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Happy Valentine's Day: counting and measuring.

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On Valentine's Day 2003 the geographers of the United Kingdom received a truck load of cards. The "cards" came in the form of innumerable press releases and tables of statistics concerning the geography of the UK signed, mysteriously and variously, ONS, GRO(S), and NISRA. The first of the 2001 Census data concerning the characteristics of the population of Britain had been both released and instantly interpreted on our behalf at 11am on the day before. If you are not reading this in Britain please keep reading; this story has wider implications. The cards made the headlines on February 14th. These cards were not just delivered to geographers of course. But it was geographers who were most excited about what they might reveal,

because the Census, far more than any other survey, contains geographical data. What could the data be telling us? What secrets lay within it? We (and particularly quantitative geographers) felt loved and needed. Our meal ticket for several years of research had come in. Newspaper and television pundits were talking about what we did. The people of the UK had studiously filled in their forms for our delectation and delight; and so many forms, producing so many numbers, and so many headlines. We could hardly contain our excitement (5 billion will be released in all, on a population of only 50 odd million). But then we began to read what was being written about these numbers, to see something of the purposes for which numbers had been made up, we began to see an agenda forming where the data, supposedly collected for one purpose, was being used for many others, and we began to look at the numbers themselves.

In writing this chapter I want to try and answer a few simple questions in relation to human geography: “what can and should be counted and how does one measure and quantify and to what end?”? To try to answer these questions I have used my experience of Valentine’s Day 2003 with excerpts from the press cuttings and news releases, tables and summary statistics of that day. These were just the first substantive results from the 2001 Census, many more will follow, and their substance and interpretation will shape both the work of geographers and the picture of the human geography of the UK that is painted for a decade to come. The key question is how should you decide what to work on presented with such sources of information? Whose picture really is being painted by these numbers?

The Big Story

One story dominated census reporting on Valentine's Day 2003. The headlines below are emboldened only when they were so in the original stories. Most of the text below is taken from the Internet and hence the text appears there a day before it appears in print in the following morning's newspapers. The evening television news on almost all channels also led with this story when discussing the 2001 Census. An operation costing a quarter of a billion pounds and collecting millions upon millions of statistics was boiled down by the press (with the assistance of the census authorities) to just two numbers: 39 and 45.

"Blacks and Asians overtake whites in two areas of Britain" (headline, David Barrett and Lyndsay Moss, PA News, the Independent.co.uk 13/2/3)

"More diverse, caring and single – the new face of Britain. Whites in minority in two boroughs, census reveals" (headline and sub heading, main census story, John Carvel, Social Affairs Editor, the Guardian, 14/2/3).

"Top 10 facts from the 2001 census... [Fact number one] Two boroughs of Britain had more blacks and Asians than white people for the first time ever." (David Batty, SocietyGuardian.co.uk, 13/2/3).

"Ethnic groups growing – census. Two areas of Britain have more black people and Asians than white people for the first time ever..." (BBC lead census story 13/2/3)

“Census results unveiled ... the census findings, published by the Office for National Statistics, reveal that two areas of Britain have more blacks and Asians than white people for the first time ever.” (ITV news website 13/2/3)

“Population snapshot ... Two areas of Britain have more blacks and Asians than white people for the first time ever: In Newham, East London, 39.4 [sic] of people are white, and in Brent, north west London, 45.3 per cent are white.” (Channel 4 News lead census story 13/2/3).

I could go on and on – but hopefully the list above gives you an idea of how this one story dominated the first reports of the substantive Census results (simple population counts by age and sex had been released earlier). Perhaps, thankfully, at least from the point of view of census reporting, the storm clouds of war were gathering on February 14th and the front pages of most newspapers and the first item on most news channels led with the news on the forthcoming war and the preparations for what turned out to be the largest UK peace demonstrations of all time over the weekend that followed. I say thankfully because the Census was not designed to produce scare stories over “white” people becoming a minority in a couple of places. How then did this turn out to be the story that was so extensively reported?

