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## Official Sources

The centralization of knowledge requires *facts* – and the legitimization of some facts, and the methods used to collect them, against other facts – to justify features and forms of *policy*. (Corrigan and Sayer, 1985: 124, emphasis in original)

### Introduction

One of the central arguments of this book is that in all human geographical research it is very important for the researcher to consider the processes through which data sources are constructed. In some cases the researcher is directly involved in the processes of data construction. In others he or she is using data that have been produced by others. In this and the next two chapters, we consider sources of geographical data that are not produced by the researcher him or herself but constructed by others before the research takes place. Such sources may have been produced privately by individuals, social groups, voluntary organizations or firms (these types of data are considered in Chapters 3 and 4). Alternatively they may have been produced by government agencies or public authorities; that is, by the state. Such ‘official data’ are the subject of this chapter. We are treating ‘official information’ separately from other types because it is produced in distinctive ways for particular purposes and these need to be understood when using the information in research.

Official information is of enormous importance for research in human geography. The population geographer’s migration flows, the economic geographer’s local labour markets, the social geographer’s crime patterns and the political geographer’s election analyses (among many others) all usually depend, at least in part, on official information. Historical geographers often rely heavily, though by no means exclusively, on official records of past events (for examples, see Baker et al., 1970). Given the importance of historical sources to their work, they have often also been particularly sensitive to the impact of the circumstances under which those sources were produced, an issue that is of particular significance to the arguments of this chapter. Census data are of great value to both historical and contemporary geographers and it is interesting that geographers are now at the forefront of technical and intellectual developments in census design and data collection (Martin, 2000). Official voting data provide the raw material for numerous studies of electoral geography.<sup>1</sup> Official documents are also textual, as well as statistical, and geographers make good use of these too. For example, Moon and Brown (2000) examine the ‘spatialization’ of policy discourse through an analysis of health policy documents in Britain.

In addition to the sheer number of studies which use it, official information is important

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because of its particular authority. When we read official statistics or government reports, we often assume they are reliable and accurate simply *because* they are official. Furthermore, some of this authority rubs off on academic research based on such data, making it seem sound, well founded and valid. There are certainly some good grounds for these assumptions. First, governments (especially in industrialized countries) have very large resources at their disposal. These resources (staff, finance and so on) are usually much larger than those to which academic researchers have access. Governments can thus draw larger samples, undertake more thorough analyses, use longer timescales and cover wider areas than other researchers and organizations. Secondly, governments frequently give themselves legal powers to support their research activities. For example, in most countries, members of the public are obliged by law to complete a census return on a regular basis, often every ten years. In many cases information may be a useful by-product of legislation primarily enacted for other purposes. For instance, the collection of taxes may also generate information about employment and income, while vehicle licensing leads to information about car-ownership patterns. Thirdly, in the modern world, governments are interested and involved in much of the everyday life of the population. Through the breadth of its activities the government knows something about what we are doing: whether we are shopping, working, earning, marrying, having children, travelling, suffering illness, claiming welfare benefit or finally dying. Of course we are not always identifiable as individuals within this information, but our activities contribute to it, none the less.

Yet despite the resources, legal powers and breadth of involvement of governments there are also good grounds for supposing that official information is not as reliable as is frequently assumed and that its special authority

is undeserved. Governments are not neutral referees overlooking society but players actively involved in the game. Like other organizations in society, they have particular objectives in obtaining, processing and presenting information and particular interests at stake in its content. Official information should therefore be treated with the same healthy scepticism which most good researchers bring to the study of *unofficial* sources.

Throughout this book we will be stressing that no source of research material may be taken at face value, even, or perhaps especially, where it carries the cachet associated with 'official' information. In all cases, data used by researchers in human geography are constructed in specific cultural, political and economic contexts which influence their character and content. If we are to construct valid interpretations of data, therefore, we need to understand, and to take account of, those contexts. Thus, in this chapter we consider how, why and in which contexts governments construct the data they do and the consequent implications for their use by human geographers engaged in research.

### **Types of official information**

Governments produce information in a variety of forms. A simple typology might show that information can be textual, graphical and cartographical, aural or numerical in form. A government report is a textual source, official photographs are graphical, government radio broadcasts are aural and government statistics are numerical. These differences are important and they affect how the data can be interpreted. In this chapter, however, we are focusing on data construction rather than data interpretation. As far as construction is concerned, three broad categories of data can be distinguished.

First, governments are large bureaucracies and produce information as part of the bureaucratic process. A minister may commission a report before reaching a decision. Parliament produces bills and Acts in the process of legislating. Local councils publish the agendas and minutes of their meetings. Official inquiries absorb written and oral evidence and produce reports. The courts produce written judgments. In all these cases, documents and information are the by-products of the process of governing and of the operation of large bureaucratic organizations.

Secondly, governments monitor the societies they govern. As we shall see shortly, monitoring and surveillance are very important in shaping the nature of the modern state. They also produce huge amounts of information. Taxation records, population records, censuses, health records, financial statistics and a whole host of other sources of information are generated simply because the state and the government need or want to keep a check on what is going on.

Thirdly, governments communicate. From public health announcements to political propaganda and from communiqués at international summits to the contents of the school curriculum, governments address their citizens (and the wider world) in a variety of ways. Such communication may involve social engineering of a mild kind, such as trying to persuade parents to immunize their children, or it may involve giving direct orders prohibiting certain activities. It may involve the relatively straightforward provision of information (about welfare benefits or health care, for example) or it may be sophisticated political publicity intended to change people's minds.

These three categories may overlap. For example, official statistics are often produced through the bureaucratic process of governing, and may then be used in public information campaigns.

## Information and state formation

### *Record-keeping and the origins of states*

All organized human societies, past and present (including tribal societies based on kinship relations), have some form of government or collective rule. Following the rise of settled agriculture, early urban centres and divisions of labour by about 5000 years ago, government increasingly became institutionalized in *states* of various forms (Mann, 1986). According to the sociologist Anthony Giddens, the origins of states are closely related to the invention of writing. Giddens (1985: 41–9) challenges the idea that writing is straightforwardly a representation of speech. He argues instead that writing initially took the form of record-keeping:

Many linguists have regarded writing as no more than an extension of speech, the transcription of utterances to transcriptions on stone, paper or other material substances that can be marked. But neither the first origins of writing in ancient civilisations nor a philosophical characterisation of language bears out such a view. Writing did not originate as an isomorphic representation of speech, but as a mode of administrative notation, used to keep records or tallies. (1985: 41)

There are examples of non-modern states which apparently used no form of writing. In the Andean Mountains of what is now South America, for example:

