

**DOCUMENT, FACTUALIZE, AND COMMENSURATE  
HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS**

*Keywords:* categories, counts, figures, registration technologies, documentary artifacts, archives, political violence, facts.

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## **1. Introduction**

This cluster aims at strengthening the link between the field of social studies of science and technology (STS) and that of human rights, by examining three central operations that are part of the management of severe human rights violations: *documenting, factualizing and commensuring*.

Although the field of the social sciences of human rights resorts more and more frequently to the documentation, factualization and commensuration of human rights violations - let us think of witness statements, forms of admission and qualification of victims, lists of prisoners, databases of victims, national numbers of disappeared or world numbers of displaced -, has not stopped to analyze the social, political and technical processes that give rise to such operations and artifacts or to explore their consequences in the management of such violations. To date, in these disciplines, records of human rights violations have generally been used to give plausibility to the violence, crime or violation of rights under study, rather than to examine their constitution and effects.

The principles, concepts and tools of STS help us bridge this gap, since they allow us to identify and examine the role and effects of a series of “infrastructural” Bowker (1994) and, often, “invisible” (Leigh Star 2010 : 382) operations –such as nominations, classifications or typologies – and of various non-strident objects that participate in the documentation, factualization and commensuration of serious human rights violations: anthropomorphic files of disappeared people, photographic or audiovisual captures of victimizing events, passports, birth certificates and other identity documents: “‘humble’ (Miller 1987: 107), relegated objects that, nevertheless, possess great power due to their capacity to conventionalize behaviors and norms” (Bernasconi 2019: 29) and to attest the existence of beings / facts / policies of violence.

Governmental or alternative operations and objects mediate the management of these violences, generating universes, discrete phenomena, stable populations and “thinkable subjects” (Gatti 2017). Operations and objects that, at the same time, are continually challenged, broken and overwhelmed by the occurrence of violence; horrific actions that exceed our nomination and categorization repertoires; even more so our

quantification systems. Extraordinary and mobile practices, in dislocated states, with their visibility and clandestine games and their dehumanizing methods, designed to expel people from the field of citizenship and 'erase' or 'suck' men and women from the face of the earth. Bodies without a name, disappeared without a body, 'known unknowns', liminalities (Bernasconi & Ruiz 2018) that appear from the margins of our "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière 2009), rattling (Martínez & Gatti 2020) the available objectification systems.

By bringing together empirical research that draws on the principles, approaches and concepts of STS studies for the investigation and problematization of documentation, factualization and commensuration processes of severe human rights violations, this cluster poses the challenge of bringing to the field of studies of STS two issues that have been difficult to address: the question about the subject, the lived experience and with it, issues of intelligibility and significance and, related, the question about politics, criticism and responsibility.

At the same time, STS studies, and more globally, the contributions of materialistic, pragmatic, and immanent sensibilities, contribute to raise a *posthuman agenda* for human rights research. If in this field it is essential to think of the subject as an agent and victim of violence in order to assign responsibilities and blame (Ricoeur 2000; Donnelly 2003; Goodale & Engle Merry 2007), a posthuman human rights agenda contributes to examining the forms of emergence of these subjects, to place them in the network of human and non-human relationships that constitute and sustain them, and to observe the distribution of agency in diverse forms of relationship that often occur outside the norm, exposing ourselves to the field of the *(in)human*.

## 2. Three dimensions of research

### 2.1. Documentation

Documentation of human rights violations is often claimed and promoted by survivors, relatives of victimized people and activists as part of their practices of resistance and the fight against impunity. In this way, it is inscribed in a field of dispute that has to do with violence – led by state and non-state agents - as an exceptional but finally institutionalized form of control (Bernasconi 2018). Thus, the documentation of human rights violations tends to emerge, first of all, as a solidarity, urgent and pragmatic reaction to someone who suffers this type of violation. Under these circumstances, documentation not only aims to gather key information, it also seeks to "exert control over the meaning of the events in question and fix their value" (Bernasconi 2019: 147, Petryna 2002, Diaz and Gutierrez 2009). When crime is part of a systematic and not accidental exercise, its documentation makes it possible to apprehend its mode of operation, to distinguish different forms of aggression, to mediate its enunciation and to help define the type of assistance required. In short, documenting human rights violations allows vulnerable populations to act in their defense, while representing an antidote to impunity and forgetfulness (Bernasconi 2019, Bernasconi, Ruiz and Lira 2019).

