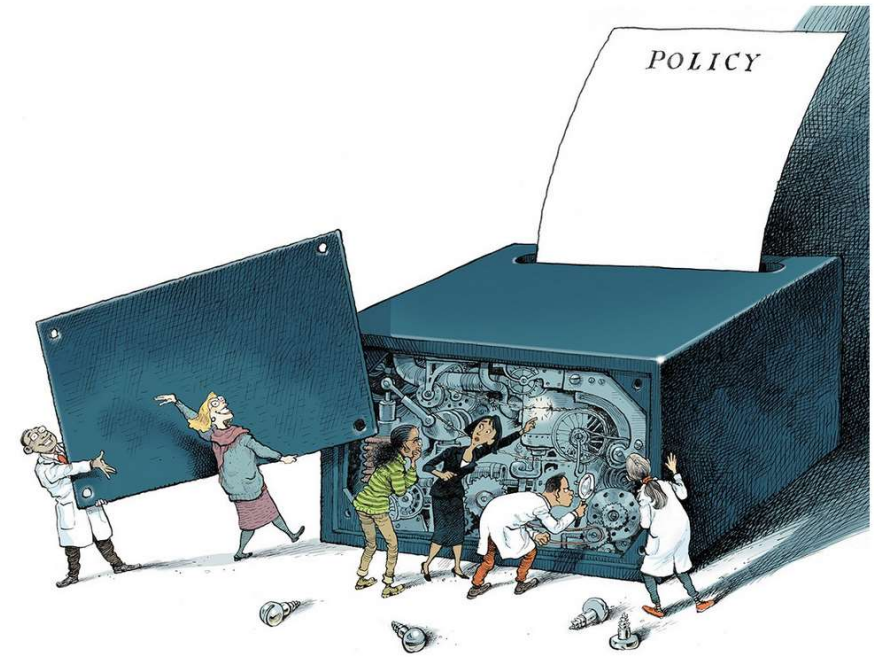


# Mind the assumptions

Assess uncertainty and sensitivity



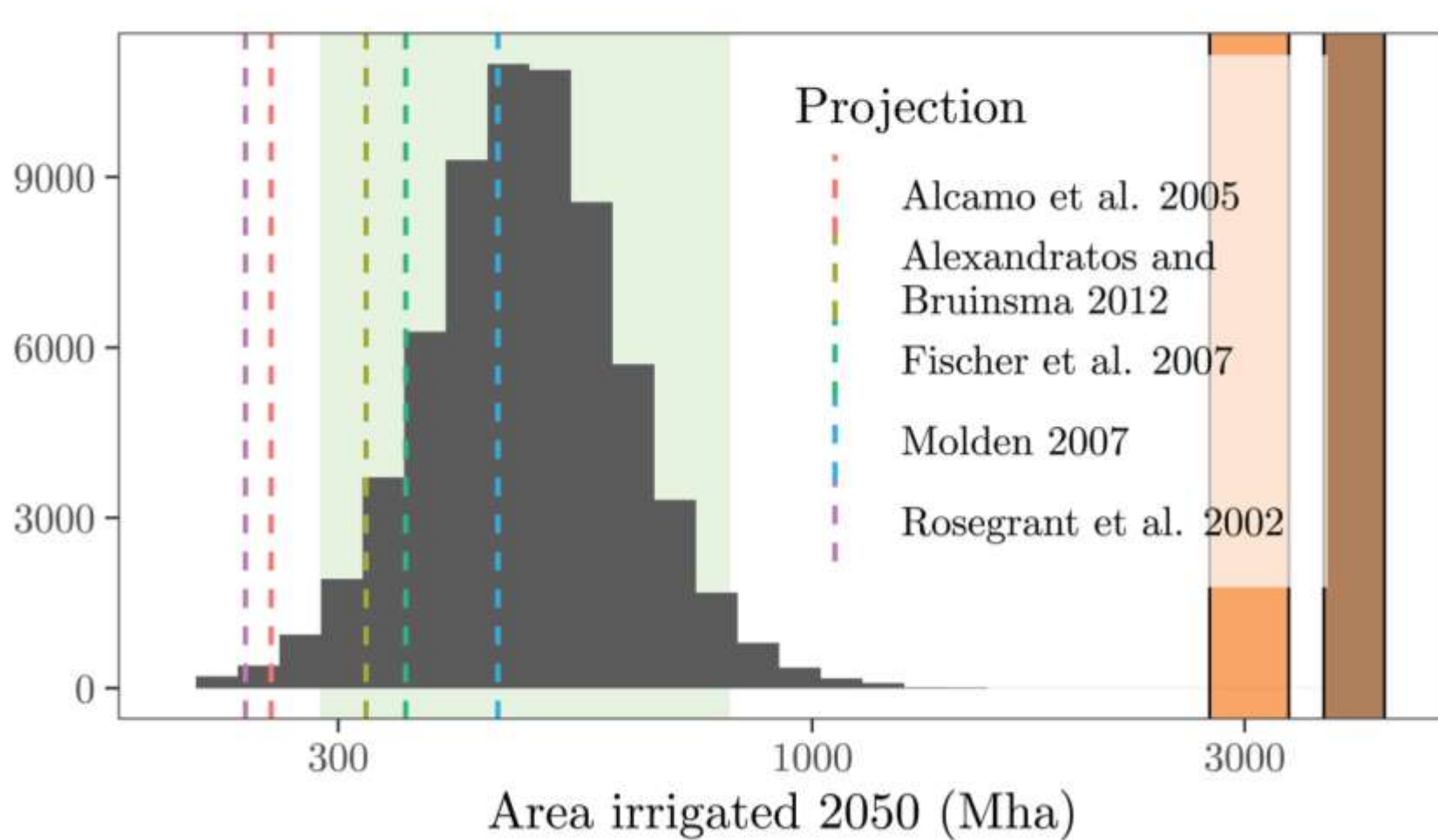
... this may lead to interesting discoveries ...



# 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](https://www.ifs.org.uk/docs/john_kay_feb2012.pdf)



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

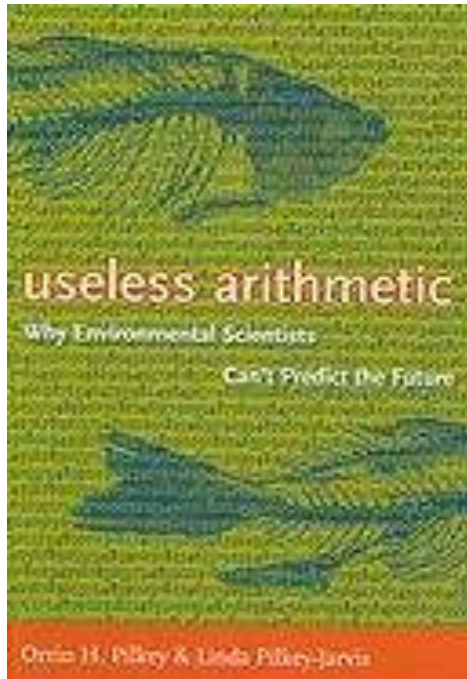
Journey Purpose	Weekday					Weekend	All Week
	7am-10am	10am-4pm	4pm-7pm	7pm-7am	Weekday Average		
Work	-0.48	-0.4	-0.62	-0.5	-0.44	-0.48	-0.45
Non - Work (commuting and other)	-0.67	-0.65	-0.53	-0.47	-0.59	-0.52	-0.56





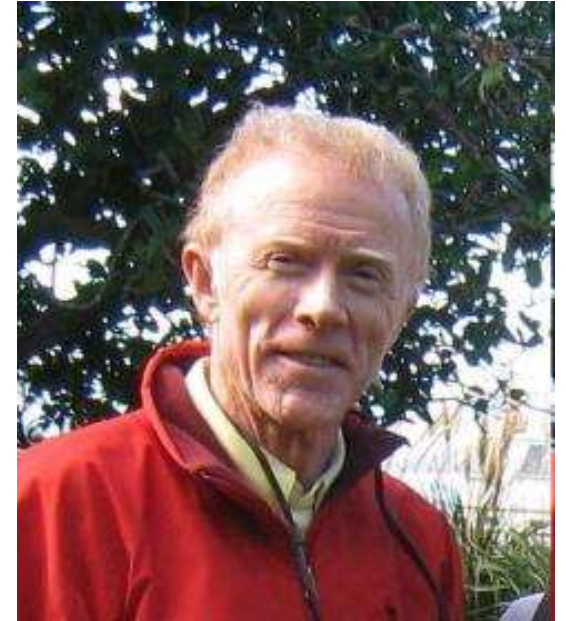
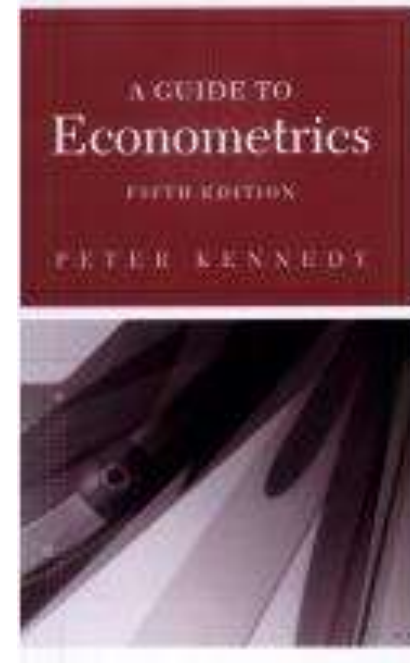
Orrin H. Pilkey