About A.D. 1400–30, one 'tribal' grouping and chiefdom, the Inca, conquered the rest. By 1475, the Inca had used massive *corvée* labor gangs to build cities, roads, and large-scale irrigation projects. They had created a centralized theocratic state with their own chief as god. They had taken land into state ownership and had put economic, political, and military administration into the hands of the Inca nobility. They had either devised or extended the *quipu* system whereby

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bundles of knotted strings could convey messages around the empire. This was not exactly 'literacy' ... Yet it was as advanced a form of administrative communication as any found in early empires. (Mann, 1986: 122)

What seems crucial, therefore, is not writing per se but the resources and ability to *keep records*. The significance of this development should not be underestimated since, without the capacity for record-keeping, an organization would lack a key means of what Giddens terms 'administrative power' (1981: 94–5; 1985: 19). Indeed it is doubtful whether it could be an organization at all. The exercise of administrative power based on the collection and organization of information is thus a defining feature of all states. It is both an outcome of state activity and constitutive of state power: states generate information through their functions but also require information in order to undertake those functions in the first place. Generating information, therefore, is not an optional extra for state organizations but seems to be central to the very possibility of states existing at all.

### **Official information and the development of the modern state**

While record-keeping is a necessary feature of non-modern states like the Inca Empire, it is in modern states that it reaches its most developed form. Drawing on the work of the classical sociologist Max Weber, Christopher Dandeker argues that 'bureaucratic decisions and calculations depend on *knowledge of the files*, that is on a mastery of the information stored centrally in the organization' (1990: 9, emphasis in original). For Weber, the institutions of the state are exactly such archetypal bureaucratic organizations. The construction and processing of very large quantities of information are defining features of government in the modern world. The amount of

information routinely collected by state organizations is vast. The UK government's annual summary of official statistics (the *Annual Abstract*) contains over 300 separate tables of data dealing with topics as diverse as population, iron and steel production, government debt and academic research. The US government's *Statistical Abstract of the United States* runs to over 1000 pages. By contrast, in medieval England the famous Domesday survey of 1085 contained just 11 questions relating to the ownership of property (Darby, 1977: 4–5). Furthermore, medieval governments undertook such data collection very infrequently: no more often than once every several decades. By contrast, modern governments are engaged in an almost continuous process of monitoring the various indicators which are the basis of 'official statistics'.

Furthermore, *statistical* information forms only a part (albeit an important one) of the total information produced by the state. Policy decisions depend on 'knowledge of the files' but the contents of the files can take many forms. Records concerning individuals, for example, may include reports, photographs, transcripts and forms. The governing process itself involves the production of large quantities of textual and graphical, as well as numerical and statistical, information. For example, governments often establish commissions of inquiry relating to particular areas of policy. The reports of such bodies are often invaluable sources of research data. Other kinds of records include financial accounts and registers of various kinds. An example of a geographical study that makes use of this kind of source is Driver's account of the geography of the workhouse system in Victorian England and Wales, which draws on the unpublished Registers of Authorised Workhouse Expenditure (1989; 1993: 73–94).

The 'outputs' of the policy-making process can also be a rich source of data for research. Modern states produce copious quantities of

planning and policy documents which both present government policy and enable its implementation. They also contain very particular representation of the social and economic world (the objects of governance, as it were). Governments have also significantly expanded the quantity and range of information they publish under the umbrella of government publicity or public information. In this case states are addressing their populations directly, and examples include the educational curriculums, health advice, edicts compelling people to do certain things and to refrain from doing others and so on. Whichever the form in which state information is produced, one thing is clear: the rate of its production has increased dramatically over time and continues to do so.

How should we account for the extensive growth in government activity in this area? One important reason concerns technology. Today governments have the technological capacity to conduct data-gathering exercises on a scale which their medieval predecessors could scarcely have imagined. Printing, transport, telecommunications and storage facilities are all involved. Yet while this is clearly a necessary condition of the growth, it is not, in itself, a sufficient one. It does not tell us why governments might *want* to gather information on this scale. To answer this question we need to consider the ways in which states themselves change over time and how those changes are related to changes in civil society.

All official information is gathered for specific government purposes. However, those purposes vary through time and across space. The worries and concerns of the Norman monarchy in medieval England were not the same as those of the drafters of the Constitution of the USA or of the present-day European Commission. A good example of this historical development is provided by the English (subsequently the British) state. According to Philip Corrigan and Derek

Sayer in their book *The Great Arch* (1985), the English state underwent a succession of phases of formation. Each phase involved what they term a process of 'cultural revolution' (Corrigan and Sayer, 1985: 1–2): a transformation in the ways in which the agents and agencies of the state made sense of and represented civil society. Part and parcel of this process was a growth and extension of the generation and use by the English state of official information of various sorts.

The purpose of the Domesday survey, for example, has been the subject of academic debate, but whatever its purpose it is clear that official information in medieval Europe was collected, when it was collected at all, for a limited number of reasons. By modern standards, medieval states had a small number of functions centred on the security and finance of the royal household, the defence of the realm and the regulation of feudal ownership rights. Beyond these, there was relatively little contact between the state and its subjects. Most of what are regarded as state functions today in the fields of education, health care, support for economic activity and even the preservation of law and order were carried out, in so far as they took place at all, by other agencies, particularly the Church and the feudal manor.

The state did need information in some spheres of activity, notably taxation, but feudal ties of rights and obligations and religious conviction ensured that for the most part government was carried on and social order was maintained without the state needing to know in detail about most of the activities of its population.

In the 1530s, during the so-called Tudor revolution in government, Thomas Cromwell, an official at the Court of Henry VIII, was responsible for a significant increase in the information-gathering activities of the English state (Corrigan and Sayer, 1985: 48). Much of this was aimed at countering threats to the

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King, but it included making compulsory, from 1538, the keeping of parish registers of baptisms, marriages and burials. According to Corrigan and Sayer these registers:

provoked widespread resentment, and people feared their use for taxation purposes. Cromwell's own justification, responding to such fears, is interesting. The registers were being instituted, he said, 'for the avoiding of sundry strifes, processes and contentions rising upon age, lineal descents, title of inheritance, legitimation of bastardy, and for knowledge of whether any person is our subject or no'; 'and also' he added, 'for sundry other causes' (Elton, 1972: 259–60). Concern with property and concern with rule are equally witnessed here. Registers are not merely a technical device, they materialize new sorts of claims of a state over its subjects. The Elizabethan Poor Law, for example, was to rely for its administration on the kind of detailed knowledge of individuals the registers supplied. (1985: 50)

Here then was a definite extension of the functions of government accompanied *and enabled* by an extension in the information-gathering activities of the state. Tudor England also saw the systematic mapping of the country with the county maps of Christopher Saxton. According to Derek Gregory, 'these paper landscapes represented the administrative apparatus of the state with an apparently indelible authority, revealing the steady encroachment of surveillance into still more spheres of social life' (1989c: 376). Such piecemeal encroachment continued during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Brewer, 1989), but it was not until the nineteenth century that the information-gathering activities of the state took on anything like their modern form in terms of both quantity and quality.

This development both reflected and partly influenced the changing relationship between state institutions and the society they governed. In this, the twin processes of urbanization and industrialization were central. In Britain, the agricultural 'improvements' of the

country during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had created a large class of landless people. These people, separated from the traditional religious, cultural and economic ties of rural life, and with no means of support other than the sale of their labour power, made their way to urban areas. There, new, factory-based systems of production were hungry for the labour that they could provide and the industrial towns and cities quickly expanded. In 1801 (the year of the first Census of Population in Britain) 33.8% of the population of England and Wales lived in urban centres. By 1901 the urban population had expanded eightfold and its proportion had increased to 78% (Carter, 1990: 403). This startling transformation in the geography of the country caused *and made visible* social problems on a scale never previously imagined. Working-class districts were regarded as overcrowded and the people who lived in them uneducated and at risk of disease and crime. In addition they were uprooted from established ties of kinship and community, which had often served to mask, if not to prevent or solve, similar problems in rural areas. In the new industrial areas, however, there was no disguising the suffering and poverty which existed and which was exacerbated by exploitative conditions of employment in the factory system.

It was not long before the mass of the urban poor became a focus for crusading social investigators and thence for government policy. Seduced by its own rhetoric of progress, bourgeois society in Victorian Britain was hardly about to blame industrialization itself for the plight of the poor. Instead it preferred to locate the causes of social distress in the moral failings of individual sufferers themselves and the overcrowding and dirt of their immediate environments. According to Felix Driver:

The association of moral and medical concerns was a central feature of nineteenth-century social science. The question of



density was a special focus of interest. There were many attempts to relate population density to crime and other indices of 'demoralization', at various ecological scales. The most common foci were the overcrowded, unsupervised and disorganized spaces of the nineteenth-century city ... What seems to have most concerned middle-class commentators was their own lack of control over and within such areas; indeed, their obsession with hidden recesses, narrow turnings, dark alleys and shadowy corners was quite overwhelming. The literature on the rookeries of London, for example, was predicted [*sic*] on the assumption that they were located beyond the public gaze, *outside the ambit of official surveillance*. (1988: 280–1, emphasis added)

A mixture of fear, loathing and social concern of the middle class and the government for the mass of the urban poor prompted a desire to know precisely what were the social conditions of the population, to enable both reform and social control. The rapid growth in the collection and interpretation of social statistics in nineteenth-century Britain can thus be related directly to the urban-industrial transformation. Similar processes took place in other countries which experienced similar industrial development, albeit sometimes with different emphases. In France, where the development was related particularly to concerns about public health, 'a professionalization and regularization of population statistics, linked to a range of reformist projects, occurred during the first decades of the nineteenth century' (Rabinow, 1989: 60). In the USA the focus of concern was frequently immigration and the formation of ethnically segregated 'ghettos' (Ward, 1978). What unites all these transitions is the use made of statistical data to try to understand new, radically different and much larger social worlds: 'without the combination of statistical theory ... and arrangements for the collection of statistical data, ... the society that was emerging out of the industrial revolution was literally unknowable' (Williams, 1979: 171).

These desires to make knowable the unknown both to 'improve' and to control it led to an upsurge in the collection of statistical information. In Britain, the government was accompanied, and frequently assisted, in this task by interested members of the Victorian middle class. The establishment of 'statistical societies' in Manchester (1833) and London (1834) (and later in other provincial cities) laid the foundation of a long national tradition of empirical social research (Cullen, 1975). The studies undertaken by these societies and individuals were the forerunners of non-governmental research, which is the subject of the next chapter. They culminated in the 1890s with the publication of Charles Booth's huge survey of *Life and Labour of the People in London*.

For the government, statistics were compiled with increasing frequency throughout the nineteenth century. The Statistical Department of the Board of Trade was founded in 1832. The Registration Act 1836 led to the establishment in 1837 of the General Register Office for England and Wales to record births, deaths and marriages and to undertake the decennial Census of Population. A General Register Office for Scotland was set up in 1855.

The close links between the government and the growth of statistical information are expressed in the very word 'statistics' itself. Originally the word was simply an adjective associated with the noun 'state' (*statist + ic*). According to one nineteenth-century definition, statistics is 'that department of political science which is concerned in collecting and arranging facts illustrative of the conditions and resources of a State' (Corrigan and Sayer, 1985: 134).

The purpose of this information gathering, particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century, was to enable the development of state policy. Policies of moral and environmental improvement were introduced on the

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back of statistical inquiries. The workhouse system, the development of public health measures, medical activities and education were all central to the government of Victorian Britain and all depended on information. Furthermore, all were intended to treat social ills by extending state influence, regulation and control into all parts of civil society.

Effective public policy was not the only consequence of the growth in state information gathering. The development of statistics also affected the object of study (i.e. society) itself. This is a difficult notion to grasp at first as we tend to assume that statistics are first and foremost a simple description of social 'facts'. However, the production of official statistics is not the neutral, technical and scientific exercise it appears to be. As we have suggested, official data do not provide complete or transparent pictures of social reality. Rather they are influenced and conditioned by the interests at stake in their production. The demands of government policy or the moral concerns of the middle classes are reflected in the statistics that are constructed. At the very least they require that certain topics of inquiry are selected as relevant over others. At worst there may be active manipulation of figures to provide justifications for particular government activities. But we can go further than this. Not only are statistics sometimes an inaccurate picture of 'reality' but, by being collected at all, they also change the nature of that 'reality'. Catherine Hakim (1980) has analysed the census reports accompanying the British Census since it began in 1801, and her findings help to show what we mean.

As she points out, the census has been an important source of information on occupations. Yet the particular choice of occupation categories included in the survey has played a part in making some occupations respectable and others illegitimate. Estimates suggest that 20% of unmarried women in London in 1817

were involved in prostitution (Hakim, 1980: 563). Yet the category of 'prostitute' is not listed in the occupational classification of the British Census. This refusal to give formal recognition to the economic activity of a substantial proportion of the city's population had the effect of making prostitution appear less socially acceptable, as well as calling into question the accuracy of the data.

In the early years of the census the full separation of paid employment from home life, and the resulting partial exclusion of women from the labour market, had yet to occur. The economic unit was considered to be the family as a whole, rather than an individual male breadwinner. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the census had begun to ask for information on the occupation of individuals and this led to numerous women being classified as economically inactive, despite continuing to be engaged in domestic labour in the home. The change in the form in which these figures were collected partly reflected, *but also partly produced*, these developments in the labour market. By categorizing women as 'inactive' the official census contributed to the exclusion of women from the labour market and to their confinement in the home.

