

COMMENTARY

Over my shoulders: A Look Back at *The Statistical War on Equality*

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This much is certain. Looking back over my shoulder at the trajectory of an academic career is a tricky business. Seeing where one has been forces one to consider where one has been going. The essay that my colleagues have been so generous to comment upon, "[The Statistical War on Equality](#)," was published when I was in the midst of my doctoral coursework at Indiana University in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (republished in this number of *DataCrítica*.) In response to these generous comments, I would like to begin by contextualizing this work within the broader discipline. This means looking at key junctures where frameworks have shifted in the ways that rhetorical critics see themselves. In his highly influential *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke (1969) presaged this shift with his compelling history of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophy as a series of dramatic enactments. Challenging the traditional representational models of symbolic activity, this new history would position rhetoric at the center of epistemic production. Nelson and Megill's (1986) "rhetoric of inquiry" would give form and substance to this critique, suggesting that knowledge production is an extension of these rhetorical systems rather than the reverse. As this hidden history began to unfurl, rhetoric crept from the margins of western metaphysics back into public view, a contested transit that has not been without blood both inside and outside the discipline. Professor Gershberg correctly identifies one of these uneasy tensions, noting that rhetoric

works both "with and against the social scientific tide." Perhaps more so than any other discipline, the field of communication is constituted by methodological diversity.

First, a brief note on the inspiration behind the essay is in order. While the question of race plays a key role, it was the issue of methodology that generated it. After reading through *The Bell Curve* and the subsequent critiques of this work, it became clear that, while many scholars challenged the authors' interpretation of their data, none had embarked upon a systematic analysis of the methodologies supporting the work. These assumptions simply went unchallenged. In Professor Kuypers' response he suggests that the piece still falls prey to simply engaging *The Bell Curve* on an ideological level. When the essay was in the production phase, the title itself was something that I wrestled with for some time—eventually deciding on the more provocative "statistical war on equality" rather than a more distanced, less remote title such as the "manufacture of social cartography." In retrospect this point is a valid one, but the academic process was (and remains) proportional measures of analysis and passion. The problem of *The Bell Curve* was not just what representations of race were being projected, but the institutional assumptions that generated them. As Professor Gershberg points out, this was a problem of the irresistible confluence of vision and space. In their analysis of whiteness, Nakayama and Krizek (1995) used the backdrop

of social cartography to describe the ways that ethnicity is marked and experienced by those in America. What my essay attempts to do is take this process of mapping a step deeper to look at modes of knowledge production that generate these cartographies and explore the ways that graphic design combined with statistical packages that have developed over the centuries have become so deeply embedded that most individuals no longer even perceive their political impact on their lives. Excavating the contours of methodologies for generating representations places certain historical and conceptual burdens on the rhetorical critic and creates difficulties that go beyond simply examining the amplification of certain well-documented racial stereotypes. It forces one to confront how we know what we know.

In his insightful commentary Professor Zagacki uses the example of the confirmation hearings of Judge Sonia Sotomayer as an example of the ways that these statistical logics of normalcy locate and delimit how one can be seen and known within the public sphere. This strikes at the crux of the question that inspired the original essay. Certain statistical methodologies are not ideologically neutral, but they shape how identities are negotiated within our larger culture. Coming back to Kuypers' observation, engaging these methodologies pulls the critic into a decidedly political terrain. Kuypers suggests that normalcy patterns are manifestly positive and writes "that 90% of Americans consider themselves middle class could be viewed as evidence of great societal success given the known relationship of the size of a country's middle class and that country's social stability and economic prosperity." This is, in part, true. Certainly standards for normalcy are used as a means for regulating and socializing populations and correcting anti-social behavior. Yet when one moves beyond the realm of behavior to innate components of one's identity as Herrnstein and Murray do, then normalization patterns are not about reinforcing pro-social action, but about establishing social

boundaries and hierarchies. In my colleague Professor Johnson's thoughtful piece on disability and technocratic culture this dynamic is highly evident. When applied to those with disabilities, normalcy patterns are used to mark individuals along axes of standard deviation that reinforce social status rather than providing the grounds for policies that might help us as a community to accept and interact with those with differing experiences and abilities. It still surprises me that even though we live in an age where almost all those within the academy would eschew the concept of "eugenics," we still remain highly dependant on the methodological frameworks that generated it.

Perhaps the most difficult question is Gershberg's observation that positing alternative variations on these social cartographies remains an underdeveloped endeavor within the field. Like Johnson, I find myself returning to Foucault who realized that identities are projected along epistemic axes and even as one attempts to create and emancipatory framework, it can be subsequently appropriated. Just because there exists a profusion of categories does not mean that we are more or less free. In reality, these revolutions are rarely earth-shattering. Foucault (1980) writes that "more often one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their minds and bodies" (p. 96). I am attracted to this last phrase, marking regions through which the nexus of mind and body coalesce to form a temporary resistance to the way that one is and will be known. The best way to facilitate this process is, in my opinion, to remain as conscious of the institutional pressures that project the self across various epistemic fields. There can be no higher calling for the rhetorical critic that to explore and expand the well-worn crosswalks of identity formation.

Recently I reread Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*. As Freud awaits his own impending exile by the Nazi's, he ruminates over the power of science to elevate humanity and control our shared capacity for violence. One can see a growing anxiety when he writes that "man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all of his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown to him and they still give him much trouble at times" (p. 44). While Freud wished to maintain faith in rationality as our salvation, he was beginning to understand that anti-social capacities existed within these frameworks as well. If the reader would indulge a longer quote:

Order is a kind of compulsion to repeat which, when a regulation has been laid down once and for all, decides when, where and how things shall be done, so that in every similar circumstance one is spared hesitation and indecision. The benefits of order are incontestable. It enables men to use space and time to the best advantage, while conserving their psychological forces. We should have a right to expect that order would have taken its place in human activities from the start without difficulty, and we may well wonder that this has not happened—that on the contrary, human beings exhibit an inborn tendency to carelessness, irregularity and unreliability in their work, and that a laborious training is needed before they learn to follow the example of their celestial models. (p. 46-47).

The political model of the social sciences has, at its core, a well-intentioned model for mapping human activity. Through these organizing principles, our baser instincts are controlled. Yet, these same models of rationality—these modes of discipline—would also send him fleeing one of many acts of mass-violence perpetrated against human populations over the past century. To leave these epistemic models

unchallenged is perilous and, for the rhetorical critic, deeply unethical.

As I noted in the introduction, looking back is a tricky business. I can see here the seeds of an intellectual project that has persisted over the past decade—the problems of space, identity, and vision—that continue to animate my work today. I am deeply grateful to the contributors who have taken the time and effort to comment upon this work. I am also grateful to the editor for bringing this work to a new interdisciplinary audience. The goal of the rhetorical critic, as I understand it, is to unpack the historical and conceptual narratives that form the basis for understanding ourselves and others at the level of practice—where the symbolic is translated into action. Exploring this terrain sometimes means causing a bit of trouble, but then that's half the fun.

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