

# PhD Projects

## Data types and functions: A study of framing devices and techniques

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This thesis contributes to the sociology and anthropology of data fields by examining some of the techniques and devices that are deployed to frame data as part of methodological, commercial, digital, journalistic and artistic practices. The thesis first traces the lineage of the concept of “frame” in cybernetic anthropology, artificial intelligence, social interactionism and science and technology studies, to delineate a conceptual framework that can account for the framing of data. The thesis advances that studying the framing of data is important because it enables to make visible both the ontological politics (Mol 1999) and the political economy of data. Empirically, the project identifies two data leaks, and repurposes the materials that emerged from these as case studies that render visible how different techniques and devices frame two distinctive data types: personal data and prices. The first case study examines the making and unmaking of search keywords as personal, and it is based on the materials and events that arose from the leak of a search engine database in 2006. It focuses on analysing how different devices and techniques work to configure certain pieces of data like search keywords to be about persons. Firstly, this case study looks at the technique of reidentification demonstrations – a statistical technique deployed for identifying persons and making them visible from anonymised databases – and at the sequential reordering of data, that is, the repurposing of data found organized in a serial order in a database. Secondly, this case study also looks at anonymisation and informed consent as ethical devices that aid in the economisation of data and its depersonalisation. The second case study is based on the materials and entities that became available as a consequence of the request of disclosure by government officials of the databases that have been used to estimate the Argentinean national inflation indicator since 2006. This case study examines a range of techniques and devices that frame prices in the measurement and commercialisation of consumer price indexes. Firstly, it looks at how procedures for the identification of products aid in the establishment of prices as pure, and

how legal regulations contain the formation of price in the measurement of offline inflation. Secondly, it investigates how digital methods like scraping – a technique for the automatic capturing of web-data – and imaging, that is, the crowd-sourced picturing of the products taken to measure inflation reconfigure the framing of retail price variation for the observation and interpretation of financial actors. The thesis concludes by suggesting that the function of traditional data types such as personal names and official economic indicators – understood as coordinators of social and economic action – might be changing due to the emergence of new data types, data frames and analytical techniques.

## Micro-foundations of financialization: Status anxiety and consumer credit in Chile

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This project investigates why people in Chile acquired so much consumer debt in contexts of material prosperity, and asks what the role of inequality and commodification is in this process. The case raises an important challenge to the literature. Insofar as existing accounts assume that the financialization of consumption occurs in contexts marked by wage stagnation and a general deterioration of the middle classes, they engender two contradictory explanations: while political economists argue that people use credit in order to smooth their consumption in the face of market volatility, economists maintain that concentration of wealth at the top pushes middle income consumers to emulate the expenditures of the rich and consume beyond their means. These explanations do not necessarily fit the reality of developing countries.

Triangulating in-depth interviews with middle class families, multivariate statistical analysis and secondary literature, the project shows that consumers in Chile use credit

to finance "ordinary" forms of consumption that do not aim either at coping with market instability or emulating and signaling status to others. Rather, Chileans use department store credit cards in order to acquire a standard package of "inconspicuous" goods that they feel entitled to have. From this point of view, the systematic indebtedness of consumers originates in a major concern with "rank", "achievement" and "security" that – following De Botton (2004) – I call "status anxiety". Status anxiety does not stem from the desire to emulate rich consumers, but from the impossibility of complying with normative expectations about what a middle class family should be (and have) that outweigh wage improvements.

The project thus investigates the way in which "status anxiety" is systematically reproduced by means of two broad mechanisms that prompt people to acquire consumer debt. The first mechanism generating debt stems from an increase of real wages and high levels of inequality. It is explained by a general sociological principle known as relative deprivation, which points to the fact that general satisfaction with one's income, possessions or status, is assessed not in absolute terms such as total income, but in relation with reference groups. In this sense, I explore the

mechanisms that operate as catalyzers of relative deprivation, by making explicit social inequalities and distorting the perception of others' wealth. Despite upward mobility and economic improvement, Chileans share the perception of "falling behind," which materializes in an "imaginary middle class" against which people compare their status, possessions and economic independence.

Finally, I show that the commodification of education, health and pension funds does not directly prompt people to acquire consumer debt, but operate as "income draining" mechanisms that demand higher shares of middle class families' "discretionary income." In combination with "relative deprivation," these "income draining" mechanisms leave families with few options to perform their desired class identities, other than learning how to bring resources from the future into the present with the help of department store credit cards.

## References

De Botton, Alain, 2004: *Status Anxiety*. New York: Vintage International.