

RadStats: *The Musical* !! (1): 1830s Edinburgh, 2020s Britain: science, class, and statistics

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In his discussion of 1830s Edinburgh, Shapin (1983:170) uses attitudes to science to define a typology of class structure. There were at that time, he suggests, four different social groups which could be identified by their characteristic and differing attitudes to the ascendancy of scientific thinking. First were those who “saw in science an actual or potential career or an appropriate avocation”. We may call these the ‘careerists’. Second were those who “viewed science as practically useful knowledge”. These were largely merchants and industrialists – ‘capitalists’, we may call them (although for two centuries we have *all* been capitalists). The third group saw science as “a legitimation of the existing social order”, and the fourth regarded it as “an important resource for undermining that order” - the ‘conservatives’ and ‘radicals’ respectively. Thus we have four groups: careerists, capitalists, conservatives and radicals. Shapin does not claim that these groups are either discrete or exclusive (i.e. they do not cover the entire social space). Clearly they are not. But are they recognizable?

Careerists, capitalists and radical may be easily recognised, but what of the third group, the ‘conservatives’? These are those who see science as legitimating the existing social order. But *how* does science legitimate the social order? Is it that social order *determines the nature* of scientific development – of the questions that are asked and the answers that are given; or is it that the “objective” nature of science, and its alliance with the religious doctrine of the day, somehow validate the present state and State as entities that should be preserved; or is there some other meaning? (Then as now, the particular role of Edinburgh as a “provincial metropolis” must not be

ignored – the 1830s were closer in time to pre-Union Scottish sovereignty than to today’s visualized future independence of the 2030s or beyond.)

Somewhat glibly, Shapin terminates his discussion with a quote from E. P. Thompson that “Class is defined by men (*sic*) as they live their own history”, and with a note that in the 1830s, “Divergent social interests gave rise to conflict in the wider society and corresponding divergent interests in culture gave rise to conflict in science and its institutions”. So it is no doubt today, but can Shapin’s typology assist us towards an understanding of 2020s statistics? In particular, what light do his categories throw upon the “data wars” that have typified the Covid pandemic?

These questions may merit serious discussion. But let me first propose a Covid “musical”, a bit like ‘West Side Story’ perhaps, with *four* competing gangs, not just two. The “Jobbers” are the careerists; the Caps (of course!) are capitalists if not Capulets, which then leaves the Cons and the Rads, the conservatives and radicals.

What could be the theme songs of these four gangs? Among titles that spring to mind are the following (adapting Shapin’s typology):

- **The Jobbers (a gang of careerists for whom statistics is a “career or an appropriate avocation”)**: More data, more data!; Model me more; I’m all for R; Theory without data is like bricks without straw (and other Holmesian themes); Science, Stats and Starmer.
- **The Caps (the capitalist gang: for them, stats is “practically useful knowledge”)**: We have the contacts, We know the system; Keep businesses open; More furlough please; Get that Vax and get back to work *NOW!!*.
- **The Cons gang (conservatives: stats “legitimizes the existing social order”)**: When will we ever see Normal again?; Boris knows best.
- **The Rads (radicals: stats are “ a resource for undermining that order”)**: Bring on the fire-fighters; It’s all a conspiracy!; Bring back Corbyn; Don’t forget the climate, COP and Clagow.

I leave others to develop the lyrics, music and plot.

Shapin, S. (1983) 'Nibbling at the Teats of Science': Edinburgh and the Diffusion of Science in the 1830s; pp.151-178 in *Metropolis and Province: Science in British Culture, 1780—1850* (Inkster & Morrell, eds.)