Steffen MAU, *The Metric Society: On the Quantification of the Social* (Cambridge, UK, Polity, 2019, 200 p.)

Steffen Mau's *The Metric Society: On the Quantification of the Social* offers a masterful overview of the changes wrought by the multiplication of metrics in the contemporary social world. Mau, Professor of Macrosociology at the Humboldt University of Berlin, analyzes what he describes as "the emergence of a society of scores, rankings, likes, stars, and grades" [2]. Drawing on a wide range of cases, from university rankings to credit ratings, credit scoring, peer-to-peer evaluation, and the Quantified Self movement, Mau examines some of the theoretical ramifications of the extraordinary increase in quantitative measurements that is transforming many domains of our lives.

The main argument of the book is that the rise of metrics in different sectors leads to an increase in competition between social actors. According to Mau, metrics function as a "dispositive of comparison that leads directly to competition" [169], both between individuals and between organizations. The argument relies on three building blocks. First, the author maps out the encroachment of metrics on areas of social life that were formerly not quantified, a development he analyzes through a Habermassian lens as a colonization of the lifeworld by the numerical systems. Second, he argues that metrics come with "an expansion, if not a universalization, of competition," [6] through processes of commensuration, comparison, and rivalry. Last, he connects this expansion of metrics-driven competition with the reinforcement of quantitative inequalities. Mau draws on multiple examples to exemplify how these dynamics tend to play out. He begins with the case of rankings and ratings, which he analyzes as forms of hierarchization, before turning to scoring and screening metrics, which he labels instances of classification. He then discusses the rise of what he calls the "evaluation cult," based on star- and point-based reviews, and examines the role of self-tracking graphs and charts in the Quantified Self movement.

The book builds on these cases for its theoretical discussion of the social effects of the multiplication of metrics and, through metrics, of status-based competition. First, building on Bourdieu, Mau argues that the development of metrics reinforces the "power of nomination" of incumbents, including states, consultants, and transnational experts.

Angèle CHRISTIN, Stanford University, Stanford, California, USA,
[angelec@stanford.edu]

European Journal of Sociology, 61, 3, (2021), pp. 486–489—0003-9756/21/0000-900$07.50per art + $0.10 per page
 doi: 10.1017/S0003975620000338

Second, he analyzes some of the unintended effects of metrics, through reactivity, decoupling, and gaming. Third, he sketches how hopes to increase transparency and accountability through quantification can end up reinforcing unaccountable structures of surveillance and control.

Mau closes his analysis by returning to the question that engages him most deeply: the creation of an "inequality regime of quantification" where worth and social status are increasingly based on quantitative indicators that are likely to converge, thus creating an individualized and inescapable system of metrics-based inequality. As he concludes, "in the digital world of unforgettability, this means that we are all shackled to a previous status. Our own past cannot be erased because status is essentially the sum of past events, or – more accurately – past data. Consequently, the possibilities of reinventing ourselves, changing our status or escaping it altogether are becoming fewer" [172]. The book starts with an evocation of the Chinese Social Credit System and ends with a dire, *Black Mirror*-type warning: we may end up assigned with a single score that determines our future opportunities.

The Metric Society is an important addition to our understanding of the impact of metrics in contemporary societies. In particular, the book is an excellent complement to several recent publications providing similarly ambitious overviews of how problematic metrics are gaining ground, including Cathy O'Neil's *Weapons of Mass Destruction*,[1] David Beer's *Metric Power*,[2] Jerry Z. Muller's *The Tyranny of Metrics*,[3] and Shoshana Zuboff's *Surveillance Capitalism*.[4] Mau provides a rigorous framework based on sociological theory and economic sociology in order to map out the consequences of metrics. His discussion of competition is particularly impressive: he carefully distinguishes between competition and marketization, two dynamics that overlap only in part. This allows him to address a wide range of metrics-driven competitive processes that are only weakly linked to market dynamics, including self-tracking and social media metrics.

Yet the analysis offered in the book made me wonder: are metrics always that powerful? While Mau avoids "the pitfall of crude and overly biased cultural critique" [8], he still assigns tremendous power to metrics. In this light, even though the analysis provided in *The Metric Society*

[1] Cathy O'Neil, 2016, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (New York, Crown).

