

RESEÑA

Hernán González Bollo, *La fábrica de las cifras oficiales del Estado argentino (1869-1947)*, Argentina, Editorial de la Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2014. 288p.

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Hernán González Bollo's *La fábrica de las cifras oficiales del Estado argentino (1869-1947)*, Argentina, Editorial de la Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2014. 288p.

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Hernán González Bollo's *La fábrica de las cifras oficiales* (factory of official figures) tells the story of the Argentine statistical system between 1869 and 1947. Using a medium/long term approach the author argues that the Argentine statistical system in this period was a decentralised and dynamic entity formed by different agencies hosted in different ministries and ran by a specialised bureaucracy. These agencies produced a great amount of censuses, surveys, statistics and reports with certain regularity, which were in turn used to advise

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policymakers and policy. Through its numerical output, the *fábrica* aimed to impose an official view of the economy. The specialised bureaucracy was a distinctive feature of Argentine public statistics. They developed statistics and many times interpreted reality through them. González Bollo's book thoroughly explains how the national statistical system extended and became increasingly more complex.

To tell the story of the Argentine statistical system, each chapter analyses a specific time period considering five aspects of the national statistical system in order to see its changing dynamics. First it considers the work of the network of powerful agencies that made up the statistical system throughout this period, examining their outputs. Second, it analyses the civil servants/statisticians and what they produced, since those individuals were in charge of establishing the problems and questions and developing the measurement tools. The third dimension shows how there are conditions of uncertainty, like economic and social crises, and changes in the political forces and relationships that shape the statistics produced and how they are used. The fourth aspect considers the process through which statisticians turned into state managers, and specifically government economists. These individuals became an elite based on knowledge and on the management of public policies. Lastly, each chapter demonstrates how statistical knowledge progressively helped the public interest advance onto the private sphere. To examine each of these dimensions, González Bollo systematically considers the interaction of four analytical tools: statistical agencies, statisticians, the relationships between the agencies and its statisticians with those in charge of designing public policy, and the social responses to the different official enquiries.

On the basis of meticulous research, González Bollo defines the *fábrica de las cifras oficiales* as the dynamic and decentralised network of offices with dissimilar administrative capacities located in different Argentine ministries, which operated within a larger context of administrative dispersion, and regularly produced numbers between 1869 and 1947. The author analyses what happened, considering all the outputs generated by the statistical system. However, González Bollo does not enquire on how statistics were produced. When constructing the history of the Argentine cost of living index and analysing how it was produced Cecilia Lanata Briones suggests a twist in the notion of *fábrica*, by proposing that of *talleres* (workshops).² She argues that the use of the term of *fábrica* is misleading and contradicts González Bollo's research. Even if it correctly gives the sense of an organisation that produces numbers, it also implies that its tasks are carried out in a structured, integrated and coordinated manner. Lanata Briones shows that the decentralised dynamic of the Argentine statistical system is evidenced particularly in the history of the Argentine cost of living index in the first half of the twentieth century. In those years, the indicator was produced

² Cecilia T. Lanata Briones, "Constructing Public Statistics: The History of the Argentine Cost of Living Index, 1918-1943", PhD (Doctoral Thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2016), <http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/3319/>.

by different statistical agencies in the 1920s and in the 1930s, with no clear connection between the estimates. Adhering to González Bollo's analogy of the statistical system as a place where numbers are produced, Lanata Briones' research conceives of it in this period as a system formed by *talleres*. Before it was a centralised production unit, a *fábrica*, the Argentine statistical system was a sum of *talleres*. Why? The two agencies that produced the cost of living indices were not standalone offices, but *talleres* within the national statistical system. The index fluctuated between the two, had different objectives, and its components were produced by different agencies.

In the introduction, González Bollo defines the notion of *fábrica* and sets the theoretical background onto which his analysis of the Argentine national statistical system is based. Following the ideas of Alain Desrosières and of sociology of quantification the author looks at how power and knowledge interacted in order to enable the Argentine state to generate information.