The power of such official 'discourses' and 'representations' to affect as well as reflect society is recognized by Corrigan and Sayer:

Whilst we should reject states' claims as description – they are, precisely, claims – we need equally to recognize them as material empowerments, as emphases which cartographize and condition the relations they help organize. Here, as elsewhere, to adapt an old sociological maxim, what is defined as real (which is not to say the definitions are uncontested) is real in its consequences. (1985: 142)

Commenting on Hakim's research, Corrigan and Sayer point out that the British Census is above all an inquiry into who is a subject of the Crown, and is thus itself centrally implicated



in 'the formation of social identities' (p. 132). Giddens makes the point forcefully:

it might well be accepted that, given certain reservations about the manner of their collection, official statistics are an invaluable source of data for social research. But they are not just 'about' an independently given universe of social objects and events, *they are in part constitutive of it*. The administrative power generated by the nation-state could not exist without the information base that is the means of its reflexive self-regulation. (1985: 180, emphasis original)

Recent writings by human geographers and other social scientists have drawn on Michel Foucault's (1991) concept of 'governmentality' to capture the relationship between state power, information (or knowledge) and the constitution of the objects of governance.<sup>2</sup> 'Governmentality' refers to the ways in which knowledge, information and understanding operate as tools (or 'technologies') of government. For Foucault, knowledge, including the kinds of knowledge produced by official information, is not a neutral, transparent window on to a pre-existing social world, in which social problems are somehow simply revealed by objective fact-finding on the part of state organizations. On the contrary, Foucault's approach implies that the social problems that form the objects of government policy in some sense come into being through the production of official knowledge of them. Take the example of 'regional economic development' which has been of longstanding concern to both economic geographers and governments. Official economic statistics are used to identify regions with economic problems, such as high unemployment or an overdependence on a narrow range of (perhaps declining) industrial sectors. In order to do this the state must first define the boundaries of each economic region (or 'regional economy'). Yet as recent work by geographers has shown, the very idea of

coherent regional economies is at best complex and problematic and, at worst, downright misleading (Allen et al., 1998). Regional territories are certainly not natural or self-evident containers for economic processes. In fact, the definition of regions is itself as much a contestable political process as the development of regional economic development policy. From the perspective of the literature on governmentality, 'problem regions' as objects of state policy-making exist only because of the state's acquisition and mobilization of particular kinds of economic knowledge and information (Painter, 2002). This is not to deny the existence of high levels of poverty or other kinds of economic distress in particular places, but it does call into question the way in which economic problems come to be framed as such and, in this example, how they come to be framed as 'regional problems' requiring 'regional' solutions.

### The contemporary informational state

One of the important insights of the Italian political theorist, Antonio Gramsci, concerned the relationship between force and consent in the maintenance of political power. For Gramsci, in the modern world power is not solely a question of control over armed force but also involves the active co-operation of the population. Both the creation and management of this 'consent' by the state and its use of 'coercion' (police, prisons, etc.) require information to be gathered on the population. As Giddens puts it, 'surveillance as the mobilizing of administrative power – through the storage and control of information – is the primary means of the concentration of authoritative resources involved in the formation of the nation-state' (1985: 181).

During the twentieth century information collection, storage and use by states have

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become increasingly sophisticated and differentiated. After the Second World War, in particular, the role of states has expanded considerably, with a concomitant increase in their informational activities. First, in the decades since the 1940s (at least until recently), most developed or industrialized states have been *welfare* states. This has involved governments in the widespread provision of public services in the fields of social security (e.g. old-age pensions), health care and education. While these expenditures have seen a degree of retrenchment in the 1980s and 1990s, they remain substantially above the level of state provision typical of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Planning and providing these services require substantial amounts of information relating to the geographical distribution, age and health of the population.

Secondly, over the same period, state claims to legitimacy have shifted in primary focus from 'high' politics (national security and the maintenance of state borders) to 'low' politics (trade, economic growth, social welfare). This has involved a relative decrease in the collection of 'intelligence' information (i.e. spying) and diplomacy and a relative increase in the collection of information relating to economic performance, industry and employment.

Thirdly, information is now held not only on populations or geographical areas as a whole but also to a very great extent on members of the population as individuals. In contemporary Britain every adult is assumed to be registered with the National Health Service, the national insurance system and the electoral registration officer. Most will also be recorded by the Inland Revenue and many by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Authority and by the Passport Office. Other specialist agencies such as the social services and educational organizations have files on particular individuals. The police maintain the Police National Computer which records not only the details of convicted criminals but

also details of police contacts with other members of the population, including many who may be completely innocent of any wrongdoing. This type of information reaches its most developed form in so-called totalitarian countries, in which large parts of the state apparatus are given over to the surveillance and monitoring of individuals. As Giddens points out, however, the difference between 'totalitarian' states and 'democratic' ones is a difference of degree, rather than kind. According to Giddens, all modern states have totalitarian *tendencies* (1985: 310). Indeed, since totalitarianism depends upon surveillance, a key precondition of its emergence exists by definition in all modern states.

Information collected at the level of the individual is undoubtedly highly significant in terms of states' social control activities, especially at the more 'coercive' end of the consent-coercion spectrum. However it is not a significant source of data for geographical research. The reason for this is, of course, its confidentiality. Information on individuals is confidential to the state, for two main reasons: first, for the protection of the individual concerned and, secondly, for the protection of the interests and activities of the state. Thus information relating to crimes and criminals, in particular, is kept secret in order to maintain its power. If suspected criminals were aware of the information held about them, it is argued, they would be better able to evade the efforts of the state to police them.

New technology has added a further twist to debates about the secrecy of state information. The use of microelectronic information technology has vastly increased the capacity of both the state and other organizations to store, sort, process, duplicate and analyse information, including information about individuals. This has led to concern among civil rights organizations about the potential uses to which such readily available large quantities of data might be put. As a result of

such pressure, some countries now have statutory protection for those about whom records are kept. In the USA the Freedom of Information Act 1966 guarantees (within limits) the rights of individual citizens to have access to large parts of the state's information archive. In Britain the provisions of the Data Protection Act are much weaker and relate only to access to records on oneself, and until recently only where these are held on computer. The Act was intended primarily to allow individuals to correct errors of fact in records relating to them. There are many exclusions, including, notably, police records. Historically there has been no general freedom of information in Britain, maintaining the reputation of the British state as one of the most secretive in the Western world (Michael, 1982).

