Official Statistics and Democratic Debate: New Expectations and New Challenges (1988–2016)

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At the end of the 1980s, Official Statistics wanted to open up to a wider audience. In this new historical sketch from the early 1990s to the 2010s, the aim is to describe how this openness translates into the production and dissemination of statistical information. First, the impact of European construction on the statistical system and its consequences on the statistical debate will be described. Second, we will illustrate through a few examples how public statistics react to the social or political demand for statistical measures and indicators. What directions are being implemented to meet the needs of varied and increasingly demanding users? In the end, if the opening of the public statistical service to many users is obvious, the question of the capacity to open the debate on what should be counted and how to measure it remains raised. Finally, the digital age changes the terms of debate. But that's another story...

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Designed to serve the public and economic and social democracy in accordance with the programme of the National Council of the Resistance of March 1944, the insufficient budgetary and human resources allocated up until the early 1960s did not allow this ambitious programme to be maintained. Established in 1946, INSEE provides its information to a group of experts and decision-makers. The arrival of new generations of policy makers, the increase in the budget and the number of Official Statistics staff proliferating through ministries and the development of information technology then promoted opening up to a wider audience[1].

With the reform of publications, the establishment of *observatoires économiques régionaux* (Regional Economic Observatories, OERs), field surveys and five-year demographic censuses, INSEE stepped up its interactions with the public. Its indicators (e.g. the price index or unemployment figures) were sometimes criticised as they became more familiar and were used to guide public policies.

The late 1980s was a time to ask questions. The *Conseil national de l'information statistique* (National Council for Statistical Information, CNIS)[2] organised a conference to consider the statistical information of the 2000s (CNIS, 1989). In his review, Michel Volle raised the fundamental question (Volle, 1989): for whom and for what purpose is this information used? However, the work of various working groups provided no direct answer to this question. Instead, they studied the impact of new technologies on statistical production, the role of statistics within the State, the social and theoretical framing of statistics and the areas on which to focus to improve quality.

Works focusing on the "politics of numbers" began to appear during this period. These examined the links between democracy and numbers, in countries such as the United States (Alonso and Starr, 1989), France (Desrosières, 1987; Thévenot, 1981; Salais, 1986) and the UK. How does politics shape numbers? And, conversely, how do numbers influence the political realm? "*How the domain of numbers is politically composed and the domain of politics is made up numerically*" (Rose, 1991, p. 675). In all these cases, the question concerns the link between ways of thinking about society, methods of action and means of description (Desrosières, 2008).

This historical outline (***Figure***) examines the links between statistics and democratic debates through three specific lenses: firstly, Europe; secondly, what we will call "statistics in the arena"; and thirdly, the desire to broaden the scope of dissemination of statistical information. In these three cases, the main question is the change between INSEE's first forty years and the following years, with the effects of the desire for Official Statistics to open up to the outside world to an ever-increasing extent, in particular.

1 See the paper included in *Courrier des statistiques* issue No 9 by the same authors: "Official statistics and democratic debate: from creation to consolidation (1946–1987)."
2 The *Conseil national de l'information statistique* (National Council for Statistical Information, CNIS) facilitates interactions between the producers and users of Official Statistics.

▶ Figure - Key Dates

* *CNIS:* Conseil national de l'information statistique *(National Council for Statistical Information)*

▶ Europe or "Statisticians on the Front Line"

The late 1980s and early 1990s were marked by intense activity on the part of the European Community, which was not without an impact on statistical production. Indeed, "the link between description and management appears clearly when several states undertake, as is the case today with Europe [...], to harmonise their social, fiscal and economic legislation, in order to make possible the free movement of persons, goods and capital" (Desrosières, 1993, p. 17). This Community activity brought statistics to the forefront. Thus, the Maastricht Treaty defined four convergence indicators[3] with which countries had to comply in order to enter the Economic and Monetary Union, and thus the euro area, and with which permanent compliance was then required in order to avoid sanctions. The criteria introduced by Article 121 of the Treaty establishing the European Community correspond to thresholds not to be exceeded:

- price stability: the inflation rate of the Member States must not exceed that of the three Member States with the best price stability by more than 1.5 percentage points;
- sustainable government finances:
  - prohibition on an annual public deficit exceeding 3% of the previous year's GDP;
  - prohibition on government debt exceeding 60% of the previous year's GDP;
- exchange rate: prohibition on devaluing the nation's currency[4];
- long-term interest rates: must not exceed those of the three Member States with the best price stability by more than 2%.