Chapter I analyses the Argentine national statistical system during the second half of the nineteenth century. Until 1880, Argentina was setting its political, legal and economic foundations. Together with the centralisation of the administrative and governance capacities of the state, an apparatus to produce knowledge gradually took shape and contributed in the process of making the nation. The relevance gained by statistics was founded on the administration's need to be based on scientific principles. This was the period of the configuration of a specialised bureaucracy. The decentralised network of statistical agencies was formed by the Department of Immigration (*Departamento General de Inmigración*, DGI), the Rural Economy and Statistics Bureau (*Dirección de Economía Rural y Estadísticas*, DERE), the Commerce and Industry Bureau (*Dirección General de Comercio e Industria*, DGCI), the National Demographic Office (*Oficina Demográfica Nacional*, ODN) and the General Bureau of Statistics (*Dirección General de Estadística de la Nación*, DGEN). Seven national censuses were taken, focusing, for example, on immigration, foreign trade, and agriculture, which were all topics related to the ruling elite's concerns for a country endowed with vast and fertile land that was entering the world economy as an exporter of commodities but that lacked sufficient human resources. The Ministry of Finance's need to organise the public accounts, especially during the foreign trade crises of 1873/6 and 1890, encouraged the expansion and methodological enhancement of economic statistics. González Bollo highlights that in these configuration years, politics had a hesitant attitude towards statistical authorities. While Congress approved several censuses, it did not sanction decennial population censuses or update the apportionment mechanism dictated by the Constitution. Francisco Latzina, Alberto B. Martínez and Gabriel Carrasco were the main statisticians of the period.

The Argentine state was obliged to modernise due to the 1890 crisis, the constitutional

reform of 1898 and the increasing social conflict. By responding to these events, the decentralisation of public statistics was reinforced leading to the consolidation of Argentine public statistics between 1900 and 1916/7, a process examined in chapter II. For González Bollo, consolidation implied that the number of formally-employed individuals increased substantially, together with the amount of institutions with statistical agencies. The “production platform of original knowledge”³ developed in the Agriculture, Finance and Interior Ministries. The national statistical system improved its internal organisation, recruiting bureaucrats and introducing stable routines. González Bollo describes the national statistical system in this period as a pyramid: the DGEN and the DERE at the top; followed by the Statistics Division (*División de Estadística, DE*) of the National Labour Department (*Departamento Nacional del Trabajo, DNT*) and the DGI; and the ODN, the DGCI and the Demography and Medical Geography Section (*Sección Demografía y Geografía Médica, SDGM*) of the National Health Department (*Departamento Nacional de Higiene, DNH*) at the bottom. The difference between the offices in the top two levels and the rest was the formers’ ability to maintain a stable routine. González Bollo identifies an “authentic census avalanche”⁴ in this period, on different topics with dissimilar geographical coverage. These enquiries consolidated a routine that combined technical resources, political support and the cooperation of society, even as politics continued to play a fundamental role in delaying the population census.

For much of the interwar period, Argentina experienced a gradual expansion of citizen participation in politics, rapid economic growth with an increase in the share of manufacturing in economic activity, and the subsequent rise in the number of industrial workers. According to González Bollo, Radical Party administrations developed public statistics to enhance the knowledge of the changing domestic economy. Thus chapter III focuses on the period 1916/7-1932 when public statistics experienced a cognitive and methodological revolution, producing an embryonic interpretation of the economy. The existing agencies renewed their position in the national statistical system due to innovation and structural changes. Statisticians had multiple parallel tasks: they were the technicians, government advisors and scientific consultants of the private sector. Alejandro E. Bunge, Raúl Prebisch and Julio César Urien, the key statisticians of this period, were also economists who were versatile in their political relationships and their contacts with the private sphere. The accumulation of expertise and information contributed to the design of the Herrera Vargas Plan in 1922/3, the first Argentine economic programme that integrated fiscal, financial, and tariff measures. González Bollo claims that the modernisation of government services, the complexity of tasks involved, the advance of heterodox economic ideas, and the continuity in intellectual autonomy brought about a revolution in the system. For him, the closure of the *Caja de*

³ Hernán González Bollo, translator, *La fábrica de las cifras oficiales del Estado argentino (1869-1947)* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2014), 79.

