

Constructing 'Socialist' Statistics*

I. Aim of Note

The purpose of this short note is to start a dialogue around the construction of a 'socialist' statistics. Over the last decade there has been a considerable growth in the innovative use of quantitative data and radical re-use of officially published statistics. Thus, many campaigns around particular social policy themes carry out their own surveys or re-interpret already published official data. But they are, of course, often limited to reacting to an initiative by a State agency. This does not make what they do reformist or irrelevant: it simply means that subjects tend to be tackled in a piecemeal fashion.

Further, whenever social statistics are discussed in general, the usual 'radical' approach is to develop a critique based on the fact that the definition, measurement and collection of socially important data series are ideologically unpregnated. Yet it seems to me obviously important to consider the practicalities of a 'socialist' statistics.

II. What DSS Said

One possible approach is that of the authors of Demyolifying Social Statistics. Their introductory chapter concludes by saying 'While setting out to topple a shibboleth (that social statistics are factual and objective), these chapters do not attempt to erect a monolith in its place...there is no methodological monopoly of truth', and that there are 'possibilities for its (social statistics) reconstruction as part of the struggle to build socialist society. Yet, the concluding chapter entitled 'Social Statistics: Towards a Radical Science' dismisses 'Socialist' statistics in only three pages. For Griffith Irvine and Miles 'the potential for producing new data...is limited by the enormous resources required' (p.373) and 'radical approaches to statistical technique are typically limited in applicability'. Moreover, they do not think there is much point in trying to produce new data and techniques because 'a different set of needs for statistics under socialism, and even in a heightened struggle for socialism, will generate different demands on statistical data and techniques, and different

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conditions for the development of new approaches' (also p.374). Indeed 'any strategy of "radical" statistics can hope for lasting achievements ...only by being developed...within and for an overall programme of social revolution'. The point is rammed home in the final sermon where we are told that to make a contribution we must integrate our work with that of radical political organisations and oppressed groups. Back to the (Party) monolith.

Instead, I want to consider what would be the essential building blocks of a statistical 'system' designed to promote the possibilities of mass participation in decision-making rather than to serve the interests of the Party or state planners.

III. The Basic Proposal

What therefore are the essential statistical requirements of such an exercise? The first step is to statistically specify the standards which have been broadly defined on a political level. I am not, by this, pretending that there is a divorce between statistical measurement and political fiat - I am simply distinguishing the identification of the elements of a concept from the enumeration of the data elements which correspond to the conceptual elements. Indeed, the latter is also a (highly) political exercise: thus Nectoux Lintott and Carr-Hill (1980) show how the choice of social indicators within a generally held social concern may lead to measures which facilitate social control or measures which are useful for public debate about living conditions.

Because of this, the measures which are proposed statistically should, as far as possible, be transparent. By that, I mean that changes in their values can easily be interpreted; this in turn requires that the underlying assumptions are clear, and the political choices are underlined.

Secondly, there is the problem of accurately measuring the present situation. This is not as easy as it sounds, because much of the production and distribution of goods is unrecorded. Nevertheless, once it has been decided that it is crucial to know the levels reached (or even unattainable) in respect of a particular aspect of welfare, reasonably accurate statistical tools can be developed. The point is that once we know exactly what we are measuring and what is the purpose of measurement, the actual design of a measuring instrument does, almost, become a technical problem. What, correctly, leads to hesitations on the part of planners

and statisticians is doubt over the utility of particular sets of data when they are collected or, if they are obviously useful in principle, doubt over whether they will actually be used. The problem of measuring the present situation is therefore closely linked with the desirability of attaining particular goods and the potential efficacy of the means available to obtain them.

Finally, we require a stocktaking of the available resources. This presents difficulties on both the theoretical and measurement levels. On the theoretical level, since no reliable knowledge is available as to which kind of resources are most effective in attaining which levels of welfare, it is not clear what resources to enumerate in such a stock-taking exercise. Yet this problem is often exaggerated: it is often possible to identify which resources are a necessary condition for the attainment of some desired end, although we cannot always be sure which are the sufficient conditions.

On the level of measurement, there is the problem of incorporating an evaluation of the quality of the goods and services (which are or can be offered) into any such overall assessment. For the simple enumeration of which kinds of goods and services are available is often a very misleading guide to what can be done with them.

Overall, therefore, the proposal is to construct an accounting framework which remains faithful to the basic measurement unit. Quantities of physical goods, differentiated by quality, should be displayed as quantities and not converted to value; labour available differentiated by aptitudes, motivations and skills must be the basis of planning; institutional constraints should be identified along with the presentation of data. It is simply a plea for dragging social statistics back to their origins - political arithmetic - and a plea that the policy be organised around people rather than the other way around.

Comments please.

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References

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