The British Blue-Collar Worker

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This paper attempts to indicate both the diversity of substance and the diversity of approach which characterise sociological studies of blue-collar workers in the U.K. The discussion hinges on four perspectives which may be distinguished in the relevant sociological literature:

1. Institutional Empiricism.
2. Systems Analysis.
4. Reference Group Analysis.

These perspectives are sufficiently clear to justify organising the discussion around them; but it should be emphasised that they are not necessarily to be seen as mutually exclusive categories. We will see in fact that sometimes two perspectives may be consciously utilised by an author in a mutually supportive way. We will further see that sometimes the answer to a problem of research strategy posed from the standpoint of different perspectives may lead in practice to an unexpected convergence as between different writers.

1. Institutional Empiricism

The classic expression of what I have here termed institutional empiricism in the context of blue collar worker studies is to be found in the work of the Webbs.1 If they begin with a “natural history” approach to the study of trade unions, they continue with an analysis which seeks to ascertain how and why trade unions behave as they do (discussing differences and similarities of action as between different types of trade union, as for example in their comments on the device of the common rule and the device of restriction of numbers). It is salutary to recall that in their work they explicitly treat a problem which is more commonly associated with the work of Michels.2 If sociology, as they as-

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2 R. Michels, Political Parties, (1911).
sert, can advance "only upon the basis of a precise observation of actual facts" then the trade unions presented "an unrivalled field of observation as to the manner in which the working man copes with the problem of combining administrative efficiency with popular control". They argued that—

if a democracy means that everything which "concerns all should be decided by all" and that each citizen should enjoy an equal and identical share in the government, trade union history clearly indicates the inevitable result. Government by such contrivances as rotation of office, the mass meeting, the referendum and initiative, or the delegate restricted by his imperative mandate, leads straight either to inefficiency and disintegration, or to the uncontrolled dominance of a personal dictator or an expert bureaucracy.2

They pointed to the substitution of these features of primitive democracy by "the typically modern form of democracy, the elected representative assembly, appointing and controlling an executive committee under whose direction the permanent official staff performs its work."3 They pointed at the same time to the "extreme centralisation of finance and policy which the trade union has found to be a condition of efficiency,"4 which was at the root of an apparent paradox:

the constant tendency to a centralised and bureaucratic administration (which) is in the trade union world accepted, and even welcomed, by men who, in all other organisation to which they belong, are sturdy defenders of local autonomy.5

Looking at the question of trade union administration in Britain much later, V. L. Allen6 argues that the increasing size and complexity of functions together with the need for efficiency has led to a bureaucratic form of administration, they have adopted the bureaucratic form of organisation at the expense of "self government." He argues that this is scarcely surprising since "the end of trade union activity is to protect and improve the general living standards of its members and not to provide workers with an exercise in self government".7 In so far as they are "delivering the goods" for their members however, Allen suggests that union leaders and executives have not deserted democratic principles, since they are typically genuinely representing their members' interests. For him it simply illustrates "the tendency for democracy to have a preference for the authoritarian solution of important problems".8 Roderick Martin has recently questioned the adequacy of this definition of democracy.9 For Allen, unrepresentative union leadership leads to membership dissatis-

1 Industrial Democracy, pp. v-vi.
2 Ibid., p. 36.
3 Ibid., p. 37.
4 Ibid., p. 102.
5 Ibid., p. 103.
7 Ibid., p. 15.
8 Ibid., p. 25.