Through the highly restrictive operation of the Official Secrets Act, most information held by the British government is confidential unless expressly released to the public. Notwithstanding some recent amendments to remove some of the more absurd examples of Whitehall secrecy, there is still much information gathered by the British state which is reserved for the confidential use of government alone. This confidentiality extends well beyond information on particular individuals to cover government-commissioned reports on a whole variety of subjects of potential interest to academic researchers. Again, in the USA there is considerably more access through the Freedom of Information Act. In some cases this results in 'secret' British information being publicly available in the USA. This picture may change in the future, as the British government has introduced a Freedom of Information Act. However, the legislation has been heavily criticized by civil rights organizations as likely to restrict further, rather than to open up, access to government information.

For the most part, therefore, the official information most used by academic researchers

is that which is actively made public by the state, usually through publication through a government publishing house, such as Her Majesty's Stationery Office in Britain (now mostly privatized under the trading name the Stationery Office Limited) or the US Government Printing Office, or through a multilateral agency such as the European Commission or the United Nations. The remainder of this chapter considers this subset of government information which is most widely available, even though it may represent only a small proportion of the information in the state's possession.

### **Government information organizations**

Most contemporary governments publish large amounts of statistical and other information relating to their populations and economies and social systems. This information is made available as a public service to researchers, journalists and other interested individuals through the publication of statistical reports on a regular (e.g. annual or monthly) basis. Such reports are normally available in large public libraries, in most university libraries and can be purchased from government publishing houses. Typical examples include the British government's *Annual Abstract of Statistics* and the US government's yearly *Statistical Abstract of the United States*.

These materials are very useful to human geographers undertaking research. A wide range of topics is covered and the figures are usually detailed and can be broken down into smaller geographical areas and/or time periods. Frequently even more detail, and the possibility of cross-tabulation, is available from the government department concerned. Increasingly this material is being, or will be, made available on various electronic media,

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such as computer-readable magnetic tapes or disks. In the future more and more of these data will be available for use in computer mapping and geographical information systems, allowing rapid cartographical representations to be constructed from official statistics. In many countries the state has its own cartographic service (in Britain, the Ordnance Survey), reflecting the important role of territory in the formation and security of modern states.

The data contained in official statistics are often population (rather than sample) data. This makes them, at least in principle, more reliable than similarly constructed sample data as there will be no sampling errors. Sampling errors arise because the characteristics of a sample of the population are unlikely to be precisely the same as those of the whole population. However, there may be errors associated with survey design and implementation. Where population data are available, descriptive statistics for the population can be derived, and it is not necessary to infer population characteristics from a sample. Where samples are used in official statistics, they are likely to be large (or at least larger than in most academic research) and this will tend to reduce the significance of sampling errors. In many cases government agencies have been at the forefront of the development of social survey techniques, and the reliability of the data they produce should thus, again in principle, be good. (See Chapter 5 for further information on the use of samples and surveys, and Chapter 8 on the interpretation of numerical data.)

For all these reasons (availability, coverage, detail and reliability) official statistics are very useful in human geographical research. However, as has been discussed above, official statistics are not first and foremost produced as a public service. The principal aim of their construction is to inform government policy. Furthermore, as we saw in the work of Hakim and Giddens, official statistics influence

the society they represent by defining and categorizing society in particular ways rather than others. At the end of this chapter we will consider some of the technical questions which arise from these theoretical insights and look at some specific examples to illustrate the problems and possibilities of using official statistics in geographical research. Before doing so, however, we will briefly discuss the changing role of government statistical agencies, again using the British state as an example.

In Britain, the modern data-construction activities of the state date from 1801, the year of the first national Census of Population. Since then, a Census of Population has been taken every ten years, with the exception of 1941. In the twentieth century this basic survey was joined by an ever-increasing output of official information. The first four censuses (in 1801, 1811, 1821 and 1831) were undertaken in England and Wales by the Overseers of the Poor under the guidance of John Rickman, the Clerk to the House of Commons. A General Register Office (GRO) was established in England and Wales in 1837 and in Scotland in 1855. The Registrar General in each case was responsible not only for the registration of births, marriages and deaths but also for undertaking the census (Mills, 1987). Initially the GRO's brief was limited to these two main functions. Social survey research was in its infancy and the usual means, apart from the census, for gathering information for the government were inquiries carried out by royal commissions on the basis of subjective evidence from public officials around the country (Burton and Carlen, 1979; Whitehead, 1987). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the investigations of Charles Booth and Beatrice and Sidney Webb established the usefulness of social surveys, but it was not until the Second World War that the population census was joined by regular *sample* surveys carried out on behalf of the government.

The wartime government created the Government Social Survey to 'gather quantitative information on, among other things, the state of public morale in wartime conditions' (Whitehead, 1987: 45). After the war the survey organization, part of the Central Office of Information (formerly the Ministry of Information), was retained and in 1957 it was given the job of undertaking a regular Family Expenditure Survey, which continues to the present day. From 1967 to 1970 it was made an independent department, before being merged with the GRO to form the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS). The OPCS was responsible for the census, social surveys, health statistics from the National Health Service and population registration, and came under the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Health.

The OPCS was complemented by a separate Central Statistical Office (CSO). Like the Government Social Survey it started life in 1941 to provide better statistics for the management of the wartime economy. It remained part of the Cabinet Office until 1989 when it became a separate government department responsible to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Its main responsibility lay in the collection and publication of trade, financial and business statistics, and the national accounts. It also housed the government Statistical Service and published a wide range of official statistics on behalf of other government departments.

In 1996, the OPCS and CSO merged to form a new 'Office for National Statistics' (ONS), an independent government department responsible to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The government claimed that the new organization would 'meet a perceived need for greater coherence and compatibility in government statistics, for improved presentation and for easier public access' (ONS website). Further changes took place following the election of the Labour government of Tony Blair in 1997. A new organization, National Statistics,

was launched in June 2000, headed by the country's first National Statistician. A Statistics Commission was also established to oversee the quality and integrity of official statistical data.

In many cases the statistics produced by the government reflect information which is collected in the course of other activities. The unemployment figures, for example, are a product of the operation of the unemployment benefits system. Sometimes statistics will be collected specifically to inform new policy initiatives. In many cases today this work is contracted out to external, non-governmental researchers. These contractors may be dedicated survey and research organizations, such as the market research companies, or they may be academics working in universities. For academics there are substantial attractions to this type of work. It represents a source of research funding at a time when other funds are difficult to come by and it appears to provide a way for academic researchers to influence the policy-making process. Very often, however, there are unforeseen difficulties. There are frequently restrictions placed on the publication of results, and often the information required by the government takes a different form from that suggested by the academic judgement of the researcher. It is also doubtful how far government policy is changed as a result of such research. Frequently, broad policies have been agreed and research is conducted either to justify the policy after the event or to prepare for its implementation. Where results contradict assumptions of government policy-makers it is likely that the research will be suppressed rather than that the policy will be changed.

