What do statistics mean in a colonial and postcolonial situation? (Anglophone and Francophone Africa, 19th -20th centuries), presentation and discussion of a research program

Wednesday 15 March 2023  13h00
Room 207, 2nd Floor, Robert Sobukwe Block

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https://chiffrempire.hypotheses.org
Statistics, what are we talking about?

What makes history students run away ... and sometimes others too....

And yet ... **figures**, even if they are limited to official statistics (produced and disseminated with the approval of the authorities), permeate all subjects of research - they are unavoidable ... The challenge of this seminar is to try to convince people of **the need to take hold of them in a critical way** and to make them an object of research, to 'make them talk', to use them as observatories, to **shed light on the societies that produce them**, on the relationships and hierarchical relations that are formed within them, the foundations, justifications and impact of their classifications and to point out what they do not show or see - knowingly or unknowingly (domestic work, for example) - as well as the 'grains of sand', **the dysfunctions** of the organisations (the non-responses, what remains ‘unknow’) that they **reveal**.
Statistics, what are we talking about?

The statistics of the Union of South Africa accompany nation-building and are of great interest for that reason alone. This is particularly true for the founding period, i.e. the first 40 years of the 20th century. The wealth of documents consulted at the National Archives in Pretoria (NAP) has confirmed this intuition.

This seminar begins with the presentation of a research program on statistics that I am coordinating. It continues with a few details on the subject of statistics and then with a presentation of what I found in the National Archives of South Africa in Pretoria, which illustrate the interest of studying statistics to deepen our knowledge of the functioning of contemporary societies.

Work in progress....
A Research program: 
Statistics of territories colonised by France-Francophone Africa XIX-XXth Century

A team spread over two continents:

**Europe (France, Germany, Belgium, Switzerland)**

**ANR-21-CE41-0012** Counting in a colonial situation: French Africa (1830-1962) (2021-2024)Four axes: Axis 1) Official colonial statistics; Axis 2) Banks, currencies and credit; Axis 3) Labour censuses and statistics on working conditions; Axis 4) Production and uses of numerical data by economic circles/

**Africa (Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Madagascar, Senegal)**

An International Research Network (IRN) - COUNT financed by the CNRS INSHS (2023-2027) which aims to founded a school of socio-history of quantification with partners from French-speaking Africa.

An extension to Anglophone Africa would be very welcome.
We have chosen to take the opposite position to that of a common one, which consists of bypassing statistics and not using them on the pretext that they are inaccurate, approximate and misleading.

**Considering that good or bad these statistics exist**, that they have been produced and used, **we intend on the contrary to make them our main object of study**, to deconstruct them and to make them tell us everything they can about the societies they are supposed to represent.

Statistics appear to us as a **particularly rich medium for illuminating the circulations at the heart of power relations.**
The colonial period seemed to us to be the most appropriate time to question the statistical object and to study in detail the image of colonised societies that it reflects and that it partly shapes.

It is a question of examining the relationship between statistics, power, domination and sovereignty during colonisation and then during the transition to independences.

It is also a question of examining the continuity of statistical or counting systems between the pre-colonial and colonial periods and then at the time of independence in order to shed light on the legacies and transmission mechanisms that are at work and to see how these representations shape colonial imaginaries.

Initially, the research focuses on the period before the Second World War.
A very short historiography

The developments of the 1990s, the work of *Theodore Porter* (1995) and *Alain Desrosières* (1993, 2008) have established the socio-history of quantification. The analysis of the grip of numbers on contemporary societies (Martin, 2020) and that of the consequences of this grip (Supiot, 2015) aim to 'deconstruct' official statistics, to clarify their relationship with the State ('government by numbers') and to clarify the relationship between statistics and political powers (Berns, 2009) or between statistics and economic powers (Jerven, 2013).

Since these works, statistics are no longer approached as simple techniques, or only through the institutions that produce them, but they are understood as structuring elements of the organisations and societies that produce them and that they influence in return.
The critical approach to classifications provides information both on the uses of statistics (by the colonial administration and by the colonised when they take them over) and on the way in which societies are ordered, the intentions of their sponsors, the recognition and social positions of their producers, the means at their disposal, the relations between investigators and respondents, etc.