National Statistics Constrained by European Statistics

> ***In order to facilitate comparisons between Member States, the European System of Accounts (ESA95) was set up.***

These decisions had repercussions on the creation of statistics. In order to facilitate comparisons between Member States, the European System of Accounts (ESA95) was set up[5]. This meant having a common national accounting system and all Member States applying it; the ESA thus became a European regulation on 25 June 1996[6]. Indeed, "Eurostat had found that most of the Member States were not using the ESA as a reference point for preparing accounts at national level, and the European system was being used only for transmission of the data to Eurostat. This method was introducing numerous distortions in the interpretation and application of the accounting rules and definitions, and was producing major differences in results between Member States. This was no longer acceptable since the national accounts were becoming the reference point for the application of a growing number of Community policies: economic and monetary union, own resources, regional policy, social policy, agricultural policy, and

3 Convergence criteria (Maastricht Treaty): *https://www.insee.fr/en/metadonnees/definition/c1348*.
4 This was rendered obsolete with the introduction of the euro for countries in the euro area. In addition, the Member State must have participated continuously in the exchange rate mechanism of the European Monetary System (EMS) for the two years preceding the examination of its situation, without experiencing serious tensions.
5 The ESA95 is very much inspired by the 1993 System of National Accounts (1993 SNA) established by the United Nations (UN), the first manual of national accounts accepted by all major international organisations.
6 See the legal references at the end of the paper.

so on." (Eurostat, 2003, p. 141). In addition to this were the difficulties inherent in taking into account, or ignoring, certain operations to reduce the budget deficit. In respect of France, after the privatisation of France Télécom (FT) in October 1996[7], it was necessary to know whether or not to take into account the payment to the State for the pension payments of its future pensioners.

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Thus, in the mid-1990s (1994–1997), each country concerned about entering the euro area dedicated a great deal of energy to calculating two ratios, the deficit ratio and the government debt ratio, sometimes at the expense of other research in the field of national accounting, such as household accounts.

With the same goal of harmonisation, Eurostat introduced a Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices (HICP). This harmonisation was not clear since, among many other reasons (consumption habits, different climatic conditions, etc.), national indices are often linked to contract revaluation procedures. In France, for example, the non-tobacco price index is used to index many private contracts, such as maintenance allowances or life annuities, as well as the SMIC[8]. These two indicators, the CPI and the HICP, differ slightly (Daubaire, 2022): they coexist and understanding the differences between these two indicators requires highly technical explanations.

In addition, the selection of these highly specific criteria would direct public policies towards controlling prices and the budget of the Member States to the detriment, for example, of issues such as employment, the environment, inequalities, etc. (Bournay, 2001).

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Beyond the Maastricht criteria, the establishment of the European System of Central Banks[9] and the creation of the European Central Bank (ECB) provide important guidance for the production of statistics. In addition to the subject of inflation, regarding which the ECB is highly vigilant, the latter calls for the production of an ever-increasing number of cyclical indicators within ever-tightening turnaround times, so as to provide many indices almost in real time, to help it adjust its monetary policy. "From the point that an independent European Central Bank was established, which monitors the financial markets and therefore needs to have the same indicators as the markets to enable dialogue with them, we saw very early on, even before the establishment of the ECB, very strong demand for the production of cyclical indices in extremely fast turnaround times. Official statistical services were requested to respond to demand very quickly." (Durand, 2006).

7 See, for example, "The 'France Télécom affair': A night at the Bundesbank" by Enrico Giovannini, in Eurostat (2003), "*Memoirs of Eurostat; Fifty years serving Europe*", p.144.

8 SMIC: *Salaire minimum de croissance* (Guaranteed Minimum Growth Wage). The SMIC is the legal minimum wage in France. It relates to the time spent working. It was established by an Act of 2 January 1970. *https://www.insee.fr/en/metadonnees/definition/c1006*.

9 *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_System_of_Central_Banks*.

More generally, as Michel Glaude (2008) writes, "To formulate, guide and evaluate these various Community policies, there has been widespread use of statistical data and, more particularly, the creation of "dashboards" that bring many indicators together. In addition to traditional macroeconomic indicators (gross domestic product (GDP), inflation, unemployment, foreign trade, etc.), the Principal European Economic Indicators (PEEIs) have been established in relation to cyclical issues, as a set of structural indicators for monitoring the Lisbon Strategy[10], while sets of indicators have also been established for each area studied (employment, sustainable development, social inclusion with the 'Laeken indicators[11]', education, the information society, health, innovation, etc.)".

