Association for Humanistic Psychology in Britain
AHP new vistas MAGAZINE
AHPB Magazine for *Self & Society* | No. 4 - Winter 2019-2020

REVIEW ESSAY

On the Quantification of the Social, and Its Vicissitudes

Richard House

***The Metric Society: On the Quantification of the Social* by Steffen Mau (trans. Sharon Howe), Polity Press, Cambridge, 2019, 200 pp, ISBN-13: 978-1509530410, price (paperback) £15.99 [orig. 2017, in German]**

> [T[he current mania for measurement and quantification eats away at social relationships, and even our sense of ourselves. (Professor Colin Crouch)
>
> The metric society is turning out a generation of numerocrats fixated on performance indicators. As such, the quantification of the social has the potential to spawn a new regime of inequality in which we are perpetually evaluated and compared with others, and in which we are compelled to strive continuously for numerical excellence.
>
> (Mau, p. 176)

So ends this highly disturbing book. It is also a quite brilliant book that should be compulsory reading for every social scientist and policy-maker on the planet – a dramatically bold claim which I hope to substantiate in what follows. (And in passing, I'm acutely aware that the academic writing style of both the book and this review essay might not be to everyone's taste.) Those familiar with the work of Michel Foucault and Nikolas Rose (1988 and 1996, respectively) will immediately recognise their influence and relevance to the arguments in this book, with notions like 'technologies of the self' and 'governing the soul' (see Rose, 2016; Scott, 2016). Thus on page 19 we find Mau referring to Foucault's notion of the 'normalization society' and to his notion of 'biopolitics', with biopower seeking to 'control individuals and their bodies, and organize them in a particular way' (ibid.). And on page 25, Mau cites Foucault's 'technologies of the self', and the idea of us being 'inmates of a digital panopticon', with self-observation and perpetual performance enhancement being insistent imperatives of the self-governing individual (see also Scott, 2016) – with social practices increasingly subject to, and transformed by, the criteria of economic efficiency and competition (p. 38).

At the other end of the book, Mau starts by thrusting us straight into the emerging nightmare that is the Social Credit System in China. We are told on page 1:

> [D]ata on individual conduct in every social sphere is to be gathered, evaluated and aggregated into a single score…. The idea is to build up an overall picture of each person's value as a basis for granting or refusing them certain opportunities in terms of housing, employment or access to credit…. In this way, the Chinese government proposes to reward honest citizens and punish dishonest ones.

Or in other words, what Mau ominously terms 'total social control'. Forebodings of some nightmare dystopia being on the horizon, a concern shared by at least some commentators, does not seem so outlandish and paranoia-conspiratorial, in the light of these express aims. And the universal roll-out of a ubiquitous 5G technology will make these social-control possibilities all the more feasible to implement (cf. the interview with Michael Bevington, elsewhere in this issue).

The book's author, Steffen Mau, is Professor of Macrosociology at the Humboldt University of Berlin, a leading expert on inequality in Europe, and who has also written *Inequality, Marketization and the Majority Class: Why Did the European Middle Classes Accept Neoliberalism?* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). The book under review here was first published in German in 2017. It's a shame that such a seminal work for modern culture took two years to translate into English (and that it's taken me many months to finally review it with the attention to detail it warrants). The contents page reveals a rich cornucopia for anyone with concerns about the impact of neoliberalism's toxic Audit Culture in modern social formations (Power, 1997; Strathern, 2000a, b) – e.g. 'The Calculative Practices of the Market', 'Status Competition and the Power of Numbers', 'The Market Power of Rating Agencies', 'The Evaluation Cult: Stars and Points', 'Professions in the Evaluative Spotlight', 'Algorithmic Authority', 'The Interdependence of Self- and External Surveillance', 'The Regime of Averages, Benchmarks and Body Images' – and so on. What rich fare this promised to be on scanning these sections titles – especially as this is a critique written by a learned professor, not a populist rant against science and technology.

The author makes it clear at the outset that he is not in principle anti-metrics and the benefits they can bring. For example, in a metric society there is less asymmetry between the professional and layman, with medical professionals now subject to review by their patients rather than by established hierarchies. Mau himself writes:

> …statistical data unquestionably have an important, indeed indispensable, role in modern society…. Quantified measurements are a key to progress, knowledge and rationalization; they help us to identify causal relationships and make sense of the world around us…. [T]he numerical medium has an emancipatory potential…. I am – I hope – above suspicion of harbouring a general aversion to figures and rejecting quantitative measuring out of hand. (pp. 8–9)

These commitments (that I must confess I don't personally altogether share) surely render Mau's subsequent critique of this increasingly ubiquitous metric world all the more devastating.