The similarity of the quotations suggests a single source and that source, interestingly, was not the government agency that released the figures; at least not directly. The main press release that National Statistics released stressed in its fourth paragraph that the big picture the census paints is “a complex rather than a simple picture. Ideas of divisions between north and south or town and country hide the contrasting ways that

people experience life in each area of the country” (ONS press release 13/2/3).

Neither their main press release nor the more detailed press release (on ethnicity and religion in England and Wales) contained the two numbers that became the big census story. However, the tables that they released along with their summaries made it possible to calculate those numbers. By working back in time, it would appear that the most likely initial source of the numbers was the Press Association (see first quotation above). Someone there, armed only with a calculator, or perhaps just pen and paper, calculated the statistics that became the story.

The government agency clearly did not want this to be the lead story, their press releases painted a much more nuanced picture of the results, avoiding crudely lumping together groups and highlighting the sensational. However they provided the numbers that made such a story possible and had the experience to know what happens when they do so. They also failed to provide the press with an alternative big story – suggesting in their earliest of releases that the big story was a decline in Gaelic speaking in Scotland! If the powers that be had not realised what the story would have turned into, then they have a very low level of competency in spinning the news. I think they did know and there are several reasons to think this. Firstly concerned organisation had clearly been pre-warned and had their press releases ready to distribute too on the morning of February 13th. Chief amongst these was the Commission for Racial Equality which lead with a story the bones of which imply: don't be concerned, there are fewer black people than you think!

“2001 census: replacing myths with facts ... The figures released today reveal that many commentators have over-estimated the size of the ethnic minority population. A

recent MORI poll found that people estimated that ethnic minorities comprised 22.5% of the total population, nearly three times the actual size.” (Beverley Bernard, Acting Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, press release 13/2/3).

Operation Black Vote and the Muslim Council of Britain also released press stories at the same time although without the same bizarre message of ‘don’t worry there aren’t many of us’!

Secondly, the main national statistical agency, the Office for National Statistics (ONS), chose not to release other statistics (which may be released later) which could easily have become the big story. Most obviously amongst these, the 2001 census contained the first ever count in Britain of same-sex couples who cohabited. Hidden within the ONS press releases was the statement that cohabiting couple families had risen from 5.5 per cent of households in 1991 to 8.3 per cent in 2001 with London having the highest proportion of adults who are cohabiting (10.3 per cent) and then: “At local level though is Brighton and Hove that shows the highest proportions of all. Cohabiting households make up 11.5 per cent and 14.8 per cent of all adults are cohabiting.” (Census 2001 – families of England and Wales, ONS press release 13/2/3). At no point in that press release did ONS point out that the definition of cohabiting couples had changed to include same sex couples, nor have they provided the figures that would allow members of the press to calculate that proportion. If they had I suspect the big story on Census day would have been something along the lines of “1 million gay ‘marriages’” or “Brighton, gay capital of Britain, married couples in minority”.

Thirdly and most importantly the census authorities chose which questions to ask in the Census and it is this which had by far the largest effect on what the “big story” is, both on the day of release and for the ten years of research which will follow. Despite an overwhelming case being made by the academic community and many others for the 2001 Census to include a question on income, this was rejected at the last minute and, instead, a new question on religion was asked (Dorling, 1999). Had the income question been asked as it is asked in the United States (and higher incomes included) the big story would have almost certainly been: “Census reveals huge income gap” followed by “in two areas of Britain a majority of the population are living on the breadline”, “census results show extreme divide between two earner households and pensioners”, “Black Britain’s paid less for the same work”, “People with disabilities are the poorest”, “Salaries now five times the average in posh place”, “I’m alright John society” and so on. The academic papers that would have flowed out as the detailed results were released would have concentrated on income inequalities. Government and public policy would be influenced first directly and then incrementally, with each drip of facts and analysis. People in Britain find income inequalities extremely uncomfortable, which is mainly why the question was not asked. Living with the unfolding statistical story of income inequalities would have been even more uncomfortable. Research papers from studying people’s chances for having good health to achieving well in education would quickly begin to make the refrain “we find income explains the majority of variation” a research cliché. Academics would no longer be using pitiful proxies, such as the number of cars people have access to or whether they have a mortgage. We know this because income is asked in almost all other official surveys, but they are surveys, not censuses. Above all else the Census helps to make statistics “real”, because it puts

them in place. When you talk about half the homes in a city rather than “the poor”, when you can say where the people you are talking about are, when you can identify the few places where the minority of the very affluent who live there have access to resources, through money, equivalent to that which has to be shared out between thousands of others, the numbers, analysis and implications come alive. But none of this happened, because the tick boxes were removed from the forms before they were printed.