Statistics in Service of Democracy or A-Democracy[12]?

By nature, this European demand for statistics places constraints upon national statistics institutes, while providing no additional budgetary or human resources and saturating the national capacity for the production of statistics. While the desire for harmonisation is initially reflected in "outputs", namely the indicators to be produced, this harmonisation is then performed using "inputs", that is to say, using mechanisms for surveys and/or reporting administrative data that are fully governed by regulations. Consequently, the role of the CNIS in judging the appropriateness of these mechanisms is limited, since it cannot go against European regulations. Similarly, the ability of the *Comité du label* (Quality Label Committee)[13] to judge the relevance of the mechanism, its protocol and questionnaires is also restricted as these issues are governed by these same regulations. Thus, Official Statistics are increasingly constrained with regard to the indicators to be produced. Furthermore, the scope for users and producers to change the mechanisms in places dedicated to consultations is being reduced.

The limitations imposed on the production of national statistics by this increasing priority demand[14] are sometimes interpreted as an additional illustration of "governance by numbers" (Supiot, 2015; Salais, 2007; Salais, 2022). For example, based on the changes in the statistical categories highlighted to study employment and unemployment, Salais distinguishes between two approaches. In a democratic approach, the primary interest of statistics is the construction of a "general knowledge" based on a varied range of statistical conventions[15], recognised by all for an understanding of the world in which they live. Once the observation is completed and shared, it is possible to define public policies to improve what needs to be done. In an approach that it describes as governance through quantification, public policy incorporates the indicator to allow its own implementation to be monitored; this indicator is predefined and imposed

10 The Lisbon Strategy was the major axis of economic and development policy of the European Union between 2000 and 2010, decided at the European Council held in Lisbon in March 2000 by the then fifteen Member States of the European Union. The aim of this strategy was to make the European Union "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion".

11 The Laeken Summit led to the adoption of a list of indicators of "job quality" (European Commission, December 2001).

12 A reference to Robert Salais's expression (2022).

13 See the paper included in *Courrier des statistiques* issue No 5: "The Label Committee: a Governing Body Ensuring the Quality of Official Statistics", Marc Christine and Nicole Roth.

14 As part of the revision of the "Statistics Act" (Council Regulation of 17 February 1997 on Community Statistics), Eurostat had introduced the concept of "First for Europe" (see legal references at the end of the paper).

15 In the sense defined by, among others, Alain Desrosières, who not only discusses equivalence conventions, but also the convention phase that provides for measurement prior to quantifying a phenomenon.

> ***Here, the numerator will be employed people aged 15 to 64. This means that it is better for young people between the ages of 15 and 20 to work rather than go to school. The same applies for people aged 60 to 64.***

by the "Centre"[16]. He developed his argument by explaining how the European Commission (example of a "centre", see Salais, 2022) moved from a goal of full employment to a goal of maximising the employment rate; this indicator becomes the flagship indicator of the open method of coordination[17]. Beyond the fact that what counts is being in employment, regardless of the wage, working conditions, duration or contract, there are implicitly other elements embedded in this employment rate for people aged 15 to 64. As Desrosières (2006) pointed out in a roundtable on "Statistics in service of democracy": "Here, the numerator will be employed people aged 15 to 64. This means that it is better for young people between the ages of 15 and 20 to work rather than go to school. The same applies for people aged 60 to 64." In other words, if the objective is limited to monitoring the indicator, this implicitly imposes policy choices regarding the employment of young people and older people. And, according to Salais, this approach can be described as a-democracy, which is "a political regime that maintains the formal procedures of democracy, but impedes any effective participation of citizens and other actors who could speak on their behalf" (Salais, 2022). In other words, the ways of describing society make it possible to impose both the way of thinking and the policies to be implemented. Above all, statistical conventions are imposed without any real discussion beyond the technical aspects. This stark observation by Salais raises the issue of discussion fora; places to examine what Official Statistics should produce.

