THE FREEMAN
IDEAS ON LIBERTY

Statistics: A Vehicle for Collectivist Mischief

by John T. Wenders

Sir John Cowperthwaite served in Britain's administration of Hong Kong for over 25 years. From 1961 to 1971 he was Hong Kong's financial secretary, a position that gave him vast power over that colony's economic affairs. It was under his guidance that the theory of positive nonintervention was used to promote Hong Kong's astounding economic progress.

One of Sir John's crusades was to prevent the gathering of statistics on many aspects of Hong Kong's life. In Hong Kong, he said, "we are in the happy position where the leverage exercised by the government on the economy is so small that it is not necessary, nor even of any particular value, to have these figures available for the formulation of policy." For him, statistics were the tools of interventionists anxious to use the government to produce an outcome consistent with their collectivist view of society.

Amen.

The United States has taken a different route. The U.S. Constitution provides for the enumeration of citizens for the purpose of determining the number of each state's representatives in Congress. However, over the years, the Census Bureau has embarked on the collection of statistics far beyond those necessary for that purpose. We now gather data detailing every nook and cranny of our lives, thus providing fodder for the collectivist meddlers.

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Most of those statistics are simply synthetic. They force disparate things into an artificial whole that exists only in the mind of the synthesizer. The statistics are the lifeblood of those whose view of society submerges the individual in such groups as the poor, blacks, men, women, children, gays, senior citizens, to name a few. To the synthesizer, the individual has an identity only as he is a member of some collection of people.

For collectivists, not only is the individual identified by his group, but so is his behavior. Thus, we can no longer tell if one's behavior is good or bad, right or wrong, until we find out his group identity. And individuals are taught to test their behavior, not against any individual standard, but how it compares with what is socially—collectively—acceptable in their group. When someone's behavior does not measure up, it is society's fault, not his.

Similarly, class welfare is defined, from above, by the collectivized statistic without any reference to those who comprise the class. There is some higher measure of welfare that exists only in the eyes of the collectivist. In this world, the collective can be "better off" or "worse off" even if no individual in it is. Since income equality is "good" in the eyes of the collectivist, a society where everyone is equally poor is better than one where everyone is unequally richer. Any grouping of people, defined from above, is automatically better if minorities are represented at least proportionally. Individual

human values are submerged for some collective, suprahuman measure of value that exists only in the mind of the collectivist. Suprahuman values are abstractions that have no meaning for individuals.

Statistics necessarily aggregate across individuals. These aggregates are, of course, the result of human action, but as aggregates they are not of human design. The unit of society is the individual, not the group. In aggregation individual action and choice are lost. The only groups that matter to individuals are those voluntarily joined. Any other group into which an individual is classified comes from the outside and exists only in the mind of the classifier.

Statistics that purport to describe groups say nothing about the causal mechanism that produced the data. In many cases, the observed statistic results from individuals each choosing what is best for them. If this is true, then the resulting statistic is an artifact that tells us nothing about the well-being of the individuals behind it. If the underlying decisions were all made by people doing what was best for them, then the outcome must be best from the perspective of those people. Synthetic statistics about the collective results are irrelevant.

Of course, even if the underlying process is right from each individual's perspective, collectivists will still claim that any statistics that show inequality or disproportionality prove that something is wrong. Beneath this claim is the implicit, but hotly denied, belief that people are all the same. The idea that people are different, and that statistical disparity merely reflects this, simply does not occur to the collectivists. These are the same people who celebrate multiculturalism and moral relativism.

The operational consequence of statistical collectivism is the demand for the state to deal collectively, and coercively, with the artificial problems suggested by these statistics. Differences become gaps: gaps in income, gaps in education, gaps in housing, gaps in health, gaps in other necessities. Problems are created and tackled from above by the collectivist mindset consumed with gapology. Leaving individuals and their associations alone is ruled out. Statistics fuel the interventionist engine.

One wonders what Sir John must be thinking now. □

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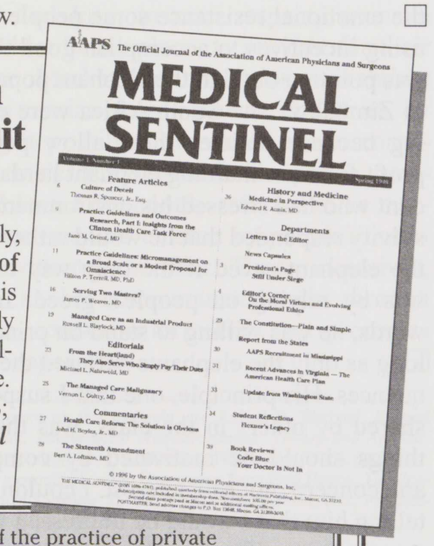
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