Through specific fields, some historians clarify the issues at stake in statistics and point out their partiality. For example, for demographic censuses, see among others Gerardo Serra and Morten Jerven, "Contested Numbers: Census Controversies and the Press in 1960s Nigeria". Journal of African History, or the work of the Nigerian economist Stopler who questions the relevance of planning without numbers (Planing without number, 1966). And many others ...
Some clarification on the meaning of statistics

Statistics, not statistic which is a branch of mathematics, are:

- **conventions** (which imply an agreement on what and how to measure);
- **practices** for counting, classifying, anticipating...;
- **institutions** (financed by taxes);
- **People**, 'professionals', which raises the question of the foundations of statistical expertise and the training of statisticians, the positions of the investigators (missionaries, teachers and gendarmes, pensioners for the censuses, market control actors for the mercurial, etc.) and their relationship to power.

Their production pursues specific objectives.
Statistics aim to:

- **count** inhabitants (to enrol and tax),
- **classify** (e.g. assets),
- evaluate, control and allocate available resources (e.g. the land register, the surveyor - one of the oldest professions in the world...)
- **monitoring** changes in production, living and working conditions
- **anticipating and forecasting** (e.g. demographic projections).

They have been **constructed by hybridisation**, and this was particularly true for the statistics of South Africa, a Union integrated into the British Empire, whose network was strengthened by the Imperial Conferences and regular meetings between the Empire's statisticians.
In short, **statistics are figures in the service of the Prince or the government.**
In South Africa, the Census and Statistics Office, and later the department of Statistics and Census, was first attached to the Ministry of the Interior, and then to the Ministry of Finance... What does it means?

Statistics are **witnesses and vectors of social and political organisations**, but also of the pyramidal structure of administrations and the hierarchy of powers. They are **indicators of the quality of the transmission** of information and the strength of the hierarchical chain.
The History of South African Union statistics (1910-1940)

Presentation of the consulted archives

**Rich archives** consulted since my arrival in Pretoria at the beginning of March: the RSA, TAB, SAB series and particularly the sub-series GG (General Government), SES (Statistics and Census Service - 395 unclassified files), SKT (Censuses), MKN (Mines) for the most numerous.

For lack of time I did not consult the archives kept in Cape Town which relate the activities of the statistical service of the colony before 1910, but it is to be done...

It is up to me to convince you of the interest of that study.
The relationship between statistics and power is evident in the British Commonwealth at the beginning of the last century. Thus, the collection, production and transmission of data confirmed both the 'submission' of the Dominions (which were accountable) to the Crown (the symbol being the standardised Blue Books that had to be transmitted yearly by the colonies to London) and their resistance, which manifested itself in 1921 through the refusal of the British proposal to organise a central statistical office for the Empire that would have centralised all the data in London.
A fair amount of correspondence between the director of the Census and Statistics Office (Pretoria), particularly with India, around the imperial conferences and statisticians' meetings shows that they make a clear difference between the statistics of the 'Old' and 'Young' Nations, the latter basing their policy on extensive statistical knowledge.
The way in which statistics are produced reflects the domination of the 'centre' over all territorial levels.

From 1910 and the creation of the Union, statistics were centralised in Pretoria and, to avoid offending anyone, the meetings of the Census and Statistic Council were organised alternately in Cape Town, which had a very active statistics service before 1910 (publication of the Cape of Good Hope Blue Books and Statistical Registers for the period 1821-1909 and organisations of census 1865, 1875, 1891, 1904, 1911) and in Pretoria.
Three questions to the archives

Firstly: Who makes statistics and how?

Secondly: What do statistics tell us about the economic and social situation in the Union (non exhaustive ...)? What categories are used?

Thirdly: What are the biases introduced by statistics in the representation of facts?

To end with a hypothesis that highlights a paradox. Given the complexity of the categories used and the lengthy developments devoted to them in all the demographic surveys and censuses of the 1930s, it would seem that the statistics examined reinforce the divisions of the population more than they seek to unify it.
Who makes the figures and how?

The organisation was set up by the Statistics Act of 1914 and its implementing decrees adopted in 1918. These texts established the principle of compulsory statistics. A Census and Statistics Office was attached to the ministry of Interior and its head reported directly to the Minister.

From 1919 onwards, a Statistical Council made up of representatives of the administrations of the main sectors of activity (agriculture, railways, mines, etc.) and of the hygiene and public health services met regularly under the direction of the head of the Census and Statistics Office to define the program of surveys to be carried out and to determine their methods.

The records of the Council's meetings provide very detailed information on the program and conduct of the various surveys. The census bulletins and survey forms are attached to the council minutes and kept in the archives in the Vital Statistics (public health) or SES series, for example.
To sum up:
One Office of Census and Statistics attached to the Ministry of Interior

The Statistical Council - The Statistical Act 1914
The organisation of data collection is partly decentralised: the Mining Department is responsible for mining statistics, the various territories for organising censuses ....

The agenda of a Council meeting in 1930 gives an idea of the scope of the work.
Statistical Council Cape Town session 2nd April 1930.

Agenda of the meeting

2) Chairman ‘Reports
A publications
B Monthly retails sale turnover ...
3) Statistics of civil Litigation
4) Agricultural Census Form 1930 and minutes of production Committee
5) Wholesale Price Indexes
6) Retail Price Indexes
7) Statistics of Motor vehicle Insurance
8) Population Census Form - Census 1931
9) Physical Measurement of citizen force recruits
10) Migration statistics
11) Fisheries statistics
12) Wine and Brandy Blending Statistics of

What do these figures tell us about the state of the Union (non exhaustive)?

What is striking is the **extreme complexity of the organisation of surveys as soon as they concern the population**. Taking racial differences into account makes the measurement very costly ... without ever being justified.

Thus, in the 1931 census, for example, but also in the agricultural and industrial surveys...**racial questions** are omnipotent and rarely discussed (except in the industrial surveys by the heads of different Companies).

The other point is the **difficulty of the participation of the territorial administrations** in the surveys...
Different questionnaires for the Census of 1931

Minutes of the session of the Census and Statistics Council 18-19th March 1935 et suiv.
Where is the National Unity?
### Native Questionnaire

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**Native Questionnaire:**

Natives of the Union shall be included in the four religious denominations or sects, and their place of residence.

**Race:**

1. Coloured
2. Puma
3. Bantu
4. Other

**Religion:**

1. Hindu
2. Lutheran
3. Presbyterian
4. Other

**Occupation:**

1. Farmer
2. Labourer
3. Unemployed
4. Other

**Age:**

1. Under 5
2. 5-14
3. 15-20
4. 21-30
5. 31-40
6. 41-50
7. 51-60
8. 61-70
9. 71-80
10. Over 80

**Marital Status:**

1. Married
2. Widowed
3. Divorced
4. Never Married

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**Native Schedule - Census 1921**

Proposed Questionnaire:

1. Name of every Native, whether member of family, visitor, or Native servant, who was present at the head of the column at the time of the Census on the 4th May 1921, shall be entered in this column without being counted elsewhere.

2. Relationship to head of family: State whether the Native whose name appears at the head of the column is the head, or wife, son, servant, visitor, etc.

3. Sex: State whether the Native recorded in each column is a male or female. Insert M. for male and F. for female.

4. Age: If age is less than one year write "Under one." If age is over one year, state age last birthday, or approximate age, if exact age is unknown.

5. Industry, Trade or Service: Insert the branch of industry, trade, etc., in which employed, such as gold mining, building, Municipal Motor, etc., motor garage, railway, road building, etc.

6. Industry: Insert and mark the occupation of each person employed in private personal service, write "Private Service." For persons employed in Domestic service at home, write "Home Duties." For domestics servants write "Domestic Servant, House Servant, etc."

7. Personal Occupation or Craft: Insert the craft or calling which each person was following at the time of the Census, such as peasant, squat, farm labourer, teacher, passenger, domestic servant, etc.

8. Period of Residence: Write in number of years, such as 50 years, etc.

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**Natives of the Union, state Country only, such as Rhodesia, Bechuanaland, South West Africa, etc:**

1. Cape of Good Hope or Orange Free State.

2. Religion: State clearly the particular religious denomination or sect, such as "Methodists, Presbyterian, ""Roman Catholic," "English Church," etc.

3. Tribe: State the tribe to which each person belongs, such as Zulu, Shona, Matabele, etc.
CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE, 1929-1930.

All information given by you will be treated as strictly confidential.

Officer of the Statistics Office requires the undersigned to fill in the following form. The form must be signed by the person filling it up and returned to the Census Office of your District. The officer will not be responsible for the accuracy of the information given by you.

1. DESCRIPTION OF EACH FARM OR HOLDING.

Please fill in the following information:

- Name and Number of Farm or Holding:
- Name of Occupier:
- Address of Occupier:
- Total Area of Farm or Holding:
- Is the Farm or Holding:
  (1) Owned by you?
  (2) Leased by you?
  (3) Occupied by you on "Share System"?
  (4) Managed by you for another person?

Note: Persons who fill in the form must sign their names in the spaces provided, and the form must be returned to the Census Office of your District.

2. LIVESTOCK RESIDENT ON THE FARM AT THE ASSESSMENT.

Please fill in the following information:

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3. AGRICULTURAL AND PASTURAL PRODUCTS OF NATIVES RESIDENT ON THE FARM DURING THE 12 MONTHS ENDING 31st AUGUST, 1929.

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I hereby declare that I have given to the best of my knowledge and belief, the correct information in all Sections of this Return in accordance with the instructions. (Sign.)

[Signature]
In addition to racial prejudice, **weak gender considerations**, outcomes related to **budget allocations** and various pressures...
Geographically unequal knowledge

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<td>(j) Industrial and Agricultural Census - 1926 and 1932.</td>
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Source. AN AS SAB GES 1901 11/32/D (1929-1932) Minutes of the session of the Statistical Council held on the 18th and 19th March 1935
LOCAL GOVERNMENT STATISTICS

1. OBJECT OF MEMORANDUM.- The object of this memorandum is to draw the attention of the Statistical Council to certain unsatisfactory features of the statistics relating to the finances of urban local authorities. It is suggested that the Council consider that steps should be taken to bring about an improvement in the position.

2. COLLECTION OF STATISTICS BY CENSUS OFFICE.- In 1918 the question of a uniform local government questionnaire was discussed by the Council and a Conference between representatives of the Statistical Council, the Four Provinces and the Census Office resulted. At that Conference the form of the questionnaire to be used by the Census Office was decided upon. Regulations dealing with the collection of local government statistics were introduced in 1920 and the forms then adopted have remained practically unchanged since that time.

Local government statistics are collected by the Census Office on two forms. One of these (S. 67 - Annexure A) which provides for the collection of detailed statistics of indebtedness, income, ordinary expenditure, and capital expenditure is issued to municipalities, boroughs and village councils. The other (S. 67 - Annexure B) which calls only for a statement of total indebtedness, total revenue and total expenditure, is used for urban areas of minor importance, e.g., village management boards, health committees, etc. Both these forms provide for the collection of other statistics relating to urban areas, but these statistics do not call for any comments at present.

The method of collection adopted by the Census Office is not uniform throughout all Provinces. The procedure in each case is as follows:

(a) PROVINCE:- Statistics are collected from all urban local authorities on the forms adopted in 1918.

(b) MUNICIPAL:- Financial statistics relating to municipalities are obtained from the Annual Report of the Provincial Auditor, certain adjustments being made in the figures relating to trading departments.

(c) TOWNSHIP:- Statistics are collected from all urban local authorities on the forms adopted in 1918.

