The production and utilisation of statistics on cultural audiences and practices has been a matter of public cultural policy in France since the early days of this policy in the 1960s. When they are not directly produced in-house, cultural statistics are generally commissioned by the Ministry of Culture or public cultural institutions. Most importantly, cultural statistics relate to a founding principle of public cultural policy, as they enable the measurement of cultural democratisation – regardless of what the generic term ‘democratisation’ is supposed to mean precisely (Donnat 1991).

Having established this relation between statistics on cultural practices and public cultural intervention, most scholars go on to investigate the ability of cultural policies to democratise access to culture. As in the fields of unemployment or crime – though admittedly on a different scale – these numbers are used to measure the efficiency of public policy. In this chapter, I do not adopt this evaluative perspective, which, as we will later see, often causes controversy. Instead of emphasising the numbers as such, I focus on those who talk about the numbers and, so to speak, make the numbers talk. In the process, I reconsider the role of numbers-based arguments in the debates, strategies and struggles on state cultural policy.

This role has been a changing one. Here, I wish to address the transformation in the use of statistics on cultural practices and audiences in the legitimisation strategies of state cultural policy in France. I will show how these statistics, which were historically constructed as instruments in the rise of public cultural policy, ended up backfiring and being used as ammunition for the critics of state cultural policy. In order to make this transformation more visible, I will address two key junctures. The first is the early 1960s, the early days of public cultural statistics, which coincided with the invention of state cultural policy. The second is the publication of the new national survey in 1990, which sparked controversy regarding the statistics.
The Politics of Cultural Statistics

on cultural practices at a critical point in what is now known in France as the crisis of state cultural policy.

The definition of ‘cultural needs’ and the legitimisation of public cultural policy through statistics in the 1960s

The conditions of possibility of cultural statistics

The production and use of cultural statistics took off in the mid-1960s, owing to a then unlikely conjunction between the fields of public administration, cultural community work and social science. At the time, distinctive rationales at work in each of these three spaces converged to make such a conjunction possible (Dubois 1999; 2012).

In the early 1960s, the utopia of a rationally planned public policy informed by science was widespread in the field of public administration. While economics was the government’s main auxiliary science, sociology also played a part in the elaboration of this ‘scienticised’ policy. This, in part, was due to the diversification of public policy domains; the evolution of planning is a particularly good case in point. Planning was organised after World War II under the authority of the state, with the participation of experts, trade unions and other representatives (Kindleberger 1967). From 1946 onwards, successive multiannual plans were designed to forecast and organise the development of the country. They initially focused on economic infrastructure and production. At the beginning of the 1960s, planning was extended to ‘social development’, including education, sports and culture (the Fourth Plan, 1962–1965). With these new policy domains, planners had to face new ‘uncertainties’, as they said. In order to reduce these uncertainties, they called on scientific expertise from sociologists. Leading administrators such as Pierre Massé, Commissaire Général au Plan (Commissioner-General of the French National Planning Board), or Claude Gruson, director of INSEE (French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies) openly asked for the input of sociologists, including on cultural matters (see e.g. Gruson 1964).

Social scientists were also in demand in the circles of cultural community work and popular education. At that time, cultural management functions were starting to become professionalised, with specialised training programmes, new positions and organisations. They required new skills – both symbolic and practical – that social science was able to provide (Saez and Claude 1981; Ion 1993).

The fields of social science and of sociology in particular were, for their part, still under construction. Sociology was still a weak discipline in the academic field: it had yet to achieve emancipation from the faculties of humanities and their dominant model, and it offered few professional perspectives (de Montlibert 1982). The public demand for sociological