

FIDDLES AT WORK: DISCUSSION AND EVALUATION OF DIFFERENT CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS

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Abstract—Different sociological aspects and researches have tried to evaluate what goes on as in shop-floor attitudes. From Marx's theory of class conflict to Burawoy's "games" (as informal practices aimed at creating space and time, controlling earnings and making work more interesting) this paper will present the practical aspect of industrial administration and therefore the human problem of industrial efficiency. It has been proved that without the consent of the workforce, the modern enterprise could not function on a daily basis. How this consent is secured has been a question of all theorists of work and workplace. We explore this process through traditional sociological thinking, and the results of various empirical researches in American plants. The intended and unintended functions or consequences of bureaucratic rules were explored in order to provide analysis for an explanation of management-worker conflict, which eventually results in a "wild cat" strike. We will also analyze how workers' resistance over "employers" or "managers" has evolved, changed character and became cheating or fiddling on the shop-floor.

Keywords—Fiddles, Cheating, Management, Sociology of work, Classical Theories

1. INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Informal social organization in the workplace underlies resistance to management authority, ranging from large-scale political and economic activity (Gouldner, 1985, Burawoy, 1985, Sabel 1982, Sayles 1958.) to the successful organization of theft of company materials (Dalton, 1948 ch.7). It is exactly in large bureaucratic settings, with elaborate internal labor markets, that long tenures facilitate the construction of coalitions with shared assumptions and goals inimical to those of the firm. Thus just where functionalist theorists assert that bureaucratic control works best, it is most disabled by the effective bargaining and purposive action that flow out of stable, coherent social formations. Where there is no hierarchy and thus no job ladders, tenures are typically short and turnover rates high; it is then hard to sustain organized resistance to management demands. (Giddens, 1989)

The apparatus of control with its achievement should not be confused. There are certain arguments for those inequalities concerned with labor.

- The sociological-functionalist argument that inequality results from a society's dominant value system- that positions are ranked in relation to their societal importance, and to the scarcity of available incumbents. (Giddens, 1989)
- The neo-classical economic assumption that sorting is based on acquired human capital, and ranking of positions on the supply and demand for the work done in those positions, as modified by differentials compensating for investments in human capital and non-pecuniary disadvantages of jobs. (Giddens, 1989)
- The Marxist-functionalist argument that inequality results from the distribution of skill levels in the structure of jobs, which is easily manipulated by capitalists and
- The more complex but still rather functionalist Marxist view that any divisions observed in the labor market must have been installed by the capitalists in their ceaseless quest for control over a restive labor force (Gordon, Edwards, and Reich, 1982)

As Em. Durkheim (1984) puts it "In reality, that human consciousness that we must realize within ourselves in its entirety is nothing other than the collective consciousness of the group of which we form part." Therefore, he makes a categorization between the forced division of labor and the kind of labor that gives happiness and fulfillment to human beings.

As he puts it is not enough for rules to exist, because occasionally it is these very rules that are the cause of evil. This is what happens in class war. The institution of classes or castes constitutes one organization of the division of labor, one that is closely regulated. Yet it is often a source of dissension, since the lower classes are not, or no longer are, satisfied with the role that has fallen to them by custom or law, they aspire to functions that are prohibited to them and seek disposes from those who exercise them. There is no solution other than to change the established order and create a new one. For the division of labor to engender solidarity, it is not sufficient for everyone to have his task: it must also be agreeable to him. "Normally a man finds happiness in fulfilling his nature; his needs are proportionate to his means". (Durkheim, 1984)

Labor only divides up spontaneously if society is constituted in such a way that social inequalities express precisely natural inequalities. Workers therefore will achieve absolute equality only in the external conditions of the struggle.

The eternal conflict between social consensus and conflict in industrial groupings is understood in through the functionalist thinking as a body consisting of different parts that need to work in harmony, and therefore the consent of all parts is needed for the workplace to function properly. (Durkheim, 1984). If a certain part of the whole is not doing this then the whole process results in different kinds of deviancies that we call cheats, or fiddles or “games”¹ happening in the shop-floor. (Burawoy, 1979)

As Pringles and Edwards (1995:5) ask, “can one penetrate the depths of shop-floor behavior by casting one’s gaze from afar?”

The basic theory of the labor process and of interests’ conflict has been drawn from Marx’s Capital. Marx influenced most theorists of the industrial relations through his class theories and by seeing the relationship between workers and employers as incompatible because of different class expectations or otherwise stated powerlessness and domination, rather than efficiency or managerial control introduced by Burawoy, (1979) and Edwards (1979). Max Weber (1976) added his speculations on the relationship between bureaucracy and efficiency, the functions and dysfunctions of rules.

