

## Scientia Canadensis

Canadian Journal of the History of Science, Technology and Medicine  
Revue canadienne d'histoire des sciences, des techniques et de la médecine

Scientia  
Canadensis

### *A Total Science. Statistics in Liberal and Fascist Italy.* By Jean-Guy Prévost. (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009. ix + 335 p., ISBN 978-0-7735-35398 \$95.00)

Bruce Curtis

Volume 34, Number 2, 2011

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1014344ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014344ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (print)

1918-7750 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Curtis, B. (2011). Review of [*A Total Science. Statistics in Liberal and Fascist Italy*. By Jean-Guy Prévost. (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009. ix + 335 p., ISBN 978-0-7735-35398 \$95.00)]. *Scientia Canadensis*, 34(2), 115–118. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014344ar>

creation of two long-running experiments in communal living, Twin Oaks (in Virginia) and Los Horcones (Sonora, Mexico). Rutherford concluded that, in the case of Twin Oaks, the Skinner influence was “perhaps more catalytic than systematic” in the evolution of this intentional community (p.137). Los Horcones, in contrast, remained committed to an orthodoxy of applied behavior analysis, and used *Walden Two* not as a working model but as literary inspiration.

This book takes psychological knowledge “out of the box” of the discipline and explores its application in a variety of real-life settings. Ironically, Skinner himself spent his entire career in academic life, and when he ventured out into military contexts in World War II or tried to commercialize his “Heir Conditioner,” he was notably unsuccessful. Yet his ideas engendered the formation of a professional group of behavior analysts and practitioners that has a complicated relationship with mainstream psychology. A gem of a book, *Beyond the Box* signals the emergence of a major scholarly talent.

JAMES H. CAPSHEW  
*Indiana University*

***A Total Science. Statistics in Liberal and Fascist Italy.* By Jean-Guy Prévost.** (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009. ix + 335 p., ISBN 978-0-7735-35398 \$95.00).

The ‘total science’ in the title of this finely-crafted and concisely-written study nicely captures its two main historical and analytic ambitions. First, Prévost offers a detailed account of the emergence, solidification and rise to dominance of the ‘statistical field’ in Italian (social) science and politics. Here, especially in the inter-war years, statisticians had some success in claiming that theirs was the only science able to deal with any and all social phenomena. In this regard, ‘total’ implies a science of everything. Second, in a particularly strong final chapter, Prévost details the elective affinities between what one might call the statistical *episteme* and ‘left fascism’ and Italian communism. In this vein, ‘total’ refers to the perspective on society as a whole implicit in totalizing social projects that are concerned with such things as population growth and distribution, or economic planning.

Before the First World War, Italian statistics remained largely a literary and topographic practice. The statistical field developed as a domain with an important degree of autonomy in a context characterized by the dramatic internal epistemological shifts associated with mathematization, by the drive to comprehensive social investigation and management

produced first by the exigencies of war and then by the rise of fascism, and by the manoeuvring for advantage of a younger generation of scholars. The latter, of whom the most remarkable was Corrado Gini, pioneered techniques and methods of empirical investigation and analysis that seemed to offer concrete gains in the study of social phenomena. Mastery of the new investigative practice demanded a large investment in technical training on the part of would-be practitioners. Such technical expertise worked to bound the field and to close off participation in it both to an earlier generation of statisticians and to members of other disciplines. Prévost is especially concerned to demonstrate how the new science carved out its own epistemological and disciplinary space between mathematics on the one hand and economics and political economy on the other—at the expense, not incidentally, of Italian sociology.

Prévost guides us through the convoluted initiatives of a large number of intellectuals and academics that resulted in the solidification and expansion of the field, through the creation of new research chairs, the establishment of novel, practical research laboratories, the foundation of scholarly journals and professional associations, state and quasi-state organizations, and the creation of dense webs of national and international intellectual exchange.