Why am I telling you this story, a story of one source of data and one set of press releases about one country? I am telling it because I think it summarises what should not be counted. More subtlety it is an example of what should not be counted and presented in this way. I have no great objection to the asking of ethnic origin on census forms. I do have great objection to crude and potentially harmful newspaper stories emerging from either malicious or unthinking actions by those paid to collect and disseminate statistics. One day you could have a job that involves counting, measuring and disseminating. Who would you have helped had you sent the story around the world that: “**Ethnic minority groups on the rise in England** ... Blacks and Asians outnumber whites in two boroughs; the overall ethnic population rises to 9%, census shows.” (The [Singapore] Straits Times, 15/2/3)? Would it have been people interested in how parts of Britain are becoming more heterogeneous in their population’s origins, or people wishing to start scare stories over immigration?

Returning to the Question

What can and should be counted and how does one measure and quantify and to what end?"

The Valentine's Day reporting of the UK Census was unfortunate to say the least. You may be wondering why I think this and here we come to the crux of the problem of counting and measuring in geography in particular and social science more generally. As I see it, the Census paints a very different picture of ethnicity in the UK. The UK is full of ghettos but they are all, without exception, ghettos of people who ticked the "White British" option. The vast majority of the Britain is made up of communities, neighbourhoods, village and towns where over 95 per cent of the population, when asked, label themselves as White Britons. There are only some 250 wards, out of over ten thousand, where less than half the population label themselves as White Britons. Even in those diverse wards, the largest single ethnic group, constituting about a third of the population, are White Britons! What is remarkable about the geography of ethnicity in the Britain is that most of the country is made up of ghettos and **all** the ghettos are White British ghettos. There are a few mixed areas and even fewer diverse areas (the 250 areas described above), but the reality (as I call my stories) of the geography of ethnicity is almost the opposite of the stories (what you are most likely to read as being the reality, as highlighted above).

You can apply the above example to many, if not most, other subjects quantified in geography. You can find a set of popular stories, a common knowledge and understanding, a spin put on a subject that is flawed. Compare those stories to your

perception of reality, if they do not equate ask further questions. Next you ask where those stories came from, what was the source and the impetus for the line that was taken? Observe how usually there is a single origin for the line taken, in the case above, the Press Association. Then return to the source that was used and see whether, if looked at in another light, it really does merit what you are reading about. If it does not then you have two further tasks: first to try to understand why that spin was placed on the story and secondly to re-interpret the source as you think it would have been better interpreted in the first place. How do you decide what is better? You begin with the last question I set myself in writing this chapter: “to what end”. Almost anything can be counted, measured and quantified; in innumerable ways. There are ‘scientific rules’ that govern such things, but they are so open to interpretation that they can be followed without determining the result and almost an infinite number of “scientifically correct” results can be attained. What matters is to what end you are working. That, above all else, will influence what you find and will narrow down the options. What you find will be influenced by the data and what you find may alter what you think, but how and where and why you look matters most.

To return to our example, the stories depend very little on the source, the census. Whatever the census had reported, the newspapers were almost certainly going to run with the stories they did. It did not matter that the government agencies did not feed them those stories directly. The agencies would have had to have gone a long way out of their way to have produced press releases that would have lead to another line being taken. They didn’t, I believe, partly because they saw their job as providing the statistics that others would interpret (although they did release press releases which interpreted that data). Perhaps they too thought that what the census showed was the

emergence of Black and/or Asian ghettos in parts of London. Almost all in determining what was written, almost all the people involved in writing these stories were White. In Britain at the start of the twenty first century most White people were brought up in areas where almost no-one was not White. Areas where a tenth or a fifth of the population are not White are now routinely labelled as ethnic minority areas in popular conversation, in the media, and in academic studies (for instance “inner cities with high proportion of Black Minority Ethnic Populations”). The fact that usually ninety or eighty percent of the population is White in these areas is largely ignored. The world is always seen and described through particular lenses. Even in a situation as absurd as I claim the initial reporting of ethnicity from the census to have been it is not seen as absurd; as it has been done before and as it is usual to do it in this way, it is seen as normal to carry on in this way. To see if it is right to carry on in this way think how you would feel if you were counted in this way? Given that criteria here are some possible answers to the questions of this chapter:

“What can be counted”: almost anything as long as it should be counted. Almost anything that is simple can be counted. Counting love, happiness, despair, aspirations, opinions, feelings, beauty, evil and good are much more difficult. However there are researchers who do attempt to count things which add up to issues such as morality. Interestingly there is a current surge in interest in economics in counting ‘happiness’ (Dorling and Ward, 2003).

“What should be counted”: what matters to people and does not harm them in the counting. As an example consider the current proposal that the ethnicity of babies should be counted upon birth registration in Britain. In other words each child’s

parents should be asked what they consider the most appropriate label for their new born baby to be. Could being labelled by their parents be harmful to a child in the future? Possibly it could. Many people are shocked to find out later in life they have been adopted, or that their father is not named on their birth certificate, why then should we not expect that some people are harmed in the future when they find out how their parents chose to label them in the past?

“How does one measure”: to measure is to compare. Again the answer to “how” is carefully and considering that you too might be measured in the way you are proposing to measure. Take the statistic above that in about 250 wards out of over 10,000 in the Britain less than half the population are White Britons. The categories that have been implicitly used to make that measurement are that “wards” and “Britain” as sensible divisions of space (they are not really). Wards are areas designed to have roughly equal numbers of electors in local government, they were not designed to be used to analyse how society is changing spatially.

Ethnicity as measured by the 2001 census is presented as a sensible division of people. Is it? White Briton is presented as a sensible reference category. Why? And fifty percent has some kind of meaning. Again, why? Note also that I’ve ignored ethnicity in Northern Ireland or questions of religion in Scotland for that matter. Every assumption can and should be questioned. However, for many people currently working in geography asking questions is seen to be enough. Providing answers is a little more difficult but equally if not more important. If you really want to say that you think someone’s interpretation is wrong then try saying not only what is wrong with it, but how you would have interpreted the information yourself.

“How does one quantify”: to quantify is to turn experience into numbers, not necessarily to demean or reduce it. Turning millions of experiences into thousands of numbers and portraying the complexity to human life can enrich it as much as other forms of analysis reduce the meaning from experience. In short, what I try to do (and often fail) is quantify in a way which does not reduce my understanding despite my need to reduce to the variety of life to categories. Most importantly do not quantify in a way you would not like to be labelled. For instance if you would describe yourself as White, but not White British on a census form, or you think others might not, then don’t mindlessly amalgamate these labels. It’s a simple way to proceed, just try to imagine how you would feel where you described as you might describe others.

“To what end?”: this is by far the most important question. If you do not know why you are looking at data, if you are looking just to find a story with little idea of what may matter you are very likely to make a mistake in how you than quantify, measure and count. You should know why you are interested in what you are looking at before you try and determine what is happening. Having looked you may change your mind, but if you begin looking without thinking, you are likely to get into trouble: by producing results which make or imply assumptions that you would not made about you were you in that situation.

