

Rad Stats - in the Context of the Radical Science Movement

I'd like to stress, right at the outset, that I would never have spontaneously offered a five-year-birthday review of Rad Stats. As someone who 'gave up' on RadStats at a very early stage and as someone who, having been proved wrong, has had a somewhat belated and peripheral involvement, I'd consider such an initiative presumptuous in the extreme. But I was asked and there are a few things I'd like to say about RadStats, so...

Let me start by telling the tale of my earlier non-involvement. It is, of itself, instructive of how far I think RadStats has progressed in the last five years.

Before RadStats I had worked with a number of radical 'professional' groupings: various sections of the Britain Cuba Scientific Liaison Committee; ?OR?, the radical operational research group; and the British Society for Social Responsibility in Science. Not at the time considering myself to be a practising statistician, I went along to the meetings that preceded the inaugural public meeting and ^{to} the meeting itself somewhat in the capacity of a 'fraternal delegate'. Like, I think, most everybody else I was amazed and encouraged by the turnout at that first public meeting. My encouragement was short-lived. I became rapidly turned-off by the tone of the meeting which was, for me, adequately captured by a comment I overheard, after the meeting, from one (representative?) attender who said disapprovingly "Isn't it strange how 'radical' has come to be synonymous with 'left-wing'?".

With a lot of other 'radical' activities on my plate at the time, I didn't place trying to politicize a group of professionals, in a profession I didn't particularly identify with anyway, interested in 'novel approaches' to their subject area particularly high on my

personal agenda. Others, I'm pleased to say, saw the earlier stages of RadStats differently. And it's thanks to them, the unnamed..., that I can now say that I assess the position of RadStats to be one of some strength and potential.

I reinvolved myself with RadStats some time later when it became clear that it was defining itself - by its activities - as interested in the same interpretation of 'radicalism' as interests me. In short, it took up, and still occupies, an important position in the loosely-knit collection of ~~radix~~ 'anti-capitalist'^{professional} groupings that have come to be termed the Radical Science Movement. And it is in this context that I'd like to offer some evaluative comments on RadStats.

RadStats now has a considerable number of achievements to its credit - pamphlets, particularly those of the Health Group, the book and its interventions in the statistical profession. So too do other groups - the Politics of Health Group, BSSRS Work Hazards Group, BSSRS Agricapital Group, the Radical Science Journal, and of course BSSRS itself. With most of these RadStats members, either individually or in a 'representative' capacity, have had some involvement. As well as the existence of each other, these groups benefit, sometimes very directly, from the organisational focus provided by the British Society for Social Responsibility in Science and it is in their own interest, as well as in the interest of the extension of the Radical Science Movement, that BSSRS should continue to flourish. I wrote in the last newsletter as to how support for BSSRS can be effected - so in fear of proselytising I won't repeat myself here.

Now, it would be particularly instructive, both for RadStats itself and for the future development of the Radical Science Movement, to consider systematically why it has been that such a radical grouping has maintained a continuing momentum around the 'discipline' of

statistics while it has failed or not even got started in others. Unfortunately, there isn't the necessary space here, nor do I feel the best qualified person to offer such an analysis. I've got a few ideas - about the nature of the 'discipline', timing, etc. - but nothing that adds up to a comprehensive picture. What I can offer for comparative purposes is some comments on the predecessors that I mentioned I'd worked with prior to RadStats.

On reflection, its interesting how fertile the Britain Cuba Scientific Liaison Committee has proved to be. Not only with the establishment of the present Britain Cuba Resource Centre, but with the way that it has fed into various other groups - BSSRS, Conference of Socialist Economists, ?OR?, RadStats itself, and many others. I'm not sure that we ever provided any real practical support to Cuba, but at a time when the BSSRS was working its way out of its 'socially concerned' mould, it proved an important focus for radicals to relate to others of a sympathetic persuasion within their own discipline.

And of course there was ?OR?. Of the three important activity areas that exist for any radical discipline based group - radicalising the profession, developing a radical critique and demystifying the subject area - ?OR? concentrated mainly on the first (as an organisation at least). It's hard to evaluate our achievements in this area. We certainly had considerable short-term successes, but the extent to which we have had, and continue to have, a lasting effect on practitioners consciousness remains to be seen. Although we laid the groundwork for a radical critique, and although no radical critique of OR (at least in Britain) would have existed without ?OR?, it is only coming to fruition, inter alia, through the activities of RadStats - most significantly the Demystifying book. Lastly, as for the popular demystification of OR, despite declared intentions and a certain amount of effort at the time,

this was probably our most underdeveloped area. But although ?OR? as an active group has ceased to exist, individual members are still very much alive, and we are still just making the contacts in trade unions, community groups, ad hoc campaigns, that need to develop before such work can seriously begin.

So then, how about RadStats? Particularly, how has it performed against the criteria I set up for ?OR?? I'll say nothing, at least in terms of past performance, about radicalisation of the profession. Still not being a practising statistician, it's an area with which I've had no involvement. (But I can witness to the affect of the Health Groups publications on the professions to which they've been directed).

The Radical critique is developing well - most notably of course through the Demystifying book. But note that I include this under radical critique and not popular demystification. As the latter, the book performed less well - despite its title. And I say this as much as a self-criticism as a criticism of RadStats generally, for we all still have great difficulty talking plainly and accessibly about issues and concepts which, lets face it, most of us are still struggling with ourselves.

Enough of the past, what about the future? RadStats must build up its links with the sorts of self-managed groups that I've mentioned above, in order to develop the framework for the popular demystification that we still need to pursue. Time consuming and not very glamorous. But trade unionists and community activists are rightly suspicious of fly-by-night academics trying to get their intellectual rocks off at the expense of their own practical struggle. Respect and credibility are only won by a record of practical support - a lesson demonstrated over time most clearly by the BSSRS Hazards work.

RadStats must work harder at 'radicalising' within the statistics, and neighbouring, professions. I say this, as I've admitted above, out of near-total ignorance of RadStats achievements to date. But I do have a sense of opportunities missed and I do have the knowledge that this is an area of work severely under practised by the Radical Science Movement generally. Again, not particularly attractive work - not nearly as rewarding as the acclaim from comrades for producing a 'neat bit of critique'. But a foremost mark of success for a radical group drawn primarily from within or around a particular discipline must be the strengthening of its political sphere of influence amongst its 'constituency'.

Lastly, and I apologise for being repetitious, RadStats or rather RadStats members must develop the position of RadStats within the Radical Science Movement. A political movement, unlike a political party, relies for its direction solely on the individual activity and energy of its members. The only discipline is the self-discipline that comes from personal commitment. Thus movements often appear, as indeed they^{often} are, extremely 'inefficient'. Links (internal and external) are often not made when they should be; initiatives are often not taken up or followed up; repetition in areas of work often occurs. Central organisation is seen, rightly in my view, as subservient to the activities of the peripheries. Organisation is, of itself, often viewed as essentially or potentially oppressive. The need to develop new forms of organisation has been the most important legacy of the last ten years of radical activity. But it is one thing to be aware of and to consciously fight against the dangers of oppressive organisation, it is another to let it slip altogether. Now, I'm not suggesting that lack of effort devoted to organisation has been, in the main, the deliberate product of ultra-libertarianism. I know from my own experiences, that when arranging a (highly committed) personal agenda organisational tasks

appear pretty low. But if we collectively view organisation as a collective task, we'll find that a small effort from each of us will allow organisation to run itself and greatly facilitate our other (higher priority?) activities.

So, to conclude. We can afford to let the radical critique flow along a bit now under the momentum already created. We must now look outwards - to our 'professional catchment' and to the rest of the Radical Science Movement. Success in another five years time will not, for me, just mean a stronger Radical Statistics Group with more active members and more publications to its credit but a stronger Radical Science Movement built out from its high spots of the present - of which RadStats is undoubtedly one.

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