

Letter to the Editor of Radical Statistics Newsletter

Dear Editor,

I ~~heard~~ heard the argument that the technicians of the welfare state were the architects of social control many times in the late 1960's and 1970's. Capitalism, contrary to the predictions of the Old Left, seemed not only capable of solving its contradictions, but of growing at an unprecedented rate in the Western world. Attention, it seemed then, should be turned to the cultural products of this capitalism, to the insanity of much of this growth, to the ~~growing~~ growing control it needed to exercise over its citizens, over deviant members in its community. Illich proclaimed that doctors produced disease. Young ~~xx~~ argued that teachers, far from educating their children in any humanitarian sense, fitted them for the straightjacket of capitalist work. Walton argued ~~that~~ (perhaps most plausibly) that legal definitions and the legal system produced the criminals. And occasionally we heard that statisticians were engaged in a process of turning people into numbers, helping the institutions of social control to plan their rational bureaucracies.

But it is beginning to look as though we of the Old Left (although I only turned 30 last week!) were right, and that Britain is at the front of the global race into industrial decline.

The proof that these institutions discussed above are not agencies of social control is found in the fact that they are being chopped mercilessly at a time when the government has a greater need of agencies of social control than ever before, as it realises in its dramatic increased expenditure on the army and police.

True to its policy which seems to be to destroy the seedcorn (viz the steel industry, machine tools industry, coal etc.), this government has set to attack research with savage enthusiasm. It is trying to completely remove in-house government research. It has ~~slashed~~ slashed SSRC budget and number of studentships. Its cavalier disregard for high quality technical information was signalled from the very beginning with the outrageous farce of the Taxes and Prices Index (which the department of Employment quite rightly would have nothing to do with and which CSO then had to cook up) and now with the cuts on GSS budget which will mean great reductions in the Family Expenditure Survey from which the RPI weights are

derived.

And what kind of lead do we get from Radical Statistics Newsletter, from the editorial in issue number 20? We get told that there is nothing harmful at all in these cuts, that there was nothing progressive about the fight to defend the ILEA from philistine attack, indeed that unemployment should be a time of great potential for "radicals", who will be freed from the hum-drum of social control, and will be able to use their 'increased time and energy' to . . . well, to form an unemployed statistician's subgroup to . . .

I always used to think that the argument of the New Left, themselves usually teachers, social workers, medical workers and so on, was very arrogant; it was never they who were committing these heinous crimes, but their reactionary colleagues. It was never fully explained to me how they escaped being branded by the ideological nature of the job they did. The arrogance now continues in this assumption of how radicals will react to unemployment. Has the ~~reader~~ writer of the ~~ix~~ editorial never read any of the research on the psychological and political consequences of unemployment? Certainly, the folk myth is that unemployment leads to politicisation, but social researchers (and indeed Margaret Thatcher) know better. They know that all the evidence points towards a picture of unemployment slowly breaking down the morale of all but the most resilient, destroying personalities, destroying organisations, defeating the best will and effort on the part of those who try to organise against it. By and large, organisations of the unemployed in the 1930's were a ~~complete~~ disaster wherever they were set up.

The only hope is for everyone who is in employment to organise now to stop these cuts, to stand up for the importance of their jobs, to refuse to accept the lies of the need to cut the fat, ~~cut it~~ and, indeed, to campaign to remove the most stridently anti-egalitarian, anti-social, anti-working class government this country has seen this century. This is what we should be having editorials about, please.

Yours sincerely,

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5 March 1981

Dear John

I would like to comment on the proposal reported in the February 1981 issue of Radical Statistics which is to produce and distribute a pamphlet in time for the 1981 UK Census.

There seems to be insufficient time to gauge the feeling of the 'progressive' movement on the issue of the Census. A campaign of boycotts, falsification etc. should only be conceivable with the backing of a broad range of groups. Further, a careful assessment of the use made of Census data by organised groups involved in trade union, housing, welfare, race and other struggles should happen before boycotts etc are considered.

How does discrediting the Census weaken the position of those who hold a concentration of power and strengthen the position of those who don't? - surely the stand of Radical Statistics should be made in these terms. I cannot see how a massive blow for the oppressed would be struck or that any concrete results would show except for a few tremors in Whitehall.

Rather than attempting to disrupt the production of these statistics, Radical Statistics should be working with 'progressive' groups which can use Census and other official data. It should be used in building progressive campaigns, in the analysis and explanation of the changes in Britain's social structure since 1971 and the affects of the Crisis on different groups of people, and it should be used in working out how to combat the crisis as well as the Right's interpretation and response to it. The Radical Statistics group should be pushing for this use of official statistics, not abrogating their responsibility and leaving the arena to the Right.

If the ~~Census~~ is to be seen as concentration of information useful to the powerful it must be placed alongside taxation and social security records, credit card systems, telephone tapping etc. Clearly then, two distinctive features of the Census emerge. First, aside from the fact that individual Census forms could be leaked, Census information is about categories not individuals. It is not used directly against individuals. Second, completing the Census form is essentially voluntary and in view of that the Statistics Office has an interest in maintaining public confidence in the Census. This opens up a fairly obvious pressure point to ensure information does remain confidential, that the methodology is publicly explained and that the type of information collected is widely 'accepted'. It is in the direction of more

useful information that the Radical Statistics group should work in conjunction with other progressive forces. While some of the left are opposed to the Census, it is ironic that the Right are dead against personally providing certain economic information and having categories of wealth etc, published.

My most concrete suggestion is that a pamphlet should be produced, not now when it can only lead to an unorganised individual response to the Census, but later as the Census results are released. Such a pamphlet, along the lines proposed by yourself, would have the objective of encouraging critical use of Census data.

Finally, as someone who works in an official statistical office, it seems to me that the approach I have set out can win across statistical workers. On the other hand, the proposed boycott campaign might amuse a few but turn most off.

I have also sent a copy of this letter to the Editor for possible inclusion in the next Radical Statistics.

Yours,

Jim Crosthwaite.

Dear Editor,

While I agree that BSSRS members should not delegate all their menial tasks to an underpaid office worker, and know that some of the people who have done this job have found it difficult to get sufficiently involved in BSSRS to feel satisfied by it, I don't think the editorial comments on the subject in Radical Statistics 20 helped solve the problem. There is a considerable area of common interest between BSSRS and Radical Statistics, and presumably this, rather than a sense of duty, is why we affiliate. It's in our own interest to cooperate with them in any way we can, whether it is intellectually, menially, socially or financially.

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25/5/81

Ben Armstrong,
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Dear Ben Armstrong,

I hope I'm not too late to get a short note into Radical Statistics 21 to express my distaste for the editor's comment that appeared at the foot of p. 2 of Radical Statistics 20.

The British Society for Social Responsibility in Science is not a centralised committee of "glamorous" people riding on the backs of the labours of others. It is a loosely knit network of local groups, working groups and affiliated groups, of which the Radical Statistics Group is one. There is no "general involvement", other than via these groups. The centre, in so much as it exists, is an office, from which the Radical Science Movement generally (again including RSG) has benefited considerably over the last ten years. The office will not run itself, and it is in order not to exploit those that do support it that the appeal has gone out to raise money for a properly paid office worker. John Lintott is right in identifying the essential relationship between menial and intellectual labour, although the distinction is rarely as simple as he implies. (He doesn't identify where editing Radical Statistics Newsletters fits!) If John believes that the benefit (including political solidarity) that RSG gains from affiliation to BSSRS isn't worth the necessary shitwork he should move for disaffiliation. Otherwise BSSRS has every right to expect local, working and affiliated groups to help support the office. Who's exploiting who?

In haste, solidarity and a little anger,

Colin Thunhurst