

TOWARDS PURPOSE

Ivan Rappoport's Towards Structure in RS13 is a welcome addition to the discussion concerning the future of the RSG - a discussion which has usually surfaced in the Newsletter only in a most indirect way. However, I want to reply to some of the points Ivan raised, in a personal capacity but under the particular stimulus of having been one of the editorial collective for RS5 whose editorialising he castigates. I am surprised that it had been so long for the issues raised there to be taken up in these pages, but it is good to see that Ivan poses them in terms of the 'active support' for the 'innovation and activity' of the RSG, raising questions of its 'structure' as against 'informality, flexibility'. Nevertheless, there are some problems with the way that these questions are taken up.

In RS5 we editors were presented with an article submitted to the Newsletter which proposed a form of statistical practice which we believed would run counter to those purposes which we felt RSG was intended to fulfil. We were, however, rather uncertain that other RSG members would share our perceptions of either the article or the purposes of RSG. We published the article with our accompanying comment in order to clarify the questions that were raised for us here, as is evident from the quotations Ivan reproduces in RS13. (Of course, this clarification was not meant to be the sort of empiricist 'clarification' supposedly achieved by a statistical survey of RSG members, but an active clarification arrived at through debate, action and reflection). Ivan's criticism seems to be aimed at our publishing the editorial comment and it is rather difficult to deduce from his notes exactly what he thinks we should have done instead. Should we have decided that the article did not reflect, had nothing to offer to, indeed was actually antithetical to RSG, even if this was still a virginal 'informal grouping of people, with ideas and aims in common' (I.R.'s words), and thus not have published it? Or would it have been 'libertarian' to have published the article without comment - as Ivan refers to its unfortunate author as 'innocuous'? I rather suspect this would be his preference. Or is it that the choice itself does not matter, and that what counts is simply that no-one should suggest that collective guidelines could be helpful?

There are many areas where our 'ideas and aims in common' are likely to be quite unanimous: for example, I rather doubt that anyone in RSG would want to make the case that, in the unlikely event of the National Front seeking to use the Newsletter, we should publish a racist piece using statistics to demonstrate the 'truth' of the sorts of filth that these people put about. There are equally wide areas where our agreement is rather less obvious, and here it would seem useful to consider, not laying down rigid rules concerning what material to publish, but to suggest some guidelines concerning how articles might be evaluated and some of the possibilities for publishing 'instant' replies or critiques where parts of a report or analysis seem badly flawed. Producing the Newsletter is one of the activities of the RSG, and if we do really share ideas and aims in common then I fail to see why they cannot be represented in our publications as well as in our other actions.

The first thing to resolve, then, is what these aims and ideas are. The issue at stake is not, surely, whether or not a particular gathering point known as RSG survives or not (Ivan seems to place rather a lot of emphasis on supposed strivings for permanence, and I would take issue with his account here if my energy permitted!). I would suggest that it is whether RSG can play a useful role in demystifying and countering the uses of statistics in reinforcing patterns of political and economic dominance founded in, and furthering, alienation, exploitation and oppression. Is this, as well as being a mouthful, asking too much in the way of definition and structure? Perhaps my formulation is inadequate, but unless we do have some normative self-image of this sort ("members ideas around certain accepted issues...work within the Newsletter should in some way be(ing) of a radical nature" as we hazily, to be sure, put it in RS5 then what is RSG?¹

¹ The only alternative that springs to my mind readily is that RSG is some sort of peer group/pressure group for academics and researchers who are in some way marginal, and thus find career support in adopting certain 'radical' attitudes. On occasion I have felt that perhaps this is to some extent the case, but if so I'll want to do something about changing it until such time as I feel no change is possible.

Ivan himself suggests that our common feature is that "we believe in a libertarian society". I take this to be an historical-normative formulation - that such a society is both a possible and desirable future for us today - rather than the assumption that the present is indeed like this! But the ambiguities in even this formulation are also crucial. To elaborate, I see a more free, more human de-alienated future as being a possibility which is actively suppressed by structures of domination in the present, rather than being merely latently waiting to be awakened by our living in a libertarian way, with only our own hang-ups about 'stability and persistence' in the way of achieving flexible, innovative groupings in all spheres of life. Perhaps there is more to the difference in our formulations than that one seems to be stressing 'freedom from' and the other 'freedom for' (as if the two could be meaningfully separated). For if we accept that there are forces which actively militate against liberty, social forces beyond those of organisational rigidity, indeed forces that themselves help to create and reinforce pressures, psychological or otherwise, for organisational rigidity, then surely we do not want RSG to further these forces. Perhaps the best we can do, embedded in the sort of society in which we are, and with only a tentative and partial analysis of the roles it assigns statistics and statisticians, is to only partially succeed in developing our opposition to these forces. But when it is possible to identify aspects of our work that do not take issue with the dominant ideologies surrounding statistics, then I would presume that our attitude should be one of comradely criticism. If material that involves an active extension of such practices is involved, then it is important to discuss what place it has in the work of the RSG.

Now clearly there are many issues where the contribution of a piece of work is less obvious than is the case with, for example, racism. For example, I don't find George Hay's piece 'innocuous' (science is neutral?), but as a prime example of the application of technocratic ideas of rationality to a problem, "inefficiency", which is accepted in the terms posed by dominant ideologies (indeed which is held to be identified in the same terms "from all points of the political spectrum"). There is the idea that "measurements" can provide "objective truth" concerning individuals' performance and that with suitable care the human relations

problems can be surmounted. Looking back on the article it is clear that the way in which 'efficiency' is conceived here is precisely one which further exploitation and domination in the labour process, and is in no way radical or libertarian. Perhaps Ivan finds the systems proposed - social division of labour, etc - compatible with libertarian living. To my mind we would have been totally irresponsible as editors not to preface this article with some critical comment.

Finally, I think that there is some conceptual slippage going on between different notions of organisational structure. I would completely agree with Ivan that a bureaucratisation of the RSG is to be avoided, but I would like to make a few points. 1) Having a policy does not necessarily imply establishing a hierarchy. Collectively determined and regulated policies can be flexible, and need not depend upon an elite to carry them out. 2) 'Structurelessness' need not mean a lack of hierarchy. Informal systems often confer advantages to those more familiar with them, with loudest voices, etc. Furthermore, in the absence of an editorial policy, then the editors are themselves privileged concerning what they choose to publish. 3) The problem is one of collectively controlling structures so that they are appropriate to our purposes, which will surely mean dismantling and destroying as well as building them. If there are problems of inertia and stability, then these should be confronted, and I am not denying that this is difficult - but it is difficult in 'informal groups' too. If we want to build a freer society then we should make sure that the means we employ to do so do not themselves subvert the ends; the ends must be latent within the means: but we also need to recognise that our means are not identical with our long-term ends, and that our building of a new world is not merely being interfered with, but - in the case of many of our comrades - brutally suppressed. To create our purpose, our identity as RSG, means making some refusals, but then growth is often a painful business. I have found the frustrations that I have encountered in the RSG to be well compensated for by the stimulation (and sometimes even fun) of the group.

P.S. Is the predictable in human affairs always disappointing? I am disappointed when friends don't turn up as arranged, and the word is hardly adequate to describe people's feelings when essential services break down! Prediction and control may go together in the statistical textbooks, but I think it is wrong to identify all attempts at co-ordinating actions as motivated by power lust.

NOTE: There will be a 'Response' from Ivan in the next issue RS15