(d) VILLAGE COUNCIL:- By arrangement with the Provincial Auditor, the Census Office is furnished with copies of the accounts of each municipality as certified by the Provincial Auditor. From these copies the necessary information is extracted in the Census Office and entered against the various items of Form S. 67. The form of these statements and the details furnished vary widely and the amount of work involved in extracting the necessary particulars is considerable.
Source. AN AS SAB GES 1901 11/32/D (1929-1932) Minutes of the session of the Statistical Council held on the 19-20th March 1934
Source: AN AS SAB GES 1901 11/32/D (1929-1932) Minutes of the session of the Statistical Council held on the 12-13th Nov. 1934

In pursuance of the resolution adopted by the Statistical Council at its last meeting, steps were immediately taken to approach the Provincial Administrations in terms thereof, through the medium of the Office of the Secretary for the Interior. The replies so far received from the various Provinces serve to indicate that generally speaking, the prospects of achieving agreement, though all the Provinces have not yet come into line, are fair.

In the case of Cape and Transvaal the proposals are favourably dealt with, but in the case of Natal it is estimated that the Administration is unable to see its way to make the suggested alterations. It is hoped, however, to find some informal means of breaking down this reluctance to cooperate in the Council's scheme. So far as the Orange Free State Province is concerned, it was stated that the views of the Orange Free State Municipal Association were being obtained, but the result of this action are not yet available.

Fortunately there are other means of promoting the scheme available. At the Fifth Annual General Meeting of the Institute of Municipal Treasurers and Accountants held in March last, the subject of standardisation in the form of municipal accounts was favourably dealt with in the address of the President, Mr. W. B. Lewis, and the discussion lent support to his views. In view of this promising opening, the City Treasurers of East London, East London, Durban and Johannesburg were immediately communicated with in the matter, each being furnished with a copy of the Memorandum which was drawn up for the Statistical Council. Very favourable replies were received from these gentlemen, and it is estimated that the subject would probably come up for discussion at a meeting shortly to be held in Johannesburg. The Secretary for the Interior was thereupon asked to communicate with Mr. Lewis, subject to there being no objection on the part of the Provincial Authorities to such action, and it is pleasant to record that certain formal resolutions of a favourable character (vide attached copy of letter from Mr. Lewis at) were adopted. It will be seen that an attempt is made therein of the understanding by the Institute of report, to be furnished to the Secretary for the Interior, on the introduction of the accounts of Local Authorities and the standardisation of the accounts of Local Authorities in a uniform financial year. It was suggested that, if this offer was accepted, the cooperation of the Provincial Authorities and Provincial Auditors should be secured. The Secretary for the Interior has been asked to proceed on
To conclude

Seen from France, one cannot but be struck by the diversity, regularity and quality of the statistics produced by the Union of South Africa at the beginning of the 20th century. It benefited from a rigorous organisation, from the emulation of other Commonwealth partners and showed the political will to know, organise and control all the territories. The French statistics of the period were much less developed: the results of the demographic censuses took nearly ten years to be published, demographic projections were embryonic, and there was no index of industrial production until the 1940s. The General Statistics of France, created in 1830, had barely 100 people on the eve of 1940. It had no contacts in the ministries... and I am not referring to the colonial statistics of the empire...
To conclude

A paradox, however. While statistics aim to homogenise and standardise situations that are by nature disparate, it seems that those of the South African Union do not aim to unify. Their systematic presentation in two languages is both a sign of a desire to integrate and to distinguish (?)... but above all, by making geographical origin (Native, European), colour (coloured) or race the pivot of all their studies, they create categories and hierarchies that separate and divide more than they harmonise. In this sense, the statistics reflect the lack of political will to integrate what they define as minorities. They aim to describe an heterogenous nation.

In the focus on racial differences obscures other inequalities (social, geographical, gender, etc.). Am I right?
I hope to have convinced you that what is counted count and that statistics matter.

Many thanks for your patience

Questions and comment are welcome

After the last slide on the Stat Sa