In France, that place is the CNIS. As explained in a previous paper, the need to open up led to the creation of the *Conseil national de la statistique* (National Council of Statistics, CNS) in 1972, followed by its transformation into the CNIS in 1984[18]. In a review of these two bodies spanning a 15-year period, their Secretary-General explained: "It remains essential for the official statistical system to play the card of openness towards the various economic and social sectors and the rest of the administration. This is not a fundamental technical requirement, even though the technical opinions gathered are not insignificant, but in my opinion it is an essential democratic requirement. The statistical administration [...] must strive for transparency towards the society it serves, which means explaining what it is doing and presenting its projects to people who normally, it is to be assumed, are less skilled than it is and obtaining their opinions" (Vanoli, 1989). In Europe, the ESAC[19] was established in March 2008 by Decision 234/2008/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council[20]. However, according to the words of its president in 2011: "We consider ourselves relatively small compared to the scope of the tasks and mandates we have (Lievesley, 2011)".

16 The place where decisions would be made regarding indicators and related public policies.
17 The "open method of coordination" relies on tools for comparisons between Member States.
18 See the paper included in *Courrier des statistiques* issue No 6: "The National Council for Statistical Information (*Conseil national de l'information statistique*): the quality of Official Statistics also depends on consultation", Isabelle Anxionnaz and Françoise Maurel.
19 European Statistical Advisory Committee.
20 See the legal references at the end of the paper.

▶ Statistics in the Arena

The question is worth asking: is the CNIS fulfilling its role? There is always room for improvement and a need to adapt to circumstances. While debate does not always begin within the CNIS, it sometimes ends up there and leads to changes in statistical production. Thus, in the summer of 2004, economists published an opinion column in the newspaper Le Monde (Concialdi *et al.*, 2004), entitled "*Cohésion sociale : des politiques à l'aveuglette*" (Social Cohesion: Policies in the Dark). This opinion column made a highly critical observation regarding the statistical system and its ability to reflect the progression of poverty and inequalities[21]. Strangely, three weeks later, it provoked a reaction from INSEE's Director-General, Jean-Michel Charpin, and Bertrand Fragonard, President of the *Observatoire national de la pauvreté et de l'exclusion sociale* (National Observatory for Poverty and Social Exclusion, ONPES), who refuted the technical arguments put forward by those researchers: "Who is poor in France?". Finally, at the end of the summer, Libération published an opinion column[22] entitled "*Mieux sonder la pauvreté*" (Studying Poverty Better), which refers explicitly to this exchange between the group of researchers and the two institutes concerned. They call for a continuation of the debate on the understanding of social inequalities "within the bodies specifically intended for it, such as the CNIS: we have proposed that this body should set up an internal working group to this end. At the same time, the debate must continue among the general public: this can only be beneficial for the quality of our social and economic policies, as well as for the ability of the official statistical system to meet the expectations of researchers and society." Trade union pressure, discussions within the CNIS and reflections at INSEE: all these steps would be necessary for the establishment of a working group chaired by Jacques Freyssinet[23]. Its work took place between November 2005 and November 2006. The draft report of this working group was discussed at the CNIS Bureau in November 2006 and then its final version was presented to the December 2006 plenary assembly (CNIS, 2007). Finally, in his season's greetings of 2 January 2007, the Director-General of INSEE wrote: "We have shown that we are listening and that we know how to challenge ourselves to make progress: as an example, I refer to the CNIS working group on standards of living and social inequalities, which has engaged in valuable debates on a subject of concern to our fellow citizens. We seek to foster transparency, including in relation to ourselves, which is why we will publish an external activity report for the first time in 2006[24]." The 60 recommendations of this report would profoundly change the statistical output on this topic. Thus, INSEE would set up an over-sample of high wealth individuals in its survey on wealth, explore the distributions of income and wealth of the last

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21 This column is based on a presentation by Bernard Sujobert as part of the "*Politique des statistiques*" (Statistics Policy) seminar organised at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales* (School for Advanced Social Science Studies, EHESS) by Isabelle Bruno, Alain Desrosières and Emmanuel Didier in 2012.

22 Written by Nasser Mansouri-Guilani (Director of the *centre confédéral d'études* (Confederal Studies Centre) of the *Confédération générale du travail* (General Workers' Union, CGT)) and Denis Durand (CGT Representative to the CNIS).

23 Jacques Freyssinet is a French economist born in 1937 whose work on employment and unemployment is considered authoritative.