After an introductory chapter, Chapter 2 explores the relationship between the numerical medium and social comparison. Chapter 3 then looks at ratings and rankings and their social impact, focusing on the case of global university rankings and rating agencies. Chapter 4 goes on to look at scoring and screening as ways of determining individual social worth, looking at the cases of credit ratings, health and safety mobility scores and academic performance measures. Chapter 5 then looks at 'the new evaluation cult' (Mau) in its manifold manifestations, and following this, Chapter 6 looks at how self-tracking practices are generating new kinds of competition and optimization. I will look in detail at Chapters 7–10 inclusive a bit later, as they had most relevance and urgency to this reviewer.

A number of interesting issues are raised in the early parts of the book. Thus, we read that 'Society is on the road towards data-driven perpetual stock-taking' (p. 3), with continuous measurement 'lead(ing) to an intensification of both external and self-monitoring activities' (ibid.) – which can in turn easily lead us to losing the capacity to act independently of 'the behavioural and performance expectations embodied in those systems' (p. 4). This clearly has major implications for human

freedom and choice – key issues of concern for Humanistic Psychology.

What Mau terms 'the cult of numbers' has 'momentous consequences' (p. 5), he maintains, leading inexorably to what he calls 'an *evaluation society* which rates everything and everybody on the basis of quantitative data' (p. 6, his italics). Further, all the paraphernalia of quantification 'ultimately transform *qualitative differences* into *quantitative inequalities*' (ibid., his italics). And he cites Jürgen Habermas' notion of 'colonization of the lifeworld', through 'instrumental concepts of predictability, measurability and efficiency', and the universalization of competition through the constant social comparison that quantification enables and essentially insists upon (ibid.). There are clearly massive control issues wrapped up in all this – and in this sense, the 'quantification of the social' can be understood, at one level at least, as merely the latest manifestation of the ideology of an aggressive hyper-modernity and technocracy.

We then read the bold claim that 'Data make visible and define who we are' (p. 11), that 'orders of worth' are institutionalized by quantified measurements (ibid.), and that 'nothing seems possible without numbers any more' (p. 12). And the issue of alleged objectivity is also usefully raised and problematised. Thus, we read that (following Bettina Heintz), 'Statistics… are selective constructions which are partly responsible for creating… reality. The objectivity of numbers… is not a fact, but an attribution' (quoted on p. 14). Put differently – and this cannot be emphasised enough:

> All numbers contain inherent preconceptions as to what is valuable, relevant or authoritative. Data tell us *how to look at things*, thereby systematically excluding other perspectives…. The use of numbers always represents a 'particular form of value assignment'. (p. 15, his italics)

Tell anyone with positivist inclinations who wants to claim that numbers are somehow 'objective' representations of reality, and therefore a superior form of knowledge for that reason, to put that in their pipe and smoke it!

The Foucauldian thrust of Mau's arguments also comes to the fore in places. Thus we read that in the metric society, 'governed subjects' are no longer treated as whole individuals… in the nerve centres of power, but only as data' (p. 24); and 'we are on the way to becoming a data-driven monitoring, control and evaluation society that no longer believes anything unless it is expressed in figures' (ibid.). Echoes here too of much that is in Nikolas Rose's important writings (e.g. Rose, 1996; Miller & Rose, 1990). These are clearly issues on which Humanistic Psychology must surely take an informed and urgent stand – which is just one reason why I wanted to write this extended essay.

In Chapter 3 on rankings and ratings, I found myself wincing when reading about how 'blaming and shaming' so easily becomes one of the sequelae of, and accepted norms accompanying, a system in which one is always comparing oneself with others, and inculcating a kind of restless hyperactivity in which the message is: 'If I am to avoid seeing my comparative advantage melt away, I need to be constantly on the ball and performing at my best' (p. 45). Mau's notion of 'the regime of averages' is also very relevant here (pp. 155–7), whereby no one wants to fall below any real or notional average benchmark, and so everyone will tend to end up trying to exceed it – as those falling below the average will often be sanctioned or cautioned, and certainly looked down upon as 'inferior'.

