What are the aims of Radstats? How should these aims be pursued? Before I was invited to become a member of the Radstats Troika in 1998 I thought these questions were fairly easy to answer. Since 1997 the ‘particular concerns’ of Radstats have been expressed on the cover of each issue of Radical Statistics:

- The mystifying use of technical language to disguise social problems as technical ones;
- The lack of control by the community over the aims of statistical investigations, the way these are conducted and the use of the information produced;
- The power structures within which statistical and research workers are employed and which control the work and how it is used;
- The fragmentation of social problems into specialist fields, obscuring connectedness.

I had no hesitation in using these words in helping to construct the Radstats website at http://www.radstats.org.uk. These words seemed to express some of them main messages coming from the seminal Demystifying Social Statistics book, published by Radstats members more than twenty years ago (Irvine et al 1979), that has helped set my personal statistics agenda for a number of years.

I first met these words (or words very like them) in a document headed Radical Statistics Group: Policy Statement sent to me by Heather Booth when I became a member of Radstats in 1983. The Policy Statement said:

1. Free access to, and free discussion of, the information, political and commercial criteria, and the procedures used in decision making, by all those affected by the decision.
2. The production and publication of statistics needed by disadvantaged groups in society, e.g. on wealth, income, prices, housing, social services, education.
3. A critique of the uses of statistics in political and commercial situations.
5. The establishment of links with the radical science movement.
6. An analysis of the historical development of statistics, its emergence as a dominant method in the social and behavioural sciences and attempts to evolve and use new approaches.

The cover wording is also repeated in two recent books Statistics in Society (Dorling and Simpson, 1999) and Tackling Inequalities (Pantazis and Gordon, 2000). Both of these Radstats books include prefaces (written by David Gordon and Alison Macfarlane) giving a brief histories of Radstats activities that culminate with the words:

We have always seen our role as belonging to a spectrum of campaigning organisations rather than as an academic or professional organisation. ... most of us share the view that the needs of the community can never be met fully by competition. The pursuit of profit alone will not eliminate the problems of poverty, inequality and discrimination. Only rational, democratic and progressive planning can tackle the manifest injustices of our present society and help the least 'powerful' groups to realise their full potential. Meaningful statistics are needed for this purpose. To paraphrase the old Marxist adage, the purpose of statistics in general and Radical Statistics in particular is not only to describe the world but to change it.

Is there a constitution?

Faced with problems arising from differences between the Policy Statement and these Prefaces I sought guidance from the Radstats constitution. But inquiries of my Troika colleagues and other Radstats activists did not reveal the existence of any constitution, or any rules - or any formally adopted statements of aims or purposes. It seems possible that Radstats had a set of rules in the 1970s when it started, but it seems that any such documentation may have been lost.

The implication is that anyone can define Radstats aims and purposes, and that there are no established procedures for resolving differences of views among members about what these aims should be. It is not even clear that Radstats has members. People are invited to become subscribers to Radical Statistics and are then treated as if they are members. But since there are no agreed aims or rules the concept of membership does not have much meaning. Radstats has been, and still is, more like an evangelical sect with followers than a political or academic organisation with members.

