

International Workshop “Quantification and Human Differentiation”

November 5 and 6, 2026

organized by Dr. Anja-Maria Bassimir and Prof. Dr. Axel Schäfer

Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies
and the Collaborative Research Center “Studies in Human Differentiation,”
at the Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany

Location: Conference Room 04-108, Hegelstrasse 59

Abstract

Quantification is a technique that assigns numerical values to objects, expressing complex and chaotic occurrences in abstract terms and thus making them readable, comparable, and calculable. The assignment of numerical values functions both as a technique of distinction and of aggregation, and depending on the context, numbers can emphasize either the uniqueness or the generality of what is being described. Quantification techniques have been used by states since the mid-19th century to understand populations and formed the basis of political economy. Particularly under the auspices of consumer capitalism, people were translated into numbers, assigned prices, and traded as commodities and risks, for example in the insurance market. Numbers and prices suggest “objective” or “true” values. However, quantification is a highly complex process that usually remains invisible but draws on or creates categories, evaluates them, and hierarchizes them. Quantification is the basis on which statistical calculations, the commodification of human lives, and their translation into monetary values function.

In this workshop, we will examine the historical processes of quantification and the creation of statistical individuals and commodified human lives. We will question which human-differentiating distinctions factor into quantification processes and how topics such as the standard of living, sociality, productivity, and normality/deviance become the basis for new human differentiations.

Schedule

Thursday, November 5

- 12:45–13:15 Meet and Greet
- 13:15–13:45 Bassimir/Schäfer, “Quantification and Human Differentiation”
- 13:45–15:00 **Keynote and Discussion: Dan Bouk (Colgate University)**
- 15:00–15:30 Coffee Break
- 15:30–16:30 Heike Wieters (Humboldt University Berlin)
- 16:30–17:30 Richard Rottenburg (University of Halle/Wits University)
- 17:30–18:00 Wrap-Up
- 18:30 Conference Dinner

Friday, November 6

- 9:00–10:00 Eli Cook (University of Haifa/Stanford University)
- 10:00–11:00 Tobias Werron (University of Bielefeld)
- 11:00–11:30 Coffee Break
- 11:30–12:30 Laetitia Lenel (University of Duisburg Essen)
- 12:30–14:00 Lunch Break
- 14:00–15:00 Thomas Stapleford (University of Notre Dame)
- 15:00–16:00 Final Discussion

Location: Conference Room 04-108, Hegelstrasse 59

Public Transport:

Go to the bus stop stop “Hauptbahnhof” or “Hauptbahnhof West/Taubertsbergbad” (underneath the overpass)

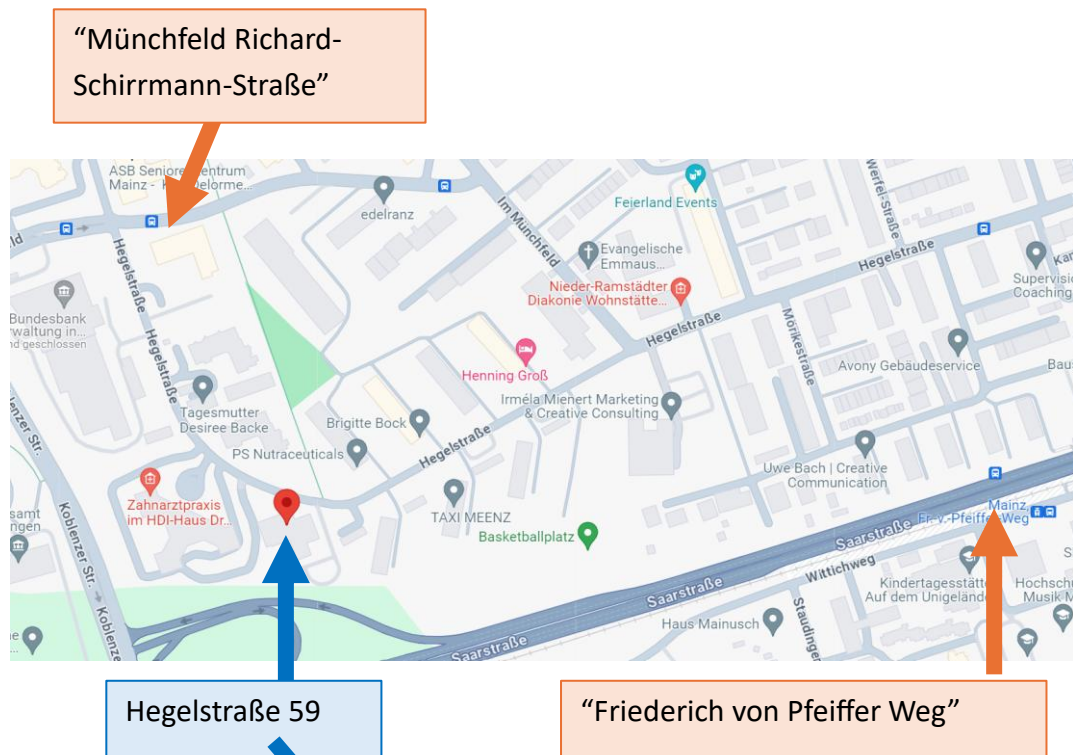
You can take either:

