

International Relations/Political Science

Academic year 2019-2020

Quantifying the International: Numbers as Instruments of Representation and Governance

Quantifier l'international: Les chiffres comme instruments de représentation et de gouvernance

RI-SP109 - Printemps - 3 ECTS

Course Description

Practices of quantification and measurement have become omnipresent in contemporary global governance. Notably used to set global agendas, monitor performance, and evaluate the impact of policy reforms, quantified knowledge is produced and circulated by a multitude of actors (i.e. IOs, INGOs, think tanks, experts, universities, etc.), on an extensive range of global issue-areas (i.e. poverty, human displacement, climate change, etc.). But what makes these numerical figures and their creators authoritative? How are they constructed and to what ends are they mobilized? What technical difficulties emerge in designing metrics of political, social, and economic behavior?

Consolidating insights from multiple disciplines (history, sociology, anthropology, law, political science), this course aims to get students to think critically as well as creatively about international practices of quantification. Students will first learn about the historical origins of quantitative reasoning in the early modern period and, more specifically, the proliferation of quantitative practices at the international level since the 20th century. Raising transversal questions about the politics of quantification, the second part of the class will empirically explore quantitative practices in three governance realms: development, human rights, and corruption.

This course is bilingual. Readings and class discussions will be in French and English.

> PROFESSOR

Monique Beerli
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[Office hours](#)

Meetings upon request

> ASSISTANT

Vanessa Gauthier Vela

[Office hours](#)

Syllabus

Evaluation and Course Requirements

- **Participation (30%)**

This course will embrace a Socratic approach to learning, which can only function if students actively participate in class discussions. In order to contribute to meaningful debates, students need to come to class prepared. For each session, students should at the very minimum complete the mandatory readings and, ideally, come to class with reading notes. Good notes include a synthesis of the reading (main argument/s, methodology, sources) as well as questions and critiques.

- **SDG Indicators Group Research Projects (70%)**

Prompt

In 2013, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) delegated an Open Working Group with the responsibility of proposing a new set of global policy objectives that would build on the soon defunct Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and define the UN's Post-2015 Development Agenda. Two years later, the UNGA adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, summarized as a "plan of action for people, planet, and prosperity." The 2030 Agenda is predominately constituted by the UN's commitment to strive toward the fulfilment of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Collective research exercise

Students will be divided up into groups by the instructor and tasked with collectively describing and analysing one of the 17 SDGs. This exercise will require students to demonstrate their mastery of notions learned in class and to conduct empirical research using official UN documents.

Each group will have to complete two assignments:

- **Group presentation (20%)** – Each group will be responsible for preparing and delivering a presentation in sessions 5, 6, & 7. Students are free to structure their presentation as they wish, but each presentation should: 1) describe the technicalities of how each policy objective is measured, with what kind of data, collected by whom; 2) analyse some of the pitfalls or shortcomings of the indicators used to track SDG progress; and 3) propose alternative or additional indicators to address identified inadequacies. Presentations must be sent to the instructor by **midnight on the Tuesday** before the presentation.
- **Collective essay (50%)** – In addition to a presentation, each group will also be tasked with writing a collective paper. The total word count will depend on the number of group members (1500-2000 words/person). In the essay, students are expected to apply concepts, ideas, and theoretical frameworks learned in class to critically analyze the power and politics of SDG indicators. Papers are due by midnight the **12th of June 2020**.

Office Hours

Office hours are an important moment for students to have a one-on-one discussion with the instructor about their personal interests and intellectual curiosities, difficulties they may have had in understanding the reading material, their future professional plans, and so forth. They also provide the instructor with the opportunity to get to know their students better.

Although I will not have fixed office hours this semester for logistical reasons, students are highly encouraged to write me an email or come see me after class to schedule a meeting.

Course schedule and required readings

Class 1 (April 8)

Introduction – Global Governance, Quantification, Power

Mandatory readings:

- Shore, C., & Wright, S. (2015). Governing by numbers: audit culture, rankings and the new world order. *Social Anthropology*, 23(1), 22-28.
- Cooley, A., & Snyder, J. (Eds.). (2015). *Ranking the World: Grading States as a Tool of Global Governance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Introduction.

Class 2 (April 22)

The Historical Origins of Quantitative Reasoning: Science, Economy, and State

Mandatory readings:

- Desrosières, A. (1993). *La politique des grands nombres. Histoire de la raison statistique*. Paris: La Découverte & Syros, Chapitre 1 & 2.
- Porter, T. M. (1995). *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, Chapter 4.

Class 3 (April 29)

“Data from the Whole World for the Whole World”: The Internationalization of Quantification

Mandatory readings:

- Cusso, R. (2012). L'activité statistique de l'Organisation économique et financière de la Société des Nations: Un nouveau lien entre pouvoir et quantification. *Histoire & Mesure*, 17(2), 107-136.
- Davis, K. E., Kingsburry, B., & Merry, S. E. (2012). Indicators as a Technology of Governance. *Law & Society Review*, 46(1), 71-104.
- Malito, D. V., Umbach, G., & Bhuta, N. (Eds.). (2018). *The Palgrave Handbook of Indicators in Global Governance*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1-18.

Class 4 (May 6) – Human Rights

**Guest speaker from the Office of the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights

(To prepare questions for the speaker, scan through the OHCHR's 2012 *Human Rights Indicators* report and other relevant institutional publications.)

Mandatory readings:

- Cowan, J. K., & Billaud, J. (2015). Between learning and schooling: the politics of human rights monitoring at the Universal Periodic Review. *Third World Quarterly*, 36(6), 1175-1190.
- Merry, S. E., & Wood, S. (2015). Translating Children's Rights in Tanzania: Quantification and the Paradox of Measurement. *Current Anthropology*, 56(2), 205-229. doi:10.1086/680439
- OHCHR. (2012). *Human Rights Indicators: A Guide to Measurement and Implementation*. Geneva: OHCHR.

Class 5 (May 13) – Development

Group presentations

Mandatory readings:

- Rocha de Siqueira, I. (2017). Development by Trial and Error: The Authority of Good Enough Numbers. *International Political Sociology*, 11(2), 166-184.

- Fukuda-Parr, S., Yamin, A. E., & Greenstein, J. (2014). The Power of Numbers: A Critical Review of Millennium Development Goal Targets for Human Development and Human Rights. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 15(2-3), 105-117.

Class 6 (May 20) – Corruption

Group presentations

Mandatory readings:

- Cooley, A. (2018). How International Rankings Constitute and Limit Our Understanding of Global Governance Challenges: The Case of Corruption. In D. V. Malito, G. Umbach, & N. Bhuta (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Indicators in Global Governance* (pp. 49-67). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Hansen, H. K. (2012). The power of performance indices in the global politics of anti-corruption. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 15(4), 506-531.

Class 7 (May 27) – Conclusion

Group presentations