Why enumeration counts

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1. Burchell, Graham, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (editors) (1991), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 318 pages.

2. Scott, James (1998), *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 460 pages; also Cohn, Bernard (1987), "The census, social structure and objectification in South Asia", in Bernard Cohn (editor), *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, OUP, Delhi, pages 224–254.

ABSTRACT Enumerations of informal settlements undertaken by their own community organizations have become increasingly common. These help urban poor communities to mobilize knowledge about themselves – knowledge that is valuable for their own discussions, that helps develop better relations with local governments. This commentary discusses why it is important for communities to have the right to undertake their own research, and how this can become an irreversible force for stronger negotiations with those who see them as a burden, a blight or a vote bank.

KEYWORDS deep democracy / empowerment / enumeration / informal settlements / participation / surveys

As the papers in the April 2012 issue of *Environment and Urbanization* richly demonstrate, the communities, federations and networks that form Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) and many closely related coalitions of the urban poor now have a deep record of local and transnational organization, exchange, advocacy and collaboration. In the more than 15 years since this network was established, much has been learned about the ways in which knowledge plays a role in the empowerment of the urban poor, both within these communities and with regard to their dealing with local and national states and with local and global funders.

One big result of these developments has been the gradual expansion and refinement of the techniques of self-enumeration within these communities. The first lesson of the experiences with self-enumeration is that they offer a new perspective on censuses and related activities to generate knowledge about subaltern communities. Starting with the influential work of Michel Foucault,[1] and articulated also by such thinkers as James Scott and Bernard Cohn,[2] censuses have typically been seen as instruments of state power and control over those communities that they seek to control. Along with mapping and ethnographic surveys, censuses are seen as one of the tools that enables "seeing like a state",[3] in a manner that enhances the capacity of the state to monitor, measure, tax and police the poor through documentation techniques. It is only recently that self-enumeration, self-mapping and self-documentation have begun to be seen as a "weapon of the weak"[4] and as part of the political self-expression of urban slum communities.[5] The essays in the April 2012 issue of *Environment and Urbanization* demonstrate beyond any doubt that enumeration and mapping can also be tools that enable poor urban communities to mobilize knowledge about themselves in a manner that can resist eviction, exploitation and surveillance in favour of advancing their own rights, resources and claims.

A further implication of the descriptions of self-surveying described in these essays is that they are far more than tools for documenting social reality as it exists. They are in fact tools for group formation. As the excellent descriptions make clear, in some important sense communities do not exist until they are documented. By this, I mean that a community is not only a living, breathing and interacting social force; it is also an abstraction, in the sense that it must exist in the minds of its members as something with social power, moral force and, indeed, some sort of sacred significance.

This is what we have learned from the lifelong work of the French sociological giant, Emile Durkheim, who showed, especially in his classic work on *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*,[6] that the idea of "God" or of the "Sacred" was nothing more nor less than the symbolic condensation of the force that society exerts within the inner life of all members of any community. Such consciousness of community, in Durkheim's view of simple, tribal societies, is mostly produced by the effervescence and excitement generated by collective rituals, in which members discover and celebrate their existence as more than a collection of individuals who happen to live together. This is the true foundation of the frequent use of the word "ritual" among members of the SDI alliance to describe their most favoured, repeated and creative practices. One crucial part of these rituals is composed of the enumeration, mapping, surveying and documentation that are described in these essays. If Durkheim is right, then these exercises have much more than a utilitarian purpose. It is in and through them that members of any community come to see that their community is not simply a material fact or an empirical reality but that it is also the source of moral order, power and value in their lives. Self-enumeration takes this power away from external agencies such as the state and puts it back where it truly belongs, which is within the community itself. In this sense, no community of the urban poor may truly be regarded as existing until it develops such rituals of self-knowledge and self-evaluation. Until that time, it is a passive, empirical reality vulnerable to definition and manipulation by others. Once self-documentation is established, the moral force of the community becomes part of the process of deep democratization.

It is this relationship between self-knowledge and community formation that makes it important for poor communities to exercise what I have elsewhere called "the right to research".[7] Research is normally an external force that invades and disturbs the lives of the poor, because it is allied with alien interests, fleeting commitments and limited trust. The poor have every right to be suspicious of outside researchers; but more empowering than suspicion is the building up of the capacity to conduct research by the community, on the community and for the community. This is true for all communities, including the poor ones described in these essays. Here, it is important to recall that the censuses, surveys and maps created by the urban poor are not just methods for creating information but are also methods for creating knowledge. Information is neutral, impersonal and generally passive. Knowledge is situational, social and active. Through the techniques described in these pages, the urban poor generate new knowledge about themselves. Through this process they are simultaneously creating themselves (as I argued above), while also asserting the right to do research on their own terms.

Indeed, these two underlying processes – community formation and the development of the capacity to do research – are themselves

3. See reference 2, Scott (1998).

4. Scott, James (1985), *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 414 pages.

5. Appadurai, Arjun (2001), "Deep democracy: urban governmentality and the horizon of politics", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 13, No 2, October, pages 23–43.

6. Durkheim, Emile (1925), *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (French original), F Alcan, Paris, 647 pages.

7. Appadurai, Arjun (2006), "The right to research", *Globalization, Societies and Education* Vol 4, No 2, July, pages 167–177.

part of the deepening of the democratic process within and across these communities of the urban poor. They are not simply secondary or ancillary processes that improve the quality of the information used by states, funders and policy makers as these communities negotiate with them, although they also have this quality. More importantly, they are active, generative and self-defining practices that, through their repeated use and improvement, become part of the political self-consciousness of these communities, reminding their members that their communities are greater than themselves. As this greatness is better understood by the poor, it becomes an irreversible force for stronger negotiations with those who still see the urban poor as a burden, a blight or a mere vote bank.

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