

REPORT ON THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE ON 24TH MARCH 1979

DAVE HARAN and JEFF EVANS

The annual meeting of the Radical Statistics Group was held on Saturday, 24th March at the National Children's Bureau, hosted by Dougal Hutchinson. The morning's programme was designed to focus on the technique of *Cost-Benefit Analysis* as a tool in policy making. Don Sharpe and Colin Thunhurst presented fairly penetrating analyses of the pros and cons of this technique. The main points of their presentations are summarised elsewhere in this issue, and there was adequate time for discussion before searching out the pub.

The Island Queen has delicious hamburgers and a great deal of sediment in the beer. At the 'short' business meeting after lunch, quite a number of issues were raised; these are reported here in some detail. After the Treasurer's report (see below), an appeal was made for help in running the BSSRS office in Poland Street. Anyone who works or lives close enough and can give an hour or so to relieve the permanent office staff, please get in touch with BSSRS at 9, Poland Street. Relief work would simply entail answering the telephone and dealing with visitors. Colin Thunhurst also made an appeal for individuals to support the *Science and Society Trust* (the organisation that helps finance BSSRS), either by individual affiliation or by Deed of Covenant (the latter allows the organisation to claim back tax, see elsewhere in this issue for more information). Because it was felt to be extremely important to keep BSSRS functioning on a sound financial basis, the meeting agreed to renew our group affiliation (£10) to BSSRS and to make a one-time donation of £20. Radical Statistics members were also encouraged to affiliate as individuals (£5).

It was stressed that someone was needed to act as Radical Statistics delegate to BSSRS steering group meetings. The delegate could claim expenses for attending meetings from Radical Statistics funds and should report back to Radical Statistics via the Newsletter. Ludi Simpson agreed to take on this role, but anyone willing to act as an alternative when he is unable to attend please contact Ludi at 16 Woburn Square, London WC1.

Incidentally, one of the uses Radical Statistics makes of 9, Poland Street is as the location of our own pamphlets and newsletters as well as those we received from fraternal organisations. Anyone interested in seeing these can consult the box files now being set up at Poland Street and might double as relief for the office staff at the same time.

Reports from five sub-groups were received. Health proved yet again to be extremely healthy. REMIS discussed their dealings with the Runnymede Trust who are cooperating in the preparation of a pamphlet called 'Britain's Black Minorities'. The Social Indicators Group brought along their publication *Social Indicators: individual well-being or social control ?* which is available from Radical Statistics at Poland Street, price 40 pence. The group on Teaching and Methodology is aiming to revitalise itself now that Demystifying Social Statistics, which was absorbing the energies of several of the group's members, is about to be published. The Education group is aiming to get going again with a meeting planned for the near future (See announcement elsewhere in this issue).

Finally, there was a discussion of the decision that all material should go before a Radical Statistics meeting before it can be published under their name. This was felt to be appropriate for pamphlets, books and long publication date papers but it was felt that press releases, quick replies to published articles, urgent letters etc. could be sent out under the Radical Statistics name provided they had been checked with any three members of the Radical Statistics steering group.

Since the business meeting went on longer than intended, Ian Miles spoke only briefly about progress and new directions for Radical Statistics before opening up the discussion. Although Radical Statistics still seems to be soul-searching, the discussion this year was much more optimistic than in previous years and perhaps next year we will be less worried about 'who we are' and 'why we are here' and more interested in 'where do we want to go ?'

COST BENEFIT ANALYSIS

The following is an outline of the discussion on cost benefit analysis conducted by Don Sharpe and Colin Thunhurst at the recent A.G.M.

Don Sharpe kicked off the debate by presenting the case for cost benefit analysis but with the proviso that the techniques are not used blindly. It organises all the information there is to hand on the likely effects which an indefinite decision may have. The analyst must list all the good and bad developments that are proposed, and those that may arise. He needs to look also at who benefits and on whom the costs fall. Those affected need not be excluded from the compiling of this list. The comprehensiveness of the list distinguishes decisions made on *social cost benefit* grounds from those on the basis of *commercial profitability*. Examples where the techniques may be applied include the decision to close a steel mill, decision to dam a river and create a reservoir, the decision to institute a programme to screen pregnant women for Down's syndrome. These decisions are of the straightforward "do we do it or not" type. It was argued that the techniques should be modified and extended to the continuous assessment and reassessment of the government's rolling expenditure plans. This idea was illustrated with points from some work carried out by Don Sharpe on the economic evaluation of public provision for the under fives.

Once the costs and benefits of the course of action have been listed and the dealers and losers identified, it is necessary to weight the relative magnitude of the effects. Here is where the trouble starts. Decisions have got to be made and inevitably any set of weights

will involve using one system of values. The theory suggests looking to the market place for the system of values which best demonstrates people's willingness to pay for the things they want and don't want. Differences in market power between gainers and losers can be directed by adjusting the magnitude expressed in the monetary unit of the benefits and costs which accrued to this group. One possible adjustment is to weight inversely according to the average income of the groups. The important thing is to make sure that issues of optimum resource allocation between economic activities are not confused with issues of optimum income distribution, but that both are included in the assessment.

In discussion the point was made that genuine cost benefit analysis is in fact rarely used in arriving at the government's final expenditure decisions. Decisions are currently made through the political processes that now exist without full and open appraisal of social costs and benefits. Don concluded with the slogan that "if priorities are the vocabulary of socialism then cost benefit analysis is its grammar".

In distinct contrast to Don Sharpe, Colin Thunhurst severely questioned the use that could be made of the market for evaluation of the costs and benefits of social policy. He illustrated his point with reference to some marked examples of 'market failure'. He went on to argue that the process of compressing multiple dimensional objectives onto a single dimension - an essential feature of Cost Benefit Analysis - is a particularly extreme example of what has come to be known as 'scientism' - the de-politicisation of political issues by their removal from the 'political arena' and replacement into the 'technical arena'. He concluded by arguing that the most significant contribution that counter-experts can make to the re-politicisation of the decision-making process, without falling into the trap of generating a counter-scientism, is by helping in the formulation of counter-plans that focus attention onto the process of planning rather than onto the outcome of planning.

RADICAL STATISTICS CONFERENCE AFTERTHOUGHTS

IAN MILES

By rambling on about balls of string as appropriate metaphors for the possible role of intellectuals in radical social movements, I seem to have a lot of loose ends left over which didn't get presented, so I thought I would take the chance to set them out here.

I had intended to specify three areas in which I thought Radical Statistics activity could be valuable: in consciousness-raising and theoretical work, in institutional politics and in broad political activities.

1 Theory and Consciousness-raising

- i) Why don't we communicate more effectively among ourselves ?
e.g. how about instituting a BIBLIOGRAPHY section in the Newsletter in which we could keep each other informed about relevant publications in our areas of interest (a bit like my tatty letter in the last issue perhaps, or even more communicative). If this proved popular enough it might make sense to think about compiling/publishing a bibliography collection as a pamphlet for course design and criticism, or for people concerned with the use of statistics in planning, wage negotiations, etc.
- ii) On the same general tack, the Newsletter carries good reports about Radical Statistics subgroups that are active and successful, but we should also share the experience of groups that fail to get off the ground or whatever. Is the crucial thing the presence of a couple of people really committed to making the group a success, as was suggested at the conference ?
- iii) We should think about areas where we appear to be weak, and ask whether we need to stimulate activity in these fields - maybe collaborating with other groups if we don't have enough resources to get something going internally. Areas where I would say we are too low in work/play include:
 - (a) *Economic Statistics*: what I wouldn't give to understand them ! Is the balance of trade data really as crooked as

they say ? Is Lawrence Harris right when he argues (in Economy and Society, May 1976) that official data here are practically useless for Marxist analysis ?

- (b) *Wages and Income Data*: especially with a Pay Differentials Board on the cards, and some form of incomes policy inevitable, we should be able to make various interventions here (Some people at the conference were making noises about getting together on this information please).
- (c) How are official statistics related to the form and changing requirements of the capitalist state in Britain ? What up-and-coming areas of interest are likely here - the underground economy ? environmental indicators ? data banks ?
- (d) *The social roots of quantification and statistics*: is Sohn-Rethel right in Intellectual and Manual Labour (1978) when he traces abstract mathematics to the development of commodity exchange and money, and what are the implications for post-bourgeois statistics ? Do we have anything to say about numerical assessment of qualitative phenomena such as 'personality', 'intellect', as a historical development ? If not, why not ?

Should we think about new groups in such areas, collaborating perhaps with existing conglomerations of interest in BSSRS, Conference of Socialist Economists, Radical Science Journal, Ideology and Consciousness. etc. ?

- iv) Shouldn't we get better publicity for our publications ? Are we aiming them at the right audience ? I am very aware of areas that are not covered in Demystifying : why don't we try to get some booklets written for course or student use - e.g. on course criticism, on alternative approaches to mathematical statistics, on why certain approaches to analysis have hegemony in particular disciplines and what their shortcomings are, on sources of critical data, on the use of statistics by radicals and alternative modes of data interpretation and social analysis and of course, non-students too, but I think I have covered this with a thin layer of hints above.
- v) Let's try and have talks that are given, at seminars or at annual meetings, written up (or down) and printed in the Newsletter even in the

form of notes, for those who were not there. If they could be precirculated, that would be great too. And meetings could be publicised more (no criticism of current round of seminars except that they might find their way into the CSE Newsletter too).

2 Institutional Politics

- i) *Royal Statistical Society*: should we rest on past laurels ?
It seems to me unwise to try and present a Radical's Page in RSS News and Notes or whatever, though it would be worth seeing whether more RSS members can be recruited. Our position can probably be best defined, alas, at this point in the recovery of radical science, by where we are critical of the received wisdom than by any definite programme that we could offer within such an established body.
- ii) *Government Statistical Service*: any chance of coordinating internal pressure (if any) around issues of privacy, freedom of information, official secrets act, etc.
- iii) *Higher Education*: apart from the fights around cuts, quotas, etc. there are perspectives to be developed on the appropriate place of statistical data and methodology in social science (and other) teaching and research. There are places where particular tokens of scientific analysis are emphasised to the exclusion of much else in students' projects for example, others where no real ability to criticise statistical practice is provided simply by ignoring the whole area.
- iv) *Research Units* etc. (Someone else fill this in). (But we didn't exactly get active over the closure of the SSRC Survey Unit did we ?)

3 Broad Political Activities

- i) Wary of reproducing expert-client splits, we need to think about ways of communicating essentials of techniques used in decision-making for the benefit of those who don't make the decisions and consequently get shat(sic) on. But there would seem to be a place for a firebrigade(see elsewhere in this issue).

- ii) There are certain big political issues we could be more active in, even if we don't have a consensus on the position to take. For example, Race questions in the census, pay differentials, data banks and state intelligence activities. I don't think it would be a bad development for groups to nucleate in Radical Statistics around such issues, providing of course their activities, as far as they get defined as Radical Statistics, are open to criticism and participation by other members.
- iii) How can we relate to political and action groups on a basis of mutual aid, without putting "politics in command" of our own specific analyses? There would probably be lessons here in the experience of other radical science groups. Given tendencies in Britain today toward a "strong state" backed by a corporatist or technocratic system of legitimation, it is more than likely that areas of potential convergence between RSG and Left-wing groups will grow in many respects.

As you can see, these are really just notes, originally jotted down to stimulate discussion at the Annual Meeting; I haven't tried to make them formal or precise, so I hope that they will stimulate without provoking to many wild goose chases!

