

I will start with (1) a personal report; (2) say why I am not taking stock; (3) a FREE DIATRIBE.

1. At the Department of Education and Science I was moved from an exciting post with the Schools Inspectorate to an odds-and-ends job. Analysing the Inspectorate's survey of secondary schools I sometimes even worked evenings without regret, though ultimately it was pretty futile, as I expect very little I did will ever be published and reach any audience beyond two mathematically inclined School Inspectors. But then dazedly churning out garbage-projections (of school leavers, teacher supply etc), all based on trends I just had to invent (much of it by hand, as the computer was strike-bound) - and I was ready to chuck it.

For October I have fixed up an SRC-funded research course at Birmingham to look into the use and organisation of statistics in Eastern Europe. This may help me do what really matters to me - work out viable principles of economic decision-making for a libertarian socialist society. Otherwise we charge along blindly to end up in some bureaucratic dead-end, whatever the good intentions of a few leftists. I do not get the impression many of you are that interested: write and I will send you a discussion paper if you are.

I was looking into another project: sequential design of surveys, clinical trials, etc. Not just making the stopping-point depend on results as you go along, but making the actual design (e.g. stratification or clustering schemes) of the remaining parts a function of interim results. I was fumbling for a suitable metric of information, and strategies for efficient utilisation of information gained. But a drug-firm representative I had been introduced to was interested, as it could help them cut the cost of drug trials, made me uneasy about the implications. I was not as keen as on the East Europe project. As it was SSRC, it probably would have been cut.

In the 4 months between resigning from the Civil Service and going to Birmingham I am on the dole - reading, writing, thinking, seeing friends - and feel myself becoming a freer person I do not quite recognise. Radical-statistically I am involved in two groups: the Campaign against Lead in Petrol, and LAIR (an anti-vivisection group "of feminist/gay women" - but still glad to have my help). Again, if you want to know more or help, write to me.

2. This stock-taking business is a bore and a waste of time. As if these repetitive discussions of "strategy" affect what any of us think or do. Easier than anything else, of course, and of ritual value. People will do what they are interested in and have time for. On the whole, they will not be interested all that much in or have much time for what most other people are doing. Understandable, and something to put up with.

But let us do things instead of talking about doing them. Let us learn from the Health Subgroup in that regard. I did not like the social indicators pamphlet - cannot leftists ever suggest anything constructive instead of all these (as well as?) critiques. Moan.

3. Have you read Orwell's "1984"? He says you have always got the High, Middle and Low. Now and again the Middle overthrow the High and become a new High, while a new Middle gradually emerges. The Low do not stand much chance, though revolutions are always in their name. Bourgeoisie overthrows Aristocracy - no argument, straight Marx. Charlie thought Proletariat would overthrow Bourgeoisie. Does not tend to happen. A new Middle grows up in capitalism - bureaucrats and technocrats (in lumping them together I over-simplify), and this lot have a much better chance of making it to the top than the proles - expertise, contacts, confidence, ambition, breadth of view, arrogance. A Hungarian sociologist Ivan Szelenyi argues we are on the way up, especially out East. (See the magazine Critique 10-11; his book "Towards the Class Power of the Intelligentsia" is forthcoming from Harcourt and Brace).

Yes, we - let us not kid ourselves. Someone said Radical Statistics had the highest average income of any left-wing group. Already we have a middling amount of power, status and privilege - enormously less than the ruling class, sure, but rather more than the dustman, the lady who cleans our office, the secretary who signs the letters of some of us on our behalf.

But we is a diplomatic fiction here, We have in Radstats a microcosm of the intellectual hierarchy outside. Not so micro, either, since a good chunk of the statistician pyramid of the National Children's Bureau (a research body), say, or of the Institute of Education, are members of Radstats. My comments about "technocrats" apply much more to Professors, Directors, etc., scarcely at all to undergraduate students, research assistants, etc. And, to be fair, they apply less to the academic environment of most Radstats members than to any other.

The same person moves through different parts of the hierarchy at different ages. I was once frightened of a certain personage when he interviewed me for a job: he seemed very powerful then. Later on, liaising (lovely word) on behalf of the Department of Education with the outfit he worked for, we had fun and games together as equals. I am not frightened of him now even though he has become a Professor. Maybe I will get to be one (or even eat 'em for breakfast?). My Civil Service superiors thought I was able but doubted my "managerial potential" - i.e., I could not be encouraged to boss anyone around properly. Will I learn in time? (Have I already?) What sort of person am I? And you?

How embarrassed we are by all this! The structure is not our fault, and who would gain if we stayed deliberately at the bottom? With some influence we can achieve this and that for the cause of progress. Mmm...

And the others are much worse than us. We do not stand on ceremony, just call me Jim... O.K, but might hypocrisy not just be veneered onto the mask of power? I ask not guilt, just some frankness - talk it out, see what can be done to share out power (e.g., those reports you have to write about people). I know the structure places limits. But in those places where radicals hold some power, can they not experiment, find where those limits are by trial and error? Are the consequences of error really too terrible to risk?

Is this naive? Are our good democratic intentions a little bit bogus? Some of us know that one of the functions of Rad Stats is as a network of useful professional contacts. You did not know? Then you are not in it - not everyone is invited. Here on my table, together with the invitation to this stock-taking jamboree, is an application form for a small closed seminar of academics and civil servants on the use of mathematical models in Government. Could help me get a job some time... Look and see if this seminar is publicised in this Newsletter.

If you know the right Radical Statisticians you can even get to be an advisor to a "socialist" State, complete with labour camps - Cuba, Mozambique ...

The vague left (of which Rad Stats is part) has plenty of talk about demystification (itself a word to demystify many) and democracy, and I will not claim it is insincere. But an idea of how the society they want would work? They are not even interested in discussing it - they will come up with some cliché against "utopianism" and change the subject. Moan. They are against production for the market, but what co-ordinating and allocating mechanisms will replace it? Rhetoric will not allocate a ton of steel among different uses, as Alec Nove (Professor of Soviet Economics at Glasgow) points out. In the absence of clear alternatives, the State apparatus, repainted in red, looms as the only dread answer.

In a State-planned economy statistics are much more crucial than in a market economy. They do not just try to describe what is happening, but are a key tool in deciding what happens. (O.K - that is a trifle over-schematic; industrial statistics may influence firms' marketing strategies, etc.). With statistics more important, statisticians can become more powerful - especially if we manage to handle those bloody Party bureaucrats! Where will each of us be then?

Can we resist such a future? The forces leading toward it are massive, and we are caught up in them. But there are other forces, people driving for genuine self-determination. They are, I think, much weaker, but they are there. Even if they do not win out, they may mitigate the severity of techno-bureaucratic power, and that is worth doing. And if there is anything we can do about it, then only a pitiless awareness of the dangers outside and inside ourselves will clarify what that is.

If you want to follow up any of the issues, then write to Stephen at the address given on p. 2.