

The Quantification of Society

A Study of a Swedish Research Institute
and Survey-based Social Science

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Academic dissertation in theory of science, to be publicly defended,
by due permission of the Faculty of Humanities at University of
Gothenburg, on April 13, at 1 p.m., in Stora hörsalen, Humanisten,
Renströmsgatan 6, Göteborg.



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
PHILOSOPHY, LINGUISTICS & THEORY OF SCIENCE

Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the contemporary history of quantitative surveys in Sweden. The core epistemic practice of constructing surveys is examined empirically through a case study of the *SOM Institute* (Samhälle, Opinion, Medier) at *University of Gothenburg*. The *SOM Institute* has performed surveys in Sweden since 1986. However, the methodology of quantitative surveys with representative sampling techniques dates back to the 1940s. A central theme in this theses is to follow how these methods and techniques have been made to work under different historical circumstances.

Theoretically, this thesis relies on concepts that are derived from classical Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and then further developed. This conceptual tool-box is then utilized to select moments in the history of surveys that are of special importance for understanding how Swedish society has been quantified.

Special attention is drawn to how the accuracy of surveys is established through mutual reinforcement with previous data. By closely studying how the *SOM Institute* conducted their first postal surveys in the 1980s, the relation and importance of other, contemporary surveys is emphasized.

Moreover, the creation of a state-science interface is described by going back in time to the 1950s and the creation of the first academic surveys. This was also the moment in history when random samples were established. Here, the impact of the creation of the welfare state and the role of science in this political project is discussed and related to the expansion of the social sciences.

To further understand the border between academic science and pollster research, a controversy that took place during the elections of 1985 is studied. The controversy was ignited because pollster data predicted that the conservative party (Moderaterna) would win the elections. However, this turned out to be false. What followed was a debate concerning both the accuracy of different methodologies and the political bias of different surveys. Academic scientists succeeded in creating a position that guaranteed value-free social science, which later would have an impact on the future of social scientific investigations.

The dissertation concludes that the way social phenomena are quantified today, must be understood in a historical context that includes the epistemic practice of social scientists. The creation of large-scale quantitative surveys not only presupposes certain aspects of modern society, it also transforms these societies.

Keywords: Quantification, survey, SOM Institute, social science, epistemic practice, Actor-Network Theory, welfare state, center of calculation.