Where to turn for more information? I could point you towards books and papers, but unless you are a very odd individual with both plenty of time on your hands and access to such things you are unlikely to follow those up. Instead there are three groups in Britain which are currently quite active in trying to answer questions in

these areas and have active web-sites. I have also added a source from the United States on sources of information on Poverty, Inequality & Globalization to try to mitigate my parochial obsession with one country. The four boxes below provide examples and links to much other work. The first is the Radical Statistics Group, over quarter of a century old this group has produced many examples of the miss-use of statistics over the years of relevance to geography. The second is the Statistics Commission, established by government in 2000 and largely but not completely transparent in operation, it is the official watchdog on statistics in the UK. The third is the Royal Statistic Society, established by charter in 1834 this is the body that has monitored and used statistics about the population the longest in the United Kingdom. The fourth is a more ad hoc collection of sources, but concerning issues of relevance world-wide.

1: The Radical Statistics Group

<http://www.radstats.org.uk/>

“We believe that statistics can be used to support radical campaigns for progressive social change. Statistics should inform, not drive policies. Social problems should not be disguised by technical language.”

Many of its publications are now available on its website. For instance on poverty and inequality:

“Low pay statistics: setting the scene; Measuring Social Exclusion: a lifespan approach;

Quantifying Social Capital: measuring the intangible in the local policy context; Social Exclusion and Housing: a relationship in need of elaboration; Poor areas and the "Ecological Fallacy"; Engendering Poverty Research: How to go beyond the feminisation of poverty; Reducing wages inequalities from published company financial statements; Looking at Health Inequalities: Social class, disabled people and ethnic origin; Money Matters: Measuring poverty, wealth and unemployment; Tackling inequalities - Where we are now and what can be done; Poverty and disabled children; Where are the deprived? measuring deprivation in cities and regions; The racialisation of ethnic inequalities in health; Making sense of health inequality statistics; Poverty and health; Working with historical statistics on poverty and economic distress; Ending world poverty in the 21st century; Poverty across the life course and health; Inequalities in crime and criminal justice; How can we end inequalities in housing?; Inequalities in education: Targets and Education Action Zones”; and many more...

2: The Statistics Commission

<http://www.statscom.org.uk>

Is currently chaired by Professor David Rhind, who began his career in geography.

The commission has the following remit

“The Statistics Commission has been set up to advise on the quality, quality assurance and priority-setting for National Statistics, and on the procedures designed to deliver statistical integrity, to help ensure National Statistics are trustworthy and responsive to public needs. It is independent both of Ministers and of the producers of National Statistics. It operates in a transparent way with the minutes of its meetings, correspondence and evidence it receives, and advice it gives, all normally publicly available for scrutiny.”

Examples of its recent reports include:

“INTERIM REPORT ON THE 2001 CENSUS IN WESTMINSTER

The Statistics Commission will publish its interim report on the 2001 Census in Westminster on Thursday 23 October at 2pm. Copies of the report will be available from the ground floor reception desk at our offices, 10 Great George Street, and in pdf format on the Commission's website: www.statscom.org.uk.”

“STATISTICS USERS' COUNCIL ANNUAL CONFERENCE

The Statistics Commission is sponsoring the Statistics Users' Council Annual Conference: Is it possible to impartially monitor the Government's performance with the available statistics? “

3: The Royal Statistical Society

Part of the society's mission is to:

“disseminate and promote the use of statistical data, where it would be of benefit to the broader community and advance the welfare of society in general.”

Its website can be found at:

<http://www.rss.org.uk/>

Examples of its recent activities include:

“On October 23rd the RSS issued a public statement regarding its views on Performance Indicators (this statement can be downloaded as a PDF file - Performance Indicators press release). The statement accompanied the release of the final report of the RSS Working Party on Performance Monitoring of Public Services, led by Sheila Bird. The final report of the Working Party is also available as a PDF file - Performance Indicators: Good, Bad and Ugly.”

“On July 9, 2003, the Society held an open discussion meeting on 'The 2001 census and beyond', with invited speakers Philip Redfern (formerly Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, London), Len Cook (National Statistician, Office for National Statistics, London) and Susan Purdon and Gerry Nicolaas (National Centre for Social Research, London). The manuscripts of the papers that were presented and a record of the discussion on the meeting can be downloaded from the preprints page on this site.