- Bus 6 to Münchfeld, or Bus 78 to Finthen Römerquelle, get off at the stop “Münchfeld Richard-Schirrmann-Straße” and walk the remaining 4 minutes.

Alternatively, you can take busses or trams to the stop “Friedrich von Pfeiffer Weg” and walk 12 minutes to the conference venue:

- Busses 54, 56, or 630 (going up the hill)
- Tram 51, 53, or 59 (going up the hill)

To plan other trips by public transport, you can download the app “Mainzer Mobilität.”



Dan Bouk:

Professor of History, Colgate University, Hamilton, NY, USA

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Dan Bouk researches the history of bureaucracies, quantification, and other modern things shrouded in cloaks of boringness. Bouk studied computational and industrial mathematics as an undergraduate before pursuing a Ph.D. in the history of science. He is the author of *How Our Days Became Numbered: Risk and the Rise of the Statistical Individual* and *Democracy's Data: The Hidden Stories in the U.S. Census and How to Read Them*, which was a *New York Times* Notable Book. His work includes essays and articles on the history of personal data in the U.S. and on the concept of the ‘baby boom’ generation, as well as the report *House Arrest: How an Automated Algorithm Has Constrained Congress for a Century*. He has been a fellow at the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library, the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, the Charles Babbage Institute, and the Data & Society Research Institute. He is Professor of History at Colgate University.



Heike Wieters:

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Heike Wieters’ research focuses on the contemporary history of European integration and governance, on the history of global welfare – especially old-age provision in Europe – and on the transnational history of interactions between the state and private players in business and society. Heike has published a monograph on the transformation of international food aid and humanitarian relief by the NGO CARE during the Cold War and has published widely in this field. Currently, she is working on a second book project on the Europeanization of Life insurance markets after 1945.



Richard Rottenburg:

Research Professor of Science and Technology Studies at Wits University, Johannesburg, South Africa, and Professor Emeritus of Science and Technology Studies, Department of Anthropology and Philosophy, University of Halle, Germany
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Richard Rottenburg is Research Professor of Science and Technology Studies at Wits University and Professor Emeritus at MLU Halle. His research examines processes of technicisation, with particular attention to evidence-making and infrastructures. He is interested in how these shape social and political relations and inform attempts to anticipate, design, and contest possible futures. He is the author of *Far-Fetched Facts* (MIT Press, 2009), a praxiographic study of knowledge and technology in development cooperation that helped open new perspectives on science and technology beyond their metropolitan centres. His current work extends these inquiries through research on technology and technicisation in Africa.



