

10th Session of the International Statistical Institute

Warsaw, September, 1 - 9, 1975

Two items at the recent International Statistical Institute meeting in Warsaw might be of interest to Radstat members. First was a session entitled "To what extent should producers of statistical data engage in research and analysis". John Boreham of the Central Statistical Office gave a paper here, as did Janet Norwood of the U.S.A.

Boreham's paper. Boreham's paper gave an account of the British Government Statistical Service, and of the pressures which are placed upon it. He seemed conscious of the power - implications of statistical information, and emphasised the need for political compromise which is often forced upon government statisticians.

Norwood's paper was more of the old school, claiming a meta-political role for statisticians. She concluded her presentation with a call for statisticians to steer clear of politics.

Of course, all this was too much for me, and I made a short contribution to the discussion emphasising the political content of statistical definitions, with particular reference to housing and unemployment. Much to my surprise, what I said was agreed to by the speakers, and I was later spontaneously congratulated by eminent government statisticians from Denmark and the G.D.R. What did I do wrong?

The other session of interest was entitled "The relevance of statistics to social sciences and the dangers of the use of fallacious arguments therein". There were three papers, by Badaloni and Rizzi, Herzel, and Sgritta and Varotti, all of Italy. I did not attend this session, but there was a rather nice reference by Herzel which compared empiricist sociology with the alchemy of old, continually attempting to convert base metal (data) into gold (theory). Sgritta and Varotti's paper however is of more interest, if only because it indicates to us that similar movements are getting underway elsewhere in Europe. Together with David Balmer, I prepared a ten page English version of the original Italian paper. I will be glad to send either to anyone interested. The flavour of their paper may perhaps be gained from the extracts given in the appendix. Their main points may be summarized as follows.

1. Official statistics are inadequate for researchers who are "unwilling to renounce a method of analysis based on the optic of a specific theoretical perspective". (1)
2. Unless this is recognised, we shall fall foul of 'data fetishism'.
3. For instance, counting *farins* is not the same as counting inches, since the meaning of *farin* contains an ideological component.
4. Hence official statistics cannot support any theory which is based on a theoretical perspective different from that adopted by the statistical office.
5. This establishes a link between the contemporary crisis of social thought, and crises in government.

01 It is clear from discussions with the authors that Karl Popper's notion of 'Conjectures and Reflections' is viewed very favourably in their eyes. They also refer approvingly to "Theorie and Realität", edited by Hans Albert (J.C.B. Mohr, Tübingen, 1964), although I couldn't find anything useful in this volume. (My copy came from University of East Anglia library).

They also referred to an 'alternative statistics' organization being established by the Italian Trades Unions. If any one wants to get in touch with the authors, their address is Facoltà di Statistica, Scuola di Perf. in Sociologia, Università di Roma, 00185 Roma, Italy.

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