Foucault (1977) has continued this debate by adding the element of knowledge in this eternal conflict. It is in the hands of knowledge and of those who possess it to exercise, power to others or as he puts it:

“The exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information...the exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely knowledge constantly induces effects of power...It is not possible for power to be exercised with out knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power.” (Foucault, 1980:52)

2. CONFLICT AND CONSENT “GAMES”

From the above analysis we can now formulate certain points to be made here:

a) The eternal conflict of classes and class interest as seen through Marxist thinking which sees the labor process divided in social categories with unequal resources. Since such marked inequalities exist, there are divisions of interest, which are built into the social system. These conflicts of interest at some point break out into active struggle between classes-which can generate processes of radical change. Here even the most stable social system represents an uneasy balance of antagonistic groupings.

b) The element of anomie drawn by Durkheim (1984), where satisfaction for one’s work is the necessary element for the harmony of the social body, where it doesn’t exist there are always problems and distractions.

c) The fact that in modern times knowledge is more power than ever, it is a tool in the hands of managers who can control workers’ attitudes in the shop-floor. (Townley, 1993)

If to achieve harmony we need to work all under the same idea, to consent and not to coerce; but what could happen in case conflicts of the inevitable equalities arise in the workplace? There are different approaches to this issue.

Burawoy (1985) finds all these theories rather unsatisfactory. Insofar as they stress social control, they fail to pin down its form and origin. Industrial conflicts proceed from the facts of consensus or social control. Conflict and consent are not primordial conditions but products of the particular organization of work.

Burawoy (1985) says that this eternal conflict is not as easily as seen by Marxists as only class struggle, as only the result of the oppression of employers to employees, but as a different social ideology. A grouping of hard working people who need to work to survive and need to “escape” from monotony and routine of every day through certain games they practice on the shop-floor.

Through various empirical researches (Roy, Lupton, Mars), it has been confirmed the idea that workers autonomously erect their own cultural and production systems in opposition to management. Elton Mayo (1949) speaks of the formation of a social code at a lower level in opposition to the economic logic of management. Michel Crozier (1964) argues similarly that in a wide variety of settings uncertainties in the labor process are exploited by subordinates, leading to power struggles and non-cooperative games aimed against management. Jason Ditton (1976) shows how the creation of uncertainty through the relaxation of rules enhances the power of management at the same time that it provides the basis for the construction of games. T. Lupton (1963) offers numerous examples of management organizing the forms of “output restriction” that Elton Mayo (1949) attributes to the workers instinctual and non-logical opposition to management.

Consequently studies such as T. Lupton’s (1963), the Hawthorne Experiments, Couldner’s, Roy’s or Burawoy’s seem to agree on the certainty that “restriction of output” was due to the efforts of workers to maintain the internal organization of their group. What had become known as restriction of output was the outcome of a discrepancy between two logics: Management logic is the logic of efficiency. Workers are “groupish”, they adhere much more to custom and tradition, and

¹ Burawoy’s term

their logic is the logic of sentiment. This is why their reactions so often seem to be irrational and so exasperating to management.²(Lupton, 1963)

Collins (1974), Dalton (1959), and Roy (1952) share similar ideas, after reporting several studies of working groups. The main conclusion leads us to the idea that “restriction of output” is an expression of “group solidarity”³, arising from causes other than economic fear, laziness or dishonesty although at the same time it expresses a feeling that workers are different from management, that their motivations and goals are quite apart from those of management employees. This conclusion stresses severely the social position of workers in relation to management rather than seeing them through traditionalistic values.

In Roy’s (1952,1954) work for example it is described how the workers’ behavior in the machine shop led management to institute controls designed to prevent the manipulation of the incentive system by the workers. These controls were immediately countered by more ingenious methods of manipulation. Both sets of manipulations were designed by the working group to serve the same end, clearly, to retain control over the working situation and over earnings.

3. “FIDDLING” THE ROUTINE

Gerald Mars (1982) has moved a step ahead in naming and categorizing participants of the above mentioned groupings in relation to their involvement with fiddlers at work. Mars talk of crimes at work, far from being the exceptional activity of the minority, are an integral aspect of all the occupations they include. They are the shadow side of conventional economic transactions. It is because regular fiddling affects the incomes and life styles of so many people that it has to be studied, discussed and understood by anyone trying to set out a description of an economy, to establish a policy for assessing industrial performance, or to institute economic technical or organizational change.