“

4: POVERTY, INEQUALITY & GLOBALIZATION resources for researchers

This website is provided by academics associated with the University of Berkeley in California

The website can be found at:

<http://are.berkeley.edu/~harrison/globalpoverty/>

Examples of its content include links to:

"Anti-Globalization" Websites/Books

Korten, D.C. "When Corporations Rule the World", 2nd ed. Berrett-Khoeler, San Francisco.

Widely acknowledged as the Bible of globalization's dissenters. Korten is equally suspicious of both big government and big corporations. He is strongly in favor of both democracy and markets, but argues that democracy only works well at the local level, and markets need government regulation.

Trade Observatory Website (formerly known as WTO watch). Centered on trade agreements and institutions, but a high quality website.

Oxfam International. Oxfam has a very broad range of interests, but it produces some of the best quality and most balanced critiques of the current global trading system. Searchable website of their statements and publications. See in particular "Rigged Rules and Double Standards: trade, globalisation and the fight against poverty."

ATTAC. ATTAC is a very international network of academics and intellectuals, the website includes searchable archive of their newsletters.

Project for the First People's Century. Rojas is an academic and consultant. His website contains an impressive set of links to papers, publications, data sources, and other relevant websites.

Discussion

Statistics are powerful. When an argument is made that is backed up by numbers it tends to carry more weight. Often that weight is warranted. The work has been carefully carried out, assumptions thought through, implications considered. Arguments about society not backed up by numbers, unless incredibly eloquently presented, and often unless they play to the prejudices a reader already holds, are less likely to hold sway. Given this it is sensible to count, measure and quantify if you know to what end. But given this people will also attempt to do these things without thinking too clearly about what they are doing.

When next you read "another study shows...", and it concerns something of interest to you ask "Is that true?", ask "How do I know it is true?", ask "Where did it come from?" (where did it really come from?), ask "Who wanted me to know that?" (paid for it to appear and why); Ask "What are the alternative explanations, stories, spin and interpretation?". And ask "Could I have done better?" To bring this chapter to a close I will return again to the British census, but that held in 1971 rather than 2001, and to what has happened to counting and measuring in Human Geography over that period also.

The following excerpt is taken from a flyer that was given to all households in Britain over thirty years ago along with their 1971 census form. It would be an interesting question to ask to what extent the 1971 census was ever used to meet the aims it specified. Processing of the 1971 census was delayed due to the complexity of

handling so much data at the time. The final printed volume of 1971 census data was not published until 1979. Only a few centres in the country could handle the unpublished data (much the same is true in 2001). In 1979, of course, a new government (lead my Mrs Thatcher) was elected in Britain that saw the market rather than state planning as the main mechanism to determine who benefits. Were the people of Britain duped?

Why this census is so vital.

The Census is about Britain. How many of us live here? How many children? Are we well or badly housed? And how many of us have cars? What kinds of jobs do we do? And how many of us are on the move, or have been, from one part of the country to another?

The Census is to get facts [sic]. Facts, good and bad, about Britain – now – in 1971 at the beginning of a new decade. For how can we make plans to improve Britain, to build houses, schools, hospitals where we need them if we are ignorant of ourselves as a people? We can't guess our way into the future by assuming that we're this and that when, for all we know, we may be nothing of the sort. The Census is to help us plan ahead from facts." (OPCS and GRO(S) flyer, 1971).

Conclusion: ask who benefits

The 1971 Census was never really used to plan how Britain should develop in the 1970s. By the time it came out the government were no longer interested and a new Census was on its way. When the 1981 Census was released it revealed a country that

had just been gripped by mass unemployment following deindustrialisation and by riots which were often labelled as race riots. When the 1991 census was released it showed that there were almost no miners left in the country but many more households with lots of cars. What it showed that was new and could not be predicted was the sizes of Britain's self-declared ethnic minorities. People were asked their ethnicity in 1991 partly because it was thought a mistake that they had not been in 1981 given the riots of that summer. At the time of the 1991 census it was said that these statistics had been collected to help identify and reduce inequalities between ethnic groups in Britain.