24 This annual report, produced by INSEE, presents the Institute's flagship work.

percentile, or even the last part per mille, and perform a first breakdown of the household account according to social groups or income levels[25], which would enrich localised income and poverty data. This reorientation continued, which allowed the following Director-General, Jean-Philippe Cotis, to state in an interview with Le Monde (17 November 2009): "Statistics are breaking free from the dictatorship of the average." Furthermore, among the approximately 50 indicators selected to study standards of living and social inequalities, while the ONPES indicators are well selected, the Laeken indicators (Caussat *et al.*, 2006) are generally not well selected, as if "the CNIS wanted to regain its autonomy from Europe" (Sujobert, 2012).

Opening up to the Margins of Statistics?

Another emblematic example of the work by the CNIS is the organisation of the working group on the homeless, which led to the report entitled "*Pour une meilleure connaissance des sans-abri et de l'exclusion du logement*" (For a Better Understanding of the Homeless and Exclusion from Housing) (1996). In his preface to the book "*La Rue et le Foyer*" (The Street and the Home) (2000), Jean-Marie Delarue emphasised the need to understand the social issue of "exclusion from housing": "It is not enough to confine ourselves to the observation that people no longer have a home: we must be able to say why, how and how many." He also emphasised the role of the CNIS in taking this aspect of social reality into account. Seven years separated the publication of the report and the first survey on the homeless in France, carried out in 2001 by INSEE. The methodological and organisational challenges for conducting this survey required several experiments and preliminary surveys by the *Institut national d'études démographiques* (National Institute for Demographic Studies, INED) and INSEE. Among the questions posed by researchers, statisticians and others involved in the work was that of the legitimacy of conducting statistical surveys of homeless people (Firdion *et al.*, 2000). Objections to the statistical survey were varied: infringements of privacy, physical and psychological disturbances, resistance to the statistical approach, political use of numbers, etc. Should this statistical approach be abandoned because, as an activist said: "The numbers are useless; what we need to do is house people"[26] or, on the contrary, as Father Wresinski pointed out, do we need a certain amount of statistical knowledge on which to "base a realistic policy and the raising of awareness in society" (Wresinski, 1987)? Ultimately, a three-fold legitimacy emerged: scientific, democratic and human or humanist (Firdion *et al.*, 2000). Scientific, because stereotypes and caricatures need to be avoided while optimally describing the continuum of housing situations and also the processes that push people to the margins of the housing system. Democratic, because it is abnormal to exclude citizens from the "statistical city" under the pretext of methodological difficulties in surveying them. Humanist, because "talking about yourself, even within a structured framework, makes it possible to take a look at yourself, to somewhat break free from the tyranny of everyday life and to reverse the feeling of social invisibility."

25 See Bellamy *et al.* (2009): it is a case of combining microeconomic survey data and macroeconomic data from the household account in order to break down the income and consumption of this account based on standards of living or social groups.

26 A head of a solidarity charity for the homeless (Paris, February 1995) (Firdion *et al.*).

Measuring for Understanding?

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The confrontation between the social demand for statistics and producers can occur in other areas. Two different examples from the late 2000s are covered here briefly, although each of them deserves further examination. The first is the establishment of a joint information mission on the measurement of major economic and social data by the Finance, Social Affairs and Economic Affairs Committees in late 2007. It made its recommendations in an information report published in April 2008 under the name: "*Mesurer pour comprendre*" (Measuring for Understanding) (Mariton and Muet, 2008), which became INSEE's hallmark in 2013. This mission was set up following a challenge to Official Statistics that was considered unprecedented and simultaneously concerned figures on unemployment, inflation and purchasing power. Its aim was to: "clarify the terms of the debate and propose measures to restore trust in Official Statistics". As stated in the introduction to the report: "the debate is not so much about the results of the measurement as it is about the nature of the data measured." In this case, it was therefore a question of defining what matters, what must be counted and displayed in the public square, because it was the economic and social phenomena to be measured that was controversial. "This is why debate is, in the most noble sense, political in nature. While statistical work is not meant to settle political and moral debates, the data provided should be used to stimulate thought." Most of the proposals would obviously focus on the need to complement the production of indicators on purchasing power, employment, the unemployment halo and underemployment, to develop statistical work and output on sustainable development, etc. It was also a question of guaranteeing the independence of Official Statistics by enshrining it in law, by entrusting an external body[27] with this issue and by extending the European Statistics Code of Practice to all Ministerial Statistical Offices (MSOs).

