

6,402: On the Aesthetic Experience of Facticity

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Abstract : Sociologists have brought to light the fascination of contemporary societies with numbers but fall short of explaining it. In their accounts, people generally misunderstand the technical intricacies of statistical knowledge and therefore accept numbers as unassailable “facts”. It is due to such pervasive fascination, furthermore, that both old and new forms of social control find fertile ground. By focusing on the process whereby the fetishization of numbers reaches its zenith, i.e., when specific statistics become emblematic of an entire society, it is asserted that numbers primarily function as moral symbols with immense potential for galvanizing collective action. Their “facticity” is not solely a cognitive problem but one that is deeply rooted in myth and connected with social experiences of epiphany and ritual. Evidence from Colombia is used to illustrate how certain quantifications become canonical. In 2021, Colombia’s Peace Court revealed that the national army had executed 6,402 innocent civilians to later report them as members of illegal armed groups. Rapidly, “6,402” transformed into a prominent item in the country’s political landscape. This article reconstructs such a process by following the first six months of the figure’s circulation, both in traditional and social media. In doing so, it is developed a new cultural-sociological conceptualization of numbers as “fact-icons” that departs from traditional understandings of statistics as “technical” objects. Numbers are icons whose appropriation is less rational than aesthetic.

Keywords : culture, statistics, collective memory, social movements

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