The censuses have become increasingly used in resource allocation (although even for that more up to date statistics are now seen as vital). Who then benefits from the release of the 2001 census? Initially the very first number released was a huge surprise. It told us that there were roughly a million fewer people living in the country than we had thought (which shows just how bad our surveys and data fusion techniques are for those who worry about surveillance!). The immediate beneficiary of this however, will be the Treasury, as the areas where fewer people now live will, in a few years time, receive less money. These tend, although are not exclusively, to be poorer inner city areas. In the short term these places will be penalised for having lost their populations, and more will likely leave these areas as a result. Some local councils have questioned the results and those which questioned most vigorously have been awarded a few more people by the counting authorities.

The big story that this chapter has used as an example, is that whites are a minority in two boroughs. This story clearly benefits right wing groups in the way it was told and

those who wish to claim that Britain is being “swamped”. It is very hard to show that the asking of a skin colour based ethnic minority question in 1991 benefited people assigned to ethnic minorities other than the answers being used to calculate police force recruitment targets. It was not at all expected (when the question was asked) that the police, largely exempt from the 1976 Race Relations Act, would use the census data, but neither was it expected that it would be used for little else of tangible benefit to those minority groups listed who then dutifully recorded their ethnicity. In the event the 2001 census is beginning to show that in terms of their position in society Black and Asian ethnic minority groups’ lot improved markedly between 1991 and 2001. The censuses tend to record what has happened rather than be used as tools to help shape the future.

Who benefits from the implications of what else was released for consumption on Valentine’s Day? It depends very much on how the figures behind the headlines are measured and analysed in the coming days, months and years. I am not pessimistic over this but it is not hard to show that very little good came of the first asking of this particular question in Britain. An established geographer, David Harvey, once said that “mapping even more evidence of man’s patent inhumanity to man is counter-revolutionary in the sense that it allows the bleeding-heart liberal in us to pretend we are contributing to a solution when in fact we are not” (Harvey, 1973, p. 144). I believe far too few have been drawn, often far too badly with far too little fore-thought. As a result people in Britain, including most teachers of geography in universities, have very little idea of simple facts such as what average incomes are in their district and region, that there are only White ghettos in this country, such as how many students are studying at university (2 million) and what really determines their

chances of entry (geographical location). Around the time the established geographer questioned the drawing of maps of inhumanity many human geographers began to stop counting or measuring. Very few human geographers in Britain now count and it is worth briefly addressing the issue as to whether this is because there is something implicitly wrong with counting.

I would claim that Harvey's sentence had more impact on research in human geography over the course of the last thirty years than any other. For those of you too young to remember the 1970s, 'counter-revolutionary' was a term of insult some people mainly working in what were then extremely exclusive universities used to annoy each other. For those too young to remember the 1980s and 1990s too, human geographers abandoning mapping did not hasten the revolution. Bleeding-heart liberals found other outlets for their worries using words rather than statistics. Qualitative methods boomed in popularity partly as a means of overcoming the problems seen as inherent in quantitative approaches. All kinds of new ways of conceptualising the world were tried out resulting in a plethora of 'isms' that undergraduate geographers are often now taught by rote. And almost no maps were drawn. The last comprehensive maps of the prevalence of death from various diseases in Britain, for instance, were drawn by Melvyn Howe in 1970!

There is nothing inherently problematic with social statistics compared to any other form of information collected about people no matter how sensitively and participatory alternative forms of information gathering may be. I find there is something a little bit painful about well meaning, almost always middle class, academics discussing other peoples' lives with them in a sensitive and caring manner.

Empathy only gets you so far, experience gets you further and you can't be taught it. The much blunter tools of the census form; birth, marriage and death certificate; unemployment and benefit record; tax record, death duties and school exam result, routine blood sample analysis (for prevalence of drug consumption) have the advantages of not noticeably influencing peoples' lives as you try to measure them. You do not leave the pensioner you just spent two hours talking to in their home with the abiding question of whether the reason her state pension is so low is because the state is funding research such as yours; nice as you may be. An ethical and moral case can easily be made as to why counting and measuring are extremely valid and responsible ways of undertaking social research. Not the only ways, but the current fashion to dismiss them as ignorant is ignorant.

