

'It's the Same Old Story'

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The years from the mid-sixties to the early seventies were for me years of great sociological excitement and discovery. It was a period when the orthodox theoretical framework and the conventional methodology of social research were put under scrutiny and were found wanting. The objective was to put something in its place which was better and more geared to our subject matter. For me, a researcher and later lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of Manchester, this period was stimulated and sustained by the arrival of Wes Sharrock, who brought with him both his desire for rigour and his monumental reading in theory and its relevance to research practice. It was his pursuit of this goal, influenced by his reading and teaching of Schütz, which prompted him to bring to Manchester a series of very distinguished naturalistic sociologists, all of whom played an important role in teaching but also in confirming our view of the sociological field. Not the least important of these visitors was Egon Bittner, whose approach to the nature of sociological organisation matched our own findings and provided solutions to problems which we were experiencing in our research activity.

In general terms the greatest of these problems was that we could not recognise how the conventional models of the subject might properly be related to or to be grounded in the activities of those which we wished to study. What we witnessed above all was interactants talking to each other and it was precisely in doing so that they performed their activities.¹ If our subject matter was to be social organisation then it was surely necessary to see what part the talk played in that organisation and more pertinently in producing the social organisation that presents itself. It was for us a crucial feature of Bittner's work that he saw social organisation as ongoingly achieved in the doings and sayings of what Garfinkel used to call its 'members'. Nowhere was this better recorded than in his early paper 'The Concept of Organization' (Bittner 1965).

To suggest the importance this paper had for my studies I wish to make reference to an early field study that I undertook into the organisation of a local political party – a Labour Party – in a northern industrial town.² As a potential field of study it was brought to my attention by local newspapers and by some

members of the party themselves. They observed that the party was split between two camps: a 'left-wing' who described themselves as 'grass roots activists', and who as 'controllers' of the City Party were in conflict with a generally older 'right-wing' or 'establishment' group, who 'controlled' the city council through their important positions on the council party policy group, and by their holding of council chairmanships such as finance and housing. The references to an 'establishment' were often disdainful.

On the face of it such a situation seemed an obvious candidate for treating as possibly exemplifying an aspect of the 'Michels Thesis' (Michels 1962). A version of his 'Iron Law of Oligarchy' might suggest that as party representatives get older and take on more responsible positions the social environment that they then find themselves leads them to divert from the grass roots and therefore simultaneously from the party and the movement's goals. These are replaced with more pragmatic motives and goals derived from their different administrative constituencies. Interestingly I found that such a sociological theory – with some differences and many derogative references – was often espoused by many of those who were sometimes referred to me as members of the party's 'left-wing.' Of course this view was not quite shared by many of those referred to as 'right wing'.

This division of views, fairly constantly expressed in the talk of the field, raised for me an interesting methodological question: Should I be involved in adopting a sociological model or theory that was held and espoused on occasions by some of the very people that I was concerned to investigate, and which was put forward not in pursuit of disinterested social enquiry but as an ensconced description of the situation, motivated by the desire to change or reorganise it? It is a strange sociological procedure that detaches members' models and theories which they formulate in given contexts in order to use them to bear the weight of professional sociological analysis. One has no warrant for doing so and indeed in my case to do so would have been to run the risk of adjudicating in the disputes of the very people whose organisation and organising that I desired to research.

At the time before Bittner wrote 'The Concept of Organization' the prevalent studies of organisation adopted a functionalist theoretical model, in some ways similar to that of Michels, which contrasted formal organisation – which the sociologist derived from the organisation's constitution and officially stated goals – with an informal organisation, the actual social relationships which emerged from a combination of group needs and the social environment in which the organisation had to function.³ The idea was generally that human needs derived from either the internal or external environment, in which the organisation operated, of necessity controlled and diverted actual performance from that prescribed and predicted by its rules and goals. Selznick's fascinating study of the TVA showed how the constituency in which the TVA operated diverted the

organisation from its New Deal goals towards the interests of southern farmers, who did not share those goals. This, he argued, was because the formal organisational goals and rules of procedure were unanalysed (or uninterpreted) in terms of the aims and institutional values of those who made up the constituency in which it operated. It can be seen from this example that Selznick, like the others, is adopting the idea that in principle rules operate to constrain members of an organisation into certain courses of action and thereby might predict it.

Again this might have seemed a useful way of thinking about the so-called 'informal groups', the external constituency and the constitutional rules and goals of the party I was studying. But Bittner's paper shows that there are some serious problems involved in this way of thinking about organisations. Even though sociologists such as Selznick see constitutions as subject to interpretation, they nevertheless reify them by giving them an independent sociological existence, so that they function like a variable in the production of social behaviour. A central question that Bittner is raising is, does it even make sense to think of constitutions and rules as capable of predicting the behaviour of members of an organisation of any kind? How could, for example, the local party constitution have predicted or described even in principle the talk activities of its members. It soon became obvious to me that goals and rules of the local Labour party were rarely invoked, but when they were their use was situational and often the subject of dispute. That is to say they were noticeably a potential resource to effect particular courses of action, and when they were used they were interpretively embedded so as to show their relevance and appropriateness to the situation. Indeed they were often used to describe, illustrate, and define the situation in the first place. For example, Bittner notes that rules are used to clarify the meaning of actions retrospectively. A version of this might be the way in which members who saw themselves as 'left wing' defined themselves and their emergence as a group by the way they 'stood up for the party and its socialist goals' when as 'City Party' councillors they refused to accept the council's Labour Party policy-making group decision to vote in council for a rent rise for municipal housing tenants. As noticed above this action was subsequently but selectively used as definitive of 'The Left'. Those who had voted 'left' now saw themselves as 'The Left-Wing Group' who stood together in adversity against 'the establishment' and whose members might be trusted as correct interpreters of the true party goals. Their 'members' action on this and other matters therefore stood as a potential model for future behaviour.