For Mars fiddling is a way of “...hitting out at the boss, the company, the system, or the state”.

In some jobs they are carried on with the collusion of management, in others fiddlers are ruthlessly and swiftly punished. In some cases fiddling appears organized and carried out by individuals in isolation from their workmates; in others it requires the cooperation of a group. There is a possibility however that all these are quite contradictory: when a supportive setting for the group exists then chances are that fiddlers will feel more at ease to act rather than in cases when there is a general feeling of insecurity associated with seasonal employment⁴ where we find a coincidence of aim and interest at many points between workers and managers. (Lupton, 1963)

This suggests that attempts on the part of managers to promote amongst workpeople “a sense of belonging” will not necessarily lead to greater co-operation on the part of workers. Given security, workers may take steps to offset the adverse effects of management shortcomings. Gerald Mars (1982) links type of fiddle to type of job. At this point this would not make of a prior issue, however one should keep in mind the main divisions (by G. Mars) for classifying occupations which are: class, income, skill or prestige. Ditton (1976) considers the connection mainly in terms of social class whereas Henry (1978:15) argues that fiddles occur “across the board”. It is obvious that in different working environments different relationships, hierarchies and organizations arise and it seems possible that not only the lowest social levels can get into fiddling; this also affects the attitudes of both employees and employers. (G. Mars, 1982)

For an industrial worker this “clings to the possibility of a last remnant of joy in his work...All activity, however much brutalized by mechanization, offers a certain scope for initiative which can satisfy after afashion the instinct for play and the creative impulse...Even when the details of performance have been prescribed with the utmost minuteness, and in accordance with the latest dictates of the Taylor system, there will be left for the worker certain loopholes, certain chances of escape from the routine, so that when actually at work he will find it possible now and again to enjoy the luxury of self determination”⁵

As Michael Mann (1970) refers to this is “a pragmatic role acceptance”. In these we should add the fact that workers have to deal with two very important facts in their work: time and amount of piecework, “making out” of the time one works to the money one gets. The rewards of “making out” are defined in terms of factors immediately related to the labor process- reduction of fatigue, passing time, relieving boredom, and so on - and factors that emerge from the labor process - the social and psychological rewards of making out on a tough job. (Burawoy, 1979:85)

An example of the ideas carried by the workers in terms of what it means to make out and consent with management may be phrased as: “you can’t make out if you do things the way management wants them done”. Hence, another worker from the

² And this is why, according to Bank Wiring Room investigators, levels of output were not the outcome of deliberation and planning, they suggested that it is misleading to describe behavior such as they observed as “restriction of output”. (Lupton, 1963)

³ The term refers to the *expression of the sharing of a common situation vis-à-vis management and other groupings, a rather negative thing compared to something with positive content or purpose.*

⁴ Wye Garments industry study, T.Lupton, 1963:On the Shop-floor

⁵ Henri de Man, *The Psychology of Socialism* (New York: Henry Holt, 1927) p.p.80-81, cited in D. Roy: *Banana Time: Job Satisfaction and Human Interaction: Human Organization* 18 (1958): 160

same factory says, “They time jobs to give you just base rates. It is up to you to figure out how to fool them so you can make out. You can’t make any money if you run the job the way it’s timed” (Roy, 1954)

In our contemporary western cultures the grid dimension is the social categories a society imposes on its people, the very appropriate behavior between people is fixed. This factor energizes mobilization, conduct towards a desirable status. Autonomy and individuality are highly valued. However with grouping cultures, collectiveness is emphasized and outside control is weak. In some cases, group-control is minimized over their individuals and these are weak on group. (Mars, 1982)

A lack of fit can have a number of effects: first, if a person cannot adapt his values, beliefs and attitudes to suit the job’s demands, he can resign and withdraw mentally from the conflict; secondly he can suffer breakdown, or thirdly, he may survive incompatibility in that state of tension sometimes called alienation. In such a state he may respond:

- Through a higher than usual sickness rate
- A greater than usual turnover in the number of his jobs
- Through sabotage/absenteeism/fiddling

When there is a fit between work and a worker’s cosmology, however, there is an aspect of “job satisfaction” which is usually ignored. The worker gets more than just cash benefits from his fiddling. (Mars, 1982)

G. Mars (1982) points out that fiddling can also be fun in terms of an escape of a “pleasurable departure from routine” and an implicit challenge to authority. A feeling of beating the system, being in control of his fate then his rewards are more than monetary. It is the incredible feeling of creativity, individuality that they do not get in their work, when this work is nothing but repetition and boredom.