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 “

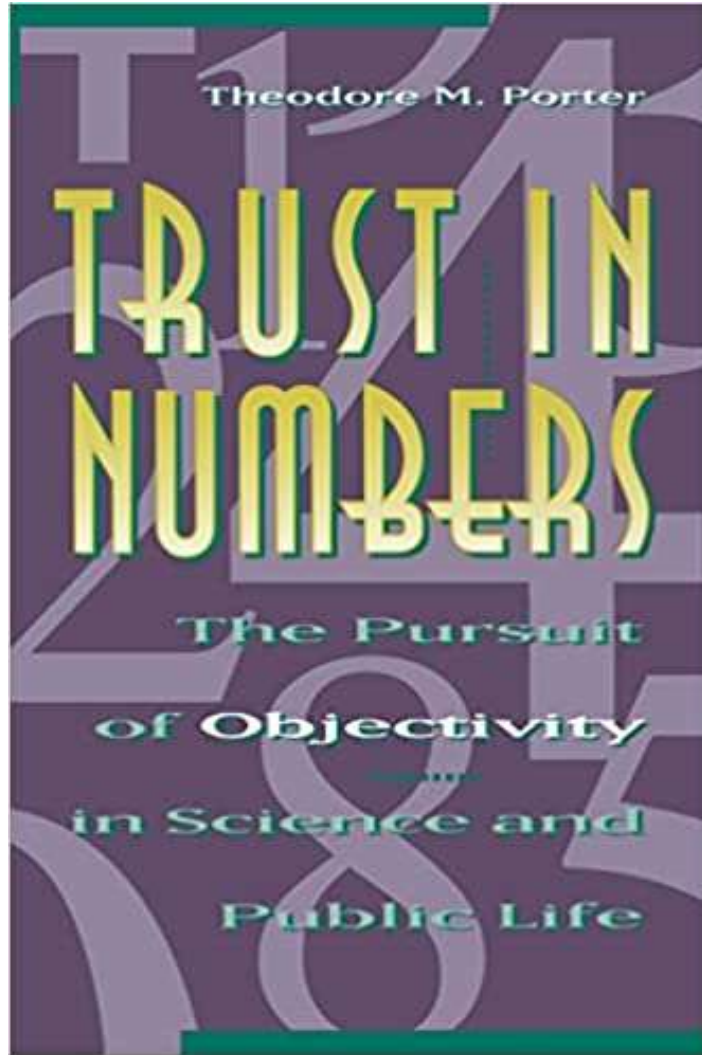


“One reason these methods [global sensitivity analysis] are rarely used is their honesty seems destructive;”

“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

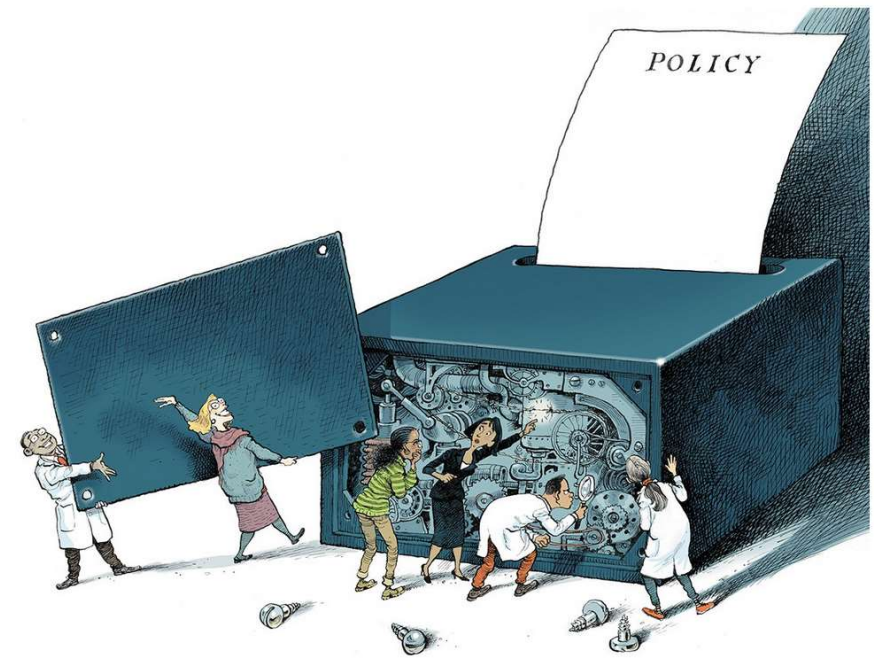
Match purpose and context

## Mind the consequences

Quantification can backfire.

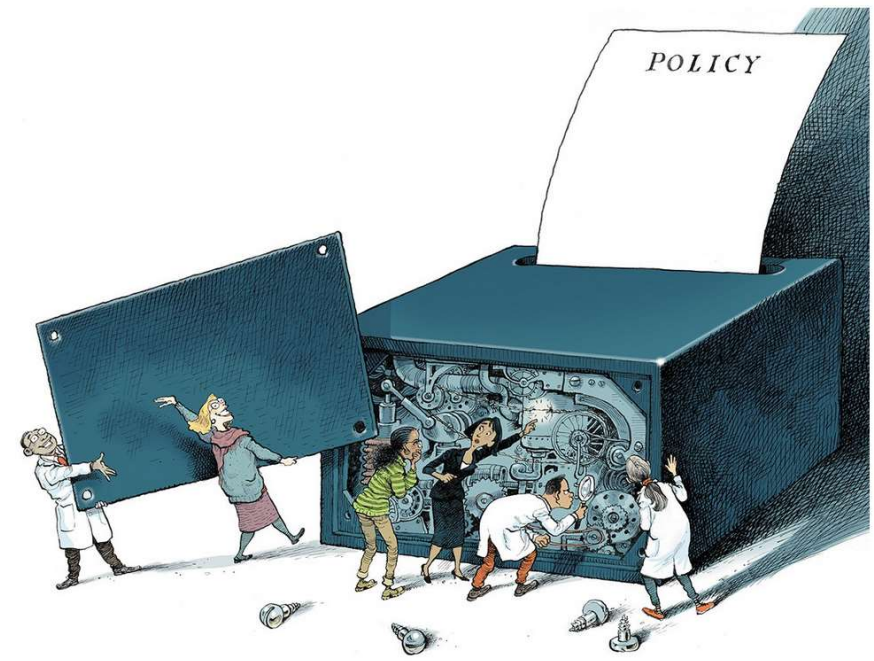
## Mind the unknowns

Acknowledge ignorance



# Mind the hubris

Complexity can be the enemy of relevance

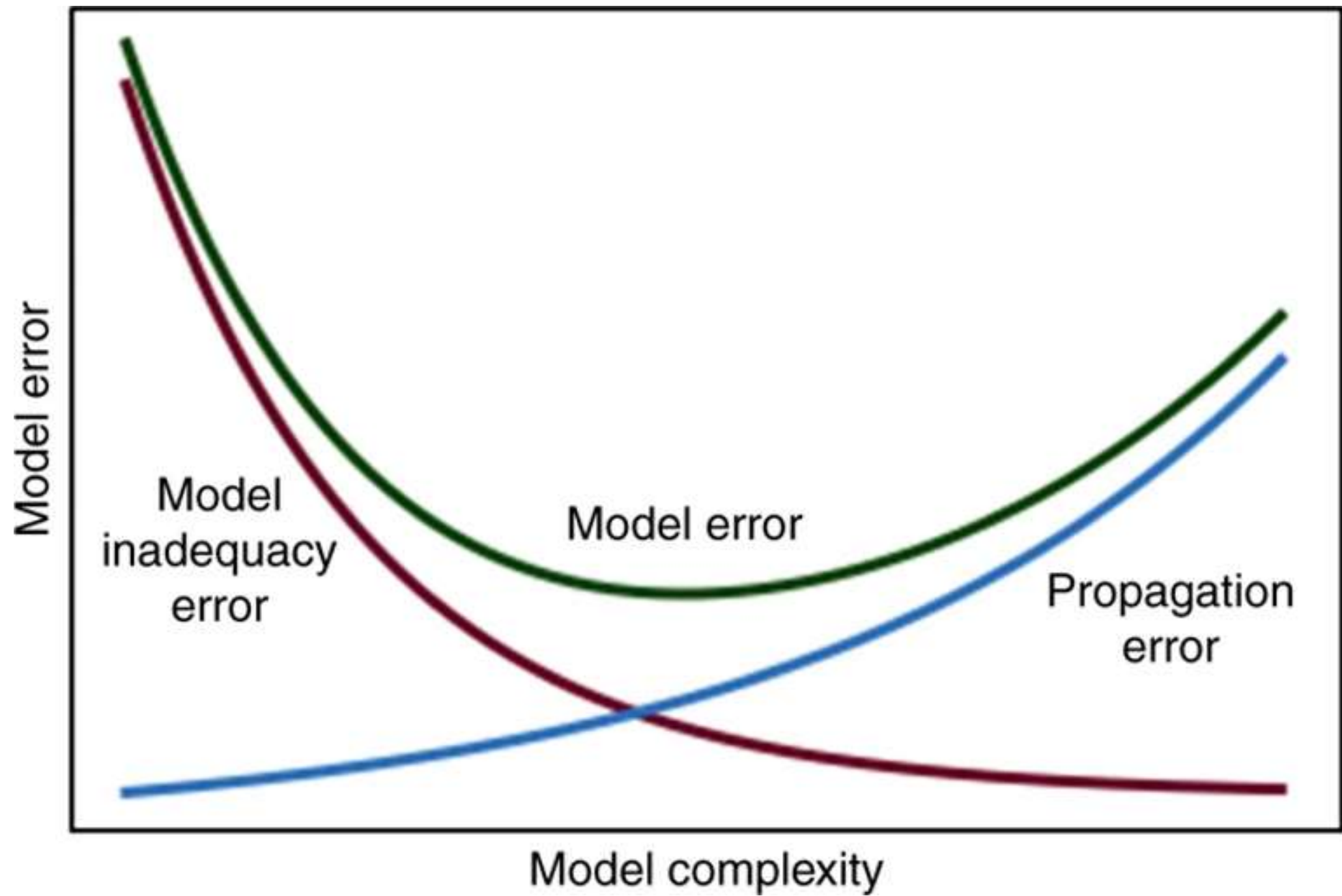


… many are seduced by the idea of adding complexity in an attempt to capture reality more accurately, but…

## SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

1. Additional information and references >260 references

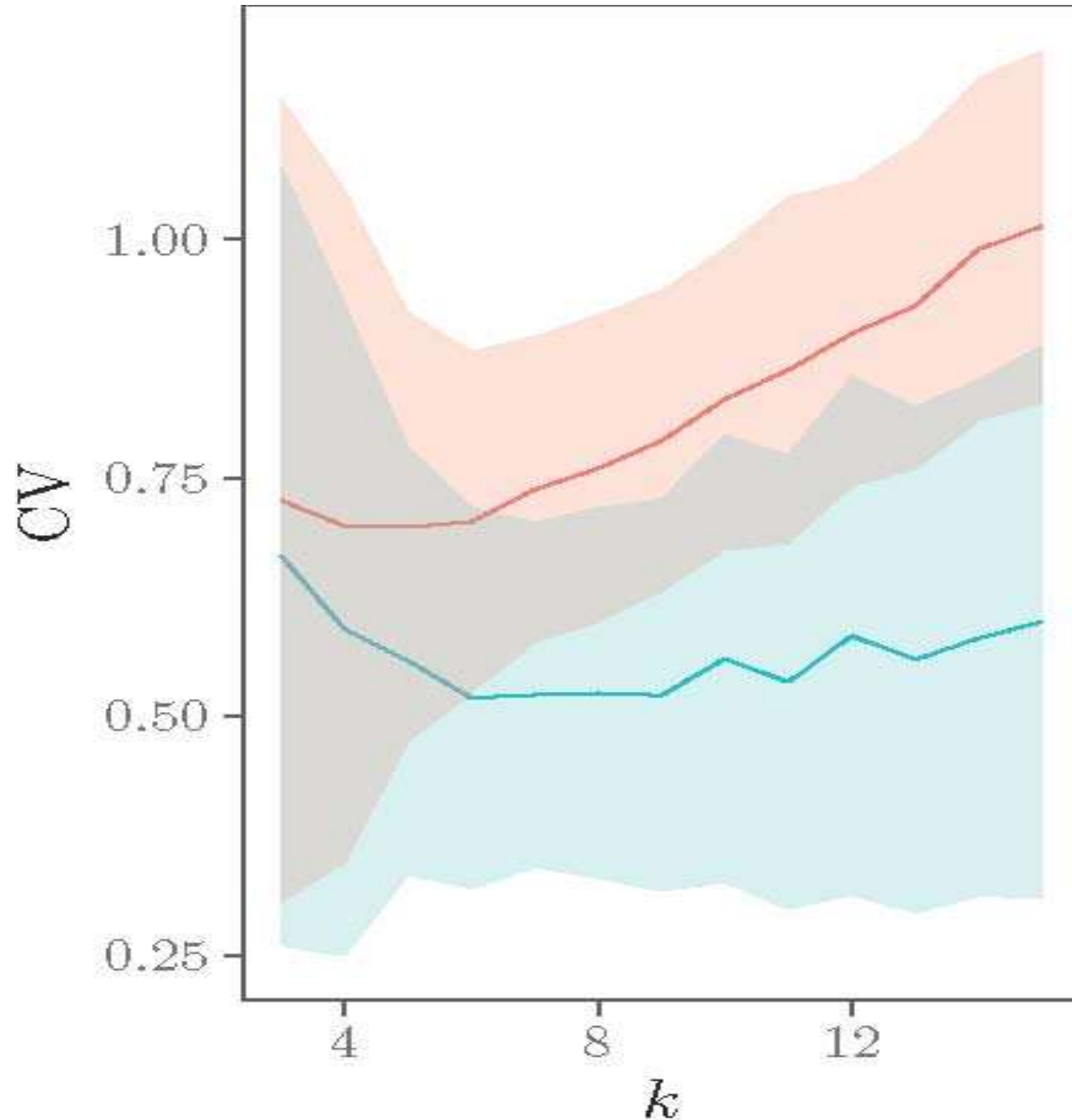




# O'Neil conjecture

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**

# Mind the assumptions

Assess uncertainty and sensitivity

## Mind the hubris

Complexity can be the enemy of relevance



## Mind the framing

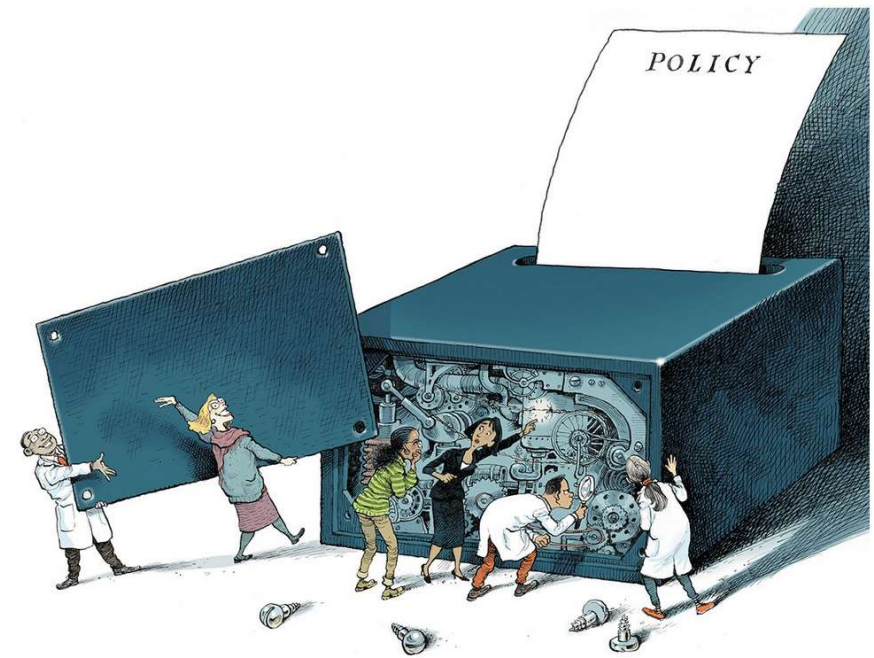
Match purpose and context

## Mind the consequences

Quantification can backfire.

## Mind the unknowns

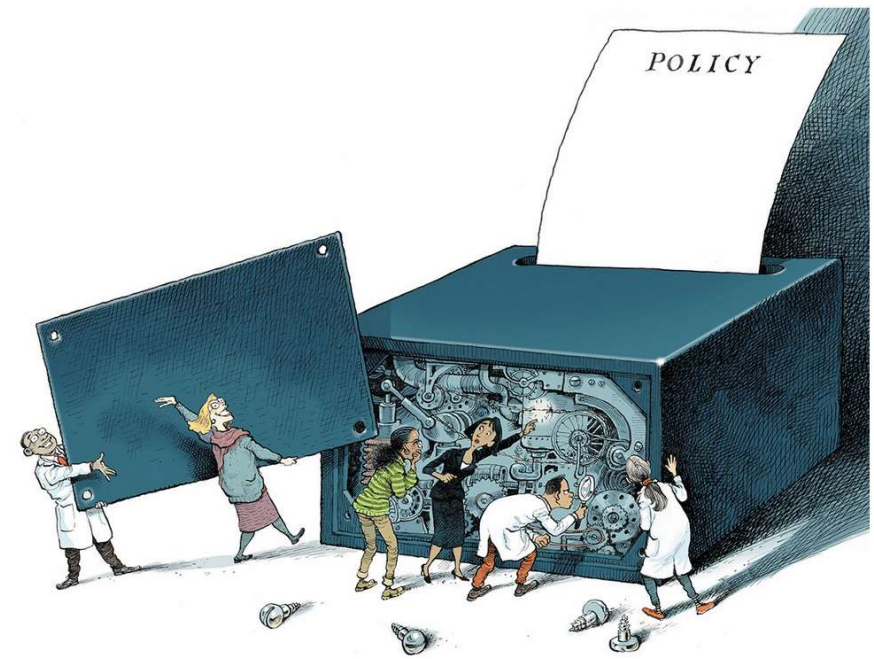
Acknowledge ignorance





# Mind the framing

Match purpose and context



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

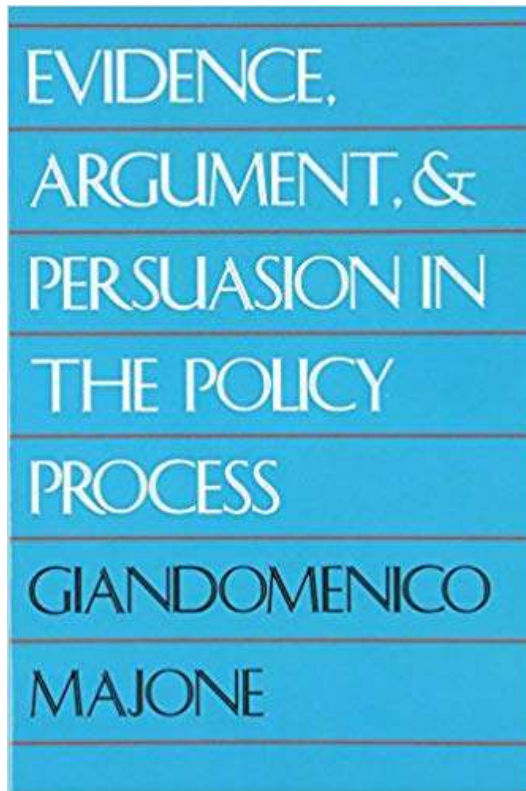
## SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

1. Additional information and references >260 references

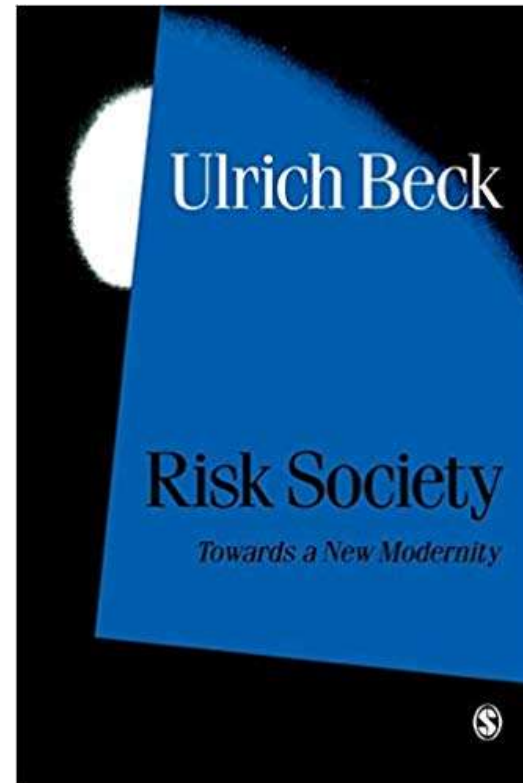
# From Ulrich Beck to Giandomenico Majone: the technique is never neutral



Ulrich Beck  
(1944 –2015)



1989



1992 (1986)



Environmental Science & Policy

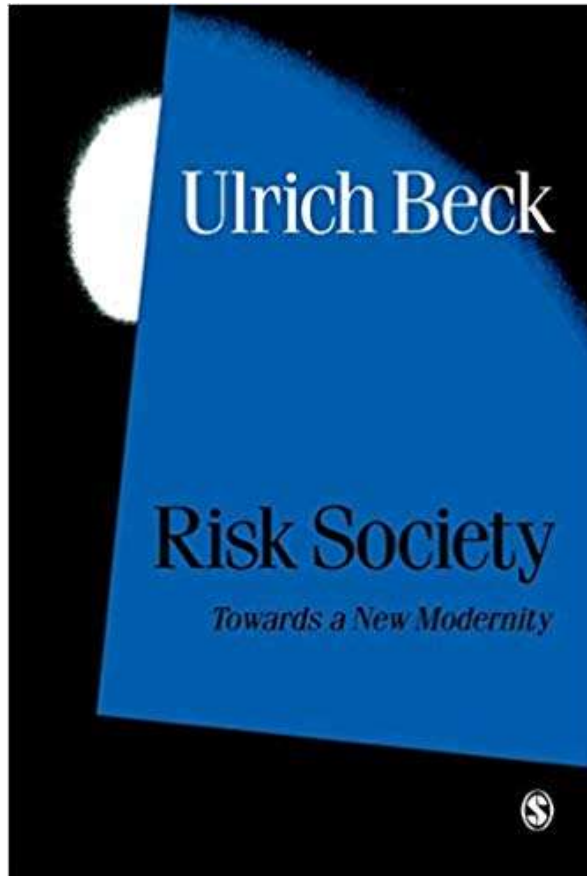
Volume 106, April 2020, Pages 87-98



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

Andrea Saltelli <sup>a, b</sup> ✉, Lorenzo Benini <sup>c</sup>, Silvio Funtowicz <sup>a</sup>, Mario Giampietro <sup>d, e</sup>, Matthias Kaiser <sup>a</sup>,  
Erik Reinert <sup>a, f</sup>, Jeroen P. van der Sluijs <sup>a, g, h</sup>

“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 <sup>a, b</sup>  , Lorenzo Benini <sup>c</sup>, Silvio Funtowicz <sup>a</sup>, Mario Giampietro <sup>d, e</sup>, Matthias Kaiser <sup>a</sup>, Erik Reinert <sup>a, f</sup>, Jeroen P. van der Sluijs <sup>a, g, h</sup>

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



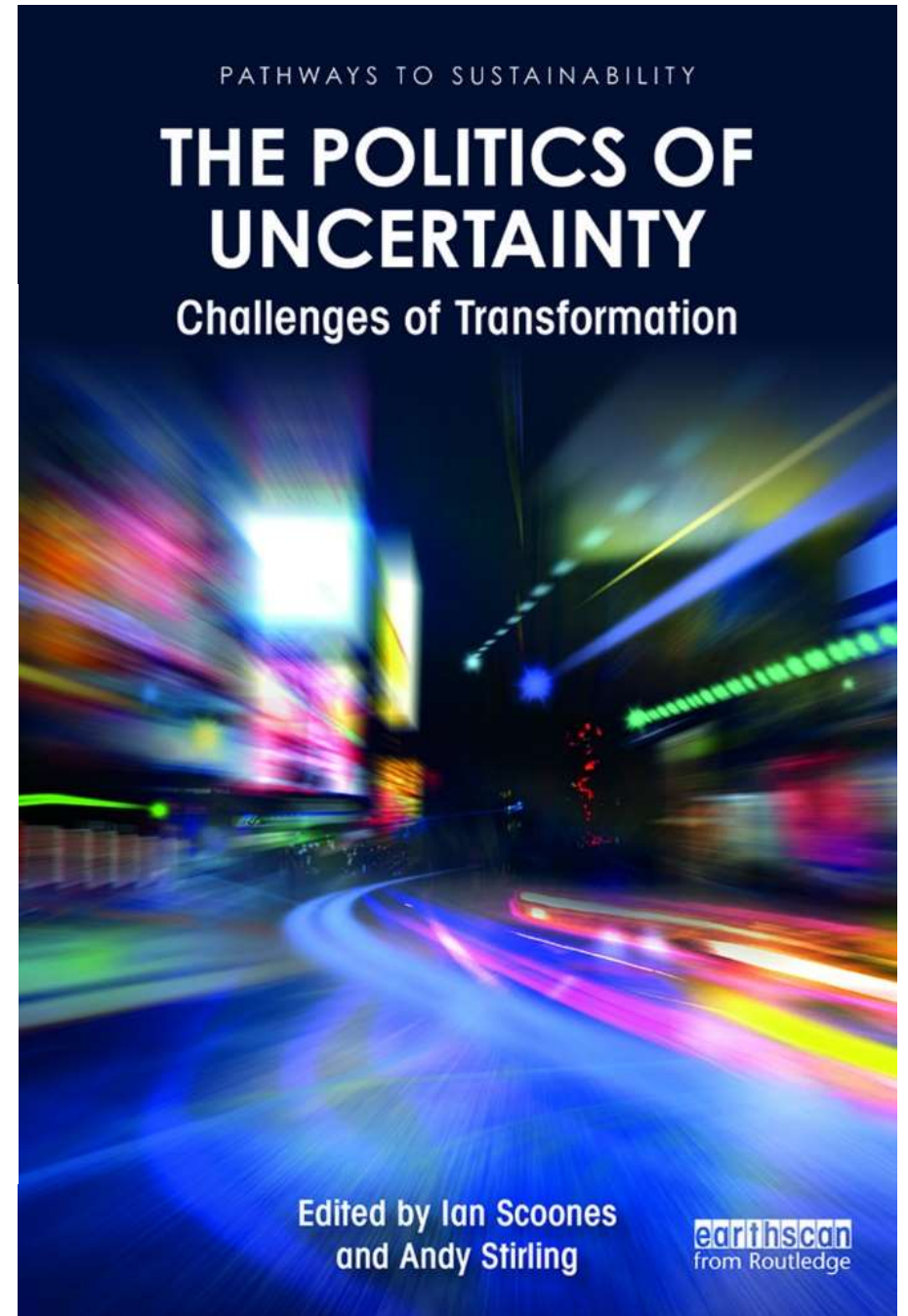
# On reductionism

## 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 is 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

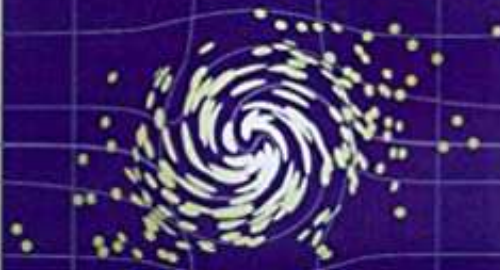
“Bay models are used to track nutrient loads to ensure the cap is not exceeded”

→ 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.

# PREDICTION

Science, Decision Making,



and the Future of Nature

Edited by Daniel Sarewitz,  
Roger A. Pielke, Jr., and Radford Byerly

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

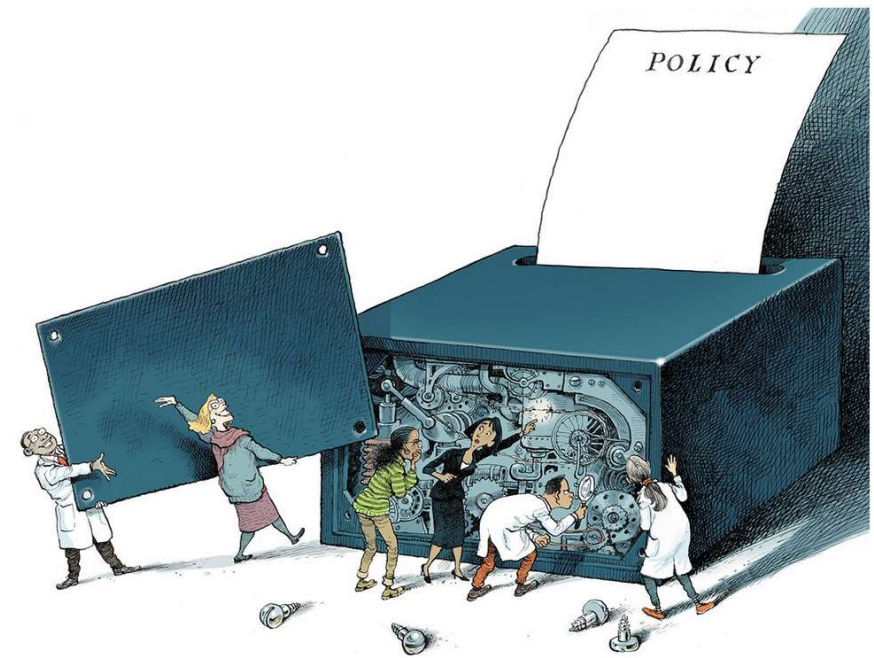


## Mind the consequences

Quantification can backfire.

