

Race Group Report

Progress on the second edition of Britain's Black Population is now well under way. Including contributions by the Runnymede Trust, we now have completed first drafts of four of the nine chapters. The remaining five are expected by the end of January. Second drafts are expected by the end of March 1984 with a view to publication at the end of the year. This puts us exactly one year behind our original timetable, and about six months behind our amended timetable (after renegotiations with the publishers).

As with the first edition, there have been tremendous problems for those who have been given the thankless task of coordinating this venture. With a cast of a dozen in the Race Group there is always someone who is not pulling his weight, and agreed dates come and go without delivery. Nothing new?! Yet somehow one expects a sense of commitment to this work, and to the group. Unrealistic? Obviously so.

But more interesting issues have arisen from the comments on some of the work. As in the first edition, chapter 1 gives an account of the demography of the black population and as such is largely statistical. I do not think I am overstating the criticism of this chapter when I represent it thus: statistics per se about the black population are racist; they are only acceptable when they are used in a context in which they add weight to an argument showing discrimination or disadvantage. Thus statistics on perinatal mortality are permitted, but only in the context of a discussion of the health service. Statistics on births, deaths, marriages, marital status, sex ratios, and the growth of the population are at best unnecessary and irrelevant....at worst tantamount to playing the numbers game, providing fodder for others to do so, and engaging in "scientific voyeurism".

I can sympathise with the basic feelings behind such comments. Race, ethnicity, colour or whatever should not be a variable of interest. Data should not exist: there should be no demand for them within society. But the black population is a group of interest within our society, albeit for racist reasons. In response to this, there are many organisations concerned with race. These people are the main users of data on race: such data that do exist are used by them to highlight discrimination and disadvantage. Is there then a case for providing them with data in as useful a form as possible? In short, is there a case for chapter 1? The criticism demands that I should also provide the arguments, that each statistic's presence should be justified in terms of its relevance to the fight against racism. But if I have not provided such an argument for each statistic, does that mean that no-one else will come in search of that statistic to add weight to their argument? Am I to be the arbiter of what is relevant and what is not?

A related issue is the question of readership. Last time, we were aiming at the interested person in the street, but our academic training rather overrode that, and in any event we got a contract for a 'real' book. Our readership has been largely academic, and there is every reason to suppose that the second edition will also attract an academic readership. If so, isn't comprehensiveness an attribute that such a book should aim for?

Comments on this or any other matter to do with the Race Group to: Heather Booth, RUER, St Peter's College, Saltley, Birmingham B8 3TE.

Health group

Following on from our decision to try to document the effects of the cuts in the NHS, we spent a meeting trying to get to grips with NHS financial statistics. Luckily, someone who understands them kindly came along and enlightened us. In the light of this and other considerations we decided not to concentrate narrowly on the cuts. Instead, we shall discuss some of the issues raised by the cuts and write a pamphlet to supersede 'In defence of the NHS' - as times have changed since 1977, there would be no point in just doing a rewrite.

At our next meeting, we shall try to find a structure for the subjects we want to cover. These include finance of the NHS (funding, privatisation and cuts), organisation (management, democracy), type of care (hospital and community care, drugs and generic prescribing, evaluation of new technology) and social and economic factors causing ill health (inequalities in health, prevention). Of course, many other people are concerned about these issues, but we feel we have a particular contribution to make on the statistical front, including the evaluation, both medical and financial of the NHS and debunking the myths being put about that the NHS is expanding.

Meanwhile, we have been asked to present some of our past work at a meeting of the Royal Statistical Society Medical Section on Tuesday March 27. Rather than having one person speak for all, we are presenting five short pieces on drugs, 'In defence of the NHS', RAWP, official statistics and third world health.

We hope to sell some pamphlets at the RSS. Can anyone who has any unsold Health Group pamphlets please try to get them to Alison Macfarlane before the 27th (40 Warwick Road, St. Albans, or at the AGM.)