Some of the success of Italian statistics in establishing a central position was due to its combination, on the one hand, of a formally apolitical empiricism, dedicated to the dispassionate investigation of reality in order to seize on its regularities and to uncover the principles underlying them. Its technical armature reinforced this dimension. On the other hand, its social theory, typified by Gini's 'neo-organicism,' which combined principles of eugenics, a critique of capitalist accumulation, and propositions about the circulation of elites, was congenial to fascist readings of social development. Leading figures in the statistics movement could justify their adherence to and support for the Mussolini regime on scientific grounds, as Prévost shows in the case of Gini's critique of liberal democracy for its inability to accommodate weighted preferences in its system of representation.

Fields of practice depend on relative insulation from exogenous forces for their autonomous development. Italian statistics was subjected to the brutal intervention of the regime's adoption of a version of the Nuremberg laws in 1938 which led to wholesale purges of putatively Jewish scholars. On the whole, the purges did not interrupt the work of other 'non-Jewish' statisticians, and the attitude of several to the increasingly violent racism of the regime was notoriously ambiguous.

There was an homology between statistical conceptions of the population of dynamic totality, statistical preoccupations with the mastery and planning of large scale social forces, and corporatist social policy. Here

Prévost points to a ‘metric habitus’ characteristic of the statistician and ‘left-fascism’s’ concern with continual monitoring and social planning. Yet he also points out that much of the Italian critique of liberal democracy and capitalism echoed the analyses common in England, France and the United States. The same ideas had a rather different complexion under different regimes, and leading early supporters of fascism among the statisticians could relatively easily carry their statistical preoccupations with them into the communist party: out of political conviction before, or out of opportunism after, the tide of war shifted from 1942. Prévost notices that within the field at its moments of greatest strength, political agreements among practitioners did not prevent them working in common. “The stronger are a field’s autonomy and cohesion...the less political disagreements or oppositions will appear decisive” (p.238).

*Total Statistics* is excellent historical sociology of science. The breadth of knowledge of Italian intellectual and political life demonstrated in it is particularly impressive, and Prévost masters the technical-scientific dimensions of his subject in addition to the intellectual biographies and networks of influence of its practitioners. Although the wealth of detail is sometimes a bit overwhelming—despite the author’s efforts to clarify through the use of maps, charts, and diagrams—there is nonetheless an elegance and incisiveness to the analytic narrative that makes for a good read.

Prévost has embedded his analytic framework for the most part in his narrative accounts, which makes for a more accessible book. While concepts from quite a disparate array of social theory—‘panopticism’ or ‘sublimation,’ for instance—are encountered occasionally, it is clear that much of his inspiration comes from Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of field-capital-habitus-strategy. Interestingly, neither of Bourdieu’s attempts explicitly to address the scientific field are invoked,<sup>1</sup> and Prévost offers no account of his own analytic preferences, despite the fact that there seemed to be moments where work in the actor-network approach, or in governmentality studies might have offered some illumination. I also thought there were places in which a broader engagement with Bourdieu’s work might have carried the analysis further. To name one, the analysis of successor versus insurgent strategies in scientific contests might offer an extended take on the work of the first generation of mathematical statisticians. Perhaps one could argue that doing so would merely be to re-codify in a theory-speak what can be equally well delivered in descriptive prose. More use of ‘habitus’ might be more telling. Prévost invokes the concept twice, as far as I can see, once to speak to the tension within the

---

1. Pierre Bourdieu, *Science de la science et réflexivité. Cours du Collège de France. 2000-2001* (Paris: Éditions Raisons d'Agir, 2001); Bourdieu, “The Specificity of the Scientific Field and the Social Conditions of the Progress of Reason,” *Social Science Information* 14, 6 (1975): 19-47.

field between those susceptible to a narrow ‘technical’ habitus and those concerned to view the world broadly, and once to speak to the affinities (not the homologies) between the ‘metric’ habitus and fascist planning. Part of the challenge to sociology of science offered by Bourdieu’s last work was to use ‘habitus’ to explain individual and group trajectories in and across fields—although Bourdieu’s account of himself made no mention of his domestic life. More depth to the cast of characters—who seem only ever to think and publish great thoughts, debate concepts, and promote policy—could be added by taking up that part of Bourdieu’s challenge.

Prévost’s book is a work of mature scholarship that recommends itself to all those interested in the historical sociology of science, the international development of statistics and the relations between fascism and science.

BRUCE CURTIS  
*Carleton University*