Eli Cook:

Research Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford University, USA, and Associate Professor, General History Department, University of Haifa, Israel

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I am a historian of American capitalism and an Associate Professor of History. My first book, *The Pricing of Progress: Economic Indicators and the Capitalization of American Life*, was published by Harvard University Press in 2017 and explores how Americans came to measure nearly every aspect of life in monetary terms. The book received the Society for U.S. Intellectual History’s Best Book Award as well as the Morris D. Forkosch Best Book Prize from the Journal of the History of Ideas.

I received my PhD from Harvard University in 2013. My work has appeared in The Atlantic, Time, Jacobin, Raritan, The Chicago Tribune, American Prospect, and Dissent. In addition to my academic work, I regularly write for and appear in public media to analyze and comment on American politics, the economy, and elections. I am currently a 2026–2027 Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS) at Stanford University and serve as an associate professor of history at the University of Haifa.

My forthcoming book, *Choose Your Captivity: How Corporations Built Our Choices and Sold Our Freedom*, will be published by Crown Publishing (Penguin Random House) on February 16, 2027.



Tobias Werron:

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Tobias Werron is a professor of sociological theory and general sociology at Bielefeld University. His research focuses on the sociology of competition, globalization, nationalism, and populism, as well as practices of theorizing in the humanities and social sciences (with a particular interest in collaboration). Together with Leopold Ringel (Bielefeld), he has conducted research projects on the history and production of rankings, which aim to explore the interplay between quantification, public performance measures, and the social construction of competition. He will present some of the findings from this research at the workshop in Mainz.



Laetitia Lenel:

Junior Professor for Cultural Economic History, Department of History, University of Duisburg Essen, Germany

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Laetitia Lenel studied history and philosophy in Freiburg, Berlin, and Prague. Since 2024, she is professor of Cultural History of the Economic at the University of Duisburg-Essen. Her research on the transatlantic history of business forecasting in the twentieth century has been awarded several prizes and has been published, among others, in *History of Political Economy* and *Oeconomia*. Her book on the history of business forecasting in the twentieth century was published by Cambridge University Press in 2026.



Thomas Stapleford:

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Tom Stapleford is Associate Professor in the Program of Liberal Studies at the University of Notre Dame where his research examines the intersection of expertise, algorithms, and governance. He is the author of *The Cost of Living in America: A Political History of Economic Statistics* (2009) and the co-editor of *Building Chicago Economics* (2011) and of *Science, Technology, & Virtues* (2021). Stapleford’s research has been supported by the U.S. National Science Foundation, the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, the Templeton Foundation, and the U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities. He is currently completing a book on *The Ethics of Official Facts*, about how we ought to calculate official statistics in a democracy, and he is director of the Notre Dame Program on AI and the Development of Ethics in Agents (ND-PAIDEIA).



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Anja-Maria Bassimir is a research associate and postdoctoral researcher at the *Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies* and the Collaborative Research Center 1482 *Human Categorization* at the Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz, Germany. Trained as a historian and religious studies scholar, she has written on U.S. American evangelicalism and religious periodical cultures. In her current research, she explores nutrition and agriculture as aspects of U.S. social policy and state building. Bassimir is the author of *Evangelical News: Politics, Gender, and Bioethics in Conservative Christian Magazines of the 1970s and 1980s* (Alabama University Press, 2022).



Axel Schäfer:

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Axel R. Schäfer is Professor of U.S. History and Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and Philology. In his research and teaching he focuses on U.S. intellectual and political history, with a particular emphasis on religion and politics, transatlantic social thought, migration, and public policy. His main publications examine the political mobilization of the New Christian Right, the relationship between conservative Protestants and the state, and the international engagement of U.S. evangelicals since World War II. In his current research he explores the historical relationship between immigration and the politics of consumption in the U.S., and how democratic societies, whose functioning is tied to economic growth policies, manage the transition to a post-consumerist age. He is the author of three monographs: *Piety and Public Funding: Evangelicals and the State in Modern America* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); *Countercultural Conservatives: American Evangelicalism from the Postwar Revival to the New Christian Right* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2011); and *American Progressives and German Social Reform, 1875-1920: Social Ethics, Moral Control, and the Regulatory State in a Transatlantic Context* (Franz Steiner Verlag, 2000).