Does it matter that Radstats does not have any formally agreed organisational structure? Will the world take
was very important that the editors of the
members in policy issues.
A third reason for preferring the
between statistics and policy.
the production of articles for the relevant professional audiences such as
actually used.
account of the activities of the Radstats Health Group that gives a fair impression of what is typically been involved
The introductory section of the latest of these -
contributions.
There is nothing wrong with being academic.
list who don't use university addresses.
computing system established at a UK university.
little over half (148 out of 282) of the members email addresses end with '..ac.uk' indicating that they are using a
Statistics
found that 48% of members/subscribers were academics (Halsam, 1992).
Most of the articles published in Radical Statistics are by academics. A survey conducted by Sue Haslam in 1991
282) of the members email addresses end with '...ac.uk' indicating that they are using a
1973, especially Chapter12). Many people regard the new towns as the acme of town planning in Britain, but this planning was
centralised. Could it really be regarded as democratic? (see Thomas, 1997).
Many people associate planning with the Soviet regime that dominated Eastern Europe for seventy years. Those associations make it difficult to imagine forms of planning that do not involve centralised decision-making by small elites that determine factors in the lives of other people. Such centralised decision-making is based on statistics and is expressed in statistics. I don't see such forms of planning as consistent with the Radstats writings.
Those who want planning need to show how it can be progressive and democratic. The promotion of planning without such a demonstration is likely to put people off both Radstats and statistics in general.
A second reason for preferring the Policy Statement of the 1980s is that it gives a rather better picture of the kinds of things that Radstats has actually done over the past decade or so than the claims made by the Prefaces. The Prefaces say that Radstats is a campaigning rather than an academic of professional organisation. But there are more connections with academia than with campaigning in the character of Radstat activities.
Most of the articles published in Radical Statistics are by academics. A survey conducted by Sue Haslam in 1991 found that 48% of members/subscribers were academics (Halsam, 1992). Since 1997 the editors of Radical Statistics have offered to get contributions refereed - a facility that has little interest for those other than academics. The mailbase system that hosts the radstats mailing list is set up for academics so it is not very surprising that a little over half (148 out of 282) of the members email addresses end with '...ac.uk' indicating that they are using a computing system established at a UK university. And there are a number of academic members of the Radstats list who don't use university addresses.
There is nothing wrong with being academic. It is difficult to imagine that the dazzling series of five books produced by Radstats activists over the past two years (Dorling and Simpson, 1999; Gordon et al., 1999; Shaw et al., 1999, Pantazis and Gordon, 2000; and Kerrison and Macfarlane, 2000) could have been done without major academic contributions.
The introductory section of the latest of these -Official Health Statistics - An Unofficial Guide includes a summary account of the activities of the Radstats Health Group that gives a fair impression of what is typically been involved in Radstats activities. There is a critique of the data available and critical examination of way available data is actually used. The campaigning has largely comprised the production of pamphlets and books supplemented by the production of articles for the relevant professional audiences such as British Medical Journal, Health Services Journal, and Nursing Times. The Health Group is very professional and academic in the best senses of those words.
A third reason for preferring the Policy Statement is that it is more realistic in its identification of the relationship between statistics and policy. The 1991 survey conducted by Carol Haslam found a strong interest among members in policy issues. One of the most notable results was to report that 83% of respondents thought that it was very important that the editors of Radical Statistics should encourage contributions concerned with 'political
issues in statistics'. That strong interest in political issues symbolises a problem for Radstats. Radstats activists and supporters are interested in policy, but as the Policy Statement points out, statistics are usually used to support the status quo (see also Thomas, 1999). The policy-confirming influence of statistics may help explain the relatively low attraction of Radstats to those outside academia.

There are hundreds of thousands of users of statistics in Britain who are aware from their day to day work that the normal function of statistics is for administrative and organisational purposes. These hundreds of thousand don’t find it easy to even think of being radical about statistics and so don’t think about subscribing to Radical Statistics. It doesn’t help to deal with this situation by pretending, as the Prefaces do, that statistics can easily be instruments of change (see Thomas, 2000, for further discussion).

**Participation in decision-making**

A fourth reason and crucial reason for preferring the Policy Statement over the Prefaces is that the former advocates free discussion. There was a lot of discussion of Radstats’ purposes on the pages of Radical Statistics when it consisted of 'roneod' typscripted A4 sheets as in the early 1980s, but that discussion has died away as Radical Statistics has become a nearly fully fledged academic journal.

Since 1996 there have been discussions on the Radstats list on the Mailbase system. This list provides unprecedented opportunity for discussion of matters of concern to Radstats subscribers, supporters, and sympathisers. Members of the list can post contributions to a discussion at any time of day or night. At the time of writing this list has 282 members. This contrasts with the 30 or 40 who typically attend Annual General Meetings that are usually squeezed into less than an hour at the Annual conference.

In February 2000 a motion was put forward at the AGM relevant to the management of the radstats list. In my view to have such a motion was inappropriate. The lack of any constitution does not give much authority to the Radstats AGM over anyone. It is difficult to see that those who attend have any authority to intervene in the management of a list provided for the benefit of academics by the Higher Education Funding Council.

The Radstats list does have agreed rules and a statement of purposes. The statement of purposes was revised this year in the light of discussion at the AGM. But the authors of the motion put forward at the AGM have not contributed to the development of these rules and purposes by expressing themselves in the list discussion.

The kind of thinking that supported the motion at the AGM may be consistent with the 'planning' emphasis given in the Prefaces. Planning, as indicated above, typically involves one group of people taking decisions that affect others. Thinking in this way may have made it seem normal and acceptable for a group of thirty people at a weekend meeting in Bradford to take decisions about the way several hundred other people should conduct their ongoing discussions, without noticing that such a procedure is profoundly anti-democratic.

The crucial reason for favouring the Policy Statement is that it does give emphasis to participation in decision-making. Matters affecting management of the radstats list should be dealt with discussion by those affected - that is by members of the list. The kind of response this article might encourage is also well suited to discussion on the list.

I look forward to learning the reasons Radstats people may have for disagreeing with this article - either in the columns of this journal or on the radstats list.

**REFERENCES**


Ray Thomas

*Social Sciences*
*The Open University*
*35 Passmore*
*Milton Keynes*
*MK6 3DY*

*Tel: 01908 679081*
*Fax: 01908 550401*

*E-mail: r.thomas@open.ac.uk*