

## A Fantasy of Local Government

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Cecilio Mar Molinero's wrote in *Radical Statistics* 56 on the activities of the Icarians in Spain in the 19th century. Mar Molinero explained how Icarians in Barcelona believed that, with adequate information on population, employment, agriculture and production, democratic planning and decision could be carried out at a local level.

The fantasy in this article aims to sketch an up-to-date version of the Icarian's utopia. The fantasy speculates on the possible consequences of the availability for local authority areas of the wide range and variety of statistics which are nowadays available at a national level.

Would the availability of such statistics contribute to the development of local democracy - as imagined in the writings of Etienne Cabet the author of 'Voyage en Icarie', and later by Bakunin and the Spanish anarchists??

Political apathy has been defined in terms of the failure of individuals to relate their problems to those of the society in which they live. The richness of national statistics does little to reduce political apathy in this sense. Where problems are defined in terms of national statistics they are remote from peoples individual experience. But what if these statistics related to local areas? Would it not be easier for individuals to relate their personal experience to the statistics? And would this not reduce political apathy?

Imagine, for example, the impact of the availability of local statistics on local newspapers. Is it possible that this information would help make local reporters knowledgeable about local affairs? Would local reporters become as knowledgeable about local affairs as national reporters are of the national scene? Is it possible that the availability of statistics would support serious political discussion in local newspapers? Imagine, for example, the impact of publication of local economic statistics relating to earnings and incomes, employment and unemployment, building activity, welfare payments of all kinds, revenues of public utilities and other organizations serving the local area. Would not the availability of such a range and variety of information stimulate

interest in the local economy and the local community? Would not this stimulation encourage individuals to participate in local affairs - rather than see themselves primarily as interested in the national scene?

Some will argue that we don't need such statistics at a local level because people in the area already know about these matters from direct personal experience. The argument of this fantasy is to turn this point on its head. Local statistics are of special value \*because\* they can be related to individual experience. Making this connection can reduce political apathy. People would identify more closely with local statistics than national statistics. Would not commentary and discussion of such local statistics stimulate participation in local decision making processes?

### Unemployment statistics as an example

Vital statistics and statistics from Censuses of Population are of course already available for local authority areas. But vital statistics are a long way from most current concerns of policy making, and population statistics are used mainly for the allocation of resources, and, by themselves, have little other relevance to policy making. But, population statistics do have policy relevance when used as a numerator in conjunction with other statistics to express a measure of need or resources.

Developments in unemployment statistics give an indication of future possibilities for the development of other local statistics, and add a small but significant fragment to this fantasy. For more than a decade the official unemployment statistics have been available for local authority areas. Many local authorities get these statistics every month. Occasionally such statistics are reported in local newspapers. The availability of these nationally produced administrative statistics for local areas marks an important step in linking the activities of central and local government.

The welfare state in Britain was established half a century ago as a nationalised industry. One consequence is a lack of coordination of national and local welfare activities. The activities of local social services departments, for example, are uninformed by the scale of central government activity in their areas. Co-ordination between social services departments and the Department of Social Security is limited by the lack of statistics for DSS activities for local authority areas. The provision of

unemployment statistics for local areas is the first major example of a statistic which allows local authorities to know with precision the level of central government activity in their area.

Unemployment statistics became available for local authority areas as a result of information technology developments. The use of postcoding made it administratively feasible to code all addresses by location, and the searching facilities of the computer make it feasible to produce statistics for any area which can be defined in terms of postcodes.

Nowadays it is feasible for any kind of centrally collected data which includes addresses to be used in the same kind of way to get statistics for local authority areas. We could have statistics for recipients of welfare state benefits and for the incomes of taxpayers from central government. We could have statistics, not just of examination performance by schools, but a wide range of education statistics relating to the population of local authority areas and subdivisions of these areas. We could have statistics for hospital waiting lists, not just for hospitals, but relating, via local authority areas to specific populations served. Statistics for what used to be called public utilities could be made available for gas and electricity use by local authority areas. There would be no serious technological problems in making these, and many other kinds of statistics available for local authority areas. The significant problems lie entirely in the political/administrative area.

### Problems with employment statistics

It would be difficult to get a good statistical picture of local economies without a regular series on the level of employment. My speculations draw attention to a problem which already exists at a national level. There is no administrative statistical series for employment at a national level which means that there is no statistics for employment which are reliable and up-to-date.

The lack of such a series does not contribute to proper management of the national economy. Managing the economy without regular employment statistics is like navigating a boat by the stars instead of using a compass. Employment statistics, and the associated pattern of journeys to work, would also be of vital importance to monitoring and managing the local economy.

Statistics of employment are however an exception to the overall picture. For most kinds of activity we already have statistics of adequate

quality at the national level. The fantasy is simply that they be made available for local authority areas.

### Implementation

Some will object to the this fantasy on knit-picking grounds. They would say that it would not be worth the trouble to get the statistics, and in the case of statistics of employment, for example, that you cant get valid statistics on employment. The only way, they would say, would be to use the administration of the system of national insurance, and the problems are that . . . . and that . . .

The answer to that kind of argument is that information systems are being redesigned anyway as a result of information developments. This process of redesign is likely to continue as the pace of information technology developments increases. 'It would be administratively costly' is no longer an adequate answer to questions about the lack of statistics - such as that for the numbers in employment. The cost is being incurred anyway as systems are redesigned.

Some will object to this clarion call for local statistics on grounds of privacy. The precautions taken to avoid identification of individuals in the Small Area Statistics and the Sample of Anonymised Records from the Census testify to the importance of this problem. But in the case of the Census and in the case of central government administrative statistics a balance can be made between the value of the information and the risk of disclosure of information on individuals.

The real question is about the fantasy itself. Would university and other researchers and journalists use and comment on the statistics? Would the provision of local information stimulate local discussion? Would it encourage participation in the decision making processes? With such information would it be easier to "set objectives, produce plans and improve efficiency" as envisaged, according to Mar Molinero, by the Icarians? Would it allow for "Decisions to be made by discussion, cooperation and mutual help after all the facts have been considered" as envisaged by the anarchists? And most crucially would the developments of local democracy lead to some withering away of the state? Would the state become be replaced with an "office for correspondence and statistics" as envisaged by Kropotkin?