To others in council this activity was definitive of the irresponsibility of those particular city party councillors, and their refusal to accept the council group rules was used on occasion to draw the line between illegitimate and legitimate members of the party itself. For them too, therefore, this rule event was definitive

and line-drawing. Together with other such events it 'shows that they are really Communists and shouldn't be in the Party at all.'

In these ways and on many occasions situated and interpreted versions of rules and goals were used as common sense constructs in order to find out and show to each other what it is that is 'really' happening around here. It is an interesting fact that when I first involved myself in the research those who wanted to help would explain 'what happened around here' by explaining the party constitution and model rules. After I became more familiar with the members of the party they interpreted the question 'what goes on around here?' as asking 'what REALLY happens around here?' and direct reference to the model rules was seen as irrelevant.

A seemingly natural first activity for a researcher is to define his field – to see who is in it – to enumerate the members of groups, thereby to make possible a sociological portrait of the characteristics of membership. In my case that would involve enumerating who is in the party or which members characterise any observed grouping such as the 'Left' and 'Right' wing. In 'Objectivity and Realism in Sociology' Bittner (1973) again gives what we must consider as both a warning and a direction in which we might proceed. In the course of their activities and involvements society-members ongoingly describe and characterise their activities and involvements, and those descriptions – which are always context-embedded – play a constitutive role in the productions of the very settings of which they are a part. Who was in the party and who was a proper member of the party was a frequent subject of discussion and conflict. This mattered greatly, for example, if a given person was proposed as a potential office holder or council member. The membership of the party itself was given as ranging between 5 and 10 thousand, and these figures were seen as varying massively in accordance with the availability of collectors and in accordance with the questions of 'Who is asking? – and Why?'

An original concern of mine was to raise the question of who and what was 'The Left', the 'group' whose existence had prompted the enquiry in the first place. Most gave me a definition which was founded around the 'City Party' councillors who split the party in council by voting against the rise in council house rents. I was also told by some that more or less the same group 'had again demonstrated their irresponsibility by refusing to vote with the Group in Council in its invoking the public order act to prevent a 'Fascist Meeting' taking place in the town. One explanation given to me by one of those so named was that 'If we'd supported that they'd have used it against us if we had a public demonstration' and 'we wanted to go along and throw the Fascists in the river'. They were also known for their support for Direct Labour, the municipal building company,

which ran into difficulty with allegations of overspending that led to its suspension by the council.

But, whilst of great relevance to my study, these situated accounts could not function as a definitive base for defining any part of my field. If I had tried so to use them, then my concepts would have remained equivocal in relation to the way they are used and acted upon by those who produce their organised activities. The argument against operational definitions, even when based on views from the field, is that by its insensitivity to the meaningful context of real life understandings it necessarily fails to recognise the nature of human activity and interactivity, and therefore fails to describe that activity – the object of human research. This was beautifully expressed by Bittner when he said:

the point made is that factual realities of socially organized settings are throughout permeated by the ways in-which-they-are-known, and derive, keep, and change their meanings with it. Moreover, the tie of accounts to settings is unavoidable and irremediable because the accounts derive their sensibility and warrant from it. The absence of this feature—the feature of dependence of accounts, and incidentally of all expressions and of all practical action, on the natural habit of their occurrence for recognizable meaning, a feature known as ‘indexicality’—tends to give representations of social settings the aspect of confabulation or fiction, an ever-present risk in narrative historiography which Wilhelm Dilthey attempted to overcome through strictly period-bound hermeneutics of cultural contents.

(Bittner 1973: 116)

In the spirit of Bittner's argument and with apologies to Dilthey I present a much abbreviated and edited version of a conversation that occurred between myself and five self-proclaiming ‘left wing’ councillors the day following a group decision to increase council house rents – some four years later than the great rift in council when ‘The Left’ had refused to do this. It commenced when one of them turned to me and said ‘What I told you about who is in ‘The Left-Wing group’ is all wrong: There is no ‘Left-Wing now.’ At this point a friend and fellow ‘City Party Councillor’ entered and was greeted by Harry Held:

Held to Yancy:

I don't know what was up with you last night. Couldn't you see it was a left versus right affair?

Yancy:

I don't know about that you'd hardly call George Wilson a right-winger. He was our leader on the Fascist issue. Though I don't know what he is playing about on Direct Labour. But we never said that we could keep rents down indefinitely.

Lough:

What you don't seem to understand is that Wilson is part of the right-wing now. It's the same old story. He's a council chairman now – in charge of housing. He's done a deal with the group leader. He's been bought out

Zach Tannenbergr (to Yancy):

I'm surprised at you being taken in like that. Look what he's doing to Direct Labour. He's more interested in keeping his chair. It was always to be expected when you think he was never in a trade union.

Joe Hill:

He never really was our leader. Our mistake was to support him for office. Look at Barbara Castle,⁴ she was a left-winger. Now she is part of the establishment.

David Yancy later admitted that he had possibly been wrong about the rent increase. 'It's true he's not our leader now. It frightens me to think how fast a man can change when he gets a chair. By the way he's withholding contracts from Direct Labour he's going to finish it.'

As Bittner says, material like this and facts which it seems to evince can be viewed from many directions, and seen as facts in many ways; but however the material is considered the researcher must rely upon his own everyday competencies to analyse it. What Bittner, and before him Garfinkel (1967), has stressed is that the organisation of members' activities are themselves the consequence of everyday competencies, and the understanding of these relies upon the researcher's possession and understanding of the same. Thus the proper procedure when faced with such materials is to describe the procedures and the co-produced knowledge that gives those materials their place in the activities that they themselves describe.

In this paper I can only hint at some of the ways in which this organisation is produced. It may be observed that, though 'The Left' can be seen as defining themselves in terms of some generalised goals, these are unspecified in detail and become concretised in relation to the stance they take on particular issues. Whilst it could be said that in general they see themselves as necessarily standing for the underprivileged, this could tell us nothing that would distinguish them from George Wilson who also claimed to be 'left', or for that matter from any other

member of the party. But we should notice from this conversation that 'The Left' and its membership is potentially revisable on each and every occasion where it is called upon to act collectively. One basis by which membership is allocated is the biographical work which relates an individual to a collective past. Hence the involvement in the rents issue, the Fascist issue and the Direct Labour issue might be called in selectively where the question of 'whether he is one of us' and 'to be trusted' comes up for review. Of course one possible means of coming to understand events and taking decisions is to see how they are understood and acted upon by others with whom you have a shared past. But it is important to note that the relationship between past and present events cannot be, or be seen to be, taken for granted. No event is exactly like another and it is therefore a product of members' work to align or distinguish them. Competence at doing so should be exhibited or an individual's motives might be subject to examination.

As in all aspects of everyday life the categorisation of persons – the product of situated biographical work – is of the greatest consequence in deciding both the nature of events and the nature of their activities in those events. They are mutually constitutive. In the above we see members' sociological reasoning and theorising at work to account for the nature of otherwise problematic events. How could this be a 'left versus right-wing affair' when George Wilson (and David Yancy) did not vote with us? After all, should they have voted with us then their participation might have been used to argue that it must therefore be such an affair. This might, of course, also be associated with arguments that show how our participation might be derived from our collective goals, as exhibited in our collective past. The lay version of the Michels Thesis serves such a constitutive function. It enables the confirmation of the motives and nature of 'the establishment', it demonstrates how they corrupt, and it simultaneously reorganises George Wilson, providing for the 'realisation' in the eyes of some that he always was one of them really, that is, 'out for himself'. All of this confirms our activity as having been properly in line with what we did before. The surety of this version of events is hammered home by its reference to Barbara Castle and the national party – IT'S THE SAME OLD STORY. David Yancy was just misled.

Thus we see a complex procedure by which a member might see acts and actors as what they are and how what we might call a *flexible charter for action* is used. By this procedure (and there are many others), contingent events and circumstances are brought into a pattern, and this pattern is ongoingly exemplified and adjusted. This is how it serves to explain and guide activities and often serves to sustain and maintain a crucial sense of collectivity. Organising is thus achieved by the provision of some sense of definiteness in a world of impermanence.

Much that Egon Bittner wrote is revealing not just of the fields of which he wrote but of our life generally. It would be a fitting tribute to him if the reader were able to reflect upon the ways in which the finding 'It's the same old story' or the 'Same again' and its attendant methodologies play a role in our everyday 'political' life. But apart from what he showed us as a Sociologist he showed us a great deal more about how one might conduct a life. I spent time with him twice. I wish it had been more as I found him to be a kindly, erudite, thoughtful, and charming man without rancour and totally available. He will be missed.

NOTES

1. The importance of talk as (social) action was impressed upon us by our reading of the philosophers Wittgenstein and Austin.
2. This will of course be making reference to the endless discussions of the material which took place between Wes Sharrock and myself.
3. For a tradition of important work in the history of the subject, see, for example: Blau (1955); Gouldner (1955); Merton (1957); Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939); Selznick (1953). This is a history in which the theoretical relationship between formal structure and social relationships is ongoingly revised and made more sophisticated whilst still retaining the basic rudiments of the model. Bittner's (1965) paper was to reveal its fundamental problems and to suggest an entirely alternative approach.
4. Barbara Castle, who was seen as having a left-wing past, was at this time a cabinet minister in the Labour Government.

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