Going Beyond GDP?

The second example focuses on alternative indicators to GDP, with the creation of the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission and its effects on Official Statistics[28]. Launched by the President of the French Republic Nicolas Sarkozy in early 2008, it published its report in September 2009. The aim was to consider alternative measures of economic efficiency and social progress. This commission would publish two books, the first for public decision-makers and statisticians (*Vers de nouveaux systèmes de mesure* (Towards new measurement systems), Stiglitz *et al.*, 2009), and the second being more scientific and critical of the concept of growth and the use of GDP as an indicator (*Richesse des nations et bien-être des individus* (Wealth of Nations and Well-Being of Individuals), Stiglitz *et al.*, 2009). A collective, the *Forum pour d'autres indicateurs de richesse* (Forum for Other Wealth Indicators, FAIR)[29], participated in the work through

27 In the report, Mariton and Muet referred to the CNIS.
28 The main part of this section is based on the thesis by Félicien Pagnon: "*Après la croissance : Controverses autour de la production et de l'usage des indicateurs alternatifs au PIB*" (Controversies regarding the Production and Use of Alternative Indicators to GDP) (2022).
29 Researchers and associations that have been working for a long time on alternative indicators to GDP.

Jean Gadrey, one of the founders of FAIR and an expert on these subjects. FAIR took quite a harsh view of some of the work of the commission, in particular the weakness of the recommendations regarding the issue of sustainability, but it was satisfied with the critical diagnosis of the predominance of GDP and its limitations. At INSEE, the report contributed to the introduction of new statistics, such as the 2010 enquête sur le mal-logement (Survey on Poor Housing), the *enquête sur les revenus distribués par quintile* (Survey on Income Distributed by Quintile), and the use of the SILC surveys[30] on social capital and human capital, new questions about subjective well-being, perceived security, etc. At the OECD[31], a new entity was established: the Better Life Initiative[32].

▶ Official Statistics and the Users Thereof

In order to examine the relationships between statistics and users, it is necessary to return to the question "For what purpose is this used and for whom is it used?" (Volle, 1989). INSEE's presentation in its blog states the following: "The National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies, INSEE, collects, produces, analyses and disseminates information on the French economy and society. This information is of interest to public authorities, administrations, social partners, companies, researchers, the media, teachers and private individuals and allows them to improve their knowledge, carry out studies, develop forecasts and make decisions." In recent times, the objective has been to look at what INSEE has put in place or could put in place to meet this dissemination objective. All these users have specific needs.

Should the Black Box of Conventions be Opened?

Since its creation in 1946, INSEE has been trying to open up and develop its output to better meet social demand. Were these efforts sufficient to respond to user criticism? In 1996, at a conference on economic and social information, Alain Desrosières, in a workshop on "*demande sociale et service public de l'information économique et sociale*" (social demand and public service for economic and social information), identified five potential criticisms:

- the most important information is being concealed from us;
- the information available is biased and does not correspond to reality;
- statistics are reductive, they are not "real life", life is something other than your tables of figures;
- statistics exercise abusive social control;
- statistics are the product of a social process, of conventions.

Concealed behind these criticisms are different perceptions of the "statistical" reality. The first two cases are classed as metrological realism, with the idea being that there is real value, just as there would be real altitude in the case of Mont Blanc. The other three criticisms are more radical, because they cast doubt on the concept of statistical activity.

30 Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (SILC, *https://www.insee.fr/en/metadonnees/source/serie/s1220*).
31 OECD: The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development is an intergovernmental organisation for economic studies (38 member countries). *https://www.oecd.org/en.html*)
32 The Better Life Index is one of the projects of the Better Life Initiative of the OECD, the objective of which is to help governments place well-being at the heart of public policy development.

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More recently, concerns have arisen regarding the "ability of statistics to accurately represent the world" (Davies, 2017). As such, these concerns were more related to the first three criticisms. Demand arose, which was difficult to satisfy, for statistics that were increasingly precise and increasingly granular, to reflect the individual nature of each person.