### **Understanding the construction of official information**

Government statistical organizations are perhaps the most organized and focused examples

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of the information and knowledge production activities of modern states. As we have already noted, however, governments also produce huge quantities of non-numerical information. In both cases, however, similar motivation is at work. The process of government both requires and produces information. At the same time, the ways in which information is constructed and presented help to shape the 'policy landscape' in particular ways; some policy approaches are made possible and legitimated, others are blocked off and discredited. In this sense no information is 'neutral' and this is certainly true of government information, whether statistical or textual. Using official data sources in geographical research thus effectively requires careful attention to the process of data construction and means that the researcher should ask some hard questions about the information he or she is proposing to use:

- Why was the information constructed?
- To which government policies does it relate?
- Have policy concerns influenced which data were constructed and how?
- In what ways?

The question 'What policy concerns or political ideas motivated the construction of the information?' is important even where the answer seems obvious. Take inflation for example. We take it for granted that information about price increases will be published on a regular basis. But why is this important? One could argue that collecting retail price information at all sets 'inflation' up as a policy problem and that it leads to particular policy responses. Some economists, for example, reject the idea that a goal of low inflation should be as absolutely central to government policy as it has been in recent years, but the high profile of the inflation statistics tends to reinforce the idea that inflation is a very bad

thing. Until recently in Britain there was not seen to be a need to compile information on a national basis about the educational attainment of school children while they were still at school. Today, testing of pupils on a national basis at 7, 11 and 14 provides information allowing 'league tables' of school performance to be constructed. Leaving aside the very important issue of whether the information is a good measure of school performance, there are profound implications from the fact the information is constructed at all. There is a close relationship here between the compilation of the information on a national basis and the former Conservative government's political aim of increasing competition among schools for the best pupils and scarce resources. Whether one agrees with this aim or not, the data-construction activity here cannot be thought of as a neutral activity separate from the political controversy. Rather it is part of the political process.

These questions about motivation and the relationship between information and policies can be asked of data sources of all types (statistical, textual and graphical). In addition, there are some further questions that need to be considered in the case of textual data:

- Which 'voices' are present in the text? Who is 'speaking' – a supposedly disinterested expert? A professional politician? An interested organization or individual? Perhaps several voices are present, as may be the case in a report of public inquiry, for example.
- By contrast, whose voices are absent? Are there 'silences' in the text representing issues or points of view that have been neglected or deliberately left out?
- What mechanisms led to the production of the report? How was the text put together – verbatim transcription? Summaries of longer drafts? Single or joint authorship? And so on.



- What rhetorical devices and figures of speech are used to convey the message? What metaphors are used? What effect do these have on the content of the document?

There is also a set of questions that relate specifically to statistical data:

- Which categories have been used and why?
- What would be the effect of using different categories?
- What and who are included and excluded from the count and why?
- What would be the effect of including other variables or groups?
- Which sampling and survey techniques have been used?
- What are the likely errors and biases associated with these techniques?
- What corrections and adjustments have been made to the results to allow for errors, and what effects have these had?

None of these questions (with the partial exception of those concerning the mathematics of sampling error) can be answered in a purely technical way. They are matters of judgement and debate. Much will depend on the extent to which information is available on the way data have been constructed and on the political and theoretical stance taken by the researcher (see Chapter 12).<sup>3</sup>

We will now consider these factors in more detail in relation to specific examples.

### **Domesday Book**

On the face of it, it might be thought that Domesday Book would be of interest only to those studying the historical geography of early medieval England. While this may be true of the evidence it supplies of the economic and political landscape of the time, it also provides a fascinating illustration of some of the more general issues that arise in using

official sources of data. Many of the problems and difficulties of using Domesday Book as a research source are also present in using contemporary official sources, albeit in more muted ways. Domesday Book, therefore, gives us a way of highlighting in acute form many of the factors that need to be considered in using *any* official data.

As every British schoolchild knows, Saxon England was invaded in 1066 by William, Duke of Normandy, who established a much stronger system of government in place of the relatively weak and divided Saxon rule. As part of this process, a fully fledged feudal system was put in place, under which all the land belonged to the sovereign who divided it among the nobles as the chief tenants. The chief tenants could divide up their lands and sublet them to other tenants, who could sublet again and so on all the way down the social and political hierarchy. Each feudal tenancy involved sets of mutual rights and obligations. The lord provided protection to his tenants (vassals) and they in turn provided military service and paid certain dues. After his military victory, William abolished most of the existing Saxon earldoms and parcelled out the land afresh, much of it to his Norman supporters. The smallest unit of feudal organization was the manor which was the seat of a local feudal lord to whom the local population owed allegiance. Manors possessed their own land (known as the *demesne*) and also sublet land to the lowest tier of tenants.

To understand the construction of the document, is necessary to appreciate the administrative geography of Norman England. The major territorial divisions of the country were the shires (from Old English *scir*), also known as counties (from Old French *conté*). Counties were divided in turn into 'hundreds' so-called because they corresponded nominally to an area containing one hundred units of taxation known as 'hides'. In those parts of the country that had been heavily affected by the Danish

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invasions the Scandinavian terms *wapentake* (instead of 'hundred') and *carucate* (instead of 'hide') were used. The word 'hide' derives from the Old English word for household and refers to a unit of land large enough to support a family and its dependants. Hundreds were subdivided into *vills* (feudal townships). However, the geography of the vills did not correspond directly to that of the feudal manors because a manor could possess land in more than one vill.

The historical geographer, H.C. Darby, made the interpretation of Domesday Book his life's work and he was well aware of the complexities involved in the data-collection process. The precise circumstances that led to the survey that produced Domesday Book are obscure. However, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that, in 1085, following discussion at a council at Gloucester, 'King William sent his men into each shire to enquire in great detail about all its resources and who held them' (Darby, 1977: 3) and that all the surveys were subsequently brought together. There is very little in the way of direct evidence about how the surveys were undertaken. However, it is possible to make some deductions about the process of data construction from Domesday Book itself and, especially, from a number of subsidiary documents associated with it (Darby, 1977: 3–9).

Some evidence of the operation of the information-collection process is provided by a document called *Inquisitio Eliensis*, which is a survey of the estates of the abbey of Ely. According to Darby:

*The Inquisitio* tell us that the king's commissioners heard the evidence 'on the oath of the sheriff of the shire, and of the barons and of their Frenchmen, and of the whole hundred – priests, reeves and six villeins from each vill'. There was a separate jury for each hundred, consisting of eight men, whose function 'was apparently to approve and check the information variously assembled' ... half the jurors were English and the

other half Norman ... We cannot say whether the commissioners themselves attended every hundred court ... or whether ... they merely held one session in the county town. A number of entries make it clear that they sometimes heard conflicting evidence ... It has been suggested 'that fiscal documents already in existence were drawn upon to help with the compilation of a partly feudal and partly fiscal enquiry'. The making of the inquest may have been a far more complicated process than was at one time thought. (1977: 5)

While it is impossible to be certain that this procedure was followed in all the local inquiries that produced Domesday Book, the overall picture is fairly clear and suggests that commissioners appointed by the king were sent out around the country to conduct the survey, and that they did so, not through a house-to-house inquiry as might happen today, but by gathering together 'juries' of local representatives including a cross-section of the population and questioning them about the local situation.

