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Exploring the Industrial Subculture

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Preface

Although it is written impersonally, in many ways this book is a very personal document which arose out of a dissatisfaction with the prevailing forms of organisational analysis. Or, to put it less strongly, it arose from my own kind of 'concept-blindness' which made it difficult for me to relate the content of industrial sociology as I knew it to the forms of behaviour which I had encountered in industry before I became a sociologist, and which I encountered again when I started research.

When I joined an ongoing research project* at the Industrial Sociology Unit of Imperial College in 1966, I believed that the sociology of industrial organisations ought to concern itself with discovering the way in which people in industry define their life-positions, with learning the sets of symbolisms which they adopt in their definitions, and with examining the collective or organisational consequences of these views which they hold of themselves. But, at that time, this belief was formulated only enough to allow me to choose a mode of inquiry — the mode of informal, slow, qualitative field observation and discussion. It did not offer a way of dealing with the data which I collected when I adopted this mode. And it did not link very directly with pre-existing studies of the industrial area, or at least not with the standard works.

It was possible to separate the available literature crudely into works by authors who had adopted a similar methodology, and who therefore offered a human and recognisable picture of the industrial scene; and work by authors who had moved on to a level of abstraction which could be accepted

* The Management Control Project, financed by S.S.R.C. and directed by Professor Joan Woodward. As the remainder of the Foreword indicates, this book is in part an indirect outcome of the Management Control Project.

logically and intellectually, but which required too great a leap of faith to apply directly to 'real' industrial life. I could only rarely connect the ideas of the second group with my observations and yet, if I set them aside, I was left in the first group with a set of authors whose style was sympathetic, but whose accounts, because of their humanity, seemed restricted in space and time, so that their insights were of only limited use.

This was a confused and disturbing position to be in, and the ambivalence of my state was reflected in the way in which I carried out my research. The project at Imperial College was concerned with examining aspects of management control systems, and my contribution to it was to carry out case studies of a variety of industrial and other organisations, primarily but not exclusively in the electronics and engineering fields (see, for example, Turner 1970a, 1970b). In carrying out these studies, in which I attempted to 'get under the skin' of an organisation by informal interviewing and observation and by just 'being around', I found that I collected one set of data which related to management control systems, and another set which I called facetiously 'sociologically significant data'. I was totally unable to deal with this second set, or even to define it: all that I could do was record it.

Fortunately for the balance of my mind, it did eventually appear that there was a way out of this dilemma. The direction was pointed by Glaser and Strauss's book, 'The Discovery of Grounded Theory' (Glaser & Strauss, 1968). I should hasten to add that the present book should not be taken in any way as an example of grounded theory: it lacks the rigorous concentrated analysis of a delimited area which Glaser and Strauss advocate.

The relevance of their book lies in their approach to the process of conceptualisation. The method which they offered for dealing with qualitative data made it possible, without the necessity of a leap of faith, to expose and make explicit the conceptual framework inherent in a collection of field data, and *then* to examine the existing literature for concepts and for theoretical linkages which related to the field observations. The literature identified is then unequivocally relevant because it fits those observations which have already

been made. The present book is the product of the application of this process to the refractory collection of 'sociologically significant' jottings in my notebooks.

It is based largely upon my own field work, and many of the illustrations are drawn from this source, although at some points this material has been amplified by evidence and instances offered by colleagues working in other fields. The next step which I hope to carry out is a more rigorous empirical study which makes use of these ideas from its inception.

Since, by its nature, the book is an attempt to move towards a sociology which works outwards from the sociologist's own typifications of his encounters and interactions with industry, Schutz's phenomenological sociology fits very well into the general approach, serving as a loose thematic line on to which the other ideas can be hung. Often these ideas do not seem to be of themselves very conclusive, being in the nature of outlines for answers to questions which have yet to be specified, but I hope that the exercise is justified by the production of a statement about industry in a manner which will stimulate others to correct its misconception.

The notion of the 'industrial subculture' was used because, interpreted phenomenologically, it seemed to focus attention on aspects of industry which sociologists should be analysing, not taking for granted. To the extent that it does this, it has fulfilled its purpose, and may be disposed of. Although there are cultural differences between industry and the wider society, it is important not to reify the notion of these differences in a way which leads to fruitless pursuit of *the* definitive industrial subculture. The notion was merely used to evoke the statement made more fully within the body of the book.

I am most grateful to the colleagues who have contributed to this book by offering helpful comments, and I should mention particularly Celia Davies, Tom Davies, Tom Kynaston Reeves, Ken Levine, Stephen Parrott, John Wakeford and Professor Joan Woodward. Professor S. Shimmin kindly offered comments on the completed manuscript and Wynne Harris and Tom Kynaston Reeves provided additional fieldwork examples.

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Exeter, 1971