



Silences and controversies on early brazilian censuses (1872-1920): from expected regularities to the politics of precision

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We hardly hesitate on taking a census by its reliability and closeness to the truth. According to the very contemporary value of precision, a census must be superior and preferable to general population estimates, such as those employed by political arithmetic since the seventeenth century. However, it has not always been the case. As Theodore Porter puts it (1995), the politics of objectivity in science and public life arises from a vast political-cognitive network, comprised by different kinds of actors engaged in the production, publicity and consumption of statistics. On other words, the statistical objectivation of reality is a collective enterprise, which is decisive for the stabilization of the meaning and the credibility of official numbers. Therefore, this paper will examine the brazilian statistical experience, in order to adress a transition that takes place in the statistical discourse: from a reasoning based on expected regularities of population growth, that lasted well after the first national census taking (1872), to the politics of precision and exhaustiveness of the census, which may deny those very expectations. By exploring the growing division of statistical offices and the changing patterns on statistical controversies we intend to shed light on the social conditions through which credibility on numbers becomes a matter of government. That is to say, when census exactitude becomes a pursued value both as a mean of acting upon population and as a way of making public concerns.

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