

## RADICAL? STATISTICS

by Ray Thomas

Should there be ethnic and racial questions in the census?

Heather Booth in her review of the Home Affairs Committee Report on this subject gets to the heart of the matter when she describes the public relations campaigns which have been used in North America to support such questions. The object of these campaigns is to convince black people that the data would not be misused.

There is no point in collecting such information unless it is used. But if it is used there can be no guarantee that it will not be misused. The only categorical assertion that can be made is that the net effect of the collection of such data will give power to those organizations which are best capable of using them.

The corollary is that the net effect of the collection of the data can be to reduce the power of the groups who are the subject of the data collection.

So aren't the suspicions of minority groups of official questionnaires on their lives fully justified?

Isn't that true of all statistics? Is not the net effect of the collection of all statistics to give power to the organizations which can make best use of them?

It may well be true that most statistics most of

the time are used for the benefit of society. But we cannot assume that statistics are always used beneficially.

If that is so in what sense can it be claimed that statistics can be radical? Doesn't the use of statistics necessarily reflect the distribution of organizational power in society?

Once upon a time I believed that statistics did at least contribute to social reform. I suppose that I believed along with Florence Nightingale that "invincible social conscience would sweep away problems revealed by statistics".

That kind of belief obviously belongs much more to the 1890s than to the 1980s. But the SSRC actually gave me a grant (HR 7195 - thanks very much) only a few years ago in response to a research proposal which unequivocally stated that "it would be assumed that the principal function of statistics would be to narrow the area of disagreement which might otherwise exist"

One of the main conclusions of the research was that this assumption was nonsense.

At the risk of causing offence all round I put forward the Gay Statistics model as giving a more realistic picture than that implied by the "narrowing the area of disagreement" assumption.

Suppose that a sociologist estimates that 20% of the population is homosexual. The Festival of Light may express dismay at this finding, but for all practical intents and

purposes they seem delighted with this research. A proportion of this magnitude shows how damaging the permissive society has been. They would argue that there is no excuse for any education which allows girls and boys to even think in terms other than sex within marriage

But the gays are also delighted. In Camden at least they use the statistics to claim 20% of the Council's recreation budget. In Parliament the gays use the statistic to lobby for a reduction of the indefensible 21 years age limit for legal homosexual activity.

So where is the narrowing of the area of disagreement? Is not the gay statistics model more typical of the policy making process than the narrowing the area of disagreement suggestion? If so why? Is it that this country just enjoys an adversarial tradition?

The one person who doesn't get into the controversy is the sociologist who did the survey. He quickly gets pissed off with the public debate. He might go along to the Home Office if he can find sympathetic ears. If so he would be saying things like "That 20% figure doesn't mean very much .. there is a continuum you know .. the real problems are .. ..".

This line of thought leads to the point that statistics is symbolic information for everyone but those who have an intimate knowledge of the collection process. So how can statistics be radical? How can symbolic information be radical?

Symbolic information is like the Union Jack, or the cross, or, the sight of the Chancellors budget case. Symbolic information in the form of statistics is part of what Merriam called the credenda of government. Things we believe in which lead us to obey authority.

Statistics are the reverse of radical. If any generalisation can be made about the kind of information they symbolise it is that they symbolise organizational power. Statistics, as the Government Statisticians' Collective observed in that Demystifying book, "imprison us in the concepts and concerns that dominate official life".

In the next issue of Radical? Statistics I put forward some views, which may or may not be regarded as radical, on the implications of the symbolic nature of statistical information.

But in the meantime I would not wish to leave you with the impression that I think statistics are useless. This article is in fact a thinly disguised advertisement for a paper called 'Towards statistics for policy making' which I have written with Ann Stanyer of Coventry Polytechnic.

This paper is actually about how to get radical statistics. You can get copies from the Social Sciences Faculty, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA.