

LETTERS

5th April 1976

Radical Statistics Group,
105 Noel Road,
London N.1.

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am doing research on the political implications of economic planning and its related techniques and am particularly concerned with the abuse of these techniques in central and local government (or indeed in any decision-making situation which is likely to have 'political' consequences). I understand your Group is concerned with this question.

I wonder if you could possibly enlighten me as to the aims of your Group, refer me to any publications or bibliographies which are pertinent to this problem and/or furnish me with any outstanding illustrations of political bias in decision-making as a result of the statistical assumptions and decision-making rules employed? I should be very grateful if you could give me some leads into this subject matter and perhaps if you think it worthwhile, I could drop in sometime over the summer as I shall be up in London for some time.

If anyone has any ideas or comments on this letter, please send them to:

Liz Atkins,
105 Noel Road,
LONDON, N.1.

Department of Sociology & Anthropology
University College, Swansea.

Dear Liz,

I enclose an account, rather brief, of my work and interests with reference to statistics. What follows will be sketchy and rambling; use it if you like.

My research is concerned with the responses of classics teachers in schools to changes/decline in demand for their knowledge. The analytical focus is on classics as curricular content; its definition changing as a result of negotiation between its purveyors, producers and distributors and other parties. This negotiation is affected by changes in the available cultural categories and images which can be appealed to for support; and the influence of statistics is one of these cultural factors.

Statistics is relevant to curricular negotiation in several ways. Most obviously the use of statistical method in constructing curricular policy tends to establish an argumentative base removed from discussion of content. The features of curricula fed into timetabling calculations are quantitative: numbers of periods, pupils.etc. Qualitative assumptions have to be built into this procedure ; for instance pupil numbers are usually estimated for the future, or produced by selective compulsion, or by 'guided' choice, and in allotting time to different curricular contents, norms of 'fairness' and 'balance' may operate, as well as head's personal prejudices. The point is, that the use of statistical calculation(and of computers) turns this procedure into a black box whose output is almost impossible to question.

Two separate points have to be distinguished. First, is the statistical thinking employed to mystify criticism and argument? For instance, is the distance of statistical procedure from everyday thinking used to conceal the fact that certain assumptions are enshrined in the input to statistical calculations? Secondly, are there features of statistical thinking which themselves encourage or facilitate mystification? Both of these are important, but my impression of the Rad Stats group is that very little been done on the second question.

A mid-point between these two questions is provided by another factor: national or cultural traditions in statistics. If you compare Quetelet and Galton you find that they developed different areas of statistics because of their different interests: Quetelet was concerned with averages, Galton with variance. Again, if one compared U.K. and U.S. statistics at an early stage, similar differences would presumably appear- individual differences in U.S. not U.K.: genetics vice versa? The German immigration to the U.S. has to be taken into account too (Hotelling, Lazarsfeld et al); but in the latter's case it looks as if part of his expertise that resonated with what was looked for in the U.S. developed, while the rest atrophied. What can be said of U.K. psychologists in this area? Did an emphasis on statistical calculation of mental factors et al reinforce the apparent over-methodologised atheoreticality (sorry!) of U.K. psychology ? I hear (is it true?) that this tradition continues in part by suppressing alien bits of its past, e.g. Spearman's creative theorising is ignored, his factor-juggling mentioned. A contemporary test case might be the attitude of psychologists generally to Liam Hudson.

This kind of query meets the examination of educational practice, for instance when the latter includes the use of models of mind in constructing curricular and school systems. Specifically, the notion of adolescence appearing in Hadow and Spens (late 20's and early 30's respectively) was built on, with a bit of Whitehead (adolescence as the 'age of precision') by Cyril Norwood to create the Norwood Report's tri-partite definition of pupils- rational, technical and mechanical, crudely. This was explicitly announced as a pragmatic, educators' classification, educational psychology as a 'scientific' area being politely put aside. Why was this possible ? Again, the most noticeable thing about the psychologists' counterblast (Burt, BJ Ed Ps 1943) is its mildness, but then Burt probably agreed with the Platonist and elitist assumptions embedded in Norwood's classification.

Hope the above may be of use or interest, at least as light reading

best wishes

Chris Stray

5 Burford Road,
Bromley,
Kent.

27th February 1976.

Dear Liz,

Thank you for all the effort you and your colleagues put into the AGM last Saturday. I have been thinking about what was said then and offer my own conclusions.

My primary interest, as I think you know, is in meeting others interested in radical methods of developing statistical analysis, but there does not appear much support for this approach.

If one wants statistical thinking used for radical political activity I reckon the immediate action should be to join with the BSSRS as a statistically committed subgroup. Our present numbers are too few to ensure our continued existence as a proselytising force. To become wholly introspective, to talk only to one another and to concentrate on a formal Policy Statement seems politically jejune and socially pointless. As a subgroup of BSSRS our first effort should be to gain adherents from statisticians. I believe there are many statisticians who have submerged sympathies for a radical viewpoint, but who have not yet expressed any commitment. Our first task is to provide a broad forum which will enable them, indeed to encourage them, to participate. Having increased our strength we then have to sell our principles to the political animal and the voter; obviously this is a different and harder sell, but it is necessarily a second step.

The first problem of gaining the more active sympathy and commitment of more statisticians can only be solved by quality publicity. Articles and papers in existing professional or radical journals are urgently needed; I do not believe we that we have the strength to publish a new journal. Wider impact can be through the newspaper, the local one rather than the nationals, where we have to latch on a local topic of current interest in order to present our radical and statistical approach. Daydreams should revolve around a chance to appear on mass TV.

This line of action is necessarily individualistic and if depends entirely on personal effort. Group activities would be organised largely to support and to stimulate the individual's effort. Some may consider this too mundane. However, it seems to me to be an inescapable conclusion if we are to have any social effect outside those who attended the AGM.

Yours sincerely,



Peter Herne