

Erica Charters: "Information and Knowledge during Eighteenth-century Colonial Warfare"

Counting, recording, and their accompanying paper records have long been seen as central to European imperial authority. Colonial surveys, for example, represented natural resources such as trees and minerals through numbers, allowing authorities to identify, classify, regulate, and administer such resources. They were made legible and "known," thereby able to be commodified and exploited. This paper examines some of the earliest attempts to count and commodify in modern European empires. Rather than focusing on the nineteenth-century avalanche of numbers, it examines eighteenth-century attempts to count manpower, namely, the counting of European troops. This paper argues that manpower was the most precious natural resource of early modern states and empires, and the focus of early record-keeping. Tracing the history of statistical techniques (including cameralism, political arithmetic, and double-entry bookkeeping) reveals how information on manpower – what historians have termed "paper technologies" and "technologies of government" – translated into actual knowledge and statecraft. Manpower records were technologies of imperial rule and technologies of knowledge, scientific methods of extracting knowledge. Yet authorities could also be overwhelmed by information, inundated by data that did not provide relevant knowledge or clarify policy. This challenges the historical assumption that modern state authority emerged simply through its ability to know more and more about subject populations.