

Introduction: “Objectification, Measurement and Standardization”

By Tord Larsen

The articles in this issue of *Culture Unbound* were presented at a multidisciplinary conference entitled “Objectification, Measurement and Standardization” held at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim, Norway, in January, 2012. It was organized by the Department of Social Anthropology, NTNU Social Research and the university’s Globalization Program.

The three-day conference consisted of four sessions: “Numbers, Standards, Indicators” (the papers by Theodore Porter, Marte Giskeødegård and Haakon Aasprong in this issue); “The Emergence and Transformation of Entities and Categories” (the paper by Jens Røyrvik and Petter Almklov), “In Transition: The Category of the Economic” (the papers by Emil Røyrvik/Marianne Blom Brodersen and Maria Røhnebæk) and “Subjectivities and Subjectification” (the papers by Alexandra Hui and Nigel Rapport). Several disciplines including anthropology, geography, sociology, religious studies, history, music, economics and technology were represented at the conference. Some of the topics up for discussion concerned psychological design of muzak in shopping malls, oil industry and the domestication of nature, standardization and objectification of the landscape, the formation of religious subjects, New Public Management and the financial crisis, the mediatization of the swine flu, and standardization and the moral economy.

The conference marked both the continuation of something old and the beginning of something new: It was a continuation of the activities of the “standardization group” at NTNU which started giving seminars at the beginning of the 2000s. The conference *Globalization, Identity and Standardization* in 2005 was the highlight of the group’s activity.

The conference in 2012 where these papers were presented also marked the beginning of an interdisciplinary and international project called The Cultural Logic of Facts and Figures: Objectification, Measurement and Standardization as Social Processes. The new project, financed by the Norwegian Research Council, is intended to break new ground, but it also continues work that began more than a decade ago, spawning doctoral and master’s theses as well as scholarly papers.



Some workshop participants and friends, from left to right: Christine Hassenstab, Alexandra Hui, Michael Blim, Tord Larsen, Theodore Porter, Evelyn Ruppert, Charles Briggs, Afia Afenah, Jason Sumich, Nigel Rapport.

The overall ambition of the conference and the project that sprang from it was to examine a number of contemporary modes of objectification, measurement and standardization to see how they constitute a cultural logic and shape the four main dimensions of social life:

- meaning/representation
- morality
- notions of thinghood
- notions of personhood

Modes of objectification – different ways of producing thinghood and thing-like entities like categories and classes – are part of the cultural “infrastructure” of any society. Social and cultural formations may be distinguished by their dominant modes of producing objecthood, and historical changes have generated a series of concepts designed to capture the defining characteristics of new modes of objectification: commodification (from Marx to Comaroff), reification (from Lukacs to Honneth), fetishization (from Marx/Freud to Zizek), simulation (Baudrillard), spectacle (Debord), autopoiesis (Luhmann, i.a.), rhizomes and assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari), ANT (Latour, Law), “thing theory” (from Heidegger to Brown and Latour/Weibel), competing notions of totalities, especially the contrast between organic and mechanistic conceptions of totality (from Hegel to DeLanda). Concomitant with the successive series of concepts which have been devised to capture new modes of objectification, we have seen a series of “turns”

which testify to a multiplicity of objectifying agents and analytical approaches: the linguistic, aesthetic, performative, rhetorical, calculative and neo-naturalistic turns. One of the ambitions of the present project is to read these turns and contemporary modes of objectification as symptomatic of an emerging cultural logic which underlies them. (“Cultural logic” is an anthropological term given general currency by Jameson, 1991). Sahlins (1976) provides a classical model for this kind of analysis in his chapter “La Pensée Bourgeoise: Western Society as Culture”). We do not want to over-systematize these tendencies, but they do articulate in determinate ways, and their convergence needs to be analyzed more closely than is usually accomplished by the application of blanket terms like “neoliberalism”. To investigate some of these tendencies in depth and to trace their interrelations, we have gathered a group of academics who would like to follow up their pioneering analyses of contemporary life and help bring about a new synthesis of recent developments like the new economic cosmologies, new object strategies in the arts, the branding of identities, the breakdown of dichotomies between inert things and agents, the simultaneous instrumentalization and subjectification of morality, the performative nature of identity work, the commercialization of emotional life and other contemporary phenomena.

