

Statistics in Spain - a personal historical perspective

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A remarkable book was published in France in 1842. This book had an important impact in the development of statistics in Spain. For a start, its author, Etienne Cabet, pretended that he had not written it, that he was only translating a book that had appeared in England. This was a ploy to bypass censorship. The idea being that if the British government, much more conservative than the French, had allowed the original to be printed, then the French censors would not object to it. The idea had worked.

"Voyage en Icarie" was written as a guide book. Lord Carisdall, a friend of Lafayette, had visited a distant land ruled by reason, justice and wisdom where crime was unknown and people lived in peace. This had been achieved by abolishing private property, by asking people to contribute according to ability, and by rewarding individuals according to need. Lord Carisdall had taken notes as he had been travelling, and had decided to publish his notes to encourage others to visit this eden on earth.

The Spanish translation appeared in 1846. Soon there were Icarian groups in Barcelona. They used to meet in a café not far from what was to become in 1992 the Olympic village. The café is still there today, full of memories and little changed. Barcelona was the foremost industrial area of the country, with a long tradition of trade union activities. Icarie provided a model to be followed by trade unionists: Icarians were hard working individuals who took decisions in general meetings after listening to the advice of specialists who had studied the facts of the problem under discussion.

Statistics played a fundamental role in decision making in this ideal world. Informed decision making required the collection of a population census with details of age, sex, marital status, education, employment and characteristics of dwellings, not very different from the censuses that are taken in the UK every ten years. The population census was to be complemented by a census of agricultural and industrial activity. The objective of providing housing, food, jobs, and general welfare to all the individuals of Icarie required detailed knowledge of the current situation and of the resources available. Once the data had been obtained, it would become possible to set objectives, produce national plans, and improve efficiency. Cabet devoted much effort to show how existing resources, if used in the right way, could satisfy the needs of many more individuals than they did at the time. He suggested, for example, the introduction of communal take-aways in order to free individuals from the

need to spend so much of their time cooking, and activity that, he thought, could be best carried out in an industrial manner. Cabet did not think it possible to plan directly at the national level. Planning and decision making was to be a decentralised activity, although examples of best practice were to be identified for all to follow. Icarie, an old town, was to be redeveloped according to these principles. Later, Cerdà put in practice the plans of the ideal Icarian city when designing the expansion of Barcelona beyond its walls. One of the main streets in what is now called "the widening" is the Avenue of Icaria, complete with "New Icaria" luxury apartments overlooking the Mediterranean sea.

The need for statistical information became widely accepted and the Spanish equivalent of the Central Statistical Office was set up in 1856.

Icarian thinking was seen as a threat by the right, but also by Karl Marx who devoted a few lines of the Communist Manifesto to attack it. It served to prepare the way for anarchist ideas.

Anarchism entered Spain in 1868 following a liberal revolution supported by the masses which led to the dethronement of the Queen and to freedom of press and association. It was the time of the first Workers' International Association. Fanelli, a friend of Bakunin, and an engineer, visited Barcelona and set up the first Spanish branch of the International at Terrasa. The building where meetings took place was demolished in 1974. Fanelli made a "mistake". Instead of the accepted statutes of the International, of which Marx was the Secretary, he gave spaniards the statutes of Bakunin's group of activists. Bakunin's vision of the organisation of society was not very different from the Icarian utopia, and found a well prepared ground. Anarchists continued to dwell on how modern methods of production, if properly applied for the benefit of all could bring enormous improvements in standard of living for all. It is interesting to see the calculation of the number of hours of work that should be necessary to support a decent standard of living, made by Kropotkin in his book "The conquest of bread".

Anarchism relies on the principle that "everybody is good". Decisions are made by discussion, cooperation and mutual help after all the facts have been considered. It is, of course, important to have good information, good education, and a dedicated group of activists who can spread the gospel and help people see the light for themselves. The instrument to bring about an anarchist society cannot be a political party, ruled by corruption, deception and self-interest, it has to be an institution organised around the world of work, where those who are in charge of the production process can also cooperate in economic planning. The legalisation on trade unions opened the way for such a body: the National Worker's Confederation (CNT).

Central to anarchist thinking is the abolition of the state, which is to be replaced with an "office for correspondence and statistics". This is not to be interpreted that civilisation will be replaced by chaos, rather the opposite. The central office will act as a source of information that will allow trade unions, communes, and associations of individuals to arrive at rational decisions by way of consensus. A full description of how statistical information, production planning and trade union activity were to dovetail in the running of the new society was not produced until the 1938 conference of the CNT, during the Spanish Civil War. By then, it was too late. Anarchism had been defeated in the Republican side by the combined forces of communists and moderate republicans, as described by Orwell in "Homage to Catalonia".

The vision of a society organised around trade union activity, where economic planning is a natural consequence of cooperation between the agents of production in the light of the best possible statistical advice, was to be adopted by the enemies of the anarchists: the fascists (*Falange Española*). The falangists reversed the line of authority. Planning was to take place at the top, and instructions were to be distributed down to the workers through a "vertical" union organised along types of activity. Vertical trade unions were to be both the source of information and the instruments that the state would use to implement economic plans.

During the Civil War, Franco proclaimed himself the leader of the fascist party and officially adopted the program of *Falange Española*. This he did without the support of those in the party, who rightly thought that Franco was only using their ideas for political propaganda purposes rather than out of conviction. Franco was not a fascist. He was just a right wing soldier with no ideology. He did, however, set up a system of trade unions which reflected falangist thinking. The main weight of statistical activity was to be transferred to these "vertical" unions. This structure served a series of purposes. First, it gave fascists secure and well-paid jobs as statisticians - the state had bought their souls and had given them something to do in accordance with their programme. Second, it gave the state an instrument to control wages and salaries. Third, it created the tools to distribute the burden of taxation. The idea of using the unions as a mechanism of national planning was soon forgotten, and market forces were left to operate within a very regulated economy.

