

## CAN WE TRUST STATISTICAL DATA ? A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Statistics and politics are closely intertwined. Linked to the development of modern states, official statistics have always suffered from a democratic deficit. How a structure belonging to the government and usually dependent on a strong Ministry (Economy and/or Finance, Industry, Internal Affairs, generally) can still develop authoritative statistical data? It is not surprising, in these circumstances, that, on the one hand the statistical offices have developed a discourse emphasizing technical sophistication, research of quality, transparency, independence and have tried to turn it into action (e.g. through the status of the Chief Statistician). And, secondly, that governments, seeking to legitimize their policies (this is especially true in the context of neo-liberal globalization), have seen in the statistics and the image of science it exudes a powerful tool. It is clear that, far from being necessarily against nature, "collusion" between politics and statistical offices or between state and figures is inherent in the existence of the two entities.

I will first show how socio-politics of statistics\*, a discipline that emerged during the 70's, analyzes statistical tools, practices, norms and institutions trying to avoid both the internalist and the externalist biases. Then, I will define the concept of statistical regime that can be helpful for the comparative and historical study of statistical experiences throughout the world. Finally, I will shortly present two cases of statistical debate related to the use or misuse of statistics. To the question 'can we trust statistical data?' will thus be given a theoretically grounded answer.

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\* An illustration of that point of view can be found in our recent book (in collaboration with Jean-Guy Prévost), *Statistics, Public Debate and the State, 1800-1945*, London, Pickering & Chatto, 2012.