## Mind the unknowns

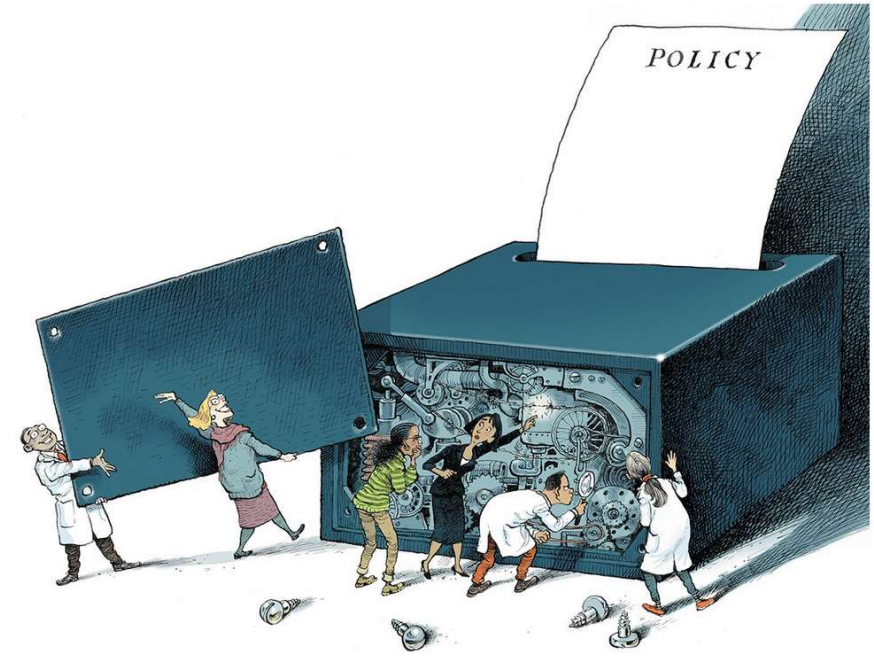
Acknowledge ignorance





# Mind the consequences

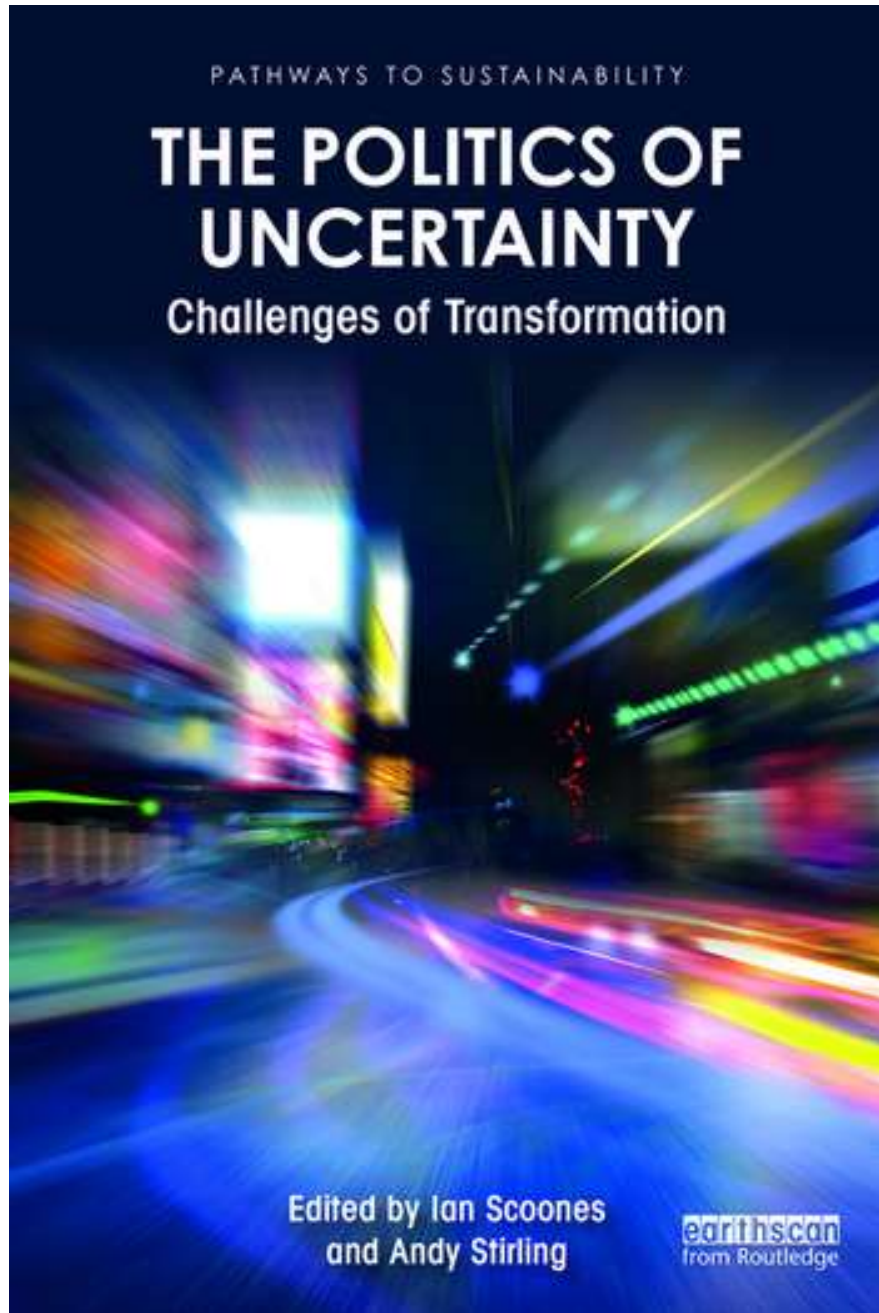
## Quantification can backfire



From the risk of financial products to the management of coastal 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





# Mind the assumptions

Assess uncertainty and sensitivity

## Mind the hubris

Complexity can be the enemy of relevance

## Mind the framing

Match purpose and context

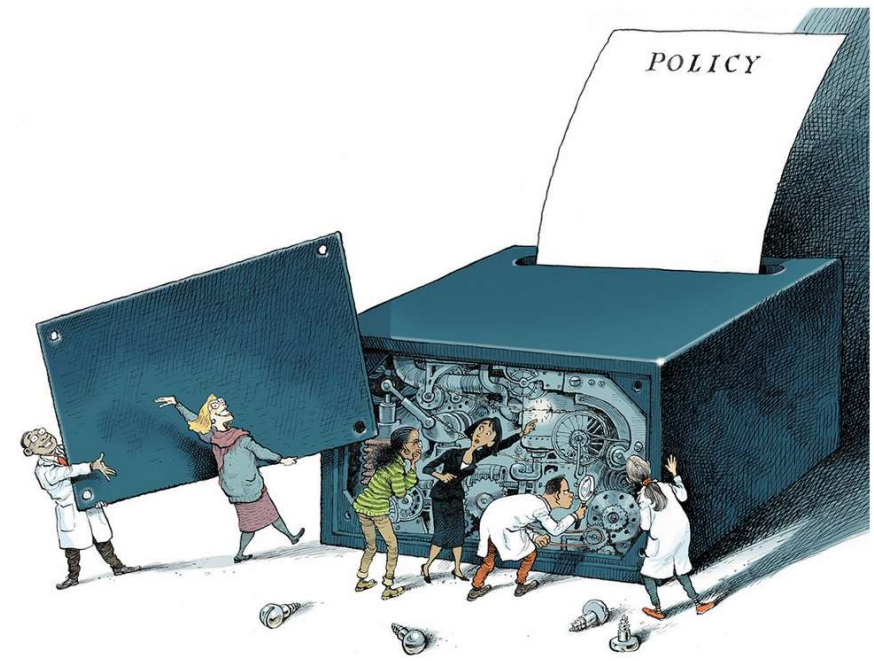
## Mind the consequences

Quantification can backfire.



## Mind the unknowns

Acknowledge ignorance

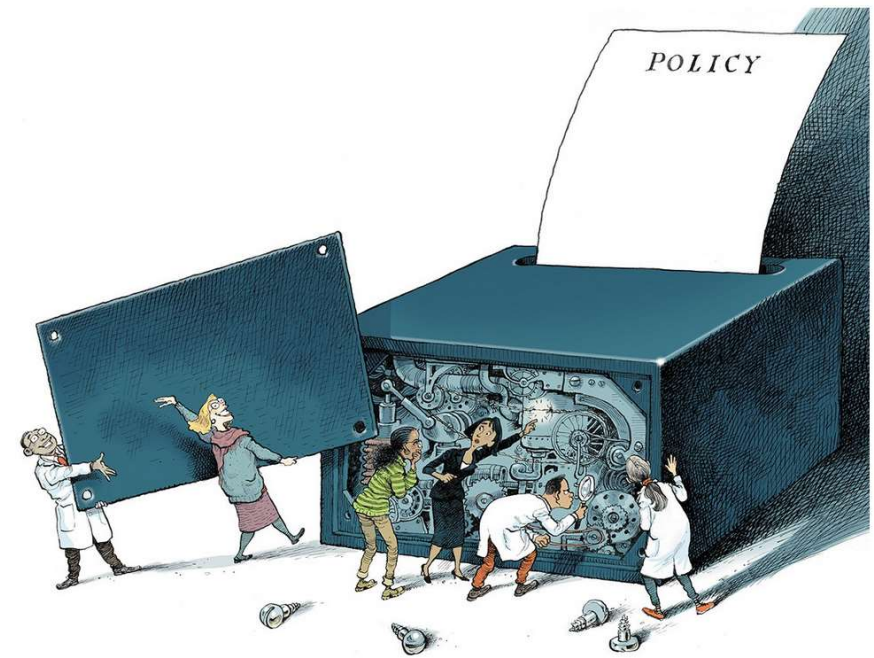




# Mind the unknowns

## Acknowledge ignorance

“there is no  
number-answer to  
your question”