As we see in the works of D. Roy (1952-54) or C. Moule (1998) in different American plants there is another factor of serious consideration when it comes to fiddlers’ groupings: it provides an exciting play, offers prestige (through give and take of goods for well below market prices and give or sell them to friends). At the same time a worker who finds the way to blur the line between work and non work will not be able to make any distinction between earnings and fiddled extras; they are combined to form an appropriate level of overall reward in the perceptions of those who receive them.

Of course one cannot say that the personality factor is one of no importance, it is on the contrary that behavior is affected by the situations people find themselves in. Some people will be in the same work situation as others and will not react in the same way. They might agree on the same issues but they could -at the same time-react quite indifferently or not at all, where the grouping’s social codes could enforce certain actions. Mars (1977) calls this state of mind, fiddle-proneness⁶.

Finally how society evaluates fiddling is a totally different story: As Mars (1982) implies society increases severity with the degrees of offense, otherwise stated: society ranks big stealing above little stealing. The truth is that it works quite the opposite way: wherever there is huge corruption there is always the idea that the person or people are connected to other powerful or successful people, “big men”. Corruption in these cases is seen as a way to achieve success. To have this success it means his style is well justified by his actions. However, opinions on “small time crooks” or “little men” are indisputable: it is seen as nothing more than dishonest. This is certainly not a conflict of classes it is a question of power and control and of other social agencies activated by the most powerful elements of society for their own interests.

4. CONCLUSION

It is no wonder that the total effect fiddling had, created a storm of contradictory beliefs. From Sociology’s point of view, we saw how the division of labor since the Marxist era has created class conflicts, anomie, bureaucracy, and dysfunction of rules. The idea was that the working class was underestimated and should react against the establishment. Fiddles at work were, in this occasion, seen as a way to rebel against the inevitable routine, the inevitable need for survival at any cost. A human being’s value as a personality was then just about starting to become important.

In later years, during the 20th century the human factor became the most important of all. Elton Mayo debated strongly on the issues of social groupings and the need of belonging, in order to fight against inequalities, daily routine, bad wages, oppression within the industrial settings. Then it was realized that power lies in the hand of those who know things. Therefore it was the turnover for managers to create a certain consent of workers and working classes in general. Without the consent of the workforce, the modern enterprise could not function on a day-to-day basis (Ritzer, 2012). How this consent is secured has been the question of some interest to those who studied work and the workplace. As Burawoy and many others realized by empirical diagnosis what needs to be studied and evolved within the modern organizations is not how managers can suppress absences or restriction of output or resistance, but how they can make employees not to resist, not to fiddle, therefore commit their energy to a degree which is acceptable to employers. There Gramsci added his thinking about the new class of consensual hegemony that could rule without creating reactions only by taking consent from the governed, which indeed is contrasted with domination, exercising of power via coercion.

⁶ Any work context where a propensity exists for a job to offer regular material rewards that are excluded from formal accounts or which are included under ambiguous or deceptive headings. (Mars, 1977)

Hence, the debate moved to a different level: Fordism provided a new concept of work structure where the “assembly line” was the main core and workers were nothing but parts of a well structured-body. Toyotism or Japanisation on the other side provided the concept of Total Quality Management with improvements in output for workers and their employers. However the social construction of skills remains within competing groups such as workers and managers and fiddling although put aside has never stopped finding new ways to develop. It is no wonder that management act clumsily in their handling of employee theft. The normal workings of market exchange cannot explain the relationships of alternative exchange systems. Fiddling can thus be blamed on individuals rather than on groups. Social control of fiddling is obviously necessary. (Mars,1982). The question here is what sort of control should this be? In a tightening world such as we live in, self-control, change of jobs, collective and temporary withdraw of labor suggest the ways a worker can define his/her position in the labor process. And what is more is what G. Mars refers to as “music behind the words” meaning that individuals need to stay loose in their working lives. When pressure is so strong from outside factors, when the ability to fiddle is limited, then people invariably take action.

Hence within the “new technology” era the whole of society stands on a very uncertain level, which affects clearly the way people, perceive themselves as workers, as personalities and how they cope with everyday struggles. They have to improve or adjust to the new conformities and this is what defines peoples’ decisions at length. (Lytras, 2000)

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