



A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society

By Mary Poovey

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How did the fact become modernity's most favored unit of knowledge? How did description come to seem separable from theory in the precursors of economics and the social sciences?

Mary Poovey explores these questions in *A History of the Modern Fact*, ranging across an astonishing array of texts and ideas from the publication of the first British manual on double-entry bookkeeping in 1588 to the institutionalization of statistics in the 1830s. She shows how the production of systematic knowledge from descriptions of observed particulars influenced government, how numerical representation became the privileged vehicle for generating useful facts, and how belief—whether figured as credit, credibility, or credulity—remained essential to the production of knowledge.

Illuminating the epistemological conditions that have made modern social and economic knowledge possible, *A History of the Modern Fact* provides important contributions to the history of political thought, economics, science, and philosophy, as well as to literary and cultural criticism.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Poovey (English, New York Univ.) defines the modern fact as systematic knowledge that is derived from the theoretical interpretation of observed particulars, i.e., numbers. This distinction between description (numbers) and interpretation has not always been made, and in this work Poovey is interested in how numbers came to be seen as value-free and impartial while the theories used to interpret them are widely understood to be influenced by social and political factors. From the development of double-entry bookkeeping in the late 16th century to the early use of statistics in the 1830s, Poovey focuses on the history of wealth and economics in Britain. During this period numerical representations became an increasingly important vehicle for producing knowledge and displaying mercantile credibility and virtue and ultimately economic and social prestige. The modern fact is a pioneering epistemological designation, and this book is an important contribution to the history of science and thought as well as literary and cultural criticism.

Written mainly for the scholar, this book is recommended for large public libraries with research collections and academic libraries strong in the social sciences. —Jim Woodman, Boston Athenaeum

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About the Author

Mary Poovey has recently retired from her position as Samuel Rudin University Professor in the Humanities at New York University. She is the author of numerous books, including *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* and *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain*.

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