

Tekst 8

Measuring madness

THE TYRANNY OF NUMBERS
Why Counting Can't Make Us
Happy by David Boyle

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BRYAN APPLEYARD

1 This is a strange book. Its thesis is straightforward enough: our obsession with counting and measuring has led us astray. Numbers tell us
 5 nothing, very little, or only what we know already. Of the complexities and nuances of life, they can say nothing; on the deep mystery of individual experience, they are silent.

10 It is time, says David Boyle, to stop counting and start living – “We die a little,” he writes, “if we do nothing but count.”

2 What is strange is the way he makes his point. He hops between
 15 “historical interludes” and contemporary analysis. Each chapter ends with a “bizarre measurement” and a couple of weird statistics, for example,
 20 “Number of floppy discs BT believes can store a digital version of every experience in an 80-year life – 7,142,857,142,860,000.”

3 The point is to establish the sheer
 25 eccentricity of our numerical mania and to prove its cultural specificity. Far from being the platonic absolutes we think they are, most numbers are products of local
 30 prejudice. They shore up attitudes and opinions, and hide what they do behind a mask of hard, unarguable truth. We think they tell us more
 35 than they do. Learning that people around the world have sex 120m times a day seems, at first, hugely informative but, on second sight, it means absolutely nothing.

4 More seriously, numbers can de-
 40 clude us into adopting appallingly damaging policies. Boyle goes into the history of the measurement of national income, admitting that
 45 Keynes made brilliant use of the idea as a way of managing wartime resources. But this also led to the mad, post-war pursuit of economic growth as a single, simple quanti-

fiable figure. We believed,
 50 for example, that building as many homes as possible was an unarguable good. In fact, it meant we knocked down perfectly
 55 good houses and erected cheap, nightmarishly bad tower blocks. Quality was left out of the equation because it was not
 60 measurable. Keynes’s legacy was thus interpreted as purely numerical, even though the man himself was primarily concerned
 65 with immeasurable culture.

5 The central danger is the idea that “numbers are serious and words are not”. There is a contemporary
 70 fashion for appearing to be hard-headed by referring to some supposedly tough and incontrovertible statistic. And this again leads –
 75 although Boyle does not go into this – to apparently tough-minded views such as the conviction that the human brain is “just” a computer. In spite of the multiple failures
 80 of artificial intelligence and the unarguable truth that arithmetic is an inherently incomplete discipline, intelligent people still like to insist that, in the end, everything is number.

6 85 The truth is, as Boyle makes clear, that nothing is. Outside the realm of pure mathematics and inside the realm of human affairs, number is a strictly limited tool that has to be carefully balanced with
 90 other forms of insight if it is to be useful. With some sceptical ambivalence, Boyle covers the way in which, for example, companies
 95 have begun to take on more elaborate assessments of their performance than the mere profit and loss accounts.

7 There are now environmental
 100 audits, ethical audits and countless attempts to assess the happiness and well-being of employees. His scepticism is justified here because, all too often, such devices simply re-



Kerb crawling: what do numbers tell us?

105 sult in the production of yet more numbers. And, in any case, companies often buy these ideas in the un-
 stated belief that they will, in fact, feed through to the bottom line, and that is always just one number.

8 So what is to be done? Boyle writes of counting less and getting it right in order to get closer to “joy and humanity”. Doctors and econo-
 115 mists, he says, can frequently see and understand a problem without measuring it. Such expert intuition is more valuable than costly accounting.

9 120 I’m sure he’s right, but I am less sure that he understands the scale of the problem. Numbers are powerful not just because they are persuasive, but also because we believe
 125 in little else. We are dubious about expert intuition and even more dubious about the quality and scope of our own feelings and insights. We worship numbers because, like
 130 God and the planet, they seem to be bigger than ourselves. But, unlike either, they are dependent on us. As such, they are to be as rigorously mistrusted as any other human
 135 artefact. Boyle’s book successfully stimulates mistrust. Whether it does anything to rekindle trust in ourselves is another matter.

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- 1p **26** ■ Why does Bryan Appleyard call “The Tyranny of Numbers” a strange book?
- A It appears to lack coherence in its treatment of the subject matter.
 - B It dares to challenge the importance of counting and measuring.
 - C It depends on numbers to prove that numbers are in fact meaningless.
 - D It needs a great many words to deal with a perfectly well-known phenomenon.
- 1p **27** ■ Which of these words can be inserted before “We think they tell us more than they do.” (lines 33-34)?
- A Admittedly,
 - B As a result,
 - C Rather,
- 1p **28** ■ Which of the following is true according to paragraph 4?
- A After the war, Keynes was forced to revise his ideas on the economy.
 - B In Keynes’ view, welfare could be achieved on the basis of exact calculation.
 - C Keynes believed in economic growth as a prime condition for human happiness.
 - D Keynes’ economic theory has led people to pursue misguided policies.
- 1p **29** ■ Which of the following reflects the position the reviewer takes in paragraph 5?
- A He shoves Boyle’s ideas aside in favour of a theory of his own.
 - B He shows his agreement with Boyle’s book and explains its main argument.
 - C He supports Boyle’s argument and expands it along his own lines.
- 1p **30** ■ What does the reviewer suggest about “such devices” (paragraph 7)?
- A They are ultimately intended to increase the profits of companies.
 - B They cannot express in hard figures the clashing interests of companies and employees.
 - C They have yet to show any impact on the reputation of a company as a whole.
 - D They will only obscure the harsh reality of working conditions.
- 1p **31** ■ Which of the following sums up the reviewer’s conclusion with regard to believing in numbers?
- A Life’s really important decisions are taken without recourse to numbers.
 - B Numbers are more than just tools of communication.
 - C Numbers have a right and a wrong of their own.
 - D People should see the relative value of numbers.