The *Inquisitio Eliensis* also lists 11 questions to be asked in each hundred (see Box 2.1). As Darby (1977: 5) notes, 'whether these were the "official instructions" for all counties, we cannot say, but they, or at any rate a similar set of questions, must also have been asked elsewhere'.

This 'fieldwork' seems to have been conducted on a county-by-county and hundred-by-hundred basis and provided the initial survey returns. It appears that these initial returns were then summarized in documents that grouped together several counties, still organizing the information on an area-by-area basis. From these summaries the final Domesday Book proper was prepared. In the final version some of the detailed information was edited out but, more significantly, the areal organization of information was replaced by a structure that mirrored the feudal system. That is, for each county the data were:

**Box 2.1 The Domesday questions**

- 1 What is the name of the manor?
- 2 Who held it in the time of King Edward?
- 3 Who holds it now?
- 4 How many hides are there?
- 5 How many teams, in demesne and among the men?
- 6 How many villeins? How many cottars? How many slaves? How many freemen? How many sokemen?
- 7 How much wood? How much meadow? How much pasture? How many mills? How many fisheries?
- 8 How much as been added or taken away?
- 9 How much was the whole worth? How much is it worth now?
- 10 How much had or has each freeman or each sokeman? All this is to be given in triplicate; that is in the time of King Edward, when King William gave it, and at the present time.
- 11 And whether more can be had than is had?

Explanation of terms not defined elsewhere:

'In the time of King Edward' refers to the reign of Edward the Confessor (1042–66). 'Teams' means ploughteams made up of (usually eight) oxen. 'Villeins' were tenants tied to the land on which they worked. 'Cottars' were tenants who occupied a cottage in return for labour. 'Freemen' (unlike 'villeins') were allowed to leave the land on which they worked. 'Sokemen' were a class of personally free peasants attached to a lord rather than to the land.

rearranged under the headings of the main landholders, beginning with the king himself and continuing with the ecclesiastical lords, the bishops followed by the abbots, then with the great lay lords, and finally with the lesser landholders in descending order ... It follows that if two or more lords held land in a village, the different sets of information must be assembled from their respective folios in order to obtain a picture of the village as a whole. (Darby, 1977: 8)

There are two documents that are thought to be surviving regional summaries. These are the so-called Exeter Domesday Book covering the south west of England and the survey of the eastern counties of Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex. The information in the Exeter summary was edited and incorporated into the main Domesday Book, but that for the eastern counties, was, for some reason, never

incorporated. Domesday Book today, therefore, consists of two volumes, the Great Domesday (also known as the Exchequer Domesday) that was compiled in Winchester at the king's Treasury and the Little Domesday that covers Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex and which represents an earlier stage in the data-construction process.

Darby (1977: 8) provides an example of typical entry from the Great Domesday Book in which all the information relating to the village of Buckden is to be found in one entry, because all the land was held by one landlord, the Bishop of Lincoln:

In Buckden the bishop of Lincoln had 20 hides that paid geld [i.e. tax]. Land for 20 ploughteams. There, now on the demesne 5 ploughteams, and 37 villeins and 20 bordars having 14 ploughteams. There, a

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church and a prieset and one mill yielding 30s (a year), and 84 acres of meadow. Wood for pannage one league long and one broad. In the time of King Edward (i.e. in 1066) it was worth £20 (a year), and now £16 10s.

From the hundreds of entries like the one for Buckden, historical geographers such as Darby have been able to construct detailed accounts of the geography of Norman England (Darby, 1950–1; 1951; 1977). In this process of interpretation, all the questions raised above about the construction of data are relevant.

In the case of Domesday Book, the motivation for the gathering of the information is a matter of some debate. Traditionally it was viewed as a taxation assessment (Round, 1895; Maitland, 1897). More recently it has been suggested that it provides a record of the patterns of feudal ownership and of the King's relations with his senior feudal tenants (Galbraith, 1961). Its role could also have been primarily symbolic, serving to secure the Conqueror's authority over his new subjects (Clanchy, 1979: 18). To some extent, the view that is taken of the purpose of the document will affect the interpretation. If it is treated as a fiscal document, for example, issues of accuracy become very important. On the other hand, if its role was largely symbolic, then whether the Bishop of Lincoln's holding in Buckden was precisely 20 hides or some other figure arguably becomes less important than the insight provided into the relationship between Church and state by the allocation of lands to bishops in the first place. The questions about the character of the information gathered are also pertinent. Livestock, for example, are largely ignored by the survey, while the information on industry and towns is very limited. While this reflects the rural and agricultural basis of the Norman economy, it also influences the interpretations that can be made of the source.

**The UK unemployment figures**

Unemployment has been one of the most important social and political problems since the mid-1970s. Politicians of all parties recognize this, although proposed solutions vary radically. For those on the free-market right unemployment is said to be caused either by the unwillingness of individuals to work or by the effects of state intervention in the labour market producing disincentives to do so. The traditional left-wing view has been that unemployment is a product of unfettered free-market capitalism and that state regulation or economic intervention is required to respond to market-generated economic crises and to more general problems of market failure. Whichever view is taken, it is clear that measuring the level of unemployment accurately provides an important indication of economic success and, by implication, of the success of social and economic policies of governments. However, this raises the spectre of manipulation; if the measure of unemployment falls, governments can claim success for their policies even if unemployment itself has remained stable or increased. According to many commentators, this was precisely what happened in Britain during the 1980s and 1990s.

The geography of unemployment and employment has also long been of interest to economic geographers. In order accurately to interpret the geographical distribution of employment changes and trends and to map and analyse the pattern of employment opportunity and labour market activity, geographers use official statistics. Accuracy, and the process of data construction, is therefore not just an issue for assessing policy success; it also has profound implications for academic analyses, including those on which policies are partly based. Writing at the end of a long period of government by the Conservative

Party (1979–97) during which the integrity of official British unemployment data had frequently been a matter of political debate, Levitas (1996) provided a detailed review of the measurement of unemployment in the UK. This section is based on her analysis.