[2] David Beer, 2016, *Metric Power* (London, Palgrave Macmillan).

[3] Jerry Z. Muller, 2018, *The Tyranny of Metrics* (Princeton, Princeton University Press).

[4] Shoshana Zuboff, 2018, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism. The First for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York, Public Affairs).

is internally highly convincing, it endows metrics with a strong and inescapable power. This somewhat deterministic angle emerges particularly clearly when Mau adduces real-world examples to support his claims. Indeed, Mau often relies on ominous predictions and sentences using the future and conditional tenses to sustain the evocation of an utterly quantified society. He draws abundantly on promotional material written by companies selling indicators and analytics, which have a built-in incentive to appear impactful and efficient. He is far from the only scholar relying on this type of data: most of the recent overviews of the impact of metrics mentioned above also draw to some extent on material produced by the makers of data, metrics, and algorithms.

There are good reasons, however, to believe that the actual effects of metrics may not be quite so clear. First, creating and enforcing metrics requires a great deal of work. The quantification effort is never seamless; the aggregation of metrics across domains, even less so. Thus, many of the metricized systems examined in the book are in fact rife with errors, gaps, empty cells, and aggregation issues. The Chinese Social Credit System, referred to in Mau's book, is a good case in point. As Shazeda Ahmed[5] shows, the data compiled by local governmental agencies in China is extremely fragmented and messy, far from the Orwell-meets-Foucault scenario evoked by most critics. Of course, one can always argue that this is just the beginning and that perfectly accurate and encompassing metrics are yet to come. But I would offer a different possibility, namely that quantification, by definition, is always a profoundly *incomplete* exercise. Not unlike the modernist project analyzed by James C. Scott[6], and for the same reasons, quantification can only remain a partial project, in the two senses of the term: both incomplete and biased.

Hence, metrics on the ground usually look quite different compared to the view from the top. This is because social actors typically find multiple ways to evade metrics, especially when they do not match their local priorities – what Bourdieu would call the "logic of practice." In particular, and as Mau acknowledges, individuals and organizations are likely to game metrics and "decouple" their daily activities from the expectations embedded in quantitative indicators. This in turn opens up new avenues of research. If we agree that there is a gap between what metrics are designed to do and the effects that they actually have, what happens to the processes of comparison and competition highlighted by Mau? When

[5] Shazeda Ahmed, 2019, "The Messy Truth About Social Credit," *Logic* 07 [https://logicmag.io/china/the-messy-truth-about-social-credit/].

[6] James C. Scott, 1998, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, Yale University Press).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975620000338 Published online by Cambridge University Press

people evade metrics, do they step out of competitive dynamics, reinforce them, or modulate them in unexpected ways depending on the context? As an ethnographer, I would say that this is an empirical question – one that is likely to vary depending on the institutional features of the cases under consideration.

This role of local practices in shaping the actual impact of metrics raises another question, this time related to technological change. Mau brings up digital technologies at multiple points but does not systematically discuss the role of technology in the book. Yet one could argue that digital technologies are a primary force here – first because they are literally made of metrics, through their data, code, and algorithms, but also more profoundly because of the monetization model adopted by most digital platforms, which is based on behavioral targeting and engagement-based metrics. As more of our daily activities are mediated through digital platforms, they become metricized. As platforms and digital metrics make their way into all possible social domains, perhaps it is time to turn our attention from theorizing what is common to all metrics to analyzing the differences that emerge between metrics. Such a comparative approach would mean paying closer attention to the mundane differences that emerge between the technologies, infrastructures, and materiality of metrics, which often profoundly shape how they are received by social actors.

To make sense of these emerging dynamics, scholars will benefit greatly from the rich theoretical framework and sophisticated set of analytical tools offered by Mau. As data, metrics, and algorithms continue to multiply, online and offline, *The Metric Society* will shape how we think about their effects on the social world.

ANGÈLE CHRISTIN

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975620000338 Published online by Cambridge University Press