Studying statistical margins, moving beyond the dictatorship of the average, disseminating statistics at sub-national or even local levels and offering personalised price indices are all responses, albeit partial ones, to the criticisms made of the Official Statistical Service. In contrast, the issue of conventions was ultimately addressed to only a limited extent: "The conventionalist attitude entails considering the basic activity of statistics to be coding. Coding is comparable to what a judge does: an individual case is taken and then sorted into a class. There is an arbitrary and conventional nature to this act of sorting." (Desrosières, 2008). These conventions are not devoid of impacts on the way in which society is represented. The question then arises of whether any random individual is able to participate in the development of such conventions. Some people refer to the concept of "statactivism" (Bruno *et al.*, 2014). Another area to explore would be hybrid forums (Callon *et al.*, 2001). Indeed, the question arises of the ability to impose what matters, what must be counted and how it must be counted (Latour, 1999). Without necessarily being responsible for the choices made, statisticians will help to reify categories that will be used to describe the world. These categories or conventions could be discussed in hybrid forums, "open spaces where groups can actively discuss technical choices that are binding upon the group." They are considered hybrid, because these bound groups and their spokespersons are heterogeneous: experts, lay persons, politicians, etc.

Opening Up Data to Researchers

Among the variety of users of Official Statistics, some are more expert than others and can contribute to this convention phase, but also and above all they can contribute to analysis: these are the researchers and they have specific needs. They want to access the most detailed micro-data possible to be able to carry out their studies, while sometimes moving away from the usual classifications. In order to get the most use from such micro-data, it is necessary for the micro-data to be documented and for the metadata to be rich and of good quality, which incurs costs for the producers. In fact, INSEE and the Official Statistical Service conduct surveys or produce files from administrative sources without having the ability to make full use of these resources. This under-use is obviously a problem given the cost of these operations. Among the quality criteria put forward by the OECD is that of profitability, in respect of the information produced from a mechanism. Compared to the previous period (1946-1987), disseminating sources (surveys or administrative data) to enable their use is one way of enriching the social debate and a new service provided by Official Statistics. Progress in this area has been significant since the late 1980s. First of all, in 1986, a convention

was signed between the CNRS[33] and INSEE, via the *Laboratoire d'Analyse Secondaire et de Méthodes Appliquées à la Sociologie* (Laboratory of Secondary Analysis and Methods Applied to Sociology, LASMAS)[34]. Prior to this convention, researcher access to Official Statistics data was piecemeal and rather depended on the knowledge among the researchers themselves (Silberman, 1999). Although access for CNRS researchers remained limited, this convention was a first step. The situation continued until the launch of the "*Sciences sociales et données*" (Social Sciences and Data) mission in early 1999 by Claude Allègre, then Minister of National Education, Research and Technology, led by Roxane Silberman, then Director of LASMAS-IRESCO[35]. This mission identified three needs: increasing the dissemination and use of data and further involving researchers in data production. This mission would lead to the creation of the Quetelet Centre in 2001 (Chenu, 2003), the founding members of which were the CIDSP (currently the CDSP) which provided socio-political surveys, LASMAS (currently ADISP) responsible for Official Statistics data in particular, and the INED[36]. In 2005, it would become the Quetelet network (Caporali *et al.*, 2015). This organisation not only managed archiving and documentation, but it also controlled access for researchers. This led to the creation of *fichiers de production pour la recherche* (Production Files for Research, FPRs), "reasonably anonymous files, that is, files in which it is not possible to identify anyone, provided that such files are used for scientific research purposes" (Le Gléau, 2014). In relation to companies, the fact that it was not possible to open up data to researchers was the impetus behind the amendment of the Act of 1951 in 1984[37], to render such access subject to the approval of the *comité du secret statistique* (Statistical Confidentiality Committee). It quickly became apparent that, for more precise research work, access to more detailed files was necessary. This led to a further amendment of the Act of 1951 in 2008 and to the extension of the missions of the "Confidentiality Committee", from just business surveys to household surveys. At the same time, in order to secure access to those detailed data, INSEE, together with the *Groupe des écoles nationales d'économie et statistique* (Group of National Schools of Economics and Statistics, GENES), launched a secure centre project in 2007. This led to the creation of the *Centre d'accès sécurisé aux données* (Secure Data Access Center, CASD) in 2010 (Gadouche, 2019). However, access to these files was limited to research purposes.