A paradigmatic example is what occurred in Chile under the dictatorship (1973-1990), where the documentation of systematic human rights violations was, first of all, carried out by civil society organizations that defended and assisted the repressed, and denounced the truth of the crimes that the dictatorship denied (Ahumada et al 1989, Bernasconi 2019, Del Villar 2018, González 1981). Decades later and even currently, these documents have been transferred to other processes for managing this catastrophe in the legal, health, pedagogical and cultural fields.

At the level of documentary techniques, artifacts and processes, we are interested in asking: what is documentary matter and what role do recording and archiving devices play in this definition? What social, political, epistemological and ontological effects does the documentation of severe human rights violations produce? What relationship is established between archives and memories of atrocities? How to translate heinous files and for what purposes? What is the docility and recalcitrance of this type of documentary artifact?

## 2.2. *Factualization*

We call the factual constitution or factualization of the reality of a crime, violence and / or violation of rights (Dulong 1998, Zimmerman 1974) to those operations of translation of lived experience; a unique and immeasurable situated experience (Akrich, Callon & Latour 2006, Diaz 2017). These translations necessarily imply degrees of deindexicalization and can comprise verifiable qualitative abstractions in the use of categories, typologies, and forms (Thévenot 1986), and quantitative abstractions expressed in numbers, figures, and statistics.

These translations are carried out each time an event or experience is recorded or registered, in a testimony, in a list of victims or in an accounting record of violence. With the register we go from the level of private to public experience, from events to facts, from the “world”, the flow of life, to the “reality” formatted or framed in forms and equivalences (Boltanski 2009). More fundamentally, factualizing is a way of inscribing phenomena that would otherwise be unrepresentable in the ‘distribution of the sensible’ (Rancière, 2009).

In recent years, in Europe and the United States we find an example in the mass death of migrants at international borders. These deaths have been classified as a systematic issue resulting from migration and border policies thanks to the objectifications and records carried out by militant groups (Last 2017, Martinez & Díaz 2020).

Nevertheless, the attestation is not a re-presentation of reality; rather, it constitutes it and contributes to creating new distinctions and social categories such as “victim”, “disappeared”, “genocide”, “femicide” among several others that are so common today that they seem self-evident. However, all these categories are the result of the sociotechnical work of attestation, registration and formalization that allows them to circulate and be sustained over time through activities of various fields (legal, administrative, pedagogical, cultural).

Some of the questions that we are interested in addressing in this specific dimension of the cluster are: What kind of practices, devices and operations participate in the factualization / registration of crimes, violence and violation of human rights? What are the effects of factualization / registration practices? What epistemological, political and ethical paths can be traced by following the registry of victims and victimizing events? What are some of the dynamics between objectifications of violence and the break / rupture / subversion of such objectifications?

## 2.3. *Commensuration*

Factualization or registration activities imply processes of homogenization and equivalence in order to organize elements, events or individuals in the same level (Desrosières 2008, 2014). This commensuration entails establishing criteria and parameters (Espeland & Stevens 1998, Bowker & Leigh Star 2000) to bring together a series of experiences and events under the same category; law, regulation or standard that would otherwise be dissimilar and irreducible, as in the particular case of a “disappeared” in Chile in 1973 and the case of a disappeared in Mexico in 2020. Both justice and statistics, although in different ways, commensurate. Justice is not emancipated from ethics and the singularity of jurisprudence, but requires equalizing the subject and his experiences under the same regulations to distribute penalties and reparations. Statistics, on the other hand, is a deindexicalization procedure that detaches itself from the singular case and operates by generating a new universe of visibility that otherwise did not exist: the measurable panorama of reality.

