

We can't count our way out: Rethinking quantification amidst digital authoritarianism

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Abstract

As digital infrastructures become increasingly central to statecraft, so too do the quantitative techniques that animate them. In this commentary, we contend that digital infrastructure, authoritarian politics, and postpositivist thinking coalesce in authoritarian counting, or ways of making evidence that couch projects of exclusion, expulsion, austerity, and violence in the aesthetics of objectivity. We argue that the ascent of authoritarian counting requires that we re-envision the goals, audience, and character of quantification. Confronting an antagonistic state forces us to reconsider who the audience for counter-data is and what its goals are. A core contribution of critical quantitative work must therefore be to conceptualize, as a central measure of quantification's efficacy, whether counting with each other can engender forms of counting on each other.

Keywords

Critical quantification, evidence, authoritarianism, digital activism, United States

What we are in

Contemporary authoritarian governance (Koch, 2022) leverages digital technologies with a postpositivist politics that both disavows and operationalizes empirical authority. In the U.S., authoritarian actors wage a “war on measurement” (MacGillis, 2025) while simultaneously

exploiting the aesthetic authority of data. The Trump administration's firing of the Bureau of

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Labor Statistics chief over “faked... Jobs Numbers” exemplifies this politics.¹ The state automates austerity with artificial intelligence (AI), uses tax records to fuel border patrol, and transmutes personal identity into risk. This is not a retreat from quantification, nor is it a clean break from some previous liberal order; it is their disfigured reinvention.

Digital infrastructures, authoritarian politics, and postpositivist thinking coalesce in authoritarian counting—ways of making evidence that couch exclusion, expulsion, austerity, and violence in the aesthetics of objectivity. Here, we argue that the ascent of authoritarian counting requires re-envisioning the goals, audience, and character of quantification away from evidence-oriented counting and toward “movement math”—calculative logics that hinge on “our means to take collective control” over our lives (Rosenthal and Vilchis, 2024: 29).

Focusing on the U.S., we characterize authoritarian counting along two vectors: spectacles of quantification and techniques of ordinalization. Spectacles of quantification, such as the Department of Government Efficiency’s so-called savings dashboard,² situate antidemocratic statecraft in quantitative aesthetics. These imitations of methodological rigor embrace the pageantry of data and AI to develop aesthetically coherent numerical evidence. Techniques of ordinalization, such as the creation of a unified application programming interface for sharing taxpayers’ data with deportation officers (Turton et al., 2025), apply the surveillant, datafying tendencies of Silicon Valley as a practice of quantitative governance.

Developing counter-data to combat structural power imbalances provides one avenue for resisting authoritarian counting. However, confronting an antagonistic state forces us to reconsider who the audience for counter-data is and what its goals are. If we cannot count our way out of authoritarian governance, it is imperative for critical quantitative scholars to ground accountability in their research and praxis, not as an afterthought, but as an organizing

principle for principled organizing. A core contribution of critical quantitative work must therefore be to conceptualize, as a central measure of quantification’s efficacy, whether counting with each other can engender forms of counting on each other.

The quantitative politics of digital capitalism and the troubled evidence of authoritarian counting

How people count forms a critical part of public policy and formal statecraft. Modern capitalist states depend on and produce “public habitat(s) of numbers” in order to exercise power (Rose, 1991). The U.S. Census, a constitutional mandate that geographically underwrites how people are included or excluded in democratic life, shows how state-sponsored enumeration is simultaneously a precondition for redistributive policies and an act of biopolitical control. Through the 19th and 20th centuries, the numbers it produced brought democratic practice into being—quite literally, through apportioning political representation—while also providing the statistical foundation for racism and eugenics as state policy (Kanström, 2010). Here, the seeds of authoritarian counting are planted in the numeric foundations of liberal democracy.

Under digital capitalism, counting characterizes everyday life, even if people do not always have control over how they are counted. The production and continuous collection of data depend on objects, interfaces, and practices which “first quantify and then dispossess” (Thatcher et al., 2016). At the scale of civic society, this culminates in “ordinal citizenship,” where people are sorted, ranked, and moralized according to the logics of capital (Fourcade and Healy, 2024). In some respects, however, counting scarcely seems to matter at all; the right has co-opted “a wide range of theories associated with the postpositivist left” (Wyly, 2009) that make it easier than ever to manipulate and fabricate stories with quantitative evidence. The rising tide of generative AI, fueled by data and the promise of future datafication,

1. <https://archive.is/nULLj>

2. <https://archive.is/a9Tab>

means evidence is both abundant and spectacular (Gregg, 2015). While these systems depend on specialized quantitative methods, the outputs they produce are often detached from any measurable, observable reality.

It is easy to imagine a certain kind of world exists, even if it does not, when its evidence abounds: evidence for conspiracy theories, for violent deportation, for racist borders, for war. That these kinds of evidence often derive from juked stats or cooked books does not make them any less real. In performing “the discourse and aesthetics of empiricism,” such evidence goes beyond depicting; it assembles (Rice, 2020).

Following Jenny Rice, navigating this unstable landscape of evidentiary claims means attuning differently to evidence itself—not as something that *is*, but as something that *does*. This requires investigating the material and structural processes behind acts of evidence, “how evidence operates apart from its contents” (Rice, 2020), and what sort of feelings evidence produces in the encounter between subject and object. Critical quantitative scholars, policy-makers, and activists must confront that authoritarian counting *does* produce actionable evidence, and consider what that means for their evidence in turn.

Anticipating that the right would continue to co-opt postpositivism, Wyly (2009) and others (cf. Sayer, 2010) have called for an activism that harnesses the tools of quantitative spatial science for emancipatory ends. These interventions foreground the historical mutability of political–epistemological alliances, yet presuppose a political environment that is amenable to incorporating socialist and progressive viewpoints rather than annihilating them. The question, then, is not whether to reject counting, but how to reclaim it as a social practice accountable to people, not evidence. A barrage of unbelievable evidence from an openly antagonistic state necessitates a fundamental recalibration away from evidentiary appeals and toward an applied solidarity.

We can’t count our way out

Authoritarian counting reduces quantification to narratives that evacuate context and inhibit collective responsibility. The task ahead is to rebuild

counting as a social relation—not a tool of oppression, but as a means to hold each other accountable. If we cannot count on the state, if policy and law increasingly refuse to register harm or redistribute resources, then the question becomes: what can we count on and how might an encounter with counting itself become an opportunity for mutual support?

Many scholars and activists already engage in precisely this kind of quantitative spadework, developing insurgent forms of intellectual labor that reject legibility to the state. These grassroots data practices rooted in movement math are not efforts to quantify for the sake of proof, legitimacy, or evidence, but to coordinate care, articulate demands, and develop emancipatory analysis—they are, we might say, acts of anti-authoritarian counting with, for, and on each other.

Counting with each other

In January 2025, landlords in Los Angeles exploited historic wildfires to gouge rents. Tenant organizers responded by coordinating a crowdsourced counter-data archive using Zillow price histories to track egregious price gouging in a public spreadsheet (Kirk, 2025). Reflecting on the project, organizer Chelsea Kirk said:

There wasn’t one type of person contributing. Some were comrades in the tenant movement. Some were realtors, attempting to distance themselves from their industry’s worst (natural?) impulses. Some were homeowners—millionaires even—suddenly confronted with the reality of housing as something that could be taken away. Most appeared to be ordinary Angelenos, furious at what they saw, people I’d never met.

Between the cracks of ecological and constitutional crises, the spreadsheet brigade emerged as an engine of collective solidarity just as much as it was a form of evidence. Other collective projects seek to build “data refuges” (Janz, 2019), as in the Data Rescue Project’s (<https://www.datarescueproject.org/>) work to serve as a clearinghouse for at-risk U.S. governmental data.

Counting for each other

When it comes to property in the United States, it is incredibly hard to know who owns what. Landlords have deep, granular data on tenants, while tenants may never even know their landlord's name. Increasingly, scholars and organizers are building digital tools to combat this information asymmetry. In New York,³ San Francisco,⁴ Philadelphia,⁵ and Boston,⁶ it is easy to search an address or owner and determine what else and where else they own. These are not data visualizations drenched in spectacle, but capacious tools for tenants to organize at scale and across geography (Appel et al., 2024).

Feminist counter-data projects also exemplify counting for each other as a form of resistance. In Colombia, activists developed a registry of femicide to reveal how state failures in data collection were complicit in the deaths of trans and cisgender women and girls. As journalist Valda Ampuero explained, the goal was not abstraction but humanization: to “give a face, an image, to those data” (D’Ignazio, 2024). So too with projects that bear witness to colonial and imperial atrocities, for instance, in Gaza. With the intentional absence of state data collection, organizations such as the Gaza Ministries of Health (Batrawy, 2024) build ledgers of loss as a way of holding power to account.

Counting on each other

It is time to act like we are in a crisis—not because the present crisis is particularly novel, but because quantitative scholarship sometimes behaves as if it has all the time in the world, lost in debates over statistical thresholds or trapped in endless cycles of robustness checks. The numbers do not speak for themselves. They never have. What matters is how they are spoken, by whom, and toward what end. The authoritarian right knows this.

So, let's count like we are in a crisis. Strategic positivism, as Wyly (2009) envisioned it, is not a call to retreat into empiricism but to instead reimagine its

uses. This requires rejecting the false choice between one fantasy that all data supports authority, and another fantasy that all authorities will support data. It means building quantification from the ground up, in conversation with movements, not as research subjects but as co-organizers. Authoritarianism thrives on isolation and opacity. Critical quantification must build its inverse: a practice of relational legibility, of counting on each other not just for survival, but toward emancipatory transformation. Their numbers are chains; ours must be bricks.

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3. <https://whoownswhat.justfix.org/>

4. <https://evictorbook.com/>

5. <https://www.whoownsphilly.org/>

6. <https://who-owns-mass.org/>

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