The Digital Age and Free Content

More generally, there was the question of access to the statistical information produced by the Official Statistical Service. In the late 1980s, the question arose as to whether or not it would be necessary to focus on statistical output that could be sold, which would make it possible to identify the needs towards which output should be oriented (Volle, 1989). In the 1990s, INSEE sold its publications, CD-ROMs containing data of varying levels of detail, while respecting statistical confidentiality. However, the development of the Internet and the possibilities offered by this new mode of disseminating the information produced led INSEE, in mid-2003, to modify the pricing and re-dissemination policy and provide completely free content (Audibert, 2007), following the example of many statistics institutes outside

33 CNRS: The *Centre national de la recherche scientifique* (National Centre for Scientific Research) is the largest French public scientific research organisation.
34 Led, at the time, by Alain Degenne: *https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alain_Degenne*.
35 IRESCO: *Institut de recherche sur les sociétés contemporaines* (Institute for Research on Contemporary Societies).
36 CIDSP: *Centre d'informatisation des données sociopolitiques* (Centre for the Computerisation of Socio-Political Data); CDSP: *Centre de données sociopolitiques* (Socio-Political Data Centre); ADISP: *Archives de données issues de la statistique publique* (Archives of Data from Official Statistics); INED: *Institut national d'études démographiques* (National Institute for Demographic Studies).
37 See the legal references at the end of the paper.

France. Eurostat would do the same in 2004. This new policy resulted in a sharp increase in not only the supply of statistical information, but also in demand. As the Director-General of INSEE pointed out in 2007, "the audience has expanded and diversified" (Charpin, 2007). This decision was highly significant and made INSEE a pioneer in the development of Open Data a few years later. Indeed, in 2011, the "Etalab" mission was established, which set up a single inter-ministerial public data portal and, in 2016, the *Loi pour une république numérique* (Act for a Digital Republic)[38] enshrined in law the principle of Open Data by default[39].

However, free access to increasingly detailed information was insufficient. The information shared must be easy to understand, which means that it was important to document and support the use of detailed files. Efforts are being made along those lines, with the consolidation of INSEE's many websites into one website, the expansion of the sections for definitions, methods and, more generally, the related metadata[40] and with the continued production of first-class analyses, that were even more sophisticated so as not to leave the users of INSEE's website unsupported in the face of the vast amount of data. This openness generated more demanding users, which required consideration of the consistency of the data disseminated and their comparability over time and space when producing statistical output. In terms of support, the introduction of the "INSEE contact" service in the early 2000s provided a space to respond to questions from users of the site. At the same time, this strategy was accompanied by the gradual disappearance of hardcopy publications. In fact, the insee.fr website became the main mode of disseminating statistical information.

Alongside this increase in the dissemination of statistical information via its website, INSEE demonstrates its desire to "make the figures tell a story and reach out to all audiences" in its medium-term programme for 2016-2025, called INSEE 2025. As stated in a meeting with the CNIS in March 2016, the objective behind this strategic focus is as follows: "Official Statistics describe and analyse an increasingly complex reality, use the most modern modes of dissemination and reach out to all audiences using universally accessible language and appropriate products. Thanks to the collective work of all those who contribute to its output, INSEE submits its figures to the test of reality and to international comparison in order to make them more relevant, consistent, and of higher quality, and it ensures that the figures are useful in informing national and local decisions and that Official Statistics provide consistent coverage without redundancy." In order to reach out to all audiences, INSEE uses a range of tools, including a blog, a mobile application and a YouTube channel, to expand its dissemination channels. Lastly, INSEE is embracing social networks such as Twitter (X) and LinkedIn, exposing itself directly to the criticism of its users. Explaining, disseminating and communicating statistical information through these new media channels provides access to a new arena. Whether to dispel misunderstandings or to change its output, permitting, accepting and responding to criticism has become a necessity for INSEE. Data is ubiquitous on the Internet in this new era of Open Data, which facilitates the production of new official or non-official statistics and also opens up the possibility for competitors less concerned with the quality and reliability of their output to develop. In a world in which an increasing number of debates are taking place on social media, with the excesses that this can lead to, and with the loss of trust in expertise, Official Statistics must take on new challenges to maintain their vital role in democratic debate. But that's a different story for another day…

38 See the legal references at the end of the paper.
39 See S. Goëta (2024), *Les données de la démocratie – Open data, pouvoirs et contre-pouvoirs* (Data on Democracy – Open Data, Powers and Counter-Powers).
40 See the paper by Mauguin and Sagnes, "*Faciliter l'accès aux données de l'Insee*" (Facilitating Access to INSEE Data), in this issue.

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