Emblematic numbers of victims are one of these measurable panoramas, allowing us to convey part of the magnitude of the violence inflicted: the 6 million victims of the Holocaust, the 30,000 disappeared from the

Argentine dictatorship, the 50,000 from Guatemala, and many more. The production of figures makes it possible to denounce the systematic nature of crimes, raise general causes and transform this violence into public problems. The figures also allow the government's management of pacification after a conflict, providing synthetic and universal messages capable of impacting large audiences. A clear example is the 2016 peace agreement in Colombia, which went through, among others, the closure of the casualty count and the production of a total number with which to continue acting and affirming the end of a five decade internal conflict.

The social sciences and humanities have analyzed quantification processes mainly as devices and technologies of power and knowledge that are at the disposal of the control of populations, bodies and the self (Foucault 2004, Rose 1991). Indeed, the massive quantification of social phenomena is born as part of the State's management, regulation and control apparatus (Desrosières 2008, 2014) and is prolonged in different forms of governmentality. However, as argued long ago by anthropology (Goody 1977) and recently restated by ethno-accounting studies (Cottureau 2016) and the sociology of quantification, quantification practices are, in general, useful not only for governmentality purposes but also to intervene in daily life and to be able to objectify and organize the environment, practices and social coordination.

In recent decades, the field of human rights and humanitarianism, globalized and professionalized (Fassin 2016), has been “seduced” (Merry 2016) by metalanguages, among them that of quantifications (Merry & Bibler 2013). In the face of state, racial, ethnic or gender violence, various metrics – figures, statistics, trends, distributions, among others – are participating in the identification and monitoring of situations in which human rights have been violated, of situations of non-compliance with obligations regarding these rights, as well as in the justification of the need for new laws and policies in the area (Longard & Fukuda-Parr 2012). But what are the limits of the commensuration of the experience of violence? What are its assumptions? What are the public, political, militant and governmental uses of the commensuration of human rights violations? Finally, what are the figures for human rights violations made of? and what is its social life? These are some of the questions that we are interested in addressing in this axis of the cluster.

### **3. Suggested Topics**

The proposals of this cluster may include but not refer exclusively to the following issues:

#### *Documenting*

Documentary material in severe human rights violations

- Artifacts and technologies for documenting human rights violations, crimes and violence.
- The social, political, epistemological, ontological effects of the documentation of severe human rights violations
- The links between archives and memories of the atrocity
- The (in)capacities of circulation and appropriation of documentary artifacts related to serious human rights violations
- The docility and recalcitrance of the artifacts that document human rights violations
- Human rights archives, memories and patrimonialization
- The public, political, cultural and artistic uses of human rights archives

#### *Factualizing*

- The factualization of human rights violations and their obstacles: controversial categorizations, stories in tension, conflicting figures, absence of data and figures.

- Tension between the factualization of crime, violence or human rights violation due to quantified generalization (statistics from Truth Commissions, for example) and the need for individualization by the victims (a face behind the figures)
- The social life of categorizations in the field of human rights violations, crimes and violence: social processes of categorization, emergence or constitution of new categories, circulation of categories, rise and fall of categories (victim, survivor, internal enemy, terrorist, etc.)

#### *Commensurating*

- The public and political life of the figures of human rights violations (public use of the figures, political use, effectiveness of the figures, circulation of figures)
- The production and management of the truth regarding human rights violations, crimes and violence (statistical or numerical truth, legal truth, testimonial truth, forensic truth)
- Controversial figures, "black" figures, manipulation of violence figures.

#### 4. Practical information

Your proposal should consist of an abstract (ca.300 words) and a brief biographical note (ca. 100 words). Please submit abstracts to Oriana Bernasconi ([obernasc@uahurtado.cl](mailto:obernasc@uahurtado.cl)) or Paola Diaz-Lizé ([paola.diaz@ehess.fr](mailto:paola.diaz@ehess.fr)) with the subject "Issue Title"

#### Important dates

Activity	Deadline
Call for abstracts	April 15th, 2021
Decision on abstracts	May 1st, 2021
First drafts	June 30th, 2021 (full <b>8000- word</b> drafts)
Editors comments to authors	August 15th 2021
Revised drafts for external review	September 15th 2021
Comments Returned	December 15th 2021
Final version to editors	January 30th 2022
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