

Statisticians against the cuts? II

In the editorial I wrote in RSN 20 I tried to express (perhaps too baldly) the following argument: if statisticians are by and large technicians of social control, then what is radical about defending their jobs? I didn't elaborate the first part of the argument since it seemed to me a position probably shared by most people in RadStats. I only quoted the editors of Demystifying...; I could also claim support from many articles in past RSNs, including John Bibby's in no. 21; and also from Cathie Marsh's convincing application of it to the particular case of opinion pollsters in Demystifying...

But, says Cathie Marsh in her letter in RSN 21, the "proof" that statisticians and "technicians of the welfare state" aren't agents of social control, but just workers doing an important job, is that their jobs are being cut; which is about as silly as saying that the fact that the government is refusing to subsidise some sectors of industry is proof that those sectors aren't out to make a profit - it's not that they're not trying, they're just not succeeding well enough! If industry is being "restructured", as they say, then of course that implies cuts in jobs. With statistics as with other industries, the Tories just want a better return on investment, hence the rhetoric of "cost-effectiveness", hence also their willingness to consider new statistical measures, such as the Taxes and Prices Index, where they can smell a profit.

Incidentally, why is the TPI an "outrageous farce" while the Retail Price Index is, by implication, "high quality technical information"? Technically the two are about as bad as each other, and they are both intended to manipulate wage demands and wage settlements. Of course it was crude opportunism for the Tories to introduce the TPI just when they were shifting taxes from incomes to expenditure; if anyone had accepted the substitution it would, as usual with opportunistic manoeuvres, have come badly unstuck, since the TPI is now rising much faster.

The "Old Left" is always more at home attacking poverty than repression, and the aspects of each that they don't attack are the ones that they've maintained whenever they've been in power, and which have a place in their vision of the future. Hence the condemnation of poverty caused by unemployment - which can be outlawed as "parasitism" later on - and the silence concerning the poverty of alienated labour at any wage - which will be necessary to increase productivity. Hence the defence of the statistical apparatus in general - it will even need further extension if every aspect of people's lives is to be rationally planned by experts - combined with denouncing specific bits, especially those managed by private enterprise (Stalin didn't piss around with opinion polls, oh no!).

My editorial wasn't in fact addressed to the Neanderthal Old Left, whose disappearance from the ranks of RadStats I had optimistically assumed, but to a "New" Left which is perfectly aware of the repressive role of statistics, combats it in everyday work situations, and in the course of RadStats activities, but nevertheless sees no better solution than to condemn all statistical cuts and defend statisticians' jobs. That position, I suggested, is incoherent, but of course we need to come up with alternative solutions. The general strategy I'd suggest is that where the State can't or won't perform certain functions essential to our welfare we have to find our own ways of seeing that those functions are performed: if it can't protect us from being attacked in the streets we have to defend ourselves; if it won't make housing available, or the earnings with which to buy it, we squat; and so on. "Radical" professionals can often play an extremely useful role, by spreading their expertise around, by contributing out of high earnings when still have jobs, and by contributing their time when they don't, e.g. doctors and medical workers in setting up alternative health care (a though of course useful skills are more often found outside the ranks of professionals: building workers, agricultural workers, mechanics, etc.).

In the case of statisticians it is much less obvious (-t least to me) whether and how our expertise might be usefully recycled. We have a role in countering propaganda which could be expanded, but that is perhaps not enough; hence my suggestion of an Unemployed Statisticians subgroup to address precisely these sorts of questions (but of course we don't have to wait till we're unemployed).

Last but not least, the problems of surviving without a job in the short term. I did not argue in the editorial that statisticians shouldn't defend their own jobs; on the contrary I made it clear that I sympathised - I would do the same if I had a job - if only because we're all entitled to a reasonable standard of living (although many statisticians are grossly overpaid). But for RadStats to simply condemn statistical cuts is to turn its back on its many perfectly valid analyses of the role of statistics and statisticians. And when Cathie Marsh (who turned 100, was it, the other week) urges everyone "to stand up for the importance of their jobs", I wonder where her outdated class analysis is going to take her next - support for the naval ratings facing redundancy? Why not, they have to eat too and they don't own any means of production.

(P.s. The figures given on p.7 in RSN 21 for "cuts in government statistics" do not say cuts in what, and could well be interpreted as cuts in statistical series (measured somehow). In fact they are cuts in expenditure. The cuts in staff are quite possibly greater. But the cuts in available statistics are substantially less (however measured) because of such factors as computerisation and very much higher prices for statistical publications. Just so we don't treat figures as carelessly as the opposition...)

Defensive reactions from BSSRS

Whether in haste or in anger, I don't think Colin Thunhurst read my comments on BSSRS office work properly. My point was that if office volunteers are obtained through an appeal to RadStats - on the basis of solidarity, RadStats use of the office for mail, whatever - without general involvement in mainstream BSSRS activities (social or economic statistics, say, is fairly peripheral), then the result is likely to be (cheap or free) alienated labour, division between menial and intellectual workers, and all the rest. Colin didn't address this point.

I didn't say BSSRS was centralised; and "glamour" is obviously relative, e.g. writing articles relative to typing them out. I think much of the work done by BSSRS is excellent. It wouldn't, after all, be worth writing to the Tory Party offices say with similar criticisms; but in view of the defensive reaction of Colin and others - to what was a specific gripe not a general slagging off - I wonder whether it was worth it in the case of BSSRS either.

John Lintott