I'm sure this ideology of 'unending striving to be better' will chime with many if not most readers. But is this kind of hyperactivity really the way we all want to be living a human life? Certainly, 'The more visible [the] criteria are, the more the actors can be relied on to conform with them' (ibid.). See how conformity and *compliance* lie at the heart of this unforgiving ideology.

We also see how, in this toxic world, the way things *appear* becomes more important than the true substance of things. Thus, 'Instead of *being good*…, there is a growing emphasis on *looking good*, with the things that used to matter being eclipsed by image cultivation and self-projection' (p. 47, his italics). In the world of politics, this is sometimes referred to as a 'culture of spin'. And

this chapter also has a very revealing and disturbing section on the issue of university rankings, and their negative unintended consequences (pp. 47–53).

There are also some references in the book (though perhaps not enough) to the relationship between neoliberalism and the metric society's quantification of the social. This is of crucial importance, because we have to try to understand the rise of the metric society in the context of contemporary capitalism and its current imperatives. Thus, we are told that in neoliberalism, the key evaluation criteria are efficiency and performance (p. 3), and that 'The expansion of markets and capitalist economics brought about a massive surge in the use of numbers in everyday… practices…, making possible techniques of governance which replaced the sacred with objectivity and rationality' (p. 11). And 'the logic of optimization and performance enhancement which neoliberalism has imposed on every conceivable aspect of life is leading to a… battle for the best figures' (p. 12), with 'the expansion of calculative practices' (p. 114) continuing apace.

Another link to the ideology of neoliberalism is that 'the concept of neoliberalism stands for an agenda that sidelines collective responsibility and calls on individuals to take responsibility for themselves' (p. 23). And 'it is only logical that neoliberalism should install a system of continuous system audits and "tests" in which each individual has to keep proving themselves' (ibid.). This is crucial, because the inexorable rise of the metric society's quantification of the social is not some neutral and progressively virtuous scientific development, but rather is deeply rooted in the ideology of 'modernity' and the dynamics of capital accumulation (capitalism). And the impact of this process goes deep into the psyche: for 'the quantification of the social leads to a drive towards commodification which binds the individual, and their habits, tastes and lifestyle increasingly to market evaluations, thereby rendering them marketable in their turn' (p. 164).

But for me, the real meat of the book comes in Chapters 7–10 inclusive. In Chapter 7, 'The Power of Nomination', I was immediately reminded of England's schools inspectorate, Ofsted, and the articles in this issue by Richard Brinton and Faysal Mikdadi. In looking at what he terms 'the nomination power of the state', Mau argues that 'only when things are named and statistically recorded can they become the object of political intervention' (p. 112); and nomination power is now 'exercised via figures, graphs and league tables', with 'certain ways of codifying social value becoming so deeply ingrained that people come to accept them as *natural* and indisputable' (p. 113, his italics). And here again we see the inculcation of conformity and compliance; for 'once a set of indicators has been decided upon, actors in the relevant field are obliged to conform to them' (p. 114).

With regard to education, we read that 'efficiency-oriented competition… can only be effectively implemented if objectively measurable and predefined performance parameters can be successfully established as a basis for identifying differences and conducting better/worse comparisons' (p. 117). And arguably most scary of all is that the 'inherent expansive tendency' of these quantification trends has 'the potential to dramatically restructure whole areas of society according to their imperatives' (ibid.) – and in the case of the professions, with 'generalized trust… and professional self-direction being replaced by a "culture of evidence" based on documentation, monitoring and indicatorization' (pp. 120–1).

On school league tables, the verdict is withering: '[R]ankings create self-fulfilling prophecies by encouraging schools to become more like what rankings measure, which reinforces the validity of the measure. Rankings impose a standardized, universal benchmark… that creates incentives for schools to conform to its measures. These factors all encourage… homogenization…' (p. 139). The international Pisa rankings of schools and the academic peer-review process also come in for quite withering critique (see pp. 122, 145–7).

Perhaps the essence of Chapter 8, 'Risks and Side-Effects', is best summed up by the pithily telling quotation (from Louis V. Gerstner): 'People don't do what you expect, but what you inspect' (p. 130). For performance indicators are fundamentally about *directing and controlling behaviour* (p. 129).

And with regard to unintended consequences, these can easily outweigh any benefits accruing from the intended effects of a system that has performance indicators at its heart. 'Campbell's law' also comes strongly into play here – i.e.: 'The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor' (quoted on pp. 130–1). Those counsellors and therapists subjected to Audit Culture assessments of their therapeutic work will know only too well the mal-effects on the therapy experience of these monitoring- and control-obsessed quantifying procedures – for 'quantitative parameters are always reductionist' (p. 134), and often positively tyrannical (Strathern, 2000b). And at worst, such a system can lead to a situation where 'an organization's internal, self-defined objectives are completely surrendered in favour of overriding, externally defined goals' (p. 131).

There is so much of relevance and import in Chapter 9, 'Transparency and 'Discipline', and Chapter 10, 'The Inequality Regime of Quantification', that I herewith issue a spoiler alert, and I will just share a few choice quotations. To misquote *Fawlty Towers*, there really is 'enough material for a whole conference here!'. Linking again to the issue of 5G technology (cf. the Michael Bevington interview, this issue), we read that 'we are now facing the prospect of an omnipresent surveillance adapted to our increasingly fluid lifestyles' (p. 142) – not just in the workplace, where it's bad enough (pp. 149–51), but also with the relentless extension and incursion of these technologies into our private lives as well – 'open[ing] up new possibilities for monitoring a whole range of human activities, which in turn increases the potential for external control' (p. 143).

Yet there is a deep *seductiveness* about this whole technology that we mustn't ignore or downplay, for 'The magic attraction of numbers and comparisons is simply irresistible' (p. 144). And (following Bauman) the promise of social recognition and the reward of an experienced meaningful existence (however illusory they might be in reality) constitute a powerful emotional pull for keeping us hooked in and logged on – providing at least temporary, if ephemeral, relief from an experience of existential emptiness that a spiritually barren, materialistic hypermodernity can so easily generate for all of us. For in the new symbolic order of the metric society, 'only those who are counted, count; [and] only those who are evaluated have value' (p. 143).

And as a final hat-tip to Humanistic Psychology and Carl Rogers' person-centred therapy, there is a very interesting section titled 'Establishment of worth' (pp. 160–2), which has many overlaps with Rogers' notion of 'conditions of worth'.

In conclusion, as you can probably tell, I am a big admirer of this book. I also hope the relevance of the issues addressed in *The Metric Society* to Humanistic Psychology and the humanistic therapies will be clear to readers without my having to unduly spell them out. Briefly, we need first to interrogate the inherent *seductiveness* of the illusory certainty that numbers and quantification commonly provide, and the emotional comfort that an illusion of certainty will often confer, at both conscious and unconscious levels. That human beings find something comforting and seemingly providing temporary relief from our (existential) anxieties doesn't at all necessarily mean that the thing in question is either good for us, or somehow gives us a more accurate perspective on reality and truth. Indeed, it will commonly be quite the opposite, in its failure to engage with subtlety, nuance, complexity and paradox. Mau himself refers to 'the deceptive clarity of hard statistics' (p. 34).

Next, as Lau shows very clearly, our very sense of self, and our perception and experience of relationship at every conceivable level, will also be profoundly impacted by our immersion in the metric world and its many vicissitudes. For example, in the realms of health and exercise, we read that 'The quantified self can come into conflict with the affective self, supplanting it as the ultimate arbiter of our physical and mental states' (p. 103). So data can actually leave us mistrusting our own bodily awareness – with the human being becoming 'a quantitative body, to be mastered by self-governance techniques' (p. 105) – which will in turn necessarily change our relationship with ourselves. And as we saw earlier in this review,

any notion that data and numbers somehow provide a more 'objective' take on what is real and true than does our own subjective experience is highly problematic, if not just plain wrong.

Yet the cultural trend in late-modernity is most surely towards judgements being increasingly made by machines rather than people (p. 62) – or the 'march of the Inhuman', as I sometimes call it (e.g. Sim, 2001) – with 'the sterile procedures of algorithmic data evaluation… increasingly crowding out our gut feeling and experience' (Mau, p. 63). We surely really need to start worrying when algorithmic procedures begin to *create* rather than reflect reality – as Mau writes, 'it is sometimes no longer possible to say whether [algorithmic selection and sorting processes] are analysing or generating [social reality]. In many cases, they adapt reality to their models rather than vice versa' (p. 79). For algorithms are 'anything but neutral methods of social datafication…. [They produce and represent] what is to be regarded as relevant or valuable' (p. 124). And quoting Staldaer, 'Data and variables… are always already "cooked"; that is, they are engendered through cultural operations and formed within cultural categories' (ibid.). And even worse still, the processing operations of computers and software are so often deemed to be 'neutral, authoritative and accurate', such that they are rarely questioned, and 'we find ourselves literally incapable of either escaping, or even effectively challenging, them' (p. 125).

One great gift of this vital book, then, is that it opens up a space for us to think deeply about these positionings and constructions of the self and our human world, and whether we really want to choose to embrace this world uncritically or not.

I mentioned the Unconscious above, and we also need to engage fearlessly with the *psychodynamic* aspects of the metric society and the Audit Culture (see, for example, House, 1996; Cooper, 2001). In a succinct statement that chimes very closely with Mau's critique, Andrew Cooper impugns the noxious nature of the manic accountability culture that has engulfed our public services since the 1990s under the so-called 'New Public Management':

> We now live in a relentlessly superintended world, a quangoed regime of commissioners, inspectors, and regulators . . . [quoting Peter Preston]. Fundamental principles about freedom, autonomy, and citizenship are threatened by this state of affairs . . . Obsessional activity… is essentially about control rather than creativity….
> (Cooper, 2001, p. 349)

Anyone who has been subject to the 'quantification of the social' professionally (House, 2011) or socially must surely be aware of the manifold unintended consequences and negative collateral effects that abound in this manically quantified social world, and of its mesmerising impact on our capacity to think critically about the kind of world that a metricised society creates. Humanistic psychologists will care deeply about the kind of human society that ubiquitous quantification is creating; and humanistic therapists will need to be aware of the way this world impacts upon the kinds of issues and ways-of-being that clients bring into therapy. And anyone who is concerned about the future trajectory of the human species will want to figure out whether the multiple costs and mal-effects of the quantification of the social are worth any benefits that these technologies confer.

Humanistic practitioners of all hues ignore this momentous trend in the hyper-modern society at our great peril. And to inform ourselves of the many dangers and complexities, there can be few better places to start than with this thoughtful, intelligent book.

References

Cooper, A. (2001). The state of mind we're in: social anxiety, governance and the audit society. *Psychoanalytic Studies*, 3, 349–62.

House, R. (1996). 'Audit-mindedness' in counselling: some underlying dynamics. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 24(2), 277–83; reprinted in R. House & N. Totton (Eds.) (2011). *Implausible Professions*, 2nd edn (pp. 74–82). Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.

House, R. (2012), General practice counselling amidst the 'audit culture': history, dynamics and

subversion of/in the hypermodern National Health Service. *Psychodynamic Practice: Individuals, Groups and Organisations*, 18 (1), 51–70.
Martin, L. (Ed.) (1988). *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
Miller, P. & Rose, N. (1990). Governing economic life. *Economy and Society*, 19 (1), 1–31.
Power, M. (1997), *The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Rose, N. (1996). *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Rose, N. (2016). Governing the soul – a quarter century on: commentary… *Self & Society: International Journal for Humanistic Psychology*, 44 (4), 431–3.
Scott, B. (2016). On Nikolas Rose's *Governing the Soul*. *Self & Society: International Journal for Humanistic Psychology*, 44 (4), 426–30.
Sim, S. (2001). *Lyotard and the Inhuman*. Cambridge: Icon Books.
Strathern, M. (Ed.) (2000a). *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy* (EASA series). London: Routledge.
Strathern, M. (2000b). The tyranny of transparency. *British Educational Research Journal*, 26, 309–21.

About the contributor

Richard House, Ph.D. – chartered psychologist, childhood campaigner, and a 'former' lots of things – including a university lecturer, counsellor-therapist, a Steiner Kindergarten leader and trained Steiner class teacher. Author or (co-)editor of 13 books, Richard's best-selling book *Too Much, Too Soon? Early Learning and the Erosion of Childhood* was published by Hawthorn Press in 2011; and his *Therapy beyond Modernity* (Karnac) was published in 2003. Richard is currently a full-time left-green activist in Stroud, Gloucestershire.