These are some modes of contemporary objectification which demand both in-depth studies and integrative efforts:

- increased quantification and measurement of social life
- standardization undertaken by national and international organizations
- commensuration in all forms
- the rise of a culture of indicators
- financialization of the economy
- New Public Management
- “the audit society”
- cognitive and reflexive capitalism
- the expansion of medical diagnoses
- evidence-based medicine
- contemporary construction of scientific objects
- patenting and the management of intellectual property rights (including the safeguarding of traditional cultures)
- the mediatization of reality
- the return of religion
- branding, design and fashion, contemporary forms of celebrity and fame
- new object strategies in the arts, conceptual art and performance, musical sampling
- commodification and branding of identities, performativity and citationality
- objectification and “outsourcing” of emotional life

Some of these themes will be investigated in depth, but always with an integrative purpose in mind. It is our ambition to show that these modes of objectification converge and mold emerging patterns of meaning and morality, and bring new notions of thing- and personhood into being. It is through the study of these effects that we will be able to corroborate our view that objectifying technologies function as cultural premises and that they cohere in a cultural logic, in spite of

the diversity they display on the surface. An important part of the project will be to develop conceptual tools to trace the strands of this coherence.

The topics listed above enter into contemporary political debates about governmentality, management, financial upheaval, education, identity politics, moral reorientation, religious renewal and artistic innovation. In theorizing these matters, we hope to make a contribution to public discourse about such issues as well and to improve our understanding of cultural premises which shape contemporary thought, political strategies and institutional arrangements.

While all epochs and all cultures manifest dominant modes of objectification, some eras more than others display a passion for quantification. The 20th and the present centuries are in the grip of “the will to quantify”, perhaps unparalleled since the Renaissance (Crosby 1997), the Enlightenment (Frängsmyr et al. 1990) and “the statistical 19th century”. Quantification, measurement, standardization and the rise of a “culture of indicators” (Merry 2011) are not simply ways of organizing pre-given entities, but are performative and generative technologies. They create institutional objects, and there is a relationship between statistical systems and modes of governance, between numerical representation and regimes of control and dominance. Not only are numbers a form of representation (along with the forms of narrativity and visualization), but quantification, measurement and standardization give rise to forms of subjectivity and carry with them a range of normativities.

The project is divided into five thematic categories or sub projects:

1. Genealogies of quantifying technologies. Some of these helped produce the scientization of mental disease and the notions of person and morality consonant with that development (Theodore Porter); other statistical practices helped bring about the notion of “national economy” (Mary Poovey/Kevin Brine).
2. Michael Blim, Emil Røyrvik and Tian Sørhaug offer analyses of contemporary processes which Porter and Poovey/Brine have described historically. They all address, in different ways, “the calculative turn” and bring out the cultural logic which informs present day economics. This includes the normativity inherent in quantification technologies like standards (Christina Garsten).
3. The sub projects which examine the emergence of new entities: mediatization of biomedicine (Charles Briggs), transformations of the landscape (Kenneth Olwig) and the entifying strategies inherent in New Public Management (Petter Almklov).
4. Standardizing pressures in the arts which foster new cultures of listening (Alexandra Hui), movement (Kalpana Ram), and pictorial representation (Nigel Rapport) which in turn influence social life.

5. Contemporary cultural understandings of identity and subjectivity and their relationship to quantification (Lorenzo Canas Bottos), legal rhetoric and the transformation of “culture” from cognitive horizon to intellectual property (Rosemary Coombe), standardization and its effect on individuality (Nigel Rapport) and the changes in contemporary forms of communication and ethical discourse brought about by increased measurement and processes of reification/objectification/entification (Tord Larsen).

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