⁴ González Bollo, *La fábrica de las cifras*, 90.

Conversión, the Argentine equivalent of the Gold Standard, between 1914 and 1927 helped generate an original set of variables to fill the vacuum that the new context generated.

In the 1930s, the industrial sector had a leading role in the economy, although without the active encouragement of economic policies since the general belief was that it was a provisional and temporary strategy to undermine the effects of international events. These changes and the semi-autarchy conditions imposed by World War II brought about an active state. Declining population growth and urbanisation, due to the demand created by industrialisation, generated significant social changes, which fostered public policy. Between 1932 and 1943, the period analysed in chapter IV, public statistics expanded by broadening their geographical and subject coverage, aiding and participating in ministerial and parliamentary commissions, which González Bollo sees as a leap forward. Agencies and statisticians with techno-bureaucratic roles oversaw private activities as mediators and inspectors in markets, and participated in the design of the Economic Action Plan (*Plan de Acción Económica*) of 1933-34 and the 1940 Economic Reactivation Plan (*Plan de Reactivación de la Economía Nacional*). Given their direct links with the economy, statisticians were transformed from technicians focused on routine activities to state managers. The OIE, the DGEN, the DE and the DERE “were the synthesis of the numerical production achieved, and privileged strongholds of the updated measurement techniques and the most prestigious statisticians”.⁵ The administrative structure of the offices broadened as they established more divisions. Their permanent staff rose substantially. Each agency was in charge of at least one periodically-released measure and designed, advised and participated in regulatory agencies. A more refined collection of information delivered a view of a “standardised, global and dynamic economy”.⁶ Socio-labour statistics, elaborated by the DE of the DNT, an agency headed at that time by José Figuerola, became a channel of communication between the state and different actors, while also contributing to the design and monitoring of policies and markets. Statistics provided cognitive support for the performance of the DNT as a mediator between capital and labour. This period had another avalanche of censuses, all sanctioned by a law, although with no national population enquiry. Censuses were a joint effort between agencies. The topics covered were unemployment, secondary activity and construction, mortgages, agriculture and schooling. For the first time, there was an official monitoring of both industrial activity and the socio-labour conditions of urban workers. The fluctuations of 1937/8 were a turning point. As González Bollo argues, this represented a shift in power within public statistics away from the OIE and towards the DE and the DERE, which was symptomatic of the demise of the orthodox view and contributed to the DE’s upward trajectory.

⁵ González Bollo, *La fábrica de las cifras*, 165.

⁶ González Bollo, *La fábrica de las cifras*, 163.

Chapter V, for the author, is both an epilogue and a prologue. With the 1943 *coup d'état* the methodological and administrative centralisation of the national statistical system began. The military began to collect all the statistical activity in one place as part of the legal and technical structure of the Executive. Reports and data were produced behind closed doors. This data became a crucial part of the military doctrine of national defence and provided the basis to its expansive policies. Unlike the previous years when society knew who the men behind the numbers were, this information was not only of restricted circulation but also generated by 'anonymous' individuals. Thus, the Argentine statistical system as it had existed so far, ceased to exist which opens the door to a different story that is yet to be told.

While within the sociology of quantification framework most country-based researches are focused on one or two statistical agencies at a time, the decentralised Argentine scenario demands an equivalent study that considers different agencies in parallel. González Bollo research on the *fábrica* of Argentine numbers provides this thorough and comprehensive examination.

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