The German Blue-Collar Worker

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In the following article I will begin with a review of the history of thought in the field of Industrial Sociology before dealing with present thinking about the sociology of German blue-collar workers.

History of International Industrial Sociology

The development of industrial sociological thought has passed through four phases:

1. A politically-speculative phase introduced by the French socialists. At the beginning of the 19th century Charles Fourier had already dealt with the question of making industrial work more pleasant by a change in the distribution of labour after a period of two hours, and by good, clean, working conditions. In 1850 Frederic Le Play published five volumes on “Les Ouvriers Européens” in which he described the social organization of work in industry as a school of social harmony. One of Le Play’s pupils, Emile Cheysson, said that good industrial relations have as much economic significance as the condition of tools and machinery. Cheysson described three ways of ruining an industry: economic unprofitability; technical backwardness; and bad human relations.

2. A social historical and political phase, introduced by the English socialists. In the early stages of the development of this phase, Robert Owen introduced the 10 hour working day into industry in 1800, abolished child labour, and commenced an inquiry into social conditions in industry. In 1900 the social historians and sociologists Beatrice and Sydney Webb published their inquiries into the problems of industrial democracy.

3. A phase of empirical sociology introduced by the Germans. The chief initiators of this revolutionary way of thinking about the sociology of industry met for the first time in a Society for Social Politics created in 1872 by Gustav Schmoller, Adolf Wagner and other notable representatives of the Historical School. This learned society devoted most of its energy to the investigation of working conditions in industry. In a speech to the political science society of
Berlin in 1889 on "Wesen und Verfassung der grossen Unternehmungen" (the nature and constitution of large firms), Gustav Schmoller developed the following normative concepts of a social order in industry centred entirely on the blue collar worker:

(a) Industry should be a matter of "public concern" and should be seen as public or semi-public organizations in order to become a legitimate part of broader society.

(b) There should be a guarantee of "a good and legitimate organization of social life" in a new business. To ensure that this was effective there should be an opportunity for appeal against penalties imposed by employers.

(c) An industrial business should maintain a committee of workers as an equal partner of the management.

(d) Better human conditions would be guaranteed if there existed good moral and intellectual education of the employers, managers, supervisors and workers. Managers should learn and practice methods of dealing properly with workers.

(e) By establishing and stabilising human relations, a regular way of life, group contracts, output premiums and communities of workers a strong connection between the business and the workers should be attained, overcoming the effects of a split existence.

(f) Businesses, especially large ones, should in the future have a mixed constitution and be managed "like a community which strives after order", and become a body in which the social partners "come to a widely satisfying activity."

These concepts were empirically founded in several industrial investigations. The most important of these studies was the experiment which took place between 1905 and 1910 in ten German industrial factories on the selection and adaptation of workers. The following bases of industrial sociology came from this research and have retained their validity to the present day:

(a) The avoidance of every social and political problem in the interests of an objective, ontological and sociological way of thinking.

(b) To make every single enquiry into a business concern in the knowledge that the results could be representative for the whole branch of industrial work.

(c) To use participant observation as a method of industrial sociology, with periods of four months of practical activity by the researchers in the business concerns.

(d) Questioning of a controlled system.

One of the most important results of this comprehensive research was the discovery of the small group as a constructive element of social order—a discovery almost 30 years before the publication of the Hawthorne experiment. Two quotations from this research in a spinning mill demonstrate the point: