

AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF SOCIAL TRENDS

This is written in part in response to the proposal by John Bibby in RSN 21 that some of us should combine to edit an "Anti-Social Trends". I am enthusiastic about the idea and would like to propose another possible general framework/outline for such a compendium (whether annual or occasional). I want to push the project a little further along the road and, to this end, ask anyone interested in taking part in such a project to write back to Alternatives to Social Trends c/o Radical Statistics Group c/o BSSRS, 9 Poland Street, London W1, with specific comments on the outline(s) and what they are prepared to do, and with general comments on the feasibility of such a project and whether or not it should go out under the RadStats label. I need comments before Christmas because I am going to organise a meeting of those committed to working on the project in January.

The Outline

I INTRODUCTION

(a) the context

This would include a bit of history of social statistics; a discussion of the role of statistics in state planning and social control in all its forms; a bit of utopian raving about statistics in a socialist society; and some deliberation of the problem of what is to be done...now, i.e. the contents of the book.

(b) how to decide

Who decides what counts as welfare/wellbeing (afraid there will be some 'academic' distinctions here). The classification below reflects one view of the world on which readers are invited to comment, suggest modifications, do a survey of their friends, and then "put to the vote" (i.e. we'll poll RadStats members in anticipation of mass control over the definition and use of statistical criteria in decision making).

II MEASURES OF SOCIAL TRENDS

The basic proposal is to consider social trends first in terms of overall well-being, that is indicators of economic, political and social welfare and indicators of those factors influencing that welfare, and second in terms of oppressed groups, that is indicators of discrimination in respect of the same indicators and particular groups of people, and of resistance to that oppression.

(a) Aggregate Individual Well-being

(i) The State of Being

That is welfare measured in terms of

- physical aspects e.g. health
- intellectual aspects e.g. education and learning
- emotional aspects

(ii) Material Comfort

Are people's "basic needs" satisfied in terms of minimum material comforts and security: food, shelter,...

(iii) What People Do with their lives

We would want to distinguish between

- useful paid activity
- useless or anti-social paid activity
- useful unpaid activities
- "leisure" as social reproduction
- socially irrelevant activity
- other uses of time

(iv) The Joy of Living and Loving

This would include

- the aesthetic and physical environment
- relationships
- survival prospects

(b) Main Influences on Wellbeing

One type of influence that we would want to focus on in this section will be the activities of the State in constraining or determining people's wellbeing (as defined above), e.g. nutrition in schools as an influence on health; or changes in the Rent Acts as an influence on people's security of tenure.

(c) Oppressed Groups

This section shows how low scores on the indicators defined above are concentrated in specific groups (e.g. the "unemployed", women, blacks, the elderly, those living in institutions, the handicapped, youth, gays, "tenants" in the private sector,...) The analysis itself would rely on simple breakdowns of the data according to, for example, age, race and sex, and according to housing and employment status.

(d) Resistance to Oppression

This is the most difficult to classify. It is not degree of unionisation, size of protest marches, party membership (any party) or the Equal Opportunities Commission. It is success (to be defined) in resisting all the forms of oppression catalogued in section (c). It should be clear that what we would want to measure depends on what is happening and so cannot be classified in advance. If it were to be written now this section would include material on community organisation for self help in the day to day problems of living, mutual aid organisations for support in times of crisis, and more overt attacks on the State.

III DATA

For many of the crucial items above no useful data will be available. We shall often muddle through...with a critical examination of what is available, try to be imaginative, and occasionally give up.

IV WHAT ARE THE SOCIAL TRENDS?

This section will extrapolate on the preceding analyses and by that I mean that we shall often have to use non-quantitative material (e.g. on the "riots") to interpret and predict social trends. We shall want to point to both the constraints and the possibilities on the creation of a libertarian socialist democracy.

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