If asked to give a list of statistics maps I would recommend to illustrate the effective use of simple quantification, the most recent maps by a UK geographer I would include would be those of Howe (1970). For mapping of the world, including Britain, the best example is still the project inspired by Michael Kidron's Pluto Press Project¹ (Kidron and Segal 1984; Fothergill and Vincent, 1985). For mapping of the last census, the work of two researchers based in a Social Policy Department was most influential (Forrest and Gordon, 1993). Only the first of these examples involved work supported by an academic geography department. Mapping is clearly out of fashion in human geography, more so in the UK than in the USA. By the time you read this an *Atlas of Community Economic Health and Distress in America (1960-2003)* may have been published. There are people still counting, and some mapping

¹ For more on Michael Kidron and the Pluto Press project read his obituaries in the Guardian (27/3/2003) and Times (3/4/2003). It is interesting to compare Michael's choices in life, to map 'man's inhumanity with man', against David Harvey's advice to geographers.

what they count, but they are few, are increasingly far between. Was David Harvey right to advise against mapping? It depends on who benefits.

So who does benefit from counting and measuring and to what end? The state is the principal beneficiary. Its ability to shape peoples' lives, encourage them to conform, guide them through education, bump them up with sure start schemes, encourage and cajole them to go to university, to get a job, get a mortgage, have kids, get married, pay their taxes, consume large amounts of goods, vote to maintain the status quo, retire quietly and die even more quietly (if possible) requires the collection and analysis of a huge quantity of statistics. That is why the UK state pays a quarter of a billion pounds for the census and billions more for the collection and analysis of many more numbers. Individuals benefit too however. Without social statistics and the work that has been done to analyse them and popularise them it is unlikely that the living conditions of poorer people in the UK would have been raised such that they almost always appear to be similar to those enjoyed by the majority a generation before (see Davey Smith et al. 2001 for more than two centuries of evidence that such research matters).

In countries that collect and analyse fewer numbers (and at times within the UK when this has been so) it is not surprising to find the social gaps between groups of people growing. The most socially surveyed populations in the world live in Scandinavia. The least socially surveyed live in the world's poorest nations. However, not all countries that survey their population in detail and not all researchers that study such information do so with the interests of people at heart. Ministries of Truth and police states abound. It is not the information that is good or evil, it is what you do with it

and who then benefits. Mapping, counting, measuring and analysing may not help make the world a better place to live in, however given that human geographers have largely abstained from such practises over the last thirty years I think it fair to conclude that not doing so has not helped much either (Dorling and Shaw, 2002). It is time to come in from the innumerate wilderness and start counting again. As I write this almost a year has passed since those first Valentine's cards of the most detailed geographical statistics in history were sent to geographers in Britain. By Valentine's Day 2004 a million times more will have been posted.

Key Questions for students

1. Who decides what is counted in official surveys in the country in which you live and who most influences their decisions?

Search the web to try to find out what your key census or survey organisation says about this, to whom they are accountable and which parts of government provides their funding (see also Dorling and Simpson, 2000)

2. Suppose you were appointed as a fast-track civil servant and given the task of measuring whether inequality or polarisation were rising in your country. How would you go about the job?

Try looking at the websites of the major sponsors of social research in your country. In the UK these are <http://www.jrf.org.uk/> and <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/> . If you get stuck imagine you only have an hour in which to provide an answer to your impatient boss, and search harder.

3. Pick a recent topical debate covered by one of the four web-sites in the reference list below and explain where you stand on the issues raised.

If you cannot find a relevant debate on one of these web-sites then search your national newspapers on-line for a debate that has concerned statistics and some political, economic or social issue over the course of the last week.

4. Compare and contrast one of the books Michael Kidron was associated with, with David Harvey's advice in *Social Justice and the City*. Why do you think their approaches were so different?

Alternatively compare the questions asked at the end of this chapter with those at the ends of all the other chapters in this book. Why do you think different people ask such different questions and give different advice as to how to begin answering?

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