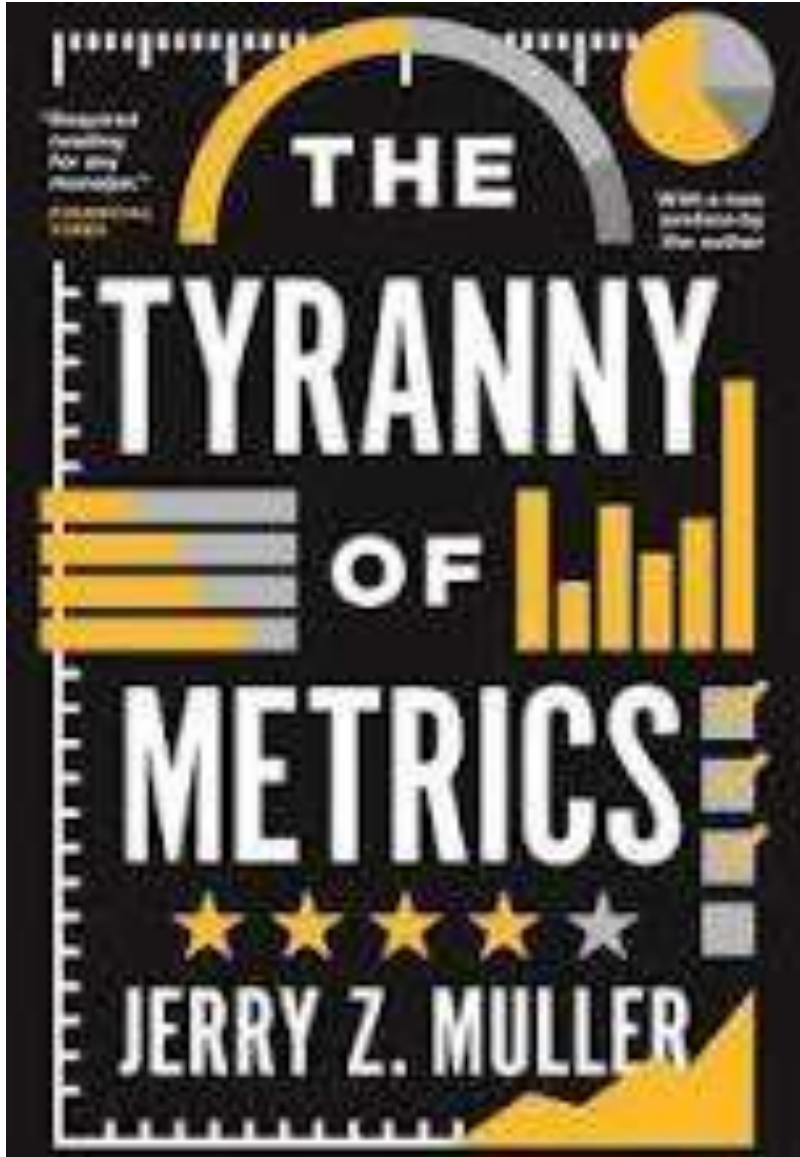


### SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

#### 1. Additional information and references

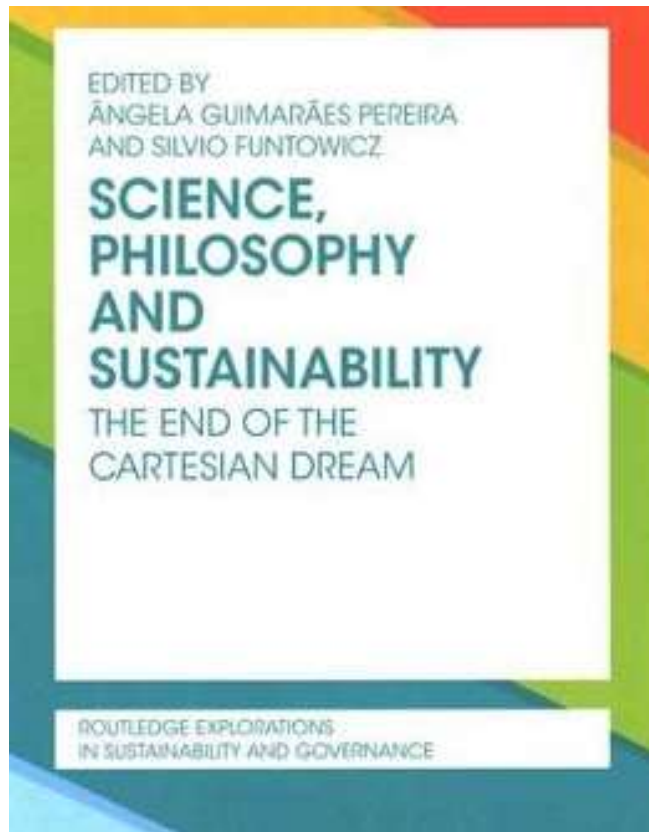
>260 references

Anthony Fauci



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.



# 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 <sup>a, b, c</sup>  , Mario Giampietro <sup>a, c, d</sup>



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



## Futures

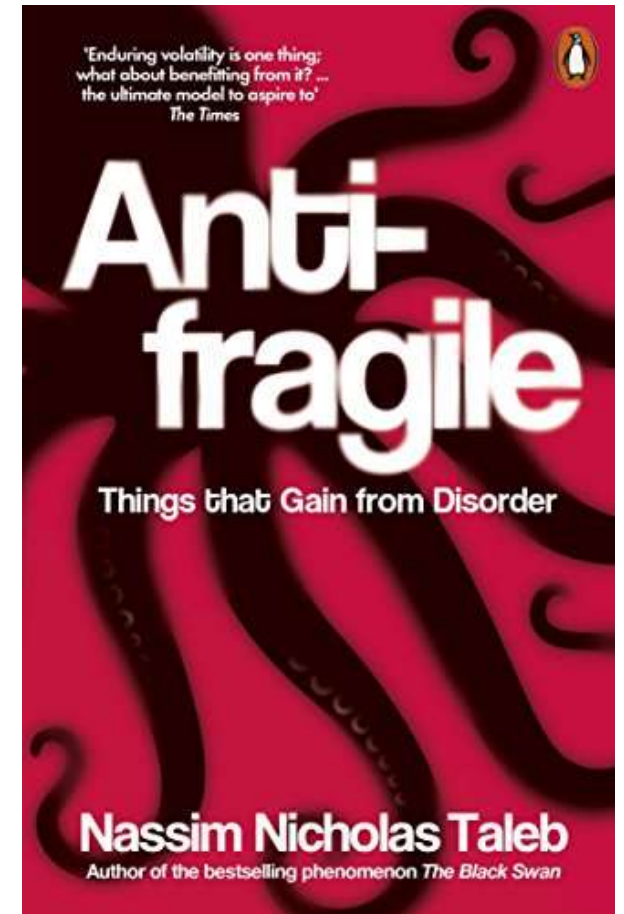
Volume 91, August 2017, Pages 62-71



Original research article

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

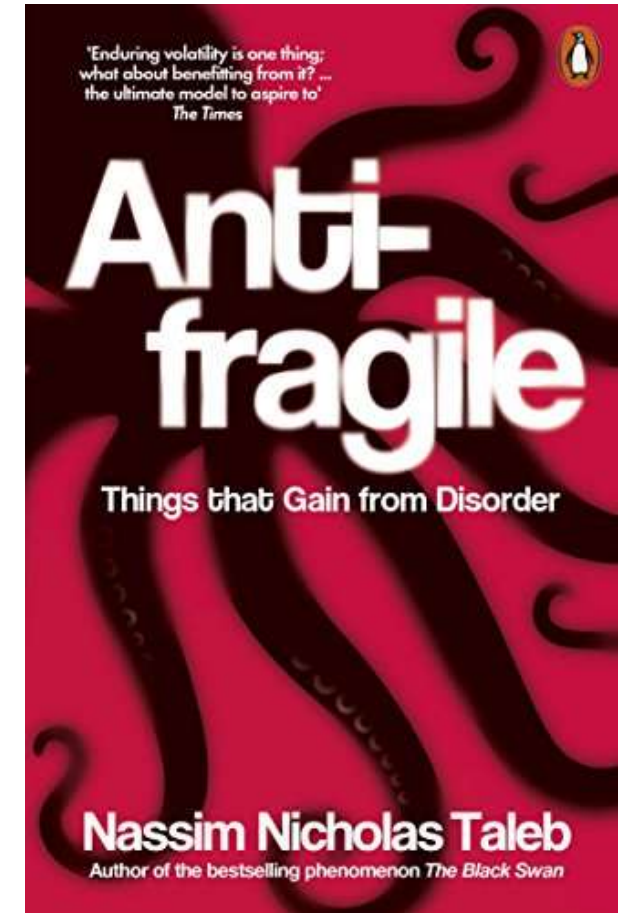
Andrea Saltelli <sup>a, b, c</sup>  , Mario Giampietro <sup>a, c, d</sup>



“...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)



Futures  
Volume 91, August 2017, Pages 62-71



Original research article

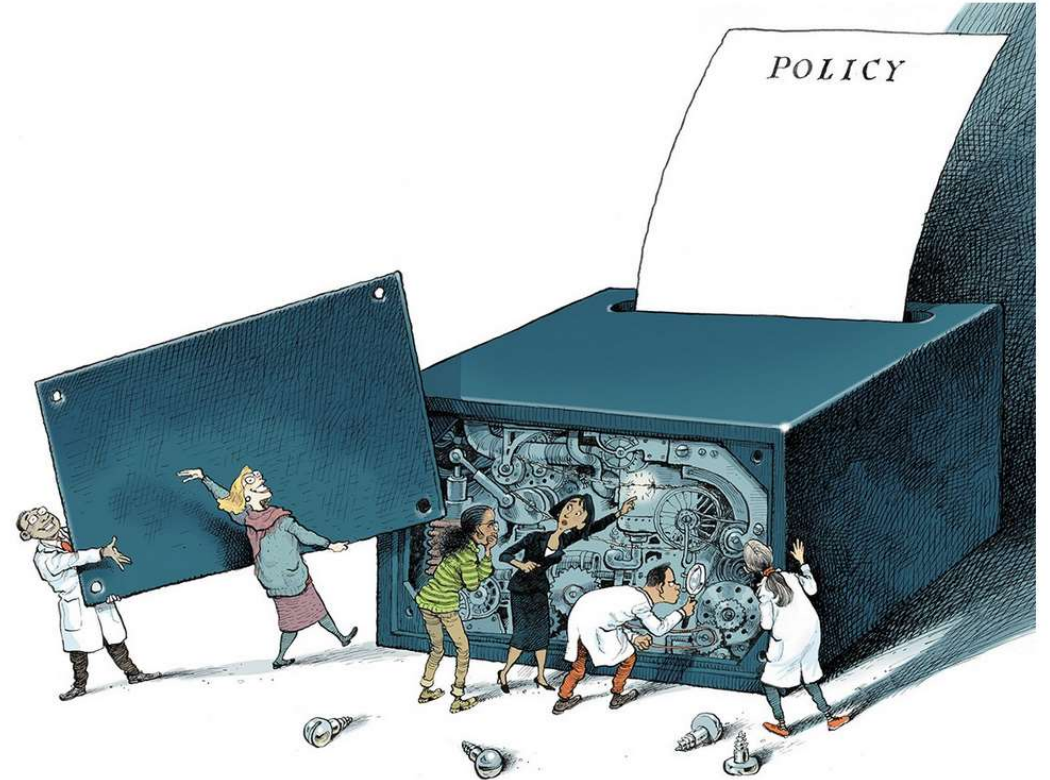
What is wrong with evidence based policy, and how can it be improved?

Andrea Saltelli <sup>a, b, c</sup> , Mario Giampietro <sup>a, c, d</sup>

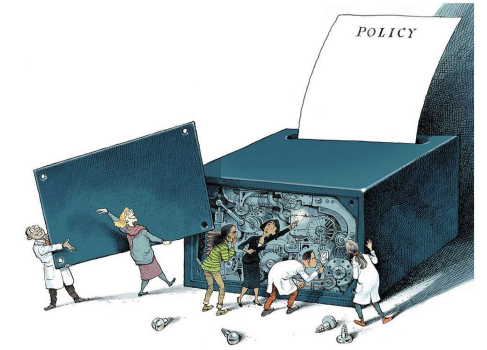
COMMENT | 24 June 2020

# 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

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**Andrea Saltelli**

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

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**Antonio Andreoni**

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

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**Wolfgang Drechsler**

Tallinn University of Technology, Estonia;  
UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose;  
Davis Center at Harvard University, United States

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**Jayati Ghosh**

University of Massachusetts Amherst, United  
States;  
UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose

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**Rainer Kattel**

UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose

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**Ingrid H. Kvangraven**

Department of Politics, University of York

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**Ismael Rafols**

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Leiden University, the Netherlands

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**Erik S. Reinert**

Tallinn University of Technology, Estonia;  
UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose

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**Andy Stirling**

Science Policy Research Unit, University of  
Sussex

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**Ting Xu**

School of Law at the University of Essex

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**UCL Institute for  
Innovation and  
Public Purpose**

WORKING PAPER  
WP 2021/05



... 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



**UCL Institute for  
Innovation and  
Public Purpose**

WORKING PAPER  
WP 2021/05



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.



**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

## 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

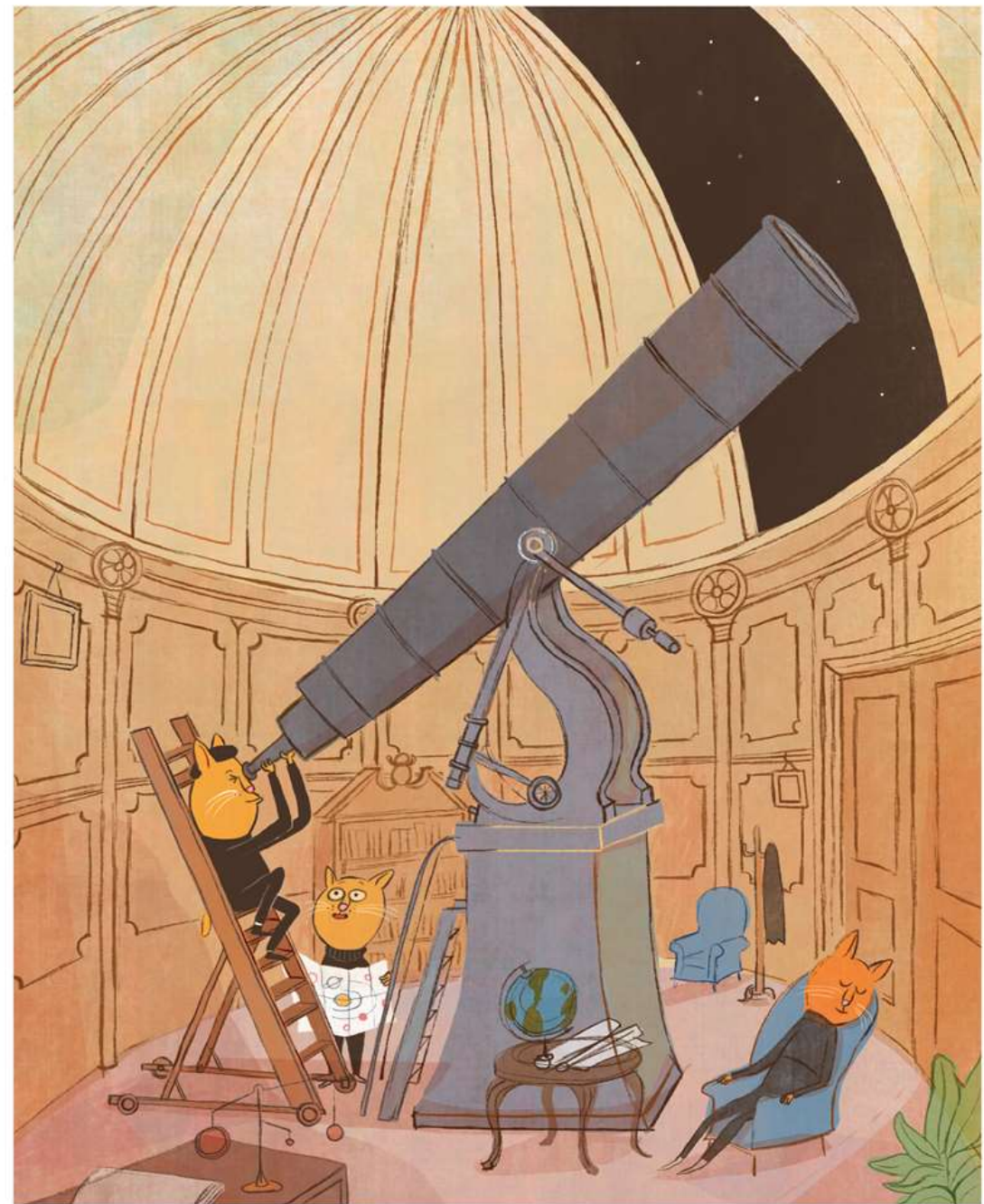


Illustration by Marina Muun

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

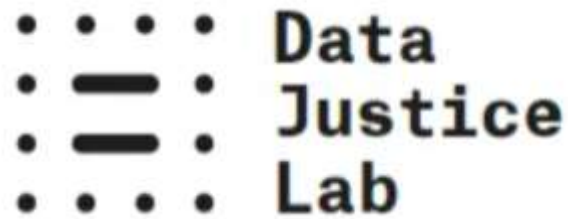


... then how about an observatory for visible and invisible numbers ?



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

Existing  
initiatives looking  
at quantification



STOA - C4AI



THE ALGORITHMIC JUSTICE LEAGUE





www.andreasaltelli.eu

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Tweets by @AndreaSaltelli



**andrea saltelli**  
@AndreaSaltelli

Impressive asymmetry of power in the ongoing battle on social and environmental sustainability... 🤔🤔 <https://twitter.com/marpinoir/status/1409405623725400065>



Jun 28, 2021



**andrea saltelli**  
@AndreaSaltelli

Replying to @AndreaSaltelli

Should we come to term with the fact that the internet - at the end of the day - proved to be an instrument of oppression and domination rather than one of freedom and emancipation? 🤔



Jun 27, 2021

[Embed](#)

[View on Twitter](#)

# The End



@andreasaltelli