At the heart of the problem is the question of definition. Prior to 1982, the official measure of unemployment was based on a count of those registered as seeking work. Those who were claiming welfare benefits were required to register, but others could also register if they wished, so that the count included those who wanted to find work but who were for one reason or another ineligible for benefits. In 1982 the official measure was changed so that it included only those claiming benefits. This led to a reduction in the measure of unemployment of about 200 000 people (out of a total of over 3 million). As Levitas points out (1996: 48), this change was highly significant because it turned the unemployment count into an administrative measure. This meant that changes in the rules relating to benefit entitlement would have an immediate effect on the unemployment measure which was not produced by any real change in the economy. By the time of Levitas's study, 30 further changes had been made to the unemployment count. This meant that the official headline figure for unemployment in the UK in 1996 was based on a very different definition from that used in 1979. This, according to Levitas, had three consequences:

First, there is the effect upon unemployed people of a benefit system using increasingly stringent criteria for the receipt of declining amounts of benefit. Secondly, the count cannot be treated as a continuous series, as its coverage becomes narrower over time. Thirdly, it cannot be regarded as a measure of unemployment. (1996: 48)

The changes included the following:

- 1986: introduction of more stringent availability for work criteria, especially

affecting women with child-care responsibilities (107 000 claims for benefit disallowed under this rule in 1987).

- 1988: removal of benefit entitlement from 16 and 17-year-olds (reduction in the count: over 100 000).
- 1989: introduction of requirement that claimants must be able to prove they are 'actively seeking work'.
- 1996: introduction of Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) in place of unemployment benefit involving means testing of benefit claims after only six months, instead of a year.

All these changes affected the unemployment count regardless of the real state of the economy. Whatever their merits in terms of the operation of the social security system, they produced entirely administrative reductions in the measure of unemployment. For many commentators, therefore, the official count became largely useless as a measure of unemployment. Even the retiring head of the government statistical service asserted in 1995 that 'nobody believes' the claimant count (Levitas, 1996: 62).

However, as Levitas pointed out, the problems with the claimant count do not mean that official statistics could not be used to provide better measures of unemployment. She reviewed a number of alternative approaches, including that provided by the Labour Force Survey (LFS). The LFS is a sample survey in which 60 000 households are interviewed about their labour market activity.

Although it produces a better measure of unemployment than the claimant count, and one that can be improved further by academic researchers undertaking secondary analysis of the data, the LFS does have some drawbacks of its own. Because it is a sample survey rather than a count it is subject to sampling errors. There are also problems with the sample frame. Because it is based on addresses, it excludes those living in hostels and with no

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fixed abode (two groups whose numbers have increased with the rise in homelessness and who are disproportionately unemployed). Finally, where individuals are absent at the time of the interview, proxy responses are recorded by asking other members of the household. The accuracy of some of this information may be rather questionable, and it may also be subject to gender bias. For example, a woman seeking work who spends her time undertaking domestic chores might describe herself as unemployed but be described by her male partner as a 'housewife' (Levitas, 1996: 53–4). 'Housewife' is a particularly gendered term and was itself popularized, in part at least, by official policy after the Second World War when governments were faced with large numbers of men returning from military service, and wanted to encourage women to return to domestic labour and give up the paid employment many had undertaken during the war. Despite these drawbacks, the LFS does provide significantly more reliable data on unemployment rates, has the twin advantages of following international definitions (allowing for international comparison) and allowing detailed analysis to examine relationships among other social variables, such as gender, ethnicity and age.

While the LFS serves much better than the claimant count for measuring unemployment according to international definitions, and in a more consistent way, there are some wider issues of definition that call into question conventional measures of unemployment altogether. The population is conventionally categorized not into two groups of employed and unemployed but into three: employed, unemployed and 'economically inactive'. The existence and definition of this third group raise further problems for the measurement of unemployment and as a consequence for the definition of unemployment as a political problem. The LFS definition of unemployment is explained by Levitas as follows:

To be counted as unemployed in the LFS, respondents must have:

- (a) done no paid work in the week in question;
- (b) wish to work;
- (c) be available for work within the next fortnight;
- (d) have made some effort to seek work in the past four weeks, or be waiting to start a job already obtained. (1996: 55)

Take the example of a middle-aged man who has been out of work for two years and who believes there are no jobs available for him. It is not unlikely that he will have made no effort to seek work in the past four weeks but, at the same time, be available for work and wish to work. On the LFS criteria he will be recorded as economically inactive, rather than unemployed. Similarly, many married women are defined as economically inactive, rather than unemployed, because, while they may wish to undertake paid work, they are not actively seeking employment because they are occupied with domestic responsibilities. Anomalies such as these have led to employment and unemployment falling simultaneously in some parts of the country at some times. If the population is static but employment is falling, this is hardly a picture of economic dynamism and success, and yet changes in 'economic activity' rates might allow a government to claim as much. At bottom the problem is precisely the one that forms the basis of the arguments in this chapter, namely, that statistics are a social construction. As Levitas (1996: 60) puts it: 'The line between "unemployment" and "non-employment" or "economic inactivity" is imposed upon a reality that is far more complex and fluid.'

Far from reflecting reality in a neutral and objective way, official statistics depend upon particular understandings of reality, and these understandings affect (often in profound ways) the picture that is painted of social and economic life by official sources of data. In a further shift in the official statistical view of



unemployment since Levitas's analysis was published, the New Labour government elected in 1997 decided to adopt the Labour Force Survey definition as the source of Britain's official unemployment figures.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we have deliberately not presented detailed case studies of geographers' use of state information as to do so would be to focus more attention on the *interpretation* of official sources than on their *construction*. By considering the issue of construction in detail we have tried to demystify official sources – to knock them off their pedestal, as it were – and to show that just because information comes with an official seal of approval does not mean that researchers can take it simply at face value. In fact, as we have suggested, official sources can be just as partial and subject to errors and evasions as any other kind of data. Indeed, when it comes to political influence, official sources are probably more affected than others. First, official information is always collected for a governmental (and hence political) purpose. Secondly, partly because of the cachet of the 'official' label, official sources can appear to be more neutral,

reliable, comprehensive and authoritative than other kinds so that their political character can be disguised. For this reason, paying attention to the process through which they are constructed is particularly important, as this should highlight the purposes for which they were produced and allow the researcher to take these into account in their interpretation. None of this should lead to an outright dismissal of official data, though. For many geographers they will continue to be an invaluable source, partly because of their comprehensiveness and quality. Handled carefully, official information can be expected to fuel the practising of human geography for a long time to come.

## Notes

- 1 Prominent examples include Johnston (1979), Taylor and Johnston (1979), Johnston et al. (1988), Shelley et al. (1996) and Johnston and Pattie (2000).
- 2 Murdoch and Ward (1997), Blake (1999), Dean (1999), MacKinnon (2000) and Raco (2003).
- 3 Those interested in considering this latter point in more detail should also see the companion volume to this book, *Approaching Human Geography* – Cloke et al. (1991).