

Policing by Numbers: Plague, Political Arithmetic, and Numerical Argument

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This paper examines the rise of numerical representation as a strategy for talking about social and political policy and, specifically, about the relationship between illness and urban infrastructure, in two very different literary venues: the political arithmetic study and the historical novel.

John Graunt's 1662 *Natural and Political Observations Made Upon the Bills of Mortality* is significant for three key reasons: first, because it argues for the formation of state policy in response to studies of populations; second, because it argues for the formalization of that study using the most readily available indexes of births and deaths; and third, because it attempts to historicize and critique those documents and the data they ostensibly represent. It is perhaps one of the first explicit elaborations of biopolitical thought, arguing that just as "it were good to know the geometrical content, figure, and scituation of all the lands of the kingdom...it is no less necessary to know how many people there be of each sex, state, age, religion, trade, rank, or degree," as such data allows one to see, for instance, "how many women and children do just nothing, only learning to spend what others get," "how many [people work] by fighting as soldiers" or "by ministeries of vice and sin. What begins as an effort to assess the comparative severity of a series of plague outbreaks during the sixteenth century becomes an argument about how to regulate flows of labor, track the movement of populations, and categorize persons in terms of their fitness as workers.

Numbers do not speak for themselves in Graunt's work, despite their centrality to its vision of state policy. Instead, they represent an interpretive payload to be excavated and interpreted by "numerate" individuals, who, upon evaluating and selecting the right kinds of facts and figures, can process them into necessary information about how populations move, work, live, and die. Assessing the health of the body politic becomes a matter of quantifying, aggregating, and surveilling the bodies that exist at the margins of its borders—and this project, we are given to understand, becomes bound up with the ability to read and write with numbers effectively.

Graunt does not only model what that kind of numeracy might look like. He also gives us a sense of what it *does not* look like: "Most of [those] who constantly took in the weekly bills of mortality," he writes, "made little other use of them then to look at the foot, how the burials increased or decreased." Rather than thinking about what these numbers mean in context, the casual reader takes them as a set of inarguable descriptions of public health and shorthand indicators of social crisis. Daniel Defoe intuitively makes use of this symbolic cachet in his *Journal of the Plague Year*, which builds the form of the bill of mortality into a non-fiction novel that masquerades as a firsthand account of an episode of plague. In a basic sense, the text asks us to treat its reproductions of mortality bills as a credit to its narration; if we cannot trust the author alone, the logic seems to run, surely we can trust the document. This formal bait-and-switch begins to look a bit more complex, however, when we think about the novel not simply as fictionalized history, but as fictionalized historiography—that is, as an effort to represent the recording of historical events, and

not just the events themselves, and to think about how engagements with these textual records of crisis can impact both top-down administrative policies and on-the-ground responses to them. While the *Journal* may not serve as a reliable account of plague, it tells us much about the relationship between the numbers, historicity, and policy formation during the long eighteenth century.