

Democracy, social inquiry and indicators: a pragmatic perspective

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Important economic and human resources are currently devoted to the construction and experimentation of new indicators of human well-being and of environmental sustainability. However the ontological nature of socio-political indicators and the reasons why they are progressively invading the public sphere are left generally unexplored. This article tries to shed some light on these questions with the help of concepts and propositions borrowed from the writings of two outstanding representatives of the pragmatic movement in philosophy: Peirce and Dewey. First, taking as illustration Lorenzetti's frescoes of the "Allegory of the Good and Bad Government" in Siena, and drawing on Peirce's semiotics we analyze political indicators as signs that circulate between the governments and the public. We then mobilize Dewey's theory of the public and of social inquiry to account for the increasing importance of indicators in contemporary policy-making. Bringing together these two pieces, we discuss the importance of cognitive structures called "frames" in the interpretation of indicators as public signs and the fact that they are most often than not different for the three categories of actors involved in addressing social problems: the political leaders, the experts, and the public. We conclude on the importance of organizing debates between these three partners as soon as possible in the social inquiry process in order to avoid mismatches between their respective ways of framing the problems.

Key words: Framing, Measurement, Public, Semiotics