The vertical trade union was charged with collecting statistics on industrial production. These were to be the basis of a peculiar system of company tax. During the Franco regime most taxation was indirect. In some cases the operation of the tax was simple; for example, tobacco paid a percentage of the price, just as is the case now. Tobacco was easy to tax because its

distribution was a monopoly under the control of the state; sales figures were accurately known and tax collection was efficient. The mechanism to collect and police tax collection in other industries could have been set up, but an alternative method was devised. The global contribution of each industry to the exchequer was first calculated at ministerial level, then apportioned to the various regions, where it was apportioned again between localities. Industrialists met at the trade union offices in order to negotiate how much tax each individual company had to pay.

Statistical secret was guaranteed by Law and, in theory, nobody had anything to fear from data disclosure but managers realised that if they provided accurate data, taxation would become efficient. Most provided nonsense data or nothing at all. This information was to serve, at a later stage in the process, to build national accounts. I became aware of the issues when I did my finals project. I had to visit the local union branch in order to obtain some information. I was met by an ex-member of the falangist party who proceeded to explain to me that their data was not very good because people like my father, a small businessman, refused to cooperate. My father's data was considered to be so bad that it was replaced with estimates based on the number of workers employed, the only number presumed to be reliable because workers had to be registered with the social security system. My father's explanation was obvious: if no accurate data existed, managers had more bargaining power in the annual tax negotiation.

Much later on, I was to come across falangist statisticians again, this time in Madrid. I was engaged in a research project and I visited the Ministry of Agriculture with a British friend, also a lecturer. We were met by the person in charge of collecting the information we needed. He asked our opinion about Franco, who had died two years earlier. Had I said that I had been actively engaged in illegal union activities, I would have received the standard answer that information which is not published is to be considered to be confidential. I replied that I was not interested in politics - a safe answer - but that my family had remained in nationalist controlled Spain during the war. This was the correct answer and we received a good service.

The 1960s saw the adoption of indicative national planning, French style, complete with input-output tables. Inter-industry flows were studied, and taxes were based on trade rather than on estimates of total industrial activity. There was a shift from Trade Union control of data to professional estimates produced by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), the Spanish equivalent of the British CSO. Technocracy infiltrated Spanish economic life. Think tanks were established in every ministry, in the form of "technical secretariats". Statistics found its way to university degrees. Things were quickly changing, reflecting the changes that were taking place in Spanish

society, and which culminated with the advent of democracy in 1975.

Democracy led to many changes. The new structure of the state brought with it new data collection arrangements. Spain is no longer a highly centralised country. Regions were given a high degree of autonomy and many powers were devolved to regional governments. The collection of statistics is one of the few powers that, according to the Constitution, is reserved to Central Government. The old vertical trade unions were abolished, and all statistical activity at the level of the State was transferred to the INE. Some of the individuals who had practised the profession in the old unions went into retirement and others were transferred into the scientific civil service. This was the opportunity to rethink statistical activity, and a Statistical Act was passed in 1989. The INE was reorganised as a semi-autonomous technical body. The director of the INE is nominated by the government, allegedly on the basis of merit, and the institution is left alone to carry on with its work.

The INE publishes the dates when major statistics are to be released, has a Statistical plan, agreed with users and providers of data, and the plan is reviewed at the end of the year to assess the extent to which its objectives have been met. A major activity that is taking place currently is a statistical inventory. All statistical information published in Spain is under scrutiny. This is an attempt to find out who collects what information, why it is collected, whether collection is justified, whether the method to collect the information is the best possible one, whether any changes are justified, and whether there is some information that is not currently collected but whose collection would be desirable. It is a major planning effort that is expected to bear fruit in the near future.

There are aspects of the INE that are peculiar to Spain. The INE is also in charge of statistical activity that in the UK is performed by the OPCS. It is also responsible for the electoral register. At election time, the local offices of INE have substantial extra work revising electoral rolls.

Relations between politics and statistics have now been established on a much more professional basis. One would think that Spanish legislators have read the suggestions of the "Counting with Confidence" report and that they have accepted its recommendations.

Anecdotes still exist to illustrate the relationship between politics and statistics. I will mention two. The first one I heard from others, the second one I heard first hand. In a recent election, the Government commissioned a survey of voting intentions from INE. The opposition argued that since the survey had been commissioned by the government of the country from an

official body, its results should be available to all political parties and not only to the one in power. The argument was accepted, and the government released the raw data of the survey with no time to process it before the election. The second anecdote relates to the 1989 Act. A professor of Statistics, who told me the story, was an MP for one of the opposition parties. When the Statistical Act was debated he suggested some fifty amendments to the legislation. They were all voted down by the party in government. A few days later, the party in government proposed the same amendments as its own. Professor Rioboo, then asked why the government had voted against his proposals if they agreed with them. The answer was: "as a member of the opposition we could not accept your proposals, but as a professor of Statistics we respected them".

Much time has elapsed since the icarian vision of a happy society based on information and consensus. All the information that the icarians requested is easily available, the federation of autonomous decision making bodies is also there. What is missing is the will to plan collectively in order to put resources to their best use for the benefit of all. Perhaps Spain is in need of a cultural revolution. Perhaps Spain is not alone in that.

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